



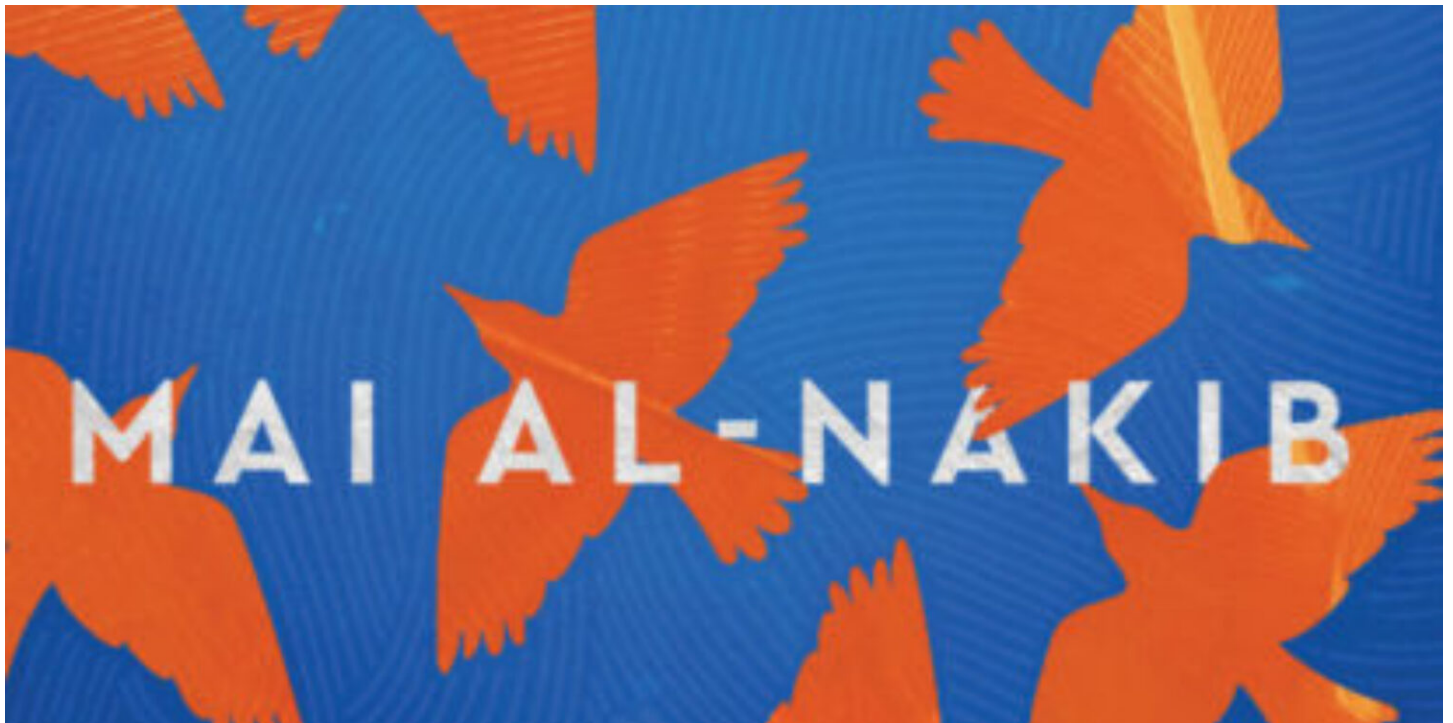
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REVIEW (LONG READ): AN UNLASTING HOME BY MAI AL- NAKIB

04 April '23



Review by Alia Ragab.

With thanks to Saqi for the review copy of the book.

Information on the book can be found [here](https://saqibooks.com/books/saqi/an-unlasting-home/)
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[12 minute read]

“So here I am—unlikely caretaker of an ancient parrot, accidental collector
of fading traces—stuck in place.”

Bebe Mitu, our unexpected parrot protagonist, is a consistent figure in Mai al-Nakib's **An Unlasting Home**, the debut novel of the Kuwaiti writer and Professor of English and Comparative Literature. A transnational and intergenerational novel that spans five family trees, three generations, and many countries. United through Kuwait, Al-Nakib's characters find themselves constantly drawn back there, while moving incessantly, building unlasting homes across the world. Left over are Sara and Bebe Mitu, guardians of the family's history.

