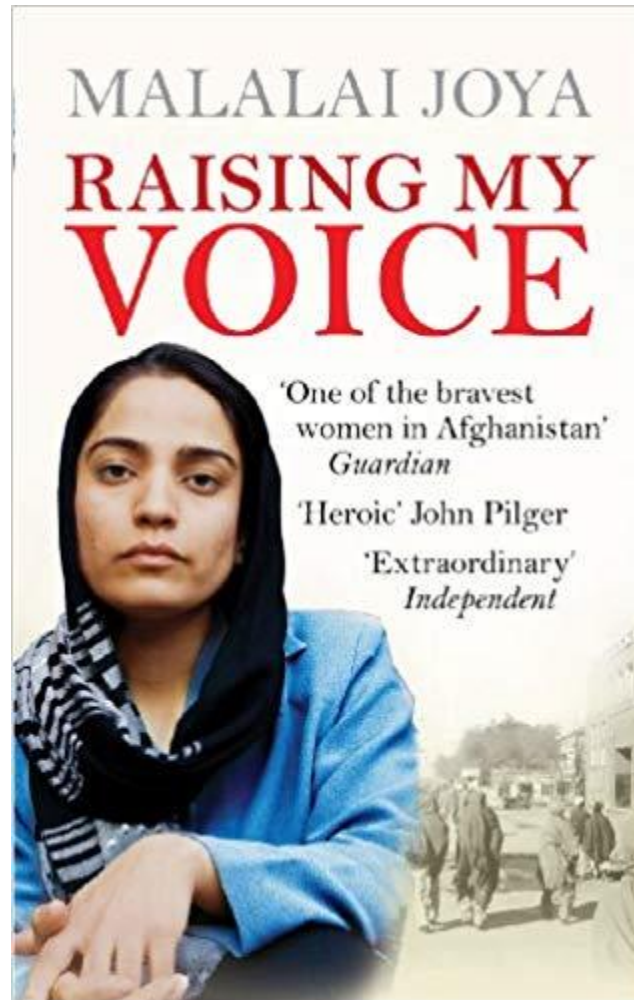


**No Longer Birds with Broken Wings: Grappling against the
Subjugation of the Afghan Woman
A Concrete Introspection of Malalai Joya's *Raising My Voice***

Nisha Thomji Varghese



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Raising-My-Voice-Extraordinary-Afghan/dp/1846041503>

Discrimination of women in the world is still a very real problem. Even though huge strides have been made against it in many Western countries it is still devastating throughout the world. All women deserve a life with the opportunity to be educated, to work, to be healthy and to participate in all aspects of public life. Yet in many parts of the world, women and girls live

within the confines of rigid gender norms, which frequently result in disproportionate access to essential services and major violations of their human rights. But it also seen that women who have been marginalized as “the other” have exhibited resilience and have tried to overcome adverse events and experiences. They have not taken things lying down and have fought tooth and nail, braving all odds to achieve what they believed was right. Malalai Joya from Afghanistan is one such woman who has tried to voice the concerns of the people of her country.

Women in Afghanistan have for many years been depicted as neglected and harassed. They have been pictured as pitiful, ostracized and pushed to the margins. They have been featured as birds with broken wings, voiceless and incapable of experiencing happiness and joy. As portrayed in the media Afghan women are seen as creatures who have to face discrimination and marginalization at the hands of their men folk and also their fundamentalist society. Today the media reports that women's rights in Afghanistan have gradually improved in the last decade under the Karzai administration. The truth is far from it. Malalai Joya in her memoir *Raising My Voice* speaks about the deplorable condition of women in so called democratic Afghanistan. The true situation of Afghanistan has been hidden behind a smoke screen of words and images which have been made up by the U.S and it is only lies that the Western media portrays. They are fooling the world by creating a perfect picture of Afghanistan whereas the truth is not that.

Malalai Joya

Malalai Joya candidly exposes the situation in her country tracing its glorious history where women once enjoyed freedom and liberty under King Amanullah Shah to what it has come to now, controlled by the U.S and NATO forces. She is the epitome of a resilient woman who has dared to voice the truth even when she knows that it can cost her, her life. Her memoir *Raising My Voice,* gives expression “about the plight of the Afghan people from the perspective of a member of my country’s war generation” using her “personal “experiences as a way to tell the political history of Afghanistan, focusing on the past three decades” of what she calls “oppressive rule.”

