

Ep. 18 - Tasneem Alsultan

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, photographer Tasneem Alsultan.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I remember a photo editor told me that "your work is like anyone else's. It doesn't show me the Saudi that I would have expected to see." And I said, "of course, because no white man would have ever been able to get intimate access of these women's homes. Or the young men who are all playing their PlayStation and laughing and just chilling in their homes or at parties that are - like no one's going to be able to photograph that and gain trust of the people they're photographing."

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Tasneem Alsultan has made a career out of capturing change. The Saudi photographer has been at the forefront of documenting headline-grabbing shifts in Saudi Arabia, from women gaining the right to drive, to the country's first concert by a western singer. Her work has led to assignments with *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, Amnesty International, and more. But Tasneem has also been documenting the more intimate, personal changes that don't make international headlines -- things that happen in the privacy of homes, or in the company of family and friends, like weddings. Tasneem herself was married at 17, but got divorced ten years later, leaving her as a single parent. At the time, she felt like she was the only one who knew what it was like to go through that - but it wasn't until she began hearing from women with stories like hers, that she realized their experiences were not as uncommon as she thought. Out of those tales of unlikely love, she created *Saudi Tales of Love*, a series showcasing love stories of all kinds: widows, people who were happily married, and divorced women. It went on to win first place in the 2017 World Photography Organisation Awards. I sat down with Tasneem Alsultan to talk about her lens on life and photography from her home in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tasneem, it's a pleasure to have you on *This Being Human*.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

So much of your work centers around love. It pours out of your photographs, showcasing love, different iterations of love, and yet you have this experience of your own marriage and eventual divorce. What do you remember about that time and how were you feeling and how were you being seen by others around you?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I think when my very close friends say, "well, you were brave," I see other women who were much braver than I am. I can't say like I had an abusive, horrible relationship. It's just, we didn't get along. It's not what's seen usually from Saudi women. We're usually portrayed as victims, we're usually portrayed as women who don't have a voice. So I think my, my story and my photography and those images were different than what's expected. I still remember, like, one of my, one of my therapists would say at one point of my life was like, "you're only afraid to get divorced because you are afraid to be lonely, and not alone." And we don't always distinguish the difference. So I think with my photography, I'm trying to project that, that we should always be with the right person and not be afraid of being lonely, because being alone means your independence and you're in charge of your life. So I'm -- I don't know, I'm trying to share my struggle in different ways, through other people's struggles. Whether it's a woman who is happily married, whether it's a woman who is divorced, whether it's a woman who has gone through loss and is a widow, or a woman who has never been in love, I think all of those women are going through different chapters of their life. And it has been actually done where I photographed a woman and then years later, she's in a different chapter of her life, and I asked her, what, what do you feel about the images that I have already published or shared? And they are sometimes taken back by how different they are.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You're giving people advertently or even inadvertently, an insight into who they were and who they've become and yet, love, love is celebrated by you, it's highlighted by you. What brings you back to love?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I mean, I think the first people that you witness are your parents, and my parents are very much in love. And I'm very lucky to have that. I've always seen my parents be very full of respect and admiration for each other. My dad would take time off to babysit us while my mother was pursuing her master's and then her PhD. And even before that, my grandparents, both of them, I remember both my grandfathers would write poems to their wives and would be always, you

know, “ayuni, habibiti, aziziti.” Like I remember my grandfather always referring to my grandmother with his eyes, you know, my eyes, my love, my heart, my soul. And I think that's, that's so admirable and so beautiful to witness that I, I knew that I wanted that. And if I, if I don't have it in my life then it's not, it's not good enough. I want that. I want respect and admiration.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

