

SPECIAL REPORT

insight

A conversation with **Nejoud Al-Yagout**

Al-Yagout goes back to universality while writing

Simplicity in poetry speaks transcendent language

By **Chaitali B. Roy**
Special to the Arab Times

Nejoud Al-Yagout is perhaps one of the most tolerant, altruistic and liberal persons I have come across. She is open-minded, empathetic, compassionate and loving. A poet-activist, she uses words to a purpose. Although her first book 'This is an Imprint' encapsulated a personal journey rooted in angst, loss, identity crisis leading to a more illuminated state of consciousness, she has followed it up with poems that touch on issues troubling Kuwait, and the world in general. Issues of alienation, discrimination, violence and intolerance — religious or otherwise repeatedly surface in her work.

It is well-known that Arab literature has a strong tradition of poetry, but when Nejoud writes she transcends her regional and local self and speaks from a spiritual perspective. Her words are neither just Arab nor just Kuwaiti; they speak a language and express sentiments that everyone understands. "We come to this world without any religion, race or nationality," she had mentioned in an earlier interview, "and while writing, I go back to that essence, to that universality."

To write her first book of poetry, Nejoud dipped both into her personal experiences and the collective consciousness. Despite the dearth of a robust tradition in English writing in the Middle East, the reaction to her first book of poetry was quite encouraging. But the poet did have her own share of apprehensions after having waited so long to publish her first book. "I feel you expose yourself with poetry, it is almost as if your soul is naked in front of everybody, and that was one thing that delayed the process of publishing. But, a few months back I prepared myself for the experience," she had smiled.

Nejoud Al-Yagout has just published her second book 'Awake in the Game of Pretending' with Friesenpress. This anthology of poetry is divided into six chapters of the spiritual journey: Awakening, Dark Night of the Soul, The Matrix, Realm-Love, Forum of Expression and The Divine. In the words of the poet: *Awakening entails a new-found awareness and way of looking at the world. Dark Night of the Soul reflects plunging into despair and fear as the new replaces the old; as conditioned thoughts make way for being-ness. The Matrix is disillusionment with the external. Realm-Love is the arising of an understanding that earthly love is still not an adequate reflection of the ocean of love within us — which radiates love and is constantly ready to give, unconditionally, even in a world that has forgotten how to love. Forum of Expression is about finding solace in writing which provides catharsis. And, finally, The Divine is realization of the One. The book is available on Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble online and Friesenpress.com.*

In Insight today, Nejoud Al-Yagout shares her journey with poetry and sheds light on other issues close to her heart. If the words of this young poet can make a dent on even one soul, and does what she wants to do: spread love, compassion and the joy of living, the trials and tribulations of her creative journey will be worth it.

Question: When did you know you had poetry inside you?

Answer: Poetry began flowing inside of me when I was a teenager. It was my first introduction to the world of self-introspection. There was an energy within that was begging to come out into the light. Initially, it is particularly frightful to know that we can be containers of so much darkness.

Q: Is it right that to be a poet or even a writer one needs to go through a cathartic experience in life?

A: Catharsis sounds so glamorous but we forget that in order to experience it, we must go through extreme suffering. Some people write after suffering, but can we be certain that one has to go through pain to write? Who knows? I hope not. I feel when our consciousness evolves collectively, there will no longer be a need for suffering.

Q: How did you nurture the 'poet' inside you?

A: The poet inside me makes itself known, loud and clear. I am merely a vessel. The only way I can nurture anything is to observe it without judgment. Somehow, I am the permissive parent that lets it be. I must admit that I still engage in duality as this parent because the editing is more reflective of a punitive disciplinarian. At first, however, I am always a pushover.



Nejoud Al-Yagout

Inside out I
SCREAM
A poem by Nejoud Al-Yagout

plinian. At first, however, I am always a pushover.

Q: You were very quiet all these years. Was it a self-imposed silence? Why did you break it? In other words why didn't you publish earlier?

A: The silence was broken because it was time. For what? Only the now can reveal the answer.

Q: What was the reaction to your first book?

A: The reaction was very positive — for me and for many others in the local cultural scene. People were weary of only tasting the essence of creativity outside of Kuwait. The scene here was a late bloomer, but it is definitely making up for lost time. People are dehydrated and want to get rehydrated on local art juice.

Q: I enjoy the simplicity and lyricism in your poetry — how important is to be simple?

A: Simplicity speaks a transcendent language. I am a sucker for diction that flows. Lao Tzu is a testament to the beauty of simplicity. The words dance more freely that way.

Q: With people having no interest in reading nowadays, how do you hope to reach out to them with your books?

A: It is difficult. With poetry, especially. But, I have reached out somehow. There are many new friends I have made that I would have never met if it were not for the books I have written. I hope to reach out to the others by connecting to the collective paradigm. If you find me in you or you in me when you read. *This is an imprint or Awake in the Game of Pretending*, then we are meeting in a paradigm of oneness.

