



I AM MALALA:

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

THEME 3: *Cultural Politics, Gender and History in
Malala Yousafzai's I am Malala*

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



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To expand the reach of Malala’s memoir—*I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*—and spread Malala’s message to young people and activists, the Global Women’s Institute (GWI) of the George Washington University (GW), in collaboration with the Malala Fund, developed a resource guide for high school and college students around the world. Building on the content of Malala’s memoir, the resource guide supports global efforts to mobilize women and men to address women’s and girls’ rights to an education.

Malala’s memoir opens the door to some of the greatest challenges of our modern world. It is about politics, education, culture, religion and violence against women and girls. It is a moment in the life of a young girl and in the history of a country. To do these broad themes justice, faculty from a wide range of disciplines contributed to the development of the resource guide.

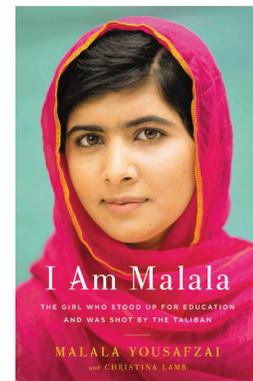
The resource guide challenges students to think deeply, share their experiences, and engage with their communities. Each theme is divided into 4 parts:

- **Part 1** is the narrative with learning objectives to frame the conversation and help plan lessons;
- **Part 2** lists the resources to help students and teachers deepen their knowledge about the theme;
- **Part 3** lists individual and group activities, including some to be done outside of class if students are interested;
- **Part 4** is the high school supplement intended to help high school teachers introduce and discuss some of the concepts and context that appear in the theme narratives.

Each part may be printed separately to be used by teachers or students.

THE EIGHT THEMES ARE:

- 1. Memoir as Literature and History**
- 2. Education: A Human Right for Girls**
- 3. Cultural Politics, Gender and History in Malala Yousafzai’s *I am Malala***
- 4. Religion and Religious Extremism**
- 5. Malala and Violence against Women and Girls**
- 6. Malala Leadership Essay**
- 7. Malala and the Media**
- 8. Global Feminisms: Speaking and Acting about Women and Girls**



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book, visit malala.gwu.edu.



CULTURAL POLITICS, GENDER, AND HISTORY IN MALALA YOUSAFZAI'S I AM MALALA

BY KAVITA DAIYA

PART 1



Narrative

In order to appreciate the cultural issues around female experiences brought forward by Malala Yousafzai's memoir, *I Am Malala*, it is important to situate the memoir historically and read it as a part of a particular cultural and political context in Pakistan. In this essay, I will connect culture and history through the following:

- A discussion of how Malala Yousafzai's narrative illuminates common cultural practices around the place of girls in the family in modern South Asia
- An examination of the connections between cultural practices shaping girls' experiences and the history of secularism in Pakistan

Culture and History

From a Euro-American vantage point, it may be tempting to approach Malala's memoir as evidence of the incompleteness of Pakistan's modernity or of how "women in the Global South" are victims of their own cultures and traditions. In such approaches, readers tend to reductively homogenize whole communities and cultures, erasing the complex diversity in them to produce one simplistic idea about a place; examples would include "exotic India," "underdeveloped Africa," or "repressive China." Historically, many Western feminists have participated in producing stereotypical and ahistorical images of women from the so-called third world as simplistic victims of their "cultures." Many recent feminist critics like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and bell hooks have criticized these accounts, which not only stereotype and dehistoricize cultures but also ignore how girls and women in non-European contexts criticize, negotiate, and challenge the violence and discrimination they face. Malala's memoir should be read as part of this tradition of critique and

dissent if we do not want to reduce her to this stereotype of third world woman/victim. As Malala also insists, "I don't want to be thought of as the 'girl who was shot by the Taliban' but the 'girl who fought for education.'" (152-153) If we want to understand Malala, as she herself wishes, as an active, resistant, and political actor in her Pakistani and Muslim community, then we have to attend to the history of Pakistan and secularism, which profoundly shapes her as a political subject.

