

SPECIAL REPORT

insight

A conversation with **Mai Al-Nakib**

'The Hidden Light of Objects' decidedly fiction

Literature has ability to humanize

By **Cintra Fernandes**
Arab Times Staff

IN this special feature, Kuwaiti Author Mai Al-Nakib, discusses several aspects of *The Hidden Light of Objects*, her debut collection of short stories, bringing to the fore pertinent issues in Kuwaiti society today.

Question: Have you come to the end of your book readings? How would you describe the experience of having your first book published? What has the overall reception been?

Answer: My book, *The Hidden Light of Objects*, was released by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing in hardback in the MENA region, the UK, and Europe in April 2014 and Australia and India in June 2014. It was launched at the Literary Majlis in Doha and at the Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait this April, followed by readings at various other venues in Kuwait. I also did readings in the UK this August—first at the Mosaic Rooms in London, and then at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. I'll be traveling to Sydney this December. The book will be released in hardback in the United States in January 2015, and I will be doing a number of readings across the US at that time. The paperback release is scheduled for spring 2015 in the MENA region, the UK, and Europe. I'll be presenting at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in March 2015. It's been a busy year!

On the one hand, the experience of having my book published has been immensely rewarding. Based on a number of reviews in various newspapers and magazines, I'm happy to say that the reception has been quite positive so far. On the other hand, the experience of having my book out in the world is not quite what I expected. *The Hidden Light of Objects* no longer feels like it belongs to me; it belongs to its readers now. This is as it should be; but the sense of separation or disjunction I feel in relation to the collection is not something I anticipated in advance.

Q: When did you start writing the book? How long did it take until it was finally published?

A: I began to write the stories that would comprise *The Hidden Light of Objects* in 2006. Because of my academic commitments, I was only able to focus on writing fiction during the summers. So there were large gaps of time between the writing of each story. I was able to really concentrate on the collection from 2007 to 2008, when I was on sabbatical. I signed the contract with Bloomsbury in May 2012, and the book was published in April 2014.

Q: Why did you choose to write short stories instead of a novel for your debut endeavour?

A: As a form, short stories are deceptively straightforward. I started with short stories because I believed they would be more manageable than the longer novel form. In some ways, this turned out to be true. Short stories are limited in length, so there is always a sense that the end will soon arrive. The short story tends to focus attention, draw the reader in quickly, and then move along at a sharper clip than the more leisurely novel. But while the concentration of the short story form may appear less unwieldy than the novel, that does not necessarily make it any less demanding. In some ways, the restrictions of the short story make it more difficult to express what you might want to. Soon into the process of writing the stories, I began to realize that they were connected to each other, that, in fact, I was writing a collection and not individual pieces. Because I thought of the stories as part of a larger structure with linked components early into the process of writing them, I believe *The Hidden Light of Objects* has prepared me well for writing a novel. I was quite lucky to be able to publish my short story collection first; this is not often the case.

Q: Why did you choose to write in English?

A: As a result of personal and historical contingencies, English is my first language. Writing in English is not a choice for me. I can speak, read, and write in Arabic, among other languages, but I do not feel sufficiently fluent to write fiction in any language other than English. I think in English and consider it to be my mother tongue. This might strike some as problematic, but not me. It might be the case that as an Arab writing in English I will not be sufficiently equipped to express specific affects or experiences only Arabic can express. However, as an Arab writing in English I am in a position to express a different range of affects and experiences, equally significant. Luckily, literature is a capacious field, with room enough for all kinds of expressions. I am baffled by those who argue that all Arab writers should write in Arabic or that those who

write in French or English, especially if they are based in the Middle East, are in some way deficient or incapable of producing anything relevant. Arabic is not under threat of eradication and so, as far as I'm concerned, the Middle East can easily accommodate some literary and linguistic diversity. Also, thanks to the art of translation, writing in English will not necessarily limit readers in this region or beyond.

Q: The trope of objects is a common thread woven through most of the stories in your collection. Why did you choose to write about objects?

