

CHAPTER 13

Media and Imperialism in the Global Village

A Case Study of Four Malalais

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Since the events of 9/11 and the start of the “War on Terror,” debates pertaining to Muslim women’s rights have been reverberating globally. Particularly in the West, Muslim women have been put under the popular culture spotlight, evident in the proliferation of media such as fiction films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news that focus on their plight under repressive Islamic regimes. The resultant media attention has been critiqued by scholars from a variety of disciplines concerned with the overwhelming portrayal of women as victims, without accounting for their actual or potential agency, thereby perpetuating stereotypes of women under Islam that have gained new currency since 9/11. Yet while this type of media continues to proliferate, little attention has been given to the cultural productions that constitute local gender subjectivities and social movements. Likewise, little attention has been given to how local activists and human rights groups “talk back” to this discourse.

In this chapter, I trace and contextualize the trajectory of iconic figures and their role in key contemporary moments of activism and reform in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In particular, I will focus on the four Malalais (Malala Yousafzai, Malalai Joya, Malalai Kakar, and Malalai of Maiwand) in order to highlight the various ways in which Af-Pak women’s activism gets selectively recognized and appropriated by neoimperial agendas. Through

tracing how Malala achieved such global stature, I hope to underline the ways in which particular aspects of her activism were deemed more legitimate than others in order to justify neoimperial agendas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The backlash against Malala in her native Pakistan also reveals how the global media and the Western exaltation of her ended up privileging a particular type of activist that obscured the many other Pakistani and Afghan women who had been advocating for political and social change for decades before. In doing so, this chapter engages with a broader set of questions: Why have some of these local heroines like Yousafzai become global phenomena, winning accolades such as the Nobel Peace Prize, while others have had a hard time crossing their localized boundaries? What is the role of political economy, imperial ideologies, and disparities in media infrastructures in their circulation or lack thereof? What does the politics of recognition that surrounds them tell us about the ways in which digital media are implicated within structures of empire?

In order to begin to answer the aforementioned questions, I interrogate the international celebration of Malala Yousafzai and, during select moments, the celebration of the other Malalais, but also the moments when they became *persona non grata* within media and government discourse. The goal is not to question the worthiness of people like Malala's accomplishments, but rather to critique the workings of empire in not generating platforms for those equally worthy female activists in the Af-Pak region. I am not the first person to draw attention to the incredible global scope of Malala Yousafzai's recognition and critique it as a tool of imperial agendas. In fact, Yousafzai herself has reflected on the pull of forces casting her singularly as just a victim: "In Swat, I studied in the same school for 10 years and there I was just considered to be Malala. Here I'm famous, here people think of me as the girl who was shot by the Taliban. The real Malala is gone somewhere, and I can't find her."¹ Thus, one of my main goals is to situate Yousafzai within a broader history of progress, reform, and activism in South Asia. This chapter also situates this issue of gender and iconicity in relation to a post-9/11 context marked by new media developments including the emergence of dozens of new television and radio stations, hundreds of publications, a fledgling movie industry, and an Internet infrastructure with funding from foreign and domestic sources.

At a time when numerous other human rights activists from the region have also risked their lives to fight local and foreign injustices in ways both spectacular and ordinary, it is critical to understand not only what makes their efforts less worthy of global recognition but what their contributions

are in the first place. I argue that when celebrated women activists, who bravely fight for modern signifiers of human rights, equality, and justice, also question and challenge U.S. imperialism and hold U.S. foreign policy accountable for the rise of extremism in their region, they become dangerous figures. They can no longer be easily subsumed into the simplistic narratives of victimhood into which imperial discourses slot them. Their circulation must be managed and controlled, and it is here that the role of global and digital media acquires significance.

