

I AM (NOT) MALALA – ANTAGONISTIC PERCEPTIONS OF A NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE

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Abstract: *At the age of 17, Malala Yousafzai is awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, an event that unleashed enthusiasm and revolt, appraisal and sheer hatred, support and blame. I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban is the book Malala Yousafzai co-wrote with journalist Christina Lamb, triggering the same antagonistic reactions, East and West. The aim of this research paper is to cluster the most vocal attitudes, identify their ideological, political and cultural motivations and therefore position the Malala phenomenon against a balanced perceptive background. As with the case of the Rushdie affair, Malala has become one of the most controversial disputes at the international level oriented on the West-East discrepancies of perception and reaction.*

Keywords: *Malala Yousafzai; I am Malala; Nobel Peace Prize; Pakistan; Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan*

1. TERRORISM AND RADICALIZATION

Malala Yousafzai is the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, enjoying the reputation of such an award, bearing the responsibility of a worldwide acclaimed peace-through-education icon, and probably wondering why her Pakistani conationals – some, few or too many of them (depending on who is counting) – have been so vocal, unfortunately in a negative way, about her standing among the most influential contemporary world personalities. Our present day world tends towards common goals and achievements, states to be sharing the same values and principles while trying to ‘solve’ issues – social, political, ideological, or cultural – that would plague the supreme achievement of a superior humanity. However, the project of bettering the world comes under immediate questioning when there rise suspicions about who the white well-wishers are, what exactly their generous plans are – and how about expected profit? - , or who is going to be the sacrificial pawn, as a necessary move of the global game. Be the dream as global scale humanitarian as it may, the de facto world we are creeping through continues to exist as divided as for a long time: the West vs. the East, the Global North vs. the Global South, the Developed Countries vs. the Underdeveloped ones, the colonial vs. the post-colonial and dichotomies could continue as many

as our ideological mindsets may develop. It is, therefore, human to contextualize and historicize phenomena that have achieved an ecumenical scope, to dispute them and attempt plausibility against the background – cultural, ideological, religious, geopolitical – against which they have erupted. The present study deals with the phenomenon that Malala Yousafzai is in our contemporary global society, the positive reactions towards her agenda as well as the negative comments she has received in time. At the same time, the study sets to discuss the critical motivations behind both types of response to her messages, taking into consideration the historical, ideological and cultural elements that have created the dichotomic discourses.

2. NARRATIVES OF HAILING

When, in 2014, at the age of 17 Malala Yousafzai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Kailash Satyarthi, Indian activist against child labour, the Western political leaders and some of the Pakistani officials - Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and former president Asif Zardari talked in terms of Malala having made the nation proud – reacted in a positive way, hailing her as an icon of the fight for education, especially as a defender of female education in the schooling process, as well as a human rights advocate.

However, 2014 stands as the peak of a whole previous campaigning life that started with Malala's corresponding for BBC Urdu between January 3rd, 2009 and March 12th, 2009. During this period of time, she reported on the daily life of young schoolgirls in the Swat Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Northwest Pakistan. The reason for which this daily life was of interest to BBC is that the influence of the Taliban in the area was increasing, with a direct effect on the schooling process: schools were constantly being closed, especially those educating girls.

Yousafzai's blog, modelled on the diary of Ann Frank (d.1945) written under the Nazi occupation of Holland, provoked the ire of the Taliban who opposed Western forms of education which they regarded as an assault on their traditional values and an extension of the Western hegemony in that region. This blog allegedly led to the attack against her outside her school by the Taliban (Kunnummal and Esack, 2015:55).

