

Alanoud Al-Sharekh

Online introduction: In our 'Expansion' issue, 21, Alanoud spoke about the essential role of women in society, and briefly discussed the difficulties that emerge with a successful career or with familial and social ideologies. This online piece is an extension of the lighter print release, and covers a more in-depth side to the discussion of feminism and gender equality.

(Family)

1- Hanan: Why do you think it was important to your father to establish Arabic as a language in technological mediums, and do you think that that would consolidate Arab identity? Do you think was his purpose?

Al-Anoud: Well, I mean no doubt that my father believed like many people in his generation that grew up in the sixties and under the banner of "alqawmiyya alarabiyya" and Pan-Arabism that a more consolidated Arab identity was in the benefit or in the interest of everyone who comes from an Arabic nation or has Arabic roots but I think more than that, my father was a frustrated writer, let's put it that way, so for him the Arabic language was something beautiful and needed preservation and the only way to preserve it to ensure that our heritage, especially the continued existence of our complicated linguistic processes, was to digitize them. So, I think it was also his love of the word in Arabic that drove him to invest so much in ensuring that Arabic language technology was actually controlled by the Arabs and not the other way around.

2- Hanan: That's actually connected to my question. Since your father holds a master's degree in Economic Development, he's also interested in literature and the arts. He authored short stories like "Al-Makhad," it's renowned, so did the intersection between art, literature and technology affect you and how did it affect you growing up?

Al-Anoud: Well, it's funny that you read "Al-Makhad" and we're talking about family. So "Al-Makhad" is actually a little bit based on my mother going to labor with my older brother, so as a family, we haven't really shied away from this intersectionality of different things happening in our lives and finding themselves through cultural expression. My father, along with being a short story writer, he is a renowned art collector and he has focused his collection, the Sharekh Collection on abstract Arab artists from 1968 to 2008 so it covers a 40-year period and it's one of the most comprehensive collections of specific young Arab artist from the postmodern age that we have in the region. And I think growing up with this sort of focus on art and beauty and particular intellectual pursuits made us all more porous when it came to the exchange of cultural expression, so for me a political statement is more potent when you express it through a cultural tour or through a visual presentation rather than simply a political statement or a direct

confrontation. It forces you to try and find subtle expressions that will resonate with people instead of just telling them.

3- Hanan: Yes, that's very true. You have to engage people in whatever art form or political statement you're making. Where is that collection displayed? The Al-Sharekh collection? Is it private?

Al-Anoud: It's a private collection; we started the formal documentation process and where it will end up, of course it depends on what my father and the family by extension ultimately decide to do with it.

4- Hanan: What kind of role did your mother play in your growth as a person? Did she uphold traditional values?

Al-Anoud: Well, I think she may have been slightly more conservative in nature than my father but I don't think you can call my mother traditional by any stretch of the imagination. Both my mother and father are very much self-made people and so she pursued her education even after having us, and she was very adamant in that process of self-improvement and learning and knowledge wouldn't stop just because she had children at a very young age, but I think what my mother really instilled in me was the sense that a woman has to be able to stand independently both in social terms and in financial terms irrespective of her background and irrespective of her marital status. And I think that was really part of the driver in me of focusing on women's issues and women's rights and the drive to empower women.

5- Hanan: That's really inspiring. What about your brother, Fahad Al-Sharek, he's the CEO of Sakhr Software Company, did he encourage you and your sister Manayer along with your other brother Abdullah, did they act as guardians or patriarchs or did they allow you your freedom as women?

Al-Anoud: I think that as we grew up and as the advent of technology and I would say, the rewriting of social contracts even between us within the family and our roles changed, so did my brothers' positioning from a sort of very protective to a much more permissive roles but I think without a doubt, without the support and guidance of my siblings, all of them in their own way I mean there's an age difference naturally, me and Fahad are slightly older than Abdullah and Manayer but I think each of my siblings in their own way have really enriched and guided my own career in their own perspective, because although we are very close, we have at times very different outlooks on our life and we come from different backgrounds as well, Manayer has an artistic and entrepreneurship background whereas my younger brother is a classical banker like my dad was and Fahad is very much tech oriented. So each one of them I think has contributed to make me the person that I am

today, and I'd like to think that I played a small role in contributing to their personalities as well.

