

Questioning Freedom: A Transnational Feminist Critique of the Representation of Muslim Women in *I am Malala*?

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Received: December 12, 2023

Accepted: January 12, 2024

Online Published: February 5, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n2p418

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n2p418>

Abstract

Do Muslim women need freedom? has remained a contentious question in gender equality discourses since 9/11. In this ongoing debate, the usage of personal narratives of Muslim women plays a critical role in popularising the perception that Muslim women are denied their right to freedom in Islamic societies. Approaching these narratives with the idea of freedom configured in secular liberal tradition impedes the critical responsiveness to the variants of freedom that govern the lives of Muslim women. As a corrective to this long-held critical bias, this research contends that any attempt to settle this controversy needs to be attentive to the questions that must precede the readings of such narratives: What is freedom? Is it an essentialist idea? What practices harm Muslim women? What type of freedom do Muslim women need? This paper responds to these questions by situating them in its reading of *I Am Malala* to destabilize the mainstream readings of the text, which view the oppression of Muslim women as rooted in religion. Informed by the transnational feminist understanding of freedom as postulated by Serene J. Khader in *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic* (2019), an anti-essentialist reading of this narrative rejects the representation of traditional forms of selfhood of Muslim women as marginalized compared to the dominant construction of individualized selfhood of Malala. Khader's idea of freedom negates the liberal feminist's approach to the value of independence individualism as a necessary precondition for freedom supports this paper to argue against the representation of Muslim women as oppressed in *I am Malala*.

Keywords: Freedom, Muslim women, oppression, representation, gender equality

1. Introduction

In contemporary times, the freedom of Muslim women has become a controversial issue due to the recent international media coverage of the death of an Iranian girl- Mahsa Amini- who refused to veil in public and the news of French bans on the wearing of veils by Muslim girls in schools, it is urgent to respond to the questions raised regarding Muslim Women's freedom: What is freedom? Is it an essentialist idea? What practices harm Muslim women? What type of freedom do Muslim women need? (AbuLughod,2002; Ahmed,2009; Khader,2019) , However, considering the widespread international attention given to personal narratives to postulate the unfreedom of Muslim women living in Islamic societies - in general, and into *I am Malala* in particular- in the campaigns for gender equality, this research chooses to situate its argument against such reductionist approaches in reading in reading *I am Malala*. This book was published a decade ago to tell the readers about the challenges that Malala faced while campaigning for the girls's right to quality education which got impeded when a transitory political insurgency broke out in Swat, a remote area of Pakistan. It was a hard time for the local community since every fraction of the society including men and women, adults and children, rich and poor became victims of the religious extremism practiced by the local Taliban as a pressure tactic to get their undue demands accepted by the government. However, this victimization soon ended when the State curbed this insurgency after some time. However, the narratorial focus of the book does not limit itself to the portrayal of this temporal phase of turmoil in a particular area of Pakistan. Instead, it extends to the historical projection of socio-political structures that have hindered the possibility of gender equality in Pakistan since its creation.

Against this national backdrop within which Malala unfolds her story, the war on terror becomes the war on gender to conspicuously raise the question of Muslim women's freedom. In her reading of *I Am Malala*, Khoja-Moolji points out that by generalizing and decontextualizing the sufferings of Malala, the text resonates with these assumptions by imagining "Muslim women as suffering collectivity. Malala comes to represent the plight of all brown and black girls, and, hence, facilitates the overcoding of Muslim women as perennially oppressed by the mass of Muslim men/Islam/culture".(2015, p.544). Therefore, this research challenges the totalization of the victimhood subjectivity of the Muslim women in the text and claims that any attempt to answer this question first requires identifying the notion of freedom, values, and practices that are regarded as fundamental to freedom in *I Am Malala*.

This research determines Malala's notion of freedom, identifies the sources that inform her sense of freedom, and analyzes the practices and values she claims to have a debilitating effect on the freedom of Muslim women. The objective of such inquiry is to point out the lack of evidence, silence, and gaps in the narration in *I am Malala*, which implies that Muslim women live in a state of unfreedom due to the

adherence to traditional values and unchosen relationships. For this purpose, a theoretical space is outlined in the succeeding section to point out the contemporary debates surrounding Muslim women's freedom. Such a consideration helps in developing a non-essentialist notion of freedom. Next, the non-ideal Universalist position of the reader is developed based on Khader's idea of feminism to develop a holistic understanding of Malala's freedom sensibility with a focus on her experiences of public and private spaces in Pakistani society, wherein her story is set for the most part. After identifying Malala's notion of freedom as based on Western ethnocentric ideals of liberty as an act of resistance to this biased projection of the traditions harming Muslim women, the research extends its focus on the lived experiences of Muslim women narrated in the text. I then show how judging their traditional attachments according to the liberal idealization often leads to incorrect judgments about their individuality and the value of the traditions that ensure a culture of respect towards the female gender to safeguard their dignity, bodily inviolability, safety, and security.