Noting that many books were written about Afghanistan after the 9/11 tragedy, Joya says that only a few of them offer “a complete and realistic picture” of Afghanistan’s past. Most of them describe in depth the cruelties and injustices of the Taliban regime, “but usually ignore or try to hide one of the darkest periods of our history: the rule of the fundamentalist mujahideen between 1992 and 1996.” Joya, an alias she adopted during the time of the Taliban when she worked as an underground activist, goes on to hope that “this book will draw attention to the atrocities committed by warlords who now dominate the Karzai regime.” She adopts the surname Joya after the Afghan writer Sarwar Joya who struggled against injustice during the early twentieth century. He spent nearly twenty-four years of his life in jails and was finally killed because he would not compromise his democratic principles.

Like Sarwar Joya, she is also not ready to compromise her opposition to the fundamentalists or mellow down her words against them. As she says: “... I, too may join Joya in the long list of Afghans who have died for freedom. But you cannot compromise the truth.

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And I am not afraid of an early death if it advances the cause of justice. Even the grave cannot silence my voice, because there are others who would carry on after me.” (Joya 3)

A Voice of the Voiceless

Malalai describes herself as someone who has become “a voice of the voiceless” by a quirk of fate and history. According to her *Raising My Voice* has been written to offer a complete and realistic picture of Afghanistan’s past. People usually blame the Taliban for the atrocities committed against people especially the women in Afghanistan. Malalai wants to draw the attention of the world to the darkest period of their country’s history, i.e., the rule of the fundamentalist mujahedeen between 1992 and 1996. She calls them the warlords who instigated civil war in the country for their own personal gains. They are the people responsible for turning the beautiful landscape into a “land of tragedy.” She goes on to say that it is these warlords who are the dominant forces in the Afghan parliament. They are just pawns and puppets in the hands of the Americans who are the real rulers of Afghanistan. America does not want to leave Afghanistan for a number of reasons which Malalai enumerates.

The United States is using my country for its own strategic interests. They would like to stay in Afghanistan forever, so they can keep military bases and a presence in the region. Central Asia is a key strategic region, and the United States wants to have a permanent military presence there to counteract China’s influence in particular. The superpower would prefer to keep the situation unstable, so they can stay indefinitely and use and occupy our country as part of a big chess game. (Joya 238)

Another reason why America wants to stay in Afghanistan is because the Central Asian area is very rich in oil and natural resources. To ensure that these resources do not flow through Iran or Russia, the West has started making provisions for a pipeline to be built from Caspian Sea through Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and then on to India and Pakistan. The West wants to use for themselves the untapped natural resources like copper and other metals which are available by the plenty in Afghanistan. The “war on terror” that that America wages over Afghanistan is just eyewash according to Joya. It is just an excuse for intervening and remaining in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan and in the “war on terror” the United States has put some small fish in jail, but only to deceive people. They must target the big fish and the sharks...As I have said, this new Afghan government is not only a photocopy of the Taliban, but some of the prominent figures from that former regime have been recycled and repackaged and now hold positions of power. (Joya 241)

Message of *Raising My Voice*

Raising My Voice has many other messages for the world. There are a lot of false allegations and misinformation being spread about Afghan people who are depicted as terrorists and criminals. Malalai wants to portray to the world “the truth that Afghans are brave and freedom-loving people with a rich culture and proud history, who are capable of defending their independence, governing themselves and determining their own future.” (Joya 4)

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She also wants to tell the world that Afghanistan is caught between superpowers, from the British Empire to the Soviet Empire and to the more recent America and its allies. They have tried to rule Afghanistan by dividing it. All the money and power have been given to fundamentalists and warlords who have driven their people into misery. The U.S led so called war on terror is in actuality a war against the afghan people. The Afghans are not terrorists as portrayed by the Western media but victims of terrorism.

Getting Worse Progressively

Today the western media portrays Afghanistan moving towards progress and women being emancipated, but Malalai says that the situation is getting progressively worse, not just for women but for all Afghans. As Joya puts it

We are caught between two enemies-the Taliban on one side and the US/NATO forces and their warlords' friends on the other. And the dark-minded forces in our country are gaining power with every Coalition air strike that kills civilians, with every corrupt government official who grows fat on bribes and thievery, and with every criminal who escapes justice. (Joya 5)

Rejecting US Occupation

Malalai becomes the mouth piece of every Afghan when she says that it is her greatest desire that the lessons of her memoir would penetrate into the soul of the U.S government and warn them that the people of Afghanistan reject their brutal occupation and their support of the warlords and drug-lords.

