CONVERSATIONS

A Saga About Three Generations of Kuwaiti Women Across the Middle East and America

Mai Al-Nakib, author of "An Unlasting Home," on the Middle Eastern melting pot and finding empowerment in not belonging

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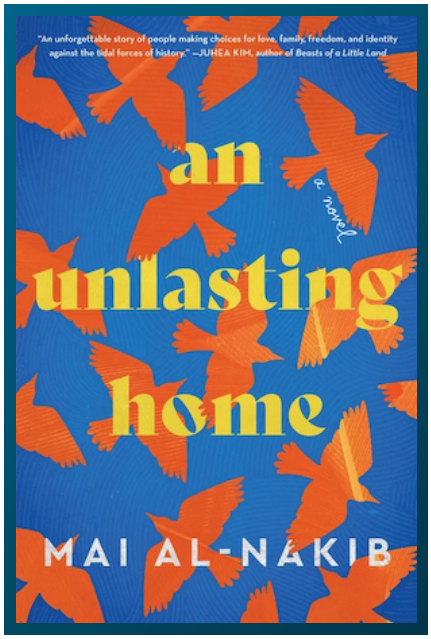
A few years ago, during the initial craze of 23andMe, I received a gleeful call from my Turkish mother who had just taken the test. *We have*

Serbian, Bulgarian, and Italian blood! Considering her deep familial ties to the Ottoman Empire, I didn't find this particularly surprising. Rather it was her *enthusiasm* at the now proven connectivity to these other lands that piqued my interest. The results of this test opened up a new world of curiosity for her as she began to draw parallels between her habits and her newfound cultural roots. Everything now had a reasoning that could be traced back to an ancestor—diet, skin complexion, mannerisms, creative leanings.



But what if she were able to trace the particular family member from each country? What if she could learn about the serendipitous moments that triggered each individual to cross paths with the other and bring her into existence? How would the knowledge of their stories impact the course of her life?

In her debut novel, *An Unlasting Home*, Mai Al-Nakib takes us on this very journey. Through the culturally rich stories of four female characters—Lulwa, Yasmine, Noura, Maria—we venture across the globe from Kuwait to Turkey to India to America, as their tales knit together to create the fifth character and protagonist, Sara. A professor of philosophy at the University of Kuwait, Sara finds herself on trial for blasphemy after an ultra-conservative law is passed, making the act a penal offense. As Sara awaits the results of her conviction, she reckons with the stories of these four women and must now decide what *her* story will be.

Despite the 6,317 miles between New York and Kuwait, I sat down with Al-Nakib over Zoom. Our respective bookshelves heaving with multicolored books in the background, we spoke in depth about the Middle Eastern melting pot and finding empowerment in not belonging.

Amy Omar: Your novel is such a refreshing and eye-opening account of just how culturally connected we, in this case the Middle East, really are. In many ways, like the countries in the Middle East, Kuwait is a confluence of many different cultures, being the crossroads of trade and political turnover. There are many touching moments of ethnically different groups living in peace amongst one another. Do you think this has helped foster more of an openness to other cultures? How did this amalgamation affect your upbringing and how is this different today?

MAN: The novel attempts to capture the sense of movement and migration that has always existed in Kuwait. As a port town, pre-oil, because of maritime and overland trade, Kuwait was a crossing point, linking the Arabian Peninsula, India, Africa, Iraq, and Iran. This intersection of cultures could be experienced in the language, music, food, and, of course, the people themselves. All this encouraged an openness to other cultures, a worldliness and acceptance of difference. This sensibility lasted into the post-oil period, I would say up until the 1980s, when I came of age. After the invasion, however, Kuwait turned inward, developing a more defensive, siege mentality. This is understandable as a response to the invasion, but because as a nation we haven't fully metabolized the trauma of the invasion or its

outcomes, it has had some negative effects. *An Unlasting Home* attempts to deal with this through Noura's complicated relationship with Kuwait, as well as Sara's.

Kuwait is now going through a hyper-nationalist, borderline xenophobic moment in its attitude and policies toward migrant workers and non-Kuwaiti residents. The unresolved issue of the stateless *bidoun* population—long-standing members of Kuwaiti society who continue unfairly to be denied citizenship—is simply untenable. This all has to do with both a sense of entitlement amongst the population and their fear that by sharing rights or awarding citizenship to others, they will lose their own privileges. In my opinion, this attitude poses an existential threat to the very survival of the country. This may sound apocalyptic, but these types of social fissures tend not to end well for nation-states. Combined with our lack of concern over environmental degradation and our lack of preparedness for a post-oil economy, the future doesn't look bright. I think all of this is reflected in the novel.