Colonial and Neoimperial Feminism: Giving and Taking Voice

In order to understand why certain instances of resistance to the social and political order among women from South Asia and the Middle East are celebrated and others are left out of the contemporary record, it is important to consider how both colonial administrations and discourses view women as a proxy for how effectively a broader political agenda is being implemented. This colonial history is by no means a relic of the past. The regimes of knowledge production that are endemic to colonial forms of power continue today in the guise of neoimperial nation-building and development projects and more outward forms of militarization, such as the systematic drone attacks that are specific to the U.S.-led War on Terror (Khalili 2012; Grewal 2017; Parks and Caplan 2017; Packer and Reeves 2017; Tahir 2017), and their place in the genealogy of U.S. warfare. The ways in which the media mobilize visual representations cannot be detached from war, militarization, and humanitarian and development discourse (Chadha and Kavoori 2015; Chrisman 2013; Solomon 2007). When grappling with a figure like Yousafzai, it is crucial, then, to keep in mind how imperial projects have mobilized gender as a weapon of conquest, regime-building, and the governance of colonial subjects.

A key way that imperial powers have used women to further their agendas is by creating a narrative in which there is a righteous “us” (read the West) and a morally bankrupt “them” (read the “East” or “The Muslim World”). In Samuel Huntington’s classic piece “The Clash of Civilizations,” which has been disgraced in academia but is still alive and well in policy circles, sets up false binaries between religiosity and secularism and between progress and religious extremism. This modernist rhetoric was used to justify Western rule in the name of liberating Muslim, Hindu, or Pagan women from their “repressive” societies. As prominent postcolonial

scholars have noted, these false binaries obscure the complexities of the residues and social configurations of the colonial encounter (Asad 1986, 2003; Chatterjee 1997; Gole 2006; Mahmood 2005).

Yet in order to maintain the fiction of being bastions of democracy, human rights, and freedom for all, the Western ruling elite needs to do more than erase their regressive records; they also have to erase the agency of progressive reform in South Asia. Anyone who is familiar with Afghan history knows that the long struggle for women's rights (and sexuality) has been an ongoing battle between modernist state policies and the more restrictive and repressive interpretations of Islamic and tribal laws dictated by religio-tribal elders. Put simply, there is a long history of Western colonial and more recent neoimperial discourse that deliberately distorts and erases histories that do not neatly fit within its narrative and geopolitical agenda. Mainstream Western media, including television networks and films, even independent ones, tend to perpetuate this dominant ideology.

Therefore, when some people from the Global South and East are handpicked for public consumption and celebrated globally, we must be suspicious. Upon close analysis of the media coverage of the four Malalais as well as other Afghan and Pakistani women who have spoken truth to power at home and abroad, it becomes clear that there is a logic to choosing who gets media coverage and who does not. In the digital age, there are certainly more spaces for disjuncture from the dominant discourse and self-representation. However, as we shall see in the discussion of the four Malalais in the next section, ultimately media forms play less of a factor in who gets covered than ongoing colonial agendas.

The Four Malalais

The four Malalais I will be presenting are Malala Yousafzai, Malalai Joya, Malalai Kakar, and Malalai of Maiwand. First, it is important to note that while only one of them, Yousafzai, has achieved an iconic global stature, all of them are well-known public figures in the Af-Pak region, and Joya and Kakar are figures I know personally through my activist work in the region. Additionally, it is important to highlight that most of the Afghan and Pakistani women's rights groups and activists I have met and worked with actively seek to expand their reach outside of the local and into the global public sphere. The fact remains that international attention can bring allies, clout, and funding to enact local change, and local activists are keenly

aware of the power differentials. Yet, for a variety of reasons, which I will elucidate in this chapter, most of them have been unable to tap into global networks of media, funding, and activism.