6- Hanan: I'm sure you did, so would you describe your family as a conventional Kuwaiti family?

Al-Anoud: I think we are conventional in the sense that we are all very family-oriented so in a very specific not just Kuwaiti but perhaps even GCC and pan-Arab way the family is the core of our being, in many ways it's our *raison d'être* our successes are our family's successes and failures are harder because we don't see them as individual failures we see them as we've collectively let down the family. And I think this is a specifically regional burden perhaps that even in our exposure to western values and ideals we still haven't embraced the idea of the individual over the idea of you being an extension of the family unit or the tribe or the community so in that way I think we are more conventional than we may seem I think it is also conventional for Kuwaitis to push boundaries and be a little bit different and be a little bit culturally investigative and I think also in this way we are probably a conventional Kuwaiti family.

(Education/Career)

7- You hold a BA from King's College and a Master's and PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies, you're also a researcher on youth and gender demographics GCC security and you're also an activist for women's rights and minority rights in Kuwait so you have that intellectual background, how did you get into academia? What inspired you to pursue an academic career? What was your drive?

Al-Anoud: If I'm going to be really basic about it, my drive was that I like to read. I found interest in aspects of debate that I think would suit somebody who wants to be in a field where you need academic rigor and it was one of two things, I would either become an academic where you have to present proof of every argument that you are doing and really delve deeper to understand issues, or I would become a lawyer and present arguments for certain cases and it just so happened that the trajectory of life followed my passion, which was in literature first and then I came back to Kuwait at a seminal moment of women asking for their political rights, and I got really involved in that movement and so that changed my trajectory from purely interested in literature to really focusing on feminism and feminist literature. The comparative aspects of that and understanding questions of gender and citizenship and so from that essentially it became a human rights issue, and like most things in life I found a serendipity between what I was passionate about and what I was actually pursuing in my research and my work, so it just happened that way. Essentially, my academic findings became a way to solidify my activist interests, which were in human rights and women's rights, vice versa. It became a cycle that kept feeding into

each other and as geopolitical issues change and feed into these subjects my interests would follow them.

8- Of course, that makes perfect sense. Does your interest in human rights in particular stem from an injustice you witnessed or something you encountered or does it stem from social responsibility?

Al-Anoud: It's always a moment of awareness. You become aware that perhaps as a woman you're treated casually, institutionally and insidiously sometimes people are not even aware that they are doing this but you are treated as Simone de Beauvoir out it as "the second sex", so you're not the standard you're something that is an accessory, you complete Adam for example and as your awareness of that grows, then you are aware of other and similar injustices for other disenfranchised groups that may be in an even more vulnerable position than you are because you might be a woman but a woman of a certain privilege, so you are able let's say to resist some forms of injustice that are being practiced against you or you are able to speak about this in a public platform, but there might be a lot of people out there who are voiceless, who cannot express their injustices or who may just be unaware that they are being victimized and I feel that it's our job, our social responsibility to highlight these things and speak about them but also speak about them in a culturally-nuanced way. I don't think it serves our purpose if we adopt issues or adopt campaigns as is in different countries that might have different sociopolitical circumstances and try to enforce them in this part of the world.

9- Hanan: Yes, we have to contextualize everything. What was the favorite project you worked on? If you have a favorite one?