Al-Nakib describes writing (<https://arablit.org/2014/07/25/mai-al-nakib-and-writing-histories-thats-not-our-version-of-things-how-dare-she/>) her award winning short story collection, **The Hidden Light of Objects** (2014), as a way to “try to make some sense out of the acute changes the country had undergone since 1990 and especially after 2001”. The present novel is a thorough extension of this, exploring Kuwaiti history through the tales of women linked to the country. The frame narrative is set in 2013, as Kuwait University philosophy professor Sara is under trial for blasphemy, a crime that can lead to capital punishment. Though Sara is in a state of inertia, the novel moves across Turkey, Lebanon, India, Iraq, the U.S, and of course Kuwait, as she collects ‘fading traces’ of her family with Bebe Mitu by her side.

In the front matter, we encounter a map that tracks the constant migration of generations of women leading up to Sara. The map looks almost like a bird's eye view of the globe, and reads like a bird migration chart. In the back matter, we find that the novel's title comes from the following quote from James Joyce's **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**:

“Then he was to go away for they were birds ever going and coming, building ever an unlasting home under the eaves of men's houses and ever leaving the homes they had built to wander.”

As in Joyce's passage, where the protagonist is contemplating his own wandering, the movements of al-Nakib's characters are constantly linked to the migration of birds – each home unlasting and seasonal. On each return to Kuwait, we find that homes are not only physically unlasting, but also culturally in flux.

Our journey starts in the old city of Kuwait in the 1920s, where Sara's great-grandmother Sheika grew up in the Kuwaiti harbour. The men of the family would be out in merchant ships, trading along the East African coast and Indian Western coast for most of the year. In monsoon season, the men would go out pearling; it was a community “shaped by weather and water”. Lulwa, the youngest of Sheikha's children and Sara's grandma, is luckily married off to a man she already had her eyes on. Mubarak is a rich Kuwaiti merchant known for his dates from Basra, and has fleets of ships constantly trading jewels between Kuwait and India.

Simultaneously, we are following the story of Yasmine, Sara's paternal grandmother, and her Turkish mother Yeliz. Born in Saida, Yasmine is incredibly studious and skilled at writing, but chooses to move to Basra to teach Arabic literature at a primary school following her father's death. It's in Basra where she meets Marwan, son of the Pasha of Basra, who she marries despite her guardian's reservations (his scepticism is ultimately validated).

Daughter of Lulwa and Sara's mother, Noura, is born in India, but the family is moved back to Kuwait by Mubarak near its independence (1961) to help shape the future of the nation. It is in post-independence Kuwait that Lulwa and Yasmine meet, beginning an intimate friendship and eventual marriage of Noura to Yasmine's son, Tarek. We are also introduced to **ayah** Maria, born in Poona, India, and her life leading up to her move to Kuwait to take care of Noura, who is described to her as "the bird of [Mubarak's] soul".

Noura and Tarek raise Sara and her brother Karim between Kuwait and the U.S. The siblings attend university at Berkeley, where they remained during the Gulf War (1990). Sara goes back to Kuwait after her mother's death, which coincided with the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003), while Karim stays in the U.S., refusing to return.

"[The] bird flew the geography of my genes"

Birds hover above the characters, foreshadowing the migrations to come. Lulwa and Mubarak's happy marriage and memories are tracked through birds: "An assortment of birdcages hung from the tall ceiling [...]. All of them contained birds, which Mama Lulwa sometimes let out to whirl like escaped memories above her head". On Noura and Tarek's honeymoon, "Noura fed the migratory birds [...] Day after day, more birds arrived. [...] Amid gleaming ice and the wonder of birds, Noura and Tarek made their first child".

Birds revive happy memories, mimic the movement forced onto the characters, and are used to explain periods of stasis. By likening women to birds, al-Nakib grants her female characters a certain kind of liberation, and positions their occasional stasis as a natural, protective state. Sara explains that torpor is "a sort of bird hibernation [...] they enter a sleep like state. This allows them to survive harsh conditions"; the only alternative is migration, a migration most characters pursue.

