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War from a woman's perspective

Renowned journalist Christina Lamb has seen it all over decades covering conflicts around the world. Life caught up with her during a recent Bangkok visit to discuss what it's like being caught in the crossfire

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"They tell you things because they think you are not a serious journalist"

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Simple, direct, articulate, Christina Lamb spoke with lucidity about war, conflict and hope. In Bangkok last week as guest of BangkokEdge Festival, where she gave a talk about her books, including *I Am Malala*, the respected British journalist shared her first-hand view about trouble in the world and also women's place in war.

For three decades, the foreign correspondent and bestselling author has lived life on the edge, covering conflict and war in some of the world's most dangerous countries -- Zimbabwe, Syria and Afghanistan, where she began her career in the 1980s covering the Mujahideen and the Soviet invasion of the country.

Currently chief foreign correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, she has eight books to her credit, including bestsellers *I Am Malala* (co-written with Malala Yousafzai), the memoir of the Pakistani teenage education activist shot by the Taliban; *The Girl From Aleppo*, chronicling the escape by a wheelchair-bound Syrian refugee; *Waiting For Allah: Pakistan's Struggle For Democracy*; *House Of Stone: The True Story Of A Family Divided In War-Torn Zimbabwe*; and more.

One can assume that Lamb's success has largely been due to her familiar, approachable and dependable personality. Her character means women are willing to share intimate details of their lives with her in the hope that atrocities meted out on them are not repeated.

Lamb tells us she caught the writing bug early and envisioned herself becoming a novelist one day. Growing up in what she describes as "the boring outskirts of London" made her all the more conscious about the exciting world outside. To address her longing for adventure, she read up on the lives of explorers.

She went to Oxford, and editing her university newspaper eventually set in motion a chain of events which would eventually see her become a globetrotting journalist in the thick of some of the world's hotspots.

After completing university, she worked at the *Financial Times* as an intern. It was at this juncture, back in 1984, that she visited Thailand for holidays. (Reading the *Bangkok Post* during her stay in the capital impressed her enough to write to its editor for a possible job opportunity, which she did not get a reply to.)

While still interning for the *Financial Times*, an opportunity arose for her to interview Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan, who was in exile in the UK at the time. The day Lamb interviewed Bhutto was the day she announced her engagement to Asif Ali Siddari.



Bhutto found a kindred spirit in Lamb, who received a personal invitation to her marriage in Pakistan. By then a TV journalist covering local news, she attended the colourful wedding where everyone wore dazzling outfits; it was a traditional Pakistani wedding which she describes as "the most amazing introduction to Pakistan".

It was there she met Bhutto's political colleagues, who brought her up to date with the plans they had of toppling the incumbent military director. Least to say, Lamb was fascinated by what was being divulged to her. The strangest thing that happened to her growing up in London was finding her way back home late at night if she had missed the train.

"Here were people who had been tortured, gassed and imprisoned for attempting to restore democracy, which I had always taken for granted. This made me decide to move to Pakistan. I had no desire to return to covering local news on television," remarked Lamb, who was just 22 when she packed her bags for her first assignment as a foreign correspondent to Peshawar, Pakistan, where she was to report on the Afghan Mujahideen and Russian presence in Afghanistan.

Despite being in uncharted waters, Lamb learnt fast. Working closely with the Afghan Mujahideen was an exciting chapter of that journey.

"Working there was a real lesson, because from the outside that story had been presented in the Western media as very black and white," said Lamb in retrospect.

"The Afghan Mujahideen were like the heroes, good guys, men from the mountains, very poor, with old rifles and poor equipment, taking on perhaps the most powerful army on earth, the Red Army.

"So it was very clear, good against bad. It was the last proxy war against communism. So this was how it was presented, very black and white, so when I got there I discovered they [Mujahideen] were doing bad things themselves, torturing prisoners, and corruption was being practiced. So I was shocked because this was not how it was being presented in the Western media.

"This made me realise to never conclude on a story until I got to the bottom of it."

Besides their hospitality, Lamb found Afghans to be amazing storytellers. They have very high illiteracy rates but an equally high oral tradition, she said.

Working with the Mujahideen was a learning curve that she is grateful to have experienced.

As they needed Western media to tell their stories, Lamb said there was little issue for most of them to have a woman tag along. Sometimes she had to go disguised as a man, and in an attempt to mingle in with the locals, she dyed her hair a darker shade. Lamb was also shot at and ambushed, both times escaping unscathed.

Asked if there were any drawbacks to working as a female foreign correspondent in the type of conservative culture she was in, Lamb said: "I would say it's a great advantage to be a woman in that part of the world in general because I never had a man refuse to speak to me.

"Sometimes they don't take women seriously but sometimes it is good in a perverse kind of way as they tell you things because they think you are not a serious journalist. I feel I have access to half of the population my male colleagues don't have access to. Just because women are behind the burqa does not mean they are not an influence on society."

Lamb, who has come a long way since then, shared how reporting on war and conflict has shown her the tenacity of women who are caught in the crossfire. She finds it a privilege and responsibility to share their stories.

"During the siege of Aleppo last year it was the women who went to great lengths to put food on the table for their children, even though it was sandwiches made of the herbs they could find. To keep their homes warm during the winter months they were able to burn wood from the window frames of their homes.

"These are just two of many examples that make them active participants in this conflict. They are not waiting for men to sort things out for them. I desire to show this side of the conflict in the stories I write."

Working on the book I Am Malala with the charismatic Malala Yousafzai, who stood up for education rights and was shot by the Taliban, is one of the many highlights Lamb has enjoyed as an author.

"She is a great inspiration. It was an honour working with her," recalled Lamb about their collaboration. "On the first day that I met Malala, I was captivated. She is very warm. She came in the room, brought tea and sat with me on the sofa. At that point she was 16. She was so poised, so eloquent and passionate and had that sort of earnestness about her."

Lamb, who years ago interviewed Malala's father, a peace activist, told of their growing friendship, saying: "While writing this book was important to me because I am passionate about women's education and have a special place in my heart for Pakistan, the single biggest thing for me about doing this book was to know her family personally.

"We have become friends and they are like my second family. They are so warm and funny. So it was nice to see the other side of Malala at home fighting with her brothers, listening to music, and doing normal teenage things. A real contrast to the Malala who delivers captivating speeches on the world stage, I would say."

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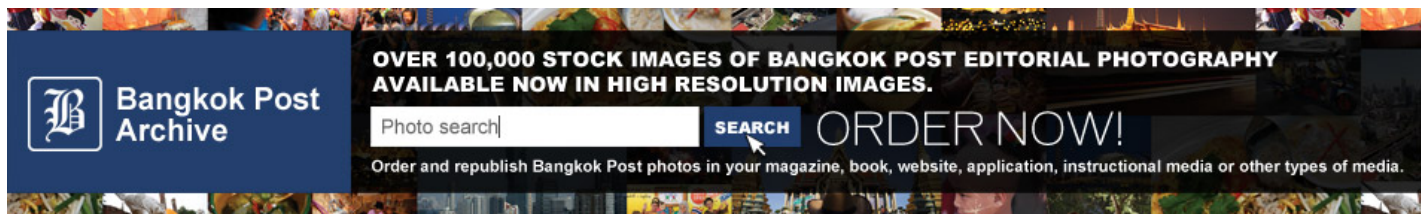
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