Pakistan is a relatively young nation: It was formed in August 1947 when the British decolonized the Indian subcontinent. At the same time that the British granted India independence, they also divided it and created two countries, Pakistan and India. Having stoked fears on the part of Muslims that they would be oppressed in a free India, as they were outnumbered by Hindus, the British enacted a partition along religious lines. Many Muslim-majority regions formed "Pakistan," and Hindu-majority areas were named "India." Pakistan became independent on Aug. 14, 1947, and India on Aug. 15, 1947. Thus, from the start, the popular understanding was that Pakistan was created "for Muslims," so that they would not be a minority in what was a Hindu-majority India. Following this partition, approximately 7 million Muslims migrated from India to Pakistan; called *mohajirs*, or migrants, they faced discrimination as outsiders. As a result, they eventually mobilized themselves and became a political force: the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM). Malala also refers to the mohajirs and their political clout: "The MQM is a very organized movement and the mohajir community sticks together." (111) In part, the large scale of Partition migrations was a consequence of religious violence; when the locations of the borders were announced by radio on Aug. 16, Hindus and Sikhs attacked Muslims and vice versa. Approximately 2 million people died in the span of one year, while by official counts, 5

million Hindus and Sikhs left Pakistan for India, and 7 million Muslims left India for Pakistan. In this, as in other moments of ethnic conflict, women became targets of terrible sexual violence, mutilation, abduction, and commodification. The experience and enduring impact of this gendered ethnic violence have been the focus of much research, including my first book, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and National Culture in Postcolonial India* ([2008] 2013).

Subsequently, as feminist historians Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin detail, from 1948 till 1956, both India and Pakistan agreed to forcibly repatriate and “exchange” the over 100,000 women who had been abducted, regardless of the women’s own wishes. They were also forced to leave behind any children they had after their abduction. Enacted at the scale of the nation-state, this dehumanizing action formally cast women as property that “belonged” to both the ethnic community they were born in and the nation. This idea that women are not equal citizens but rather that they “belong” to the nation and community—also operative in other conflict zones from Bosnia to Rwanda—has continued to shape women’s experiences during conflict.

Secularism and Gender

Mohammed Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, had originally intended for Pakistan to be a Muslim country but a constitutionally secular state in which all communities—Hindu, Christian, Parsi, Sikh, Muslim—lived peacefully, and women and men had equal rights (21, 49). However, he passed away shortly after independence, and since then, the Pakistani government has had a checkered relationship with institutions of secularism. In Chapter 20, Malala refers to this history when she describes her trip to Jinnah’s tomb in Karachi. She asserts how Jinnah had dreamed of a secular and inclusive Pakistan when he had founded the country. After 1947, ethnic minorities including many Hindus, Parsis, Jews, and Sikhs left the country, fleeing religious persecution. After Jinnah, successive political leaders colluded with the Army and religious groups as they jockeyed for political power. As political power shifted back and forth from democratic forces to the military in different decades, the period from 1977 to 1988 under the military dictator Zia ul Haq saw a mass movement sweeping the countryside and the cities of Pakistan that argued for the radical Islamization of both state and civil society. While religious parties were able to consolidate popular support from a largely uneducated and unemployed youth, as there was little industry in the fledgling nation to support the growth of a middle class, the Harvard- and Oxford-educated political elite often made compromises with the Army and the religious parties to preserve their power. Malala observes in her memoir that General Zia argued that the Army’s government was “pursuing Islamic principles” and opened many religious schools across the country. He ushered in much repression, from setting up “prayer

committees in every district” and “prayer inspectors” to changing laws so that a woman’s word in court counted for “only half that of a man’s.” (21)

The film *Khamosh Pani* (*Silent Waters*, 2003) by notable Pakistani independent filmmaker Sabiha Sumar captures this transformation poignantly, tracing how it affects the life of a female Partition survivor in rural Pakistan. The film depicts the experience of rape and sexual violence that women experienced during the 1947 Partition, and connects it with how women again became increasingly erased from public life and stripped of equal rights with General Zia’s 1979 Islamization of Pakistan. *Khamosh Pani* won critical acclaim at film festivals globally.

