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## Book Review: Syrian Women Refugees: Personal Accounts of Transition

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### ***Book Review: Syrian Women Refugees: Personal Accounts of Transition*<sup>1</sup>**

Aynur Erzenoglu<sup>2</sup>

*Syrian Women Refugees: Personal Accounts of Transition* by Ozlem Ezer provides the reader with first-hand accounts of Syrian women's lives before and after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria. Ezer adopts a gender-sensitive and anti-colonialist approach while giving voice to nine forcibly displaced women. Each of the book's nine chapters highlights the life story and thoughts of one of the women. The book also analyzes the converging and diverging experiences of these nine women and highlights the importance of individual accounts in understanding how forced displacement should be managed in an international frame.

The book is the product of a narrative inquiry process which spanned 2 years across multiple countries. Ezer's aim is to bring a real human face to the experiences of refugees by preserving the authenticity of their individual accounts. This is evident in the descriptions of each woman's experience. Ezer preserved the women's original accounts without filtering, since there are some parts in the accounts which can be considered anti-LGBTI, and some ideas which can be considered to conflict with feminist values. The chapters include the transition and resettlement process, not just their escape from the war. The richness of the accounts allows the reader to make sociological, cultural, and political inferences. Ezer also takes pride in placing "the invisible survivors" on the stage, by documenting accounts of women who can easily "pass" in European or North American cities; referring to their language skills and ability to perform etiquette smoothly (p. 27). However, the most distinctive aspect of Ezer's book is the lack of drama and horror in the narratives. She refuses to dramatize, exoticize and mystify these women's lives to evoke sympathy or appeal to Orientalist expectations. An elaborate personal narrative accompanies each woman's story and is presented as a challenge to Western stereotypes, providing evidence of disregarded statistics.

With the assistance of fellow researchers and interpreters, Ezer conducted in-depth interviews with nine Syrian women aged 26 to 52 (as of 2018), who were born in Damascus, Daraa, Homs, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor, and Latakia. With funding support from a Mellon research grant, face-to-face interviews were initiated in Sweden, Germany, and Canada. At the end of the two-year narrative inquiry process, the women were living in Turkey, Greece, Germany, and Canada, with multiple movements documented in between. Ezer is careful to acknowledge that the experience captured by these women is not indicative of all Syrian women and she specifies this through the deliberate use of the word "womanhoods" in plural form.

The topic of Ezer's focus and the subject matter of the book is arguably relevant to multiple audiences as it depicts one of the most important global issues of our time. However, Ezer's methods also offer insight and value with respect to the way she approaches the subject and discussion. Ezer states that her book is an attempt to introduce novelties in oral history and

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed Book Citation: Ezer, O. (2019). *Syrian Women Refugees: Personal Accounts of Transition*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

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narrative inquiry (p. 19). Indeed, Ezer provides stories that offer valuable insight to the lives of women refugees and challenge stereotypes, while feminizing the discourse on the refugee crisis. All of the women comprising the stories in this book have suffered loss because of the war and forced displacement, all of them have suffered from a toxic patriarchal culture, and all of them mention suffering discrimination because of their race, nationality, residency status, religion, looks, biological sex or gender. The book reveals the universal problems of women and displaced persons, and how they deal with these problems.

The book also celebrates women's empowerment, unity, and solidarity instead of taking advantage of matters such as rape and presenting women as victims. There are no exaggerated or glorified details. The narrators are presented as normal, relatable human beings, not heroes or victims. I believe that this is the result of Ezer being an academic, not a journalist, and allowing the participants to have control over their stories. There are already enough small details for the reader to appreciate in the narrations.

There are many fiction and non-fiction work written about Syrian refugees and the refugee crisis, which makes it easy for Ezer's book to be overlooked. However, Ezer's contribution owes its distinction to the combination of multiple factors. It is a book written by a feminist Middle Eastern woman with a sensitive anti-colonialist approach, also importantly the author is not a journalist. The women who comprise Ezer's book are respected and treated as much more than just sources of information. Further, they were given access to the transcripts along with the liberty to edit and omit any parts as they wanted (p. 28). Overall, *Syrian Women Refugees: Personal Accounts of Transition* is a great book for anyone who would like to learn about the effects of forced displacement on Syrian women's lives from first-hand testimonies.