



Malala Yousafzai: A Progressive Voice for Progressive Society

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Abstract— This paper seeks to suggest that Malala Yousafzai, despite being born and brought up in Swat, a small valley which is part of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan), proved to be an emissary of education for women and hence of their empowerment with sheer grit and courage in the face of multiple threats. The paper also attempts to understand that in her autobiography, Malala's voice gives a clear assurance of the promotion of gender equality. It has already been established that she strived to find a place of independence and liberation amidst a male-privileged society. Malala Yousafzai's act of writing blogs and challenging the Taliban has promoted the slogan "One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world"(UNESCO Speech) and it has become the slogan for millions of men and women worldwide who actively work to claim their rights.



Keywords— Education, oppression, resistance, hegemonic constructs.

This paper seeks to suggest that Malala Yousafzai, despite born and brought up in Swat, a small valley which is part of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan), proved to be an emissary of education for women and hence of their empowerment with sheer grit and courage in the face of multiple threats. Education has always played a very crucial role in the development of human races. It has become the highest agenda of the international communities. It is affirmed in numerous human rights treaties and has been recognized by governments as pivotal in the pursuit of development and social transformation. Education, particularly for girls and women is a key driver for economic growth, a crucial tool for ensuring basic amenities such as food, security, reduction of child malnutrition, lowering of HIV/ AIDS infections and thus incrementing proven strategies of growth. According to Amartya Sen, Committed sincerely to the cause of ending poverty and deprivation, this celebrated economist, "education makes the horizon of vision wider" (199). With the result, education becomes productive force for creating skills, positive social norms and critical thinking. Unfortunately education still seems to be a major challenge for girls who belong to marginalized groups,

such as the Hill Tribes in Southeast Asia, indigenous and Afro-descendent populations in Latin America, the lowest castes in India and Nepal, or the Roma in Eastern Europe, Islamic states such as Pakistan, Afghanistan. Here, girls suffer disproportionately in education relative to the mainstream population and absolute to boys in their own linguistic or ethnic group. Lewis and Lockheed quote that "these excluded girls make up more than 70 percent of the millions of out-of-school girls in the developing world" (3). The importance of ethnic and linguistic divisions, their determinants, and the impact on girls' schooling is a real cause of concern. Recent global assessments of education have noted that "rural children, low-income children, and children from ethnic minorities are at risk"(World Bank). In rural areas that are culturally rich but traditionally rigid, especially in Islamic States, girls' education and women empowerment are complicated issues of debate. Pakistan is one of the most protuberant cases of a countries competing for the dynamics of development, modernization, religion and tradition. The World Economic Forum has ranked the country as the least gender equitable in the Asia and Pacific region (Gender Gap Report). The 2012 annual report from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

details many challenges that women face, including being “attacked and killed on account of asserting their rights to education, work and generally for choosing to have a say in key decisions in their lives”(Raphel).

Patriarchal values are embedded in the societal structure which varies across the class, religion, urban and rural sub-divides. These create discrimination and disparities in the most of spheres of life. Insurgency propagated by Taliban has affected the education system all over Afghanistan and in some areas of Pakistan also. Jain R.I. Cole mentions in his book, *The Taliban Women and Heglian Private Sphere* that:

Radical Muslim fundamentals code women as especially subjective and private, and therefore excluded from the public sphere. They advocate a neo-patriarchal counter modernity in which they actively combat those elements of the modern condition that contribute to the entry of women into the public sphere, including mass co-education, mixed sex factory and office work, women's entry into many professions, and consumerism and the consequent desire for a second income within the family. In Afghanistan, the Taliban feared the advent of such developments, given that few actually existed on the ground. (775-776)

Hence according to talibanistic ideology women ought to be confined within veils without being escorted by a close male relative. This particular patriarchal approach has isolated women from public domain and has reduced women powerless. Public of Pakistan as well as authorities has not been able to put an end to this misogynist approach. As stated by Erin Staub,

“ a lack of protest can confirm perpetrator's faith in what they are doing”(78). Women are not in a position to put challenge because most of the affluent positions are occupied by men. According to Bell Hooks, “Patriarchy is

political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence”(18). In such situation due to gendered socialization, majority of men and women in general do not take initiative to control violence and subjugation. According to Sabl “most virtues are pluralistic and episodic: it is legitimate for some citizens to specialize in some, others in others; and many virtues are called for only in certain circumstances, useless or harmful in others”(2). Virtue of courage in extreme circumstances is a real act of resistance to the hegemonic dominance of any ideology.