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AO: On the topic of migrant workers, I'm really intrigued by Maria's storyline. Maria sacrifices her family in India and moves to Kuwait and then to America to raise Sara and Karim while their mother, Noura works. Historically, the narrative of the caretakers has been greatly overlooked. Why was it important to tell Maria's story alongside Sara's other female ancestors? How does her

backstory shed light on the other stories?

MAN: The stories of relationships that develop between domestic helpers and the children they care for is underrepresented in Kuwait and elsewhere too, and I felt this was an important story to tell. Maria leaves her own children behind in India to care for the children of strangers in Kuwait. She does this to ensure the survival of her children, but over time, these other children, Karim and Sara, become her children, too. Maria becomes the emotional center of Karim and Sara's lives, filling in the gaps left by their parents.

Because Maria is a second mother to Sara, she plays as significant a role as the other women in Sara's life. In aligning her story with the stories of the other women, it becomes clear how, as women, as mothers, they share many of the same obstacles and aspirations. It doesn't matter where they are from—whether Turkey, Lebanon, India, Iraq, Kuwait—these women want similar things: better lives for their children and for themselves.

AO: I'd like to talk about the men in your novel. You have these characters like Dr. Sherif and Mubarak who are examples of this type of man who we don't really talk about. They are the type of men who aren't outwardly advocating for women's rights, but in subtle ways, really support the women in their lives. It was really refreshing to see a non-stereotypical Middle Eastern narrative of a father figure who, for example, didn't disallow their daughters to study or work.

MAN: It mattered to me to convey these examples of supportive fathers, brothers, even unrelated men like Dr. Sherif, who believes so much in Yasmine's talent and wants her to succeed as a writer. It's too easy to portray men, especially men from the Middle East, in the stereotypical, Orientalist way you mention; but the reality is so much more complex and interesting.

"What holds these women back is less one individual man and more an overarching patriarchal force that structures their lives, limits their decisions, shapes their choices."

What holds these women back is less one individual man and more an overarching patriarchal force that structures their lives, limits their decisions, shapes their choices. For example, while Yasmine's husband, Marwan, comes closest to the overbearing, sexist husband type, it is in fact the patriarchal system that enables him to control her property, to marry a second wife, to prevent her from working—in short, to keep her under his power. But Yasmine was raised by an open-minded father and she had the support of her father's friend, Dr. Sherif; so not all the men in her life followed that oppressive pattern.

For Noura, also raised by a supportive and loving

father, the social and cultural expectation is that she should follow her husband back to Kuwait. This prevents her from fulfilling her ambition of going into politics in the United States. The choice for Noura is either to divorce her husband, who she loves, or to submit to his decision for the family. And yet Tarek seems so completely oblivious of his own privilege to decide on her behalf; he takes it for granted. It's these patriarchal forces that bind these women, regardless of the support some of the men in their lives may provide.

AO: The idea of a homeland identity has always been fascinating to me; often we end up attaching ourselves to a homeland different from the one of our birth. I was particularly interested in Noura's detachment from Kuwait and Sara's attachment to it. Noura clearly saw the lack of opportunities for women in Kuwait, but Sara is still hopeful. Why does she return to Kuwait?

MAN: In many ways Noura grew up in a much more hopeful Kuwait, so it's unexpected that she would be the one to want to leave in the early 1970s, when the promise of its future was still viable and exciting. But it was her political acumen that enabled her to perceive the cracks before anyone else. Sara grows up feeling out of place in Kuwait. She wants to be American. Maybe she picks up on some of her mother's sense of loss; and it's her mother who decides to enroll her and Karim in an American school [in Kuwait] once they return from the United States, which alienates her from her country even further.

But once Sara moves back to America and achieves everything she thinks she wants—a great job, a nice

boyfriend—it turns out not to be enough. Unlike her brother, Karim, she doesn't feel at home there. Karim always knew, as a gay boy, that Kuwait could never be a home for him. He leaves with no regrets, no looking back. That is, I think, a privilege afforded to him as a man. He has the freedom to sever ties in a way Sara cannot. Sara isn't forced to return, but she has subconsciously internalized the experiences of her grandmothers, her mother, and Maria, and, through them, is drawn back. She senses that it is only in Kuwait that she can piece together the puzzle of these generations of women and the effects they have had on her.

AO: One of the central themes of *An Unlasting Home* is lack of permanence—in the physical home, politics, relationships. For better or worse, the lack of stability forces the characters to stay on their toes. Do you think this awareness of the lack of stability actually drives the characters, by not allowing them to "settle down"?