A: It's not so much that I chose to write about objects as objects found their way into the stories. The trope of objects was one of a number of elements that kept recurring as I was writing the stories, which made it clear to me that they were connected. The idea that objects have hidden lives is something we understand as children but tend to forget as adults. But when we encounter an object that meant something to us as a child, it can trigger a singular, sometimes disturbing sensation. My stories attempt to explore why this sensation matters. My feeling is that it can loosen up the seeming rigidity of the present, remind us of alternatives we might have taken for granted when we were younger and have forgotten about later in life. It's never easy to realize that the way your life happens to be going at the moment is not the only way it could have gone, and that, once upon a time, ten or twenty years ago, when you wore that particular yellow sweater now eaten by moths, you imagined your life would be completely different. My stories attempt to trace some of the strange effects random objects can have and some of the changes they can precipitate.

Q: In what way, if any, are the stories autobiographical?

A: This is not an autobiographical collection, despite the fact that aspects of my life and my experiences find their way into my writing. It's impossible to completely escape the traces that make us who we are, and these traces will inevitably pierce through the writing. Nonetheless, the stories in *The Hidden Light of Objects* are decidedly fiction. Fiction makes it possible to escape or transform personal traces; to imagine other worlds; to inhabit unfamiliar points of view; to connect to people and places and times that might not be possible otherwise. To me, this is a far more stimulating and expansive way to read than trying to decipher whether elements in a story are autobiographical or not.

Q: Nostalgia seems to be a cornerstone of your writing. I find that in Kuwait today, a lot of the artistic discourse is centred on how things used to be, everybody seems to be looking back at the good old days. Can you shed some light on what has caused this?

A: Memory, time (the relationship between past, present, and future), the processes of recollection and remembering are all central concerns for me. Nostalgia is trickier, and I think my writing moves back and forth in relation to it. At times it may seem like a character or story falls into nostalgic longing, but almost always, the stories whip back against that pillow of sentimentalism. Nostalgia can be an effective tool if it prompts some urgent critical awareness of the present. But a backward looking nostalgia that presents the past as a model of perfection to which we should return is both idealistic and potentially dangerous. My stories may look back, even nostalgically, but they do so as a way to offer alternative narratives about Kuwait and the Middle East than the ones that dominate today and that were being presented as definitive post-invasion and, especially, post-9/11 (both in the Middle East itself and in the West). The idea that this part of the world could only be viewed (or could only view itself) as conservative, traditional, Islamist, terrorist, orthodox, and so on, felt incredibly stifling and inaccurate to me. My stories were written, in part, as a way out of all that for myself (and, perhaps, for readers, though I was not thinking about potential readers at the time). The new attentiveness to the past among a younger generation in Kuwait might be driven by something similar. I cannot speak for the specific motivations of individuals, but maybe this tendency you've identified expresses a desire to open ourselves up to versions of life other than (or even contrary to) what appears to be the most widespread. A more varied and pluralistic Kuwait. It doesn't matter whether or not these versions match up to the "actual" past; only that the versions of the past being referred to or imagined are seen as varied, cosmopolitan, diverse, and so on. That does seem to be the case, and it will be interesting to see where this emergent tendency goes.



(Top): Mai Al-Nakib at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. (Above): 'The Hidden Light of Objects' seen on display.

biography

Mai Al-Nakib is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Kuwait University. She is author of *The Hidden Light of Objects* (published by Bloomsbury in April 2014). Her collection of short stories has been nominated for the Edinburgh International Book Festival's First Book Award. You can vote for *The Hidden Light of*

Objects before the 17 October 2014 deadline at:

www.edbookfest.co.uk/the-festival

#first-book-award/vote?book=4718

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Q: During your readings, you have talked about Kuwait's historic cosmopolitanism. Is Kuwait cosmopolitan today? How would you describe this brand of cosmopolitanism post the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait?

A: In my talk at Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya last April, I discussed language and cosmopolitanism in Kuwait in relation to my collection. As a thriving commercial port town since the 1700s, Kuwait's population was accustomed to travel and movement, developed canny negotiating capacities, and expressed an outward-looking slant on the world. Historically, Kuwait and its population have tended to be globally interactive, managing to maintain autonomy over centuries. I would argue Kuwait's past successes were a result precisely of its outward-looking, engaged, generally tolerant sensibility. This particular point of view also defined the early years of Kuwait's establishment as a modern nation-state, all the way into the late 1970s and early 1980s. After 1991, Kuwait's historical cosmopolitanism began to recede. In some ways, a more inward-looking attitude is understandable; interactive policies and tolerance seemed to have brought nothing but catastrophe to the country, so it was believed something drastic and different needed to be done. But the move toward insularity and an imagined cultural or national purity has been detrimental to the country. Kuwait is a heterogeneous place: the majority of its inhabitants are non-citizens and come from all over the world, and the citizens themselves are a diverse mix.