2. Literature Review: Questioning the Freedom Discourse of Life Narratives

In contemporary times, published life narratives enjoy wider popularity due to the attention focused on them by human rights discourse. The last three decades have witnessed an increasing tendency in the use of these narratives by international human rights campaigns as evidence of human rights violations in societies where the voices of individuals remain unheard due to local pressures. The truth status accorded to their stories has tuned storytelling into a privileged mode of action that empowers the individuals to share their stories with international audiences to "issue a call within and beyond UN protocols and mechanisms for institutions, communities, and individuals to respond to the story; to recognize the humanity of the teller and the justice of the claim; to take responsibility for that recognition; and to find means of redress." (Schaffer and Smith .2004, p. 3) However, critical responses to these narratives point out not every story gets heard. Only such narratives get notified whose ideas of rights and justice coordinate with discursive frames of human rights campaigns. The canonization of the selective narratives entangles the subject of the narratives with essentialist ideas of what it means to be human so that "Stories enlisted within and attached to a human rights framework are particular kinds of stories—strong, emotive stories often chronicling degradation, brutalization, exploitation, and physical violence; stories that testify to the denial of subjectivity and loss of group identities". (Schaffer and Smith .2004, p.4)

This increased attention that the genre of life writing has received in the last three decades has resulted in the emergence of "oppressed Muslim women" narratives. In the words of Ahmad(2009), such narratives present Muslim women as " always singular and representative—is veiled, subjugated, indomitable in spirit, but still in need of rescue from an enlightened West". p.106). There are many alternative life writings by notable Muslim writers, including Mariama Ba, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Assia Djebar, Abu-Lughad Nawal el-Saadawi, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Shelina Janmohammad, Ibtehaj Muhammad and Ahdaf Soueif. However, due to their belief in liberating religious practices, they fail to get the attention the texts like *Princess* by Jean P. Sasson, *Not without My Daughter* by Betty Mehmoody, *Honor* by Mukhtar Mai, *I am Nujood: Age 10 and Divorced* by Nujood Ali, *I Am Malala* by Malala Yosafzai, *Let Her Fly* by Ziauddin Yousafzai receive since:

Each of these individual texts, after all, ultimately weaves into a seamless blanket of discourse. Readers of *Princess* give online recommendations for *My Forbidden Face* as an alternative treatment of the same topic. Betty Mahmoody, author of the notoriously Islamophobic *Not Without My Daughter*, provides a testimonial for *Princess* on Jean Sasson's Web site. Teenage readers of Shabanu graduate to Mahmoody's memoir. Whatever their content, their readers form these books into linked narratives that add up to a consolidated indictment of Islam. (Ahmad 2009, p.124)

The formulaic repetition of patterns of Muslim women's complex experiences jeopardizes the empowering potential of traditions and risks recuperating justicatorily imperialist idea of Enlightenment liberalism "that what is universally valuable for women *just is* (an idealized form of) the Western way of life."(Khader 2019, p.2) In the post-9/11 world, the prevailing feminist attitude has been that freedom cannot coexist with religion. It is argued that "Muslim women are oppressed by barbaric, medieval religion, and "Islamland" represents a sort of final frontier in humanity's struggle for freedom from the bonds of the past. (Khader 2019, p.76) Since religious traditions demand obedience and suppress independent thought, it is claimed that Muslim women need to be liberated from "harmful traditional practices" (Khader 2019, p.1) by adopting the liberal values of individualism, autonomy, and gender role eliminativism. The persistence of this bias can be located in the dilemma that exists in mainstream feminist criticism.(Jamil,2018)

