

When Idols Turn to Sand: How the West Nearly Killed Malala Yousafzai

by Matthew Snow

The Buddhist figures towered over the Bamiyan valley in the heart of Afghanistan – their hooded eyes long since sheered from their faces and precious stones long since plundered from their antique beauty. Yet, there they stood, seemingly eternal. The Buddhist statues were once representations of a by-gone era harkening to the days of the Silk Road, but by early 2001 they were offensive representations of sin. By March of 2001, they were representations of western contempt. As the Taliban regime announced the plan to destroy the images, the international community responded through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's fundraising. This was perceived as an offer that attempted to capitalize on Afghanistan's depressed economy – ironically exacerbated by the imposition of United Nations sanctions.¹ As the Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaef, recounts in his memoir, "the issue of the statues became more than just a religious matter."² It was a matter of international meddling, and daring a culture that is obliged to accept any challenge. The west had changed the symbol of the Buddhas for the Pashtun Taliban, altering it from a benign historical artifact into a malignant solicitation from the western world. Had they accepted money to spare the statues, they would have been little more than prostitutes in the Pashtun culture. Or worse, they would be *daus* – a man so devoid of honor and so powerless he allows other men to sleep with his wife. It is the utter state of honor bankruptcy. In response to insult, the world watched as the ancient relics disappeared in plumes of black smoke and shouts of "God Is Great."

In 2009, the world began carving a new statue in the feminine form. She was built from the raw materials of the Pashtun heartland, and forged in Swat Valley of Pakistan's lawless Northwest Frontier Province. It took four years of international attention, awards and prestige to refine her into a western symbol, but only one fateful moment and a single bullet to take it away. Though the Tehrik Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) physically squeezed the trigger, it was unscrupulous self interest that oriented the barrel, and ultimately, it was the culturally-misguided and media-sensationalized western influence that directed the bullet into fourteen year old school activist, Malala Yousafzai.

Swat has always been as conflicted as it is beautiful. The snow capped peaks lurching toward the heavens above landscapes shrouded by waterfalls and evergreen forests have cradled "northern savages impelled by fanaticism" long before Sir Winston Churchill denounced them. In his 1897 dispatches from the front as a war correspondent for *The Telegraph*, Churchill chronicled the northwestern uprising led by the Mad Fakir of Swat and a handful of teenage boys.³ The Mad Fakir convinced the local population that he was in the company of divine hosts and possession of heavenly powers. In fact, he only had to throw a stone into the Swat River which would produce the effect of a bullet on a British soldier – a feat as proven as Schrodinger's Cat. Far be it from the

villagers to challenge faith in the power of divinity: by the time he advanced on the British outpost in Chakdara, the Mullah's rhetoric had swollen his ranks to thousands of Pashtun tribesmen armed with primitive flintlocks and swords. A four day siege of the garrison followed but was quelled with the arrival of British reinforcements; however, no sooner had the Chakdara insurrection been quelled than an Afghan Saint, the Mullah of Hadda, declared jihad in the Mohmand territory just west of Swat.⁴ Each jihad was led by popular Sufi Mystics; however, they were jihad in name only. Each had little to do with religion other than pretext and everything to do with defense of the Pashtun way of life. Pashtuns are often identified by the *Pashtun Wali*, the ancient code outlining their tribal ethics; however, defiance is one of their greatest virtues to never grace its tenets. Only God and a Pashtun's father may tell him what to do. In the cases of the early uprisings against British colonialism to present-day rages against encroaching westernism, the natural fears of change are easily flared by Holy rhetoric demanding a way of life that coincides with the traditional Pashtun culture. Just as the Mullah of Hadda was actually indignant of the Hindu control of the Shankarghar bazaar, the Mad Fakir was likely reviled by officers of the Royal Crown settling tribal disputes among the local Pashtuns.⁵ These were changes in the traditional power dynamics and influence within strict tribal societies – notions easily capitalized on by holy men with proclamations that the usurpers of power were un-Islamic.

