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## Analyzing Global and Local Media Representations of Malala Yousafzai

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### Abstract

During the War on Terror, when high rates of violence were occurring and schools were being forcefully torn down in Swat Valley of Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai fought for girls' education rights. At just 17 years old, Malala Yousafzai has inspired people around the world with her passion and determination to make sure girls everywhere can get an education. When the Taliban tried to silence her, Malala answered their brutality with strength and resolve. Soon in the international media, she was acclaimed as a brave hero and later honored with a Nobel Prize. She received a mixed response for her efforts in Pakistan. While some praised her, others thought her as an opportunist or believed that there was a Western conspiracy behind her promotion on an international level. This article explores the disparities in media representation of Malala Yousafzai on global and local levels. Employing ethnographic research methods, we bring to light the perceptions of people from her hometown and juxtapose it with those of international media outlets. The article will help understand the complex controversies surrounding Yousafzai's struggle and legacy.

*Keywords:* Malala Yousafzai, Media representation, Reception, Pakistan, Global media, Local media

### Introduction

This article describes Malala's depiction in the local and global media. Various socio-cultural, political, and ideological discourses were used to describe her role at the societal,

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national, and global levels (Ashraf and Jan). Socio-cultural factors, especially in Pashtun society, have a significant influence on the attitude of the Pashtun people about the representation of Malala at the local level. The article focuses on how people perceived and narrated Malala's role in light of different ideological discourses both at the local and global levels. It is important to explore how culture, orientalism, hegemony, and gender ideologies influence the perception of Malala's representation at the global level.

Gender identity is socially constructed and culture has a significant influence on gender identity (Walters, "This Is My Story"). Theories of feminism like liberal feminism, radical feminism, and cultural feminism elaborate the various dimensions of gender inequality (Grivel and Bousquet).

Religious discourses and cultural baggage have left their mark on Pakistani nationalism and gender activism. Due to this, Pakistani women find themselves in a precarious situation by being forced to make decisions that are inextricably linked to the responsibility for determining the honor and dishonor of the entire country (Spivak, qtd. in Sahar).

Various sociological, political, and gender theories could help us to understand the perceptions of Malala. Malala's activism challenged the cultural patriarchy, the hegemony of the state, and put emphasis on women's liberty and rights in Pakistan (Walters, "'Shot Pakistani Girl'"). Moreover, the philosophy of Orientalism (Said) and hegemony of the Pakistani state have a significant influence on her reputation, as her critics view her as fostering Orientalist stereotypes of the East as oppressive to women.

Malala has been portrayed as a symbol of liberty and peace in the Western media, and international media presented her as a symbol of resistance against extremism and patriarchy (Sadaf). The international media consciously projects her as a peace activist to counter the extremist narrative about places in the world where women are deprived of their basic rights. However, the local socio-cultural values of Malala's native society have led to her being viewed in Pakistan as a threat to national integration and cultural values. Moreover, the ideological and national discourses of Pakistan have a significant impact on how Malala is represented (Qazi and Shah; Qazi and Farooq). Hence, this article investigates Malala's representation in light of different socio-cultural, political, and identity discourses as well as how her representation is influenced by the local socio-cultural and political narratives in Pakistan. Moreover, the local perception of people in Malala's hometown is juxtaposed to the international reputation of Malala to understand the realities regarding her political activities and struggle for human rights at the global level.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Various studies have contextualized Malala within a variety of socio-cultural and political narratives in international and local media. This research study investigates the local socio-cultural narrative of Malala's representation in Pashtun society and how these local narratives contradict the global political narratives associated with Malala. This study proceeded with the following research questions:

- How do people perceive and narrate Malala's role in light of different ideological discourses both at the local and global levels?
- What kinds of socio-cultural, political, and ideological narratives have influenced Malala's representation at the local level?