When Tasneem first started approaching women to open up and share their stories about divorce, it was tough. But, she was persistent.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I wanted to photograph divorced Saudi women and no one allowed me initially. And I struggled for the first few months. And then I met with one of my very good friends who was divorced and then remarried and she said, “first photograph me.” And she's very well connected. And her second husband is an actor, a famous actor. So she's very much respected. So she allowed me to photograph her first. We came to the realization that when you're remarried, the stigma of being divorced is removed because now you've, you've moved on. So I started with that. Someone who is remarried. And then I went back to the divorced woman, and then the widow, and then I'm now happy to photograph whoever. But It wasn't just the divorced women project. It was, you know what? We're all in this together. We're all feeling the same emotion and the same anger and frustrations with society, how we were wronged, or how we were, we did everything that was a taboo. And photographing beyond that is great. And then, so what? I'm divorced. And then so what?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Your work dodges some of, most of, the lazy shock value stereotypes that often exist of Saudi women in the western media, women from the so-called Islamic world, images where all you see is a woman with their face covered or draped in black from head to toe or that ubiquitous image right, of the niqabi woman stepping out of a Victoria's Secret shop with an arm, with an armful of bags.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Oh, yes, Everyone does that! Everyone takes that photo, I hate it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Right? It's it's it's so ubiquitous, so lazy. Is there a particular image that comes to mind from all the images that you've taken, that flies in the face of that over-the-top stereotyping? Is there like that one image that totally blows stereotypes to smithereens in your mind?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Oh, there's one. She's Ouhood. That's her name in the story. And her story is, “my friends are divorced, my parents are divorced, everyone I know who was in love is now divorced. I got divorced not once but twice. Single mothers get nothing. Not the children, not the money, nothing.” But the photo that I remember now immediately was, I went with her diving in Jeddah

and she was wearing a bathing suit and she's coming out holding an ice cream that's dripping. And you would never assume this photo is in Saudi. It's a woman wearing, like, showing all her legs and just licking an ice cream. And it's just, that's the exact opposite of the stereotype that we've had. And then the second photo of her was coming out of the water, because I always love to work on collaborative portraits where I photograph everything in a very documentary manner and then at the end, I ask them how they want to be portrayed and seen when they're at their most, I guess, they feel that moment of pride. This is how I want everyone to see me. So she came out of the water and she said: "Saudi women can't drive, but we can dive."

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I want to explore your love for wedding photography. What draws you to capturing, capturing weddings, but also Tasneem, I have to say, capturing weddings in a way like I've seen few other people do it.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

So I have to admit that when I first started photographing Saudi and Khaliji weddings, you know, in the Arab Gulf countries, Dubai, UAE - yeah UAE, Bahrain, etc. I remember initially I was like, well, this is kind of boring because it's in a ballroom and it's segregated and usually the men are the ones who are fun to photograph. And I was comparing it to beautiful elaborate Indian weddings or amazing, you know, south of France weddings like, or even like Tanzania weddings. So like all the weddings, in my, that I've experienced, just weren't... yeah, Saudi's weren't as fun. And then after a few months of photographing so many Saudi weddings, I realized that I was -- I don't know why I decided that I was very responsible over the stories that I was capturing, that it was, it was my fault that I didn't find them interesting. And it's the most important moment, hopefully one of the many important moments in their life. So why was I dictating and deciding that this was too boring? You know? I had to dig deeper. A grandmother will always be looking at her granddaughter or grandson walking down. And there's always a moment that they'll have either a tear or you'll feel that sigh, that's always going to come up, and that's my job as a wedding photographer to document it. Because, I think that we don't always realize that once that photo is taken and that event is gone, then we don't know if we'll all gather again in the same way. So I'm always photographing the grandparents and photographing the children because I think these hilarious facial expressions that they do, these things are never going to be recreated again, because they're going to be older and they're going to look at themselves and "oh my God, look how silly I was. Look at the face that I did." I feel those emotions. Once I leave a wedding and I feel that the couple are in love, I really, I like, I feed off that. I feel like, oh my God, this is amazing. I can't wait to find other couple who are also in love.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tasneem, amidst so much personal change in your own life and your ever evolving work, you've often captured so much change that's happening around you in Saudi Arabia. And I think in terms of the things that the world has focused on, fairly or unfairly, to be honest, chief amongst them has been the movement and now the granting of permission for women to drive for the first time in the last few years. What was that moment like for you personally?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

