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Pakistan: Being Malala - “In the conservative worldview, as well as in the eyes of those so-called ‘radical new leftists’ a Muslim woman should be passive, otherwise she can only be one kind of agent”

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Recipients of humanitarian awards often invite controversy. In Pakistan, religious and political identities are valued more than the contributions of such recipients. Malala Yousafzai may have the Nobel Peace Prize, but she remains the target of criticism from Pakistani conservatives and also many ‘progressives’.

After surviving an attempt at her life by the Taliban, Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai became a global spokesperson for girls education. Nominated last year, Malala went on to win this year’s Nobel Peace Prize, but she still invites criticism and resentment in Pakistan, and not just amongst the religio-conservatives.

Pakistanis are so unaccustomed to good news that they get twisted in moral knots when something miraculous, heroic or inspirational happens in the country. If this news is about or made by a woman, you can bet there’s going to be backlash. So when the teenage school girl, Malala Yousafzai, survived being shot in the head by a Taliban gunman on her way to school in 2012, one would think there would have been celebratory relief and a wave of support for her defying the militants’ directives against the pursuit of lay education in Swat. Instead, the news of her survival and recovery became the trigger for a perverse form of nationalist outrage. News of her being flown to England for surgery and treatment was followed by vicious accusations that she was ‘faking it’ and for deliberately bringing ignominy and infamy to the country by surviving [1].

Some rationalized that Malala and her supporters were stealing the mantle of innocence from the real victims, the Taliban. Others bickered that the real and equal victims were those citizens killed in the conflict in the tribal areas, not by the Taliban but by periodic drone warfare. These commentators objected to the exceptionalisation of Malala by arguing a case for other Malalas that we “don’t see” [2]. Malala may have become a symbol of survival, resistance and defiance for her supporters but, for the Right and some Left commentators, the intuitive reaction was to delegitimise her victimization by moral equivocation, diluting her worth and denying her role in disrupting the narrative of religious militancy in Swat at the time [3].

Some observers even sympathized with the militants and offered the empathic defense that the Taliban were simply products of imperialism and reacting to the “global climate” and “broader context” [4]. The presumptive base for all such reasoning is that the militants are passive righteous victims and represent all “tribal people” who are the exclusive victims of state violence via drones,

and therefore the militants are representative avengers of this injustice.

That the right wing clerics, sections of the media and conservative nationalists should opt for this discourse was predictable, even if she was just a teenage girl. The usual tropes of her being a traitor and a CIA agent encouraged many conspiracy theories [5].

What was unexpected though, was a similarly mean-spirited prevarication that sprang from a spectrum of so-called progressives too. 'I Hate Malala' campaigns surged through social media over the next year. They became particularly strong when Malala recuperated and got involved in promoting the cause of girls' education with the United Nations and from her new home in England. This hate-mongering continued when her autobiography 'I am Malala' [6] hit the bestseller list and when she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize last year. The hate campaigns [7] were supported by a wide range of groups and individuals and included the youth following of the populist Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf political party as well as, The All Pakistan Private Schools Management Association and The All Pakistan Private Schools Federation. This included 'English-medium' schools, considered to be bastions of "liberal thinking", which banned the book in all their affiliate schools and their libraries [8].

But the absurdity of unaccountable politics that can circulate in cyber space was best exemplified by an article carried by a self-acclaimed progressive magazine on Pakistan's politics and cultures [9]. This piece did not even pretend regret at the attempted murder of Malala by the Taliban, or locate it in the history of target killings, torture, lynching and complete bans on women's mobility by the militants across northern Pakistan. Instead, it mourned this "dastardly act" (could there be a more colonial term?) because it "re-energized the liberal hawks in Pakistan as well as the United States."

The evidence for such an observation and inaccurate reading of the political environment in Pakistan was a placard held by some Islamabad-based activists saying '*Drones Kill so Malala can live.*' By this time prominent politicians, tribesmen and activists perceived to be even remotely 'liberal' were being systematically threatened, persecuted or murdered for their views. Further, the criticism that elite liberals support drone warfare is deeply flawed, because in fact support (and opposition) for a military solution to militancy (including by drones and however false or unethical a proposal) cuts across all classes in Pakistan.

The on-line collective which generates such regular critiques [10] mainly comprises US based scholar-activists who label themselves as 'Orthodox Maoists and Marxists' as badges of proof of their radical credentials. They excel in attacking, almost exclusively, something called Pakistani liberals and liberalism, based not on substance or context but ironically, by way of performative, associational or symbolic politics of those activists, protestors or even victims, who raise their voice against violent Islamist politics in Pakistan.

The apologia on the Malala attack in this virtual critique depends on a reification of the 'real' victim (of imperialism) who are exclusively those killed by state-sponsored drones. Meanwhile, the hundreds of thousands killed by the Taliban are worthy of sympathy but do not qualify as victims of an identifiable, systemic institutionalized religious violence. This rationale is based on a dated analysis that depends on a "theory of origins". It situates the millennial Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan as direct heirs of the mujahideen force created to defeat communist advances in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Such analysis absolves contemporary militants of any agency, and painstakingly avoids discussing religion as the material and ideological base of post 9/11 militancy or politics. Instead, the Taliban are depicted as vacuous puppets - creations of the Afghan jihad - void of religious agency.

By now, even the Taliban themselves were exhausted of repeating that it was not drones but that the

reason for punishing Malala was her insistence on attending school and her “secularization agenda” [11]. The detractors seemed determined to ignore these testimonies. Malala’s threat was not just her physical defiance by way of her insistence to attend school, but the fact that the Taliban’s entire body politic was at risk of subversion if she was allowed to continue her “secularization project” [12].