2.1 Muslim Woman as a Reader of the Text

A Muslim woman can be a reader of a text, too. This way of her being is less noticeable in feminist criticism as compared to her being a writer. From being the subject of inquiry in feminist criticism, her voice as a reader of the text needs equal attention. Reviewing the politics of reading Western feminist circles, Amireh (2019) points out that despite acknowledging resistant reading as a potent source of analysing the authenticity of women's narratives, reading Muslim women's narratives has remained deprived of this critical reading practice. The result of such reluctance has been that "obsolete paradigms and categories of analysis persist and even dominate when the subject of study is Muslim women."(p.185) To redress this ideological damage, Ahmad (2009) stresses the need for critical considerations of alternative Muslim female inclusive readings as a corrective to point out the gaps, ellipses, and silences inherent in the texts to supplement what is left unsaid about the liberating potential of traditional ways of living in the life of a Muslim woman. Therefore, the paper's title positions me as a Muslim woman who reads *I am Malala*. Such a positionality is a response to the paradox in mainstream feminist criticism where Muslim women as subjects of analysis receive critical attention. Yet, their position as readers of the texts remains largely ignored. This research stresses the emancipatory potential that reading may open up for Muslim women, showing how a Muslim

woman's reading of a text written about her draws attention to the problem of liberal interpretation of their freedom.

3. Theoretical Framework: Conceptualizing Freedom from a Transnational Feminist Perspective

To conceptualize the idea of freedom which this paper exploits, first, it is significant to define the idea of feminism. In contemporary times, the existence of a variety of feminist approaches makes it hard to offer a singular definition of feminism. Consequently, different types of feminism including liberal feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism...etc not only differ in defining this term but also differ in their understanding of the concept of freedom. From among this great variety, this paper adopts a transnational feminist approach to freedom which appears as a reaction to the liberal feminist stance of freedom. Such an idea of freedom is inspired by Khader's (2019) conception of feminism, which centers around the "universalist opposition to sexist oppression but ... does not require universal adoption of Western—or more specifically... Enlightenment liberal- values and strategies." (p.3) She rejects associating tradition with oppression as "Western feminists often mistakenly think that universalizing the values of what I call Enlightenment liberalism is the feminist solution: the idea that tradition causes sexist oppression and that capitalism is beneficial because of its ability to decrease the hold of tradition lays bare an important liberal line of thought."(Khader 2019,p.64) This rejection raises the question of which values women should consider emancipatory when their real-world experiences are subjected to analytical scrutiny and attention. Since freedom is not a free-floating capacity independent of the social framework in which it expresses itself. It is a consequence of the socially determined values that set individuals free from oppression in specific contexts. So, it requires consideration of the moral and material conditions that regulate women's lives in particular contexts that are needed for emancipatory projects.

Illustrating the centrality of individualism to the understanding of freedom, Khader defines individualism as an expression of a person's individuality. However, liberal feminism accepts it as the core value of freedom. The problem lies in their stringent abandoning of cultural, filial, and communal bonds because they limit women's self-realization. The fact that not all contexts are identical to Western contexts evades their attention. Khader (2019) argues that this emphasis may devastate women living in traditional societies. She insists on comprehending the value of individualism in terms of how its forms can either benefit women or harm them. For this purpose, she differentiates between two types of individualism: independence individualism and personhood individualism.

According to Khader (2019), independence individualism operates on the principles of Enlightenment liberalism, which requires freedom from all kinds of ties. Independence individualism promotes biased Western values, increasing the gendered labor burden. It fails to consider women's vulnerability to poverty and exploitation under non-ideal conditions. It overlooks the significance of the communal bonds and filial relations as a source of dependency, warmth, protection, and love for women. It exposes women to an unending crisis in the name of self-realization and economic independence. It assumes an ideal position by implementing parochial Western values of self-sufficiency, and independence under the hoax of stability and freedom. This form of individualism is complicit in extending the imperialist agenda. It is not needed for feminist praxis and is marked with justification and the constitution of imperialism. Whereas, Khader views personhood individualism as crucial to feminism. It regards women as individuals who accept that living in a society, people rely on one another for their needs. This understanding may provide them the "protection from vulnerability that more independence individualist societies have difficulty providing" (Khader, p.66).

4. Analysis of Freedom Discourse in *I am Malala*

The cover image of the uncovered face of Malala and the book's title entail individual autonomy as central to Malala's conception of freedom. Before the reader learns the background details that inform her choice of the title, the self-presentation of Malala on the cover of the text and the single 'I' as a pronoun referring to her in the title indicate independent individualism that governs her sense of being. Though, the veritable description of "the girl who stood up for education and was shot by the Taliban" which follows the title on the book cover, makes it ironic too. The detailed description of the moment when the Taliban questioned Malala's identity in the prologue directs readers' attention to the threatening consequences that her commitment to the value of individuality receives. The details of this can be seen in the following passage where Malala puts before the readers the precise moment before being attacked by the Taliban who asked:

'Who is Malala? He demanded.

