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# “This Is My Story”

## *The Reclaiming of Girls’ Education Discourses in Malala Yousafzai’s Autobiography*

Rosie Walters



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### ABSTRACT

The cause of girls’ education in developing countries has received unprecedented attention from international organizations, politicians, transnational corporations, and the media in recent years. Much has been written about the ways in which these seemingly emancipatory campaigns reproduce historical discourses that portray women in former colonies as in need of rescue by the West. However, to date little has been written about the ways in which young women’s and girls’ education activists represent themselves. In this article I analyze *I Am Malala*, the autobiography of Pakistani girls’ education activist Malala Yousafzai, written for her own age group. Using a feminist, poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis, it considers the way in which Yousafzai negotiates and challenges discourses around young women, Pakistan, and Islam. I conclude that a truly emancipatory understanding of girls’ rights would look not to the words and policies of powerful organizations but, rather, to young women themselves.

### KEYWORDS

agency, development, postcolonial, power, rescue, resistance, self-representation

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In 2014, the year she turned 17, Malala Yousafzai released a second version of her autobiography, rewritten for her own generation, detailing her fight for girls’ education. In it, she reflects on her childhood in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, her campaign against the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), their attack on her in October 2012, and her move to the United Kingdom. Having blogged, lobbied politicians, and spoken publicly since a young age, Yousafzai was propelled into international fame after surviving an attack by two TTP gunmen while sitting on the bus home from school. Since then, she has given speeches at the United Nations, made a film, and told her story through countless interviews and in the two versions of her autobiography. Her story resonated in the West in a post-9/11 context of “save the Muslim girl” stories (Sensoy and Marshall 2010: 309; see also



Yaqin 2013). Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall write, “The ‘veiled’ brown girl in need of saving figures as the static vulnerable girl in the rescue discourse Laura Bush used to rally support for the U.S. military invasion [of Afghanistan]” (2010: 680). Yousafzai’s story also resonates with powerful campaigns at the highest levels of international politics that advocate investment in girls’ education in developing countries as the solution to global poverty. With programs such as the Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect, the UN Foundation’s Girl Up, and Plan International’s Because I Am a Girl, international development policy has embraced a narrative in recent years that sees girls in developing countries as untapped resources whose untold potential to boost economies is restrained by outdated cultural norms. These narratives reproduce tropes that see former colonies as being in a childlike phase of development, unable to protect their own (especially female) citizens; they have been used to justify a range of Western interventions. For some, Malala Yousafzai’s story has been adopted into such discourses by the West (see Olsen 2016). Indeed, in a recent study of UK newspaper coverage of her story, I analyzed how it was underpinned with gendered and orientalist understandings that ultimately positioned the UK as Yousafzai’s protector and savior (Walters 2016). However, one aspect that has been undertheorized in the literature is how Yousafzai herself negotiates such discourses. She is patronized by the very same Western institutions that would claim to be rescuing her while simultaneously rejected by many in her home country who see her as complicit in a Western political project that is anti-Islam and anti-Pakistan. Much has been written about the newly emergent discourses that see powerful actors mobilizing in the name of girls in developing countries (see Khoja-Moolji 2015a; Koffman and Gill 2013; Moeller 2014), yet little has been done to understand how girls negotiate these discourses. In this article I analyze how Yousafzai, addressing her own age group, subverts these discourses by contextualizing her story, challenging assumptions that readers might make about her childhood, and turning the gaze back onto the West. In doing so, I argue that girl studies scholars have a duty to pay heed to the everyday acts and representations with which girls resist powerful discourses.