Al-Anoud: Well, it's difficult to say that I have a favorite project but I think that the range of projects I worked on from the very serious, the ones that look at the legal aspects of a certain cause like national women married to non-nationals, these are important but they are very dry and there are the more culturally-engaged intellectual explorations where I'm able to have a little bit more fun with; looking at the impact of a certain idea and exploring it either through a platform such as Nuqat, and one of the more interesting things that I did there was talk about Bedouins and the collective destiny in Kuwait and it was a very short presentation in Arabic that took on a life of its own. It went viral, 40 thousand views and rising, so many newspaper articles about it but it challenged something that I think people took as a given, that you and I today can say who is a Bedouin in Kuwait was. I saw it more as a collective of assumptions that really had an underlying political agenda that we needed to stop, look at it and reexamine, if you like take ownership of again. Because I think there is something beautiful about Bedouinism that is in danger of being corrupted.

10- Hanan: That's really intriguing. I'm sorry I missed that. Did you ever investigate the issue of statelessness, stateless women bidoun women in Kuwait?

Al-Anoud: I completed a study last year and it was a joint supreme council of development and UNDP and Kuwait Women Research and Study Center at Kuwait University with Dr. Lubna Al-Qazi, one of my mentors and one of the women that I especially respect in Kuwait in both academic and social terms. We did a study that looked at national women married to non-nationals across the GCC and of course that really looks at women as incomplete citizens and so there's no escape from issues of children's rights and especially with stateless people. Even when I spoke about Bedouins this issue came up, for me, from a human rights perspective it's a clear-cut issue, there's no gray areas but when you look at it from a security perspective that's where it can get a little bit complicated but all complicated issues have solutions and solutions that are humane at the end of the day.

(Publications)

11- Hanan: I agree. Since the discovery of oil, Kuwait has undergone process of modernization that propagated socioeconomic, political and cultural changes. Bureaucracy, for example further enhanced the polarization of the residents of Kuwait according to class, race, ethnicity, sect, religion, etc. How do you think the concept of the family changed since the discovery of oil?

Al-Anoud: Well, I've been involved in several academic publications that looked at that so first an edited volume called *The Gulf Family* and the second one is from the SOAS series, it looked at political and popular cultures in the Arabian Gulf and both of them were a culmination of papers given at conferences, before that we looked at the issue of women and challenging limitations so I think that the family is very much the cornerstone of both political elites, merchant elites the social elites in the gulf. I don't think that the concept of family in terms of socioeconomic and political importance has shifted a great deal between pre-oil Kuwait and post-oil Kuwait and for example, if you just take a snapshot of the calls for political inclusion in 1938 Kuwait and calls for inclusion post-independence Kuwait, you'll see that it's pretty much the same group of merchant elite families that are involved in that process on both ends of the spectrum. What has changed I think is intergenerational relationships within families.

12- Hanan: How so?

Although the hierarchies are still in place in the sense that we really put a lot of value into our elders in this part of the world, therefore, they have a lot of social and economic significance because most of the wealth is still with the over-sixty generation in this part of the world with a few exceptions. We've had some

interesting tech or rather more accurately app breakthroughs for young people but still most of the wealth is still with older generation. So I think in terms of intergenerational relationships between families, there is a growing sense of independence from the authority of the elders but still some respect. So whereas before let's say the majority of marriages would be brokered in-house by older relatives and not by young people, I think we've seen slight shifts in that today. More and more young people, especially when it comes to their choice of partner want autonomy from that.

13- Hanan: In terms of women, you published *Angry Words Softly Spoken*. In the book you shed light on women's issues, their subjugation to the regulatory rules of patriarchy, why does your research focus on the role of women in society? What appeals to you in that particular field? Do you identify as a feminist?