No one said anything, but several of the girls looked at me. I was the only girl with my face uncovered. (p.10)

This emphasis on the 'uncovered face' of Malala hazes the reader's attention from the actual cause of the Taliban's attack on her. The text carries details from which it can be inferred that she came under the watchful eyes of the Taliban because of writing the diary of Gul Makai for BBC. She started speaking against the Taliban, "first secretly as Gul Makai, then quite openly as Malala."(p.122) However, foregrounding the idea of the "uncovered face" that put Malala's life in danger creates an impression of the incompatibility of tradition with freedom.

Freedom remains one of the central concerns of the narration in *I Am Malala*. Right through the choice of the book title, Malala's notion of freedom gleams the unconventional choices that she confides to have opted in her life throughout the narration. Malala's approach to freedom is discernible in two ways in the text: first, through her resistance to traditions, and second her perceived difference from other 'oppressed Muslim girls'. Coming from a traditional society, throughout the text Malala rationalizes her freedom in making unconventional choices. She tells the reader, "I wore more fashionable clothes and didn't cover my face even when I became a teenager".(p.37). In a society where family, marriage, and motherhood were the ideals of feminine desirability, Malala under the influence of her father's repeated proclamations, 'Malala will be free as a bird,' (p. 19) conceived freedom as an individual's ability to do what one

desires without fearing external constraints. Malala was desirous of freedom early on in her life since she viewed traditions as social constraints:

I knew as we got older the girls would be expected to stay inside. We'd be expected to cook and serve our brothers and fathers. While boys and men could roam freely about town, my mother and I could not go out without a male relative to accompany us, even if it was a five-year-old boy! This was the tradition.(p. 19)

Malala seems sceptical of family, marriage, and traditional norms as encoded with patriarchal norms and meanings. Though she mentions several restrictions that govern feminine behavior, the last sentence is crucial in claiming them to be the consequence of tradition.

Malala's freedom sensibility was also influenced by her exclusive choice of Western classics as worthy of reading. Her reading list mainly comprises classical texts that celebrate the liberal ideals of individual freedom and resistance to patriarchal social order. She discloses her inspiration for the books like *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Brief History of Time*, *Ann Frank's Diary*, *The Alchemist*, *Sherlock Homes*, *Twilight Series*, *Diary of a Wimpy kid*, *Diary of Anne Frank*, *Anna Karenina*, and fiction of Jane Austin. The entire narration references her choice of Western readings "I read my books like Anna Karenina and the novels of Jane Austen and trusted in my father's words: 'Malala is free as a bird.'(p.38) Her exclusive involvement in Western literature affects her agentive capacity that values freely and consciously chosen values more than traditional practices.

4.1 Geographics of Freedom: From IslamLand to England

In the exposition of the prologue, Malala's introduction to the Western readers is significant concerning her idea of Muslim women's freedom. She laments: "I COME FROM a country which was created at midnight. When I almost died, it was just after midday".(p.8) The use of upper case in the first three words of the speech sounds like strong resentment over her national identity, which seems to have constricted her freedom to live. Also, by correlating her death with the country's birth, she taps into the Western reader's common knowledge of the nation's colonial past. Malala's political consciousness hints that even sixty years after independence, the not-so-new country failed to safeguard the freedom of Muslim women. In the opening lines, an unspecified reference to the country serves as a reminder that despite being created in the name of religious freedom at the end of the British occupation of the subcontinent, Pakistan is a place where a female is not free to live. After briefing the readers about her country of origin, she remembers her country of residence instantly, "I am in Birmingham, England". (p.8) This juxtaposition ensues a detailed comparison between the country of her origin –Pakistan and its' once ruling country of her stay-England is drawn that convinces the readers of the folly of the nation in claiming independence :

I am in a country which is five hours behind my beloved homeland Pakistan and my home in the Swat Valley. But my country is centuries behind this one. Here there is any convenience you can imagine. Water running from every tap, hot or cold as you wish; lights at the flick of a switch, day and night, no need for oil lamps; ovens to cook on that don't need anyone to go and fetch gas cylinders from the bazaar. Here everything is so modern one can even find food ready cooked in packets. (p.8)

However, Malala's appreciation for England is not limited to the material progress of England. Her fascination for the country was more for the freedom she believed women had there. Her binary thinking evokes the superiority of Western modernity by contrasting it with the material backwardness of Pakistan. Throughout the narration, Muslim women are widely presented as living in unfreedom compared to their Western counterparts. This can be substantiated by numerous examples in the text where she implicitly or explicitly compares the lives of Western and Pakistani women. One such instance is her recollection of the seaside visit to Karachi. In a chapter entitled "The Woman and the Sea," she daydreamt herself crossing the sea one day:

