

DURING THE WEEK SHE WAS A QUIET, HARD-WORKING STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER. AT WEEKENDS, SHE WAS ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL WOMEN ON MIDDLE EAST TV. **ADAM WAKELIN MEETS DR HALLA DIYAB**

ou could walk past Dr Halla Diyab in Gal-lawtree Gate and you wouldn't give her a second glance - well you might because she's rather attractive - but her face wouldn't ring any particular bells.

Yet that same face in the streets of Cairo, downtown Damascus or Riyadh doesn't just turn heads - it creates a clamour that can slow the traffic and has people fumbling for their camera phones.

In the Middle East, 3,000 miles away from her adopted home of Leicester, Halla is a genuine, bona fide celebrity. She is famous for her outspoken appearances on TV talk shows and author of controversial, taboo-breaking dramas that outrage the religious reactionaries while pulling in upwards of 50 million viewers.

Halla, 30, the daughter of a Syrian diplomat who grew up in Libya, Syria and Egypt, moved here in 2004 to study for a PhD at the University of Leicester.

"I always call it the city where I was reborn," she says. "It is my second home."

"Leicester is such a cosmopolitan place, somewhere I found myself and could feel comfortable with who I was, with who I wanted to be."

"I didn't wear bright clothes before I came here. I didn't wear red shoes or sleeveless dresses. I was not comfortable with my femininity. I was ashamed of it."

HEADLINES

In 2006, Halla met a film director friend of her late father who, after much persuasion, allowed her to write an episode of a new show he was working on. The director liked what he read and he commissioned her to write the whole series.

It was called Beautiful Maidens, an unflinching and hugely controversial drama about the victims and perpetrators of a suicide bombing in Saudi Arabia.

"The series stands out because it offers a rare, nuanced criticism of militant extremism that is neither patronising nor imposed from the West," wrote The Guardian's Middle East correspondent.

"It is one of the few times that Arabs have seen the debates they have in private echoed in popular entertainment."

The show, which aired during Ramadan, generated mile-high headlines and viewing figures to match.

Halla went on Egypt's Hala Sarhan Show - the Middle East's Oprah Winfrey - to defend herself against the charges who railed against her for supposedly insulting Islam.

She was such a hit that the host gave her a regular guest slot.

Soon, she was a presence on Lady of Ladies - Egypt's equivalent of Loose Women.

So Halla began a jet-set double life - unassuming bookworm by week, mouth-torn Eastern TV star at the weekend.

The secret celebrity



BIG IN THE MIDDLE EAST: Dr Halla Diyab in Leicester and, below, at work in the studio



From Monday to Friday, she would have her head bowed over research papers in the University of Leicester.

Then, unbeknown to anyone, she would fly out to Egypt every Friday evening. A chauffeur-driven Lexus would pick her up at the airport and take her to a five-star hotel in Cairo.

Saturday and Sunday were spent recording her television shows before she flew back to the UK to resume her studies on Monday morning.

"I was the liberal young woman, a little bit westernised who wasn't afraid to speak

out and challenge other views," she says of her TV persona.

"No one in Leicester knew what I was doing, not even my PhD supervisor. I was very secretive at that stage. I didn't even want my friends to know."

"In Egypt, I was talking to politicians and being chauffeured everywhere. In Leicester, I was going to the vegetable market and Marks & Spencers and living a completely private life."

If Halla thought life couldn't get any more surreal, she was about to be proved wrong - by a phone call from Libya.

Colonel Gaddafi, she was given to understand, was an admirer of Halla's work and he

was interested in her scripting a movie about the Italian colonisation of his country.

So, with more than a few snakes slithering in her stomach, she got on a plane to Tripoli.

Halla was met at the airport by the colonel's goons. They took her passport and wouldn't return it for several weeks.

Eventually she was driven for six hours to a place somewhere close to the Gaddafi's hometown of Sirte.

The convoy pulled up at a tent surrounded by gun-toting soldiers and camels.

She was escorted inside to see the colonel and his entourage sat on a white, plastic patio set. Gaddafi paired a chair and told

Halla to sit down next to him. "He said it was the chair in which Tony Blair had sat," she remembers. "I was very afraid, to be honest with you."

"He was very ruthless and intimidating, but he was very hospitable and generous at the same time."

"She worked up a script, but the film was quietly dropped after Libya agreed a compensation deal with the Italian government."

Halla completed her PhD in 2008, but she found Leicester a difficult place to leave.

"It's in my heart," she says. Her company Liberty Media Productions Ltd has offices in Leicester and London.

She divides her time between the two cities and the Middle East.

A 90-part series, written by Halla, called Ma Malikat Aymanum, about the trials and tribulations of four Muslim women was another commercial and critical hit in 2010.

Like Beautiful Maidens, it hogged the headlines across the Middle East thanks to its uncompromising portrayal of social and religious issues.

"Some religious leaders accused me of attacking Islam," she says. "I wasn't attacking Islam. I was questioning why Islam was twisted and changed and used against women."

A new drama scripted by Halla, about the Arab uprisings seen through eyes of disaf-

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fect Middle Eastern youth, will air on August 1.

With a scenario torn straight from today's headlines, it looks to be another controversial hit. Provocative documentaries about the Jihad movement and a life-swap show which will see four militants in the UK change places with their Middle Eastern counterparts are also in the pipeline.

Halla is intrigued by the so-called Arab Spring, but she's not to be convinced that the push for democracy will genuinely advance the rights of women in the region.

"The problem in the Middle East is not just political, it is the groups that are still using religion to suppress women," she says. "These uprisings are never going to liberate women unless we, as women, start our own revolution. We need to claim economic, artistic and religious reform."

"It is a courageous and, possibly, dangerous view," she says. "I'm a mum, a teacher and an intellectual, but she is way ahead of me. She's the one who somebody will kill me."

"She thinks that I need to find a husband to stop me. I'm afraid that she's the one who somebody will kill me. I think I can look after myself."