Alongside this, any understanding of Pakistan must consider how it was and continues to be affected by the political history of its neighbor Afghanistan; indeed, the rise to power of the Taliban in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region, formerly known as North West Frontier Province, where Malala is from, is not unrelated to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan during the Cold War. From 1979 to 1988, the United States covertly funded, trained, and armed mujahideen militants through Pakistan, creating what became the Taliban to resist the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Malala is keenly aware of and criticizes both Zia’s Islamization and the American involvement in Cold War Taliban politics and support of Pakistan’s military rulers. As Malala also mentions, in 1979, once Russia invaded Afghanistan and the U.S.-supported shah of Iran was overthrown, the U.S. lost its regional base in Iran and so shifted to Pakistan: “Billions of dollars flowed into our exchequer from the United States ... and weapons to help the ISI [Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence Agency] train the Afghans to fight the [Russian] communist Red Army. General Zia was invited to meet President Ronald Reagan at the White House ... The US government lavished praise on him.” (22)

Girls and Male Privilege

If we approach culture as a historically changing set of learned and shared ideas and practices, then we can understand better how the cultural privileging of boys manifests itself in different ways across the world. Malala’s memoir shows how poor families in Pakistan and many other parts of South Asia endeavor to ensure that the boys get some kind of education and often care less if their daughter remains illiterate, because she does not need to be educated to assume the expected role of wife and mother. In an early moment in her narrative, describing the birth of her younger brother, Malala recalls, “My mother had been waiting for a son and could not hide her joy when he was born. To me he seemed very thin and small, like a reed that could snap in the wind, but he was the apple of her eye, her *ladla*. It seemed to me that his every wish was her command.” (16) This moment where Malala

recognizes the inequality between her and her brother's treatment signals how, from the moment they are born, male children are prized and privileged over female children in a large majority of families in South Asia. This has terrible implications for girl children. The powerful documentary *It's a Girl* (2012) shows that female infanticide has generated a massive gap in the population ratio of men to women across a large part of Asia, where, according to the United Nations, an estimated 200 million women are missing due to gendercide. The social organization of South Asia's many communities is largely patriarchal. Many believe that the son will eventually care for the parents when they are old, providing a safety net for the future in a society without any state-sponsored social security. The son therefore is to be prized; the daughter, however, will marry and leave for her husband's family. She is thus often seen as an economic burden, even as she performs unrecognized but valuable labor in the fields and the home for her family.

These patriarchal ideas that the son is superior to the daughter prevail in middle-class and wealthy families as well. It is not uncommon therefore to see, as Malala describes, the husband and son in the family getting the choice meats at dinnertime, or more food, more milk or eggs, which is expensive, while the daughter-in-law or daughter gets less or none (21-22). This kind of discrimination is both subtle and deeply unfair, as it inhabits the intimate relations of a family and indelibly will shape the sense of self-worth as well as physical health of the girls and women in the family. Malala is able to cast a critical lens on this, because her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, who is educated, liberated, and fair-minded, rejects this gender-based way of treating girls as less, and she embraces his perspective. Because of his education and support, she is able to challenge gender inequality within her culture. But many others are not so fortunate. In 2009, I investigated the tragic and untimely death of my 34-year-old cousin Kavita, married into a very rich family in Mumbai, India. I learned that in the four years of her marriage, she had been tortured and abused in various ways, including the deprivation of food. Sometimes the house servant would sneak a sandwich into her room out of pity; sometimes she got food through her sister. This family hid bars of gold in their wardrobes and bank lockers, and yet withheld nutritious food from my cousin. This is not an isolated story: Most girls learn early that they can expect to get less food than boys.

Cultural Politics and Women's Struggles

"We talked about how things happen for different reasons, this happened to me, and how education for females not just males is one of our Islamic rights. I was speaking up for my right as a Muslim woman to be able to go to school." (141)

This is a poignant moment, underscoring how at the heart of Malala's story is a vulnerable girl child wanting only to go to school to learn things about her own life and the world. It is also a powerful moment in which Malala is showing us a complex vision of Pakistani culture: one that allows debate and dissent on what actually IS Pakistani and Islamic culture. That secularism is a problematic and contested idea in Pakistan is apparent even in Malala's text. She discovers that the Taliban have named her as a target only when she happens to meet the Pakistani-American journalist Shehla Anjum on a visit to Karachi, and Anjum mentions this to her: "We didn't know what she was talking about so she went on the Internet and showed us that the Taliban had that day issued threats against two women—Shad Begum, an activist in Dir, and me, Malala. 'These two are spreading secularism and should be killed,' it said." (112) In response to the Taliban's claim that education is un-Islamic and "Western," Malala asserts: "Today we all know education is our basic right. Not just in the West; Islam too has given us this right. Islam says every girl and every boy should go to school. In the Quran it is written, God wants us to have knowledge." (263) Similarly, later in the narrative, she argues, "I love my God. I thank my Allah. I talk to him all day. He is the greatest. By giving me this height to reach people, he has also given me great responsibilities. Peace in every home, every street, every village, every country—this is my dream. Education for every boy and every girl in the world. To sit down on a chair and read my books with all my friends at school is my right." (265)

