



Braving Misconceptions In The Name Of Education

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Abstract

The year 2012 was one of the most significant in the annals of Pakistan. Fourteen year old Malala Yousafzai was shot at point blank range by a Talib for advocating education for women in her native Swat valley. Education is mandatory in Islam. It motivates people to seek knowledge and delve in critical thinking. But, education for women received a huge setback after the emergence of the Taliban who strictly denied education for women based on the misconception that Islam forbids women education. Since recovery, Malala, besides being a noble laureate, has become a prominent education activist braving the misconceptions on education in Islam. I am Malala, published in 2014 encapsulates the life and predicaments of people in Swat valley under the Taliban regime. It throws light on the situation of girl children and the predicaments they brave for the sake of education.

Keywords: Memoir, Education, Taliban, Islam.

Introduction

“I know the importance of education because my pens and books were taken from me by force”. (Yousafzai, 179) was the cry of Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl who gave the issue of Education a new life and brought it to the limelight. Malala was shot by the Taliban, an extremist force for campaigning for education. Memoir, as a genre, excels in conveying promptness and righteousness, where private sentiments muscle with open issues. There are a plethora of magnificent memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies grounded on historical events penned on crucial occurrences, Among the host of memoirs published lately Malala’s memoir has gained unparalleled recognition over of its attention on education, one of the most distressing issues repeatedly debated but requires productive implementation.

Malala’s memoir I am Malala encapsulates the life and predicaments of people in Swat valley under the Taliban regime. It throws light on the situation of girl children and the predicaments they brave for the sake of education. Education is a process or an art of imparting knowledge skill and judgment. Every individual has been given the right to make use of this right. In spite of knowing the significance of education many children are denied this right. This issue has been demanding attention

in almost every country. In Islamic countries children, especially women children are not allowed to educate themselves in the name of religion. The misconception that Islam does not permit women to educate themselves has been widespread.

This traditional mindset looms at large amidst Islamic countries. Islam has been facing a wave of misconceptions regarding different issues and education is one amongst it. The teachings of Islam are based on the Quran and the Hadith. The concealed reality is that in Islam educating oneself is mandatory. It is believed that the first verse to be sent by God is based on educating oneself this shows the amount of significance given to education by the Almighty in the Quran. The Prophet states that, “the seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim”. (Tirmidhi, Hadith, 74)

Islam means peace, Islam has always produced people who have been harbingers of peace in the world but, in today’s world Islam is being featured as a religion which teaches violence. This erroneous trait is incited by the extremist groups as proper Islam. Such mentality is wide spread in Pakistan by Taliban who entered Pakistan with an intention of preaching proper Islam. Pakistan is a Muslim country founded by Mohamed Ali Jinnah, a lawyer by profession with an intention of creating a ‘Pak’ a pure country which will be an illustration to all the Muslim countries worldwide. But with the entry of the Taliban, violence has been amplified in Pakistan in the name of religion.

The first five verses of the chapter Al – Alaq (the clot) in the Quran were the first words of revelation to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), by Almighty Allah which ordains, “Proclaim (or Read!) In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created man out of a leech-like clot” Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most bountiful, - He who taught (The use of) the pen, -Taught man that which he knew not...” (Al Alaq or Surah Iqraa Chapter 96 Verses 1-5) It has also been claimed in the hadith as, “It was narrated that Anas bin Malik said: "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon ever Muslim” (Ibn Majah Vol. 1 Hadith No. 224)

Islamic history had highly prioritized women’s education. Women were believed equivalent to men in attaining knowledge and equipped themselves as teachers to instruct others as well. The point of reference for this was set with Prophet Muhammad (SAW) whose wife Hazrath Aisha (RA) was one of the scholars of her time and was also a mentor to both men and women in Madinah after Prophet's (SAW) demise.

