I AM MALALA:
A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

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

For more information about the resource guide, visit malala.gwu.edu or www.malala.org.
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 begins with learning objectives and a narrative, intended to start the conversation and help plan lessons. The theme then includes individual exercises, group activities, and resources to assist students and instructors in deepening their knowledge of a topic.

**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

*To learn how to purchase the book, visit [malala.gwu.edu](http://malala.gwu.edu).*

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*A Memoir by the Youngest Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.*
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 organised 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, had been waiting for a son and could not hide her joy. To me he seemed very thin and small, and I had been waiting for a son and could not hide my joy. To me he seemed very thin and small, and I had been waiting for a son and could not hide my joy. To me he seemed very thin and small, and I had been waiting for a son and could not hide my joy. To me he seemed very thin and small,” (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,
murdered into her room out of pity; sometimes she got food through
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
Pakistan were 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.

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
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PART 2

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.

PART 3

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.
PART 4

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*


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

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