Malalai was born in Ziken in Western Afghanistan during the year the Soviet-backed coup changed the history of the country. Ever since as she says, "war is all we Afghans have known". She had a traumatic childhood because her family had to be on the run constantly because her father was part of the mujahideen fighting against the Soviet occupiers. Malalai clearly distinguishes between the two types of mujahideen. In her own words:

It is difficult for outsiders to understand, but our people divide the mujahideen into two types: the real and the criminal mujahideen. In the early days of the Soviet- Afghan War, the majority of those who struggled against the Russian forces called themselves mujahideen- or 'holy warriors'. They were, like my father, Afghan patriots, united to fight against an oppressive invader. The day the Soviet-backed regime of Najibullah finally collapsed on 28 April 1992, the real mujahideen laid down their arms, but it was on this date that the extremists and poer-hungry groups began their civil war. It is these criminals that today we call jihadis to distinguish them from the honourable mujahideen. (Joya 28)

Religion in War

While Joya's father and his comrades fought for freeing their land they never brought religion into their struggle. They had only one agenda-freedom from the Soviet troops whereas

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the rebel leaders who fought against each other for supremacy and power later on let out to the Western media that the fight against the Soviet troops was for Islam. Joya reiterates the fact that religion was used as a tool to let loose a horde of atrocities on the people especially women by the fundamentalist mujahideen or warlords as she calls them.

As soon as the Soviet troops left Afghanistan, civil war broke loose in the country and many warring factions under the leadership of warlords like Gulbuddin Hekmatayar, Ahmad Shah Massoud, Rashid Dostum, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Abdul Ali Mazari blasted Kabul. An interim government was tried to be formed by the other warlords and the Islamic jihad Council led by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi tried to stop the chaos. But the fighting raged on and the militias of these warlords pillaged the city, robbing families, slaughtering and raping women. Thousands of innocent people were slaughtered, and the city of Kabul was almost entirely ravaged. Though ultimately an interim government was formed under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud and Burhanuddin Rabbani, the country was split into fiefdoms ruled by the whims of rival warlords. They ignited an ethnic clash in the country and horrible things were done to the innocent civilians belonging to different ethnic groups. Joya says that since the world media had turned away from Afghanistan after the Soviets left, many of the crimes against people especially women remained undocumented and hidden before the rest of the world. It was during this time that thousands of Afghans including Joya's family fled to refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan.

Oppression of Women Began Before Taliban

Joya recounts in her memoir that the severe oppression, intolerance and brutality of women did not begin with the Taliban rule as the rest of the world believes but during the time of the warlords. And she vents righteous anger against the fact that these same warlords now dominate the American backed, so-called democratic government of Afghanistan. She speaks out how women were deprived of their basic rights under the name of religion and how the warlords closed the doors of the school for girls and even prohibited the sound of women's footsteps. The interim governing council also publicly announced a new set of rules governing the conduct of women called the 'Ordinance on the Women's Veil.' It proclaimed that "A denier of the veil is an infidel and an unveiled woman is lewd". There were other conditions laid down also like women were not perfume themselves, wear adorning, thin or tight clothes, wear clothes resembling men's clothes, go out of their houses without their husband's permission, talk to strange men, walk in the middle of the street and many other such constraints.

In most parts of Afghanistan women now had to wear a burqa because of the fear of being kidnapped, raped and murdered. Young girls were forcibly married to the jihadi commanders. These so-called Muslims married four women in public, which is permitted in Islam, but most of them had more than four wives. They used rape as a weapon to dominate and terrorize people. Their men raped children as young as four, and cut off the breasts of women. There were even reports reaching Pakistan of these criminals raping the dead bodies of women and the old grand-mothers-which is beyond imagination... It was not only the women who were made the victims, but men were also subjected to rape and abduction. Whenever people raised their voices against injustice, they were either

insulted and beaten or killed...The Amnesty 1995 report was simply titled ‘Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights Catastrophe’ (Joya 32-33)