Sara's stasis, likened to a bird in torpor, hibernating but left vulnerable, frames the novel's multiple entangled plotlines. As Sara listens to Bebe Mitu squawking, "sometimes it's Mama Lulwa's voice I hear, other times Baba Mubarak's, or my mother's", she is similarly psychologically trapped within these generational memories. Her physical entrapment, like Bebe Mitu in his cage, is caused by her awaiting her trial under a fictional blasphemy law. Al-Nakib explains that the Kuwaiti penal code does not count blasphemy as a capital offense. In the author's note, she clarifies that though the majority of the elected parliament of 2013 voted to pass such a law, the Emir of Kuwait, who holds authority over all amendments of laws, rejected it.

The novel's reliance on this hypothetical law risks obscuring its more interesting plotlines. leading to a lack nuance in the rise of conservatism being tracked through 'blasphemy'. Fittingly, Salman Rushdie is referred in the novel to convey Kuwait's descent into conservatism, cementing him as an emblem of the risks of free speech. Rushdie's case is by now sensationalised in popular culture, while blasphemy and violence continue to be inextricably linked to the wider Middle East through Islam. As Zain Khaled recently argued (<https://www.thedrftmag.com/after-the-fatwa/>), Rushdie has turned into "a paragon of Western liberalism" – his recent novels have lost their critical edge as he adopts a moralistic, Western-apologetic, appeasing tone. Similarly, **An Unlasting Home** risks essentialising the complexity of cultural and political censure in countries like Kuwait. For a novel that deals with and weaves together the local and global in such beautiful detail, the frame narrative betrays the political, cultural, and social nuances the rest of the novel intricately carves throughout its large chronological scope.

Despite this narrative, political complexity is more than apparent throughout the book. Though Sara claims she is "not politically inclined", she, like many others in the region, is forced into politics due to their chokehold on daily life. Sara begrudgingly and carefully explains regional politics throughout the novel; beyond this, al-Nakib weaves the tales of family history onto her characters' bodies. Top-down politics become physically inescapable as transnational histories are charted within the characters themselves.

Arabic literature has linked the bodies of women to the birth and health of a nation since the early 20th century, and al-Nakib toys with this tradition. She positions women as birds, migrating and nesting in unlasting homes, as men embody grounded, national histories. Nation-building in Sara's narrative is inherently connected to physical, bodily violence. Poignantly, the entrapment grief had on Noura following the Gulf War is also tracked through birds:

"The oily grime stuck their feather dusters together [...] Migratory birds that had instinctually returned to the Gulf for hundreds of years found themselves, without warning, flightless".

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SPOILER ALERT

The text below contains spoilers!

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And there are many other examples. Sheikha's older brother Abdullah drowns while pearling, foreshadowing the industry's collapse in 1925; the 1948 Nakba's displacement of Palestinians who became Kuwait's largest

immigrant group is charted through Nabil and his family (the destruction of a nation connected to the founding of two new ones); Baba Mubarak and Baba Marwan die right before the Islamic Revolution, leaving Noura “grateful her father was not alive to witness it”; Sara’s father is shot following the end of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait for his Basrawi accent (despite being a nationalistic Kuwaiti); the safety Karim finds in exile emphasises the ‘bifurcation’ of Kuwait.

It is perhaps through this embodiment that readers can best complicate al-Nakib’s fictionalised blasphemy law. Though too straightforward of an image for Islamic conservatism, it is an extension of violence that is inextricably linked with states (re)fabricating their identity. In the novel, this is not just in the case of Kuwait, but in the Nakba of 1948, and the destruction of Iraq by the U.S. post-9/11, to name only a few examples.

“Bebe Mitu comes with me, wherever I end up.” (p.433)

The novel is a beautiful exploration of the historical and cultural forces that shaped and continue to shape Sara’s Kuwaiti lineage, as al-Nakib weaves this history into her characters and their surroundings. Sara, with her ancient parrot guardian by her side, bravely faces both the past and present of a transnational Kuwait.

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