It was amazing. I mean, it was shock. It took us by surprise that we were going to drive, because I as a Saudi woman, up until that announcement, was one of the many, many women who said, "I'll never drive in Saudi even if they allowed it. The men are insane. There's so many car accidents, it's never going to go well and we're going to be harassed," like we all went to the worst case scenario and just stuck to it. Because it was just far beyond what we will imagine. And I, I drive everywhere else in the world. I have my license since 14 plus years ago, so. When the announcement happened, we all had goosebumps. We were crying. You can't explain that feeling. My dad can't feel the same way... My dad just felt, oh, great. That means I don't have to drive you around and be your chauffeur to all these different places. But that emotion is very different and I think it's very, we -- only women who have never been able to drive in their home country can understand that. But then I would have to photograph a feeling and how do you announce that? How do you photograph that story for *The New York Times*? So then, me and the writer for *The New York Times*, Ben Hubbard, we started seeking out all the women who in 1990 went to drive asking for permission to change that right. And they got arrested. I think there were forty seven women and their names were on papers. And that paper was posted outside mosques and universities and schools. And they were slandered for being the outspoken women who, yeah, they lost their reputation, they were fired. So meeting them, you know, since that story in 1990, meeting them in 2017 was amazing. I felt so much resilience that women in general always carry, like they, they knew that it wouldn't change a thing, but they just wanted to go down in history and record it and that they did something.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, one of the images from that time captures a husband and wife and the wife is behind the wheel and her husband is next to her as she drives for the first time. And it's an amazing image because they're in this small, intimate space, you know, in the front two seats of a car at this historic moment in this historic time. And there's no sense whatsoever that you were there to capture it. What's the magic trick about being unseen at intimate moments?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I'm usually a person, like now you've noticed that I talk a lot, but when I'm behind a camera, I kind of forget. I become absent and I'm just there documenting what's happening. And I'm very, I'm five foot one, so I'm tiny and I just run around. So because I'm running around and I'm like doing really weird moves on the floor and then I'm like holding my camera really high. And so after the first five seconds, people tend to ignore me, like "we don't know what she's doing." And they were laughing and giggling about just him trying to mansplain to her how to drive. And she's like, "I can't wait to get the driver's license. I won't need you here. You're the worst teacher." So they were just laughing about that. And yeah, that was it. That was one of the moments that I got to capture.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's Interim Director and CEO. Did you know we have posted dozens of fascinating talks about arts and culture to our Youtube channel? Hear from contemporary artist Ekow Nimako, whose awe inspiring Afrofuturistic Lego sculpture, "Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE," just joined the museum's permanent collection. Or, discover the story behind Remastered, our exhibition celebrating the museum's world class collection of Iranian Ottoman and Moghul Indian miniature paintings. For all that and more, search Aga Khan museum on Youtube and click the subscribe button. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I'm curious, Tasneem, so much of your work focuses on Saudi women. I mean, what about Saudi men? You know, how do they fit into your work? And in some ways, really, how do they react to your work?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Oh, my dad always says, like, "I'm a good man, I've never done anything to hurt you. Why do you always portray Saudi men as... Yeah, why do you hate us so much?" And I'm like, "yes. But I personally believe that in general, change won't happen if we're all patting ourselves in the back. And we're all celebrating how amazing we are." So I've been very fortunate to have an amazing father and amazing grandfathers and uncles and brother. But that does not mean that that's the generalization. I think there are more women who have been affected negatively by the men around them that I think it's more important to share their stories, that we can later become part of that change, that I hope women can raise their sons and realize that this is no longer accepted and condoned and we need the fathers to also come in. So, yeah, I think it's just in general, the work that I do, I don't want to talk about how everything is amazing and everything is perfect because then, great. What is there to add?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, one of the social changes that you also captured, talking about men and and and this kind of bifurcation of public space between women and men, you captured a concert that was held in the coastal city of Jeddah in 2017. A men only concert featuring the rapper Nelly.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Yes!

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And Algerian singer Cheb Khaled.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Wait, how do you - you've done your homework. Wow. Okay.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Well, I remember hearing about this concert and thinking, *Nelly and Cheb Khaled on the same stage?* That was my first, that was my first sort of sort of like, what is going on? But the more

you read about this event, this, this men-only concert featuring Nelly and the Algerian singer Cheb Khaled and you were there. What was the significance of a concert like that, first of all?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I was hired by *The New York Times* to go photograph the first ever concert of a Western singer in Saudi Arabia, which happened in December 2017 in Jeddah. It was seven thousand men and I got permission to get there. So I flew to Jeddah. Went, you know, in an Uber to the location. And then I showed them my permit and the guards who were not Saudi didn't allow me in. So I think those men, the guards, were worried that I would be photographed among seven thousand men and people would ask, "how did she get in? Fire the bodyguards who got her in." I didn't want my, my editor to find out that I couldn't get in because I'm a woman. I already felt kind of a lot of pressure because I was a woman and I was a Saudi. I needed to prove to him that I was the best person to have handle Saudi specific stories because I didn't want him to hire another, again, outsider white man photographing my work, you know, for me. So.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Totally get that.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Yeah, so I, I had to basically climb around the gates, under the gates, around the cars, step on boxes. And I like they knew that it was me because I wore the Uber driver's hoodie and his baseball cap and they're like, "we could see your fingernails are red," you know, "you're wearing earrings." I was like, "guys, I just need to do this. You have to help me around this." And towards the end, I have one photo where I am basically on stage, but I'm not, I swear to God, I'm - I'm lying down on my stomach. And I'm photographing between the legs of one of the bodyguards standing in front of me so that none of the people on stage or behind, in front of the stage actually, can see me. And I'm just trying to photograph both the singer and the crowd. I have to be in the crowd, but I wasn't allowed to so that was all I could get. And yeah, I didn't let it stop me. I was there for a few hours until the concert finished and they were... I remember like the bodyguards were like, "you know what, we'll let you photograph Nelly." I was like, "no, no, I don't care about him. I want to photograph the Saudi men at the front."