*Malala Yousafzai: The Celebrity vs. the Activist, and the Censoring
of Drone Warfare*

In the discourse on iconic global women activists, Malala Yousafzai is now a household name. Having graced the covers of books, women's rights brochures, and been the subjects of several documentaries, the name Malala evokes not only an individual but a symbolic figure. Malala Yousafzai was born in 1997 in the Swat Valley in Pakistan near the border of Afghanistan, where as a child my family and I spent time as refugees during the Soviet Occupation. At the age of 11, in 2008, she started writing a blog for BBC Urdu about life under the Taliban, which gained attention in Pakistan. Adam Ellick from the *New York Times* picked up on the story and made a documentary about her the next year called *Class Dismissed: The Story of Malala*.² She became a regional symbol of resistance to the Taliban, which of course put her in danger in the Taliban-dominated region where she lived. Yet it was in 2012, when she was shot at 15 years of age by the Taliban on a school bus, that she became a global figure. Following the shooting and her subsequent recovery in a Birmingham, UK hospital, Malala was offered multiple book deals, speaking engagements, and became the subject of additional documentaries, which culminated in her winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. In fact, the UN General Assembly declared her 16th birthday "Malala Day."³

Following her recovery, Malala's speeches were primarily focused on the power of education to equip girls, no matter where they lived, with the tools to move beyond their economic and cultural circumstances. In fact, Malala herself emphasized the global relevance of her message by noting in her 2013 speech to the UN: "Malala Day is not my day. Today is the day of every woman, every boy and every girl who have raised their voice for their rights." And when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, she noted, "I tell my story not because it is unique but because it is not. It is the story of many girls."⁴ While Malala herself attempted to draw attention to the tragically ordinary fact that girls like her suffer disenfranchisement every day at the hands of corrupt governments, the media persisted in promoting a narrative that emphasized her extraordinary

quality as a women's rights activist who embodied resilience, bravery, and heroism. With the publishing of her memoir, *I Am Malala*, which sold 1.8 million copies worldwide,⁵ Malala became a ubiquitous name in the global consciousness.

On the one hand, Western media outlets, NGOs, and public schools mobilized Malala's image and her writing and speeches as a kind of extraordinary aberration—as a unique story of female bravery that one does not often see in places like Pakistan or Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistani media outlets and public figures were quick to say that she had “sold out,” and that in fact the global embrace of her as an extraordinary heroine erases the heroism of thousands of Pakistani women who resist the dominant social and political order every day, and who do suffer while doing so—if not through suffering a bullet to the head, then through other forms of gender-based violence. In fact, the global embrace of Malala sparked outrage and skepticism among the Pakistani middle classes.⁶ While her blog and the rapid proliferation of social media platforms at the time of her shooting certainly contributed to the transnational circulation of the shooting, there are deeper forces at play.⁷

The ways in which the United States has used Pakistan as a battleground for its ongoing War on Terror in Afghanistan is widely known. The status of women has functioned in critical ways for the ongoing justification of militarization and development projects (which often go hand in hand, as noted by scholar Jennifer Fluri [2012]). The shooting of Yousafzai was also mobilized by U.S. government branches in order to justify ongoing drone strikes in Pakistan, which the Obama administration ramped up in 2009 under the U.S. military and the Central Intelligence Agency in order to destroy the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership.⁸ In fact, even the Pakistani liberal elite have used Yousafzai's shooting to encourage U.S. intervention in Pakistan. Following the shooting, one Pakistani citizen at a vigil held up a sign that said “Drones kill so Malala can live,” a statement that bought into sharp focus the neoimperial logic that drone attacks against the Taliban are the most effective mechanism to protect children like Malala. What the sign did not point out was that as of 2014, between three to four thousand people have been killed by drones in the Af-Pak region.⁹ *Time* magazine columnist Joe Klein defended drone attacks on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, shortly after Malala's shooting,¹⁰ stating that these attacks were preemptive ways to protect “our” children, adding, “The bottom line is: In the end, whose four year old gets killed?” The shooting of Malala then, was also a

way for the U.S. global media infrastructure to justify the ongoing use of drones in Pakistan by pointing to the brutality of a force like the Taliban.

