

***This Being Human* Transcript  
Ep. 22 – Khalid Albaih**

**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.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

What's the most trouble you've ever gotten in over your cartooning?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Well, uh, where can I start? [laughs] I was detained in two different countries. My life was threatened by people in power in my own country in Sudan before the revolution. And it's just the fact that you are not stable, that you're never stable. I think that's the biggest thing that really affected me.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

For Khalid Albaih, cartooning is a matter of life and death. One of his role models was assassinated, and Khalid himself has been forced into exile, questioned by authorities, and lived a life without security, hopping from country to country. The source of the drama are his political cartoons — single panels, often with no caption, that mock and criticize authoritarian leaders around the world. But that's not all he does. He also shines a light on social issues like the Syrian refugee crisis, the effects of climate change, and racial injustice.

After failing to get a job as a political cartoonist in a newspaper, he started publishing cartoons online — under the name Khartoon! — a fusion between the Sudanese capital and his lifelong passion. He found a following there, and during the Arab Spring his work exploded in popularity.

These days, Khalid Albaih's drawings can be found in museums worldwide. And his cartoons, as well as commentary, are published in places like *NPR*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Guardian*. I reached Khalid in Doha, Qatar, where he's spent much of his life.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Khalid Albaih, welcome to *This Being Human*.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Thank you very much. I mean, I'm just, wow. I'm super honoured to be here, man. I'm very, very, very happy. And I'm very honoured to be here.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Khalid, how and when did you fall in love with cartoons?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Oh, man. So, you know, I always liked art. I always liked comics. And growing up, I was in Sudan. And I remember we had all these translated DC and Marvel Comics that were translated into Arabic. And, you know, this is really what attracted me to art and attracted me to comics. And as a kid, when I'm looking at this stuff and kind of remembering that time now, I really see a lot of connections of things, not — doesn't really have to do with cartoons. I mean, it really, it really, it has a lot to do with finding heroes, you know, so that was the first time that I actually thought about cartooning and I thought about, you know, making heroes, right, or talking about heroes and highlighting our life and highlighting these people that are doing incredible things. Normal people, you know? And for me, like one of my best heroes is Superman, who's an alien, who's an actual alien, but he's disguised as a man. And his vision of a man is someone that's weak, someone that stutters, someone that's, like, super powerful but like he plays the part so well, he wears glasses. Nobody even hears him when he talks, right? So for me, that was kind of an indication of how gods see humans or, you know, just we're very weak. And then from there, it was just, you know, years later that I got introduced to political cartooning. But definitely comics was the start.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You know, I love the story about Superman, because Superman is the most unusual in some ways of superheroes, isn't it? Because in some ways Clark Kent, as you know, Superman as Clark Kent, rather, you're right, shows up all this human frailty and weakness. And yet there's something about the comic book world where people who look like us become extraordinary.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Yeah.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

And I wonder if the young Khalid Albaih reading Superman felt like he could be extraordinary because he was exposed to these fantastical personalities.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

I mean, for me, I always felt, you know, I was always like, you know, a geek and I liked comics since I was a kid, you know. And I was super tall, even as a young kid. But, you know, I wasn't sporty. I didn't like playing sports; I loved like just drawing and reading and stuff. So seeing Clark Kent being like me, you know, being in like this nerd, you know, that no one listens to, no one, no one even sees sometimes, right? And, you know, even though he could be the biggest person in the room and no one actually notices that at all, he kind of gave me hope. You know, I was like, "Maybe I am that," you know? That's great to have. That's great, to — it's great to see.

And it really affected me a lot. It really affected me a lot growing up. We have this saying in Arabic, that is [speaking Arabic], which means, “God puts his secret in the weakest of his beings.” Right? So for me, that really resonated. You know, like someone as weak as that can change the world. And that, for me, is why until today, I cheer for the underdog, you know, because I believe in the people that don't show up, you know, a hundred times bigger than themselves and claim that they are this and that and this and that, you know? I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with that. But for me, I really like the person that works in silence, you know [speaking Arabic], you know? So you do you do your things in silence and things like that. It's just the idea of Superman really resonated a lot with me. And of course, it came from immigrant Jewish kids that felt the need to hide themselves, right? And in this world, like, you know, just become ordinary just like everyone else. So this is what everyone else meant. This is it. So the idea of Superman came from that, came from people that feel that they have so much to give, right, but they're not given that chance.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

When did you first realize the power that the medium of comics and cartoons has to directly inspire social change?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