Access to Education

Joya remembers with gratitude how she was given access to education in the refugee camps because her parents were insistent on that. She later on became part of an NGO and started literacy classes for adult women. Her stints in the different refugee camps were an eye opener to the various kinds of sufferings women underwent. There she realized the power of education and how empowering it could be. She read voraciously and was determined to transmit knowledge to the poor downtrodden Afghan women, so as to empower them and make them aware of their rights. Reading biographies of people like Gandhi, Che Guevara, Patrick Lumumba, Nelson Mandela and the like gave Joya the much-needed courage and determination to fight against the injustice rampant in her beloved country. She realized “the importance of fighting to the end even when the odds are stacked against you.” (38)

Full-time Activist

Joya joined the organization called OPAWC (Organization for Promoting Afghan Women’s Capabilities) in 1998 as a full-time activist. By this period the Taliban had overthrown the warlords and taken over Afghanistan. Though they had promised security to the people of the country, “their security was like the graveyard.” (Joya 39) They kept repeating the atrocities that had been committed by their jihadi brothers. Strict rules and repressive medieval measures were introduced in the name of religion. OPAWC were planning to send someone to the Herat province of Afghanistan to start underground classes for girls in defiance of the Taliban and Malalai was the natural choice as she had been handling literacy classes for women in the refugee camps.

It was on her return to Afghanistan Malalai started exhibiting resilience and pertinacity. She was determined to restore the rights of her people even if it meant treading on dangerous waters. She adopted the burqa not because she wanted to comply with the orders of the Taliban but because it helped to hide school books and other forbidden objects under the long blue robes. She also befriended neighbourhood girls and they rebelled against the Taliban in many ways. They would gather together and dance together to amuse themselves. They would secretly dress up in Western-style clothes and even put make up under the burqa. All this had been forbidden by the Taliban. Schools were set up for girls in the basements of certain homes and this was done carefully and with lot of secrecy. Many times, such schools were discovered and the inmates punished and tortured but this never prevented people from starting at a new place. Since television had been banned by the Taliban, Malalai says how she and her five sisters watched the movie *Titanic* at a neighbour’s place. It was all done in secret. She remembers how on many instances the common Afghan people stood with each other to trick the Taliban.

Though it was really dangerous teaching at an underground girls’ school, Joya never even for once thought of giving it up. She had close shaves many a time but she was determined to fight. In 2001, she was named the director of OPAWC in Western Afghanistan which came as a big responsibility. It was in that year in September that the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon were attacked. Within days the American invasion began and for the Afghans the next disastrous

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period began. Thousands of innocent people lost their lives as a result of gunfire, mortars, aerial bombings and explosive devices.

War and War Lords

In the first years after Afghanistan was invaded, as they removed the oppressive regime of the Taliban and many promises were made, many people seemed sympathetic to the American and allied forces. But America had its own agenda. In Joya's memoir she paints a very candid picture about the U.S. They had supported the Taliban initially because they had made a deal with them for an energy pipeline through Afghanistan. Later when the Taliban, who had been offering sanctuary and support to the Saudi Osama bin Laden, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri and their foreign al-Qaeda supporters, turned against them, the CIA turned its attention to the warlords especially Ahmed Shah Massoud and started financing him to get rid of Laden. Though Massoud was killed before 9/11, when America established its base in Afghanistan, all the other warlords who had plundered the country during the civil war returned and the Western media tried to portray these warlords as "anti-Taliban resistance forces and liberators of Afghanistan".

As soon as the warlords returned they started a new wave of crime and brutality. They returned to their old habits of using rape to punish their victims and reward their fighters. They started attacking the ethnic group Pashtuns, rampantly raping the women. They justified these heinous crimes by simply stating that because the Taliban were Pashtuns, all Pashtuns had to be punished. Afghans also believe that the transitional government set up by the Americans with these warlords in power was the beginning of a new era of destruction. From then on, the country of Afghanistan has gone from worse to worse. Though a Loya Jirga was held, though so-called democratic elections took place, though a new president was elected, though a parliament was constituted, nothing changed for the common Afghan man and especially the Afghan woman.

It was during these bleak times and hopeless situation that Malalai once again emerged as a powerful voice in her beloved land. She started an orphanage, tried to educate girls and started voicing her protests against the injustice being meted out her fellow Afghans. Because she won the favour of the common Afghan people she was chosen to represent her province at the Loya Jirga. She boldly exposed the crimes of the warlords and demanded that they should be brought to trial. This fiery speech earned her the ire of the fundamentalists and from then on she knew her life would always be in danger. But that never deterred her. As she says "...I also began to realize just how much words are popular weapons and that I had to continue speaking the truth for the sake of the Afghan people who have silenced for long." (Joya 86)

Women are Marginalized

Women had always been marginalized in Afghanistan. And there was no change in that situation even after the American government established the so called democratic government.