It is notable that Malala herself has vehemently spoken out against the U.S. drone campaign. In meeting with President Barack Obama in 2014, she noted in a statement, “I thanked President Obama for the United States’ work in supporting education in Pakistan and Afghanistan and for Syrian refugees. I also expressed my concerns that drone attacks are fueling terrorism. Innocent victims are killed in these acts, and they lead to resentment among the Pakistani people.”¹¹ Despite this honest plea for the United States to reconsider its drone program, the White House statement on the meeting left out this part of the discussion.¹²

Rather, the statement focused on Malala’s activism around girls’ education.¹³ In more recent years, Malala has also spoken out against global political violence, including the Israeli state’s targeting of Gaza, having pledged \$50,000 to rebuild Gaza schools.¹⁴ She has also spoken out about the injustices faced by Rohingya refugees and Palestinian children, having tweeted in December 2017, “Today I am thinking of Palestinian and Rohingya children—and all around the world still struggling to achieve Anne [Frank]’s dream of freedom. #HumanRightsDay.” And in more recent years, she has condemned the Taliban for their ongoing persecution of civilians in Afghanistan.¹⁵ In more recent months, Malala has publicly critiqued the Trump campaign’s remarks about implementing a Muslim travel ban, calling it prejudiced, noting, “Well that’s really tragic that you hear these comments which are full of hatred, full of this ideology of being discriminative towards others.”¹⁶ And yet these statements, as much as they remain couched within the more humanitarian language of education, freedom, and children’s well-being, were only given coverage by a handful of news sources.

I seek to critique the global perception of Malala’s work not to discredit it. In fact, the Malala Fund and other initiatives she and her family run have made impressive contributions to the construction of girls’ schools in Pakistan. The Malala Fund, for example, provides educational opportunities to former domestic workers, children fleeing conflict, and provides school supplies for girls’ schools affected by flooding.¹⁷ In 2014, the Ministry of Finance of Pakistan signed an agreement with the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation that would allot \$7 million from the Malala Fund toward an education project that would focus on rural areas of Pakistan.¹⁸ What I am interested in disaggregating is why it is that only

a sliver of Malala's work is being given global media attention and along what lines are certain types of activism distinguished from each other to the point where recognition and access to resources shift? The case of Malala also draws our attention to the ways in which a particular victimhood subjectivity is a precursor for getting educational, professional, and medical benefits from Western powers. It is certainly no coincidence that, as of 2017, Malala began studying at Oxford University and she and her family are now living in Birmingham. The fact that she and her family retained Edelman, a top PR firm that has represented companies like Microsoft and Starbucks, to help in managing media requests, and that she regularly gives speeches and interviews, and meets with world leaders, have all contributed to what some media experts call "The Malala Machine."¹⁹

Therefore, it would be a misreading of Yousafzai's advocacy to say that it has been completely subjected to the misappropriation and misuse of the U.S. military industrial complex and the global media infrastructure to which it is tied. It is important to acknowledge her incredible agency when explaining her advocacy, postshooting. She has made the decision to accept media requests, and has figured out a way to remain connected to Pakistan and expand her message globally while still living in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, in addition to the dangers of the hypermilitarization stance that Yousafzai's shooting has been mobilized toward, it is also important to see how she has been treated as more of a persona and less as a person. In other words, her activism has been mobilized to further the trope of the Muslim woman victim rather than as part of a longer life history of enacting social change.

