Book Review


Reviewed by Catherine Hezser, Trinity College Dublin

This book is very hard to describe. From the very first sentence onwards, I have been asking myself: What is all this about? The confusion on the part of the reader may be intended, though. The format and style which Rela Mazali chose for her work are as peculiar as the tales of women’s comings and goings related here. The book is neither a scholarly examination of women’s mobility nor a novel or travelogue or (auto)biography. It may perhaps be described as a multicolored carpet into which many different yarns have been interwoven to create a fascinating piece of fabric. The yarns are the narratives of women’s dreams of far-away-countries, of actually traveling, and of staying at home.

Until very recently, and to some extent still today, women’s physical mobility has been severely constrained. Women were expected, or even forced, to limit their activities to the private domain of their homes. From an early age onwards girls were educated to become “domestic goddesses”, to focus their ambitions on gaining a husband, cooking meals, and caring for their children. Once a family was established, leaving it behind and pursuing one’s dreams elsewhere would be most difficult. The family would function like a chain binding women to their homes. Free, unrestricted mobility, the ability to go wherever one wants, at whatever time, would have been inconceivable.

It is not always parents or husbands who take women to task and remind them of their home-tied duties. It is also women themselves who do not want to disappoint their loved ones’ expectations, who do not trust their own ability to manage alone in strange places, or who are simply too hesitant or lazy to try something new. But there are others who, against all odds, roam the world or explore particular areas far or near, who cross many boundaries, not only the threshold of their homes, but also of their native identity, ethnicity, and religion. What all of these women have in common is the need for independence, the gradual or sudden realization that staying put is stifling and suffocating. That they can only live their lives fully when released from any strings that bind them.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, twelve visits to the virtual home which constitutes the starting point and destination of the journeys. The women’s “gathering in text” functions like a home, “a house in a warm climate”, in which one feels safe and comfortable to exchange one’s thoughts and experiences but which is not restricting, allowing the free movement back and forth. Much of the book consists of direct speech, of women reflecting on and telling each other about their movement in space.

There is June, for example, whom we first meet in a house in the Swiss mountains. Entering the conversation as a retiree she has been married four times with children of four fathers. Originally from the United States she always dreamed of traveling to India and doing humanitarian work. Once a Shakespearean scholar she ends up as a delegate to the United Nations. Her daughter

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Janie remembers the temporary nature of their former homes, the lack of inherited or bought furniture and her mother’s love for cardboard cartons as storage containers: “there wasn’t really any sense of permanence really in the way it was set up. There weren’t any... family heirlooms or... grandfather clocks standing around, you know” (27). June obviously avoided getting attached to material things which might have prevented her from moving on.

Janie herself is twenty-eight, married with two children. She has lived in East Jerusalem, Saudi Arabia, and Tel Aviv with her husband and children, due to her husband’s work for the International Committee of the Red Cross. Like her mother’s moves, her’s were not always self-determined but caused by circumstances and her husband’s profession. She appreciates the fact that her children are exposed to different environments, cultures, and mentalities while at the same time experiencing security and stability within the family. Little family rituals, meals, songs, and other “repeated actions” as well as stories and memories associated with relatives, friends, and once familiar places provide a notion of home wherever the family happens to be.

While one woman presents her story, other women enter the chat room and join the conversation. They reflect on their own experiences, so that eventually the women’s stories become interwoven and form part of one and the same tapestry. Mazali refrains from neatly separating one story from another. This makes the reading somewhat difficult, since one can easily lose track. It also adds life to the endeavor, however, since the reader gains the impression of actually listening to an ongoing conversation. Reality is always messy, resists categorization and adherence to rules. In this messiness the reader finds herself and her own experiences which also defy convention. The very structure and style of the book invites women to reflect on their own lives and to “feel at home” amongst the narrators with whom they share the complexity and variety of the “comings and goings” of their lives.

What is lacking is detached theoretical reflection, and it becomes obvious that all theory would destroy the immediacy of the account. Mazali does not assume the role of an anthropologist who collects information and data in order to objectify them and construct her own theory. She rather remains a subject amongst subjects. In this way she also prevents the reader from taking an outside perspective. The very involvement of the author and reader in the narrative itself and its sense of reality convey the feeling that our individual stories are women’s history.

Rela Mazali also reflects upon her own identity as a Jewish Israeli woman. Already before she met Janie, who lived amongst Palestinians, she had been to Gaza herself as “a radical, a political dissenter”. Jewish Israelis do not normally enter Palestinian areas, so that crossing the boundaries into the “enemy’s” camp is considered a transgression. The place is gloomy, foreign, loaded with danger, the realm of the “other”, better to be avoided. Crossing the boundaries to either side is made difficult by soldiers who guard the checkpoints. But the forbidden and distant is always what is most attractive. The American Black Hebrews’ dream of visiting Jerusalem equals the attraction to Gaza in Mazali’s mind.

Mazali does not follow one story straight to its end but lets herself be side-tracked. After mentioning her leftist political leanings she goes on to tell the story of Bashan, the Black Hebrew woman who dreamed of Jerusalem. From Bashan who was born in Georgia and never lived in Africa, she moves on to talk about American blacks’ perception of Africa as a mythical place, a

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place of origin and belonging. In this way analogies are drawn and connections established between very different women’s sense of identity and home, without ever being made explicit. Altogether, Mazali has created a fascinating account of women crossing of boundaries in the many different senses of the word. She has shown how women’s lives consist of continuous “comings and goings”, of staying at home and venturing out, of feeling safe within the familiar and being attracted by the unknown. The ease with which women nowadays are able to change places attests to their freedom and independence which defies all preconceived notions of the nature of a woman’s life.

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