



MAI AL-NAKIB'S THE HIDDEN LIGHT OF OBJECTS

By Nada Faris

We were thrilled to discover that Bloomsbury, the internationally renowned publishing house, was publishing a collection of loosely linked short stories by Mai Al-Nakib titled *The Hidden Light of Objects*. In a number of stories in her collection, Al-Nakib, a professor of postcolonial studies and comparative

literature at Kuwait University, raises questions about Kuwait's collective identity, its national past, and its future.

When asked how history and nostalgia figure in her fictional debut, Al-Nakib answers, "On the one hand, it's impossible to escape the historical traces that make us who and what we are and that shape

our perspectives on the world. On the other hand, fiction allows us to flee the confines of these determining factors. Fiction makes things up, it invents worlds, experiments with settings and characters and episodes as far away from ourselves as could be. I am especially interested in fiction's attempts to shunt the weight of history."

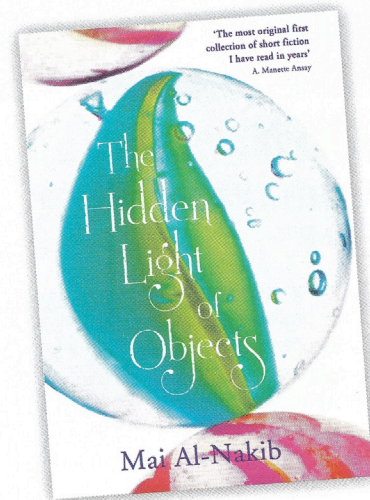
Although *The Hidden Light of Objects* experiments with history, it cannot exactly be classified as historical fiction. Instead, Al-Nakib's stories explore the process of individual recollection and its, sometimes overlooked, connection to historical forces. Why do we allow certain moments to define us and how can these moments, seemingly insignificant, affect the rest of our lives? For Al-Nakib the personal is always "overwritten by much broader historical and political conditions."

"Blink and it's gone," the short story collection begins. Al-Nakib establishes transience not merely as a recurrent motif, but as the edifice upon which the entire narrative structure rests. Perhaps the story that most manifestly explores the relationship between present and past, on the one hand, and the personal and historical, on the other, is "Echo Twins." The story spans the years 1937 to 1945: the period during which Kuwait's economy evolved from dependence on pearling to the production and export of oil. Al-Nakib provides us with an image of life before the discovery of oil in Kuwait. She writes, "[Mish'al and Mishari] lived with their mother in a typically Kuwaiti mud brick house overlooking the glowing waters of the Arabian Gulf. The thick, mostly windowless outer walls enclosed a charming open courtyard overrun with pots of purple and yellow flowers reaching

out to the sun all day, then tightly folding up their petals in late afternoon. In the middle was a sheltering sidr tree ringing with sparrows and red-vented bulbuls. Bright rooms with windows and paned doors opened onto the central courtyard which could be seen from every corner of the house. The courtyard was bordered by a shaded, arched corridor surfaced with tiles hand-painted blue, green, and rust. Burnished teak beams, likely scavenged from one of the dhow-building yards nearby, supported the roof." We learn, or maybe remember, that our parents and grandparents slept on terraces, walked barefoot on cold tiled floors, huddled together when it rained, and shared their meals.

But change was on the horizon and, soon enough, it would affect the entire country as profoundly as it did the characters in the story: "By 1946, oil was vatted and ready to launch across seas and oceans accustomed, for hundreds of years, to carrying spices, jewels, textiles, water. Everyone around was touting change, splendor, and the end of misery. Money, unprecedented, would soon cascade, and the demolition of history would begin. Arched corridors, hidden courtyards, and shared terraces no more." What happens to the country as a result, like what happens to twins Mish'al and Mishari and their mother Hayat, is an ambiguous blessing, "the Janus-faced reality of producing and exporting oil."

To be clear, "Echo Twins" is not a historical parable. It is a narrative about specific characters and their complicated existences. Nevertheless, we can glean from literature kernels of knowledge that may illuminate our daily lives. "Echo Twins" pushes us to question the role our economy plays in impacting society both



positively—the cascade of unprecedented money—and negatively—the demolition of our historical consciousness and our natural environment. This critical awareness can, in turn, help us make informed decisions in order to benefit, rather than harm, our future.

Let's hope we don't blink before that chance is gone. ■

The Hidden Light of Objects, published by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, is available for purchase at select bookstores in the Gulf, the UK, and Australia (and in the US from January 2015). In Kuwait, visit private university bookstores supplied by Growmore. It is also available online at www.amazon.co.uk.

"Echo Twins" earned Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train's* August 2011 Short Story Award for New Writers. Some of Mai Al-Nakib's other stories have appeared in *The First Line* and *Ninth Letter*. Visit Al-Nakib's personal website www.maialnakib.com for updates and upcoming events.