On October 9th, 2012, Malala was attempted a murder on by Atta Ullah Khan, a graduate student in Chemistry, at the order of Mullah Fazlullah, the Taliban cleric who used to be the most vocal against girls' education. The criminal act was immediately denounced at both international and national level: British Foreign Secretary William Hague named it "barbaric", USA president Barack Obama – "reprehensible, disgusting and tragic", while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented on the attackers' feeling "threatened by that kind of empowerment" that they felt in Malala's "[being] very brave in standing up for the rights of girls"; in Pakistan, president Asif Ali Zardari called it "an attack on civilized people", while fifty most representative Muslim clerics issued a *fatwā* against the offender. The criminal act against her propelled Malala on the international scene of activism and she has become a leading voice for the rights of women to education and a defender of the oppressed. On July 13, 2013, the United Nations dubbed her birthday as "Malala Day", after her speech held in support of universal right to education. In her speech, Malala said:

The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born... I am not against anyone, neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorist group. I'm here to speak up for the right of education for every child. I want education for the sons and daughters of the Taliban and all terrorists and extremists.

As Kunnummal and Esack (2015: 55) remarked:

This attack was widely denounced in the international media and by organizations and politicians – both Muslim and non-Muslim – and garnered intense media attention heralding the beginning of Yousafzai's image as a global icon of girls' right to education and a symbol of bravery against unjust political forces.

After recovery, in U.K., she started the Malala Fund with the mission of supporting girls' education worldwide, while in Pakistan, as an immediate consequence of the dramatic event, over two million people signed the Right to Education Campaign's petition that later turned into the ratification of the first Right to Education Bill in Pakistan.

Besides the two most impacting years, 2012 and 2014, Malala's advocating campaigns and speeches have been rewarded with the most prestigious prizes, among which: National Youth Peace Prize, 2011; Sitara-e-Shujaat, Pakistan's third-highest civilian bravery award, 2012; Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, awarded by the European Parliament in 2013. In 2013, 2014, and 2015, she has been considered one of the most influential personalities worldwide, while in 2017 Malala has become the youngest United Nations Messenger of Peace. In 2013, the book *I am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* – a memoir – that she has co-written with Christina Lamb, a British journalist, is published in USA and UK, the international response being, once again, overwhelmingly appreciative.

If at the international level Malala Yousafzai has constantly been praised, supported and promoted as the voice in defence of female education worldwide, in Pakistan, her home country, reactions have been contradictory. In this section, we shall refer to the positive response she has received from media and from politicians.

Farman Nawaz, in his article "Noble Prize Winner's Fate in Pakistan" published on October 14th, 2014 in *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, states:

Malala has paved the way for an environment which can lead to the establishment of a society of progressive views and development. [...] Malala has played such a role in a Talibanized society that can improve the lost image of Pakistani society. Her role is a ray of hope in the darkness of extremism and fundamentalism.

What can be easily deduced from Nawaz's positioning is that he polarizes the Pakistani society into fundamentalists and pro-Western open-minded supporters, his claim being that the extremism exercised against Malala's agenda is the same that destroyed the nation by supporting Talibans and what he calls terrorism.

In another article, "Hating Malala", published in *Dawn*, Pakistan's oldest and most widely read English-language newspaper, on October 13th, 2013, Cyril Almeida develops a pro-Malala argument against the negative perception of her activities within the Pakistani community. He starts his argumentation by rhetorically asking: "Why are so many ordinary, seemingly normal people consumed with anti-Malalaism?", constructing his theory around the pivotal idea that Pakistan is a declining state, incapable of providing its citizens the basic amenities as a premise for them to lead a decent life. Almeida insists on the general dissatisfaction of Pakistanis with the state apparatus, calling it, in their name, a "predatory state" towards which natural feelings of love and loyalty cannot be triggered. On the background of general discontent and lack of coagulating and guiding lines, there has appeared the "alternative discourse, a replacement theory", namely the Taliban platform with (more) religion as the condition that "will lead to peace, security and maybe even prosperity." Under these circumstances, Almeida answers clearly the initial question:

Why hate Malala? Because she speaks of the old model, of a state that is rooted in universal and modern principles and tenets, that delivers equally to all without recourse to religion. But there's a new theory in town and it's spread far and wide in this land of hours. [...] A state can, in theory at least, eliminate the purveyors of an ideology that make it possible for so many to hate a teenage girl who was shot in the face for speaking about girl's right to education. But can an already declining state do any such thing? Long live the Taliban! Down with Malala!" Through his ideological analysis of the confused Pakistani mentality, Almeida manages to portray Malala in the brightest, though tragic colours, of a personality that her own people does not deserve. In the same line of analysing Pakistanis' mentality, Syed Irfan Ashraf, columnist for *Dawn* and against the Talibans' dogma, explains: "People want to see things in black and white. They want to believe the Western people want to get hold of this region, the resources, that they are behind the military and terrorism. If they accepted what Malala is saying and accepted her as a daughter, then they would have to admit they are wrong. (in Hamida Ghafour, "Malala Yousafzai: Backlash against Pakistani teen activist spreads in her homeland", thestar.com, July 19th, 2013).

