



Mai Al-Nakib, *An Unlasting Home* (New Texts Out Now)

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Mai Al-Nakib, *An Unlasting Home* (New York: Mariner Books, 2022).

Jadaliyya (J): What made you write this book?

Mai Al-Nakib (MA): After the publication of my collection of short stories, *The Hidden Light of Objects*, I knew I wanted to write a sweeping, multigenerational

novel about a family based in the Middle East. Two of the characters, Lulwa and Yasmine, were already coming to life, but I did not have a sense of how they would intersect, or of the plot, or much else, really. It was all very hazy, as it always is for me at the start of a project. Then, in 2013, Kuwait's parliament passed a law making blasphemy a capital crime. After 1991, political and social life in Kuwait had turned increasingly conservative and religious, but this decision felt extreme, especially since Kuwait's judiciary had never inclined toward capital punishment. I immediately started to consider if anything might be construed as blasphemous in the university courses I taught in postcolonial studies, comparative literature, and literary theory. Beyond my own personal anxieties, I worried about the chilling effect this would have on Kuwait's historically vibrant media and on progressive change in the country more broadly. That

moment felt utterly bleak to me. I think it may have been the next day that I wrote a version of what would become the first chapter of *An Unlasting Home*, in which the protagonist, Sara, a philosophy professor at Kuwait University, is accused of blasphemy under the new law. The sense that Sara's story would provide the link between the other characters started to emerge. I began to see the project as a polyphonic novel about the contemporary moment in Kuwait through the protagonist, Sara, but also as a historical novel about a lost, forgotten, or—somewhat more dramatically—destroyed Kuwait through the other characters, all connected to Sara in some way. And that was the start of the process.

J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the book address?

It is, in many ways, a story of inherited trauma, migratory passage, loss, and resilience.

MA: *An Unlasting Home* is a

multigenerational saga that traces the lives of five formidable women from the early twentieth century to 2013, across Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, India, and the United States. Sara Al-Ameed, a philosophy professor at Kuwait University, has been accused of blasphemy under a new law classifying it as a capital crime. As she awaits trial, she is forced to reckon with her own past, as well as that of her family and country. She attempts to untangle the complicated generational lines of the women who made her: her grandmothers, Lulwa and Yasmine; her mother, Noura; and her beloved ayah, Maria, who helped raise her. In doing so, Sara begins to come to terms with some of the reasons why her life has stalled—including why she returned to Kuwait from the United States in the first place, following her mother's death. It is, in many ways, a story of inherited trauma, migratory passage, loss, and resilience.

J: How does this book connect to and/or depart from your previous work?

MA: My last book was a collection of short stories and this one is a novel, so an obvious departure has to do with form. I thought of my collection of short stories, *The Hidden Light of Objects*, as a love letter to Kuwait. Because the book was banned in 2017 in Kuwait, I do not think it was received in the spirit it was offered! Still, I was writing about a Kuwait that I felt had been forgotten or lost. Upon my return from the

United States and when I started teaching in 2004, it felt like the country had suffered collective amnesia. Few seemed to remember the cosmopolitan Kuwait I had experienced growing up in the late 1970s and '80s. So part of the process of writing those stories was to reanimate that period and experience, to bring it back to life for myself and to preserve it, as it were—not that that is ever possible. With *An Unlasting Home*, which I see as a second volume in what I think will become a loosely linked triptych, Kuwait again features as a transformed place, one that is no longer fulfilling the promise of what it could have become, given its many bounties. I do not just mean oil here, but the gift of the desert, the sea, the bird-filled skies, its singular geographical position as a pearling and seafaring port, its cultural specificity, its demographic diversity, and so on. It is in the title: Kuwait is an unlasting home for the characters. That does not mean that it cannot be a home for some, but for Sara, her gay brother Karim, her Palestinian ex-lover Nabil, her ambitious mother Noura, and others, Kuwait cannot provide the shelter or the context in which they can thrive. The puzzle of the novel is whether Sara has a chance.

J: Who do you hope will read this book, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?

MA: In general, I do not think about audience as I write. Almost until the end, I write for the form of the story and for myself. Who the audience might turn out to be is something that coalesces toward the end of the process, when I begin to realize that this will be something that others are going to read. But by then it is too late—what it is is not going to be altered to fit any imagined audience. I do have a sense that I do not only write for a Middle Eastern audience. At the same time, I do not write exclusively for a non-Middle Eastern audience either. The reason I write is, selfishly, for myself. But I also write to connect. I write alone but with the intention that my writing will be read. This is not arrogance but necessity. I want it to be read by one other reader, at least one, anywhere—the more far-flung the better—who will feel something akin to what I felt when I wrote the words. That is, or should be, enough.