With political cartoons I think it was the introduction to Naji al-Ali, who was a Palestinian cartoonist who was living and working in Kuwait as a Palestinian refugee. And he worked in the newspaper in Kuwait in the 60s and 70s, and he was assassinated in London in the 80s. And just like all the greats, just like Malcolm X and, you know, just like Martin Luther King, he knew he was getting assassinated. He knew it, you know, but he still kept on working. And no one until today knows was it, you know, the Israelis or was it the Palestinians that killed him? Or maybe it was both because it was in both their benefits for him to lay down his pen, right? So when I got introduced to the story of Naji al-Ali and his work, because his work also took me from comics to political cartoons that are like, ha-ha funny and, you know, just gags and stuff, to something that's really serious and something that's really deep and poetic and sad. It had a lot of sadness to it, that he really poured all his life, his energy, his anger, his disbelief, you know, his belief in those cartoons. And even if it cost, it would have cost him his life, and it did, he still did it. And I think this is the time where I realized that this is, you know, cartooning is very serious business.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Khalid has personally experienced some of the consequences of speaking out against power. He's been detained and questioned twice. And his criticism of former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir meant Khalid wasn't welcome in his homeland. But he says he's not looking to make trouble.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

I always need to think and think about what's the — what is the best way for me to talk about what I want to talk about without being in that situation again, you know, without creating that situation again, because that's not what I want to do. I do want to shake you a little bit, right? I

want you to see things. And I want all sides to do that. But it's definitely not my intent to do that. That's not the point for me.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You know, as you're speaking, Khalid, I'm thinking about all the people who, when they think about what you're saying, they're like, who could be so threatened by lines on a page, by cartoons, by images, by things that, you know, we read a newspaper and then wrap our fish and chips with.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Yeah.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I think that for me is like it's like a fundamentally important question because I think it speaks to the power of your art and of your work. Why are people so threatened by drawings on a page?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Authoritarian regimes work on fear, right? The only way that they control people is to make them fear them. So if I tell a joke about you, if I make people laugh at you, I'm not scared of you. They're not scared of you anymore. And that threatens their power, right? That's why. So it's not that they're scared of you; you threaten them. They need to stop this because they need to have everything under control. They need to keep the status quo going. And you're disturbing that. You're mocking the man that doesn't make a mistake. You know, the alpha male, the leader, the great leader, all of these, you know, embodiments that the dictator would like to have that, you know, you're making people see that it's not true. And if you look at even in the Arab Spring, the day — I still remember this very clearly. I was watching Al Jazeera and this one, Libya just started, you know, things just started like happening in Libya. And there was a video shot with like, you know, a super-low res camera on the phone. It was a cartoon drawn on the wall of Gaddafi and people throwing like shoes at it, you know, and people filming it. And there was a lot of people. And it was a detailed cartoon, so that person, like really took his time drawing that cartoon on that wall. This is when I knew that things were over. That's it. People are not scared anymore. People are willing to risk their life for them to go out. And Gaddafi knew that. And it's the same thing, like it's the same thing in Sudan in 2019. Same thing. You drive around Khartoum and it's all these tags, all these little cartoons and all of these things in the street. And it went from super-fast scribbles that people do when they run away, right, to super detailed. And this is when you know that they're losing the grip. They're losing their grip on society. They're losing their grip on maintaining that tough image, right? So that's why they're scared. Definitely that's why they're scared.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

The cartoon that Khalid may be most well-known for is not one that mocks a dictator. It's a depiction of NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who famously kneeled during the national anthem -- which effectively got him shut out of professional football. In Khalid's drawing, Kaepernick's hair is replaced by a black power fist. It's as simple as it is powerful. The image came together during a road trip Khalid was taking across the United States.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

In 2016, I was invited by Colby College in Maine to be the Oak Human Rights fellow. And during that time, I was doing a tour with my artist collective — it's called CultuRunners — and we're a bunch of Arab artists that have an RV that looks like an Arab house. You can imagine how that is taken in the U.S. by police. And we drive around —

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I mean, that sounds dope.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Yeah, it is dope. It's very dope. And we, you know, we drive around the U.S. doing projects and so on. My project was called *We the People*. And I wanted to investigate how the Civil Rights movement went from sometimes considered even a terrorist movement to Obama being president, because obviously something worked, right? Something is happening. And because I wanted to reflect that on the Arab Spring. How can we make it work? So we set off, we went -- I visited New York. We went to the Malcolm X Museum, we met some of his family. And went to the South, went to New Orleans, spoke to a lot of people in New Orleans. And we did this amazing tour where we ended up in the Lorraine Motel [in Memphis], which is the Museum of Civil Rights where, and it's the hotel where Martin Luther King was assassinated. And during that trip, I was exposed to a lot of the histories that, you know, I knew little about, the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, and so on. And of course, I came across the image of the [1968] Olympics with the athletes putting up their black fists. And at the same time, when I was in America, all the news was talking about Colin Kaepernick. I have no idea about American football at all. Like, you know, just like everyone who's not American. I had no idea what's going on. I had no idea who Colin Kaepernick was. But all I knew was that he was kneeling down during the national anthem in protests about police brutality and so on. And this is something that I can relate to. This is something I can understand. And especially at that time of Trump coming to power, things were super intense. So for me, Colin Kaepernick kneeling down is a continuation of black athletes putting up their fists in the Olympics. So all I did was just merge the two images together, basically. So I had, you know, Colin Kaepernick kneeling down with his afro being the black fist, you know, and I just posted it online and it just went like fire man, it just went crazy. People were picking it up. Newspapers — like, it was insane, you know?. Celebrities. And that happened twice because it happened in 2016 and then it happened again in '18, right? Even bigger. And again, with the Black Lives Matter movement, when everything was happening, it went, like — I don't think I've ever seen anything go, from my work, go as viral as this.