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Right.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Dancing and cheering.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tasneem, you're global. You know, you spent, you've spent time in the United States, you spent time in Europe. You've traveled extensively for your art and to document our remarkable, messy, incredible world. And I guess in some ways, that must make you kind of an insider and an outsider in Saudi Arabia. And how does that global experience of having grown up elsewhere,

gone to school in the United States and so on, inform your view of what to shoot and how to shoot it?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I'm very wary of media and how representation is extremely important and how othering is the worst thing that can happen, especially to the Middle East. I've seen how my father is... maybe he's Saudi national, but I feel his being is always- and I think in his mind, his homeland is Iraq, so I see how Iraq has been deprived of really any kind of dignity when it comes to media. And I always want to, to be very cautious and aware that for instance when I'm photographing for *The New York Times* that my work doesn't fall into hands that can use it against me or my people. When I say my people, it's whoever I'm photographing at this point. And I've seen that happen to many others before me. So I always feel like it's my job to photograph it in a way that the people who I am photographing will not come back to me hurt or attacked or threatened or, you know, the list goes on. There might -- the most important people that I've, I will try to protect and not the publication itself.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Now, I have to ask you from the point of view of a journalist to a journalist. How do you navigate conversations with foreign editors-

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Oh, God.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Who come to you interested in those shock value stereotypical shots of Saudi Arabia, the Arab world and its people. Like, what do those conversations look like?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

I remember a photo editor told me that your work is like anyone else's. It doesn't show me the Saudi that I would have expected to see. And I said, of course, because no white man would have ever been able to get intimate access of these women's homes, or the young men who are all playing their PlayStation and laughing and just chilling in their homes or at parties that are ha-- like no one's going to be able to photograph that and gain trust of the people they're photographing. And he didn't get it. He didn't really understand. It was more of like, I can see this photo anywhere. It's a girl wearing jeans, chilling, watching TV. And I'm like, no. Every other western journalist who's come to Saudi before that has only been able to photograph, like you said, niqabis walking out of Victoria's Secret or women wearing niqab in their own homes, eating a sufra like on the floor. Why would they ever be wearing their niqabs and covering their faces while they're sitting in their homes and they're all young women in Riyadh? Like that doesn't work. But I've seen it so many times that we're over it. And I think what's now changing with social media and how it's accessible to everyone, is that photo editors are now a little bit more, I don't know what the word is, but they're being questioned, of like, why are you allowing this? Why are you publishing this?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Do you ever find yourself or catch yourself Tasneem, imposing your own stereotypes on Saudi society, or the people you're photographing? I wonder sometimes, you know, we have those moments right, where we're like, uh, what am I imposing on this situation? Do you ever, have you ever found that happening?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

No. I found my friends tell me that -- and we noticed this and we started like looking at through my photos, that whenever I photograph women wearing niqab, I get more likes and comments than when I'm photographing Saudi women not covering up and not sharing this same stereotype that's expected. And I will get maybe a quarter of those comments, a quarter of the likes. So my friends always mock me when I'm posting a photo of the niqabis, they're like, "yeah, Tasneem, fall into that stereotype." And I'm like, "no, no! But it's it's actually what I've seen. It's where I am."

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tasneem Alsultan, what does this being human mean to you?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

It's the mind. Sometimes you wake up and you don't know why you're upset. And sometimes you wake up and you are just cheerful and you have no idea why. So I think it's the mind. You just have to really understand that whatever your mind, your body, your soul is going to be experiencing that day, it's always coming for a reason.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tasneem Alsultan, thank you so much for joining me on *This Being Human*, this has been such a joy. And we look forward... I look forward to following your work as it continues to develop and as it continues to give us insights into all these incredible, extraordinary people, that you, that you showcase. Thank you, Tasneem.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I really, really enjoyed this.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Nicole Edwards. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to

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