

Mai Al-Nakib

The professor and author reflects on coming of age in the diversity of 1980s Kuwait

A professor of comparative literature at Kuwait University and a published writer, Mai Al-Nakib always juggles a number of projects. Currently, she's judging the Kuwait Film Festival and developing a research paper titled 'Travelling Postcards: Retracing Kuwait's Modernity'

'When I'm writing, I like to feel I have a clear horizon, to quote Hitchcock,' says Mai Al-Nakib, a Kuwaiti writer and professor. 'Like I have a whole day ahead of me and don't have any obligations except to write.' But between teaching literature classes at Kuwait University this semester, serving on the jury of the first annual Kuwait Film Festival and preparing to present a research paper at the American University of Kuwait's Gulf Studies Symposium, days with a 'clear horizon' are hard to come by. Still, Al-Nakib finds time to write in the cracks between her schedule.

She's in the process of completing a new novel, her second work since she published 'The Hidden Light of Objects' in 2014 – a collection of interconnected short stories that present overlooked moments of everyday life in 1980s cosmopolitan Kuwait and elsewhere.

Al-Nakib's conversation, like her prose, is lucid and precise as she segues from French philosopher Gilles

Writer: Marziah Rashid
Photographer: Huda Alabdulmughni





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Deleuze's critical theory to her confluence of cultural identities. Her personal history – a 'tangle of languages and places' – suggests that her choice of specialisation in comparative literature is not coincidental: she's lived in Kuwait, the UK and Missouri, where she grew up, and Rhode Island, where she completed her PhD at Brown University. 'In this branch of literature, you're always bringing two seemingly disparate things together,' she says. 'My particular background has given me an instinctual capacity to always see things from more than one perspective.'

MR **What's your syllabus for a typical semester like?**

MA In my introduction to comparative literature class we've read Albert Camus' 'The Outsider' alongside Kamel Daoud's 'The Meursault Investigation', which reimagines Camus' work from the point of view of the Arab. I tend to put together different texts that speak to each other, but also mix up the visual with the literary. We look at ekphrastic poems, which I put side by side with the paintings they refer to. I bring the material back to Kuwait. I frame it from a lens of comparative study, which is that when you look at a situation being expressed in one particular text, you always bring it back to what you're experiencing. I think that makes it more vivid and urgent. I like to make the material relevant to my students' lives and to the way they see or might begin to see the world.

MR **Your book 'The Hidden Light of Objects' is partly based on your coming of age in Kuwait in the 1980s. What was that time like?**

MA Kuwait in the 1970s and 1980s had a very diverse community. My parents themselves had a very cosmopolitan background. My mother grew up in Pune, India and didn't move to Kuwait until she was 10 years

01 A 1950s clock tower on Kuwait University's Shuwaikh Campus

02 'I think literature is productive,' Al-Nakib says. 'It's not a fantasy or escape. Sometimes you read a book and it changes the way you live in the world'





old, which is when she started learning Arabic. My dad's mother was Lebanese and her mother was Turkish. He grew up in Basra and came to Kuwait when he was 14. He was 16 when he graduated from the Shuwaikh Secondary School and went to Vienna to study medicine – so he went from Arabic to German and then, when he moved to the US to do his medical residency, to English.

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مي النقيب

- MR **What are some of your memories from growing up?**
MA One of the things that was key to me and turned me into a reader and writer is the Family Bookshop – the oldest bookstore in Kuwait – in what is now known as Old Salmiya. It was a half-pedestrian, half-commercial residential area where you would see a mix of people shopping and socialising, and where the shops were mostly local. A lot of my childhood was also set in the American School of Kuwait – there the kids were from all over the world, some of them half-Kuwaiti and half something else. Growing up surrounded by all that diversity affected my sense of self and place, and the way I saw Kuwait.

- MR **Tell us about the new novel you're working on.**
MA It's almost done now. It's a book about formidable women



and tells the story of five female characters whose lives are intertwined – it's a polyphonic novel with different voices. It traces a kind of geographical map across the Middle East, India and the US, so place really matters in it, as well as the idea of the past and how it impinges on the present, because it's a generational book.

- MR **You're also on the jury of the Kuwait Film Festival. What's your background in film?**

- MA We've had more than 10 years of a film week here at Kuwait University, which is something that I put together. I was also the liaison between the Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies (AGAPS) and the Middle Eastern Studies Association's film festival. Along with AGAPS, I helped draw the attention of Gulf filmmakers to that festival, because there weren't a lot of regional filmmakers sending their work and it's important to get those films to that particular audience, which is made up of academics who might write about or teach

03 Al-Nakib feels she impacts her students at Kuwait University in a way she wouldn't be able to anywhere else. 'Here, I'm making a difference in my community as a teacher,' she says



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them. The Kuwait Film Festival is, for the moment, specifically for Kuwaiti films. They're putting together a really high calibre set of workshops during the week of the festival and they'll also be screening films.

MR **Gilles Deleuze turns up as a critical framework in a lot of your scholarly writing.**

MA I'm drawn to his notion that philosophy, literature and art create concepts, perceptions and feelings and can produce actual effects in the world. I carry with me traces of who I am as a Kuwaiti. Deleuze's work resonated with my particular traces – cultural, linguistic, all of it – and I found it to be relevant to many things I'm interested in about the region. I've written about Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani from the perspective of Deleuze's 'symptomatology' – how the artist or writer does a diagnosis of society, almost like a physician. Kanafani had done that for Kuwait. He lived in Kuwait in his early years and Kuwait features in a number of his stories, most unforgettably in 'Men in the Sun'. I did what Deleuze told us to do, which is to put ideas to use in interesting ways that unfold new ways of thinking. It's an endless way of looking at and reading Middle Eastern culture.

04 As a former student in Kuwait University's Department of English herself, Al-Nakib earned a scholarship that paved the way for her to eventually return as a faculty member