Al-Anoud: *Angry Words Softly Spoken* or 'Al-Ghathab Al-Na'im', the Feminist Novel between Arabic and English are the same book. It was translated by the Higher Council of Literature in Egypt, because they thought it was a seminal and important book in Arab feminist theory. They approached me and I was involved in the translation process so I chose 'Alghathab Alna'im'. It sounded better than the literal translation, I have a master's in Translation and Applied Linguistics so we played around with how things sound in Arabic and English and I think it comes naturally to people who are involved in literature. My other book that focuses on women is *Challenging Limitations: The Redefinition of Roles for Women in the GCC*. I had a conversation with a friend who is also involved in women's issue and she said I was a self-declared feminist and I said no I'm a self-evident feminist, what else would I be? I know that people have had feminist fatigue and the title itself even in the west, third-wave feminism has had something of a backlash because it excludes some people and some people feel that it's a white woman's term, but I think we are in the post post-colonial era, I don't care what you call it but I think feminist makes perfect sense to me and I embrace it because for me it means that you believe in the empowerment of women and you are aware that there is a systematic disempowerment of women. I focus on women's issues in this part of the world because as I told you my activism and my at least phd intertwined and so as we were dealing with the rejection of the passing of the bill in 1999 to get women their full political rights. I also looked at it Pan-Arab and the premise of my book is that if you look at the different countries in the Arab world through their literature and the emergence of a feminist consciousness in their literature you can find that we are at different stages of awareness depending on where you are, of course. Several factors play into that, especially the sociopolitical engagements and whether a specific country had gone through independence struggle with colonialism because a lot of the initial feminist demands were intertwined with the language of nationalism. So I think that for me to understand my position better in the world I have to look at it through the lens of being an Arab through the lens of being a Muslim through the lens of this east west conversation that we are all engaged in today.

14- Hanan: Yes, that definitely has changed. Your books, *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States* as well as *The Gulf Family*, focus on the significance of different forms of identity and kinship, why did you choose those particular topics? What kind of public awareness do you want disseminate through your writing?

Al-Anoud: As I told you, these were the results of a conference that we held in London and the latest of those were published in 2008, so at that time I was a fresh PhD post-doc researcher and I was really frustrated with the conversation at the time, especially since it seemed to be going on in western academia that portrayed our region as two things: petro-dollars or terrorists and so I felt that there were many more interesting changes happening in terms of social relationships, women's placement, and youth movements that was completely being ignored by the research trajectory. So, I wanted to focus a little bit more on other dimensions of the GCC that I thought were part of our rich fabric, a more interesting history that we have and that would be of utmost importance in the future.

15- Hanan: Do you think tribalism hinders progressive change? I know it may seem like a simplistic question but it's also loaded and layered?

Al-Anoud: Not necessarily but the way that it's been applied especially for those countries that have embraced aspects of electoral democracy like Kuwait where in the absence of political parties, the tribe has become a de facto political party, but it's a very dangerous kind of elitism because and I say this in Bedouin lecture, I say that the tribe has become a political party that you are born into. So it's a very exclusive political party and with the demographic shape-up of Kuwait, the numbers of those who come from specific tribal backgrounds far exceed other aspects of democracy. You don't want a democracy that is based on the exclusion of others; you want a democracy that is based on the inclusion of others. Ultimately, you want a democracy that has some form of meritocracy in it. So you don't want to, arguments for elitism can be taken in another context but if you look at merchant elitism for example in Kuwait or people belonging to specific subset of educational elitism that I think for the sheer numbers, tribalism can be a damaging force.

16- Hanan: As a Kuwaiti woman, what kind of familial, socioeconomic, and political obstacles have you encountered in your personal life?

Al-Anoud: I've had an interesting career where I've worked for at different times governmental institutions, non-governmental institutions, Arabic and English institutions. I've worked for English think-tank for three years I was their fellow for regional politics and it's interesting that feminism and its counterpart sexism know no cultural barriers. I've actually had to struggle sometimes more being an Arab woman in a non-Arab organization than being an Arab woman back home,

because there you have an added layer of racism alongside the sexism. I think that's the encounter that has astounded me more.

17- Hanan: Do you think gender equality should be implemented in all private and public institutions?