While the composition of the demographic has changed from what it was before the invasion (more Bedouin, less Palestinian, for example), it remains as varied as it ever was. The conditions for cosmopolitanism exist in Kuwait today like they always have. Whether or not cosmopolitanism becomes a widespread sensibility once again has to do with how those within this heterogeneous community live and engage with each other, how open we are to difference. Remembering our cosmopolitan past might elicit a change in attitude in the present. One hopes anyway.

Q: It is very encouraging that your collection includes stories of expatriates living in Kuwait. Of late there seems to be a regression into an 'us and them' type of a situation. Is there hope for the outsider?

A: I agree that "us versus them" divisions structure the social, political, economic, and religious order in Kuwait, as in many other places. Citizenship laws, among other laws, normalize these divisions. There are, of course, more ethical ways to effectively organize and live in any community. Whether or not we get there has to do with how successful we are in overhauling the system of education so that kids learn early on about rights, responsibilities, how to think critically, and what it actually means to live ethically in a community among individuals who are not exactly the same as you are. This is certainly not what's being taught in public schools in Kuwait today. By the time kids arrive at university, it's too

late. Unless this happens, I don't see how the divisive attitudes on the rise in Kuwait (and in the Middle East more generally) can change. If the system of education were to be overhauled, we'd have a generation with an alternative sensibility to the one that dominates today in about ten to twenty years. Sadly, I see no signs of movement in that direction.

Q: Your collection features the quotidian lives of people in this region. Do you feel that the mainstream media has failed to engage the personal with the political?

A: Mainstream media tend not to depict the personal or everyday aspects of life in the Middle East. This is a problem that has been with us for a long time and, as we know, Edward Said has written about it extensively and eloquently. In fact, Said argues that literature is the discourse that can do what mainstream media cannot. Literature can humanize; it can convey nuances; it can uncover overlooked specificities; in short, it can offer perspectives and images that counter familiar and harmful stereotypes. Anyone genuinely interested in the Middle East would learn more by reading a few novels, short stories, or poems by great writers from this region than they would watching CNN or the BBC.

Q: There is a beautiful progression in your stories — from the wonder of childhood to the restless and confusing teenage years to middle aged disappointment. Is there a happy ending for the Arab youth in sight?

A: Given the horrific events of this summer, I cannot be optimistic for Arab youth at present. In addition to ongoing threats of violence, the worrying standard of public education also gives little cause for optimism. Without a radical transformation of the system of public education in the region, I worry about our future. Nonetheless, transformation is always possible, and young people themselves are often the instigators of such changes, pushing against restrictions and attempting to open up opportunities for themselves. As for the experiences my stories depict—the wonders of childhood, the confusing but exhilarating teenage years, the sobering realities of aging—these are not limited to Arabs.

Q: Many of your characters seem to be itinerants in one way or another. In today's globalised world, do any of us really belong to a place?

A: The question of belonging (or not) is of particular interest to me and each of the stories engages it differently. Not belonging to a place is commonly depicted and experienced as painful. Dislocation brought on by war, economic deprivation, political or religious persecution, or whatever else can produce terrible hardship and an intense sense of alienation for those forced to leave their homes behind. For many in the world today, for a wide range of complicated reasons (globalization, among others), belonging to a single place is a luxury that cannot be afforded or enjoyed. This is something many non-Kuwaitis living in Kuwait experience on a daily basis; Kuwaitis experienced something similar during the 1990 invasion. But even for those lucky enough to have the stability and rootedness of "home," belonging is not automatic or permanent. Growing up (childhood into adolescence into adulthood) and aging can include moments or extended periods of alienation and dislocation, as can the experience of inhabiting more than one cultural, national, or linguistic position at the same time. I've always had the sense that "home" is not forever, and that a nomadic or itinerant existence, while difficult at times, is more compelling and fruitful or, perhaps, just inevitable. I'm not in a position to say that this is the case for everyone, but it's certainly the case for me.