In such scenario, Malala Yousafzai, the youngest ever Noble Laureate, a native of Swat valley in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa, North West Pakistan, advocated female education when Talibans banned girls from attending schools. A young girl of fourteen years, Malala broke the shackles of silence and resisted against this campaign of Taliban to deny the girls of Swat valley of their basic right to education. In spite of impending consequences, she chose to speak up against this imposed impediment of Taliban. She becomes “demos” which is terminology used for common People by Jacques Ranciere, resisting against the ideology and enlists herself as an icon of struggle thus segregating herself from “uncounted” and “unaccounted” terrain of common people(Ranciere10,38). She advocates “ dissensus” because it makes the powerless and excluded “demos”, a political force through disagreement (112). Malala becomes an active agent whose voice not only reverberates in the state but also at the global level. In her memoir, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, Malala tells the story of her experiences as a young girl living in the Swat Valley in the face of violence and religious extremism. Using her brilliance, empathy, and sheer force of determination, Malala is a voice for change and a beacon of hope for girls worldwide. Michael Foucault clarifies in his lecture about the created subjectivity in case of individual's transition from subjugated to the exalted position.

I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand ... a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the

required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the reemergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges [...] that criticism performs its work [...]. To emancipate [them] from that subjection [is] to render them [...] capable of opposition and of struggle.(81-82)

Hence this transformation is the outcome of sufferings of the individuals/ groups making them agents of emancipation. To obstruct this necessary perpetuation of power, therefore, dominant classes utilize not only the “Repressive State Apparatus” to assert their governmental superiority over their people, but also “Ideological State Apparatuses”(Althusser137) in order to engrain their ideology within the masses, even in seemingly politically independent environments. Althusser elaborates:

...while there is one (Repressive) State Apparatus, there is a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses...it is clear that whereas the – unified – (Repressive) State Apparatus belongs entirely to the public domain, much the larger part of the Ideological State Apparatuses (in their apparent dispersion) are part, on the contrary, of the private domain. (144)

Under such circumstances, an authoritarian ruler can enforce legal consequences on the subjects of his regime; he can prevent the need for such brutal force through the indoctrination of his subjects through political propaganda distributed surreptitiously through educational systems. In this way, ideology’s influence can be found in every aspect of a society’s structure, subjecting its citizens unknowingly to the political thought of the dominant class. According to Lukas, power relations are:

how we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert

them. It may contribute to their continued functioning, or it may unmask their principles of operation, whose effectiveness is increased by their being hidden from view. To the extent that this is so, conceptual and methodological questions are inescapably political and so what ‘power’ means is ‘essentially contested ... (63)

This postulates that power is as complex a phenomenon as gender is, and the relationship between the two is a contentious one. From Foucault, Lukes, Bourdieu and Giddens to a plethora of feminists, the notion of power has remained a focal point of debate and still no consensus has been formulated. However, many feminist scholars assume that “theories of power tend to be silent when it comes to the subject of gender” (Davis 67). Malala’s courage has proved that, when women choose to resist, all the maps change. There are new mountains. The new voices which are under sea, become volcanoes and erupt to change the world. Silence is what allows people to suffer without recourse, what allows hypocrisies and lies to grow and flourish, crimes to go unpunished. Voices are essential aspects of our humanity, to be rendered voiceless is to be dehumanized or excluded from one’s humanity and the history of silence is central to women’s history. Different scholars have conceptualized power in different ways but Giddens’ conception of power, as both “constraining as well as enabling,”(25) is more relevant in the case of Malala. According to Giddens, investigating power also involves uncovering “dialectic of control,”(16) that deprives women of their subjectivity and agency and compels them to lead fragmented lives, but it is enabling in the sense that women choose to resist and it is true for Malala who wrote blogs under a pseudonym - Gul Makai, the name of a heroine from a Pashtun folk tale but talibans’ attack has strengthened her to fight openly for her noble cause.