Al-Anoud: I think gender equality is just one form of equality that we need to look at. We need to look at finding equal opportunities for young people if young people or women or people from a certain socioeconomic background are only allowed to engage in the labor market in entry level positions this is going to create huge problems for us in the future, because the aspirational underpinnings of any education or any form of ambition is upward social and economic mobility and if there is a ceiling on that then you have frustration, anti-establishment movements, and economic and cultural regression. Yes, I strongly believe in gender equality in terms of legal rights and in terms of opportunities, but I also believe in the need to investigate ways to make it a level-playing field for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and especially for young people. Look at what the UAE has done, it might be a symbolic gesture having a minister of youth but it's an important symbolic gesture. I wrote a short article a few years ago warning of an irreversible disconnect between GCC leadership and their youngsters if they don't actively try to engage them more and I think the wholehearted embrace of digital media is one way for leaders to get automatic feedback from young people instead of through voice-boxes that claim to speak on behalf of them.

18- Hanan: I agree with you. So you think women play a key role in the public development of Kuwaiti society. Are Kuwaiti women different from their peers in the GCC? If so, what sets them apart from the rest? How are Kuwaiti women different?

Al-Anoud: Kuwaiti women are different because they live in Kuwait. We don't have the same limits on our social and physical mobility as our neighbors. We do struggle with aspects of a guardianship system in our legal rights but it's not as pervasive as it is elsewhere in the GCC, alongside Bahrain Kuwait has the longest history of education and emancipation in the GCC, the first group of women scholarship students we've had in the fifties. So we've had 60 years of Kuwaiti women studying abroad, don't tell me that doesn't make a difference. Of course it does, and they came back and collectively threw away their Abayas because they felt that they were being hypocrites. Kuwaiti women are special because they are from Kuwait. Kuwait is special. There has been a lot of talk about Kuwait not catching up to its neighbors and it's true when you look at it in terms of infrastructure and cultural production, specifically I think Kuwait has unfortunately lost its crown a little bit but in terms of trendsetting engagement of the Kuwaiti people, no, I think really we are still more courageous perhaps even in sharing our intimacy and our human face than the more formal social structures that exist elsewhere in the gulf.

19- Hanan: Do you view your books, publications and activism as tools of empowerment? And why do you think it's important to empower women and urge them to have agency and actively affirms their life choices?

Al-Anoud: Well, I'm a mother I have a daughter I want her life to be easier and safer than mine even though mine was sheltered and steeped in privilege. I don't want her to be held back because she is a woman, and I certainly don't want there to be laws in existence that allow the physical violence against women and unfortunately like it or not these laws exist today in Kuwait and elsewhere in the gulf, if we are not brave enough to raise our heads above the fray and say well I don't care how uncomfortable this conversation makes you we need to talk about domestic violence, we need to talk about laws that encourage violence laws like article 153 laws like the article that allows you to kidnap a woman rape her and then marry her without any prosecution I mean this is ridiculous why do these laws exist? We don't question the motives of the lawmakers in the 60s, I think they were doing their best at the time but in this day and age, no, we've signed on to cedaw we have to respect our constitution, our religion Islam doesn't condemn the mistreatment of women, why should our laws? I mean somebody has to stand and say there's a problem here we need to find a solution.

20- Hanan: In the future how will the structure of kin and family change, in your opinion, especially with the rapid encroachment of technology and globalization on our everyday lives? What part will woman play in that system of organization? Do you think they'll be disavowed or included?

Al-Anoud: I think Instagram has become a predominantly female marketplace. And how's it going to change in terms of the family. I think lots of people today are conducting completely secret lives online in the privacy of their bedrooms. Sometimes under anonymous accounts sometimes, not that their families have no control over. And that is empowering, yes, but also very frightening because there has to be safety measures, check measures in place. So I think what we are seeing more is a move away from the formal intergenerational hierarchies within a family into a more individualized space a more control over the trajectory of their life. But I think what is going on is this increased level of exposure on all fronts. Our political, religious, and intellectual leaders, we are all engaging in a free flow of ideas and it will no doubt lend itself to the loosening of some of the constraints that are in place because of inherited traditions so young people today are picking and choosing what traditions they want to embrace, including the position of women.