Arab history notes that one of the wives of the Prophet Mohammed (SAW), Aysha (RA), led an army of 30,000 soldiers, cooked for them and helped medicate them. Aysha discussed and negotiated various issues and political matters with Prophet Mohammed, who freely acknowledged her wisdom. It is also noted in Islamic historical documents that one sixth of the Hadith record Aysha as being part of the chain of transmission of the sayings and traditions of the Prophet. This is greatly appreciated among Muslims today. As noted before, Khadija, the first of Prophet Mohammed’s wives, managed a successful commercial endeavour and was the first prominent businesswoman in Islam. (Badawi, 1995)

Such extremist groups gain support from the Mullahs, jirgas, political parties and sometimes the government, who claim to follow the footsteps of the holy Prophet. Pakistan recently made news for the violence against a small seventeen year old girl Malala, who was shot for claiming education for herself and other girl children of her valley. Malala states, “I was a girl in a land where rifles are fired in celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain, their role in life

simply to prepare food and give birth to children”. (Yousafzai, 9) For a Pashtun it was a gloomy day when a daughter is born. Her father Ziauddin, was different from other Pashtun men. He celebrated his daughter’s birth by throwing dried fruits sweets and coins into her cradle, something which was usually done for boys.

Women in Swat valley were not educated nor did they consider its significance. Malala’s mother started school when she was six and stopped the same term. Her family encouraged her to go to school. She was the only girl in the class of boys. She was brighter than other boys. But every day she would leave behind her girl cousins playing at home and she envied them. She felt that there was no point in going to school as she is going to end up cooking, cleaning and bringing up children, so one day she sold her books for nine anna’s spent the money on boiled sweets and never went back. Her father said nothing nor even noticed as he was busy with local politics resolving feuds.

It was only when she met Ziauddin, Malala’s father that she regretted. Ziauddin was an avid reader and a poet. He wrote many poems for his wife but she could not read. His dream was to open his own school but with no family contacts or money it was extremely hard for him to fulfill his dream. “ He thought there was nothing more important than knowledge”. (Yousafzai, 32) His village school had been just a small building and his classes were taught under a tree on the bare ground. There were no sanitary facilities yet he considers himself lucky because his sisters and his aunts did not go to school just like millions of girls in Pakistan. “He believed that lack of education was the root of all Pakistan’s problems. Ignorance allowed politicians to fool people and bad administrators to be re –elected.”(Yousafzai, 33) He believed schooling should be available for rich and poor, boys and girls. The school that her father dreamed of would have desks, a library, computers, bright posters on the walls and most important washrooms.

“The school was my world and my world was the school”. (Yousafzai, 46) says Malala, who used to spend her time in her father’s school from her childhood. She used to sit and listen to classes for much older children and wonder listening to classes for much older children and wonder listening to what was taught. She almost grew up in school. Malala read books like Anna Karenina and the novels of Jane Austen and trusted her father’s word ‘Malala is a free bird’. When she heard stories of the atrocities in Afghanistan, She felt proud to be in Swat thinking at least here a girl can go to school. Her father repeatedly assured her saying, ‘I will protect your freedom, Malala carry on with your dreams’ (Yousafzai, 55)

Ziauddin, Malala’s father offered free education to many children who were orphaned and could not afford to pay their fees, though some of the rich parents did not like their children studying with the girls whose parents cleaned their houses or stitched their clothes as they considered it shameful. Moreover Malala’s mother offered breakfast to a few of them as she considered that children could not study with a hungry stomach. Influential people in remote areas took money from the government for schools which never saw a single pupil. Instead they used the buildings for their hujras or even to keep their animals. There was even a case of a man drawing pension when he had never taught a day in his life.

In front of the school there was the house of Gulamullah, a mullah who called himself a mufti, an Islamic scholar. The mufti was all the time watching girls going in and out of the school every day and became angry, particularly as some of the girls were teenagers. Shortly afterwards the mufti went to the woman who owned the school premises and said “Ziauddin is running a haram school in your building and bringing shame on the mohalla. These girls should be in purdah. Take this

building back from him and I will rent it for my madarasa. If you do this you will get paid now and also receive a reward in the next world". (Yousafzai, 74) Malala's father was angry "Just as we say , Nim hakim khatrai jan" – "half a doctor is a danger to one's life", so, "Nim mullah khatrai iman" – "A mullah who is not fully learned is a danger to faith, he said". (Yousafzai, 74, 75)

One night after the mufti had failed to persuade the landlady to cancel their lease, he gathered some of the influential people and elders of their mohalla into a delegation and turned up at their door. Malala's father seemed worried though their father shooed them inside they could hear every word. Gulamullah said that he represents good Muslims and that his girl's school is a blasphemy and that he should close it. "A girl is so sacred she should be in purdah, and so private that there is no lady's name in the Quran as God doesn't want her to be named". (Yousafzai, 77) Though Malala's father tried to make him understand that the name of Maryam is mentioned in the Quran the mullah disapproved his words. Later it was finalized that there will be separate entrance for boys and girls. In spite of adhering to the rules the mullah kept interfering with the staff and women students. His interference is an indication of the changing mindset of the people.