Q: Please share your journey with poetry with us?

A: Poetry has been my forum of expression so far. It has been a sacred journey. Perhaps it can be considered a connection to the wordless realm that manifests itself through language. There is an intricate rhythm that we dance to unconsciously. When that rhythm becomes conscious, creativity arises. I am dancing to the same formless rhythm that we all dance to, essentially.

Q: You have recently released your second book of poetry — within a very short time. How did that come about?

A: I can't stop writing. I feel that once you publish your first book, you have opened a portal to infinite possibilities. My second book was one possibility. Also, I am going through a period of chrysalis so I have to write.

Q: How do you as a creative person publicize your book or reach out to your readers? Are there avenues in Kuwait?

A: Social media is the platform for

biography

Nejoud Al-Yagout has lived in various countries including China, Pakistan, Italy, the UK and the UAE. Her father was an ambassador of Kuwait and this gave her the opportunity to become a global citizen. This has influenced her poetry which transcends race and religion. Having experienced different cultures has expanded her consciousness. Oneness is an essential part of her philosophy and she is an avid reader of mystical saints such as Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. Although she loves to read poetry, she has no favorite poets. In fact, she knows too well that temperaments change and

what she considers a favorite today can be on the back of a shelf tomorrow. It all depends on the moment. Nowadays, she reads Sultan Bahu and Rabia Al-Adawiya. Tomorrow, she insists, her shift may alter. Al-Yagout is the author of two books. This is an imprint which is a book of 58 pairs of poems written on two frequencies and a new book, *Awake in the Game of Pretending*, which chronicles a spiritual awakening in six chapters: *Awakening, Dark Night of the Soul, The Matrix, Realm-Love, Forum of Expression and The Divine*. She currently works as a librarian in a private school in Kuwait.

publicity. I was very lucky with my first book. My friends and people in the cultural scene really helped to publicize my book. I still don't know why I was so fortunate but I am immensely grateful.

Q: Apart from writing poetry you have slowly become involved in activism — what are the issues you are working on?

A: A few people and I founded a group called *Befriend The Other*. Our goal is to raise awareness of people living in the peripheries of society. By befriending them, we discover we are the other. Our first project revolved around the stateless. Then, Amira Behbehani, a talented artist and a dear friend, asked me to join Art Salon — a group affiliated with Peace Day — to bring attention to peace. The more I awaken, however, the more careful I am about engaging in polarities. If we cheerlead for peace, we are keeping the realm of war alive. By calling someone the "other" we are only highlighting dualism. I will continue to provide support, but my perspective is shifting gradually.

Q: I think you are active on the 'stateless issue' and you have reacted with a poem — Can you share it with us?

A: The stateless are ahead of us on a spiritual paradigm because as we awaken we let go of everything we thought defined us — and nationality is a big part of that. However, since we are still living in a realm of lower frequencies, I can grasp how brutal it is to feel excluded in one's place of birth.

Stateless One
By Nejoud Al-Yagout

All souls are stateless
We are born stateless
We die stateless

All souls are free of labels
Free here
Free there
Free everywhere

So, stateless one, you're one step ahead in a paradigm realm

But a thousand worlds behind as you steer this earth-ship's helm

In rocky waters, you navigate
In an ocean

Where lost souls dictate
(who to love and, more importantly — for them — who to hate)

Tell us, oh stateless one:
How does it feel to be marginalized?

To cringe in shame when asked who you are

Aren't we all the same beneath our yellow star?

Tell us, oh stateless one:
How does it feel to be ostracized?

To fidget in your chair when they sing the national tune

Aren't we all the same beneath our blue moon?

Tell us, oh stateless one:
How does it feel to be antagonized?

To feel belittled until you die

Aren't we all the same beneath our pink sky?

We live your pain
So many do
For beneath all these labels, you are us
And we are you

Q: You have released videos based on your work — how did that happen? Is this a new concept?

A: People don't realize that I am very shy for now. I add for now, because as I practice self-inquiry, I aspire to grasp the awareness that even this label is illusory.

When my book came out, everyone wanted me to recite. They wanted to hear my voice. I had to come up with a way to let them hear my voice without me reciting publicly, so making the videos was an epiphany. With continued self-inquiry, shyness can be eradicated without effort. But, in the meantime, asking me to recite in a room filled with people is like befriending lions or waltzing with crocodiles! Unappealing.

Q: About the tragic happening at the Al Sadiq Mosque — what is your reaction as a creative, pragmatic and liberal person?

A: The attack brought us to our knees, but it also helped us ascend collectively. It was another dark night of the soul. I am not a politician nor an analyst nor a guru. I leave that to the experts. Perhaps we can heed the advice of the coolest sage ever, Ramana Maharshi, who said: "Your own Self-Realization is the greatest service you can render the world." This man is a rock star. If we spent more time asking ourselves who we are rather than analyzing and blaming, we would awaken much faster, both individually and collectively.