I sat on the rocks and thought about the fact that across the water were lands where women were free. In Pakistan we had had a woman prime minister and in Islamabad I had met those impressive working women, yet the fact was that we were a country where almost all the women depend entirely on men. My headmistress Maryam was a strong, educated woman but in our society she could not live on her own and come to work. She had to be living with a husband, brother or parents. (p.110)

Her longing to move to 'the land where women were free' suggests exclusive association of freedom with the Western world and this is contrasted by her desperation over the fact that in Pakistan, 'almost all the women depend entirely on men.' This relational identity curtails their agency in determining their personal choices. Their subjection to 'a husband, brother, or parents' implies that marriage, family, and dependence on men are the only possibilities these women are envisaged to have in Pakistan. The fact that her Aunt Najma "had never actually laid eyes on the ocean" (p.110), who had been living in Karachi, was inferred by Malala as "her husband would not take her to the beach, and even if she had somehow slipped out of the house, she would not have been able to follow the signs to the sea because she could not read." (p.110) This detailed description unrelentingly focuses on the husband's exclusive authority that renders her ignorant of hegemonic norms. No consideration is given to her material conditions, which the reader learns later in the text that she "lived in a very small house and so, at last, my father understood why they had refused to take him in when he was a student."(p.111) Thus, the fact that Aunt Najma accompanied them to the seaside without any trace of her husband's disapproval indicates that the truth lies more in her low economic status than her gendered identity.

Such invocations indicate the reworking of the image of 'IslamLand,' which in the words of Abu-Lughod (2002) serves as the 'mythical place' that endorses the killing of Muslim women. To quote her words, "IslamLand is the problem and Islam is condensed in the figure of the victimized Muslim woman", within oppressed Muslim narratives to popularise the idea that "it is the men in IslamLand who most

need to undergo a moral revolution—and that they will do so only if induced by Western moral pressure and shaming”.(Abu-Lughod 2002,p.81) The same idea is reiterated throughout the text, showing men's dominance over the public space. In contrast, women are mainly confined to their homes and have little role in social, political, and cultural matters under cover of religion as "often it feels that we have forgotten the word and think Islam means women sitting at home in purdah or wearing burqas while men do jihad". (p.49) Malala thinks that female conformity to the tradition perpetually enslaves them to domesticity. She views traditions as social imposition on the female gender. Girls were encumbered with responsibilities, whereas boys remained free, "They were just waiting to be married ".(p.20). Here, the traditional segregation of the sexes is pointed as an expression of gendered oppression. Such expectations are shown to have put constraints on the imaginative possibilities of alternative prospects. Such indoctrination made "mock weddings" as the girls' favourite game in the village. A passage where she details that during childhood when she visited her grandparents' house, the girls' favourite game was weddings. This entire description foregrounds the cultural conditioning of the girls early on in their lives, where they only thought of marriage as their prospect and could not think of any other possibility. Our favourite game was 'weddings':

The most important part of the mock wedding was jewellery. We took earrings, bangles and necklaces to decorate the bride, singing Bollywood songs as we worked. Then we would put make-up on her face that we'd taken from our mothers, dip her hands in hot limestone and soda to make them white, and paint her nails red with henna. Once she was ready, the bride would start crying and we would stroke her hair and try to convince her not to worry. 'Marriage is part of life,' we said. 'Be kind to your mother-in-law and father-in-law so they treat you well. Take care of your husband and be happy.' (p.37)

The girls only dreamed of becoming homemakers. So the reader takes the impression that women's consent to marriage is not born out of their autonomy but of tradition. So, as an effect of societal indoctrination, girls assume it as their prime responsibility to serve their husband's families. In the text, there are references to the women of Barkana where her father grew up. Most of them "spent their days looking after the children and preparing food to serve to the men in their *hujra* upstairs."(p.35)The emphasis on the commonality of their experiences entails that traditional marriage confines Muslim women to the private sphere, where they are seriously disadvantaged. Because they cook, clean, and raise their children, Malala assumes that marital life is a denial of a woman's essential humanity.

Numerous passages in the text contain generalized comments about the absence of freedom in the lives of Muslim women in Pakistan. She tells the readers, "In Pakistan when women say they want independence, people think this means we don't want to obey our fathers, brothers or husbands. But it does not mean that. It means we want to make decisions for ourselves. We want to be free to go to school or to go to work".(p.110) Malala's comments on the desirability of independence by Pakistani women equate freedom with self-determination that is free of all external constraints. The present tense narration of generic statements like the above in the text implies that adherence to traditions constricts girls' freedom. While boys retain their freedom outside, girls get imprisoned inside their homes. The invisibility of their bodily existence becomes the fate imposed on them by society.