Maulana Fazlullah entered as Radio Mullah. He introduced himself as an Islamic reformer and interpreter. Fazlullah exploited the ignorance of people by misinterpreting the Quran and the Hadith. His radio broadcasts were often aimed at women as he knew that men were away for work and women took care of the household. He often repeated that women had to take up responsibilities of the household and only in emergencies can they go outside. Women were so moved by him; they thought him as a kind of Robinhood and offered him money and gold ornaments. Seeing this Malala's father felt that if people offered so much money to construct schools, roads and clear the river of plastic wrappers, Pakistan would become a paradise.

Taliban started putting restrictions on girls education and did not want male teachers to teach them. Many male teachers stopped coming to school telling that the maulana does not like it. One teacher said that he saw a beheaded corpse on the way and could not risk his life to teach. Few were ordered by Fazlullah to help build his centre in Imam Dei. Ziauddin said, "I agree that female teachers should educate girls, but first we need to educate our girls so they can become teachers". (Yousafzai, 97) In spite of his advice many teachers stopped teaching in schools.

Subsequently the Taliban announced that there should be no education for girls even in madrasas. They started speaking against school administrators and congratulating girls by name who left school. "Miss so – and – so has stopped going to school and will go to heaven' he'd say or 'Miss x of y village has stopped education at class 5. I congratulate her'. Girls like me who still went to school he called buffaloes and Sheep and would go to hell". (Yousafzai, 97) Women students were not able to understand what was wrong. One day when Malala asked her father he said, "They are scared of the pen". (Yousafzai, 97) They started shouting and attacking women who went to market or shopping not even on Eid. Many women started getting tired of Fazlullah.

When the schools reopened after Eid a letter was taped at the gate threatening them that the school they are running is western and infidel and the uniform was unIslamic and they had to stop it or else they will be killed. After which they started blowing up schools usually during night time curfew. Peace marches were organized many girls came forward to speak against the Taliban. Many television channels conducted interviews. Malala says the more interviews she gave the stronger she became, she states, "In my heart was the belief that God would protect me. If I am speaking for my rights, for the rights of girls, I am not doing anything wrong. It's my duty to do so. God wants to see

how we behave in such situations. There is a saying in the Quran, ‘the falsehood has to go and the truth will prevail’. ‘If one man, Fazlullah, can destroy everything, why can’t one girl change it? I wondered. I prayed to God every night to give me strength”. (Yousafzai, 117)

Due to the bombings there were broken bricks, burned books and more over people looted from destroyed schools. The furnitures, the books, the computers were all stolen by the local people. “Her father cried when he heard this stating, “They are vultures jumping on a dead body”. (Yousafzai, 119) By the end of 2008 around 400 schools were destroyed by the Taliban. Eventually they announced that girls should not go to school. She believed “The Taliban could take our pens and books but they couldn’t stop our minds from thinking”. (Yousafzai, 122)

During one of those dark days, Malala’s father received a call from his friend Abdul Hai Kakar, a BBC correspondent based in Peshawar. He was looking for a teacher or a school girl to write a diary about life under Taliban. He wanted to show the human side of the catastrophe in Swat. Initially Madam Maryam’s younger sister Ayesha agreed, but her father refused permission as it was risky. Malala felt “When I overheard my father talking about this, I said ‘why not me?’ I wanted people to know what was happening. Education is our right, I said. Just as it is our right to sing. Islam has given us tis right and says that every girl and boy should go to school. The Quran says we should seek knowledge, study hard and learn the mysteries of our world”. (Yousafzai, 129)

Since Hai Kakar felt it was dangerous to use her real name he gave a pseudonym Gul Makai which meant cornflower. Her first diary appeared on 3 January 2009. Under the heading ‘I am Afraid’, Her diary received attention further afield, newspapers and printed extracts. BBC even recorded it with another girl’s voice. “I began to see that the pen and the words that come from it can be much more powerful than machine guns, tanks or helicopters. We are learning how to struggle. And we were learning how powerful we are when we speak”. (Yousafzai, 131)