Feminist scholars in literary studies have documented the historical absence of women’s writing from critical discussions of autobiography. This is intrinsically linked to the very nature of the genre that “functions as the closest textual version of the political ideology of individualism,” and therefore, “is gendered as ‘male’” (Gilmore 1994: 1). The autobiographical “I” is tied closely to an Enlightenment understanding of the self: “[A]ll ‘I’s are rational, agentic, unitary. Thus the ‘I’ becomes ‘Man,’ putatively a marker

of the universal human subject" (Watson and Smith 1992: xvii). The 'I' in autobiography adopts an objective, individual, and rational position in a journey of discovery. Recent work by feminist scholars, however, has shown how women authors have challenged this model of the self through "a more dialogical conception of Selfhood as something which is essentially social and relational" (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xvii). Furthermore, Lee Quinby (1992) argues that as a genre, autobiography and its assumptions about subjectivity are inherently tied to the post-Enlightenment West. Nevertheless, some postcolonial writers have used it as a means to subvert Western human rights and development discourses by positioning, "Western readers as those in need of schooling" (Gilmore and Marshall 2010: 682–683).

I adopt a feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist framework. As Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill write, it is an approach that "recognizes that global inequalities that are gendered and racialized remain entrenched" (2013: 85). A poststructuralist analysis of autobiography rejects the notion that there is a single, unified subject to be represented truthfully or otherwise by the author (Smith 1990). It seeks to analyze the ways in which the subject enters into dialogue with discourses about identity and truth (Gilmore 1994). While dominant discourses come to shape society's understandings, individuals can and do have agency to negotiate or even reject them. My approach, therefore, is to "read against the grain," with the purpose of seeking out "that which [evades] the dominant discourse" (Khoja-Moolji 2016: 9). My intent was to find the instances in which Yousafzai negotiates, or subverts, the dominant discourses surrounding girls' education. The themes of the findings were thus largely dictated by the literature on those discourses, including my own previous findings on representations of Yousafzai in UK newspapers. These included the portrayal of "Third World"—especially Muslim—girls as passive victims in need of rescue by the West, the assumption that Western societies have achieved gender equality and are thus best placed to help other societies do the same, and the fixation on investment in individual girls rather than collective action as a solution to gender inequalities. After many close readings of the autobiography, I selected over 7,500 words of relevant passages and coded them according to these themes. The examples given in this article then, are just a few of the many that I could have cited. Without denying that Yousafzai's story, and at times her representation of it, resonate deeply with problematic Western constructions of Muslim societies (Khoja-Moolji 2015a), in this article I analyze the many occasions on which she reclaims her story from those discourses. In highlighting this, I hope to act as an "ally" to girl activists in

making the world “a more respectful place for female youth” (Kearney 2009: 22). If, as Gilmore and Marshall state, “How women of color use autobiography to talk back to the construction of the permanently vulnerable girl is an important and yet undertheorized area of feminist resistance” (2010: 668), then how girls of color do the same is theorized to an even lesser extent. My previous study analyzed 223 UK newspaper articles and found that in over 424 quotations, Yousafzai herself was only cited 47 times. In other words, despite journalists embracing Yousafzai’s cause of girls’ education, “nearly nine times out of ten they still rely on someone else to explain how this theme is significant” (Walters, 2016: 664). Read in this context, the concluding statement to the prologue of her autobiography “I am Malala and this is *my* story” (Yousafzai 2015: 7, emphasis added) signals that this retelling represents both Yousafzai’s resistance to Western depictions that would silence her, and her response to her attackers who climbed onto her school bus and demanded to know, “Who is Malala?” (2015: 7).

In the following section, I summarize the extensive literature on girls’ education discourses in international development and the many ways in which these discourses resonate with neoliberal, individualistic visions of empowerment that posit girls in developing countries as being in need of rescue by the West. In the following three sections, I analyze instances in which Malala Yousafzai counters these discourses in her self-representation before discussing the implications of these findings for the study of girlhood.

