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**FROM THE
MIDDLE EAST
TO LEICESTER**

An Interview with

**DR.
HALLA
DIYAB**

**NEWS
EVENTS
FASHION
MUSIC
FOOD
THEATRE
BOLLYWOOD
TRAVEL**



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Dr Halla Diyab goes unrecognised in Leicester, but she has celebrity status in the Middle East. An outspoken television personality and writer of popular serial dramas, she speaks up about taboo subjects close to her heart, like the status of women and restrictions placed on young people.

She is known to millions who watch her work on the world's satellite channels. Born in Libya, she then grew up in Syria and Egypt, and in 2001 came to the UK. Colonel Gaddafi once summoned her to his Bedouin tent near Sirte to ask her to write a movie about Libya. Her company, Liberty Media Productions, has offices in Leicester and London.

Which of your script-writing projects or TV assignments has made you most proud, and why?
Ma Malakat Aymankum (Your Rightful Disposal, 2010), I think because it is the project which liberated me from fear. At the beginning of my writing career I used to be shrouded with fear, so I

could not voice many ideas which I believe in, as I was afraid of what other people would think.

But through time I broke free from fear, and that was obvious in Ma Malakat as I could speak about taboos and challenge them. This thirty episode TV soap opera tackles Arab women's current struggle for equality and freedom in the Middle East.

What gives you the strength to continue tackling culturally divisive subjects, even when faced by the pressure of more conservative voices?

I want to inspire the future generation. I do not want the daughter I might have one day to suffer what I suffered from when I was living in the Middle East. The only way to do so is to change into an inspirational person myself.

How does it feel to have the opportunity, through your dramas and TV appearances, to be a force for change in the Middle East?

In front of the camera I feel so free, I feel I forget and forgive all

the pain I went through in my life. I feel I am finally under the light after being entrapped for years in the shadow. I feel liberated and free, and you can not be a force for change unless you are liberated yourself and free.

What are your hopes for the Middle East in the years to come, following the Arab Spring?

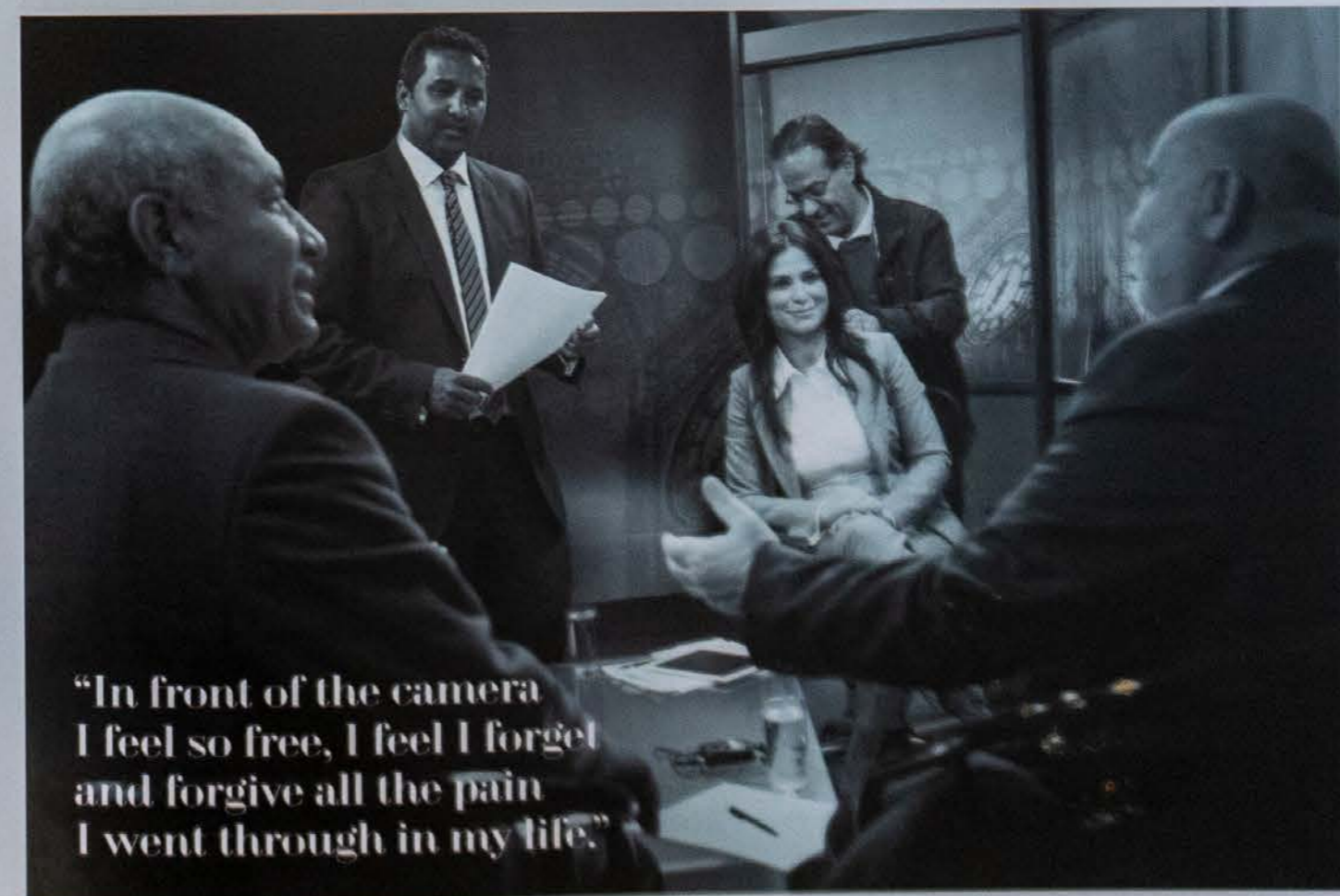
I hope people will change from being, for long years, subjects of government into citizens of state who have rights and opportunities. I hope we will be ruled by democratic laws and civil society laws. I hope we as women can gain our rights and contribute to the society.

