

FORUM

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The politics of pity and the individual heroine syndrome: Mukhtaran Mai and Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Using Lilie Chouliarki's questions regarding the ethical responsibilities of spectators towards visual suffering in our mediatised age as a start-off point, wherein she states, 'the mediation between spectator and sufferer is a crucial political space because the relationship between the two of them maps on to distinct geopolitical territories that reflect the global distribution of power', this article looks at a recently staged operatic performance in NYC about the story of Mukhtar Mai's rape called Thumbprint, as well as the performative memoir I am Malala (2013) by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb. This article raises the following questions: is Thumbprint a 'spectacular performance'? Does it reproduce the image of the 'third-world woman as monolith' – or did it allow for the figure of Mukhtaran (as she is sometimes called) to speak to the audience assembled at Baruch Performing Arts Center in ways that brought forth the historical context of Pakistani and US politics? Does Malala's self-representation in her memoir, her staging of herself as the 'voice' of a Pakistani young woman, similarly exemplify the competing motives animating the spectacle of being placed in the center of a supposedly 'universalist' human rights discursive

KEYWORDS

spectacular human rights
neoliberal feminism
politics of pity
Mukhtar Mai
Malala Yousafzai
Islamophobia
Pakistan

1. A question asked by Gayatri C. Spivak in 1985.
2. This by now classic phrase was used by Gayatri C. Spivak in her article, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice' which was first published in *Wedge* in 1985; reprinted in 1988 as 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg's edited collection, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
3. See particularly Hannah Arendt's book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1958.

framework? How far do these two women's performances of Self/Voicing (as presented in the theatre of the West) – force us to ask anew, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'¹. To what extent do these two performative instances of 'voicing the other' call attention to the West's ongoing obsession with 'the cultural politics of recognition', which, based on an 'identity-based politics of visibility', has dominated western liberal feminism since the end of the twentieth century, and been responsible for directing 'public attention away from the regressive politics and growth of global capitalism' – and which in turn is implacably intertwined with the politics of US Empire in the twenty-first century? How do these two performances of individual women refusing victimhood feed, paradoxically, into a neo-liberal politics of redemption?

NEO-LIBERAL FEMINISM

Western liberal feminism serves as a screen masking the reframing of an old colonialist trope, that of 'white men saving brown women from brown men'² especially in the Muslim world. Angela McRobbie offers an insightful take on this rescue narrative trope:

Elements of feminism have been taken into account and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice,' these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly modern ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively so as to ensure that a new women's movement will not re-emerge.

(McRobbie 2009: 1)

We can trace these ideas and their deployment back to the conception of the 'sovereign state' envisioned by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century, a conception exposed by Hannah Arendt in the 1950s for its depoliticization of the emerging bourgeois citizens of Western liberal democracies. Arendt was one of the few thinkers who saw how Hobbesian state power and the concomitant lack of political engagement by average citizens was intimately linked to the imperialist project of Europe.³

Today, as a cover for imperialism at home and abroad, white middle class feminism directs its appeals to young white women (and women of color from erstwhile colonies aspiring to western privilege) through the rhetoric of individual 'self-empowerment'. This rhetoric is used to cover up western imperialist ideology when western nations invade/bomb Muslim lands like Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan, in the name of rescuing oppressed Muslim women who can then be mobilized to empower themselves as individuals with the help of western feminism and 'aid', in the process becoming model subjects of Empire. McRobbie contends that in this way:

feminism is instrumentalized. It is brought forth and claimed by Western governments as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means. Freedom is re-vitalized and brought up to date with this faux feminism.

(McRobbie 2009: 1)

In the US, this is so obviously the strategy Sheryl Sandberg and her supporters deploy. Sandberg uses feminist rhetoric as a front to cover her commitment to Western cultural imperialism, to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.⁴

4. See for instance, trenchant intersectional critiques of Sandberg by bell hooks and others on *The Feminist Wire*: <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/>.

ISLAMISM, ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE NEO-LIBERAL FEMINIST PROJECT

I find myself caught between the Scylla of Islamophobia (*Legislating Fear*) evidenced in resurgent orientalist tropes about 'brown women who need saving' by the West (by white 'feminists' and men), and the Charbydis of an Islamism which resurrects the nationalism of early postcolonial history, conflating women with the nation, and hence with a factitious 'tradition' of male dominance over 'their' women as a prideful response to the erosion of national sovereignty by neocolonial imperial Western forces (Chowdhury 2011: 157). To get past and beyond this no-woman's land, I want to propose alternative readings of two specific narratives, the stories of Mukhtar Mai and Malala Yousafzai. The former was born Mukhtaran Bibi in a small village in southern Punjab named Meerwala in 1972, and became the victim in June 2002, of a gang rape as a form of honor, ordered by a panchayat (tribal council) of the local Mastoi Baloch clan that was richer and more powerful compared to her Tatla clan in that region. Her rape was supposedly a payback for her brother's alleged crime of having sexual relations with a woman of the 'superior' Mastoi clan. The second narrative is that of Malala Yousafzai, a young girl from the northern area of Pakistan known as Swat, where she was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen on her way home from school on the afternoon of 9 October 2012 when she was barely 15 years old. She miraculously survived, but since then, has moved to live with her family in England. These two stories have been framed for public consumption in a way that dovetails all too neatly with expressions of liberal western feminism critiqued pointedly by Angela McRobbie and other socialist feminists like her.

I share with many such scholars who live and work in the global North, an anxiety regarding Muslim women and the circulation of orientalist tropes about them. It is my contention that the performative – that is to say, iterative – trope of the individual heroine, fighting bravely against a uniformly and always-already patriarchal, oppressive culture coded this way because of its adherence to Islam, exemplifies a (faux) feminism that undergirds and contributes to Islamophobia and the concomitant military adventurism in Muslim lands by the U.S. and its allies (Bhattacharyya 2008: 10). Such a 'feminism', therefore needs to be recognized and unmasked, clearing the path to more progressive futures.

'Faux feminism' is instantiated and its attendant anxieties unleashed, through the packaging and re-presentation of Mukhtar Mai and Malala Yousafzai's life-stories which have been circulated in the West most recently through *Thumbprint*, an opera about the 2007 gang rape of Mukhtar Mai, and the English language memoir of Malala, *I Am Malala* (2013) subtitled *The Girl Who Was Shot By the Taliban*. The question of western liberal feminism's complicity in solidifying this performative trope for its largely western audiences/readers, is a question Elora Chowdhury also raises in the final chapter of her important book on the Bangladeshi Women's Movement, *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh* (2011).