### **Methods and Methodology**

The researchers used the qualitative approach to investigate Malala's representation in her hometown as well as in the international media. An ethnographic approach was adopted to get in-depth information about the issue at hand. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for

six months in different parts of KP-Pakistan, exploring the socio-cultural factors which have the potential to damage Malala's representation at the national level. The different socio-political narratives were analyzed to explore Malala's representation globally as well as in her native Pashtun society. The purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of the respondents, and to collect data from the people who serve the interest of this research study. According to the nature of the research questions, primary data was gathered using qualitative interviews through in-depth interviews to gain in-depth information about the socio-cultural factors which might have influenced people's perceptions of Malala. The primary data were collected from journalists and cultural and political experts to explore Malala's representation in different socio-political contexts.

## Data Analysis

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, we critically review the general trend of prior studies that have studied factors influencing Malala's representation at the local and national level. E-books, journals, and institutional reports are some of the specific sources used in the review. The goal is to go beyond evaluations of prior findings to identify gaps in the literature that indicate areas that need more investigation. We extracted and developed five themes in light of primary data and from the existing literature. The socio-cultural and political factors which might have significant influence on Malala's representation in both global and local contexts are discussed in light of these themes.

### 1. Malala through a Western Perspective

Malala is viewed and analyzed in multiple hegemonic frames—Western, Eastern, Muslim, Pakistani, ethnic, and gender-based (Khurshid and Pitts; Khoja-Moolji). From the dominant Pakistani conspiracy perspective, which may carry some seed of truth, the West has its own biased agenda and representational criteria to represent policies and individuals to the world (Douglas). In the case of Malala, the story ran on every international media channel, portraying a girl whose struggle and efforts no one can deny; however, Western journalism may be accused of appropriating her story to cash in on her fame (Khurshid and Pitts). Nonetheless, the global message about Malala is a positive, affirming one. As one respondent stated:

I picked up a book about Malala in Switzerland and there a lady asked “Do you read Malala?” As I responded that I am from her hometown Swat, she offered me free coffee and huge respect. Perhaps they don't know much about Pakistan, but they definitely know about Swat due to Malala. (Personal communication, 25 August, 2021)

The Western media promotes liberal values and puts emphasis on women and girls' education, particularly in nations where women's rights are not protected. The Western media first reported on a girl in Pakistan's Swat valley being denied an education after her father's all-girls school was closed due to the Taliban's oppressive and backward attitude towards girls' education (Thomas and Shukul). In the two-part documentary named *Class Dismissed: The Death of Female Education* (2009), Mr. Ziauddin Yousafzai, Malala's father, is the focus of the documentary, while Malala is only mentioned in passing. In contrast, Malala is a central character in the documentary *Malala Yousafzai's Story: The Pakistani Girl Shot in Taliban Attack* filmed by Ellick and Ashraf (Ellick and Ashraf).

The Western countries, through diplomatic pressure at the government level, support women's rights. The Malala case has been highlighted to promote women's education and protect women's rights. The Western media promoted her and made her popular at the global level. The West projected her role as an ideal girl to inspire other girls in this part of the world.

This narrative provides the basis for all Western narratives on Malala. Through word choice such as “Malala, the courageous; Malala, the crusader; Malala, the victim; and the Taliban, the zealots; Taliban, anti-women radicals; Taliban, anti-girl education terrorists,” Western messages supporting women’s rights are communicated (Thomas and Shukul). The global agendas of peace, education, gender, development, democracy, and governance are easily recognizable and could be appropriated to nurture already established Orientalist discourses (Thomas and Shukul; Khurshid and Pitts). The Oriental world is represented both culturally and ideologically by employing certain terminologies, vocabulary, and imagery (Shah et al). In addition, Yousafzai's work and Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism are closely aligned because both challenge prevailing stereotypes about the East.