The Taliban's view of culture, and of women's role as silent property, is thus being challenged by Malala, civil society, and now the government. Toward the end of her memoir, Malala notes how many girls' schools and colleges in Pakistani cities had been attacked and bombed since she left for England. It is very clear that even when segregated in all-girls schools and colleges, where thousands of Pakistani parents are sending their girls to get an education that they hope might lead them to a better life, female education is not acceptable to the Taliban. What is at stake then is both the autonomy and rights of local Pakistanis, as well as the very place and personhood of the girl child—within the family and home, and outside in public life and in the institutions of civil society, like schools.



Resources

Pakistani writing on women:

Nadeem Aslam's poignant novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* takes up the issue of violence against women in Pakistani culture through the representation of love and marriage. We can thus place Malala's memoir in its larger literary context of Pakistani, and more broadly South Asian, literature by reading it alongside works like Aslam's novel, Bapsi Sidhwa's novels *The Bride* and *Cracking India*, Talat Abbasi's short stories in *Bitter Gourd and Other Short Stories*, Kamila Shamsie's novel *Salt and Saffron*, Sara Suleri's memoir *Meatless Days*, and others.

Historical and cultural works:

Irfan Husain, *Fatal Faultlines: Pakistan, Islam, and the West*

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*

Ayesha Jalal, "The Convenience of Subservience: Women and the State of Pakistan," in *Women, Islam and the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti

Women's organizations:

- The Sarhad Rural Support Program
- Women Media Center
- Aurat Foundation
- All Pakistan Women's Association
- Blue Veins
- Sindhiani Tahreek
- Society for Appraisal and Women Empowerment in Rural Areas
- The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

Prominent activists:

- Munawar Khan
- Muneeza Shamsie
- Asma Jahangir
- Mukhtar Mai
- Tehmina Durrani
- Samar Minallah
- Shad Begum
- Malalai Joya
- Sakena Yacoobi



INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

1. Investigate the difference between urban and rural women's schools and colleges in Pakistan. How many exist in the major cities like Karachi and Lahore, and how many in rural areas? What challenges do they face?
2. Identify and discuss the textual moments where Malala sets out her political opinions about women, secularism, and culture. What can we glean from this dialogue about how she views modern Islamic identity?
3. A new Pakistani animated series about a female superhero, *Burka Avenger*, also advocates for the value of education as Malala does. Identify and view an episode from this series, and explain how it resonates with or differs from Malala's memoir.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

1. Watch Sabiha Sumar's film *Silent Waters*. Discuss how women's lives are depicted in the film. What factors have a negative impact on the different women's lives, in the public sphere and in their private lives, across the generations?
2. Watch the documentary *It's a Girl*, and identify the various factors that generate gendercide according to the film. Then discuss strategies the film identifies that can combat and end gendercide, and how they can be implemented. Discuss how the documentary connects with the memoir: What are the points of congruence and divergence?
3. Study three different feminist activists or women's organizations in Pakistan (some listed below). Identify the focal issue for the activists or organizations—be it education, human rights, rape laws, domestic violence, rural development, etc.—and the method by which they articulate their resistance and projects. Together, discuss the outcome of each one's struggle, and map out their similarities and differences, their strengths and limitations.



Supplemental Material for High School Cultural, Politics, Gender, and History in Malala Yousafzai's I am Malala

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

1. How can the study of cultural practices help to inform our understanding of historic events?
2. Think about a major world conflict present in the news today? What questions do you have about culture and history that would help you to better understand the political situation?

CONTEXT

What is culture?

"Culture," is the social context of a group of people, that includes the patterns of meanings, values, beliefs, knowledge, morals, religion, laws, custom, and the arts, which shape their attitude to life.

How can a study of culture and history help us to understand Malala's story?