5. Of the fourteen men originally imprisoned on charges of raping/witnessing Mukhtaran's rape, an anti-terrorism court sentenced 6 men (including the 4 rapists) to death for rape on 1 September 2002. In 2005, the Lahore High court cited 'insufficient evidence' and acquitted 5 of the 6 convicted, and commuted the punishment for the sixth man to a life sentence. Mukhtaran and the government appealed this decision, and the Supreme Court suspended the acquittal and held appeal hearings. In 2011, the Supreme Court too acquitted the accused, to the dismay of human and women's rights activists in Pakistan.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mukhtaran_Mai
Accessed 31 December 2015.

This is the question of, as she puts it, 'feminist complicity in, and mounting dissent against, interlocking hegemonies of neoimperialism, fundamentalism, and patriarchies' (Chowdhury 2011: 157).

Thumbprint

Thumbprint is an opera that narrates and comments on Mukhtar Mai, an illiterate Pakistani peasant woman raped in 2007 by several high-ranking men of the powerful Mastoi clan in Meerwala village of the Punjab province. Mai challenged the clan in court, undoubtedly a first in the history of Pakistan. Six of the rapists were convicted and sentenced to death.⁵ *Thumbprint*, with music and lead role performed by Kamala Sankaram, libretto by Susan Yankowitz, and directed by Rachel Dickstein, premiered at New York's Baruch College Performing Arts Center on 11 January 2014.

Feminist complicity in maintaining 'interlocking hegemonies of neoimperialism, fundamentalism, and patriarchies' (Chowdhury 2011: 157) is apparent in Phyllis Chesler's glowing account of the production, not unrelated to the latter's fervent support of Israel, a state whose oppressive policies against Muslim-majority Palestine, including Palestinian women, clearly inflected her relation to feminism and her take on *Thumbprint*. Here is a comment posted on the conservative news and opinion website *Breitbart*, in which Chesler accuses the National Women's Studies Association (the USA's leading academic feminist organization) of using feminism as a front for anti-Semitism:

The next National Women's Studies Association annual meeting will take place in San Juan, Puerto Rico on November 13–16, 2014 and is aptly named 'Feminist Transgressions'. Indeed, the conference itself is 'transgressive' in that it minimizes the cause of women to focus, yet again, on the cause of Palestine, aka the destruction of Israel.

This is only the latest, among many other examples, of the way in which Women's Studies – an idea which I pioneered so long ago – has been Stalinized and Palestinianized. I wonder whether the forces of evil will try to pass a resolution in favor of boycott, divestment, and sanctions – not against Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea, or Russia – but against Israel only.

(Chesler 2014a)

Chesler concludes: 'It's almost as if the feminist world has become a wholly owned subsidiary of the PLO!' (2014a)

So when *Thumbprint* got an enthusiastic thumbs-up from Chesler, I was plunged into an abyss of Islamophobia. Chesler's extreme pro-Zionist agenda goes hand-in-glove with a US neo-imperialist right-wing agenda that refuses to recognize the human and women's rights of Palestinians. Here is some of what Chesler wrote about *Thumbprint*:

She [Mukhtar Mai] could have been forced into an unwanted marriage and literally tortured for the rest of her days by her in-laws and husband – but since she was of a lower tribal caste (she is a Gujjar biradiri – *and yes, everyone is Muslim*), they instead decided to shame her, spoil her. What they did to Mukhtar was meant as a prelude to her suicide.

Pakistan, especially the Punjab, is virulently misogynist. Daughter- and wife-beating are normalized as is polygamy, forced child marriage, often to a first cousin, forced veiling, and the honor killing of any girl or woman who is perceived as even slightly disobedient, or who has shamed her family in any way.

(Chesler 2014b: 83, emphasis added)

After casting Mai's rape as exemplary of the savagery *specifically* of Muslim men who are representative of *the entire Punjab province* of Pakistan, Chesler goes on to cast Mai as a heroine par excellence, exemplary of feminist exceptionalism:

Our Mukhtar is a different kind of heroine. According to librettist, Susan Yankowitz, who interviewed Mukhtar three times, she tried to kill herself multiple times, failed, and decided that since she was 'as good as dead', she might as well go to court and demand justice.

(Chesler 2014b: 83)

Jeff Lunden, another liberal commentator reviewing the opera for NPR (National Public Radio, USA), similarly emphasizes the 'individual' nature of Mukhtar Mai's resistance: 'One single person: one body, one voice made this enormous change' (Lunden 2014).

That some measure of justice was indeed delivered in her case when six of Mukhtar's rapists were sentenced to death is as Chesler describes, 'absolutely unprecedented' (Chesler 2014b: 83).⁶ However, Chesler then goes on to generalize that 'Such justice is an incredible accomplishment *for any woman who lives in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa*' (emphasis added). Here I have a problem. Does any and every woman face a lack of justice across the board everywhere, undifferentiatedly across all of 'south East Asia, the Middle East and Africa'? Chesler should read some Pakistani feminists, such as Zamurad Awan, who while recognizing the courage and tribulations of Mukhtar, also correctly observes that 'the status of women in Pakistan varies considerably across classes, regions and the rural/urban divide due to uneven socioeconomic development and the impact of tribal, feudal and capitalist social formations on women's lives' (Awan 2009).

And as Sehar Mughal, another Pakistani feminist scholar points out in her Master's thesis, 'The Fate of Tomorrow is in the Hands of Women: Gender, social position, and the media in Zia ul Haq's Islamization campaign':

Even today the image of Mukhtar Mai represents Pakistani women largely as victims of patriarchy – her courage and resolve portrayed as rarely found among other Pakistani women. The same representation of women as oppressed was capitalized on by Western media, and used in Afghanistan to find legitimacy in the ongoing war in order to show Afghani women how to think and act so that they could be 'free'.

The place that women hold in society in Pakistan, however, is much more complex and multi-faceted than is apparent in media coverage of the case of Mukhtar Mai. The state of women in Pakistan has much to do with economic class, caste, location, and education.

