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# An Unlasting Home: Identity and belonging are interrogated in this moving, inter-generational story

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Book Club: Imagining a reality where blasphemy becomes a capital offence, Kuwaiti Professor Mai Al-Nakib delves into the mind of a woman facing a possible death penalty, while tracing the lives of the female ancestors who shaped her.

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Spanning the Arab world, India and the United States, this family saga tells of the heart-stopping triumphs and failures of three generations of Arab women [Saqi Books]

"If I'm found guilty, there's a small chance, a very small chance, I will hang."

These are the words uttered by Sara, a Kuwaiti philosophy professor, when she tells Maria, a woman who was initially hired as her childhood nanny but is now practically her second mother, that she has been accused of blasphemy and faces a possible death sentence.

This blasphemy case becomes the anchor of *An Unlasting Home* (<https://saqibooks.com/books/saqi/an-unlasting-home/>), Mai Al-Nakib's debut novel that spans generations and continents through the lenses of Sarah and her female ancestors.



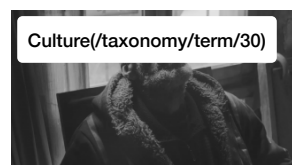
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"An Unlasting Home is both a captivating fiction story and a well-researched history lesson told through various female voices"

Al-Nakib is an Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Kuwait University, and her short story collection, *The Hidden Light of Objects* (<https://www.maialnakib.com/fiction/books/the-hidden-light-of-objects>), won the Edinburgh International Book Festival's First Book Award in 2014.

*An Unlasting Home* was initially released last year in the US with Mariner Books, an imprint of Harper Collins, and released in paperback in the UK on April 4, 2023, with Saqi Books.

Al-Nakib tells *The New Arab* that her plot, while fiction, was in fact inspired by a real-life event.

"In 2013, the Kuwaiti parliament passed an amendment to a law, making blasphemy a capital crime (<https://www.newarab.com/news/kuwaiti-academic-charged-blasphemy-quran-comments>)," she recalls. "This was a dark day for me personally as a university professor who spends her days teaching material that could be construed as blasphemous; it was a dark day for activists and journalists in the country; and it was a dark day for all citizens and

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residents, whose freedoms, overnight, had been profoundly curtailed."



The next day, Al-Nakib started writing a chapter about Sara, imagining what would happen to a professor accused of blasphemy under this new law, which was eventually overturned.

"Over the years, the pendulum has swung between ultra-conservatism and moderate openness. These days we seem to be swinging back toward conservatism," says Al-Nakib.

Sara is averse to this conservatism that has transformed her hometown, which she sarcastically deems, "The new Kuwait." She recalls wearing bikinis here when she was younger, laments the new popularisation of niqabs (<https://www.newarab.com/news/in>

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6

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stagram-influencer-arrested-over-blasphemous-comedy-skit-kuwait) and connotes the sea of black abayas in her classrooms and city streets as "depression" and "prison", though later acknowledges her biases.

Sara's liberal upbringing and worldly experience make her particularly tuned into the politics at play, and acutely aware of the body policing she receives due to the hemline of her own skirts.

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Book Club Hafsa Lodi

While Sara may be the novel's main character, equal weight is given to the myriad of women who came before her, living across Kuwait, India, Beirut, America and more. Sara is the daughter of Noura, whose Kuwaiti family lived in Pune for many years, and readers get a glimpse of just how enmeshed these two cultures can be.

Arabic and Hindi terms are interspersed throughout the text, and we learn that Kuwaiti women with ties to India often wear saris as eveningwear. And when the girls raised in Pune relocate to Kuwait, Al-Nakib comically describes how they are taught to pronounce their father's name with a correct Arabic accent.

*An Unlasting Home* is both a captivating fiction story and a well-researched history lesson told through various female voices. Al-Nakib inhabits the lives of women in eras past with extraordinary detail, weaving in significant moments in history – such as cultured pearls threatening Kuwaiti pearl-diving businesses, and the reality of experiences such as travel, which once required extended journeys by sea.

**"I knew I wanted to write a teeming, expansive novel – the kind with generational trees and maps – about a family based in this part of the world. I also knew that women's lives, their stories, tribulations, and triumphs, would be central"**

It took her around eight years to write the book. "Keep in mind that I work full time," says Al-Nakib. "I write in pockets of time I manage to steal away from my weekly work schedule and primarily over the summers and during mid-year breaks."

Throughout the story, she gives just as much attention to her characters' personal lives as she does to the political backdrop that

informs them – particularly the developing wave of colonialism that begins to envelop the Global South. “And then there were the British, skulking in the shadows of Palestine, India, Egypt, Sudan – and Kuwait as well,” she writes at one point. At another, she describes one couple’s downward spiral “comparable to the one into which Europe was sucking the world”



These global shifts have a huge impact on women in the region, and Al-Nakib paints each of her characters with different strokes, describing their dreams and fears amid this political and societal landscape.

Some, like Yasmine, embody the potential future of Arab women, while others like Noura, represent a waste of ambition and intelligence. For the latter, the line that can’t be crossed by women in politics in Kuwait is like a “noose around her

neck", restricting her from becoming the active, policy-influencing changemaker she aspires to be.

"Patriarchal forces certainly structure the lives of the women characters, but the particular men in their lives – whether fathers, brothers, or husbands – are very often supportive," says Al-Nakib, who portrays the men in her story with as much care as she does with their female counterparts.

One central character isn't a blood relative at all, and that's Maria, who initially comes from India to Kuwait as Sara's nanny. "Maria is a second mother to Sara, and Sara becomes a surrogate daughter to Maria," says Al-Nakib "These key relationships between nannies and the children they care for are rarely represented in literature, although it is often central to the lives of both."

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Society Anmol Irfan

Al-Nakib delves into the history of Maria's life prior to her arrival in Kuwait, describing the "hours of agonising work" that Maria undergoes hand-rolling *biddi* cigarettes to support her family.

Maria makes immeasurable sacrifices, ultimately leaving her



children in India to go to Kuwait and become the caretaker for Noura's children. The points at which these characters' paths finally cross in the text become to make for a powerful and emotional experience for readers. "I ask a lot of my readers right the outset: to trust that the threads will come together," says Al-Nakib.

"I knew I wanted to write a teeming, expansive novel – the kind with generational trees and maps – about a family based in this part of the world. I also knew that women's lives, their stories, tribulations, and triumphs, would be central," she says.

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Book Club Ramona Wadi

As female family members overcome everything from tragedy and death to displacement and gender discrimination there's an underlying tone of female rage, which is often internalised.

In the lead-up to her trial, Sara reflects on traditions and attitudes that have been inherited over generations (<https://www.newarab.com/features/stone-house-vivid-generational-palestinian-storytelling>), while examining concepts like integrity,

freedom of expression, and belonging – or un-belonging, as she attempts to come to terms with her own bifurcated identity while anticipating the uncertain outcome of her case.

"Readers may come away from my novel with a sense that while homes may be unlasting, the outcome is not always catastrophic," says Al-Nakib. "It can provide an opportunity for transformation and new potentials."

***Hafsa Lodi is an American-Muslim journalist who has been covering fashion and culture in the Middle East for more than a decade. Her work has appeared in The Independent, Refinery29, Business Insider, Teen Vogue, Vogue Arabia, The National, Luxury, Mojeh, Grazia Middle East, GQ Middle East, gal-dem and more. Hafsa's debut non-fiction book Modesty: A Fashion Paradox, was launched at the 2020 Emirates Airline Festival of Literature.***

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