## 2. *Malala, Activist for Women’s Education Rights*

Since the age of 11, Malala Yousafzai has blogged, delivered lectures, and lobbied politicians in reaction to the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Walters, “Shot Pakistani Girl”). Malala’s efforts are associated with the global agendas of peace, democracy, and education. In Malala’s case, she fits the global agenda of gender equality, images of the third world, women’s education, and the contemporary global War on Terror (Ryder). Yet one local respondent stated that Malala had not helped the cause of local women in Swat:

The people believed that she would do something special for the promotion of education in Swat but she failed to live up to the people’s expectations. The majority were particularly frustrated when she did nothing for the women’s education in her hometown as she used to talk about them in the past. (Ali, personal communication, August 24, 2021).

Malala’s projection in the global media serves the interest of the West whose media exaggerates her role for the West’s own strategic and political concerns. She became a global icon (Thomas and Shukul), an international symbol with growing recognition and fame after her projection in the global media. However, Malala is only partially successful in promoting women’s education. One participant disclosed that: “Malala claims that she established a fund for women’s education, but in Swat there is nothing on the ground” (Huma, personal communication, August 25, 2021). Malala has been struggling for women’s education on a worldwide scale, but in her hometown the residents hoped she would take more concrete steps for women’s education. However, the negative propaganda against Malala in Pakistan has undermined their view of her efforts regarding women’s education.

## 3. *Malala, Symbol of Women’s Emancipation*

In an era of intense obsession with Muslim women/girls, Malala has become a symbol of not only Muslim girls’ desired subjectivity, but also Muslim communities’ willingness to embrace modernity (Thomas and Shukul). However, Malala’s popularity as a global icon has been perceived by powerful elites in Pakistan as a threat to their power (Olesen). In Pakistan, the media and public discredited and criticized her in light of socio-cultural and religious ideologies, and the powerful elite created propaganda to damage her popularity. Electronic and print media depicted her role as a threat to cultural values, patriarchy, and national identity.

Malala challenged the cultural values of the Pashtun people, which confine women to indoor activities and deny them access to education. Thus, Pashtun’s cultural narratives influence their perception of Malala and her efforts. She also challenged the patriarchy and male dominance in Pakistan, becoming a symbol of women's empowerment. She inspired many local women who then challenged the patriarchy in Pakistan.

Since the Pakistani state viewed her as a threat to national identity, she was represented as a Western propaganda tool or as an agent of U.S. and anti-Islamic forces across the world (Thomas and Shukul). To slander her, Pakistani media have developed various conspiracy theories to demonize Malala in the name of religion, secularism, and nationalism (Qazi and Shah). Pakistan's coverage of Malala as a threat to cultural values influenced citizens to perceive her negatively and to undermine her pro-women's rights efforts. Kaka describes in his article that Malala means different things to different people (Kakar, "From Malala"). The powerful elites who aim to maintain the status quo deem her a threat to Pakistani and Islamic Pushtun traditions. Likewise, conservative Pakistanis call her a threat to national identity.

In contrast, the liberal media represented her as a softer image of Pakistan to the outside world. This liberal media representation of her aligns with the universal liberal ethos of human rights and aims to problematize the West's view of Pakistan. Thus, her role is highly appreciated among activists who support democracy and human rights not only in Pakistan but also in the Western world (Belal; Khurshid and Pitts; Thomas and Shukul; Qazi and Shah; Sadaf; Shams).

#### 4. *Malala's Presentation as a Counter-Taliban Narrative*

Political groups, both right-wing and left-wing parties, support or oppose Malala for their own political gains. Political parties can easily be tilted toward the popular sentiments of the masses. However, nationalist political parties in Pakistan, particularly Awami National Party (ANP), endorsed her role and presented her as an ideal Pashtun girl. Millions of people around the world endorsed her undeterred commitment to education and saw her as a symbol of social change (Martínez García). However, both the positive and negative perceptions of the local people have been analyzed through ideological lenses. Shehzad Ghias summarized eight anti-Malala arguments which were disseminated on social and electronic media sources. The people of Pakistan argued that hundreds of children have suffered in the War on Terror so why should Malala be the only one receiving recognition? Malala's achievements are questioned under the presumption that the status of women and their education in Pakistan has changed little (Khoja-Moolji). In response to these questions, Ghias writes that many children have suffered "but few of them made a conscious effort to take a stand against the Taliban. Malala did. She was fearless against all the threats on her life."

