

Yvonne Ridley – The Undercover Journalist

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Abstract

The proportion of women in the media, politics, and decision-making fields is steadily rising. It's a result of everyone's work throughout the previous few decades. Women have the freedom to choose what they want and what they do, and everyone understands this at this age. Journalist, politician, and author Yvonne Ridley made headlines in 2001 when she was captured by the Taliban in suspicion of being an American spy. As an undercover journalist, she invaded Afghanistan following the attack on the World Trade Centre. Prior to her release on humanitarian grounds, she had been held captive by the Taliban for about eleven days. In June 2003, she gained more notoriety when she adopted and converted to Islam. She has since been an outspoken advocate for the Palestinian cause and on a number of international problems. This essay focusses on Yvonne Ridley's conversion to Islam, her identity, and her experiences as a journalist and revert Muslim.

Keywords

Yvonne Ridley, Journalist, Captivity, Afghanistan, Islam, Conversion

Introduction

Women's representation in the political, decision making and media sectors is gradually increasing. It is because of the efforts of many over the past decades. It is the age where all understand, women have their own free will to choose what they want and what they do. Women in journalism sector is more prone to danger due to the work situations and chauvinistic nuances. It requires bravery and great leading quality to be able to sustain in such competitive field, and one such personality is Yvonne Ridley. Yvonne Ridley is a British Journalist, Author, TV presenter, Media Consultant and Script Writer. She grew up in a working-class environment in the northeast of England. After graduating from college, she went into journalism and has since enjoyed an award-winning career. She has written freelance for many publications, including *The Washington Post*, *Tripoli Times in Libya*, *Tehran Times in Iran*, and *The Sunday Times*. She has worked for various Fleet Street publications, including *The Observer*, *Independent on Sunday* and *The Daily Mirror*. She made news in 2001 when she was apprehended by the Taliban government, having entered Afghanistan covertly before the US-led war began, while donning the voguish blue burkha. She was detained by the Taliban two days into an undercover assignment for Express Newspapers on suspicion of being an American spy. 11 days later, after being freed on humanitarian grounds, she came out of it unharmed. After a few years of her release, she embraced Islam and became the voice for many unvoiced.

9/11

Yvonne Ridley was in her Sunday Express newsroom on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when the world went berserk on the headlines of the World Trade Center in New York being attacked by flights. World Trade Center's North Tower, South Tower and one of Pentagon's five sides were attacked. The 47-story World Trade Center Seven crumbled due to structural damage. There were 200 firemen and 78 cops missing. The Sunday Express editor, Martin Townsend, and the news editor, Jim Murray decided to send her to New York right away. Yvonne Ridley made her way to Heathrow Airport and by the time she got to the airport, all incoming transatlantic flights were rerouted to Canada. When she was waiting in line at the British Airways desk, she was informed that there wouldn't be any aircraft crossing the Atlantic for at least a day. After cancellation of flights for days in a row, she was decided to send to Islamabad, Pakistan. Boarding the Emirates airline to Dubai and to Islamabad, she reached Pakistan. She thought this was the point at which the next horrific chapter of this tale awaits documentation in the annals of history.

Shameem, undercover journalist

Yvonne Ridley met driver Pasha who could speak in English in Islamabad. Adorning a longish black dress, she visited an Islamic University at Nowshera in the Northwest Frontier Province. People thought there would be a war and Pakistan President Parvez Musharraf joined America's cause. On this, the Taliban warned Pakistan of the consequences it would face. She went to Jalojai (the largest refugee camp in Pakistan). Some of these Afghans had been living in these squalid conditions for more than twenty years since Afghanistan was first plunged into war. The homes were made of mud and brick and the newest arrivals from the summer were living in makeshift, canvas tents. Sighting the suffering children in the camp reminded her of her daughter Daisy who is half Palestinian.

She thought of making a story about the people who are remaining in Afghanistan. She reached the Afghan border on 27 September, with the help of a guide named Muskeen and was given a traditional Afghan dress and a blue, silk burka and were joined by a family of four, a man, a woman and her two daughters. Yvonne Ridley was disguised as a deaf-mute Muslim woman whose name is **Shameem** and they are off to a wedding. She was joined by two guides Jan Ali and his uncle. They reached Jalalabad and a place called Kama, a typical Afghan village. She met some thirty to forty people who has gathered in a house and asked them about their lives, hopes, fears, ambitions, September the eleventh and about American reprisals. Conversation with them went through a translator and she sympathised with the people of Afghan. Education is on a standstill and other things are restricted but the Burka-clad Afghan women give the impression of servility, the women from Kama were strong, spirited and resilient. The Pakistan borders were closed and they had to use an alternative route one which the smugglers use. The next day they reached Daur Baba and they will soon be in the Pakistan border. They are to ride on donkeys. Sitting on the donkey, the

English Northern expression ‘Flaming Nora!’ spilled involuntarily from her mouth in excitement. The movement caused her camera to move into full view and a Taliban soldier noticed this. More men gathered confiscating her camera and arresting her.