4.2 *Beyond the Cover: Who Is This Muslim Woman?*

The notion of independence individualism that disapproves of filial relationships and traditions orients Malala's understanding of the lives of Muslim women living in Pakistan. They are imagined as imprisoned, secluded, and alienated beings who are denied the right to live their lives according to personal choices. Mostly, the comments that are made about Muslim women in the text project them to be one-dimensional women who are subject to patriarchal tyranny. At the same time, where in the text she views Muslim women as marginalized, a remark appears about the social fabric of the society, which governs around the principle of respect for both men and women: "In our culture, every man is your 'brother' and every woman your 'sister'. That's how we think of each other. When my father first brought his wife to school, all the teachers referred to her as 'my brother's wife' or *Bhabi*".(p.9). This statement shows the value of personal relationships and how society views Muslim women. Like any other human society, Muslim women might face oppression in specific cases that virtually all women face in daily life in any other culture. But, the moral ideals of the Muslim society ensure respect for both male and female gender not just in everyday life but at times rife with troubles and social unrest. An example of this is Malala's statement when she tells the reader that "To protect women's purdah, men in families hosting the refugees even slept away from their own homes" (p.92) Such statements in the text, where even strangers protect the privacy of women belie Malala's generalized perception of essentialist inferiority and maltreatment of females in the Pakistani society. These statements reflect the public attitude of respect that regards a woman as a person who possesses dignity and is subject to care.

Further, attention to these details also reveals that social norms differ from place to place. Her amazement to see the women of Islamabad belies the essentialist statement made about Muslim women in the text that they had marriage as their only fate in life. There she was introduced to "women who were lawyers and doctors and also activists, which showed us that women could do important jobs yet still keep their culture and traditions." (p.98) If the women of the village never left the house without purdah, then there were women of Islamabad who moved freely "in the streets without purdah, their heads completely uncovered".(p.98) Even in a remote area like Swat, not all women were housewives as she states at one point in the narration that "our schools had about seventy teachers, around forty men and thirty women".(p.60)

Recognition of their dignity reflects that the achievements of Muslim women may be low in public life but that does not make them servile. There are examples in the text where women appear to be recognizable individuals who defy the stereotype of an alienated, secluded, and shrouded Muslim woman. The text contains details of both the personal and the public lives of Muslims, like Malala' mother, her grandmothers, women of Spal Bandi, female teachers, her school fellows, and women of Islamabad. None of them is

oppressed, secluded, or subjected to forced marriage. Some of them were housewives like women of her family, whereas women like Benazir Bhutto were active in politics too. This is particularly evident when she tells the readers about his father's admiration for the woman of the "Spal bandi"- her maternal native village of Toor pekai. They were living in a remote mountainous area, where the vagaries of the weather and extreme poverty made most of the opportunities of living a comfortable life unavailable to the women. Even though domestic chores are time-consuming, they "had great freedom" because they "had a beautiful spot on top of the mountain where only they could congregate to chat about their lives". This example reflects the absence of humiliation and maltreatment in their married lives, which otherwise could have imprisoned them to the domestic space only and the comfort and security they had outside their domestic spaces. This acknowledgment of freedom for the women of Spal Bandi was not just exclusive to them. This can be verified from the details when Malala tells the readers about how the day-to-day life of women in Mingora was affected by the presence of the Taliban in the area: "My Mother and her friends were upset about not being able to go shopping, particularly in the days before the Eid holidays, when we beautify ourselves and go to the stalls lit up by fairy lights that sell bangles and henna. All of that stopped." (p.62) Examples like these challenge the readers not to confuse the specific instances of constraints on women's liberty with their general servility.