(2011)

6. Subsequently, as noted earlier, all save one of the accused, have been released, with the Supreme Court citing lack of sufficient evidence as the cause for their verdict. It should be noted that Bronwyn Curran, an Australian author of a 2006 book on the Mukhtar Mai case and a former Islamabad correspondent of AFP, claimed that 'after many months painstakingly poring through every police statement, medical record, witness testimony, and cross-examination transcript in this case, coupled with multiple visits to Mirwala, Jatoli and Dera Ghazi Khan for extensive interviews with members of both sides of this case, I reached the same conclusion as the Supreme Court has in 2011'. Curran here falls into the camp of those western feminists who see third world women like Mukhtar only as victims. She claims that 'Ms Mai is a victim of characters around her who have used her, her family, the local police and courts for their own purposes'.

Source: <http://www.pakistantimes.com/topics/mukhtar-bibi/>
Accessed 31 December 2015.

As Mughal points out, *Thumbprint* and other media coverage of Mukhtar Mai in the West rework the trope of the singularly oppressed Muslim woman, who, unlike the majority of her Pakistani sisters, stands up against the patriarchal rapists and oppressors who think they can rape her with impunity, believing she will be so devastated and 'shamed' that she will either commit suicide or stay silent. The opera represents Mukhtar Mai's courage as an exception to such a rule. We hear a chorus of women singing:

[...] Every girl fears this fate/It is like a vulture flying right above our heads. When we walk or work or play/A man can grab you/take you into darkness, break into your body/take you into darkness/Day and night, night and day/ Every girl/Fears this fate will come to her [...]"

(*Thumbprint* quoted in Chesler 2014b)

From such 'darkness', a great light shines forth in the shape of Mukhtar Mai. The women express their desperate hope: 'In a dark season/Someone must be the first ray of light'. And Mukhtar Mai replies: 'Let it be me, let it begin with me'.

And it is true that in the context of the particular village of Meerwala in Southern Punjab, Mukhtar Mai nee Mukhtaran Bibi is a trailblazer, an icon for women's rights. However, within the larger picture, for decades the Pakistani women's movement has actively championed women's rights, challenging misogynistic Islamization laws such as the 1979 Hudood Ordinances promulgated by military dictator Zia ul Haq of which the most controversial rape law was repealed in 2006. Mukhtar Mai's quest for justice achieved the degree of success it did because of the Pakistani women's movement. As Nadia Tariq Ali asked in her 2011 article 'Does Mukhtaran Mai [sic] Verdict Mean Failure for Pakistan's Women's Rights Movement?':

It is clear that Mai and many other women like her have suffered extreme injustice. But it is not right to assume this verdict is a benchmark to measure overall progress of Pakistan's larger women's movement – a movement that originally emerged in the 1980s to reclaim the rights of millions of women in the face of state oppression and General Zia ul Haq's Islamization program.

(2011)

That movement, which has come a long way since its beginning, was launched by a handful of highly-qualified and enterprising upper middle class women who were sometimes misunderstood even by other women. Today, despite setbacks like what happened to Mai, thousands more women and men continue to be torchbearers in the women's movement fighting against discriminatory legislation, advocating for reducing gender-based violence at all levels of society, and pushing for laws that advance the welfare of Pakistani women. The recently approved Sexual Harassment Act (passed by the Pakistani Senate in January 2010), the restoration of seats reserved for women in the national and provincial assemblies, the inclusion of gender issues in the manifestos of all leading political parties, the battles for peasant land rights, and mobilizing other civil society groups on issues related to women's rights, are developments that could not have happened without a collective movement for women's rights in Pakistan. The Pakistani women's movement generates concrete results. Nadia Ali underscores this point:

In some ways, one can even sense the progress of these efforts by looking again at the Mukhtaran Mai case: not long ago, sexual assaults of similar nature were most often simply swept under the carpet in Pakistan. But Mai's case was brought dramatically to the forefront and all effort was made to help her get justice. Also, the widespread outrage that followed the court verdict [when 5 of the 6 accused were released due to insufficient evidence against them according to the Supreme Court] – clearly reflected that people were aware of her plight and expected serious punishment for the perpetrators of the crime. This increased awareness around justice is particularly significant, because the women's rights movement in Pakistan has been primarily about educating the masses on significant gender issues and changing their mindsets over the long term.

(2011)

Unfortunately, these very real challenges to Pakistan's patriarchal, misogynist culture organized and led by Pakistani feminist and women's rights activists, even when not fully successful, are *not* what mainstream American media has focused on in its coverage of the Mukhtar Mai case; nor is it what *Thumbprint* highlighted.

Seher Mughal enumerates various examples of the stereotypes of Pakistan and its women that are endlessly circulated in western media, and which become the performatives of artworks like *Thumbprint*. Thus, A *Washington Post* article of 21 April 2011, reporting on the Mai verdict reads, 'The case exposed to the world a side of Pakistan's tribal culture in which women are often punished harshly for affairs or sold as brides to settle disputes or compensate for the perceived sins of their relatives.' According to Mughal, 'Pakistani culture is routinely characterized as 'traditional' and Pakistanis are often portrayed as illiterate. Nicholas D. Kristof, a *New York Times* journalist who has written a lot about Mukhtar in his column, routinely points out Mai's illiteracy' (2011). She goes on to underscore how almost all stories from the *New York Times*, refer to the 'illiteracy that is rampant in Pakistan,' and how 'the *Jirga* or tribal council is mentioned in all articles'. She cites one among a plethora of similar articles that explains to the readers of the *New York Times* how the decision of the *Jirga* which apparently ordered Mai's rape, is yet another instance that 'directly sheds light on the traditional and savage nature of Pakistan's rural tribal culture' (Mughal 2011).

Following a similar line of analysis, Madiha Kark writes:

The *New York Times* also failed to provide reporting on local protests in Pakistan following Mai's case, instead, most of the articles that did mention any form of protest, attributed it to 'worldwide outrage' or 'international outcry' failing to mention the local sentiments following the rape. By not covering the local sentiments of protesters, the *New York Times* chose to frame the news by portraying an indifferent image of Pakistanis that are mum about injustices on women.