However, even non-Pakistani commentators in the US weighed in and complained that drone victims are also ‘Malalas we don’t see’ [13]. This was amazing. These “Other Malalas” - often victims, not even survivors - were not subversive or defiant as Malala was. Not only was this literally a false and ridiculous claim but as Pakistani feminist, Rubina Saigol, opined, such moral equivalence recalled what the religious party, the Jamaat e Islami, was invoking on the issue at the time too. The Jamaat habitually uses such reasoning as when Pakistani feminists protested the rapes of countless Bangladeshi women by the Pakistani army in 1971 at which point the religious party would equivocate that there had been countless reprisal rapes by the Bangladesh army too. Such moral equivalence flattens all violations as equal, and therefore erases both guilt and the courage of resistance, judging these as, resolved and lapsed.

The defense of the Taliban as misguided guerrillas is based on a confused theory that alternates between seeing the Taliban as victims of imperialism, but also as agents of anti-imperialism. The argument that they must not be judged ‘out of context’ deprives them agency and presents them as flattened non-actors who are exacting passive revenge for drones and US imperialism. No explanation has been offered as to why these so-called anti-imperialists exact revenge on women with such enthusiastic gusto. Malala’s own explanation that “They are afraid of women,” is more insightful than the imaginings of those looking for grand theories.

The “broader context” that foreign commentators urge Pakistani human rights activists to consider when protesting religious militancy is in fact very much in favour of ‘not catching’ or holding responsible those ‘caught on the scene and in the act of the crime’ [14]. This socio-legal institutionalized resistance and mind set is exactly what has long provided a shield of impunity for murderers in Pakistan, whether in the name of religion or custom/tradition. How this generous advice serves justice, remains an un-discussed concern.

The Talib’s clear demand for an authentic Shariah-based Pakistani state is dismissed as simply a ‘misguided’ view of Islam. This, despite the fact that their demands and worldview on women, minorities and their role in Pakistani society overlaps with and is shared by many other Islamists and conservative men. Apparently, this ideological base will dissipate once drone warfare ends.

Meanwhile, there are a few “liberal hawks” in Pakistan who are genuinely buoyed by the global recognition of the courage of the second Pakistani to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. [15] They would not quibble over the hand-wringing controversy and erudite noises which pretend to sympathise with Malala, but argue that she was not technically or morally qualified to receive such recognition. The supporters would recognize that such rewards are symbolic and will always provoke controversy and debate. Instead, they realise that the worth of this award, even if symbolic, is in serving as a moral pushback to Pakistani religio-nationalist sentiment and politics.

Supporters of Malala recognize the value of resistance to religio-political hegemony in Pakistan. They connect how both Malala and the only other Pakistani winner of the Nobel Prize, physicist, Dr Abdus Salam (who belonged to the ex-communicated Ahmedi sect and who had to leave the country due to persecution), resist the preferred role assigned to women and minorities as permanent and passive victims. Those perceived as lesser Muslims, or who are critical of Islamist politics, or who dare to aspire to be autonomous, secular, liberal or westernized, threaten the whole religio-national narrative.

In the conservative worldview, as well as in the eyes of those so-called 'radical new leftists' who live in the heart of the Empire themselves, a Muslim woman should be passive, otherwise she can only be one kind of agent- a foreign agent, the "other". And the only ones worthy of sympathy, support and awards are victims not survivors. As one insightful journalist observed, "The Nobel's always tough on Pakistan's mullahs, first an Ahmedi now a girl" [16]. Unfortunately, the worth of both kinds of citizens continues to be questioned, even by those who are not conservative clerics.

Afiya Shehrbano Zia

P.S.

* <https://opendemocracy.net/5050/afiya-shehrbano-zia/being-malala>

* Afiya Shehrbano Zia is a feminist researcher and activist based in Karachi, Pakistan. She is the author of, ' Sex Crime in the Islamic Context' and several published articles on women, religion and secularism

Footnotes

[1] http://www.buzzfeed.com/hayesbrown/pakistani-newspaper-editor-malala-is-a-normal-useless-type-o?utm_term=t19ql5#2fsd89a

[2] <http://www.thenation.com/article/170920/malalas-you-dont-see>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/10/malala-yousafzai-taliban-misogyny>

[4] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/nivi-manchanda/out-of-nowhere-taliban-and-malala>

[5] http://www.buzzfeed.com/hayesbrown/pakistani-newspaper-editor-malala-is-a-normal-useless-type-o?utm_term=t19ql5#2fsd89a

[6] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Am-Malala-Stood-Education-Taliban/dp/1780226586/?gclid=CNaJrfXPp8ECFbHHtAodZgEARQ>

[7] <http://www.dw.de/talibans-criticism-of-malala-reflects-a-mindset/a-16960977>

[8] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/inspiration-or-danger-private-schools-in-pakistan-ban-malala-yousafzais-book-8930925.html>

[9] <http://www.tanqeed.org/2012/11/ask-the-right-questions-saadia-toor/#sthash.rePR5oY3.20OU3JWa.dpbs>

[10] <http://www.tanqeed.org/#sthash.nzZ2BW5O.GjFpOMnA.dpbs>

[11] <http://tribune.com.pk/story/452910/the-ttps-defence-of-the-attack-on-malala/>

[12] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/17/taliban-letter-malala-yousafzai>

[13] <http://www.thenation.com/article/170920/malalas-you-dont-see>

[14] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/nivi-manchanda/out-of-nowhere-taliban-and-malala>

[15] <http://jinnah-institute.org/pakistans-pride-malala-yousafzai/>

[16] <http://jinnah-institute.org/pakistans-pride-malala-yousafzai/>