J: What other projects are you working on now?

MA: I am working on a novel set on the Kuwaiti island of Failaka about a decade into

the future. Something has happened on the mainland, and a few of the former islanders have returned to their homes. I will not say any more than that. Failaka is an intriguing setting: an island that was inhabited in the Bronze Age, widely considered to be part of the Dilmun Dynasty, along with Bahrain, and also inhabited during the reign of Alexander the Great. After the invasion, the Failachawis were not allowed to return, ostensibly for security reasons. The story of Failaka both before and after the invasion is endlessly fascinating to me, and so the research for this project is a delight.

J: Do you think your writing can make a difference in Kuwait?

MA: I think this is a wider question: do I believe writing can make a difference in the world? Or can art or literature change the world? Or, even, what is it that art or literature can do? On gloomy days I think: nothing at all. I write because I must, not to make a difference necessarily, but because I have some niggling obsession—a story, a character, a place, an event, a problem—that must be put to paper. If one other person reads it, connects with it in some way that is meaningful to them, then it is worth it. But this all sounds rather solipsistic. I think that writing, like any cultural medium, can have an effect. It may not be grand, but it can produce small ripples that are likely impossible to measure. Writing will not have the immediate and widespread impact that social media has, but that does not negate its chances altogether. Not yet, anyway. Books continue to be sold. People continue to read. Our relationship with narrative, with stories, is ancient. It may be under pressure, even under threat, but I think it will ultimately prevail. As for my writing making a difference in Kuwait, that is up to readers to decide. Because I write in English, its exposure is somewhat limited. Along with many other books, *The Hidden Light of Objects* was banned in 2017. Since then, thankfully, that particular law has been overturned, so my book is no longer banned. But it reveals that those in power do indeed believe that literature can make a difference, enough of one to necessitate its suppression. Even today, anyone can accuse writers of publishing incendiary material and there are a number of penal codes they might be breaking without even knowing it. And, as illustrated in *An Unlasting Home*, when an accusation is made, you are in the judicial loop: guilty until proven innocent. It is frightening, although it does not limit how or what I write. To me, the freedom to write what I want matters above all. That must never be compromised, whatever the response.

Excerpt from the book (from Part I, "Sara," pp. 3-8)

I open my eyes to a blood-red sky. I submitted my grades a few days ago; now I have three months to think and write. Karl comes in July. I visit Karim in August. But today, under the indifferent rust of a desert storm, it's just Maria and me.

Still in my pajamas, I skip down the stairs to the kitchen. Its walnut cabinets and Formica counters are worn, nearly thirty-six years in use, but the ochre fridge and stove gleam under Maria's care. Maria stands guard over the warming milk, daring it to froth over. She cracks three cardamom pods with her teeth, as she always does, and tosses them into the pan.

"Gross, Maria!" I tease, as I always do.

She spins around and cackles at me, reaches out as if to pull my hair. I wrap my arms around the back of her shoulders and kiss her on the cheek. I may be forty-one, but my days in the Surra house with Maria make me feel ten.

After breakfast, Maria chats on the phone with one of her daughters, and I go up to my parents' bedroom. I sit at my father's desk, which faces the long window looking out on a garden wall pink with bougainvillea. At this desk my father wrote articles for prestigious medical journals, keeping himself current with the literature. I've changed nothing here. Not the enormous four-poster bed that never quite fit the seventies vibe of the house. Not the avocado-green walls that remind me of hospitals. Not the shelves stuffed with decades of *The New England Journal of Medicine* and my mother's copies of Fanon and Arendt. I write at my father's desk late into evening, but I spend every night in my childhood bed.

Around noon I smell cumin and coriander. Maria is making something special. This will upset Aasif, who will ask whether his food isn't good enough that Maria must cook also? I'll reassure him, as usual: "Your food is famous all over Kuwait. One little plate of bhajia won't change that. It makes Maria feel useful. You can understand, no?" Aasif will snort, but the swollen vein on his forehead will deflate. Maria will cross her eyes at

me behind his back, and calm will return to the kitchen.

I head downstairs for lunch, and Lola the cat follows. She's more Maria's than mine, but she enjoys the warmth of my lap. As soon as she sees me, Maria announces, "Josie's getting a raise!"

"At last!"

"She had to wait. Kuwaitis first."

"I know. It's not fair. I'm so happy for Josie. You're a good mother, Maria."

She smiles, but I catch the fleeting wince. I hold my breath, and it passes.