(2013)

What, then, is the way out of this morass of Islamophobia that also would avoid the pitfalls of a knee-jerk nativism that ignores the very real injustices committed against poor illiterate peasant women like Mukhtar Mai and the immense courage it took her to fight back against a powerful feudal system

7. After surviving the bullet wound to her head and shoulders, Malala Yousafzai was moved to the [Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, U.K.](http://www.queenelizabethhospital.nhs.uk), for intensive rehabilitation. Due to continued security risks in Pakistan by the Taliban, she now lives in Birmingham with her family where she attends school. At 17 years of age, she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. According to the Washington Post, ten militants purported to have been part of the shooting spree that almost killed Malala, were given life sentences by an anti-terrorist court in Pakistan in April 2015. (see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/04/30/malala-yousafzais-attackers-sentenced-to-life-in-prison/> Accessed 31 December 2015). However, there are reports that eight of those ten have already been released (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/06/05/eight-ten-militants-jailed-for-shooting-malala-yousafzai-shooting-already-freeo.html>. Accessed 31 December 2015).

and an indifferent state apparatus? Mai herself suggests a solution, which also points to a direction transnational feminist scholarship has begun pursuing in its analyses and activist concerns over the recent decades. It is, as both Chowdhury and McRobbie suggest, a direction that warns us of the danger of instrumentalizing feminism for the neoliberal ends of globalization that tout individualism as panacea for social and economic ills. Instead, we are pointed back toward what Nancy Fraser calls the ‘solidaristic scenario’ of a transnational second-wave feminism.

Here is Fraser’s spot-on analysis of how a white Western liberal feminism has served as a handmaiden to neoliberal capitalism that has not helped, nor ever will, ‘rescue’ the Mukhtarans and Malalas of our unequal world:

[...] feminism [of the white liberal variety] contributed a third idea to neoliberalism: the critique of welfare-state paternalism. Undeniably progressive in the era of state-organised [*sic*] capitalism, that critique has since converged with neoliberalism’s war on ‘the nanny state’ and its more recent cynical embrace of NGOs. A telling example is ‘micro-credit’, the programme [*sic*] of small bank loans to poor women in the global south. Cast as an empowering, bottom-up alternative to the top-down, bureaucratic red tape of state projects, microcredit is touted as the feminist antidote for women’s poverty and subjection. What has been missed, however, is a disturbing coincidence: microcredit has burgeoned just as states have abandoned macro-structural efforts to fight poverty, efforts that small-scale lending cannot possibly replace. In this case too, then, a feminist idea has been recuperated by neoliberalism. A perspective aimed originally at democratising [*sic*] state power in order to empower citizens is now used to legitimize [*sic*] marketization [*sic*] and state retrenchment.

(2013)

Holding Mukhtar Mai up as the ‘individual heroine’ of Pakistan’s uniformly oppressed women, serves the ends of (neo) liberal individualism which loves words such as ‘empowerment’, but this does not help her or advance her goals for herself or for the other ‘disempowered’ women – and men – of her village.

In an interview with Samira Shackle of the *New Statesman*, Mai says bluntly, in response to a question about the State’s responsibility to control extremism, and to help women like her achieve justice, ‘Our laws are made, but they’re never acted upon. It is our government’s fault, the fault of our legal institutions, the police, that they don’t enforce these laws’ (2014). Here, she is clearly in favor of a strong state, that could – and ought to – enforce laws that are meant to protect women like herself; a state that is strong in terms of protecting its most marginalized citizens, working for and with them – not a militaristic/imperialist state as conceptualized by Hobbes and feared by Arendt.

Mai also points out, commenting upon the hope she sees for Pakistan and its women,

The future is brighter. Women have a voice. They use it in public to ask for their rights. You see now, even a child like Malala has the courage to speak out.⁷ There are dangers – but placed against the need to achieve something, to express yourself, the threat is diminished. We have to keep moving ahead.

(Shackle 2014)

Mai uses 'we' in her response to a question about her 'individual' vision, a 'we' that encompasses other women of Pakistan who feel emboldened to challenge injustice, to fight against violence enacted the name of tradition or religion. She links her struggle to that of Malala Yousafzai and elsewhere in the interview says, 'There are many more Malalas in this society' thus moving away from the individual heroine syndrome toward collectivity. Mai also acknowledges that she was encouraged in her dream to start local schools for girls – and boys – in her village after her ordeal was publicized, by supporters she met throughout Pakistan. These were, in her words, 'educated people and they agreed with the course I had chosen to take. They encouraged me. It was then it occurred to me that education is important. It brings enlightenment' (Shackle 2014).

8. This phrase reflects the title of Wendy's Hesford's book, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms*. Richard Schechner has pointed out that the phrase would be much clearer if it were 'spectacle-rhetorics'. I agree.

NEOCOLONIAL HUMAN RIGHTS/NEOLIBERAL PITY POLITICS

Unfortunately, Mukhtar Mai's acknowledging the role of others in her struggle for justice, and the need to articulate this struggle within a broader critique, is overlooked by the creators and interpreters of *Thumbprint*, including the 'expert panelists' commenting on the opera on its premiere – including Phyllis Chesler, as well as Mukhtaran herself who was mobilized to take her place as witness to a depoliticized neoliberal Western feminism's forward march into a repoliticized neocolonial regime of power. The 'need to achieve something' – in Mai's statement that I cited earlier, is set up against, and diminished by, global attention paid to her second statement, that women like her now have a 'voice' and thus access to a means of self-expression, viz. 'empowerment'. But as Gayatri Spivak so brilliantly asked us to consider long ago, can the subaltern really 'speak'? What does Mai's 'voice' amount to, what can it actually say in the space that is always and already overdetermined by universalist discourses of women's human rights enabled by the very neoliberal and neoimperialist regimes of power that continue to practice policies which circumscribe the same lives they claim to be 'liberating'?

Put another way, 'women's empowerment' narratives – especially with regards to 'third world Muslim women' in the post 9/11 world – lend themselves to a 'spectacular rhetoric'⁸ of human rights that erases the possibilities for a meaningful transnational feminism that could actually challenge the structural causes of global inequality which neoliberal economic models have no interest in addressing. This 'spectacular rhetoric' according to Wendy Hesford, enacts, through the image of the 'suffering other', not so much a politics of the other's accessing her 'voice' but the presence and self-recognition of the Western feminist who has rushed to that other's rescue, whether through aid agencies, or through performances in the other's name, or through 'activist' writing and publishing. These affective performances are meant to connect the Western performative subject to her "other" through shared experiences of suffering (Hesford 2011: 7).