## The ‘Girl Powering’ of International Development

In what Koffman and Gill refer to as the “girl powering” (2013: 86) of international development, nongovernmental organizations, national governments, global governance institutions, and transnational corporations have converged in recent years around a hegemonic discourse that sees girls’ education as the solution to many development problems. Starting with the Nike Foundation’s launch of the Girl Effect in 2008, a vast array of actors have embraced discourses that see girls as having the potential to lift entire communities out of poverty, if only they are given formal schooling (Switzer 2013). These discourses unproblematically link the rights and interests of young women in developing countries with the achievement of international development goals by arguing that when investment is given to an adolescent girl she will reinvest the benefits in her own community. This logic sees young women as deserving of an education, not because they have an equal right

with young men to such opportunities, but because they are a winning investment opportunity. It is important, of course, to clarify that some girls' organizations are setting out their own alternative vision of girls' empowerment. For example, the Malala Fund provides a platform for Yousafzai herself. Her blog entries on the site are often deeply political, including statements about girls' rights and a recent post criticising President Trump's travel bans, thus making space for girls themselves to challenge powerful people and institutions. However, such organizations also need to speak to, and at times adopt, dominant discourses in order to be heard in international fora.

While calls for investment in educational opportunities for young women would be welcome for many, the girl powering of international development is problematic in many ways. First, as a representational regime it masks the extractive nature of the relationship between some of the very same organizations funding these initiatives and the communities they purport to be helping. Following the Girl Effect logic, interventions by powerful actors in developing countries are benevolent and efficient solutions to inequalities resulting from outdated cultural norms in those countries. Heather Switzer (2013) points out that this serves to discourage critique of the structural relationships that cause inequalities, and to discourage collective organizing by women to address the many forms of discrimination that they face. Second, as Switzer goes on to say, many of the campaigns promote a simplistic model of young women's empowerment that ignores the diverse injustices faced by young women and focuses almost entirely on providing them with primary education as a means to gain workplace skills. Third, underpinning the Girl Effect's claims to be raising awareness of adolescent young women's unique potential and abilities is an essentialist and individualistic narrative that places the responsibility for solving some of the world's most pressing issues, which the international community has so far failed to do, firmly on the shoulders of children. As Kathryn Moeller, reflecting on her experience of ethnographic fieldwork in a project in Brazil funded by Girl Effect, argues, "The Girl Effect is not what one would ask of her or his own child ... It asks them to be responsible for the lives, well-being, and futures of those far beyond themselves, including their families, communities, their nations, and the world" (2014: 599). It is an extension of neoliberal discourses in the West, in which young women are seen as either can-do girls or girls-at risk, with untold potential, as long as they do not make the wrong choices (Harris 2004). This discourse plays out in the lives and on the bodies of young women in developing contexts who are offered educational opportunities if they, in turn, accept individual responsibility should

the supposedly wrong choices mean that they ultimately fail. As one recent blog post by the Girl Effect in Rwanda put it, girls should “commit to live an exemplary life” (Girl Effect 2015: n.p.). Fourth, as part of a discursive regime that Özlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall label “missionary girl power” (2010: 296), initiatives such as the UN Foundation’s Girl Up, which encourages girls in the West to set up clubs and fundraise for UN girls’ education projects, place young women in the West in the role of the “sisters, saviors, and ‘BFFs’” (Koffman et al.: 161) of their counterparts in developing countries. They appeal to patronizing narratives that see girls in postcolonial states as being in need of rescue while remaining silent about the many enduring inequalities that Western young women may face in their own communities. Finally, in what Projansky calls the “spectacularization” of girlhood, we are invited to gaze at spectacular girls like Yousafzai, to marvel at their abilities, and achievements, but also to watch in horror if weakness, the wrong choices, or the inability to cope with the pressure of society’s expectations might lead them into a “spectacular descent into at-risk status” (2014: 4). Girls are spectacular and they are a spectacle; they are not, however, to be supported in this particular discursive regime which has little or nothing to say about the many girls who, for whatever reason, do not measure up to this individualistic vision of success.