Captivity

Yvonne Ridley, was taken to a place and was locked in a room with air-conditioning and a toilet. She was constantly pestered with kindness. Ridley protested and did not eat anything. She was regularly visited by two men, Hamid and Abdullah. She requested a telephone which was rejected. In her words, “Hamid says everyone is very bothered that I’m not eating and asks if there’s something wrong with the food if I have a special diet or would I prefer hotel food. They constantly refer to me as their guest and say they are sad if I am sad. I can’t believe it. The Taliban are trying to kill me with their kindness. These people are in many ways like the Gurkhas. They are mild-mannered, gentle and considerate yet when it comes to fighting, they are among the most fearsome warriors in the world. I wish everyone knew how I am being treated because then I could perhaps relax. I bet people think I’m being tortured, beaten and sexually abused. Instead, I am being treated with kindness and respect. It is unbelievable. Damn. I’ve somehow managed to break the radio so I still don’t know if the world knows of my plight. I did hear a bulletin about eight Christians who have been locked up in Kabul for trying to convert Muslims to their faith”. She was constantly questioned about why she entered Afghanistan and what is her motive. She wrote everything daily. On Tuesday, 2 October, and three or four persons questioned her. After two days she was informed that she will be going home and Hamid would drop her off at Kabul airport. The next day a Maulana, a religious cleric came to visit Ridley. He enquired her about her religion and what she thinks about Islam. She thought greatly of Islam and admired its followers. She promised the maulana that she would learn Islam after returning to London. He asked if she wish to convert to Islam now and for this she politely declined. The travel towards Kabul took nearly 6 hours and then they entered a fortress-type building, which turned out to be the terrorist wing of Kabul Prison. She was aghast and asked questions about her being sent home and demanded a decent place to stay, which was ignored.

She was lied about going home and was made to stay with the other inmates. They had to deal with mice, rats and scorpions. Her days at the Kabul prison were worse and there was no proper hygiene and the inmates were treated harshly. Yvonne was rigid towards all intelligence officers and was on a hunger strike. On the day that followed Yvonne Ridley witnessed a series of Western bombings in Afghanistan, which was the start of the US led war. She was informed after some time that they were taking her to the border. The prison governor gifted her a beautiful, thick, black velvet dress with a red and gold veil, it was a traditional Afghan outfit. Heading to the foreign ministry, she was escorted by a diplomatic official to the border. At each checkpoint they passed, the diplomat waved a paper signed by Mullah Omar declaring that Yvonne Ridley was to be released on humanitarian grounds. Reaching the border and crossing past a double gate she felt the glare of television lights shining into her face. She could not see a thing and was momentarily dazzled. A voice shouted out, ‘How did the Taliban treat you?’ and she replied, “With courtesy

and respect". Her words state, "The reality was that the Taliban had treated her with courtesy and respect, contrary to their reputation. The people with an almost relaxed capacity for barbarism had been chivalrous – which was more than I could say about the brutal and sometimes savage treatment that was soon to follow from so-called fellow journalists."

Towards Islam

The embassy arranged flights back to London via Dubai for Ridley. She learned later that her news agency and many international figures had made her release possible. She assumed, the West was not impressed with her release, if the Taliban had tortured and killed her and sent her broken body back in a box, or even performed her execution live on Al Jazeera, it would have provided a wonderful piece of propaganda for the West. Days after her release Pasha contacted her of the information that her guides were released. And weeks later, she broke on the information that the village of Kama was bombed. Her heart was stolen by Afghanistan, a wild, unforgiving country whose contrasts of people are reflected in its stormy history, politics and geography.

She gave her word to the Taliban cleric who asked if she wanted to convert so that when she returned to London, she would study the Islamic faith and Quran. She visited Dr Zaki Badawi, head of the Muslim College in London, a prestigious postgraduate institution for Muslims. He offered to help her understand more about Islam. Two years later, she converted to Islam. She adds, "I've always had a core belief in God and was, until I converted to Islam on June 30, 2003, a practicing Christian. I went to St James' Church in Piccadilly maybe twice a month, which in secular Britain is regarded as bordering on fanaticism," says Ridley.