Thus, for example, the 'staged unveiling' of Zoya, a representative of RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan), at New York City's Madison Square Garden in 2001, began with Oprah Winfrey reading aloud Eve Ensler's poem, 'Under the Burqa' which the latter wrote after traveling to Afghanistan and meeting with women living under Taliban rule. Ensler's poem, written much like the opera about Mukhtar Mai's rape, in the voice of one of those suffering women. Later, Winfrey, who had asked Zoya to come on stage wearing a burqa, lifted the burqa off her, letting it fall to the

ground on the stage. This performance choreographed by Winfrey, as Hesford notes, enacted 'a dual rhetoric of recognition' which was 'staged between Zoya and the audience [with Winfrey as stage director], a rhetoric that cast Zoya as a victim 'awaiting liberation' rather than an 'active agent in history' (2011: 6). At the same time, the 'solidarity' Eve Ensler laid claim to as a byproduct of her own 'affective identification' with Zoya's pain at the same event, put Ensler center stage as the benevolent 'rescuer,' thus validating her own presence: 'To allow another's pain to enter us, forces us to examine our own values [...] insists that we be responsible for others,[and] compels us to act' (Ensler quoted in Hesford 2011: 6, emphasis added). As Hesford correctly stipulates, 'In this way, Ensler's imaginative identifications are a form of self-recognition' (2011: 6).

Such a cultural politics of recognition, resting as it does on an 'identity-based politics of visibility' – or 'voicing' – which, to recall Nancy Fraser once again, has been the cornerstone of Western liberal feminism from the end of the 20th and into the 21st century-has indeed served to direct 'public attention away from the regressive politics and growth of global capitalism' (2013). Such a regressive politics which is occluded in the human rights spectacle which the performances of Zoya, Mukhtar Mai, and Malala are made to enact on the global (re: Western) stage, underwrites, in fact, the very discourse of universal human rights. Hesford's term, 'human rights spectacle' thus 'encompasses appropriations of human suffering in activist, cultural, and legal contexts, as well as Western democratic nations' use of images to deflect attention away from their own human rights violations by turning other nations into spectacles of violence (Chow 1991: 81–100). And it further instantiates the regressive politics at the heart of global capitalism by 'mapping the world in terms of spectator zones and sufferer zones' (Chouliarki 2008: 4), without analyzing how such 'zones' might in fact be linked through the inequalities exacerbated by current economic systems and policies of neoliberalism.

These mediatized zones, as Lilie Chouliarki describes them in her book *The Spectatorship of Suffering*:

embed new transnational technologies of communication in existing and relatively stable transnational relationships of power and these map out an asymmetrical and unjust landscape of news flows. The consequence is new divisions rather than simply new unifications ['affective identification' in Ensler's words]. The parallel to the digital divide in new media is the satellite divide in global news flows [...]. The division between safety and suffering captures a fundamental aspect of this asymmetry in the viewing relationships of television. This is the asymmetry of power between the comfort of spectators in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the spectators' television screens.

(Chouliarki 2008: 4)

Of course, the 'safe spectators' whether they be consumers of news flows or of news stories of suffering others represented in plays, operas, books etc, are elite Western audiences, and the sufferers are the poverty-stricken illiterate 'others'. Edward Said would call this viewing asymmetry 'a contemporary mutation of the old divide between the West and the "orient"' (quoted in Chouliarki 2008: 5).

Such a 'viewing asymmetry' is constitutive of the visual field of human rights discourse which is the subject of Wendy Hesford's study in *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (2011). Using the

term 'spectacular rhetoric' to draw attention to the visual rhetoric embedded in human rights discourse, Hesford alerts us to the visual economy that undergirds the distribution of visual capital in human rights politics (2011: 8). Such an understanding of human rights discourse is dependent upon and constituted by a visual rights economy – wherein pity (and even its superior cousin, empathy) at the image of the other's spectacularized suffering is

made possible by and productive of relations of power, and that these power relations bear at least some relationship to wider social and political structures which are themselves associated with transnational relations of exchange in which images are commodities

(Hesford 2011: 8)

Such an analytic frame allows me to read the production of *Thumbprint*, as well as the memoir, *I Am Malala* (2013), as two related instantiations of the visual performance of asymmetrical power relations between the Western world and Muslim Others that arise out of and reconfirm those relations within the neoliberal world order *in the guise of empowering Muslim women*. As Hesford clarifies,

[...] to focus on the visual economy of human rights is to examine the potential of neoliberal politics and human rights politics to jointly incorporate victim subjects into social relations that support the logic of a global morality market that privileges Westerners as world citizens.

(2011: 9)

By highlighting the performances of Mukhtar Mai and Malala Yousafzai as re-presented through the visually discursive field of human rights, we can indeed see how, as Hesford claims:

Spectacular rhetoric activates certain cultural and national narratives and social and political relations, consolidates identities through the politics of recognition and configures material relations of power and difference to produce and *ultimately to govern human rights subjects*.

(2011: 9, emphasis added)

Or, as Moon Charania argues in *Spectacular Subjects: The Violent Erotics of Imperial Visual Culture*:

I also use this description of Mai, as a brown woman in which a white audience takes interest, to make clear an insidious investment on the part of human rights regimes. As an apparatus of neoliberal, neocolonial and the war on terror's machinery, human rights in its (over)use of such visual tropes and imagery to paint a picture of brown oppression, demonstrates a simultaneous allegiance to whiten the brownness of these women's lives while using that same brownness to mobilize a narrative of the *other*.

(Charania 2011: 67, original emphasis)

FOLLOWING THE MONEY

It is unsurprising then, to learn that this activation of the performative spectacle of 'women's rights as human rights' in *Thumbprint* was initially

funded as a monologue written by Susan Yankowitz for a production called *Seven*, by the nonprofit Vital Voices Global Partnership, which in turn grew out of the U.S. government's successful *Vital Voices Democracy Initiative*. The *Vital Voices Democracy Initiative* was established in 1997 by then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, convened in Beijing, to promote the advancement of women as a US foreign policy goal. According to the Vital Voices website:

Under the leadership of the Vital Voices Democracy Initiative, the U.S. government, in partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank, the United Nations, the World Bank, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the European Union and other governments coordinated Vital Voices conferences throughout the world, bringing together thousands of emerging women leaders from over 80 countries.

These conferences launched regional Vital Voices initiatives that continue to give women the skills and resources they need to lift up themselves, their communities and their countries.

The overwhelmingly positive response to the Vital Voices Democracy Initiative led to the creation of Vital Voices Global Partnership as a nonprofit non-governmental organization (NGO) in June 2000. Vital Voices is now continuing the work of advancing women's economic, political and social status around the world, by providing skills, networking and other support to women around the world, whether they are working to increase women's political participation in Latin America or to promote women's entrepreneurship in the Middle East.