It is in this context that Malala Yousafzai’s story emerged, “more or less pre-packaged” by discourses that see Western-style education as the only way to counter the perceived “backwardness” (Olesen 2016: 315) of developing countries, and in particular, Muslim countries (see also Thomas and Shukul 2015). Indeed, analysis of the coverage of her story in UK newspapers revealed a tendency to present the UK as a “paternalistic, caring benefactor, and champion of gender equality” (Walters 2016: 665) in providing medical treatment and safety for Yousafzai in the aftermath of the attack. The way in which powerful actors in the West have embraced Yousafzai’s story is viewed with suspicion in her homeland where skepticism ranges from a sense that her story has overshadowed the stories of other victims (particularly of drone strikes), to a conspiracy theory that her attack was faked in order to undermine the Pakistani state (Olesen 2016). When her first autobiography (Yousafzai 2014) was released, some in Pakistan even started to observe an “anti-Malala day” in protest at passages in it about the author Salman Rushdie (Khoja-Moolji 2017). Yousafzai herself describes how it was “hard news” when she learnt of this response to her story. “People ... said I was a bad Muslim. People ... even said my father had shot me as a stunt so we could live overseas in luxury” (2015: 177). It may perhaps also

have come as hard news then that her first autobiography was seen by some to “[rearticulate] the trope of victimized Muslim women” (Khoja-Moolji 2015b: 552). While the first book (2014) does not explicitly define its intended readership, it was published at a time when Yousafzai was taking her campaign to decision-makers at the highest levels of international politics. This, along with its having been coauthored by war correspondent Christina Lamb, might explain Shenila Khoja-Moolji’s findings that it frequently reproduces Western discourses about Pakistan and Islam. The second book (2015), however, was written for Yousafzai’s own age group, and includes discussion questions and activities for school classes. Writing for those still in school may have allowed Yousafzai to assume that her readers would have little prior knowledge about Pakistan, the Taliban, or Islam, thus enabling her to explain her story on her own terms. Furthermore, the fact that she rewrote the book a year later may have given Yousafzai time to reflect on her representation in the West and in Pakistan, and on the reception of her first book. There is a marked difference in the description of some events and impressions between the two versions. For example, while Yousafzai discusses enjoying watching the US television show *Ugly Betty* in the first version, it is only in the second that she describes reaching the conclusion while watching it that women in the US face many forms of oppression (to which I will return presently). Undoubtedly, the choice of the successful author of young adult novels, Patricia McCormick, as coauthor of the second version will have contributed to the different tone. However, without having been party to the numerous discussions, resulting in deletions and alterations, that would have constituted the editing process, it is impossible to gauge whether the different content and tone is a result of the influence of the two coauthors, or whether it is Yousafzai herself who strategically adopts different voices to reach the two different audiences. In either case, I concluded that a search for examples of Yousafzai’s resistance to representations and appropriations of her story in the second version of her autobiography (2015) would yield interesting results. I chose to read this text as speaking to, and against, attempts by those in both the West and in Pakistan to appropriate Yousafzai’s story. In doing so, I aim to contribute to an area that remains undertheorized in the literatures on girls’ education discourses and on autobiography—girls’ own interpretations and self-representations. Catherine Driscoll (2002) argues that girlhood is often portrayed in both popular culture and academic literature solely in relation to a future role as woman, and indeed, though many autobiographical accounts of girlhood exist, they are almost invariably written by adult women reflecting on a journey of becom-



ing (Gilmore and Marshall 2010). The structural marginalization of children generally, and girls in particular, makes it almost impossible for a girl's own story to emerge in a format such as this autobiography, with such global readership. Malala Yousafzai's writing, therefore, offers a unique chance to analyze the ways in which a girl has written a "counterpedagogy of childhood" (Gilmore and Marshall 2010: 678), one that resists patronizing assumptions about postcolonial girlhood.

