

1 In 2007, Somali-born Dutch author Ayaan Hirsi Ali published 'Infidel', an autobiography that documented her journey from repression in Muslim East Africa to the freedom of the Netherlands. To be free, Hirsi Ali claimed, Muslim women must renounce their faith and their cultures. Rife with awe-struck veneration of the empowered West, Hirsi Ali's recipe for liberation for Muslim women was eagerly consumed. The book became a New York Times best-seller and its author a celebrity. Not long after, Hirsi Ali collaborated on a film that further pushed her point and featured her naked silhouette in the rituals of Muslim prayer. Extremist clerics in various parts of the Muslim world denounced her as a heretic, bolstering Hirsi Ali's royalties.



In 2013, the world got to know Malala Yousafzai, a schoolgirl from Pakistan who has won the Nobel Peace Prize for championing for girls' education.



2 On Oct. 8, 2012, Malala, then 15, was a student at one of the few girls' schools in the Swat Valley, in the country's north. On an otherwise uneventful afternoon, Malala, whose family had received threats from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) for continuing her education, got into the Toyota van that transported the girls to and from school. Minutes later, it was accosted by Taliban gunmen; (they asked for Yousafzai by name) and shot her. Her skull was fractured, and she nearly died.



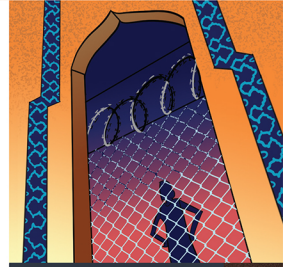
3 For Muslim girls and women around the world, however, the story is more than just a tale of survival. In Malala's story is the proof that feminism, or the desire for equality through education and empowerment, is not the terrain of any one culture or faith. In Malala's book, 'I am Malala', we are introduced to historic figures that don't often feature in mainstream discourses about Islam and feminism.



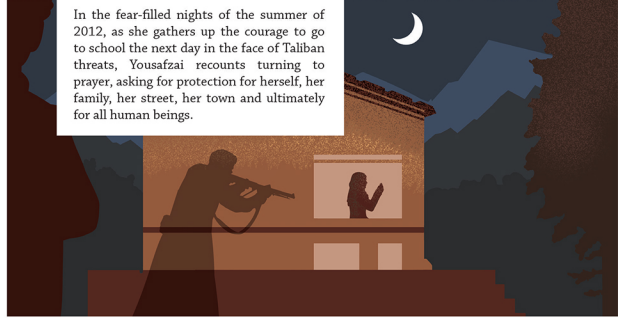
4 Here we meet Malalai of Maiwand, a Pashtun heroine of old, for whom Yousafzai was named. She rallied Pashtun men to fight the invading British, venturing bravely onto the battlefield and dying under fire. We are also introduced to Gul Makai, another Pashtun heroine, who used the Quran to teach her elders that war is bad. It was under her name that Yousafzai wrote her first published work, the diary of a schoolgirl banned from school in a Swat controlled by the Taliban. In the legend, Gul Makai is able to convince her elders of the evils of conflict; she marries her love, a schoolmate.



5 In the renunciation narrative of ex-Muslim women like Hirsi Ali, persecution is a justification for abandoning culture and homeland, deeming those contexts too stubbornly patriarchal to be the venue of empowerment. Malala's story exposes the error of these assumptions; with confidence, she not only embraces faith and culture but also critiques them. When telling the story of a girl married at 10 years of age to an old man, she says, "I am very proud to be Pashtun, but sometimes our code of conduct has a lot to answer for, especially in its treatment of women."



In the fear-filled nights of the summer of 2012, as she gathers up the courage to go to school the next day in the face of Taliban threats, Yousafzai recounts turning to prayer, asking for protection for herself, her family, her street, her town and ultimately for all human beings.

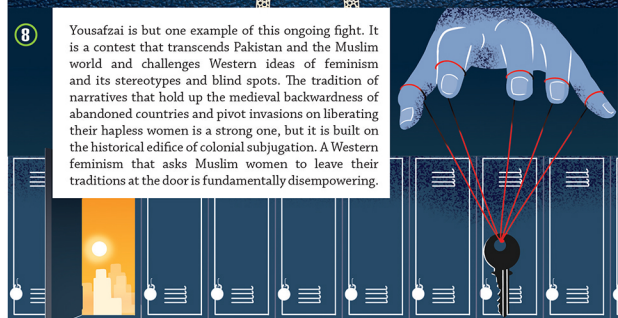


6 "The Taliban think we are not Muslims, but we are," she says. "We believe in God more than they do, and we trust him to protect us." Yousafzai's story reveals the everyday details of a battle that millions of Muslim girls around the world are fighting every day.



7 It is a world in which the threats of violent extremists must be borne with courage, even when they do not yield fame or notoriety; in which there are fathers, brothers and husbands who support women's struggle; in which faith strengthens resistance and culture undergirds identity. Their battles for emancipation have authentic vocabularies all their own that communicate paths for empowerment that at some times intersect and at others veer from the paths of their traditions. Their victories lie not in renunciation but in resistance and reclamation of faith, culture and public space.

8 Yousafzai is but one example of this ongoing fight. It is a contest that transcends Pakistan and the Muslim world and challenges Western ideas of feminism and its stereotypes and blind spots. The tradition of narratives that hold up the medieval backwardness of abandoned countries and pivot invasions on liberating their hapless women is a strong one, but it is built on the historical edifice of colonial subjugation. A Western feminism that asks Muslim women to leave their traditions at the door is fundamentally disempowering.



9 In Yousafzai, we have a teenage Pakistani girl who looked straight in the face of terror and came back to tell her story. Her book bears the message that the desire for empowerment is universal but amenable to many paths. The day before Yousafzai's book was released, the TTP vowed to bomb every bookstore in Pakistan that dares to sell it. Again and again, the Taliban have vowed to kill her if she dares to return to her beloved Swat.

Yet at the end of her book and in almost every interview she has given, Yousafzai repeats this message: "I know I will return" — and she certainly will.