"One of the reasons that my speech had sparked such a rabid reaction is the fact that I am a woman, and a young one at that. For fundamentalists, a woman is half a human, meant only to fulfill a man's every wish and every lust and to produce children and toil in the

home. They could not believe that a young girl was tearing off their masks in front of the eyes of the Afghan people.”(Joya 86)

Religion was misinterpreted by the fundamentalists to deny equal rights to women. The Taliban and the warlords had been for many years twisting Islam to oppress women and justify their crimes. Many men thought that they could use women and girls like property and they justified this by using the excuse of religion, or sometimes what they believed was “Afghan culture.” Women couldn’t get divorces even when the fault lay with the man. Rape victims were shunned by their own communities because of “the shame they brought to their families.” Fathers were brutal to their own daughters because a daughter was considered a piece of property. All this was because as Malalai says, “the results of three decades of male chauvinism justified by cherry-picking quotes from the Holy Quran and twisting Islam.”(Joya 107)

Resilience

But women also displayed a great sense of resilience in the face of terror. Malalai had sparked off a revolution of change and courage and thousands of Afghan women fanned the spark of resilience into a great fire of indefatigability. Women were ready to risk their lives to defend the honour and dignity of other women. Like Malalai says “we were our sisters’ keepers.” Malalai had made the women of Afghanistan understand that the key to their freedom was in their own hands, so they dared to be brave and prepared to make sacrifices to remove the obstacles in their path. To quote her, “Afghan women are like sleeping lions who when awakened... would play a tremendous role in any Afghan social revolution.” They were not passive and were capable of standing up for their rights.

Because of being outspoken and bold, Malalai has had to face many threats including assassination attempts. She has no private life and has to always have body guards escort her. She cannot go out with a friend even to do a simple thing like have an ice-cream. Her wedding had to be conducted with no fanfare and her husband’s name also cannot be revealed. She has to keep on changing her place of residence off and on to avoid getting killed by her enemies. But all this has never deterred her. She has met high level diplomats and boldly and unflinching spoken up against the American interference in deciding matters for her country. She has voiced her concerns about violence, poverty and women’s rights in Afghanistan at global meets. She has tried to dispel the very bad image of Afghan culture that has been propagated by the fundamentalists and by foreign powers. She has tried to expose the corruption of the warlords and call for their prosecution for their heinous crimes. She has been elected as an M.P but has been expelled from the Parliament for voicing the truth. She has been defamed by the press many a time. She has never even once thought of seeking asylum in another country, because as she says, “I can never leave when all the poor people of Afghanistan that I love are living in danger and poverty... I am just one among many who are willing to sacrifice their lives to allow the brightness of liberty to shine in my poor country.” She has tried to let the world know that the burqa is not the most important problem that Afghan women face. Without security or a justice system that protects women from rape, without employment, food and basic services, the issue of the burqa is irrelevant. She has won the prestigious Anna Politkovskaya award in 2008. She has tried to portray to world that even after eight years of intervention by the United States and

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NATO, women's rights have not been brought to Afghanistan, and they have achieved neither democracy nor justice. She has brought to light the fact that her country has lost everything the past four decades. Even today she lives under the shadow of the gun, with the most unpopular and corrupt government in the world.

Situation Will Change

But Malalai believes that this situation will change. She knows she might be killed but she has chosen to follow the glorious past of hundreds of heroes and heroines of her history who have stood by their people to the end and preferred to be killed rather than be silenced. She is the epitome of resilience. She displays the capability to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change

As I often say, there are many others to follow me. Afghans are more than just a handful of warlords, Taliban, drug-lords and lackeys. I have a country full of people who know and believe what I believe: that we Afghans can govern ourselves without foreign interference. That democracy is possible here but can never be imposed at gunpoint. That the blood of millions of freedom loving martyrs runs through our veins, and their memories live on in every corner of our country. That Afghan women have been at the forefront of our struggle throughout our proud history. Like Malalai of Maiwand, they inspire us to pick up our flag and carry on the struggle for justice and freedom. It is a battle we will never surrender. (Joya 271)

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