And your fears?

The Islamists are my fears. I am afraid we will be ruled by Islamic law. We need to separate politics from religion and keep religion as a personal relationship between people and God. We do not want the Islamists to rule Middle East and subject women to the hijab and the burka in the name of Islam. My fear is political Islam, because when you bring God and

ALL HAIL HALLA!

As talented and controversial as she is striking, acclaimed writer, producer and broadcaster Dr Halla Diyab has a mission to speak out against suppression through her scripts. PUKAAR MAGAZINE asked the Leicester-based international celebrity where she finds the strength to keep fighting for equality, why she met Colonel Gaddafi and about her dreams for the Middle East following the Arab Spring.



"In front of the camera I feel so free, I feel I forget and forgive all the pain I went through in my life."



religion into politics it is difficult to have a civil democratic society and people will be ruled by emotions and fear from God, and this does not make you a free citizen.

How much longer do you imagine Arab women will have to continue struggling for equality and certain freedoms in the Middle East?

At least for the next ten years. Being an Islamic and tribal society, the Middle East cannot change its views about women quickly; as we need a feminine revolution, we need gender equality and this will not be given to Arab and Muslim women by the Muftis and Islamist clerics. Women should strive towards their freedom by all means. We may pay a high price, but we need to set up an example for the future generation to inspire them to change.

Which issue or incident sparked your passion for tackling suppression and inequality through the media?

On February 20, 2005 I lost my dad after a five year fight with cancer. I felt devastated, lost and alone. He was more than a father to me; he was my friend who always urged me to be a powerful and strong woman who seeks competence, higher education and he always pushed me to pursue my education. His dream has always been to see me called "Dr Halla Diyab", so perhaps that's what made me continue my PhD course in UK after his death.

Despite my mum's support and love, I found the situation pretty painful. His death changed my life completely, and I found myself suddenly alone in charge of my destiny and life. I started to search for a way out of pain and the grief of his death. I realised a new passion in life which was writing drama. Maybe it was an occupational therapy I gave myself to help me look out of myself, and gradually at the far end of the tunnel that I was struggling out of I began to see this faint, very faint light – the light of the world outside me, and I kept climbing toward it.

During my writings I tried to liberate myself from many fears which entrapped me and suppressed me during my life in the Middle East. I projected on my characters the cases of suppression and inequality I witnessed in the Middle East, as I believe to be freed from this fear you need to talk about it.

My dad's family were very culturally conservative. I tried to rebel in many occasions but I failed and I found myself all the time bouncing by the wall. My life in the UK was the liberation which I strived to gain. I felt finally I am free and my drama writings helped me to be free. So I used my drama to inspire other women.

Which subjects inspire you?

I've written about older suppressed characters, but now I'm pushing the boundaries. My drama series called Chiffon deals with political and sexual taboos through the lives of 16 teenagers growing up in the Middle East.

I think Arabian youth now want

to challenge the status quo. One girl challenges her mother about the the pressure to cover herself up and there are stories about girlfriends and boyfriends. Chiffon has been banned in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, the Lebanon and most of the Emirates.

What else are you planning?

I'm working on a reality TV life-swap with four characters from the UK on a journey of rehabilitation. They'll be anti-women with extremist views – not as in committing acts – but in their ideology. A lot of them are fed with views and I want to make them enter into a dialogue.

Why did you come to the UK?

I came as a student to Warwick and the University of Leicester. I studied the repression of minorities in American drama and fiction and Gender and Women's Studies. I wanted something different.

What was it like living here?

It took a few years until I could enjoy life. I didn't know who I was. I was in a cave, gradually entering the process of growing

up, breaking free from my shell. I had to learn about English culture and people and boundaries and body language.

It was a long time before I made gestures when I talk. I was happy that the law here protects women, that the police will protect you. When I was growing up if you went to the police they would say, 'Just go home.' And I love that talent is celebrated and that women inspire their students.

How was your meeting with Gaddafi?

It was a scary adventure. I was on holiday in Syria when he contacted me. I took my camera but his men took it away with my phone and my passport. He was standing in his green tent with a green lamp and two camels outside. We shook hands and sat on plastic chairs, and he said, 'Tony Blair sat there.'

He doesn't make himself affable – he looks up when he speaks and it's just you and him. There was something serene about the scene, but when his green pen didn't work he threw it against the wall. I was scared but I didn't even blink.

I didn't get my passport back for a month.

What frightens you?

That I won't achieve what I want before I die. Some of us make a sacrifice as women for the young generation. This is the best I can do."

Who would you like to marry?

My mum says I need someone to protect me but I don't feel ready. I intimidate men. It would have to be someone who is secure enough to take me on board.

DR HALLA'S TELEVISION APPEARANCES HAVE INCLUDED THE EGYPTIAN PANEL SHOW *LADY OF LADIES*, AND A SLOT ON EGYPT'S *HALA SARHAN SHOW* – A HIGH-PROFILE CURRENT AFFAIRS TALK SHOW – TO DEFEND HERSELF AGAINST MUSLIM CLERICS.

SHE HAS PRODUCED HARD-HITTING DRAMAS SUCH AS *THE BEAUTIFUL MAIDENS* (2005) WHICH TACKLED THE EXTREMISM OF SAUDI MILITANTS, AND THE HEADLINE-STEALING SERIES *MA MALKAT AYMANKUM* (2010) ABOUT THE LIVES OF FOUR MUSLIM WOMEN.

