

BOOK REVIEW

The Home I Worked to Make: Voices From the New Syrian Diaspora

By Wendy Pearlman, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2024. 281 pp. USA \$28.99, CAN \$38.99 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-32-409223-0.

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Following her earlier work, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*, in which a collective *We* echoed the shared experience of Syrians during the 2011 revolution, war and flight, American historian and political scientist of the Middle East Wendy Pearlman traces the dispersion of voices in *The Home I Worked to Make*, where the multiplicity of individual experiences of the Syrian displacement leads to what she identifies as *The New Syrian Diaspora*. Pearlman continues where public attention begins to fade in the aftermath of the crisis, sharing the Syrians' need to try to make sense of it all. While conducting hundreds of interviews with Syrians across five continents, she discovers a key term—*home*—and requests 'permission to enter conversations that many Syrians were already having with each other or within themselves' (p. 24). She asks the question that frames the entire book: What does home mean to you? Valuable lessons arise both from the presence and absence of answers, and from the interviewing process—beginning with finding people who feel the need to share their stories and ending months or years later with a return to seek approval of and revisit the narratives they told, many of which have since evolved. *The Home I Worked to Make* is a collection of snapshots of how people from Syria made sense of home at a particular moment after displacement.

With careful attention to terms that denote different experiences of displacement, Pearlman asks about the meaning of home for those who lose it in an instant and must search for it from scratch, or as Syrians describe it, from 'below zero' (p. 165). Contributing to the growing body of research on the relationship between migration and home, the question serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it shatters preconceived notions of home as something physical against the backdrop of sudden loss. For Pearlman, the various dimensions of home that converge to give meaning to

human life (place, time, security, love, authenticity, fulfilment and other social and emotional experiences) are broken for refugees who struggle to bring them back together. Home becomes like a puzzle that, in the words of speaker Nour, 'will always be missing something' (p. 264). On the other hand, it challenges discourses on the refugee crisis that portray refugees as passive victims and anti-refugee rhetoric that demands refugees to return home when, 'too often, refugees have no home to which to return' (p. 136). By offering Syrians' testimonies of their journeys away from their physical homes, Pearlman opens the space for awareness, perspective and empathy.

The book includes 38 personal narratives rich in insight and wisdom by Syrians whose journeys have taken them around cities within Syria, through neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, and further through countries—some of which they had never imagined reaching—such as Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, South Africa, Greece, France, UK, Netherlands, Germany, Czech Republic, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Canada, USA, Brazil, India, Japan and Australia. In these narratives, the Syrians are producers of knowledge about their lived realities in Syria and along the refugee journey. The narratives are easy to follow and are accessible to a broad audience. According to Pearlman, the narratives 'speak to anyone who has ever migrated, descends from people who have migrated, or loves someone who has migrated and wants to learn about their life between worlds' (p. 27). As a Palestinian Syrian refugee and researcher of refugee stories, these narratives revealed aspects of my world that I had never known. The narratives also 'resonate with anyone who has ever felt out of place, undergone a big move, or carefully considered what they need to feel settled in time and space' (p. 27). They guide readers who are not part

of a diaspora towards a deeper understanding of the loss of and search for home. They also invite readers to make connections with their own experiences and question what home means to them.

The narratives are scattered throughout the book in an order that encourages engagement with themes rather than with a specific community or individuals. The thematic order critiques the perception of displacement journeys as ones that begin with departure from the country of origin and end with settlement in the host country. Highlighting the challenge involved in the loss of and search for home in displacement over time, the parts are structured around key moments: 'Leaving', 'Leaving, Again', 'Searching', 'Losing', 'Building', 'Belonging' and 'Living'. The words offer layers of meaning that increase in complexity within the context of displacement and prompt readers to think critically about what passive and active acts are included in the process. Pearlman opens each part with a guiding reflection on the theme and the context, theories where relevant and a preview of the speakers, then steps away to let the narratives unfold in the speakers' voices.

Narratives of 'Leaving' are reminders of the revolution and war in Syria and of the reasons that compelled the people to flee their physical homes. Between the zeal and hope radiating from the circle of the protests and the fear and suffering beyond their edge, Syria as a homeland transformed, and so did the people's sense of home. With experiences that led some to numbness (p. 46) and others to a mode of fight or flight (p. 146), survivors moved from one place to another inside the country before they crossed international borders. A central question emerges through the narratives: 'When a home becomes so violent that it forces one to flee, is it still home?' (p. 14). For some, 'Syria was never a true home' (p. 17).

'Leaving, Again' illuminates the recurring yet unspoken element of 'Leaving' in refugee lives even after crossing international borders. Caught between endless waiting for the flames to subside in Syria and the harsh conditions of temporary shelters, Syrians were forced to leave more than once. While navigating the UN's durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration culminating in citizenship or resettlement, which are unreachable for the majority of people fleeing Syria, and the precarity of life in refugee camps and the 'guest' status in the Middle East, they search for home numerous times in multiple places. For Masri, one of the interlocutors, 'moving became easier and easier each time' (p. 56). For Medea, leaving again was as hard as leaving the first time.