As Naila Sahar has written in her research article:

Malala has become a one-word trigger for vitriolic anger and malicious suspicion. Pakistanis are split in groups where one group that supports her has the tendency to dismiss criticism of her as an example of cultural backwardness, patriarchal misogyny, religious imbecility, and tribal barbarism that is prevalent especially in Northwestern Pakistan. The other group consists of vocal critics of Malala and many of them are from her hometown. This group also consists of people who Malala symbolically championed: fathers who bore the wrath of the Taliban by allowing their daughters to attend schools, mothers who nursed injured girls beaten by the Taliban, and grandparents who buried granddaughters that were blown apart on their way to school (Sahar).

Still, a significant number of people in Pakistan perceive her as a symbol of courage, bravery, education, and strength (Ashraf). Despite the terrorism and extremism that were prevalent in the region, Malala lifted her voice in support of a just cause. Despite the fact that Malala's hometown was known for militancy and terrorism, she was successful in projecting a positive image of Pashtun girls around the world. Pashtun women are often represented in the national

and global media as docile bodies who lack agency and power to voice their concerns and issues. This media history leads to the conspiracy theory, believed by some people in Pakistan, that Malala's popularity was manufactured by Western media (Thomas and Shukul).

##### 5. *Malala's Symbolism and Perception in Pakistan*

As Naila Sahar has argued in her article in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Malala is seen as a "global symbol of resistance" but not in Pakistan:

In Pakistan, she is seen as someone who aided the political agenda of the West by putting Pakistan in the limelight again for being a dangerous country that is plagued by terrorists. However, one needs to question the extent to which this perception is intensified by the Western media and not by Malala herself (Sahar).

The local media of Pakistan created different conspiracies that Malala was a "Western tool" or "drama," a conspiracy theory which had a significant influence over Pakistani citizens' perceptions of Malala (Walters, "This Is My Story"). The Pashtun social fabric and Pakistani society deem men superior to women who are then confined to their homes and the domestic sphere. Therefore, when Malala attempted to undercut these norms, she challenged the patriarchal social structure and women's oppression (Choudhury). Malala is thought to have fallen victim to fame and jealousy because she hails from quite a humble lower-middle-class family; she is not the daughter of a feudal lord nor does she come from a prominent political family background. Since Malala comes from a lower-middle-class background, the locals in Pakistan do not support Malala's position as a leader (Zia). One of the study participants stated:

The residents of Swat pinned had high expectations from Malala but now they are utterly discouraged as she fails to do anything for her region. Typically, the residents of Swat avoid discussing Malala and those who remember her also speak negatively about her. Her statements also don't have collectivism or any positive message for the girls of Swat; thus none pay any heed to her messages now. (Alam, personal communication, August 15, 2021).

The local populace was persuaded by the political and religious establishment to refute all information pertaining to Malala's attempted murder. They believed that Malala's popularity was a global conspiracy. In Pashtun society, the freedom of women cannot be tolerated and the right-wing religious workers have spread the message that Malala is pushing a foreign agenda, and she is propagating vulgarity in Pakistani society to malign its image. These clerics want to protect their power, and they perceive that Malala's philosophy will challenge the power of the local Mullah (religious clerics) (Patrascu). In extreme cases, negative perceptions led to local leaders and citizens adopting a similar approach and narrative to the Taliban (Kakar, "A Victim of Jealousy"). For example, in response to Malala's narrative, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (Lamb and Yousafzai), author Mirza Kashif Ali published "I Am Not Malala, I Am Muslim, I Am Pakistani," which denounced Malala's memoir and called it anti-Islam and anti-Pakistan. As Naila Sahar has argued:

It was largely believed that the attack on Malala was orchestrated by her father for social mobility and was exploited by the West to support their stance about redeeming the Muslim women from the religiously radicalized and oppressed Third World. Malala's father is famous for his anti-military views and politically liberal ideas...and the Pakistani media saw the injured daughter as a pawn of her father to foster his personal ambitions (Sahar).