*Malalai Joya: A Critical Voice in the War on Terror and
Afghanistan's Puppet Regimes*

Tracing the trajectory of how Joya's activism was perceived by Western political and social institutions reveals stark similarities but also important differences with her counterpart. Comparatively, Joya's messages remained underrecognized by Western media outlets, but when they were, they were seen as threatening and overly political. Joya was born in 1978 in Farah Province, near the border of Iran, where, as a child, she and her family became refugees during the Soviet-Afghan War. Joya gained international recognition after making an impassioned and daring three-minute speech²⁰

denouncing the crimes of Afghan warlords during a 2003 Loya Jirga (or public assembly) to ratify Afghanistan's new post-9/11 constitution. As a 24-year-old elected female delegate, she committed a politically and socially subversive act by denouncing *mujahedin* leaders for killing thousands of civilians during the Civil War following the Soviet exit in 1989. The video captured on cellphone cameras and professional cameras by journalists was broadcast on almost all Afghan television and radio stations and went viral on social media platforms in countries with high Internet use. In the video, we can see and hear the warlords become increasingly outraged as they forcibly remove Joya. The chief of the Loya Jirga, Sibhatullah Mojaddedi, a U.S. and Saudi government funded Islamist leader, also makes a vitriolic rant against her in which he calls her an "infidel and a communist."²¹ Shortly after this speech, he also made a statement that women are not suited for public office.

Joya's speech resulted in national and regional recognition, garnering her both praise among Afghan women's activists and disdain from male warlords and government officials who sought to uphold the status quo. In 2005, she was elected as an official member of Afghanistan Parliament, representing Farah Province. In 2007, the same warlord MPs voted to suspend her after she continued to question their legitimacy to serve in public office and demanded they be tried for their war crimes. Following this speech, Joya also gained global recognition, as she became the subject of multiple media requests and documentaries. In 2009 she published her book, *A Woman among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice*.

The political force of her work also appears in how she explains what true self-determination would mean for Afghanistan, which did not always sit well with mainstream media outlets. In one interview with CNN in 2009, Joya responds to an interviewer's question as to why she was expelled from Parliament by highlighting that she simply told the truth about the US-backed regime which is just a "carbon copy" of the Taliban, but under the guise of "democracy," and that the government was being run by warlords who were no better. The interviewer, Heidi Collins, eventually took issue with Joya's calling the U.S. presence in Afghanistan an "occupation," and continued to press Joya on how effectively Afghan security forces have defended the people, implying that the U.S. presence was necessary for Afghanistan's security. Joya responded by saying that even in Kabul, where

there is an abundance of foreign troops, safety has not been realized. I want to suggest that there is a ceiling to how much recognition Joya's activism received internationally—that while the United States and Western media have lauded her efforts to speak against Afghan politicians and the legislature, at a certain point her critique crossed a threshold, which resulted in very material consequences. In 2007, Joya publicly blamed the United States for civilian deaths in Afghanistan and for allying with corrupt regimes in Afghanistan that have actively sought to silence Afghan women.

The consequences of her public statements were drastic. In 2011, Joya was sponsored by two New York City-based organizations, the War Resisters League and the South Asia Solidarity Initiative, to promote the launch of her U.S. book tour, but she was denied visas multiple times. On the eve of what was supposed to be a three-week speaking tour, Joya was denied a visa to enter the United States. The U.S. embassy officer noted the following reasons: “She is ‘unemployed’ and lives ‘underground,’” failing to recognize that her living underground is a result of her having to hide from possible assassination attempts by the various religio-tribal forces from the Taliban to U.S.-backed warlords to various Islamic extremist sects.

The proliferation of social media, political blogs, and other digital platforms over the past 10 years has not necessarily translated into greater exposure for people like Joya, at least in the Euro-American context. Here, the stark differences between Joya and Yousafzai are explicit—while one could not even get a visa to enter the United States for a temporary stay, the other has been given permanent protection by the United Kingdom and the opportunity to study at Oxford University, as well as investment of multiple forms of economic and social capital to get her message across. Meanwhile, Joya's lack of interest in promoting girls' education within a corrupt political system in the name of women's liberation has led to her fading from the Western media spotlight.