A special assembly was held on that final morning but it was difficult to hear as the noise of helicopters was heard overhead. The bell rang for the very last time and the school was declared closed for winter holidays but the date of reopening for the next term was not announced Malala states “When someone takes away your pens you realise quite how important education is “. (134) The Taliban was against education because they thought that when a child reads a book or learns English or studies science he or she will become westernized. Malala strongly condemns this attitude telling “Education is Education. We should learn everything and then choose which path to follow. Education is neither Eastern nor western, it is human”. (Yousafzai, 136)

Hai Kakaar met Fazlullah and urged him to rethink on his ban for girls’ education. Moreover as Fazlullah received pressure from the whole country he lifted the ban for girls upto ten years of age. Malala along with a few other girls started going to school in ordinary clothes and hid books under their shawls. Though it was risky it was their ambition. “The secret school is our silent protest, Madam Maryam told her”. (Yousafzai, 139) Malala was awarded Pakistan’s first ever National peace prize. “I know the importance of education because my pens and books were taken from me by force”. (Yousafzai, 179)

The day everything changed in Malala’s life was Tuesday 9th October 2012. Malala’s school was not far from home, she used to walk but since last year, she was going with others in bus. It was a journey of five minutes. She liked travelling by bus as she did not get sweaty and used to chat with her friends and Usman bhajjan used to make them laugh with his crazy stories. Malala started taking bus to school because her mother was scared of her own. They had been getting threats all year. Some

in newspapers, some notes or messages passed on by people. Her father's friend Zahid Khan had been shot in the face on his way to prayer others told her father to be careful. "Take care, you'll be next". (Yousafzai, 4)

On October 9th, When Malala was on her way back home after her exams in the Dyna, a white Toyota Town Ace Truck with three parallel benches on along either side and one in the middle. It was cramped with twenty girls and three teachers. Suddenly the dyna was stopped by a young bearded man who enquired whether that was a Khushal school bus as he wanted the information of some children for which Usman bhaijan said that he should enquire in the school office. As the man was speaking another man wearing a peaked cap entered the back of the van and enquired who is Malala ? . No one answered but everyone looked at her as she was the only girl with her faced uncovered. He lifted his black pistol a colt 45 and some of the girls started screaming. He fired three shots one after another. It hurt Malala's eye socket and out under her left shoulder. Two other bullets hit her friends Shazia and Kainat Riaz. Malala recovered after a long struggle.

"The fight for women's rights in Pakistan is inexorably linked with the fight against extremism in that country, and in the recent years, both have had a mixed record. Fanned by radical ideology and the spillover effects of decades of war along Pakistan's borders, extremism runs deep in Pakistan". (Coleman, 279) Many brave Pakistani journalists and feminists have gave their lives fighting against such extremism.

Malala had to undergo such an ordeal for the only reason she wanted education not only for herself but all the children of Swat. The incident in Malala's life made her emerge more powerful than before and Malala decided to extend her battle globally. Malala gained support not only from her country but throughout the whole world. She says, "I thank Allah for the hard – working doctors, for my recovery and for sending us to this world where we may struggle for our survival. Some people choose good ways and some choose bad ways. One person's bullet hit me. It swelled my brain, stole my hearing and cut the nerve of the left side of my face in the space of a second. And after that one second there were millions of people praying for my life and talented doctors who gave me my own body back. I was a good girl. In my heart I only desire to help people. It wasn't about the awards or the money. I always prayed to God, 'I want to help people and please help me to do that'. (Yousafzai, 254)

Malala has become an advocate for equal opportunities for children. Malala's advocacy for education has sparked a dialogue about children's education throughout the world, three million people have signed the Malala petition which urges the United Nations to recommit to Millenium Development Goal 2 which involves primary education for children around the world. The Malala petition also led to the success of Pakistan passing the right to education bill 2012, guaranteeing that all children aged between five and 16 have access to education. Malala with her father has co - founded Malala fund to help schools all over the world. Thus Malala with the help of other children has challenged to wage war against illiteracy and terrorism by picking up books and pens. Malala has dedicated her memoir I am Malala to all the girls who have forced to put down their pens, as she states, 'To all the girls who have faced injustice and been silenced, Together we will be heard'.

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