Malala would not be the first Pakistani with a global reputation that is denied the proper respect within her own homeland: Prof. Abdus Salam, the first Pakistani and first Muslim to receive a Nobel Prize in science, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, the first Pakistani to win an Oscar for her documentary on female victims of acid attacks, Mukhtar Mai, the female that dared take to court the men who had gang-raped her in 2002 and who was proclaimed Woman of the Year in 2005 by Glamour Magazine. Referring to these illustrative cases of rejection and denial, while also mentioning the cases of the murdered child labour activist Iqbal Masih, of Rimsha Masih, who was accused of blasphemy and received asylum having being threatened with death, and of Kainat Soomro, sexually abused and bringing the offenders in court, Huma Yusuf, in "About the Malala Backlash" (*The New York Times*, July 18, 2013) concludes:

[All these cases] are a sign that Pakistan is still struggling to figure itself out – to figure out how to participate in the modern, global economy as it comes to terms with its colonial past, to reject Western pressure while coveting international approval, to strengthen its democratic institutions as an Islamic republic. The criticism back home will increase, and with it, the tragedy of Pakistan's identity crisis.

Fatima Bhutto, in "I am Malala by Malala Yousafzai – review" (*The Guardian*, October 30th, 2013), is also a defender of Malala and her "faith and her duty to the cause of girls' education [which is] unquestionable", and mentions "her pain at the violence carried out in the name of Islam [which is] palpable." Since Malala has been under constant criticism in Pakistan, starting with politicians and going all the way to ordinary citizens, Bhutto takes the responsibility of countering this by referring to "Malala's speaking against America's drone warfare, the CIA's policy of funding jihadi movements, the violence and abductions carried out by the Pakistani military." Also aware of the West's superior positioning towards the East, Bhutto assumes this yet includes Malala and her mission as equally significant in the global project of humanity:

It will always be more convenient for the West to point itself as more righteous, more civilized, than the people they occupy and kill. But now, Malala's fight should be our too- more inclusion of women, remembrance of the many voiceless and unsung Malalas, and education for all.

3. NARRATIVES OF HATE

If a people finds itself in a state of confusion as to its own identity, if dissatisfaction and lack of

visionary goals represent the daily agenda, then having a voice that crosses borders and assumes its national identity is very likely to undergo a process of tumultuous contestation. This is the paradigm in which the case of Malala may fit. At the public announcement of Malala Yousafzai's winning of the Nobel Peace Prize, in Pakistan, there were three types of reaction: the eulogistic (discussed in the previous section), the repudiating and the dodging. In this section we shall discuss the last two.

3.1. Repudiating. Denial and incrimination of Malala's achievements in terms of their motivation and purpose started to darken the Western radiance of the icon of courage and determination. Tariq Khattack summarizes it plainly for BBC: "It's a political decision and a conspiracy." (in M. Ilyas Khan, BBC News, Islamabad, October 10th, 2014) The conspiracies theories flooded the Pakistani political life, community debates and media: the shooting was set up by CIA in order to justify and continue their drone attacks, Malala being dubbed an "American spy" by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and the pro-Taliban supporters. In line with the conspiracy theories, one editor in a newspaper in Mingora, her hometown in Northwest Pakistan, claimed that: "The Americans and Malala's father conspired to get her shot so she can become a hero", while Bina Shah, in "The Malala Backlash" (in *Dawn*, July 16th, 2013) mentions another pervasive, more emotional, scheme: "She was being used to make Pakistan feel guilty for actions that were the fault of Western powers in the first place", with direct reference to the American drone affair in Pakistan and Afghanistan:

Why did America kill innocent children with drones and then lionise the young Malala to make themselves feel good that they actually cared about the children of Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Consequently, Malala Yousafzai turns into "Malala Dramazai" on Facebook posts and Twitter twits, all her public speeches being associated with "playing drama" for the West. Consequently, the dictum is given in post-colonial terminology:

Malala is the good native, she does not criticize the West, she does not talk about the drone strikes, she is the perfect candidate for the white man to relieve his burden and save the native [...] her cause had been 'hijacked' by the 'Western saviour complex'. (Assad Baig, "Malala Yousafzai and the White Saviour Complex", Huffington Post blog, July 13, 2013).

The conspiracy hypothesis was also fuelled by the viral photos showing Malala and her father meeting top USA officials and "CIA agents" at

which false statements have been added according to which Malala criticized the Pakistan Army or encouraged operations in Pakistan. Therefore, it is not only USA, but also the Pakistani government and the Pakistani media that have organized this conspiracy. (aspect discussed by Jahanzaib Haque, "We are not Malala, we may be the Taliban", *The Express Tribune*. Blogs, October 15th, 2012)

One direction in the process of Malala's public whipping centres on the influence that her father has exercised upon her ideological agenda. Ziauddin Yousafzai has been associated with Awami National Party, "a secular force of Pashtun nationalists that was allied to Mahatma Gandhi's All India Congress and opposed Indian partition" (Wikipedia.com), which is linked to the Red Shirt Movement (Khudai Khidmatgar) that, after independence, was accused of collaboration with Indian RAW. Therefore, M. Ilyas Khan concludes:

The mixed reaction that Malala has attracted can be partly explained in terms of her political heritage in a society where religion and an enduring perception of the West as the enemy of Islam dominate the public discourse. ("The Antagonism towards Malala in Pakistan, BBC News, Pakistan, October 14th, 2014).

The educational reform drive in Malala is also linked to her father's preoccupations for reform in the education system in Pakistan, so, the way in which she is perceived is being, in fact, the speaking trumpet of his agenda, in an hypostasis that is more likely to trigger attention and emotions, namely that of a vulnerable yet daring girl child/adolescent.

Another battling ground in the anti-Malala campaign was initiated by Mirza Kashif, president of the All Pakistan Private School Federation that includes most elite schools in Pakistan - 152,000 member institutions, with over 25 million pupils. He established and declared that the book will not be included in the schools' curriculum and it will be banned in school libraries. Though initially a supporter of Malala's educational initiatives, once the book published, Kashif adopted this radical positioning, stating that:

Pakistan is an ideological country. That ideology is based on Islam [...] in this book are many comments that are contrary to our ideology. (qtd. by Umair Aziz and Andrew Buncombe, "Inspiration or danger? Private schools in Pakistan ban Malala Yousafzai's book", *Independent*, November 10th, 2013).

Other accusations brought by Kashif based on her book include Malala's referring to the case of

Salman Rushdie in positive terms on the grounds of free speech and the fact that large parts of her book were not written by her given the reference to historical realities accompanied by political comments that took place before she was born. Given the scope of Kashif's influence in the educational system in Pakistan, it is no wonder that even the state schools sided with his position to a significant extent: though not officially banned, the book was not intended to be included in the curriculum either.

The fourth cluster of opinions in the Pakistani campaign launched against Malala and her activism focuses on the Taliban response. Adnan Rasheed (Taliban commander)'s open letter to Malala Yousafzai write that the reason she deserved to be shot by the militants because she was running a "smear campaign" against them, not because she was a defender of girls' education right. Ehsanullah Ehsan, chief spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, called her "the symbol of the infidels and obscenity", liable to be targeted and shot again. The other two reasons invoked by the Taliban were that, firstly, her father should have stopped his anti-Taliban campaign through his daughter, ignoring the warnings he had received and, secondly, that it was their duty to act against those who denigrate Islam, stating that the Quran says that "people propagating against Islam and Islamic forces would be killed" and "Sharia says that even a child can be killed if he is propagating against Islam." The motivating discourse of the Taliban would have stood as an appalling, yet isolated, expression of sheer extremism / terrorism unless a significant part of the Pakistani society had sympathized with their point of view. Zubair Torwali, head of the Centre for Education and Development in Swat Valley, in *The Express Tribune*, July 17th, 2013, observes on the Taliban's narrative also resonating with many people:

At the social level, Taliban apologists have quite successfully managed to spread a warped mindset among ordinary Pakistanis, which sees the militants as pious people striving to establish an Islamic state, and their opponents as Western-educated liberal heathens.

3.2. Dodging. In "About the Malala Backlash" (*The New York Times*, July 18th, 2013) Huma Yusuf summarizes the three most significant complaints of Yousafzai's critics:

her fame highlights Pakistan's most negative aspect (rampant militancy); her education campaign echoes Western agendas; the West's admiration of her is hypocritical because it overlooks the plight of other innocent victims, like the casualties of US drone strikes.

Since the second and third complaints have been discussed above, we shall focus on the first one, namely, the militancy issue in Pakistan against the background of official politics. The many people that Torwali refers too also include the political class. When the United Nations dubbed July 12 as "Malala Day" in order to raise awareness about education at a global level, the Pakistani government did not answer the event officially, nor acknowledged it. When Malala was shot by the Taliban, once again, there was a lot of confusion, better said dodging, at the level of mainstream political parties about how to deal with the extremist act of violence. Venky Vembu comments in "How Pakistani jihadi minds justify attack on Malala: Perversely" (firstpost.com, October 15th, 2012):

Leaders across the political spectrum, from Prime Minister Raja Perves Ashraf to Interior Minister Rehman Malik to opposition leaders, including the charismatic Imran Khan, have limited themselves to issuing ritualistic proforma condemnation of the attack without criticizing the Taliban by name.

Even though TTP claimed the attack and explained the motivation that stood behind it, at the official level, Rehman Malik made a strange supposition about the possibility of some splinter group of TTP to have committed the deed, while Imran Khan, also called 'Taliban' Khan correlated the attack on Malala with the drone attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan, thus trying to trigger a more extended emotional effect and at a larger scale as well. Jahanzaib Haque, in "We are not Malala, we may be the Taliban" (*The Express Tribune. Blogs*, October 15, 2012), sadly but frighteningly observes:

It probably didn't need a murderous attack on a 14-year-old schoolgirl to confirm that the Pakistani jihadi heart is today filled with poison. But to elaborate justification of that attack by mainstream political parties and by blind adherents of extremist ideologies shows just how deep the venom has travelled.

The international response to Malala – icon of courage and defender of education has been uniformly appreciative. However, Pakistan reacted to the entire Malala phenomenon in a varied antagonistic way: support, pride, hailing and enthusiasm on the one hand, hate, downgrading, and denial on the other. To hail or to hate are themselves extreme feelings and may invite thinking that adopting either of these responses is giving way to subjectivism, hidden agendas, political adherence, social benefits, or any other

type of interest. When Jahanzaib Haque asserts that: “In order for *terrorists* to flourish, they need more than guns, finding and a geographical location to operate in – they need an ideological space to occupy and work inside”, the reader observes where he stands. What could balance reactions is the understanding of the historical context and the insight into the ideological reasoning of both antagonistic sides of what the Malala phenomenon is.

4. CONTEXTS AND HISTORY

Much of the Western discourse around Malala Yousafzai as a victim of Muslim terrorism has been constructed on a post-colonial discourse that also includes in its agenda Islam, gender, and politics, while the Eastern discourse was based on a reply-back assumption, yet within the same ideological imperialist framework. A decolonial approach is

[an] epistemic perspective [that] criticises both hegemonic and marginal fundamentalism. It rejects the fundamentalist premise that speaks about the ways of finding truth and universality from one epistemic tradition (Kunnummal & Esack, 2015:51).

