

Sanctifying Malala: The Nobel Prize and Moral Alibis

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Drones Kill So Malala Can Live. Sign at a vigil, Pakistan, noted in The Nation, Oct 10, 2014

There were two recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize this year – the rather less known Kailish Satyarthi and near celebrity cherished Malala Yousafzai. In awarding the prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee deftly ignored the perceived frontrunner, Pope Francis. Il Papa will have to wait his turn.

Those getting it will always be marred by the contradictions any peace prize suggests. The greatest of all remains the fact that the dynamite guru – Alfred Nobel himself – did as much for the cause of war as he decided his profits would supposedly do for peace. Peace was a sentimental afterthought. Many winners of the prize have since kept this legacy alive: that of war maker turned peace maker; a fair share of hypocrisy, with a good share of feigned sincerity.

Satyarthi doesn't seem to suffer those problems. He made his name targeting the persistent use of child-labour in India. In the business of freeing slaves, it is hard not to admire efforts that saw the freeing of over 80,000 children from a state of servitude.[1]

In contrast, the photogenic seventeen-year old Pakistani, Malala Yousafzai, is both the prop of an agenda, and the cause of a program. In 2012, she received life threatening wounds to the head from the Taliban for her stance on girls' education in the SWAT valley. In suffering those injuries, she gave a problem a face and voice. She is also the perfect poster girl for Western middle-class anxieties, one which Zeynep Tufekci has described as "finding a young woman we admire that we all want to take home as if to put on a shelf to adore." [2]

What of, argues historian Sarah Waheed, the Malalas you do not see?[3] They are very much the victims of a dysfunctional relationship between Pakistan and the United States, one that is all too brutally characterised by the continued use of drone strikes and bundles of US aid. "Unlike Malala Yousafzai... Madonna did not dedicate a song to them, nor has Angelina Jolie spoken out on their behalf." They are the faceless ones, the sort that celebrities so conspicuously resist. Malala, on the other end, is ideological candy for the morally outraged in Hollywood and beyond. She did, after all, survive.

The congratulatory tone is invariably gushing, and the Malala cheer squad is both heavily staffed and noisy with inspirational snippets. Dominique Mosbergen, writing in The Huffington Post, gives eight reasons why Malala "is an inspiration to us all." [4] What are some of them? Bravery, for one. Another: tremendous compassion. Importantly, Malala has to be seen as a universal figure, rather than one with particular aptitude in dealing with problems of education in her own country. "Malala advocates for young women everywhere."

Malala may well strike fear into the gun men of the Taliban. She may well terrify, in her own specific way, the theocrats who stand guard over jaundiced traditions and archaic law. “Armed men run scared of an unarmed girl.” But something else is at work in what seems to be a form of witting, and unwitting deification. It ignores, for instance, that she is being perceived in some quarters of her country as a symbol of Western sponsored interference. (This takes the form, most blatantly, in the charge that she is a product of the CIA doll factory.)

Malala, in what is becoming something of a sanctification project, risks falling into the role of a moral cipher for a range of other causes in a global battle that is both political and cultural. She is a moral reminder, but also an alibi for actions taken under the cover of improvement. She has become a politicised Shirley Temple, a child politician of the developing world. Her life under Taliban rule – which she no longer experiences by virtue of her move to Britain – is becoming the cudgel to use, be it in her statements against the Taliban, or her general pronouncements on the BBC reflecting on those harrowing experiences under their rule.

This is the tragedy of politics and morality – at a certain point, manipulation is unavoidable, be it through its own self-justifying propaganda, or basic sloganeering. The public relations watchers have quickly noted the “important binary” of selecting “a Pakistani Muslim” and “an Indian Hindu”. “Their joint selection,” argues Elias Groll in *Foreign Policy*, “is an obvious nod towards the ongoing efforts to bring a peaceful end to Pakistan and India’s long-standing conflict with one another”.^[5]

Weapons get sharpened in the name of what perceived justice is – even some of Pakistan’s liberal elite have allied their interests with US drone strikes aimed for a higher good.^[6] The funding institutes get busy. The think tank circuits issue invitations. A drooling press corps, and a hyperventilating blogosphere, finds in Malala another child crusader. Her quotes are tweeted like a bestselling manual of self-help instructions – “12 powerful and inspiring quotes”. Editor of the *Pakistan Observer*, Tariq Khattak, sees the crudest form of branding at work. In his words to the BBC Newshour, Malala’s “father is a good salesman, that’s it. And the daughter has also become a salesgirl. And they are dancing on the tunes of the West.”^[7]

There is the other side of the peace and education crusade. It is the political mettle that is coming to the fore, a cool yet discerning sense that she is becoming a figure in the folds of a contradictory history. Malala, over time, has matured into a moving advertiser of causes, even telling CNN’s Christiane Amanpour that she intends leading Pakistan. “Through politics, I believe I can serve my whole country.”

That maturity, however, is in an ever problematic dance with Malala the emblem – one that European and American voices can use in their cultural causes against other states even as villages get struck by the lethal work of drones. Sainthood and martyrdom tend to be poor tools for measuring actual change.

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Notes:

[1]http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/10/will_malala_s_nobel_prize_backfire?utm_source=S

[ailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2AEditors%20Picks&utm_campaign=2014_EditorsPicks10%2F10RS](#)

[2] <http://technosociology.org/?m=201310>

[3]

http://www.thenation.com/article/170920/malalas-you-dont-see?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=socialflow

[4]

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/10/malala-nobel-peace-prize-inspiration_n_5966180.html?&ncid=tweetInkushpmg00000067

[5]http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/10/will_malala_s_nobel_prize_backfire?utm_source=ailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2AEditors%20Picks&utm_campaign=2014_EditorsPicks10%2F10RS

[6]

http://www.thenation.com/article/170920/malalas-you-dont-see?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=socialflow

[7] <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/10/10/3578820/malala-yousafzai-nobel-prize/>

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