### No Rescue Required: Girls, Resistance, and Agency

The first trope of colonial discourses that Yousafzai challenges in her writing is the attempt to "construct the colonized as childish and inferior subjects, in need of the paternalistic guidance and rule of their superiors" (Narayan 1995: 133). In the aftermath of her shooting, the UK media repeatedly reported her to be younger than she was, describing the then 15-year-old as 14, while commentators persuaded readers of the need to do "everything humanly possible" to protect "little Malala," this "vulnerable girl," and "precious jewel" (Kelly 2012). The portrayal of Yousafzai as younger makes her appear more vulnerable and in need of rescue. Yousafzai's second autobiography, however, tells another tale. When discussing her fifteenth birthday, she reflects, "This birthday felt like a turning point for me. I was already considered an adult—that happens at age fourteen in our society. But it was time for me to take stock, to think about my future. I knew for certain now that I wanted to be a political leader" (Yousafzai 2015: 125). Her assertion of adulthood exposes the ways in which the perception of Yousafzai as young or childlike is very much a Western one. Indeed, while Western news served to make her seem younger than she was, she herself describes doing the very opposite. For example, when asked by the US ambassador how old she was she "straightened [her] posture to look as tall as possible," before adding a year onto her age in the hope that he would listen more carefully to her thoughts on girls' rights as a result (2015: 104). She also describes the reaction of a friend of her father who, after hearing her speak about her cause, was shocked to discover she was then only 11. He exclaimed, "She is *pakha jenai* ... wise beyond her years" (2015: 94).

As I noted, UK newspapers also placed Yousafzai in a passive role in her own story, emphasizing her victimhood over her survival, citing (predominantly male) politicians, doctors, and even Taliban spokespersons instead of her. They persistently used passive voice constructions that

reduced her to the “shot Pakistani girl” (Walters 2016: 656). In girls’ education discourses girls in developing countries are portrayed as having incredible potential but this must be unleashed through Western intervention, so they are simultaneously depicted as potentially agentic but also as passive, inactive, and awaiting rescue. Again, Yousfzai’s self-representation tells a different story. She describes how, when the TTP had threatened to target girls’ schools, her teachers believed that it would be too dangerous for Yousfzai and her classmates to travel to school in their uniforms. She obeyed their wishes. However, she recounts, “That day I chose my brightest pink *shalwar kamiz*” (2015: 80)—a garment that would have made her stand out clearly—as an act of defiance. She describes her anger at people’s assumption that her father is the cause of her activism, “as if he forced me to speak out. As if I didn’t have a mind of my own” (2015: 188), and she describes being “furious” after the attack by the Taliban, “Not that they’d shot me. That I hadn’t had a chance to talk to them. Now they’d never hear what I had to say” (146). Her self-depiction is not of a vulnerable little girl but one of a courageous young woman, with an important political cause, who is furious, not only at people’s underestimations of her, but also at the attackers who shot her down before she had a chance to tell them why she felt they were wrong.

Elsewhere, Yousfzai also challenges portrayals of Muslim and Pakistani women more broadly. While the challenge is less unambiguous here, particularly when she discusses visits to her female relatives outside of Mingora who are mostly illiterate, reading against the grain one sees that there is much that does not conform to representations of the “average third world woman” (Mohanty 1991: 56) or indeed the “Oriental woman” who “never spoke of herself ... represented her emotions, presence, or history” (Said 2003: 6). Among the many examples she gives of girls and women who are willing to defy the orders of not only the TPP, but also their own male relatives, she also tells stories that complicate Western assumptions about passive women and controlling men. For example, when Yousfzai decides that she will not veil her face, it is her mother, portrayed as the most devout of her family, who disapproves. Yet, her mother not only respects her wishes but even defends her: “Even if my mother disagreed with my choice—and even if her friends criticized her—she stood up for me” (2015: 83). Yousfzai’s portrayal of Pakistani womanhood is complex. While her description of the hardships she faced under the Taliban will no doubt resonate with Western discourses, she complicates them by showing how different geographical and class contexts can have an impact on women’s lived realities, and how the women

around her stand up for themselves and the women around them. It is a tale full of acts, both small and large, of resistance.