*Malalai Kakar: An Unrecognized Advocate
for Afghan Women's Rights*

Malalai Kakar was a lieutenant colonel and head of the Crimes Against Women Unit in the police department of Kandahar, a conservative southern province in Afghanistan, which, like the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan, is a Taliban stronghold. She came from a family of police of-

ficers and investigators. She took a stance against traditional patriarchal and misogynist practices such as child marriages and domestic abuse in a region known as a hotbed of religious and tribal extremism. As a result, major national media institutions and women's rights organization picked up on her work, and she became an iconic and respected figure throughout the Af-Pak region for her bravery. Globally, she achieved a limited amount of exposure only after the Taliban assassinated her outside of her home in September 2008. Prior to Kakar's death, there were only a few Western and international reports about her work, hence she had not crossed over globally in the way Yousafzai or even Joya have. After her death, there were more international stories and reports commemorating her short life's work including two short documentaries, but they did not circulate in established mainstream venues as did Yousafzai or Joya's films and books. She did not travel much outside of Kandahar, which is a difficult area for international and even local journalists to travel to. The few video stories and news stories have circulated solely in online venues with limited "clicks" and "hits."

Yet Kakar's image, one in which she is seen wearing a blue burqa and pointing a gun, was used by the far right U.K. group Britain First for one of their many Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, and prowar campaigns and gained much traction online. The image is overlaid with a warning in red, "Terror attack: Severe. An attack is highly likely." A right-wing Australian senator subsequently used the altered Britain First image for a "ban the burka" campaign. The poster equates Islam with terrorism.

According to Laura Slezic, the photographer, she took the picture as Kakar was preparing to rescue a teenager who had been kidnapped. She readied her pistol and threw on her burqa over her national police uniform. Slezic, who was moved by Kakar's strength and compassion, was horrified by the appropriation of her image: "To see an image of her and all she represents used this way is such an insult to her and her family and all the women in Afghanistan. I don't even have the words to describe it." Yet, despite copyright laws, she has little recourse as the poster has been shared over 50,000 times on Facebook. As Haras Rafiq, outreach officer at the Quilliam Foundation, a counterextremism think tank, has stated, "Social media is playing a key role in radicalizing both Islamists and the far right. In order to attract more followers and get more "hits," "clicks," and "likes," these groups will appeal to the basest human desires inciting misplaced fear, violence, and revenge."²²

*Malalai of Maiwand: A Figure within the Rubble
of Erased Women's Histories*

The final Malalai also known as “Mother Malalai” or “Malalai of Maiwand” is a folkloric ethno-national hero among Afghans and Pakistanis. Malalai played a pivotal role in the second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880 in the Battle of Maiwand, in Kandahar Province, which was under the control of then British India. Although there are various accounts of her exact role in the battle, the general consensus in oral stories and Afghan history books is that she rallied a demoralized Afghan army on the verge of retreat and near surrender to retain their honor as enshrined in the codes of the Pashtunwali (or Pashtun ethical code) and continue to fight. She raised the Afghan flag and proclaimed that dying under the fire of the British artillery was an honor. She was killed in battle by the British army, but the Afghan army emerged victorious in that battle. In some versions, her role in the battle is more active as she participates in directly fighting the British army. My primary school in Kabul, where my mother was a teacher, was also named Malalai after this venerated figure. Her name has been enshrined within many institutions like schools and hospitals in Afghanistan as well as in folklore and poetry. In fact, Malala Yousafzai has stated that she is named after this historical heroine, and cites her struggle against the British in her biography *I Am Malala*. Her grave has become a shrine where people visit from near and far to pray. Not surprisingly, she does not appear anywhere in the fastidious archives of the British. While Malalai of Maiwand is a historical figure, her story reminds us of the fact that the erasure of strong, politically active Afghan women who attempted to resist the status quo is not unique to U.S. imperial discourses. This erasure was a key tool that British colonial forces used in order to make the case that Afghanistan was a backward country whose women were oppressed and, more significantly, did not have the tools to liberate themselves.