In this regard, another study participant stated:

The locals believe that Malala became well-known due to Western media. People think that Western media made her popular for political interest to build a narrative against extremism and local culture. The other two girls were also attacked by the Taliban and they were ignored by the Western media. (Gul, personal communication, February 15, 2020).

People also claimed that the shooting of two other girls by the Taliban--Shazia and Kianat--did not receive attention akin to Malala's. A 2013 *New York Times* article by Seema Jilani discussed the mystery of Shazia and Kianat's position next to Malala during the shooting; however, it was clarified that Malala was the target for assassination (Jilani). This question was answered in a 2015 article in the *Independent*, which also discussed the incredible journey of Shazia Ramazan and Kainat Riaz to receive a scholarship to the Wales UWC Atlantic College (Smallman). Despite these investigations, Pakistani citizens oppose Malala on the basis of culture, religion, and nationalism. Malala counteracts these discourses further by interpreting the Quran in a way that is "progressive on women's issues" (Sahar). A respondent described that "Malala's stance as an advocate for women's education and freedom from cultural tyranny was seen as a danger to the culture by the locals and religious leaders" (Ali, personal communication, February 19, 2020).

Despite various obstacles to Malala, she remained committed to her struggle. Malala obtained global popularity because she worked for women's rights in a region where the local culture and customs do not allow for them. The Malala slogans have the potential to challenge the power of elites and religious forces in Pakistani society who oppose women's rights.

The Pashun people also raised the question as to why Malala does not come to Pakistan. Her reluctance to come to her home country may be attributed to security threats, religious conservatism, and the conspiracy theories circulating among the Pakistani public. Malala is far away from her native country, but still she inspires millions of women across the world. She spoke vividly against the militants on national and international forums and media which takes great courage and boldness (Ford; Henry; Reynolds). However, her recent activist role has changed and she no longer directly engages with political issues and resistance movements against militancy and war in her home country.

Kakar in "A Victim of Jealousy" mentioned that when he tried to discover information from the locals regarding the contributions of the Malala Fund, the locals feared a backlash from the authorities. He writes that on condition of anonymity, the head of an organization working for girls' education said that a secondary school in Swat (Shangla) was supported by the Malala Fund, who gave 60 million rupees to buy the school's land. In 2014–15, the Malala fund also contributed 13,000 US dollars to the Sisters' Home for Internally Displaced Persons in FR Bannu as part of the "education in emergency" project, and it is currently providing 183,000 US dollars to three schools in Upper Swat. It is clear from this report that the local claims that Malala did nothing for education in Pakistan are incorrect.

To celebrate the accomplishments of Malala, Chelsea Dias writes about the "10 Ways Malala Yousafzai Has Changed the World." Among them is Malala's petition, signed by 3 million people, to urge universal primary education for all children around the world. In this petition, she urges the UN to recommit to the Millennium Development Goal 2 (Dias). Similarly, her Malala Fund has achieved financing for education worldwide, not just in Pakistan. She is a role model for children with her fearless yet forgiving attitude as she states, "I don't want revenge on the Taliban; I want education for sons and daughters of the Taliban"



(Yousafzai). Malala further challenges the status quo by speaking publicly for peaceful conflict resolution and challenging systemic illiteracy.

When asked about Malala's effects on the existing power structures and status quo of Pakistani and Pashtun society, the respondents asserted that Malala had little impact. The majority of respondents agreed that there had been no significant improvements to the position of women or girls after Malala and that women's status remains the same as it was before Malala (Kunnummal and Esack). However, Pakistani and Pashtun locals have at least become conscious about Malala and her challenge to the power structure (Syamsiah).

### **Anthropological Construction of Malala Discourse at the National and Global Level**

As discussed earlier, various discourses around Malala have been established, informed, and colored by various ideologies and political agendas. Here, we have tried to situate her agency in the dominant structural and social frames, nationally and globally. Discourse and constructionism, according to Michel Foucault, are associated with power relations in the social order where powerful individuals establish a certain set of parameters, gazes, and spectacles that reflect realities and exercise power over individual subjects (Elliott and Lemert; Said).