Yousafzai also resists attempts to depoliticize her story as just another example of third world girlhood. While dominant Western discourses see movements such as the Taliban as the result of supposedly traditional attitudes, or of a strict reading of the Quran, Yousafzai is keen to address the role of Western intervention in filling their ranks. She describes a conversation she had with President Obama.

I told him I did not like his drone strikes on Pakistan, that when they kill one bad person innocent people are killed too, and terrorism spreads more. I also told him that if America spent less money on weapons and war and more on education, the world would be a better place. (2015: 194)

Similarly, she tackles the Pakistani government's failure to protect girls' schools from the Taliban head on when she meets the Prime Minister while collecting an award. She writes that she "presented him with a list of demands," including the rebuilding of girls' schools that have been destroyed (2015: 114). Yousafzai even uses her book as an opportunity to admonish the West on its failure to meet the needs of those fleeing the conflict in Syria. "People who are safe and who aren't in need should be paying for this because these refugees do not want luxury ... All they want is peace" (2015: 214). Yousafzai is not the voiceless, passive victim that "save the Muslim girl" discourses would imply. Neither does she represent herself as in need of rescue by the West, as girls' education discourses might. Rather, she is asking politicians and publics to listen to her deeply political message, to confront the consequences of Western interventions and failures in her region, and to grant those who have suffered as a result the rights that the West purports to promote worldwide.

### ***I Am Malala* as Ethnography of the West**

Another form of resistance in *I Am Malala* is the way that Yousafzai resists the dominant "polarizations that place feminism on the side of the West" (Abu-Lughod 2002: 788). She does so by conducting a sort of "ethnography of the West" (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xxii-xxiii). In descriptions that mirror Orientalist travel writing, the West becomes a fantastical place, at times incomprehensible and at times comprehensible only through (often unfavorable) comparisons with home. She is surprised to find she likes New York: "Many people in Pakistan have been told that the United States is a dark

and goddess place, but everyone I met there was quite nice” (2015: 193). While her home of the Swat Valley has often been described as “the Switzerland of Pakistan,” Yousafzai labels New York “like a developed Karachi” (2015: 194). She makes no effort to disguise the ambiguity, and at times distaste, she feels for her new home of Birmingham, and of struggling to adapt to a culture in which, “We are just a few feet away from the next house, but for all we know of our neighbors, it might as well be a mile” (2015: 180).

Part of this study of the West involves analyzing gender relations and scrutinizing claims of greater equality. She describes how in Pakistan, when her father encouraged her to watch an *Ugly Betty* DVD to help improve her English, she concluded, “Although Betty and her friends had certain rights, women in the United States were still not completely equal; their images were used to sell things. In some ways, I decided, women were showpieces in American society too” (2015: 88). Upon moving to the UK, Yousafzai and her mother are fascinated by women going out in short skirts and bare legs in mid-winter and wonder whether their legs are made of metal to be able to withstand the cold, and Yousafzai is amused by the way in which her classmates roll up their skirts to make them shorter at school, but roll them back down again before going home to their parents. She chooses to wear her school uniform skirt down to her ankles, and her thankfulness that a few other Muslim girls in her class do the same suggests an interpretation that such a move might have an impact on her ability to fit in. The society she portrays is one in which girls’ clothing will be scrutinized by their parents and peers alike, with very real consequences, thus challenging the idea that she would encounter restrictions or be judged on her choice of clothing only in her home country of Pakistan.

Finally, the “save the Muslim girl” discourses that emerged post-9/11 not only place feminism “on the side of the West” (Abu-Lughod 2002: 788) but also link it with secularism, negating the possibility of Muslim feminism. However, Yousafzai herself emphasizes her Muslim faith at many points during her narrative, including perhaps the most traumatic part of her story. When she wakes up in the Birmingham hospital unsure where she is and unable to communicate it is the hospital’s Muslim chaplain who comforts Yousafzai, reciting the “beautiful, soothing words of the Holy Quran” (2015: 135). She also describes her campaign for girls’ education as being sanctioned by her faith, writing that it was her mother’s quoting from the Quran that persuaded her to continue in spite of the risks. “‘Falsehood has to die,’ she said. ‘And the truth has to come forward’” (78). These moments disrupt the

dominant discourses that see girls' education and girls' rights more broadly as inherently secular or Western.