The hardship and violence that women endured in Swat under the Taliban were characteristically misappropriation of Islamic teachings. However, their oppression was not confused with religious oppression. Women firmly believed in the empowering potential of their faith. Initially, from female school teachers, and mothers of students to her Mother, most women were impressed by them because they proclaimed the implementation of Quranic values and principles, "They liked his talk of bringing back Islamic law as everyone was frustrated with the Pakistani justice system, which had replaced ours when we were merged into the country. Cases such as land disputes, common in our area, which used to be resolved quickly now take ten years to come to court. Everyone wanted to see the back of the corrupt government officials sent into the valley". (p.60) Not only the narration but photos included in the text that women donated their gold and money and even their life savings. Such details falsify the claim that men imposed religion on women. Though narrated ironically, a humorous narration of an incident reveals not only the strong faith of the women but also their autonomy in making money-related decisions:

My father told me about a woman who had donated generously to the Taliban while her husband was working abroad. When he came back and found out she had given away her gold he was furious. One night there was a small explosion in their village and the wife cried. 'Don't cry,' said her husband. 'That is the sound of your earrings and nose studs. Now listen to the sound of your lockets and bangles.' (p.78)

This incident also shows that a traditional housewife may not be employed outside but can retain her agency in making free choices in money-related matters. Her husband's reaction was not about spending the money but on spending the money for the wrong cause. Generally, in a Muslim society, it contributes to autonomous or rational choices, freeing Muslim women from economic responsibilities. Other than unusual situations, it is the men's responsibility to financially safeguard women of the family as noticed in case Malala's family where her mother managed the home and the father worked hard to earn a decent living for the whole family. If Muslim women are responsible for domestic duties, men are burdened with producing financial resources for the entire family. Throughout the text, she focuses only on their responsibilities, but nowhere is the rights and privileges that their feminine existence entitle them to is acknowledged. Most Muslim women found Islam to be a positive, liberating, and uplifting experience.

4.3 Toor Pekai: Does She Need freedom?

An apt example of a Muslim woman who firmly believes in the positivity of Islam is Malala's mother Toor Pekai. She is introduced to the readers as a devout woman, who prayed five times a day, regularly recited the Quran, and had unwavering faith in Islamic values. However, her religiosity did not obstruct the fulfilment of her feminine desires: "She disapproves of dancing because she says God would not like it, but she loves to decorate herself with pretty things, embroidered clothes, and golden necklaces and bangles". (p.17) This fantasized idea of Muslim women, as stuck in the past, gets challenged through the elements of reality that pervade the text. Talking about her Mother Malala says "She herself would never appear in public. She refused even to be photographed. She is a very traditional woman and this is our centuries-old culture. Were she to break that tradition, men and women would talk against her, particularly those in our own family". (p.108-109) And this of course, was not the case. The element of reality is that her Mother did get photos in her personal life, as in the text there is a picture of both her parents as a newly-wed couple. Photographing in one's personal life differs from posting them on social platforms. Moreover, her mother's veiling practice in no sense dulled her sense of right or wrong, "She never said she regretted the work my father and I had undertaken, but when I won prizes, she said, 'I don't want awards, I want my daughter. I wouldn't exchange a single eyelash of my daughter for the whole world.'" (p.232- 233) Her love for the traditional way of living did not lessen even after moving to the liberal society of England. Her discomfort over the liberal values of English society can be witnessed when, "At nights our eyes were all out on stalks at the skimpy clothes that women wore – tiny shorts almost like knickers and bare legs on the highest heels even in the middle of winter. My Mother was so horrified that she cried, 'Gharqa shoma!' – 'I'm drowning' – and begged my father, 'Please take me to Dubai. I can't live here!' Later we laughed about it". (p.421)

Considering her parent's married life, it appears that marriage is not an unequal relationship but one of interdependence and a durable intimate relationship. It is possible for marriage to be compatible with equality:

Though she cannot read or write, my father shares everything with her, telling her about his day, the good and the bad. She teases him a lot and gives him advice about who she thinks is a genuine friend and who is not, and my father says she is always

right. Most Pashtun men never do this, as sharing problems with women is seen as weak. 'He even asks his wife!' they say as an insult. I see my parents happy and laughing a lot. People would see us and say we are a sweet family.(p.21)

The lack of access to education was not necessarily a sign of their gendered identity. The lack of resources and the exercise of personal choice of the female were also the causes behind their illiteracy. The best example can be taken from the recollection of the experiences of her Mother, Toor Pekai. Malala narrates:

My mother school when she was six and stopped the same term. She was unusual in the village as she had a father and brothers who encouraged her to go to school. She was the only girl in a class of boys. She carried her bag of books proudly into school and claimed she was brighter than the boys. But every day she would leave behind her girl cousins playing at home and she envied them. There seemed no point in going to school ... so one day she sold her books for nine annas, spent the money on boiled sweets and never went back. (p.37)

How many life lessons Malala's mother drill into her head over the years due to her early life at home? "Though my mother was not educated, she was the practical one in the family, the doer while my father was the talker".(p.101) Her illiteracy did not confound her wisdom. Her practical wisdom and day-to-day handling of the family affairs suggest that having never been to school for the women does not not render them weak nor lacking agency.