But my fight wasn’t over. I was reminded of our history lessons, in which we learned about the loot or bounty an army enjoys when a battle is won. I began to see the awards and recognition just like that. They were little jewels without much

meaning. I needed to concentrate on winning the war... As we crossed the Malakand Pass I saw a young girl selling oranges. She was scratching marks on a piece of paper with a pencil to account for the oranges she had sold as she could not read or write. I took a photo of her and vowed I would do everything in my power to help educate girls just like her. This was the war I was going to fight. (110)

Malala adamantly encourages the women to aim high by educating themselves. She believes that the education, economic independence, and self assertiveness are important steps towards liberation since there is a strong correlation between women's education and their overall progress including their economic development, and this empowerment of women is the need of society and the nation. Without probing deep into the feministic aspects, she intends to create awareness in the women by appealing to them realistically, thoughtfully, and emotionally because women in Pakistan are denied of their basic rights and are treated as dependent subsidiary.

In Pakistan when women say they want independence, people think this means we don't want to obey our fathers, brothers or husbands. But it does not mean that. It means we want to make decisions for ourselves. We want to be free to go to school or to go to work. Nowhere is it written in the Quran that a woman should be dependent on a man. The word has not come down from the heavens to tell us that every woman should listen to a man.(110)

In Pakistan, women who constitute nearly half of their country's population are paradoxically not treated at par with men in all spheres of human activity. Despite the fact that they play crucial role in the development of their husbands and children they are oppressed, suppressed, and marginalized in matters of sharing the available opportunities for the fulfillment of their lives. Women in Muslim societies are subjected to gender bias. Lack of

educational opportunities, unhappy marital lives, barrenness, polygamy are the major issues that weigh them down socially, economically, psychologically, and physically. A desire to resist oppression is implanted in the nature of human beings but very few have the courage to register their concern for emancipation, freedom (personal and civic), human rights, integrity, dignity, equality, autonomy, power-sharing and liberation. In her autobiography, Malala's voice resonates a clear assurance of the promotion of gender equality. It has already been established that she strived to find a place of independence and liberation amidst a male-privileged society. According to Susan Wendell, "An oppressor imposes unjust constraints on the freedom of individuals or groups and/or inflicts unjust suffering on them" (23). Wendell takes the idea of an oppressor to another level. She asserts the oppressor in a situation is not necessarily an individual person. "Sometimes it is a group of people, or a system of organization, or even an abstraction, such as the concept of a cruel and vengeful God who must be appeased" (23-24). Malala's Swat was plagued by a group of people, Taliban, who live under a warped religion that has overtaken the liberty of citizens to the extent of causing the superior group to make decisions as if they are a Higher Being.

Their silencing the young activist was supported by the majority who has misinterpreted the place of women in society. The result of oppression is struggle because resistance becomes the viable course of action once the individual has nothing left to lose. According to Agamben, "in the state of exception, resistance rises from the circumstance that individual has lost all the claims against state and that has little to fear from defying the state order"(trans Kevin 4). The talibanistic men exerted this unnecessary power in a violent manner so as to maintain control over a group with the help of promulgated violence but Malala's hopes, dreams and ambitions rather got wings, ironically, it is *homo sacres* extreme powerlessness that gives impetus to resistance and thereby presents a political threat to Talibanistic power. Malala, boldly shares it during her speech at UN Assembly:

Dear friends, on the 19th October, 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. And then, out of that silence came, thousands of voices. The terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions but nothing changed in my life except this, : weakness, fear, hopelessness died, strength,

power, courage was born. I am the same Malala . My ambitions are the same. My hopes are the same . My dreams are the same.(12 July 2013)

Hence Malala transcends the barriers of time also and becomes the voice of Islam's next generation of moderate Muslim. At the very young age, of 16, this passionate and indomitable teenager articulates how her faith grounds her and gives her the courage to back up her views on peace and the importance of education. Her father , a teacher and outspoken activist for education, as well as a devout Muslim who himself opposes the Taliban's narrow-minded interpretation of Islam, once recommended her to halt her campaign but Malala's unflinching courage and passion for her pursuit went on and on:

I don't know why, but hearing I was being targeted did not worry me. It seemed to me that everyone knows they will die one day. My feeling was that nobody can stop death; it doesn't matter if it comes from a *talib* or cancer. So I should do whatever I want to do.(113)

Hence , in order to invoke and make reality a vision of a society in which citizens are thoughtful and believe in true democratic ideals requires piercing of the mask of society to reveal the complexities of oppression, discrimination, and privilege. "Challenging cultural domination is both a political act and an act of bringing meaning to the experiences of historically marginalized groups (Mohanty 25).Malala expressed her inability to keep mum because her Pashtun ideals forced her to raise voice, "People were asking me to speak at events. How could I refuse, saying there was a security problem? We couldn't do that, especially not as proud Pashtun. "My father always says that heroism is in the Pashtun DNA"(44).Even in Islam, the Holy Qur'an emphasizes that Allah in His perfect wisdom has created all species in pairs, so men and women have been created of the same species. Specifically, the Holy Qur'an states, "He has made for you mates of your own kind" (42:12), and "He it is who has created you from a single soul and made there from its mates, so that the male might incline towards the female and find comfort in her" (7:190). Although the

Holy Qur'an has always been misinterpreted for establishing patriarchal gender-based regimes and the conservative, male-dominated, misogynistic religious interpretations to control and/or disregard Muslim women in a changing and dynamic Islamic society have always been used as documented yardstick to subjugate women. However, Islam's egalitarian message guarantees unalienable rights to Muslim women, namely the right to life, the right to obtain education, the right to conduct business, the right to inherit and maintain property, and the right to keep their names. But ironically, patriarchal gender-based incumbencies have consistently used Islam, as a religion, to tergiversate Muslim women's rights via historically and culturally derived religious interpretations.

As there is no consensus within the Islamic world on the assigned role and status of Muslim women, activists are striving to advocate for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice within an Islamic theology (Kalam) framework, while highlighting the teachings of equality within Islam to question patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings (Badran, 2002).

The issues of women's social status and role in society are ideological contentions that have permeated all societies from the beginning of civilizations. Throughout history, Muslim women have experienced discrimination, marginalization, restrictions of their freedoms, and restrictions of their rights. Malala Yousafzai's act of writing blogs and challenging the Taliban has promoted the slogan "One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world"(UNESCO Speech) and it has become the slogan for millions of men and women worldwide who actively work to claim rights. Their activism has channelized not only the countries but nations and thus mobilized the International organizations to scrutinize and have debates on providing equal opportunities for education. Feminists from around the world have contributed to such discussions by notifying the relevance of this issue with their lives because women especially in third world countries are deprived of this right. Malala's fight highlights a distressing reality that harmful practices such as early marriage, gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, prevent girls from enrolling in or completing school. Thus educational disparities start at the youngest ages and continue into adulthood .This ineffectiveness needs a comprehensive understanding of

the social structures and power relations which are not permitted by law and endorsed by the economy, social dynamics, family and community life. Powerful discourses can strike a balance into this unbalanced power relations. The voices of resistance can debunk the dominant worldview, Malala considers herself lucky to be on the platform where her voice represents the voice of millions and she encourages the children that their voices are powerful irrespective of their age.

We should believe in ourselves. If we want the future to be better, we need to start working on it right now. Children are in the millions in this world. If millions of children come together, they could build up this strong army, and then our leaders would have to listen to us.

The words of discord with the powerful systems is capable of institutionalizing a positive change. "When discourse is effective in practice, evidenced by its ability to organize and regulate relations of power, it is called a regime of truth (Foucault 1980:124). These 'regimes of truth' are the result of discourse and voices against the oppressors, and are reinforced (and redefined) constantly through the education system, the media, and the flux of political and economic ideologies. In this sense this battle is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but is a battle about "the rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true"... a battle about 'the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays'(Foucault, in Rabinow 1991). Malala is a stern believer of the power of dialogue She said, "the best way to solve problems and fight against war is through dialogue .It is the way to resolve political and a social enigma. Homi K. Bhabha rightly opines in this regard that:

it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history - subjugation, domination . . . displacement - that we can learn our most enduring lesson for living and thinking. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality . . . transforms our critical strategies" (172).