In their salient article, “Malala Yousafzai and the Post-9/11 Politics of Gender and Governmentality”, Ashraf Kunnummal and Farid Esack start from the premise that “Yousafzai’s public personality brings to the fore a web of power relationships of various sorts such as race, class and location” (2015: 52) and set to “interrogate the issues of class, caste, regional location, sexuality, governmentality, race and imperialism. This intersectional approach to the debate challenges the dominant paradigm of the simple victimhood of women by a peculiarly reified Muslim patriarchy. (Kunnummal and Esack, 2015:52). In the hegemonic discourse of the West, the Muslim women are still perceived as victims of a fundamentalist Islam, going hand in hand with a visionary perspective of a liberal West whose duty is to rescue and liberate them.

However, such a discourse ignores the contingencies of the space where these women exist. In approaching Malala Yousafzai, we must be aware of the geographical location of her birthplace, the local politics and the family background that all contributed to her development.

The larger and localised context wherein Yousafzai and her family emerged in the political history of this particular region is important in shaping the events that led to how Yousafzai was imagined by those who regarded her as an enemy (Kunnummal & Esack, 2015:55).

The people in the Swat Valley have constantly contested Western implications in the region and the Pakistani state policy, leading to a clear background of radicalization. Whatever was in the agenda of the West and supported officially at state level has been a perceived with suspicion and even more: the drone attacks and the complicity of the Pakistani elites are just some causes that triggered the ire of the militants in the area. It is under these circumstances that Ziauddin Yousafzai propagated his anti-Taliban credo and, along with him, his daughter did the same. The main Western political discourse was built on the fundamentalism of the Islamic militancy, namely, the Taliban one. Hand in hand with this, there went the victimization of the Muslim women in the area, what Kunnummal and Esack call

the gendered nature of South Asian politics and the War on Terror. (2015: 60); The rhetoric of women rights abuses was the major cherry on top of this [Bush] administration’s sales pitch for its discourse on human rights as a pretext for the invasion of Afghanistan (2015: 62).

Consequently, against this background of Western ideology of terror and gender, Yousafzai perfectly matches the “docile image of Arab and Muslim women, waiting to be ‘liberated’ by the US army.” (Dabashi, 2012: 185) Her story fits into the Western circulating pattern of the oppression of Muslim women by terrorist brown Muslim men.

The Western media response to the attack on Malala gradually transformed her particular case into a generic one. The name of the attacker was not important, as there was nothing of interest related to the particularities of the event. Shenila Khoja-Moolji, in “Reading Malala. (De) (Re) Territorialization of Muslim Collectivities” (2015: 546) comments on this process:

The ahistorical and decontextualized representations of the Taliban, and the grafting of the crimes of particular gunmen onto entire populations and nations, serve the critical role in contemporary geopolitics, from legitimizing military engagements (such as Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and threats to Iran) to encouraging soft interventions in the form of educational assistance and other aid projects.

Hamid Dabashi calls this “politically expedited collective amnesia” (2006) whose only escape is contextualizing and historicizing events and people, so that the ideology of a paradigm could not disfigure the truth.

5. CONCLUSION

Kunnummal and Esack (2015:66) end their article in a pessimistic note:

After 11 September 2001 and especially during the invasion of Afghanistan, global hegemonic powers used the issue of gender in South Asia to justify their colonial ambitions. We argue that many of the dominant assumptions on Yousufzai were utilized by global hegemonic powers whose aim was to exercise control over the region both ideologically and militarily. [...] Yousufzai's presence on the global stage as a peace icon and her 2014 Nobel Peace Prize have not changed the discourse in any meaningful way.

We, on the other hand, are more optimistic: once aware of the functioning ideological discourses in the West and in the East, we are able to perceive their limitations, their agendas and the consequences they may have at a global scale. Understanding means awareness and activism is the next step in unveiling the truth. Leaving behind subjectivism and the tendency to affiliate to the most powerful hence the most influential ideologically, we may stand as a significant voice in proclaiming what could help humanity unveil in both its sufferings and its achievements. The case of Malala Yousafzai could be a starting point in building a discourse in which the driving idea of her actions is the only one that matters and that could inspire us into appraising values and the beauty of a thought.

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