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### Book and Exhibition Review

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#### BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

**Review of *Heading Home: Motherhood, Work and the Failed Promise of Equality*, by Shani Orgad, New York: Columbia University Press, £25.00. Hardback, 2018, ISBN: 9780231184724**

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Book review of Shani Orgad's *Heading Home: Motherhood, Work and the Failed Promise of Equality*.

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In the first episode of Season Two of *Motherland* (BBC2), a British television comedy about 'the traumas of middle-class motherhood', Julia struggles to articulate her institutive resentments towards 'supermother' Meg. Meg is new to the neighbourhood and she seems to combine, apparently effortlessly, her high-powered job and parenting her five children, while Julia is constantly exposed as failing in both her family and working life. Responding to an accusation that her resentment towards Meg is 'unfeminist', Julia bitterly retorts "its unfeminist of *her*. I thought we all agreed, *as feminists*, that nowadays its 'unfeminist' to try and have it all." The dream of 'having it all' – of being an accomplished, ambitious, successful career woman in the workplace as well as being a nurturing, involved, calm and gentle mother in the home – has become a source of tyranny in Julia's life. She is beset by irreconcilable demands from her children, their school and her unsympathetic boss, completely neglected by her absent husband and haunted by the feeling that everyone else is somehow thriving under the 'new sexual contract'.

It is this complex knot of disjuncture, between the scripts of 'supermotherhood' and its messy and often unattainable reality, that Shani Orgad's *Heading Home* sets out to unpick. Orgad asks, in a climate when media representations and government policy insist that gender equality is structurally possible and that women can – and should – combine parenting and work with freedom, why do many women opt to leave the labour market when they become mothers and 'head home'? How do they articulate those decisions – and, perhaps most importantly, are they really 'decisions' at all?

*Heading Home* examines the gap between cultural and policy representations of the new sexual contract and the lived experience of middle-class women in London who have left the labour force to raise their children. Drawing on rich interview data, and representations of 'having it all' from advertising, film, memes, news, television, social media, policy reports and political speeches, Orgad unwinds the tapestry of gender equality that serve as a backdrop to her respondents' lives, and holds the threads up to the light. The stories she tells of her respondents are at once heartbreaking, infuriating and deeply resonant. She shows the reader a complex and nuanced world between fantasy ideals, and the constraints and disappointments of everyday life. The mothers (and a handful of fathers) in her research occupy a world

of compromise, painful accommodation, routine bargaining, and (occasionally) resolution, but often resolution that is temporary and unsatisfying. Despite their talent, ambition, education and aspiration, the women of her research have all decided to leave the labour force, and put the careers that they had constructed for themselves on hold (sometimes permanently) in order to dedicate themselves to raising their children. *Heading Home* seeks to understand the complex accounting that women do when they make these choices, in the wake of contemporary liberal feminism and the growing dominance of neoliberalism.

The book is organized into three sections. Part One, 'Heading Home: Forced Choices' explores the ways that these women narrate their experience to leave their career in a policy and cultural climate that continues to insist they can 'have it all'. We learn of the incommensurability between cultural fantasies of the 'balanced woman' and 'confidence culture' and the realities of toxic work culture and unequal domestic life. In spite of all the research evidence that shows how gaps open up in pay, opportunity, and promotion from the moment that women become pregnant, take maternity leave, give birth, and assume parenting roles, these 'motherhood gaps' and 'leaky pipelines' become constantly recast in culture and policy as somehow caused by *individuals*. And so we see, in the wide range of texts that Orgad analyses, from popular culture to self-help guides; the impossibility of 'having it all' reframed as personal preference, or even as somehow the 'fault' of women, caused by their 'ambition gap' or 'confidence gap'.