**AMIR ALI ALIBHAI**

Hi, I'm Amirali Alibhai, head of performing arts at the Aga Khan Museum. From Kwalli, to Iranian classical music, and from Arab jazz to flamenco, there is something for everyone at our #MuseumWithoutWalls. Our live arts programming is central in our mission to connect cultures and people through the arts. Discover something new or enjoy a familiar performance. Go to [Agakhanmuseum.org/museumwithoutwalls](http://Agakhanmuseum.org/museumwithoutwalls) or find us on YouTube. Now, back to *This Being Human*.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Khalid, you know your career is in a way so, such a product of the moment, isn't it? Because your work lives in the moment. And your career was launched in many ways online. And you rose to prominence during the so-called Arab Spring when social media gave a platform to a lot of people who didn't have one before. But I've also seen that you draw a lot of cartoons that are critical of the social media culture, of smartphone dependence, of all the apps that we use to brand ourselves online. And I'm intrigued, how do you kind of reconcile yourself as a critic of the culture of social media while you're so embedded in it, and in many ways your work and your message has benefitted from it?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

The short answer is, I don't have a choice. I really don't. And a lot of people don't. There's no infrastructure in most of the Global South, for example, to help artists build platforms and reach out to audiences, and for audiences to know who these people are. And as you mentioned in the beginning, I was kicked out of an editor's office once. He literally kicked me out. And it wasn't the first time. And because I — the work that I've done or I was doing, he said, you know, "This is never going to get published and it doesn't look good." So, online gave me the chance to do that. You know, the Internet gave me a chance to do that. And to develop that. And to look for resources and to copy people. You know, I copied Naji al-Ali like crazy, you know? And until I found my own voice. And this is how art works, really, you know? And that's why my work is under Creative Commons, because I want people — I don't mind people copying me or using my work. I'm honoured. And the Internet is the only way to do that, so the Internet, social media gave me that power, gave me that power of reach. So when I got kicked out of that editor's office, I was like, you know, what am I looking for? You know, am I looking for to be called an independent cartoonist that works for this newspaper so-and-so? Or do I just want to put out my art and start a discussion and talk about what do I want, you know? And I found out that I just want to put my work out there and start a discussion, just talk about things, things that we can talk about every day, things that we whisper about really, right? So that's what I've done, and it was amazing. And it was you know, this was like, what, 2008 or 2007 or something? And I had, you know, an account on Facebook, before Facebook there was something called Hi5. And I had like a Blogger website, a Flickr account, everything that you can think of. And as we grew, the Internet and the control of the Internet grew with us. And this dream of this free space, this public square, started disappearing or started being controlled. And we lived in silos. Right. If you like my work, A.I. will push you, you know, to my work and other people like me, and then it will close it off. That's it. You're just stuck in this world. So now we're back at square one, because of greed, because of, you know, PR and because of the politicians wanting to control the masses again, you know, and this time through, you know, big tech and all of that. So I haven't been as active drawing in the past, I would say year, because I was really trying to think, or two years actually, because I was really trying to think, how can we retreat? How can we retreat, regroup, and try to think about how can we talk freely again? How can we find that Internet again? How can we bust out of these filter bubbles again? And in Sudan, actually, when they shut down the Internet, everyone thought that's it, it's a wrap. Right. The army's going to come back in power and that's the end of it. But people managed to actually print good old paper, you know, walk around from house to house and distribute. This is this is what's

happening. We're going out, you know, next so and so. We're doing this, we're doing that. So they retreated and they went out in a huge protest that the army never expected. The army and the regional powers that are supporting them, they never expected it because they always thought that it's just like the Arab Spring. This is just going to die with the Internet. If we control the Internet, that's it. But it didn't work, right? So that gave me hope that it's not all in the Internet. We can actually go back, we can regroup. We can use the Internet, no problem. But we need to think about how we do that again.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Khalid, you are Sudanese. But you weren't born in Sudan. That's where your parents are from and it's a deep connection that you have to that place. It's also where your cartooning platform, Khartoon!, gets its name. You know, it's a play on the capital city of Khartoum, a city I have to say, Khalid, I love very much. So I have to ask you, as also a lover of the Sudan, how do you think about the Sudan for yourself? Do you think of it as a home?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

