

The Peaceful Scribe

You don't often meet a Palestinian who is not openly outraged by the turmoil taking place in their homeland. Despite the pain, the despair and the rage that lingers, poet, playwright and writer Nathalie Handal has found a more peaceful and effective way to not only channel her own emotions, but to also get the world talking about the horror in that region. Through her mass audience she also been able to advocate the senseless killing to stop and for the 'war' to come to an end.

Realising that even when one feels powerless, it is important to find whatever outlet open to you to make a difference, no matter how small to affect change, today, she feels that she's made a positive contribution by educating

the world about the real life experiences of the Palestinian people. Many people have unfortunately been desensitised to the horrors of living in Gaza, for example, as news networks blast images of fighting on a daily basis, with no real solution in the reports. Through the emotion of her poetry she has found another medium to tell the stories of the countless residents of Palestine, who find their stories distorted on a Western media platform. Unlike those who advocate revenge, Handal talks peace and hopes that through her work she can get people talking to work towards this end.

Having been enthralled by the art of story telling since she was a child, especially as it had always been such an integral part of her upbringing, Handal has been writing ever since she could grasp a pen. A chatty child and always telling stories, she soon realised that in her diasporic life, amidst the constant change of landscape and people, the page remained faithful to her and that words were here home, a place she could return to, to find out who she was.

Born in the Caribbean with her family hailing from Bethlehem and Beirut, Handal has had a nomadic existence and spent her childhood in Europe, South America, North America and Asia and learnt to be open to other people and cultures. She now lives in the vibrant city of New York, and it is partly her colourful and varied experiences that have prevented her perspective on life to be tainted by the Palestinian conflict.

Having spent most of her life outside Palestine, she has been back several times in order to truly understand the reality of life for her people in order to tell their authentic story. "Although I didn't grow up in Bethlehem, I've always lived there. I have a deep connection with it and when I finally got to visit, I understood where I was from. I've lost the words to describe what I feel when I see my homeland. I see the wall, the ghetto, the poverty, the feeling has gone beyond grief, beyond anger."

Handal's epiphany moment came to her at a young age, when she realised that the pen provided her with a field of infinite possibilities, that a blank page was limitless and she could write to benefit those around her. Thus, she began a journey woven with words that not only sought to plant even the smallest seed of consciousness in sleeping minds, but also to inspire.

"There is a lot to be done [regarding the Palestinian situation] and I don't know what the solution is," she says. "I think that each person should use their own talents to do what they can. The position I am in today allows me to use my skills to encourage dialogue, to spark debate, to provoke thoughts."

Humbled by living a comfortable life outside of Palestine and then seeing the reality of what goes on within, Handal is anxious to shed light on her peoples' plight. That, along with the need to defend the Arab culture in a land that holds less than favourable views of it, inspires her to write whatever flows out of her heart- regardless of whether it ruffles feathers or not.

"Sometimes I pick up a pen and I can't control what I'm writing, it pours out of me. Other times it's has a solid purpose; for instance it can be a conscious effort to highlight the richness of my culture that is abundant with beauty. Yes, sometimes being an Arab in America is hard. There is the constant battle of challenging misconceptions, which I hope through my writing I can play my part in changing this."

She is quick to point out that she is, by no means, representative of the Arab world. "I am true to myself and my world, I write what I know."

Having just finished working on 'Language for a New Century,' a contemporary book of poetry that celebrates different cultures, a novel set in Mexico, a script for a theatre in NYC as well as being part of the production team for a movie on Khalil Gibran, Handal certainly has her work cut out for her.

Influenced by her history, her culture and the need for tolerance and acceptance in today's society, Handal has found her calling in life. Rejecting the sword for the pen that is deemed far mightier and having the courage use her talent to educate and empower, she is an inspiration on many levels.

she often reported about.

When her conversion became public many associate this decision with Stockholm Syndrome, Ridley however shares that this was not the case. Out of what was a negative experience, she found enlightenment and discovered her true calling as a Muslim and this led her to a road of advocacy for Muslim causes often ignored by the international media.

Recently one such story is the reality the Muslims kept at Guantanamo Bay, the controversial Cuban detention camp where she visited and was given unprecedented access for four days to shoot a documentary with director David Miller. Ridley says that she has never experienced anything quite



so chilling and realised that she had to share with the public the stories that many Western media outlets are prevented from reporting on or are just fearful or exposing.

"Camp Delta is clinical and permanent, its sole purpose to destroy the very essence of human spirit. It was like something out of Orwell's 1984 with the bright lights and no natural daylight. The expressions on the prisoners' faces can only be described as wild. They are being dehumanised and this is turning them into wild animals or feral creatures- they are like a ghastly experiment gone wrong."

She explains that although she's a new convert she too has struggled with coming to terms with some of the character changes her new faith requires of her. Acknowledging that it's not easy to disconnect herself completely from what she's reporting on to remain objective- especially when human injustice is involved, she struggled to do so.