(Vital Voices Global Partnership 2014)

The cozy partnership of the United States' government with the NGO called Vital Voices, should alert us to the neoimperial agenda that props up the narrative of women's empowerment which is this NGO's main goal. Promoting democracy becomes similarly suspect when it suppresses people's grassroots resistance initiatives in favor of a one-size-fits-all idea of democracy fashioned on a Western liberal economic model.

MALALA YOUSAFZAI: PERFORMING A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE?

Malala Yousafzai's memoir of growing up in Pakistan's Swat region in the 1990s, written with British journalist Christina Lamb, is another performance of the Muslim female subject of oppression, who casts off her yoke to become the Voice of the empowered Muslim woman - with the help of her British interlocutors - both Lamb and the British imperial state, her saviors. The fact that her memoir, to date, has remained on the *New York Times* best seller list for 25 weeks since its publication in 2013, underlines the appeal that the particular narrative of individual self-empowerment and courage holds for her largely Western audiences. One could argue that Malala Yousafzai has become a household name in the West - a brand of sorts.

What makes her narrative 'brand' somewhat different from that of Mukhtaran, and perhaps surprising for Western audiences more familiar with images of fathers and brothers as oppressors-is that Yousafzai has a strong male figure - her father - who protects and encourages her on her path of self-discovery, learning,

and empowerment in the heavily patriarchal Pathan culture of Pakistan's north-west regions where tribal norms restrict women to domestic arenas.

In his essay, 'Brand, Citationality, Performativity', Constantine Nakassis explains,

I have suggested that the brand, in all its complexity, can only be clearly apprehended, and thus theorized, once we begin to account for the moments when brands are de-natured, when brands begin to shade off into that which they are not. Such an approach requires us to be committed, on the one hand, to the empirical [and I would suggest, ethnographic] study of the actual social lives of brands [here, Malala]-in their historical and cultural contexts and, on the other, to the ways in which such social lives always spill outside of the intelligibilities and performativities that (attempt to) normatively regiment them.

(2012: 624)

What is of interest to me in Malala's performative memoir, then, is the question of the degree of agency she exerts over her own 'branding' as the individual Muslim Pakistani heroine – an agency that I do think allows her – up to a point – to de-naturalize the performative normativity that seeks to regiment her and to render her otherness intelligible within the interpretive frame of the bourgeois liberal subject of secular democracy. This normativizing frame wants to construct her as an empowered woman in charge of her own destiny, who can then be trotted out to serve as a role model to inspire other individual girls and women around the world to become good female citizens of neo-liberal states. The question to ask, then, is to what extent Malala, as a ward now of the British state, has been co-opted by the 'new sexual contract' that Angela McRobbie claims, is being currently offered to young women and girls in the west (I would argue, everywhere) in lieu of feminism, interpellating them in the name of women's rights, 'to come forward to make good use of the opportunity to work, to gain qualifications, to control fertility, and to earn enough money to participate in the consumer culture which in turn will become a defining feature of contemporary modes of feminine citizenship' (2009: 54).

Such a 'contract' is based on the understanding that feminism (understood narrowly as a fight for women's 'equality' with men) – has won its battles, hence causing feminism to give way to a discourse of women's rights, with women's rights now largely integrated into the vocabulary of human rights. The problem with this shift, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty has also pointed out, is that 'it coincides with the general shift in global politics towards the right, and the concomitant decline of social welfarist models coincides with processes that recolonize the culture and identity of people' (Mohanty quoted in McRobbie 2009: 55).

To what extent, then, have Malala and her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, been 'recolonized' by the neoliberal capitalist paradigm that speaks in the name of individual human and women's rights?

AGENCY: SLIPPING OUT OF NORMATIVE BOXES

A little more than halfway through her memoir, in Chapter 15, 'Leaving the Valley', the then-13-year-old Malala bemoans the loss of the Swat valley, her peaceful homeland which she and her family must leave in the wake of the

9. While it can certainly be argued that poverty has existed under many systems other than capitalism, my point here is that in our contemporary times, poverty exists at least in part, as noted sociologist Allan G. Johnson also explains, because the economic system is organized in ways that encourage the accumulation of wealth at one end and creates conditions of scarcity that make poverty inevitable at the other. But the capitalist system generates poverty in other ways as well. In the drive for profit, for example, capitalism places a high value on competition and efficiency. This motivates companies and their managers to control costs by keeping wages as low as possible and replacing people with machines or replacing full-time workers with part-time workers. It makes it a rational choice to move jobs to regions or countries where labor is cheaper and workers are less likely to complain about poor working conditions, or where laws protecting the natural environment from industrial pollution or workers from injuries on the job are weak or unenforced. Capitalism also encourages owners to shut down factories and invest money elsewhere in enterprises that offer a higher rate of return (2014).

10. President Pervez Musharraf came to power in Pakistan in a military coup in 1999. He assumed the Presidency in June 2001. After the September 11 attacks the same year, in exchange for a billion+ \$\$ in aid, Musharraf agreed to give the US

Taliban takeover. There are a few key statements that need to be analyzed to understand both her future ‘branding’ as well as the ways in which her social life escapes such branding by spilling outside the normative frames that seek to hegemonize her narrative into one that fits that of individual women’s and human rights leading to the creation of an educated, empowered feminine consumer citizen at the service of neoliberal regimes of power.

She begins by sharing part of a native folk song with us, called a ‘*tapa*’ that her grandmother used to recite: ‘No Pashtun leaves his land of his own free will. Either he leaves from poverty or he leaves for love’ (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 88). Malala then adds a third reason for leaving the homeland – a reason the original writer of the song could never have imagined: the Taliban.

The mention of poverty as a main cause of exodus hints at the ‘spilling over’ effect that can help us theorize the ‘branding’ process of young girls like Malala. Poverty is a structural consequence of the global capitalist economic system which enables governing elites of different countries to band together in their oppression of external and internal ‘others.’⁹ That the young Malala is aware of this collusion between the governing elites of Pakistan and the West – specifically the USA and Britain – is evidenced when she describes her and her father’s and his friends’ disgust at the corrupt ways of General Musharraf who from 2001 to 2008 was kept in power by the USA and Britain.¹⁰ She explains:

Anyone could see that Musharraf was double-dealing, taking American money while still helping the jihadis – ‘strategic assets’, as the ISI calls them. The Americans say they gave Pakistan billions of dollars to help their campaign against Al-Qaeda, *but we didn’t see a single cent*. Musharraf built a mansion near Rawal Lake in Islamabad and bought an apartment in London. Every so often an important American official would complain that we weren’t doing enough [...]. But *President Bush would keep praising Musharraf, inviting him to Washington and calling him his buddy*. My father and his friends were disgusted. They said the Americans always preferred dealing with dictators in Pakistan.

(Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 88, emphasis added)

What her memoir doesn’t ask is what are the alternatives to dictators in Pakistan that she and her father as well as the writer of the ‘*tapas*’ which her grandmother was so fond of singing might have been aware of? What inspires her father to stay in Swat after he sends his family to the safety of Islamabad? Malala tells us,

My mother tried very hard to persuade him to come with us, but he refused. He wanted the people of Peshawar and Islamabad to be aware of the terrible conditions in which IDPs [internally displaced persons] were living [due to the mass exodus of Swati people from the valley] and that the military was doing nothing.

(Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 181)

Clearly, Ziauddin and his famous daughter are critics of the Pakistani military and government, both of which are seen as corrupt and unhelpful to the citizens they are supposed to be serving. At several points in the memoir, the collusion among a weak and corrupt civilian state, the strong military elite of Pakistan, and the Western leaders – again at the expense of the people-is

noted. Unfortunately, what we don't get is a true picture of Malala's father's leftist activism or that Malala for several summers attended the National Marxists Youth School camp in Swat. A report from the School in July of 2012 reveals the leftist activist roots of father and daughter in a way that the memoir conceals. For instance, we realize that Malala's father's zeal and commitment to stay back in dangerous Swat is prompted by his work as an activist in the International Marxist Tendency, a worldwide organization of Marxist activists. As the School's report states,

Swat is a place known for religious extremism and the Taliban. A war has been going on between the Pakistan Army and the draconian religious fanatics it itself created and nourished just two years ago. During all those months of war the Marxists not only exposed the reality of the Islamic fundamentalists and their connections with the Pakistani state but also organized the local masses against this evil nexus.

(Kamyana 2012)

Here the Taliban is identified as the creation of/nurtured by the same state and military nexus that purports to be against them! And as seen in the earlier quote, vested foreign powers (Bush et al) didn't and don't stop funding military dictators like Musharraf even when they do little to contain the jihadists and the Taliban. It is precisely to educate and inspire his fellow citizens to challenge such harmful power interests that drives Ziauddin Yousafzai and which inspires his daughter. In an article written by Imran Kamyana describing the third session of the National Marxists Youth School camp that took place in Swat in summer of 2012, we learn that

[the session] started with the topic 'Pakistan Perspectives'. It was chaired by Comrade Shehryar Zauq. Comrade Vinod in his lead off analyzed the economic, political and social conditions in Pakistan. He said the Pakistani State is facing its worst crisis today and running the whole country on internal and external debt. *Neo Liberal policies as dictated by imperialist institutions are being imposed on the Pakistani working class. Privatization, downsizing and restructuring are throwing millions of people below the poverty line every year.* Capital is being shifted abroad due to the energy crisis thus creating massive unemployment. In this scenario the ruling classes are creating non issues to divert popular attention from the real issues but all this won't last for a very long time. [...] Comrade Rehana from Kashmir, Comrade Zubair from North Punjab, *Malala Yousafzai from Swat*, Comrade Mahblos from Multan, Comrade Razzaq from Peshawar, Comrade Rashid Khalid from Lahore, Comrade Atif Javed from Rajanpur, Comrade Khalil from Kashmir, Comrade Safdar from Faisalabad, Comrade Hosho from Dadu and Comrade Adam Pal made their contributions in the light of questions asked by the audience.

(2012, emphasis added)

Here we learn about the budding socialist training of Malala, who is beginning to realize the nexus of capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and imperialism which works to keep the people down. Yet, this is NOT the Malala we meet when we read her memoir, because of the normative framework of "individual voicing as empowerment" she was made to fit into by her co-author and

government access to three military bases in Pakistan from where attacks on Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan could be launched. In elections held in October 2007, Musharraf assumed the presidency for the second time but under pressure from citizens' protests and challenges from the Supreme Court judges, had to give up his position as army chief. This then paved the way for the return from exile of former PM Benazir Bhutto, to re-enter the political process. She was assassinated in December 2008 at a rally in Islamabad, and Musharraf was widely blamed for lax security at the very least, and in spring the following year, a coalition government was formed against him, which demanded his impeachment for 'eroding the trust in the nation'. In August 2008 President Musharraf resigned from office and fled into exile in Saudi Arabia. Elections were held, and Benazir Bhutto's husband (now widower) Asif Zardari and his People's Party swept to power. In the most recent elections held in June 2013, Nawaz Sharif was elected Prime Minister, representing his party, the Pakistan Muslim League. Prior to these elections Musharraf returned to Pakistan in the hope of starting his political career again. However, he was indicted for his alleged role in the 2007 assassination of his rival Benazir Bhutto. He has been charged with 'murder, criminal conspiracy to murder, and facilitation of murder' according to a CNN report. He remains under house arrest to date. Nawaz Sharif's government continues in power.

publisher. As Jawed Naqvi, an Indian journalist writing for the *Dawn* newspaper observes,

there is evidence of a Marxist underpinning that runs the risk of being overlooked in the teenaged girl's ideological shaping. A picture in which she is seen with a poster of Lenin and Trotsky should indicate her proximity to some of the most ideologically groomed bunch of men and women in Swat. They are members of the International Marxist Tendency (IMT), which condemns religious extremism and imperialism equally.

We have been told of Malala's blogs and interviews with global news groups, but her involvement with the Marxists of Swat (of all the places) tends to be ignored.

(2012)

There is certainly scant evidence of Malala's Marxism in the memoir. The only hints we have are those spaces where 'spillage' occurs, when we read between the lines the implicit challenge to unholy alliances linking all the power groups that her narrative tells about. The effect of this 'spillage', however, is to help us theorize the efficacy of the Malala brand, which is identical to the neo-liberal branding of Mukhtar Mai. Thus, Malala's memoir and the opera *Thumbprint*, are performatives that produce the neoliberal figure of the 'Can Do' girl – which of course begs the question, 'What is at stake in this process of endowing the new female subject with capacity?' (McRobbie 2009: 58).