5. Discussion and Findings of the Analysis of *I am Malala*:

Considering the analysis of *I am Malala* in the light of Serene J. Khader this research has determined Malala's notion of freedom as primarily governed by liberal ideology of freedom. In the opening section of the analysis this paper through the analysis of the cover image of the text, its title which is based on the question asked by the Taliban who shot her, this paper points out Malala's independent individualism as the core value of her freedom orientation. From the passages of the text analyzed in the analysis section of the text where Malala comments upon the centrality of family, marriage, and motherhood in the life of Pakistani women, it becomes clear that she views the three primary units of Pakistani social structure as inherently oppressive. In pointing out the generalized nature of the statements through which Malala claims the illiberal status of Muslim women, it can safely be argued that her point of view is reductionist. Malala believes that an individual's personal choice, which is unrestrained by any social constraint, is indispensable for freedom. This paper points out that due to her belief in the independent individualistic notion of freedom, Malala mostly views traditional women as living in the oppressive and constrained society of Pakistan.

In section 4.1, this research refers to the significant passages of the text where Malala has drawn a comparison between England and Pakistan despite the geographical, social, and cultural differences between the two countries. English society is praised for its liberal values, whereas Pakistani society identified as traditional is stated as conservative and backward in its treatment of the female gender. In particular the tradition of marriage and in particular early marriage and the domestic roles and responsibilities of the Pakistani society are critiqued by the text. Consequently, the fact that Pakistani society is an Islamic society wherein the lives of both genders-male and female-are governed by religious doctrines is mistaken as a sign of male domination and patriarchy. In this regard, the geographical and economic variations which affect the lives of both genders are backgrounded.

In section 4.2 of the paper, the contradictions inherent in the text regarding the status and treatment of Muslim women as narrated in the text are pointed out. In this regard reference to the passages of the text where the respect and honor that a female gets in the society are considered to claim the contradictions inherent in the text. Additionally, the way the life of a Pakistani woman differs according to her geographical location in terms of rural to urban, tribal to cosmopolitan points out the fallacy of generalized statements of oppression regarding Pakistani women. Also, by focusing on those parts of the memoir where the focus is put on the differences between women's lives in Swat before and during the political insurgency, this paper claims that Malala misrepresents Pakistani women because she believes in independence individualism. Contrary to her approach to freedom, analysis of the life of these women in the light of Khader's (2019) idea of the personhood individualism this paper claims otherwise.

Lastly, in section 4.3 of the paper by considering the textual projection of Toor Pekai and by considering her as the prime example of a traditional Muslim woman, who holds personhood individualism challenges Malala's view of her caged position in Pakistani society. Through the analysis of the life of Toor Pekai, this paper asserts that a traditional woman who observes the veil, does not get any formal education, gets married early, and diligently performs her marital and maternal duties and responsibilities can also be a free and empowered woman if approached from the broader perspective of freedom whereby liberal notion of freedom may not be regarded as exclusive and the only liberating possibility.

6. Conclusion

Reading *I Am Malala* from a transnational feminist perspective reveals that the conflict related to Muslim women's freedom is the conflict between two different ideals of freedom. This research points out that the same practices and values assumed to be oppressive for Muslim women, when considered from the ideal of independence individualism, change their meanings to liberating and empowering for a reader informed about the alternative variant of freedom that equally values personhood individualism. Such an understanding certainly disapproves of the oppression that Malala faced during the Taliban insurgency that arose in Swat, a remote area of Pakistan. However, her victim status does not qualify her as an authority over Muslim women's unfreedom. Though Malala's independent individual approach to freedom can be accepted as a personal choice, her case as representative of the Muslim female collectivity certainly calls for

acknowledging the narratorial biases and contradictions inherent in the social existence and experiences of Muslim women who are represented in *I Am Malala*. They are humans just like other women of the world and their experiences are not exclusively shaped by their gendered identities rather, they are equally crucial in considering class, age, temporal, geographical, and ethnic associations. Accordingly, accepting and acknowledging this difference necessitates an anti-essentialist approach to freedom. Instead of fixating on certain values as the core values of freedom, different variants of freedom, as alternatives to Enlightenment liberalism, need to be taken as justifiable to ensure peace and harmonious living of every individual in the world today.

Acknowledgments

This research is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia under the project number (PSAU/2024/R/1445).

Authors contributions

“Not applicable.”

Funding

This research is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia under the project number (PSAU/2024/R/1445).

Competing interests

“Not applicable.”

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal’s policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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