"Before I became a Muslim, I used to drink to forget about the horrors I had witnessed and most of my colleagues were the same. We had to find an outlet to deal with what we were seeing. As a Muslim however, I have a more holistic approach to maintaining my sanity. I speak to others about my worries and I find that a good friends circle definitely helps. Some things you can never forget though. They constantly plague you. When you've seen suffering like I have, it's impossible to sit back and not do anything. It's been a few weeks since I returned from Guantanamo now but I can still see it, hear it, smell it. These images will stay with me forever."

Ridley's journey to Islam was more of a gradual process rather than a defining moment. Having always been exposed to Islam, especially with her keen interest in the Palestinian cause, it is surprising that she was never drawn to it before. Her first husband and father of her 15 year-old daughter Daisy, Daoud Zaroura, was a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, whom she met in Cyprus whilst researching a story.

"Whenever Daoud would talk about Islam, I'd immediately shut down," says Ridley with a laugh. "I just wasn't interested in hearing about a religion whose women were oppressed objects in black drapes."

In 2001, directly after 9/11, Ridley decided to go to Afghanistan to write a story on how the Afghans were being affected. Having been refused a visa three times, she illegally entered the country and under an inconspicuous burka began her investigation. However, her cover was soon blown when her camera slipped out of her clothes right in front of the Taliban who consequently captured her and imprisoned her for her illegal status in the country.

For 10 days Ridley was a prisoner- first in Jalalabad for six days and then in Kabul. She was convinced that her captors were going to kill her and therefore saw no need to cooperate with them. After all, regardless of what she did or how she behaved, the same fate awaited her. In an attempt to speed up the process, she spat at them, taunted them and went on a hunger strike.

During her time in prison, a religious mentor came to her with the copy of the Qur'an and asked her if she wanted to convert to Islam, to which she replied a person couldn't convert in this situation and should they let her go, she promised to read the Qur'an with an open mind. This, perhaps, was the beginning of her change- for the first time in her life she was willing to research into a religion she shamelessly knew little about despite her career.



Upon her release, Ridley decided to honour her promise and began reading a translation of the Qur'an.

"Contrary to my perceptions of Islam, when I first read it, I found that the Qur'an wasn't gender specific and was female friendly, unlike certain aspects of the bible which made me uncomfortable, such as the book of Genesis and the way Eve was portrayed as a seductress. Other things like 'Let your women keep silent in the churches' used to discomfort me. I always had certain questions which I would pose to the vicar who told me not to ask questions, which was so unlike Islam which encouraged men and women to seek knowledge."

A pivotal moment for Ridley was when she read the Prophet's (Peace be upon him) last sermon.

"It was truly breathtaking and I was deeply moved by it- the way he advocated equality and justice- no one had superiority over anyone else, and could only gain a higher rank in the eyes of God through piety and good conduct. It is as relevant today as it was 1400 years ago."

During her research process, Ridley found that her life was naturally beginning to change. She stopped partying and drinking and found that she suddenly had a clearer purpose to her life.

"I had always been an activist, even before I was a journalist and long before my conversion to Islam, but after I became a Muslim, my activism took on a different meaning. Now, the people suffering in Palestine, whose cause I had supported for a long time, were not just any victims; they were my Muslim brothers and sisters. As a Muslim you really do feel part of a global community regardless of where you're from, the colour of your skin. The Islamic sisterhood makes Western feminism pale in significance."

Despite her passion for her beliefs, Ridley is a firm believer of the Prophet's saying that there is no force in religion. Her daughter, Daisy, was baptised at the age of nine and Ridley wants her to find her own path in life.

This summer, along with approximately 30 others who are part of the International Bridge of Peace Activists, Ridley plans on sailing into Gaza and breaking the siege.

"If I see an injustice taking place, I can't

remain silent," she says. "I'm not being a fatalist but at the same time, I'm not scared. If my time is up, it's up, I leave it in God's hands."

Unrelenting and passionate, Ridley has dedicated not just her career, but her life to giving a voice to those who no longer have words; to helping those who are helpless and standing firm beside justice. Upon her conversion and subsequent donning of the hijab, many career doors were closed in her face but instead of letting it faze her, she has carved a new career for herself- one that encompasses who she is now. Inspiring and inspired, empowering and empowered, she is a woman who cannot get any further away from the Muslim woman stereotype.

Up close & personal

"I was one of the first journalists to get into the [Jenin] camp in Palestine after the siege had lifted and to this day it still has a profound affect on me....

...The first thing that hit me was the stench of death which rose from the rubble of where 300 homes had once stood... it was the same smell which permeated the air of the tiny Scottish border town of Lockerbie where I was one of the first journalists to reach the scene after a Pan Am jumbo was blown out of the skies.

...In Jenin we were told that the UN had assembled a team of people to investigate allegations of war crimes by Israeli soldiers against the people of Jenin. Israel's leader Ariel Sharon told the UN to 'get lost' and the team never set foot in Palestine. I then checked out Israel's UN record and discovered it had violated or ignored more than a staggering 70 UN resolutions.

It was clear then, as it is clear today, that those in favour with Washington can get away with murder."

Excerpts from a speech by Yvonne Ridley, 2005