Voice for the silenced

She was thrust into the anti-war movement, according to the Sunday Express lead writer, by the "sheer terror" of being bombed by the United States and Great Britain while she was incarcerated. In 2003, Ridley left Fleet Street and relocated to Qatar to help build Al Jazeera's English-language website. Later, she went back to the UK to work as a broadcast journalist for two start-up organisations, Press TV and Islam Channel. She was a freelancer for CNN, BBC TV and radio, several Middle Eastern broadcasters, and other businesses. For her presentations of news analysis and commentary, she was well-liked in the MENA area.

A Canadian educational institution nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for her work seeking justice against war crimes committed against the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar to Bangladesh and for the Syrian women who had been brutalized and tortured in the Assad government's jails. She was honoured with an honorary doctorate in March 2020 by the International Academy of Diplomatic Action in Bern, Switzerland, for her work in humanitarian journalism.

Her greatest professional achievement according to her was receiving a Palestinian passport from political figure Ismail Haniyeh after she successfully broke the sea blockade of Gaza. After sailing

from Cyprus, 44 activists from 17 different countries arrived at Gaza Port on August 23, 2008, arriving in two small wooden boats and being greeted by a besieged population. This benign gesture allowed Palestinians to freely enter and exit their country for the first time in almost 60 years. As UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories Richard Falk put it, the question at hand is whether the courage and commitment of the Free Gaza Movement "can awaken the conscience of humanity to an unfolding tragedy."

The President of the 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, compared the actions of individuals on board the boats to those of two of the greatest human rights activists in history in a statement he delivered after the tragedy. "The descendants of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King have carried out more experiments in the twenty-first century regarding the ability of nonviolent truth to accomplish justice and peace in every corner of the world—including, in the last two months, Gaza," the author said. The Free Gaza Movement has been successful in relieving the siege of Gaza through nonviolent direct action.

She gives talks about women's and humanitarian issues at conferences and on college campuses around the globe. Her most recent nonfiction book is titled "The Rise of the Prophet Muhammad: Don't Shoot the Messenger." Her other work is, *Torture: Does It Work? Interrogation issues and effectiveness in the Global War on Terror* is published by Military Studies Press. Her Scottish historical fiction trilogy "The Caledonians" was published in January 2020. The first book of the trilogy is "Mr. Petrie's Apprentice". The *Sinclair Curse*, the second title, is expected to be released soon.

Through televised appeals, fundraisers, international events, and speaking engagements, Yvonne Ridley has contributed millions of pounds to numerous charities over the years. However, her favourite organisation is the one she calls "the most heroic" Interpal, a British organization that has grown over the past 25 years into one of the leading UK-based NGOs with a focus on Palestine, helping to defend the human rights of thousands of Palestinian families annually. For such a long time, they have persistently supported the defense of Palestinian human rights in the face of some of the most severe and unheard-of types of international intimidation an NGO has ever faced.

The European Muslims League (EML), which has its shared headquarters in Milan and Switzerland, is led by her as secretary-general. The Council of Europe in Strasbourg has characterized EML as a leading authority on radicalization prevention. It is also a prominent interfaith organisation that works to improve understanding amongst individuals of different religious backgrounds. She is the Diplomatic Editor of WTX News, a book reviewer, and a columnist for the esteemed Middle East Monitor (MEMO) and the Turkish magazine *Gercek Hayat*. She was an independent candidate for Newcastle in the 2024 England elections. Her home

is a secluded farm on the Scottish border. Ridley and her spouse run a peafowl rescue center, an exotic bird sanctuary, and beekeeping after becoming certified as a Bee Master.

Conclusion

Yvonne Ridley has written her experiences of apprehension by the Taliban in her novel, “In the Hands of Taliban – Her Extraordinary Story”. She is a strong, focused and daring woman whose story has inspired thousands of aspiring Journalists and she remains a Celebrity in the Islamic world. Her words have dawned on the topic that everyone is frightened to discuss. Her Charitable works, books, political and journalistic activities clarify how empowered she is. Ridley’s conversion to Islam is not something out of Stockholm Syndrome. Rather, it is because of a learned clear mind’s evaluation of religion and humanity. The motive of the study is not to justify extremism but to teach the thought that women should be believed in what she does and choose despite the differences in religion and beliefs.

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