The relevance of the historical context is similar to the events preceding the attempted assassination of Malala Yusefzai which, like the Buddhist statues, had very little to do with radical Islam. Though the TTP of Swat did issue an edict closing schools for girls in the valley, it was an act not sanctioned by the leadership of the movement. While leaders of the TTP attempted to distance themselves from the proclamation, Mullah Omar, the uncontested leader of the Afghan Taliban, issued the statement, "We do not agree with the ban on education in Swat...We are in contact with Maulana Fazlullah and we hope an announcement to withdraw the decision will be made soon on his FM radio."⁶ This pertinent statement came from a man whose response to international pleas for the protection of millennia old Buddhist statues came in the form of rocket-propelled grenades, dynamite and the statement: "On the Day of Judgment all of these mountains will turn into sand and fly into the air. And what if these statues in this shape go before Allah? What face, then, will Mullah Omar show to God?"⁷

Mullah Omar has never been known to compromise his honor or perceived piety at the behest of international scrutiny, which certainly lends to the authenticity of his opposition to the edict put forth by the local band of Swat Taliban. Had this opposition been properly harnessed, the situation might have been resolved before it ever began by working through an established power structure and possibly bridging the gap between Islamabad, the Afghan Taliban, and the TTP in what could have been the grassroots of a peace process. Unfortunately the mass media largely ignored Omar's response in favor of a different way to perpetuate the story.

Mirza Waheed was the editor of BBC's Urdu website at the time who was seeking an "ordinary person" to report about life under Taliban rule when his reporter, Abdul Hai Kakkar approached him with an idea.⁸ Kakkar felt that Pakistani reporting had become "cliché" and wanted to give it a

new edge by utilizing a school girl to journal her experiences for publication. Malala's father, Ziauddin, was a school principal in Swat when he was approached by Kakkar, and offered his own eleven-year-old daughter. Though Ziauddin was open to Malala using her own name, BBC had the foresight to demand a pseudonym for her protection.⁹ Ziauddin, ever the promoter, tentatively agreed, though the previous year he prompted her to give a speech entitled "How dare the Taliban Take Away My Basic Right to Education" to a crowd in Peshawar (Cooke). Perhaps she was foreshadowing the winter break of 2009, but more likely she was parroting the party line for her father's transcendence into politics. Ziauddin had already brokered a deal with the *New York Times* to simultaneously film a documentary.¹⁰

From January to March, BBC capitalized on the eleven-year-old's perception of the TTP's school closure which coincided with the customary winter break, and published her entries over a ten-week period on their Urdu blog under the name Gul Makai. For some thirty-two entries, the simple school girl would transform into the young heroine and the "voice of Swat" as she pined for school over the break and speculated pessimistically about the possibility of it reopening.¹¹ However, as the winter break came to an end and regular school started again, secondary school-aged girls were not initially allowed to attend until two weeks later.¹² Following the school re-opening, the TTP brokered a peace deal with the Pakistani government which received international disdain with some western nations, namely the United States, criticizing the move as proof of Pakistan's "very fragile" government.¹³ With no nation ever benefitting from being viewed as weak, particularly one with a nuclear enemy living next door, Pakistan rebutted the claim with the second Swat offensive at the slightest transgression of the two month old peace accord.

During the second offensive, Adam Ellick's *New York Times* documentary *Class Dismissed* showcased not just closure of schools in Swat, but the closure of Swat in general as an estimated one million villagers fled the Pakistani Army's artillery and maneuvers for safer cities and camps for the internally displaced.¹⁴ *The New York Times* and Ziauddin did their best to package the exodus as escape from the TTP, but other evidence was clearly captured in the film. The cameras rolled as schools were converted into hasty fortifications for Pakistani soldiers, buildings exploded with the impact of their artillery, and four hundred *suspected* insurgents were tortured, killed, and displayed.¹⁵ However, toward the end of the film, Malala sits with President Obama's Special Representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan asking for American assistance with education.¹⁶ The impact of the scene is meant to capture Malala's determination and reinforce the notion that the education system is under Taliban threat, though an attentive viewer could note that Ziauddin complains early in the documentary that only a third of his students paid tuition to his private school that month,¹⁷ and he would gain most from foreign investment in the area's education, just as he would have gained a hundred thousand Euros had Malala actually won the International Children's Peace Award.¹⁸

Though 2009 was a prolific year for Malala Yousefzai, by its end, her father was only getting started. Malala appeared on Pakistani television shows and interviewed for the *Toronto Star* where she was portrayed by Ziauddin as the little girl who highlighted rights abuses with her blog and stood in defiance of the Taliban.¹⁹ The Institute for War and Peace Reporting, who groomed Malala

throughout the blogging endeavor, capitalized on her sudden rush of fame and packaged her for the public as an inspirational tool to stimulate similar responses through their Open Minds project.²⁰ Malala's image was growing and taking a shape of its own. She was becoming the magnitude of a stone relic carved in a mountainside, and the wrong people were beginning to notice while the people responsible for her wellbeing continued to sell the tickets to her spectacle. By late 2011, international and national nominations for awards began to roll in and cemented her visage in the Pakistani public.²¹ The TTP watched in 2012 as people began to worship her with schools renamed in her honor, meetings with politicians, and claims of starting her own political party.²² Despite what many may consider exploitation, Bene Sheppard of Human Rights Watch claims that it would not be "fair to say that she had been pushed forward in a dangerous way. No one really expected this would happen."²³ The possibility that danger was also the basis of BBC's demand that she use a pseudonym, but more importantly to deny danger is to deny the entire basis of her bravery, and the fiery courage that endeared her to the world—because the gun was always there, but the finger was beginning to curl around the trigger.