Q: You have written a poem in reaction — Would you like to share it with us?

A: I wrote two poems in reaction to the terrorist attack. One is called 'Kuwait a Minute' which was inspired by our unity in the aftermath of attacks. It is a patriotic poem, so it was more a reaction of the ego to the attack. The second poem, 'An Ode to a Terrorist,' was inspired by an inner revolution that occurred within me. Though there are traces of the ego, this poem is a transcendental musing on oneness. It resonated deeply within me because it is more expansive than the first one.

Kuwait a Minute!
By Nejoud Al-Yagout

Kuwait is ... a diamond of a land, grand and hate can never enstrate our core.

And when they arrive, preaching divisiveness we will only reach out to one another more, more, more than ever before

We are One Kuwait is ...

A brotherhood of community
And our Emir, the Father of Unity
We are One

The darkness may try to put out our light but

we will fight back with love
It can push and shove, push and shove,
but we will fight back harder, stronger
with the only ammunition we know:

Love.

We will sway, pray side by side embracing all, high, low, come, go here, there, everywhere. And when they come

riding on waves, high We will say: Kuwait a minute!

Not here.

This place is for lovers, sisters, brothers,

fathers, mothers. We are family.

Kuwait is ...
an oasis of tolerance,
and the blood of one is the blood of all.

We are one.
One

There is another poem that I wrote after that tragic day. It is called 'An Ode to a Terrorist'

Ode to a Terrorist
By Nejoud Al-Yagout

You are a thought, manifested
Whose thought are you?
Yours, mine, ours?

Somewhere in a paradigm beyond the temporal, spatial

We were one
Read your heart; there are sonnets of love

And, yet you make it so complicated
Believing thoughts that are not even yours

Dancing to others' projections.
Basking in the madness of the collective

Awaken ... As some of you have
Is there a me, you?
In this world of polarities

Is there?
Meet me on the moon
Let's drink stardust and talk of our dreams

I hate this hate I have toward you I hate this hate you have toward me.

I hate this hate
I hate this hate
Let's surrender.

Q: As a young Kuwaiti, what is the need of the day?

A: The need of the day is acceptance. Of all. Believers, unbelievers. Gay, straight. Us, them. Rich. Poor. Black. White. And everything in between.

Q: And as a poet who looks and talks about universal truth. How can we fight what's happening around us?

A: Eckhart Tolle in *A New Earth* wisely states that what we resist persists. He knows that any time there is a war against anything — be it against drugs, crime or terrorism — it is bound to fail. Tolle also points that the enemy only becomes stronger when we fight against it. Even if a battle is won, a new enemy is created. Unfortunately, we have been conditioned to believe that fighting is a necessity. The real enemy is conditioning.

Banks to finance private oil companies

KUWAIT CITY, Aug 16: Banking sources disclosed that the local banks are preparing to finance private oil companies and other firms in the next six months, and two billion dinars has been earmarked for the project, reports Al-Nahar daily.

Sources were quoted as saying several discussions and talks have taken place between concerned companies and the banks, which brought about the agreements with several local banks to finance their projects, noting that revenues from the projects will encourage banking sector

to finance the companies without fear of risks. Sources added the banks have carefully selected the companies they want to deal with to avoid repetition of repayment crisis witnessed at the start of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008.

In a related development, sources expected revenues of the banks will increase in the third quarter of the year with rates varying between 5 and 8 percent.

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About 85 percent of the respondents in a recent survey conducted at the website of

Al-Seyassah daily "al-seyassah.com" supported the issuance of necessary decree to fight terrorism, and nine percent rejected the idea, while six percent shared no opinion, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

The majority of respondents are of the view that bombing of Imam Al-Sadiq Mosque calls for issuance of the necessary decree to fight terrorism. They added that special laws are required to sentence those convicted in acts of terrorism, and with severe laws and punishments that match the crimes they have committed against Kuwait.

News in Brief

Municipality queries Mol:

Member of the Municipal Council lawyer Abdullah al-Kandari forwarded a question to the Interior Ministry and Kuwait Municipality asking whether or not the cleaning companies have handed over weapons or ammunition to the relevant authorities, reports Al-Rai daily.

He said some people threw weapons inside garbage containers after the deadline set by the Ministry of Interior for collecting weapons, and wondered if they were received by the Interior Ministry or Municipality, given that the cleaning workers sort trash from the containers.
Al-Kandari said Kuwait

Municipality did not comply with the terms of contracts with the cleaning companies which included the installation of surveillance cameras on the garbage trucks to follow up and monitor the laborers. He expressed his fears on the cleaning workers retrieving weapons and selling them in the black markets in areas like Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, Hasawi and Abbasiya.