MAN: That's really well put. In some cases, they have to move for reasons beyond their control—to follow husbands, to escape poverty, and so on. Sometimes the move is chosen, even if circumstances force the choice—as is true for Yasmine and Maria. But for all of them, I think, a sense of being *in place* or of belonging is elusive. There are times or places where they seem to almost belong—Lulwa in Pune, Noura in St. Louis—but that inevitably gets disrupted. And then there are instances where they force themselves to stay put in the space of non-belonging, and it seems almost perverse, but there is something that discomfort provides to them. This is true of Sheikha, staying with her brutal husband; and of Lulwa, allowing herself to be held captive for seven years by her mother, Sheikha; and of Noura, staying put in Kuwait long after she could have gone.

There is a degree of empowerment in not

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belonging; it allows you to pivot and to create possibilities for yourself that are often fruitful. This is the case for Maria, moving herself from Goa to Pune and then to Kuwait, making a life for her

of empowerment in not belonging; it allows you to pivot and to create possibilities for yourself that are often fruitful."

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AMY OMAR

ul belonging as well. In some ways, all of the women who shaped her have made it possible for her, finally, to let go of this place that was never completely hers anyway. Sara carries her home with her in the form of the stories that she manages to rescue from oblivion and make her own. It's only at that point that she can let go and move on.

AO: Growing up, you spent a lot of time in America. In a way you had the best of both worlds—summers in the U.S. and the rest of the year in Kuwait. Do you feel like your time in America impacted how you view the world, your career, and self in a way that would've been different if you had just grown up in Kuwait?

MAN: Very much so. I lived in America until I was about six, and, like Sara, it really did affect how I saw myself. My first language was English; I didn't learn Arabic until I returned to Kuwait. We didn't speak Arabic at home, so I learned it at school, in the one class dedicated to it. My parents spoke Arabic with each other, but English with my sisters and me. My mother grew up in India, and her first language was English, too. So, when the question of a "mother

double perspective that provides overlooked insights. I appreciate being between two worlds, two languages.

AO: In what ways did you feel different than your peers in Kuwait?

"In Kuwait, we tend to swing between extreme conservatism and moderate openness."

MAN: When I was a teenager, I wanted so much more freedom, a wild freedom, and I couldn't understand the limits. To be honest, I don't think I've changed that much!

The things that bothered me when I was 14 still bother me now. I still have issues with many of our so-called customs and traditions, especially when they're used to legitimate hypocrisy or injustice.

AO: I have to ask, how much of Sara's blasphemy trial is your attempt at rewriting history, a history that could have been your personal story if an amendment to Article 111 of the Penal Code had been passed? Did it ever cross your mind that, "This could have been me"?

MAN: Yes, and in fact, when I was a few years into writing this novel, it actually happened to a colleague in the *philosophy* department! She was accused of blasphemy. It wasn't a capital crime, but it was still an offense she could have been fined or imprisoned for. The case was dismissed, but it took a few months, and that level of stress is terrible.

In Kuwait, we tend to swing between extreme conservatism and moderate openness. After 2013, Kuwait seemed less conservative than it had been. This may have had to do with the residual effects of the Arab Spring, or maybe the shock of the amendment to the blasphemy law that almost passed. In any case, there was a shift away from the conservatism that had dominated since the 1990s. Now it seems like we're swinging back again toward conservatism, and there have been several recent incidents targeting women specifically. That said, women have become more vocal than ever and are pushing back. Groups like Abolish 153 are fighting to overturn domestic violence laws, and we've had a #MeToo movement here also. It's an uphill battle because the pressures against women remain

entrenched, but it's really heartening to see the increased advocacy.

About the Author

Amy Omar is a writer, entertainment lawyer and aspiring filmmaker based in New York. Her writing ranges from short stories to narrative essays, poetry and screenplays. She is a recipient of Wavelength Productions' Wave Grant for first time female filmmakers and will be directing her first short film, "Breaking Fast with a Coca Cola" this June. You can find her work on Medium, Twitter and Instagram.

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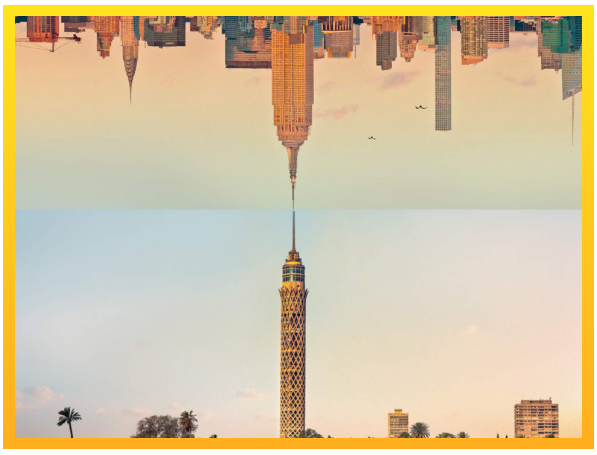

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