## Resisting Spectacularization

Malala Yousafzai cannot resist being a spectacle. In fact, she acknowledges and even embraces this role: "When you have such a public role and so many people counting on you, I believe you must always act in the way people expect of you" (2015: 184). She can and does, however, resist being seen as spectacular. Amongst other character traits, she describes her difficulty in getting out of bed in the morning, her tendency to fight with her siblings—"I may be an advocate for free speech and human rights in public; but with my brother, I admit, I can be a dictator" (2015: 186)—and her nervousness before giving an assembly at her school, despite having previously addressed the United Nations. Her self-portrayal is grounded in the everyday and the unspectacular.

Furthermore, while her story is frequently cited as an example of spectacular girlhood, in which girls "succeed because they embrace neoliberal narratives of individual choice and agency that ignore community partnerships, solidarity, and support from adults and girls alike" (Bent 2016: 107), Yousafzai constantly champions her classmates in Pakistan and credits others with her achievements. She stresses that "any one of us could have achieved what I had" (2015: 115), and she describes the collective action she and her classmates took for girls' education. She credits her best friend Moniba as the class's "public-speaking champion" (72), and, when praised for her own eloquence, she writes, "It wasn't me, Malala, speaking; my voice was the voice of so many others who wanted to speak but couldn't" (73). She refuses to speak out without the support of her mother, saying, "Because if I didn't have her support it would be like speaking with only half my heart" (78), and she credits her parents and their support for her eventual successes. Finally, she shows the many acts of bravery by others that have made her own campaigning possible including, for example, her teachers' decision to keep the school open despite the threats against them. As Emily Bent writes, spectacular discourses erase "the sociocultural and geopolitical support systems that make girls' exceptionality possible" (2016: 108). They obscure the support that girls require from fellow girls, parents, teachers, and youth workers, activists, policy makers, and communities to be able to bring about change, not because of a lack of ability but because of their position in soci-

ety as children and as female. Although the book's front cover may claim to be about "one girl" who "stood up for education and changed the world," Yousafzai's writing shows how at every step of the way, she was helped and supported by others and that with the same help and support, other girls could achieve great things too.

## Conclusion

The choice to read against the grain in this analysis has emphasized the moments of resistance in Malala Yousafzai's autobiography that disrupt powerful narratives. This methodological choice is a concerted attempt to fill the gaps in the literature on girls' education discourses that to date have treated such discourses largely as all-powerful. There is much to be critiqued and questioned in the recent focus by powerful Western actors on girls in developing countries, and the models of empowerment it puts forward, a project to which my previous work has contributed. However, that such discourses exist does not mean that they are automatically taken up. Depicting Yousafzai as a young woman whose story has been coopted by powerful discourses in the West is not that different from depicting her as a young woman whose voice was silenced by the Taliban. Both do not go far enough in acknowledging her agency. This article suggests the potential for scholars of girlhood studies to analyze the ways in which girls resist such discourses and tell their stories according to their own vision of what empowerment would mean.

Often, the study of narratives of girlhood has focused on what they can tell us about adult women's political agency. Yet the study of girlhood must also analyze girls' political agency in its own right. Malala Yousafzai's politics nearly robbed her of the chance to become an adult woman. We should not, therefore, analyze her story for what it might tell us about womanhood, but rather for what it tells us about girlhood. She portrays a girlhood that is deeply political, agentic, and that must constantly negotiate between competing and conflicting discourses that would threaten to constrain it. This matters in and of itself, and it matters for what it can tell us about the potential for girls to articulate and bring about their own vision of an empowered girlhood, with the support of activists and communities alike, and thus to open up more possible ways of being a girl.

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