'Searching' for home responds to critic Bhagabat Nayak's observation that 'home is vaguely defined or under-theorized in scholarly conventions and philosophical contexts of diaspora' (Nayak 2021). While the studies that examine homemaking after displacement arrive at a few definitions of home (Dossa and Golubovic 2019; Shamma 2020; Doná 2015; Warner 1994), Pearlman lets a plethora of definitions emerge from the day-to-day practices that the refugees from Syria dispersed worldwide start to speak about in their 'Searching' narratives. The search for home is influenced by the relationship between refugees and the environment they find themselves in. The process involves learning. Each environment has its challenges, and each refugee

has his/her response to the challenges. State bureaucracy, language, culture, gender, age, race and ethnicity affect the search. Pearlman concludes that 'the search for home is a search for an end to searching' (p. 100).

The part on 'Losing' purposefully follows 'Searching' to foreground the feeling refugees carry and grapple with in their search for home. It also refutes the simplistic notion that refugees move 'from despair to deliverance' (p. 29) or, in the words of speaker Hani, that 'once they arrive, they should just switch the mode completely' (p. 147). The refugee journey is marked by emotional ebbs and flows. Losing one's home indicates losing the physical home as well as a lifetime's work and embeddedness in a community. It involves the processing of memories, of survival guilt and of losing part of oneself. Losing is an inseparable part of the search for home.

A central term in the discourse of home, 'Building' for Pearlman, has a deeper meaning that goes beyond brick and wood into the structuring of one's identity. Refugees question their former selves in the new environments into which they are suddenly thrust. Carrying their characteristics, material and social capital and traumas from their previous lives, they respond to new cultures, societies, relations and professions, which impels them to discover both their identity and their understanding of home. Speaker Ahlam quotes Mahmoud Darwish: 'I am the land, and the land is you' (p. 171).

The ways in which refugees build their identities become clearer when viewed through the notion of 'Belonging'. Pearlman explains that while they look inward to reconstruct their roots, refugees also look outward towards their relationships with the physical and social worlds around them. The Syrian refugees who narrate stories of belonging to Syria, the Syrian culture and the Syrian people offer insight into what Pearlman refers to as the new Syrian diaspora in the book's title: a Syrian community abroad uniquely linked to Syria as a common homeland. On the other hand, within the same frame, Syrians also express their refusal of this sense of belonging and push it instead in new ways. They express their belonging to or through objects. Speaker Duha says she belongs to her pen with which she writes about her love for Syria, anywhere (p. 209). Sara says she makes a home wherever she goes with her flowers, books and photos (p. 215). Pearlman shows the complexity of perspective by bringing together the narratives of two speakers who lived through the 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria: Ahlam on the Syrian side and Rifaie on the Turkish side. After surviving another scene of destruction and death, Ahlam recommits her belonging to Syria; Rifaie's belonging remains only to his family (p. 203).

'Living' is weaving all the stages of the displacement journey in understanding home. It is the combination of all the questions at once: where, how, who, when, what and why. Answers reflect lives in displacement with or without a home. In this last part, speakers reflect on their journeys and what home meant to them throughout their lives. Home is all of the stages and in each one separately. Home shifts across the speakers' lifetime. For many, from the time they first told their stories to the time they saw them in this book, home already means something different (p. 241). Pearlman concludes that home is a struggle and an achievement. It is a work perpetually in progress. 'It is a story

written and rewritten throughout our lives' (p. 241). The conclusion ties back to the title: When refugees arrive at something that they feel is home, it is the home they worked to make. The final words are for speaker Nour, who says 'Home is where I can be myself, like I am now, but with people I love. I hope it will happen at one point in my life' (p. 265).

The Home I Worked to Make is valuable not only for understanding the Syrian displacement and refugee lives more broadly but also for making sense of the Syrian refugees' new reality. A few months after the book's release in July 2024, Syria's Assad regime collapsed, and the world, in the eyes of Syrians, changed. I had the opportunity to attend Pearlman's book talk at the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) in February 2025. At the end of her talk, Pearlman situates her book within the changing landscape of Syria at present. According to Pearlman, thinking about home after Syria's liberation first shows that home is political. Syrians fought to reclaim their country, transforming it from Assad's Syria to Syrian's Syria. Now, they can make Syria into a home that could never have fully been under Assad's rule. Second, Syrians' narratives of existential insecurity in displacement encourage moving beyond the discourse of home return and remembering that, for many, home in Syria no longer exists. Syria needs time to get back on its feet, and each Syrian needs time to see what is best for their family. Finally, narratives of the new Syrian diaspora offer a lens through which the refugee crisis evolves into diaspora-making. The transnational resources, skills, relationships and knowledge that Syrians developed in the diaspora can enrich Syria as well as the countries where Syrians live. Meeting Pearlman afterward, she shared with me her curiosity about the new stories of Syrians after Syria's liberation. If Pearlman compiles a new collection of voices, she might be the first to make a chronicle of Syria since 2011, encompassing three iconic stages from first-hand experience.

Data Availability Statement

The core work of the book *The Home I Worked to Make* (2024), as stated by the author, is based on two key steps: first, conducting, transcribing, and translating the interviews; second, condensing, editing, and arranging the testimonies as text; and finally, obtaining interviewees' approval of their narratives and, to protect the anonymity and safety of interviewees given their circumstances, whether they preferred to use their real name or a pseudonym. The raw audio-recorded and transcribed interviews are not publicly available.

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