



## READING GROUP GUIDE TO *AN UNLASTING HOME*

1. Why do you think the author chose *An Unlasting Home* as the title? In what ways are the homes of the five main characters unlasting? (See the Joyce quote in “Author’s Note.”)
2. Why does Sheikha have such aggressive feelings toward her daughter Lulwa? And why does Lulwa, unlike her siblings, put up with it?
3. Neither Sheikha nor Yeliz have much say in the trajectory of their lives. Compare and contrast how the choices others make for them affect their responses.
4. Why does Yasmine decide to marry Marwan instead of Majid? How much of this decision is her own and how much is structured by circumstance?
5. Lulwa understands right away that leaving Pune for Kuwait would be a mistake; Mubarak comes to agree with her, but too late. Noura feels the same way about leaving St. Louis for Kuwait; but her husband, Tarek, disagrees. Unpack these (and other) decisions to abandon one home for another in the novel. How do they affect the lives of the various characters? Contrast the foresight of the women characters with the blind spots of others.
6. *An Unlasting Home* conveys the ways in which political, social, and economic conditions structure the personal lives of women. Explore the different ways this applies to Lulwa, Yasmine, Noura, Maria, and Sara.
7. “Karim and I understood as teenagers, maybe even earlier, that Kuwait wasn’t for us. Things weren’t bad then. Looking back on it, we came of age in golden times. But with the unsullied vision of youth, we just knew.” For reasons both similar and different, Sara and Karim felt alienated from Kuwait when they were young. Discuss some of the reasons for this and consider why it may have been easier for Karim to leave home than for Sara.
8. What effect does the form of the novel have on the telling of this story? Consider the three-part division, as well as the way the narrative shifts between characters and times. What is the effect of having Sara’s story relayed in the first-person, while the others are narrated in the third?
9. The trope of migratory birds runs through *An Unlasting Home*. Locate some of the references made to birds and discuss their implications in context and in relation to the overall structure of the novel.



10. While Maria is not related to Sara, her story is presented in the same way as the women who are. What does this suggest about Maria's importance to the story and its reframing of the under-represented role of caregivers in fiction?
11. Noura is smart and ambitious, but her life is curtailed by patriarchal forces beyond her control. Discuss the subtle and sometimes not so subtle role patriarchy plays in Noura's life and the lives of all the women characters.
12. Maria leaves behind her own children in order to secure their futures. Discuss the effects of this fraught decision on her children and on herself.
13. Mothers don't always share their secrets with their daughters, and this withholding can have unintended consequences. Discuss this with reference to mother-daughter relationships in the novel.
14. "But she had learned from her mother that some things—the hard, real things—should remain locked in a heavy box hidden inside a mud hole." Why can't Noura acknowledge Karim's homosexuality, and how does her lack of response compound Karim's sense of alienation from Kuwait and from his own family?
15. Whether consciously or not, Sheikha, Yeliz, Lulwa, Yasmine, and Maria all make sacrifices so that Sara doesn't have to; and yet it takes Sara over a decade to come to this realization. Why does it take Sara so long to recognize her capacity to make different choices than those who came before her?
16. "Ethics requires thought, assessment, joy. Morality demands obedience. It's sad and depleting." In her Intro to Phil class, Sara explains this distinction Spinoza makes between ethics and morality. How does it apply to the events that unfold for Sara as a result of the new blasphemy law in Kuwait? How might this distinction apply to other issues dominating the headlines today?
17. Close to her trial date, Sara muses: "A violence in our lives so persistent, it's the stuff of fairy tales, the ones where children end up in ovens or inside the stomachs of wolves. These shards I've been collecting, fitting together one by one, are rapidly coming apart. And they're sharp enough to slit wrists." Discuss the layers of violence—both personal and geopolitical—that compose Sara's life and how the trauma of that violence has shaped her responses and her sense of self.
18. About contemporary Kuwait, Sara has this to say: "A past wiped out, not like a palimpsest—retaining traces, proof of better days—but like an Etch A Sketch—irrevocably, irredeemably gone." Provide examples of descriptions and events in the novel that confirm her assessment. Why is it so hard for Sara to come to terms with this transformation? How does it shatter everything her father, especially, believed in and worked so hard for?



19. A wide range of circumstances inform people's decisions to leave home—war, famine, persecution, poverty, a desire for a better life, to name a few. By the end, Sara has made her peace with letting Kuwait go, understanding through the experience of the accusation against her that it cannot be (if it ever was) a place where she belongs. Discuss the circumstances informing Sara's decision and why it does or does not make sense for her to leave.
20. Sara describes herself and Kuwait as bifurcated. What are some of the positive and negative effects of these "divisions and splits" on her and on Kuwait? What are some of the broader implications of divided or multivalent identities as represented by Sara, Karim, Nabil, and other characters in the novel?

### A FEW EXTRAS

21. The back and forth of the narrative form parallels the back and forth movement of trade across the Indian Ocean. Discuss the ways in which form and content mirror each other in the novel and the effect this has on the reading process.
22. Hikmet Bey and Hayya Al-Mustafa are seemingly peripheral characters whose actions have outsized effects. Discuss these pivotal characters, their moments of intervention, and the far-reaching consequences of their actions.
23. Sara is attached to Nabil for far longer than might be considered warranted. Explore some of the less obvious reasons behind her connection to her first love. What might the encounter in the supermarket between Sara and Nabil's mother signify for both?
24. Sara delays telling Karl about the case against her. She says, "I still haven't told Karl because telling Karl will force a decision that can only be terminal. I imagine coming unstuck and wonder whether that will necessitate coming undone." What exactly is Sara worried about here?
25. Kuwait is a key protagonist in the novel. Outline some of the changes to Kuwait over time as presented in *An Unlasting Home* and how these affect the various characters, Sara especially.
26. Sara describes the war to liberate Kuwait from Iraq as the "forgotten war," as seen from an American perspective; but it is far from forgotten in the context of Sara's life or of Kuwait itself. What are some of the ways the Gulf War irrevocably changes everything for Sara, her family, Kuwait, and the United States?