I finish off her samosas. We drink our tea with extra sugar, then Maria heads to her room to nap. I go back up to my father's desk, this time with an idea to write an essay on what teaching philosophy at the primary level in Kuwaiti public schools might achieve. In the thirteen years prior to their arrival at university, the capacity of young people to think is liquidated. They take everything literally. Supplementing the religious curriculum with an early introduction to philosophy could, I will argue, change that.

About an hour into my work, the doorbell rings. I'm surprised. We aren't used to afternoon intrusions.

Aasif, groggy from his nap, knocks on my open door a few minutes later. "Two police outside, Sara."

I slip on my flip-flops and grab a shirt to wear over my tank top. The public municipality probably needs me to move my car so that it can dig up the sidewalk for new water or sewage pipes.

Outside the sky is still red. Two men stand a few steps below the front gate. "Duktora Sara Tarek Al-Ameed?" one of them asks.

I nod and smile reflexively. "That's me."

“You’re under arrest for blasphemy. Please go inside and get what you need for a few nights in jail. We’ll wait.” My face must convey a total lack of comprehension because he repeats what he’s said more slowly: “You are under arrest for blasphemy by order of the recent amendment to Article 111 of the Penal Code of the State of Kuwait. Please put a few things into a clear plastic bag and come with us.”

I consider anyone I might know with some connection to the police, someone who would pull a stunt like this. “You must be kidding!” I say after a minute or two. “Who put you up to this?” I can think of no one.

“Duktora, this is no joke. Go inside, please, prepare your belongings, and come back out.” He sounds impatient this time.

Suddenly I feel detached, floating upward. My pulse is not racing. My breathing remains steady. Aasif fidgets behind me, slamming me back to earth. “Aasif, say nothing to Maria. Tell her I had to go to Bahrain to meet someone for work, that I’ll be back tomorrow or in a few days.”

“I will.” His eyes reflect the fear I cannot feel.

“Please make sure she eats. And change Lola’s litter? Maria can’t manage.”

He nods.

“Don’t forget Bebe Mitu.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry, Sara.”

I rush to my room, stuff a few things into a Ziploc, and call a colleague whose father is a civil rights lawyer.

“Hanan, there are two policemen outside saying I’m being arrested for blasphemy. I don’t understand what they’re talking about.”

She groans. “It’s the new law.”

“What law?” I haven’t paid attention to any laws, new or old. Unlike my mother, I’m not politically inclined. My palms start to sweat. “What do I do? Do I go with them?”

“Go with them, but don’t say anything. Take your phone with you, and text your location when you get there. If you can’t, it’s okay. We’ll find you.”

Muhannad Al-Baatin, Hanan’s father, my new lawyer, is standing in front of the building—a black-brick monstrosity in the middle of Kuwait City—when the police pull up. He is tall and wide as an elephant. Mine is not the first blasphemy case, it seems, so he knows where to find me. I’m in the habit of flipping through the daily papers, so how I missed this development, I’m not sure. But if I’m honest, I’ve kept myself removed for so long, my ignorance is no great mystery.

Mr. Al-Baatin booms instructions at me as the gray officers, diminished in the face of my lawyer’s presence, lead me up the stairs and through the glass doors. “Don’t answer any questions! A student recorded one of your lectures. A member of parliament has raised a case. Sara, pay attention to what I’m saying! Not a word, do you hear me?” I have a hard time following any of it, but I hold onto his last words: “You’ll be out tomorrow morning.”

The small, filthy cell in the women’s section of the building is beautiful in its way, covered with words in many languages. Arabic, Urdu, Tagalog, Malayalam, French, Hindi, English. The three walls, the low ceiling, the floor, even the toilet—every inch of space etched with words. Messages from one woman to another or to someone far away.

I try to recollect the faces of all the students I taught spring semester. Three all-girls classes, twenty students per class, sixty students total. I think of them sitting in the circle I make them arrange themselves into so that we can discuss things more equally. It doesn’t quite work the way it did at Berkeley, but I persist, hoping the circle will make them brave. My accuser had to be in my eight o’clock Intro to Phil class. A freshman offended to learn not everyone believes the same truth. I go around the circle in my

mind, trying to pinpoint faces, to remember names. The girls in their hijab and niqab blend together. It's bigoted of me to think so, but they're hard to tell apart. I can't single anyone out.

I give up on my class and turn to the walls of the cell. Poems, laments, prayers to God, cries for mothers. *Please, Ma, save me.* I feel cradled by thousands of writing hands, their fear blending with mine, outsiders in a closed country. They were here before me. How many were deported home? I have nowhere to be deported to. And yet, their words of longing lull me, allowing me to drift into pockets of sleep.