To make a case for Malala's construction, it is important to first demarcate among a variety of narratives. According to Edward Said, Orientalist discourses are hegemonic and project Western superiority over Eastern cultures. Using this discourse against Malala, the powerful elites in Pakistan projected her as a tool that the West used to further discourses of Western cultural superiority. The powerful elites who benefit from the status quo in Pakistan demonize her role in order to maintain their hegemony. The construction of Malala's discourse in Pakistan is informed by the interplay of local powerful actors and hegemonic discourses. One respondent stated that "The influential elite also spread false information about Malala. She disputed their account and held that Pakistan's religious and political leaders take advantage of the country's working class" (Iftihar, personal communication March 10, 2020).

Thomas and Shukul describe the dimensions of Malala's construction in Western and Pakistani media, concluding that she was created by the Taliban as much as she was by the West. The first instance of this media identity came as both the West and Pakistan were reporting on the catalyzing conflicts. The Pakistani English print media constructed a Malala-centric narrative that a girl from the conflict area was denied education by the extremists. Contrarily, Western media outlets such as BBC and CNN narrative depicted Malala as a courageous and brave girl who was shot by the Taliban gunmen espousing Islamic ideology. This construction of Malala reinforces the narrative of colonialism along with the dominant narrative of postcolonial Western discourses which depicts "third-world women" entangled in structural inequalities and patriarchal traditions. In the second and third phases of her representation, Malala establishes her own response to the imperialistic approaches, where she presents herself as a moderate Muslim and criticizes some bad and misguided individuals, both Taliban and local people. The Pakistani electronic and print media could not produce an alternate discourse because of conflicting feelings of love and hatred for her efforts, and as of yet, Pakistani media has yet to produce an anti-terrorist discourse about Malala. Malala carries multiple, pluralistic, non-violent Islamic democratic sentiments and presents a moderate image to the global world. Malala plays in the middle of two extremes and works as a double-edged sword in the discourses and narratives of so-called Islamic extremists and Western imperialistic narratives of the war on terrorism. While highlighting Malala's fragility as a young girl in regard to her Muslim history and culture, this media discourse triggers her agency in respect to her potential as an individual. Thus, Malala's status as a global symbol was created by viewing her as an agent in a society where females are weak and oppressed by patriarchy. This article makes the case that by focusing on this media discourse, Malala's status as a global symbol of

girls' education has instead served to reinforce rather than to challenge the predominant perceptions of Islam and Muslim cultures.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Malala is as much a product of the Taliban as she is of the West (Thomas and Shukul). She is, possibly, the only woman in Pakistan's nonpolitical elite to rise above everyday activism and politics. Malala, in 2012, was named as "the sixth most influential thinker in the world" (Ellick and Ashraf; Wittmeyer). The study also concluded that in relation to Malala, most Pakistanis easily fall prey to conspiracy theories and propaganda and have very little or no knowledge about her actual agenda as she is often perceived and described negatively. Malala's representation, constructionism, and discourse is established differently at the local, national, and global level. The local media portrayed her in a frame of conflict with the West, whereas the Western global media used her to make an Orientalist, colonial, and universal frame to construct her narrative. Malala potentially seems to develop a counter-narrative to all these dominant narratives and fit herself in a very moderate and pluralistic post-modernistic frame. Examined with a gender lens, Malala's reception is entangled in the cultural dominance of patriarchy in Pakistan. The study found that she owes little to the existing social structure, but she has challenged the Pashtuns' cultural codes and traditional norms of seclusion and distinction between the private and public spheres. Due to her familial background and moderate ideals, Malala occasionally seems to be the target of publicity and resentment. She has also transgressed gender-biased religious interpretations and societal standards based on religion in Pakistan. She was considered by the locals as having broken Pashtun society's cultural norms.

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