Part Two, 'Heading the Home: The Personal Consequences of Forced Choices' unpicks the public myths and visions of stay-at-home motherhood, in all its air-brushed, glorified and idealised resplendence, and analyses how these visions are complexly lived, negotiated and refuted. While, again, public myths of gender and family work to produce highly individualised, even biologically essentialist, understandings of stay-at-home motherhood – women *prefer* 'home-centred' lives, they are '*naturally*' comfortable in caring roles, they are nostalgic for the lives of their mothers and grandmothers – Orgad stunningly demonstrates a deeper and murkier set of affects. These are devastating chapters, that map the circuits of blame and judgement surrounding these mothers. Her respondents are deeply engaged with

and invested in the activities of intensive parenting, yet self-conscious about how this, too, is pathologised. They are busy – volunteering at their childrens' schools, fundraising, coaching – and yet many expressed “discomfort, puzzlement and embarrassment” (2018: 5) when trying to articulate what was satisfying in their current life. One of the incredible features of *Heading Home* is how it so powerfully exposes and disturbs our enduring ideas about what counts as ‘work’ or meaningful labour: Orgad deliberately refuses the terms ‘working’ and ‘nonworking’ mothers, terms which usually seek to pit mothers against one another. And in these chapters we see *both* how relentless ‘mothers’ work’ is, *and* how this crucial reproductive labour is constantly denigrated, trivialised and made to seem superficial, sometimes and most painfully, by family members – our own mothers, partners, and even ourselves.

In the final chapters of Part Three, ‘Heading Where? Curbed Desires’, Orgad turns her analytic lens toward the new employment paradigm of the gig economy and flexibilised work.

Examining emergent worker subjectivities such as the ‘mompreneurs’, these chapters demonstrate how the kinds of accounting that mothers do around work and labour make them, in some ways, the perfect cultural subjects for neoliberalised work. As Orgad deftly shows through her selection of cultural and policy objects, the conservative currents of popular neoliberal feminism tend to stress ‘feminist’ personal change *within* corporate capitalism. And thus the status quo is maintained, even in the face of her respondents’ deep frustrations and their desire for a different, feminist, future.

This book follows a rich feminist tradition of research which attends to the inner lives of women, and reflects on how these imaginaries are populated with desires and fantasies, as well as frustrations and boredom. And what an excellent listener Orgad is: so carefully attuned to what her respondents say – the commonsense scripts that are so easily internalised, to be repeated like a magic trick when asked to account for their ‘choices’ even when they are experienced as anything but choice. And also, crucially, she attends to what her respondents are *not* able to say – the “pauses, silences, incomplete sentences” (2018: 47) – all of this ‘great unspoken’ is central to the analysis of *Heading Home*. It is Orgad’s deep attention to the stuttering,

the tautological phrases, the rhetorical questions, the impossibility of articulation at the heart of mothering mythologies, that makes her analysis so painfully resonant.

This is an extremely timely and crucial book. In the UK, from 2018 onwards, organisations with more than 250 employees are now legally required to publicly report their gender pay gaps, defined as the percentage difference between men's and women's median hourly earnings, across all jobs. The data has been devastating: eight in ten organisations have a gender pay gap that favours men, and the gender pay gap starts to open up once employees reach the age of thirty; in other words, these gaps open up at the age when women become mothers. The lexicon developed by employment researchers to explain these patterns – 'the leaky pipeline', 'the motherhood penalty' – have now begun to leak out into public debate, alongside a proliferation of industry initiatives which seek to prioritise and take meaningful action on gender equality. This book tracks the emotional impacts of these structural failings around the promise of equality.

This book consciously focusing upon the lives of privileged mothers, middle-class mothers, living in London, who have 'headed home' and withdrawn (at least temporarily) from their high-powered and well-paid jobs, and most are able to live comfortably on their husband's or partner's single salary. Orgad details their labour lives, pre-motherhood; these women worked as lawyers, artists, accountants, managers, journalists, doctors, academics, engineers, teachers, and the appendices detail the secure upper middle-class or established middle class of the lives detailed in the pages within. This book offers a valuable contribution to the welcome sociological return of 'studying up' – and for the purpose of better understanding how those with power, influence and resources make their choices over how they will live. In doing so, this field of sociological work helps us to better understand how social institutions are sustained. 'Studying up' also helps thicken our sense of what gendered life and struggle looks like – even for those *with* material advantage and autonomy – and how 'choice' (that term so beloved in liberal feminism) is "always made within constraint" (2018: 17).

This is a beautifully written and powerfully resonant book. It captures the complicated emotional lives of women who are caught between 'gender equality'

myth-making and the stubborn and unshifting cultural scripts around femininity, home, work and value. These are women from a particular class, generation, and city, but there is, as Orgad shows, much to be learned from listening carefully to their lives and experiences, and with the deep empathy and curiosity that underpins *Heading Home*.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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