



Co-Exist Kuwait vigil

Photographs courtesy of Co-Exist Kuwait

## SPECIAL REPORT

celebrate diversity

## CO-EXIST

there's  
room for  
all

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By Chaitali B. Roy

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Co-existence is a dirty word for some as the basic premise of the term challenges notions of divisiveness, hatred, intolerance, segregation and discrimination that some so-called upholders of moral, religious and social propriety and superiority, advocate. There are many ways to define co-existence. According to the Oxford Dictionary, it is the ability and need to exist together in mutual tolerance, but there is more to it than that. To co-exist means to have a relationship with persons and groups without trying to destroy each other, and to interact with a commitment to tolerance, mutual respect and agreeing to settle conflict through dialogue without recourse to violence. Most of the countries of the Arabian Gulf have a long tradition of healthy co-existence although one must mention here that co-existence in the context of gender equality has taken time, but that is true of many nations around the world. Interestingly, a short while ago, Bahrain's King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa released an official declaration calling for religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in his country. In the piece published in the Washington Times, the king recognized Bahrain's 'multicultural, multifait society' as a 'natural and normal way of life for us in Bahrain' thus making his government's stance clear in the wake of trouble in his country.

Kuwait has managed to hold its own as a moderate and liberal country in a difficult region. However, there are issues that continue to gnaw at the conscience of moderate and liberal Kuwaitis. Nejoud Al Yagout, an enlightened, humanistic, unprejudiced and unorthodox Kuwaiti with an almost childlike faith in the power of love to bridge divides came forward and began an 'initiative' called 'Co-Exist Kuwait' which in a short time has taken the form of an underground movement that has brought rational, broad-minded, avant-garde people in Kuwait together to celebrate pluralism and diversity. Nejoud is like the Pied-Piper who has managed to attract like-minded people of different nationalities, of different age groups, from different socio-economic groups with her message of love and peace to come together in a quiet assertion of unity in diversity. And the assertion is almost always accompanied by music because apart from being a prolific poet with an interesting body of work, Nejoud Al Yagout is also a steadfast promoter of the arts and emerging artists.

The idea of 'Co-Exist Kuwait' took shape last year when Nejoud Al Yagout held a vigil for Standing Rock to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline, a movement which has gained momentum in the States. "Someone asked me to host a vigil for Standing Rock last December," recalls Nejoud. "And though the vibes were peaceful, it made me ponder. Why were we highlighting discriminative issues abroad when we haven't tended to our own garden? And in January, Co-Exist Kuwait was born. Now, in retrospect, it seemed unfair to show other countries in a negative light. Might I add that if I were to achieve something, it would be to acknowledge my own darkness as an individual, first and foremost."

The ability and the willingness to seek the good in the darkest of situations and people characterizes Nejoud, and in a way, it fuels the passion for co-existing. She displays the same spontaneous faith in human decency when asked that despite the increasing interconnectedness in the world, ironically the disconnect between people and communities continues to rise. "Our world is going through a cathartic purge, a healing phase," she explains, her belief unshaken. "Though we seem disconnected, we are actually getting closer. This night is only in place for us to transcend from fear into love."

One of the requisites of peaceful living is social cohesion, a by-product of co-existence based on justice, equality, inclusion and equity. Nejoud agrees. "Social cohesion is very important. It is the essence of our being. This is our mission: to collectively remind each other of our oneness. Paradoxically, we can only find cohesion without attachment, something we are learning the hard way. So to stick together, we must literally unglue ourselves of all that is holding us together."

To promote the principle of co-existence, Nejoud has taken recourse to



Co-Exist members promote equality

music and the arts. She teams up with talented musicians of Kuwait, who until now suppressed their passion for lack of opportunities, and fear of disapproval from so-called upholders of moral propriety, to hold events under the banner of Co-Exist Kuwait. "Music speaks to us in vibrations. It has the power to raise our frequency if it is aligned with higher realms."

Co-Exist Kuwait has seen support from unexpected quarters. Its events are jam-packed. It is common to find a hijab-clad foot tapping music aficionado rubbing shoulders with a middle-aged Indian expatriate enjoying high voltage music by a local rock band. "What brings tears to my eyes is when people who have been ostracized — because of a belief system or gender preference — get in touch. I feel relieved that they know they belong here, regardless of what they have been made to believe. For a few moments, when we communicate with one another, we are liberated and loved." It is evident from her crowded events that Nejoud Al Yagout is not alone in her journey of knowledge and assimilation. "We are never alone," says Nejoud. "I am humbled by the amount of support I have received from musicians, the media, art galleries and those who attend on a regular basis. The musicians perform without a fee, and everyone who participates is an embodiment of co-existence."

When I first met Nejoud a few years back, I was struck by a feeling of haunting sadness, which underlined the warm smile on her face. And that sadness, that search for meaning and that absolute belief in love has found expression in her work. But recently, I have felt that the poet in her has been taken over by a purpose more directional — from the realm of words and emotions she has moved to a more physical world and taken on a role of an advocate of peace. When asked how she reconciles her work as a poet with that of an activist, she ponders, "I wish I were an activist. I neither have the energy nor the confidence as yet to become one, but the yearning inside of me is too loud to ignore. Something higher is propelling me, even as I am plagued with anxiety. Though some of my poems reflect co-existence, especially the latter ones, I have not been able to write poetry in months. But, I am writing several articles and essays about tolerance, so that may be the closest thing someone like me can get to activism."

Nejoud's journey with Co-Exist Kuwait continues in cafes, restaurants, studios and galleries, parks and malls — all public spaces where people gather in peace and love in a symbolic holding of hands, to profess their empathy for each other as the world around us goes on birthing and fighting intolerance, conflict and divisiveness. Talking about her plans for Co-Existence, Nejoud shares, "We are currently in talks with Kuwait's branch of Goodwill Tribe to join forces for a mass meditation session. On December 2nd, we are hosting another concert. This time all the songs will be related to universal love, world peace or tolerance. Elated!"

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