I was born in Romania. My grandfather was born in Egypt. My wife was born in Rome. Two of my kids are born in Doha, two of my kids are born in Copenhagen.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Amazing.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

I believe that Sudan is the place where I want to see my kids grow up because of their heritage and because I believe, again, in the underdog. And Sudan is a lot like Superman. You know, we're very down to earth. We don't know how to market ourselves. We don't talk about ourselves like, you know. Even the worst of the worst in Sudan, like the dictator Ahmed al-Bashir, who was in power for 30 years, if someone dies in the neighborhood, he will just walk to, you know, to the [speaking Arabic], to the house and give his condolences and stuff, right? So we are these kind of people. We're very diverse. You know, it's the cradle of civilization, right? I mean, it's the place where a lot of the oldest homo sapiens skeletons were found. We have the biggest amount of pyramids in the world. So there's a lot. There's a lot. And because of a lot of complexities that happened in the last, I don't know, say, like 500 years, people just can't grasp how to make this place work. I would love for it to succeed because it will really make a great example of how a country that came from out of all of this could really persevere and work. You know, we could work together, we could be a democratic country that things can work, not based on race, not based on religion, just work based on humanity and work based on how we can work together, right? So I believe in Sudan. I really do. You know, and again, that's part of my belief in the underdog and love of comics.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You know, Khalid, you've spoken about this incredibly international family that you are a part of. You, your wife, your kids, your parents, being born in all of these different parts of the world, in other places you've spoken about existing at the crossroads of being African and Arab, Black and Muslim. And I wonder how much of that existing at the crossroads of things drives your

stories. How much of that experience of being so many things at the same time, how does that shape the way that you see the world?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Being in that crossroad of being so many things, you know — Black, Arab, Muslim, African, all of these things and also being immigrant, always being the different one, you know — it's like trying to connect so many wires at the same time. It's like you're trying to connect all these things and you're in the middle. You're like the connector, and each one of them comes from an extreme opposite, right? And you're trying to, like, lock things on and just say, you know, these things could work, you know, I'm right here. You know, I'm the example that these things could work. And it's really about trying to, you know, make the others understand each other, you know, translating, really. The best quality about cartooning, I think, is that we transcend language, that we jump over that border of language, because we show an image. So just like, you know, the image of Kaepernick, I didn't need to write a lot. You know, I didn't need to tell that story. If you know the story, it's great. But if you don't know the story, it's also very powerful and it makes you connect to it. And the same thing if I do, you know. The other cartoon I've done about — I did this cartoon called *Worlds* and it's the same body. One of them is lying on a beach; the other one is lying in the water. One of them is wearing a swimsuit; the other one is wearing a life jacket. This one is white; this one is black. And it's as simple as that, you know, because I am both these people. I am in the position that I am in today because I speak good English. I went to good schools. You know, I wear these nerdy glasses. I know how to talk, you know, to white people and to Europeans and to Americans and stuff. But at the same time, you know, I am from one of the poorest countries in the world. I know a lot of people that actually try to cross and are trying to cross the Mediterranean and trying to get, you know, get a better life. Simply, that's really what they want, just a better life, just to be counted. So when, you know, when I put out that cartoon and when I talk about it in exhibitions or in seminars or in whatever, when I talk to people, it's really like I can see that they have questions. It's like it opens a door to questions and from someone that is familiar, you know, someone that's familiar to them and someone that's familiar to the other side as well. What I'm trying to do is just simply make things better. You know? Connect the dots, the ones I know, at least. The best thing about a cartoon is that you could talk to a professor and you could talk to an eight year old, you know? And both of them will have a smile on their face. And that's an amazing conversation starter. Just a smile. You know, they're always like, "Oh, I never met a cartoonist before." I really enjoy that moment, you know, when someone smiles and then we'll talk about it and then they see my work and they're like, "oh, that kind of cartoonist." [Laughs] Too late! Now we have to have a conversation.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Khalid Albaih, what does *This Being Human* mean to you?

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

It's welcoming whatever is to come. It's really about, you know, having faith and just doing what you can.



**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Khalid Albaih, thank you for joining me on *This Being Human*.

**KHALID ALBAIH:**

Thank you so much for having me, man, this is great. I'm very honored.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

If you enjoyed this conversation, you can see Khalid's work on his Facebook page, Khartoon!, or his Instagram account. *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 and 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 [www.agakhanmuseum.org](http://www.agakhanmuseum.org). The Museum wishes to thank Nadir and Shabin Mohamed for their philanthropic support to develop and produce *This Being Human*.