Malala has created powerful space for herself, helping to build the next frontier of the feminist movement and

registered herself as online feminist by writing blogs. Online feminism

encompasses all text, spaces, and interactions that occur between feminists, women, girls, and social justice-minded people on the Internet, spanning various platforms including social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, as well as blogs big and small, online magazines. Although Malala was reluctant to be labeled as feminist but later on she accepted this title of feminism.

It has been a tricky word. When I heard it the first time I heard some negative responses and some positive ones. I hesitated in saying am I feminist or not?... Then after hearing your speech I decided there's no way and there's nothing wrong by calling yourself a feminist. So I'm a feminist and we all should be a feminist because feminism is another word for equality." Men "have to step forward" to promote equality of the sexes.

She struggled for her basic right to education so debarring anyone from one's basic right

In an interview for the opening of the Into film festival, Malala Yousafzai paid tribute to her father, as well as the role that men can play in pushing for gender equality:

My father set an example to all parents, to all men, that if we want equality, if we want equal rights for women, then men have to step forwards ... We all have to walk together; that's how change will come. This is the role my father has taken. He believes in women's rights, he believes in equality and he calls himself a feminist. Courtney Martin and Jessica Valenti describe a history of online feminism: She added: "It has been a tricky word. When I heard it the first time I heard some negative responses and some positive ones. I hesitated in saying am I feminist or not?"

"Then after hearing your speech I decided there's no way and there's nothing wrong by calling yourself a feminist. So I'm a feminist and we all should be a feminist because feminism is another word for equality." Men "have to step forward" to promote equality of the sexes, she said. Young women's relationship with feminism is situated within a context that is characterised by both intense social change with regard to employment, education and the private sphere but also by gender, and other forms of inequalities that are still deeply embedded in the socio-economic order (Aapola et al., 2004). The word feminism comes from

French word feminism and according to the Cambridge online dictionary feminism is “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.” The term feminism itself is used to describe a cultural, political or economic movement aiming for equal rights for both women and men. The greatest figures of British suffragettes were the Pankhurst family, Emily Davison or Emily Davies. Emily Davies contributed to female education, she believed women should get the same education as men, and she managed to form a committee to further the prospects of women taking the University Local Examinations, which was established in late 1850s. In 1878 Queen’s and Bedford Colleges began awarding degrees to women, and 30 years later women at Oxford also became full members of the universities. The Pankhurst family played a major role in the suffragette movement, the leader of British suffragettes, Emmeline Pankhurst, was very politically radical and she is considered to be one of the most influential women in the British history. The second wave of feminism emerged after the World War II and can be described as the women’s liberation movement, which focused on gaining legal and social equality for women, and most importantly on ending discrimination. The third wave feminism or sometimes also called the post-feminism begins in the 1990s and continues up to present. Post-feminism refers to the perceived failures of the second wave feminism and it continues in fighting for the same beliefs as in the previous waves. However, the movement’s focus has slightly shifted; it is less focused on political processes and on laws but more on the individual self. Also, the feminists are more diverse now, the first and the second wave feminists were mostly Western, middle-class, white women, whereas the third wave feminists are women from different ethnicities, colours, religions and social backgrounds.

Women were creating powerful spaces for themselves online, helping to build the next frontier of the feminist movement. These forums began as simple websites, and developed into communities of hundreds of thousands of people who needed a platform to express themselves. They found it on the Internet. As years went by, social technologies began to evolve into a robust, diverse field of web-based tools and platforms. YouTube allowed for vlogging, or “video blogging”; Twitter and Tumblr, or “microblogging,” allowed for easier and even more immediate sharing capabilities. Today, this evolution of online technologies has produced thousands of activists, writers, bloggers, and tweeters across the globe who live and breathe this movement, engaging their audience every day in the name of equality.

Social justice is another term I use, often to describe a brand of activism that is very similar to feminism, but broader in scope. Many feminists are also social justice activists and most if not all social justice activists are feminists. Like black feminism, social justice has somewhat different implications when used in an online context. Social justice activists fight against systemic oppression of all types, including sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and more. The term social justice can also be used to indicate intersectionality or a focus on anti-racism when it is not necessarily implied by feminism.

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