The parties involved shirk any form of responsibility for the tragedy, but the nagging guilt lies buried in the statements that their good-natured consciences refuse to accept. Kakkar at length expressed that it could have been avoided if everyone stuck to the pseudonym, but Ziauddin wanted to submit Malala for the International Children's Peace Award²⁴ which she only placed runner-up.²⁵ However, in the same interview, Kakkar said he feared the "eventuality" of her assassination. He was not alone. Ellick claims that he tried to talk Ziauddin out of the documentary, but the child's father remained insistent.²⁶ This runs counter to Human Rights Watch advocate Bene Sheppard's statement that no one could have foreseen the impending tragedy, though these statements only serve to distance those who lauded Malala, encouraging her from the safety of stable countries from the moral culpability of their complicity in her assassination attempt.²⁷ Perhaps the most complicit unwitting conspirator was her own father who at every opportunity to protect his daughter, Ziauddin only raised her above his head to be better seen.

Ameer Ahmed Khan, the head of BBC Urdu takes his stance a little more openly. In his interview with *Time* magazine, he thinks: "If I was to sit here at my desk today and think, oh my God, if we hadn't found her, this would never have happened, that would actually mean that I am not taking into account the contribution that children like Malala make to a cause that we so strongly believe in."²⁸

It is beautiful and almost idyllic to believe such a sentiment, but it is intentionally misleading. BBC did not just find Malala, they manufactured her in the fashion that the *studio system* of classical Hollywood stamped out the sultry starlets of its Golden Age—with fabricated public relations and on screen personae. This can be observed in Khan's statement that he was thrilled with the "way she was writing." He claimed it was "very, very fresh, untainted, and straight-from-the-heart take one what was going on."²⁹ The statement compliments Kakkar's notion that prior reporting in Pakistan had become stale and what he offered was new and different. Mirza Waheed explains of the process, "Malala passed on hand-written diary pages to our reporter [Kakkar] and he would scan

and e-mail or fax them to me. I would edit it to retain its directness, its raw texture, and at times, as I edited her, I would well up.”³⁰ This all seems legitimate until Kakkar’s interview with the *International Herald Tribune* where he explains that he would simply call Malala for thirty minutes every day and have her narrate what she “saw, felt, or heard that day.”³¹ It becomes clear that the writing so raw that it enamored the world was not written by an eleven year old school girl, but by a professional journalist, then edited by Waheed, and published by Khan.³² All the while, Malala’s father took the steadfast role as public relations manager, soliciting documentary makers and international accolades to keep his special daughter relevant in the international community, and offer him the soap box for his political lunge.

Whether the motive was profit-driven or to draw attention to the region is irrelevant. The individuals involved encouraged her as though she were merely an actress in a film; as though shouts of *cut* could stop villains from firing blank rounds. And now their accolades roll like an epilogue before the final credits. Kakkar currently resides in Prague, where he works for a radio station in relative safety.³³ Waheed is now able to live as full time novelist.³⁴ Khan still enjoys the BBC Urdu department head, but now with more laurels and relevance.³⁵ Adam Ellick, who filmed the experience, received the New York Times Publishers Award and The Daniel Pearl Award while contending as a finalist for the prestigious Livingston Award for journalistic excellence.³⁶ Ziauddin finally received the soapbox he desired with his new five-year diplomatic posting as education attaché in Birmingham, England.³⁷ However, Malala was blessed with the greatest gift – that of life. With life came a lesson of symbols, and the dangerous perception they can hold. She has since rejected an award from President Obama and requested that the school once named in her honor be rescinded. She does not want other girls to be targeted.³⁸ She does not want her name used to make them into symbols.

When the world should have viewed her as a child, they made her a symbol. Rather than caution her on diplomacy, the world encouraged her brazen outcries. Rather than protect her, the world exalted her. And when she thought the world was with her, the world made her a martyr. Now, as she recovers from nearly fatal gunshot wound that ripped through the throat that pushed so many strong words and cracked the skull that housed the mind she treasured above all her possessions, the world explains away their moral culpability and their complicity in the machine that nearly killed Malala Yusefzai.

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