EDUCATION AS EMPOWERMENT

The DIY (DO-IT-YOURSELF) approach that has increasingly dominated liberal discourse and policy-making from the last decade of the 20th century to the present, permeates Malala's memoir. It explains her lionization in Western media, much as it did for Mukhtar Mai. For both Mukhtaran and Malala, education – especially for women, equals 'voice', or 'freedom', which becomes a tool for 'empowerment', that is to say, allows them, and other women like them, access to jobs and goods. The dignity provided by such gainful employment and ability to become a 'good' consumer, confers on the Can-Do girl/woman, the status of a 'capable citizen', or as McRobbie has explained it, endows 'the new female subject with capacity' (2009: 58). Neither Mai nor Malala asks what the quality of this 'freedom' really is – or where the kind of education they seek might lead, what kind of 'capacity' is being formed. Indeed, in Malala's case, she *does* want all children in Pakistan to have access to education so that they can lead better, more informed lives – but *how*, precisely, would that solve the problem of the children living on rubbish mountains, scavenging rotting food? Commenting despairingly on the breakdown of law and order in Swat which she realizes is connected to the corruption of Pakistan's rulers, Malala seems to think she, as an individual heroine, could solve these endemic problems by becoming a politician herself – 'We felt frustrated and scared once again. When we were IDPs [internally displaced persons] I had thought about becoming a politician and now I knew that was the right choice. Our country had so many crises and no real leaders to tackle them' (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 204).

Becoming a politician in the mode of her icon Benazir Bhutto, is not what most women who could become workers as a result of education would be able to do. As McRobbie reminds us, for the 'global girl working 18 hours

a day in a clothing factory in an Export Processing Zone and sending most of her wages home' surely 'independence' and 'freedom' is a very different beast (54). In other words, it is fair to say that what Malala and Mai have succumbed to is a certain 'luminosity'. The theatrical effect of this luminosity, of being put under a spotlight, 'softens, dramatizes and disguises the regulative dynamics' (Mcrobbie 2009: 54) at play in the discourse of empowerment, which is utterly instrumentalized in the service of neoliberal ideologies. As Srilatha Batliwala, writing about the history of this concept (with a particular focus on India), poignantly observes:

[the discourse of] Empowerment was hijacked in the 1990s [...] converted from a collective to an individualistic process, and skillfully co-opted by conservative and even reactionary political ideologies in pursuit of their agenda of divesting 'big government' [the welfare state] of its purported power and control by 'empowering' communities to look after their own affairs.

(2013: 81)

Indeed, Malala, her father, and Mukhtar Mai, while cognizant and disgusted by the Pakistani militarist state's failure to protect its citizens from all manner of depredations including the Taliban, poverty, lack of education and employment, nevertheless spout neoliberal self-empowerment. At the end of the opening night of *Thumbprint*, the producers beamed Mukhtar Mai on skype for a Q and A session with the audience. Via a translator, Mai kept begging us to send money to help her keep her children's school running. The funds she was given by the government as an award for her courage were used up, she said. Similarly, Malala notes that during the exodus of almost two million Swati people escaping the Taliban, it was the hospitality of the Pashtuns of Mardan and Swabi (towns across the Malakand mountain pass) that helped ease the suffering of the refugees. She writes, 'We were convinced that if the exodus had been managed by the government many more would have died of hunger and illness' (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 180). In both cases, the Pakistani government and the foreign powers that prop it up are let off the hook by our two heroines: Mukhtar Mai simply begs for aid from an audience of foreigners, while Malala, despite her expressed disgust at the government for doing nothing, moves too quickly into accepting that caring citizens will and do, take up the slack through self-empowerment.

While the idea of self-empowerment appears attractive in the face of intransigent, corrupt state apparatuses, its instrumentalization (like that of human rights and women's rights) in the service of neoliberal ideologies of privatization and retrenchment of social services that shift the spotlight from addressing the structural inequalities that are the root causes to a can-do-ethic of individual success, needs debunking. But Brand Malala and Brand Mukhataran, far from debunking this individualist worldview and politics, become its handmaidens.

Let me conclude by quoting a passage from the website of *The Socialist Appeal: The Marxist Voice of Labor and Youth*. After duly noting the suffering of Malala as well as her courage, the article, attributed to 'The Struggle' collective, reminds us of the regressive politics of Gordon Brown, the standard bearer of female education and major supporter of the Malala Fund for Girls' Education. On her 16th birthday, Malala travelled with Brown to New York to address the United Nations General Assembly. This speech made her a

darling of the world, propelling her to frontrunner status for the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize. Here is the passage from 'Malala's Ordeal':

Gordon Brown, the former British Prime Minister, has become the cheer leader of the campaign for education girls in Pakistan and for so-called Millennium Development goals of providing education to girls in the developing world. This right-wing Labour politician is someone who not only voted to invade Iraq but provided a massive influx of emergency funds for this illegal war and endorsed crimes against humanity committed by Bush and Blair.

There are vested interests behind Brown's manoeuvres. He is an arch-supporter of capitalism and an economist who was ignominiously claiming in 2007 that capitalism had overcome its cycle of booms and slumps and was treading on a path of permanent growth. This was just about a year before the greatest crash of capitalism in its history in 2008, forcing this prophet of never ending capitalist boom to even contemplate sending British troops onto British streets to control the anger of workers and youth and provide protection to international finance capital and capitalism. Brown's policies both as a Chancellor and Prime Minister on health and education were based on trickledown economics, which means that the state's role in education and other social sectors should be seriously diminished.

Western imperialist nations have all gone into to full gear in capitalizing on Malala's tragedy to camouflage the campaign of mass killing of children, women and the elderly in illegal wars and the use of illegal drones across the world or, to be more precise, in Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Pakistan, etc. This is a deliberate and calculated strategy on the one hand to dupe the working masses in the Western world and on the other to enhance their policies of privatization and promotion of NGO's and other reformist organizations' in Pakistan and the developing world to foster a culture of acceptance of capitalism – a system that is devastating society as a whole.

(Khan 2014)

The reformist drama continues to be enacted on world stages. As Wendy Hesford encapsulates it so cogently, 'spectacular rhetoric unleashes a politics of pity' (Hesford 2011: 8) – which allows audiences to both pity and then admire the objects of their pity, as long as the latter can be (re)constructed in the image of the 'ideal' citizens for our neoliberal times.

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