

Naphtalene: A Novel of Baghdad

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“This Naphtalene causes the closet in which it is kept and from where it keeps watch to erupt in flaming sentences,” writes Hélène Cixous in her foreword to this book. Recalling her childhood in 1950s Baghdad, Huda smolders with rebellion, like the combustible vapors from naphthalene, a solid substance common to mothballs that’s better known for its incendiary properties as a component of napalm. Seeing the severe division of men and women in Iraqi society, the character can’t help but notice how unhappy the women in her family are. Her tubercular mother is devastated when Huda’s father leaves her to begin a new life with a woman who can give him more children. Her aunt is crushed when her husband leaves her, as well.

In light of these events and clinging to her tomboy ways, Huda is defiant in the face of threats and punishment and will not act as a young girl is expected to; she isn’t afraid of her father, or anyone else for that matter. The only person who seems to respect Huda for who she is is her grandmother, a woman with a greater understanding of the child, and life in general, than any of Huda’s other relatives. As Huda becomes a woman, the growing pains of her family and country are reflected in her experiences.

The author left Iraq in 1982; she has written several previous novels, receiving the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Arabic Literature. *Naphtalene* is the first novel by an Iraqi woman to be published in the U.S. Written when Mamdouh lived in Morocco, it was first published in 1986 by an Egyptian publishing house, and many years later translated and republished as *Mothballs* in the UK.

Her writing style is unconventional, slipping effortlessly between first and second person. Powerfully descriptive language enhances the imagery for those unfamiliar with Iraqi culture and history: “The day he gave me a leaflet I was afraid, trembling and stammering. The first leaflet was like a first forbidden kiss,” thought Huda when a friend gave her a political tract. Mamdouh describes women gathering at the mosque: “their black cloaks undulated over their statures, rose and fell.”

The author avoids flowery language and languorous prose, giving her novel a strong atmosphere of nonfiction. The chapters read like a series of scenes from Huda’s life, rather than building on each other until the book reaches a natural peak.

The cultural chasm between Iraq and the West may make it tough for readers to become immersed in *Naphtalene*, but those who give the book a chance will soon realize that certain experiences transcend nationality. Sure to appeal to people with an interest in women’s studies and cultural studies, this novel will also find a home with readers who enjoy coming-of-age stories.

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