Conclusion

The case of the four Malalais is one window into understanding the politics of recognition that operate in the media's consumption of Afghan and Pakistani women's activism, in an age of war, militarization, and development. It is clear that each Malala(i) comes from a set of different conditions of possibility, economic, social, and political, and these all contribute toward

producing different outcomes in the ways their activism get recognized and circulated locally and transnationally. However, they all share the quality of having been co-opted by U.S. government discourse and officials as well as American media as embodying the oppressed Muslim woman who is victimized by her native culture, and made more rescuable by outside powers and occupying forces.

Gender has always been a contentious issue in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As this chapter has illustrated, there is an equally long history of internal cultural contestations between progressive reformers and conservative elites. It is often through gendered contestations that attempts at setting and defining national/cultural/ social identity, often in the singular, occur. Yet during the “War on Terror” era it has become challenging for human rights activists from South Asia to challenge religious extremism, specifically the rise of Islamism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As the case study of the four Malalais shows, activists from the region are often co-opted as spokespeople to support Islamophobic and xenophobic agendas that spur hypermilitarization and hate mongering against their own fellow South Asian immigrants in the West and innocent civilians in the east.

Thus the goal of this chapter is not to hide issues of gender and sexuality that people in Afghanistan and Pakistan grapple with. It is important for the local and international activist and development aid community to continue to support gender-based projects and fight discriminatory practices and violence against women and other marginalized groups in the region. Despite the accelerating drumbeat of war to free and liberate Afghan, Pakistani, and Muslim women, since the start of the longest running U.S. war, there has been little media coverage of these issues, which have persisted. Indeed, it was only during the precursor and lead-up to the “War on Terror” that the Western media floodgates opened, evident in the proliferation of fiction films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news that focus on women’s plight under purportedly repressive Islamic regimes.

To be sure, digital media have played a central role in the circulation of the dire situation and plight of Afghan and Pakistani women. Malala Yousafzai would have never become the icon she is without her blog. Malalai Joya’s historic speech went viral after it was captured on cellphones. The death of Farkhunda Malikzada, an Afghan woman publicly beaten and killed by a mob in Kabul in 2015, also went viral because of bystanders and perpetrators recording events on their mobile phones, thus

launching a movement to curb fanatical and misogynistic mullahs and religious leaders. The members of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) and T2T (The Second Floor) have directly credited social media as the platform that helped them reach wider allies locally and internationally.

Yet we also have to interrogate the celebratory claims that digital media has created a global village that evens out power imbalances and gives a platform to the marginalized and disenfranchised. At the same time that digital media have been foundational to the rise of these human rights movements, they are far from the empowering panacea that allows for independence and self-presentation. Digital media are as entangled in the infrastructures of empire as traditional media networks.

To begin with, we must take into account lack of Internet penetration and the fact that the vast majority of Afghans and Pakistanis do not have the literacy or financial means to access the limited digital media infrastructure. In Afghanistan, Internet penetration and infrastructure is at a mere 5 percent.²³ It is also important to highlight the dominance of the English language on the Internet. More than 50 percent of websites in the world are in English. This also causes problems in self-representation and crossover of information to the broader global public sphere. While more Pakistanis than Afghans speak English, the vast majority of both countries' people do not speak English. Moreover, during the early years of the Taliban regime, even for those transnational feminist organizations who genuinely sought to help, their overreliance on digital media as a portal to understanding the on the ground situation of Afghan women often precluded their endeavors. Lacking cultural access, Western feminist organizations directed their attention to and gathered their information from the same few websites of Afghan women's organizations that were available in English. Digital media indeed served as a cross-cultural bridge, yet it was a very narrow bridge with limited access to a wider cross-section of Afghan society.

Finally, it is worth noting that established media institutions and circuits remain just as crucial, if not more so, than social media. Joya is redeemed by the success of the international journalist reports, films with high crossover in the international film festival and broadcast markets, and subsequent books. Traditional networks of activism and methods of promotion, such as film festivals and book tours, are still very effective in building a base, solidarity, and recognition nationally, regionally, and across cultures.

Notes

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