Q: I think what I enjoyed most about the book was your description of cities, especially that of Beirut. What are your thoughts on cities beginning to mirror each other on account of globalisation and capitalism. Will their essence survive? Has that of Kuwait survived?

A: Place and landscape matter a great deal to me, both in my writing and in how I live. The particularities of a city are what compose its specific charm, and I am always sensitive to these. While it's true that globalization and the hyper-consumerism that comes in its wake might seem to obliterate the singularities of a place, I am not convinced they can do so totally. Cities are flexible, layered, and surprisingly resilient; they survive war, bankruptcy, and environmental devastation, among other hazards. They might not emerge the way we remember them or the way we might want them to, but they will do something else. If we have the energy and attention to look closely, we can always find something fascinating happening in cities. This is certainly true of Kuwait.

Some, including myself at times, might lament a Kuwait City they believe once existed, whether pre-oil or pre-invasion. But Kuwait City will continue to morph in unpredictable ways and the outcome of these transformations will include both the bad (the demolition of irreplaceable buildings and sites, for example) and the good (such as the revival of neglected spaces by young Kuwaiti restaurateurs and entrepreneurs, providing exciting alternatives to Western franchises).

Q: How would you assess the reading habits in Kuwait? It has been said that the internet has reduced the attention span of the young to digest only the bite sized items that appear on their social media newsfeeds. Is this troubling to you?

A: I don't believe the issue of shorter attention spans is a problem endemic to Kuwait alone. It is a worldwide problem, and I do indeed see it as a problem. I am concerned about the inability of young people to focus for extended periods of time in the manner required for the reading of a novel or a collection of short stories. As a professor, I have noticed a marked diminishment in the ability of my students to focus their attention on longer texts. Reading a novel or short story or poem is an activity that takes time and demands the kind of thoughtful attentiveness and critical acumen completely unnecessary for social networking. This is not to suggest that there are no interesting aspects to Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. However, I am not convinced that the skills produced by social networking are the kinds of skills required to read long, complex texts well. I worry about this diminishment of the ability to focus mainly because I think it is not possible to think critically without it, and without the capacity to think critically, it becomes less likely that we are active, responsible, engaged individuals in our communities and in the world.

Q: What advice would you give to young Kuwaiti writers?

A: More than any other thing, I would advise young Kuwaiti writers to read. Read as far and wide and as much as you can — books from the region in Arabic, but also books from beyond in other languages or in translation. Read extensively and attentively before you begin to write. Pay special attention to form and style. Writing is never easy, or at least, it never has been for me. It can be tortuous. But there is nothing in the world that gives me more pleasure. If writing does not give you immense pleasure — like nothing else — then don't do it. But if you decide you must write, then realize there is nothing else in the world that can do what writing does. It opens up worlds. It allows you to live many lives through your characters that you might never otherwise have access to. It connects you to others in an incredibly intimate and, again, otherwise impossible way. Finally, I would say, write about what you know and about what feels urgent to you.

Q: What are your future writing plans?

A: I am currently at work on a novel. I always feel a bit awkward discussing work in progress, but what I can say about it is that it is a polyphonic text, set in the Middle East, India, and the United States from the 1920s to the present. The novel is a form I am excited to experiment with. To my mind, there is no other literary form with the same degree of openness and sprawl; the novel's tolerance of imperfection is a feature I find especially inviting. No other artistic form I can think of makes it possible to step into other worlds, other people's lives with the same degree of intimacy that the novel permits. I continue to write short stories because, as a form, they force me to be precise with language and technique. Perhaps in a few years I will have enough for a second collection.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about the Edinburgh International Book Festival's First Book Award, for which you've been nominated?

A: All debut writers who publish in English and who are part of the Book Festival's program are nominated for the First Book Award. It was an honor to be invited to participate on three panels at the Edinburgh International Book Festival this summer. I presented *The Hidden Light of Objects* on a panel about the short story with American author Tom Barbash. I also presented on one of five panels organized by Raja Shehadeh on the experience of living and writing in the Middle East. Finally, I took part in this year's Amnesty International Imprisoned Writers Series, with a focus on the plight of Syrian writers. The winner of the First Book Award is determined by readers, who can vote for their favorite nominated author on the Edinburgh International Book Festival's website.