Malala boldly declared that, "I do not want to be thought of as the girl who was shot by the Taliban, but as the girl who fought for education." To many Americans, this might be an odd statement: why would Malala want to be known for something as basic as schooling - when it is readily available to most boys and girls in many North American and European countries? Human beings are shaped by the complex relationships of their beliefs, historically changing communities, and institutions of the countries in which they live. Their lives are also influenced by the historical, political and social contexts in which they were raised. Because Malala's background and country are so different from ours, the more we learn about the cultural and historical forces that shaped her life, and shape the institutions of education in Pakistan, the better we will be able to appreciate her story and struggle.

What is Secularism?

A secular state is one that is governed by civil laws and authorities, in which the government has a neutral attitude toward all religions. There is no direct link between government institutions and religious authorities, and such a secular government does not interfere with the rights of its citizens to follow different faiths. All are equally protected. Pakistan was originally established as a secular state by its founder, Mohammed Al-Jinnah, but gradually experienced a deepening of Islamic influence in both political as well as social spheres. Eventually, in the nineteen seventies, its political leaders abandoned secularism and it became an Islamic state.

How are women particularly vulnerable during times of war and conflict?

A function of stable institutions is to provide equal protection to the members of a society. Such institutions include schools as well as health, child and elder care. War and conflict disrupt these necessary services and create further disruption by calling men away from their communities, forcing women and children and the elderly to migrate in search of safety and leaving them without resources or protection. Women are left vulnerable to exploitation as well as violence. Rape has been increasingly used as a weapon of war and the women carry the stigma of this violence with them for the rest of their lives. Because all forms of justice traditionally break down during civic and ethnic conflict, women have neither recourse nor access to any form of restitution. Furthermore, the communities frequently disown children born of violent rape and marginalize the mothers for having brought shame and dishonor upon their families.

What are some ways that boy preference and sexism manifests itself around the world?

Boy preference, or the practice of favoring sons over daughters, is a sexist discriminatory practice evident in societies throughout the world. Certain manifestations of boy preference can be observed in the following ways within the home, and in institutions:

Birth of a child: The birth of a son is greeted with celebration, whereas the birth of a daughter can be a cause for mourning. In some parts of the world, women who give birth to sons are honored, whereas women who give birth to daughters are shamed.

Food distribution: Men and boys are served food first; women and girls last. In times of hardship, women and girls may bear the brunt of food scarcity more than men and boys.

Education: With limited resources, a family will invest in the education of a son rather than a daughter since the daughter will inevitably marry, live with her husband's family, and not provide assistance to her parents. Moreover, the predominance of male teachers contributes to the under matriculation of girls, notably in conservative cultures because of prescribed separation of the sexes. In co-educational schools, this sexism leads to boys getting more attention and praise than girls, and being seen as leaders or smarter in math and science, than girls. This unequal treatment affects female students' self-conception and success.

Female Infanticide: The practice of aborting a child based on the desire for a child of a specific gender.

KEY TERMS AND NAMES

The Global South: The term "Global South" replaces the historically derogatory term "Third World". It refers to most nations in Africa, Central and Latin America, and Asia, mostly in the Southern hemisphere. This includes, roughly, 133 countries of the world out of a total of 197. These countries today deal with much political, social, and economic upheaval with limited resources. They face problems like IMF/World bank debt, ethnic conflict, large numbers of displaced and stateless people, gender and ethnic inequality, environmental exploitation, pollution, human rights abuses, and poverty; in some cases like India, their emerging markets promise their people hope for improved quality of life, economic growth, and investment.

Colonization/Colonialism: In the context of this essay, colonization refers to domination, and entails the subjugation of one people to another. It is the practice of one group of people or country establishing political control of a different group or country by settling there (as when the British settled in Australia, North America, and India) for the purpose of the economic and political exploitation of indigenous land, resources, and people.

Partition: When the British left in 1947, they partitioned multi-ethnic India and created two separate countries, India and Pakistan; India was to be a Hindu majority secular state which would include Muslims, Christians, Jews, Parsis, Sikhs and others, while Pakistan would be a Muslim majority country.

Hindus: The term is used to refer to all individuals who profess the Hindu religion.

Sikh: A Sikh is a follower of Sikhism, a monotheistic religion that dates to the 15th century. It originated in the Punjab region of India.

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For more information or to submit feedback about the resource guide, visit malala.gwu.edu.