The Silenced Subjectivities in *I Am Malala* and *Red, White and Muslim*: An Interpretative Analysis of Two Muslim Women's Memoirs

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon the theory of subjectivity of Muslim women as enunciated by Saba Mahmood in her seminal work *Politics of Piety*. Grounding our analysis in her work, we critically engage with two selected memoirs *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* and *Red, White and Muslim: My Story of Belief*. Both books are written by Muslim women who are from two different locations; Pakistan and America. Via their memoirs, we probe into the kinds of representation the central characters exhibit and how these texts employ the ideas of subjectivity and agency. Our position is that the subjectivity and agency of Muslim women, as depicted and endorsed in these memoirs, is more in accordance with secular neoliberal paradigm. When a secularist model is employed as a yardstick to measure Muslim women's agency, it makes her appear subjugated or oppressed. Representations are then curtailed within two extremes: that of a distressed damsel in need of liberation or a modern, chic woman who is empowered and not much different from her enlightened sisters in the West. In each case, the coveted ideal is the secularist, neoliberal model of what constitutes an agentic and free woman. This portrayal, we have attempted to argue, leaves much to be desired. It undermines the agency and subjectivity of women who opt for a more religious and more confined existence. Such women are deemed conservative and unenlightened because visibility in communal, public places is not their preference. Thus, this paper signals towards a need for a more nuanced portrayal of Muslim women.

Keywords: Memoirs, Muslim women, secularism, subjectivity, agency

Introduction

This paper's aim is to inquire into the representation of Muslim women in two memoirs, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* by Malala Yousafzai and *Red, White and Muslim: My Story of Belief* by Asma Gull Hasan. In so doing, we draw upon the framework provided by Saba Mahmood about Muslim women's unique subjectivity and agency in her work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. We argue that the kind of subjectivity and agency portrayed in the memoirs written by Muslim women are more in keeping with secularist modes of being which prize individualist struggles at the expense of collective and religious approaches. The ideas of the self that are promoted and endorsed in such works are grounded in the empowerment of the individual girl as she struggles against the supposedly constricting norms of her society. The lives of Muslim women are accordingly measured against the Enlightenment ideas of freedom, choice and autonomy. The representation of Muslim women's lives, thus, takes on an essentialist turn, normalising the empowered and liberated woman who is active in the public sphere and by the same corollary, undermining the woman who is a homemaker and prefers collective, familial ideals, engaged in struggles that are not centred on individualistic goals.

Our main purpose in this paper is not to challenge the struggle that Malala stands for, or to subvert the kind of Islam approved and endorsed by diasporic figures like Asma Gull Hasan, but to showcase the intricate ways through which these memoirs endeavour to validate their representation as the only truth about Islam. This depiction, therefore, is a crucial means of disrupting a nuanced picture of Islam and acts as a major site of regenerating clichéd platitudes about Islam. In the case of memoirs like Malala's, where an individual figure is provided amnesty against the purportedly oppressive environment of her society, we contend that the coveted subjectivity of freedom, choice and liberty becomes an effort on her part of equating her religion with the absence of these ideals. Her rescue is not, therefore, a benign activity of rescuing an oppressed victim, but is teeming with multiple implications that need careful unpacking. On the other hand, memoirs like Asma Gull Hasan's are imperceptibly upholding the supremacy of secularist subjectivities in their over-enthusiastic self-explicatory approach. Writers like her believe, quite naively so, that if Islam is only held commensurate with secularist modes of life, then that would extricate this religion from the negative undercurrents it has allegedly been allied with. Another facet of this inconsistent representation is that secular values act as the reference point against which the validity of Islam is to be tested.

Therefore, while engaging with Mahmood's theory of subjectivity of Muslim women, this paper probes into the representation of Muslim women in Muslim women's memoirs as it looks into the kind of subjectivity and agency of Muslim women depicted in the two selected memoirs. It further explores how, in the Muslim context, this portrayal promotes a specific kind of subjectivity and agency which runs parallel to secularist modes of individual empowerment.

Muslim Women's Memoirs After 9/11: A Contextual Overview

At this point, it seems appropriate to highlight the importance of the fact that Muslim women's memoirs burgeoned in the aftermath of 9/11. This key event revived a fresh an interest in Muslim lives and has been a determinative reason for once again stirring up the platitudinous notions about Islam as being conservative and Muslim women being oppressed. Since then, Islam has been seen as irretrievably linked with terrorism, being a patriarchal religion, oppressive to women. As a corollary, the Muslim woman has come to be seen as a pitiable figure, *sans* subjectivity or agency, incapable of exerting her own free will or choice.

Against this milieu, a number of memoirs, mostly written by Muslim women, appeared on the literary scene in response to the curiosity that has risen anew in the enshrouded figure of the Muslim woman. The most acclaimed amongst them are accounts such as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran*, Asra Nomani's *Standing Alone in Mecca* and Sumbul Ali-Karamali's *The Muslim Next Door: The Quran, the Media and that Veil Thing*. The proliferation of memoirs written by Muslim women might have been to bail Islam out of the pit of notoriety. However, the response to these accounts has been quite ambivalent in literary circles. Cynthia Enloe remarks, that the narratives of Muslim women are "imperially constructed to explain Muslim women" (ix). She further posits that the "simplistic narrative has been disseminated with a militarizing effect" (ix). The nondescript portrayal of Muslim women takes either of the two extremes: a plagued damsel in need of rescue, or a liberal, empowered individual much like her secularist kinswoman in the West. In either case, the desired subjectivity which the protagonist either seeks or proves her strong affiliation with, is the one which fits within the secularist framework of liberty, choice and resistance.

Mahmood's work *Politics of Piety* inhabits a key locus in the aftermath of 9/11 when Islam and Muslims were faced with the agonising task of redefining

their suspect identities. They had to explain Islam to the non-Muslim world when the latter was framing Islam as conservative and outdated. Mahmood was among the leading critics who indicated the reductionism of secular modalities and Western feminism. In *Politics of Piety*, she pointed out the deep ties which feminism enjoys with "secular-liberal politics" (1); therefore, Muslim women who do not let themselves be defined through liberal values are termed as "agents of dangerous irrationality" (1). In giving pre-eminence to individual empowerment, choice, and liberty, the secularist paradigm seeks to denigrate the societies which thrive through communal values and religious ethos. It promotes career women and defies the subjectivities of women who are housekeepers and who do not pose a resistance to their societal or religious values. Mahmood elaborates upon the negativity that enshrouds the Islamist movement. "Women's participation" in such events incurs strong responses from a "broad range of political spectrum"; they are taken as "pawns in the grand patriarchal plan" (*Politics of Piety* 1). As Mahmood explains, secular neoliberal sensibilities are troubled when they observe "women's active support of socio-religious movements that sustain principles of female subordination" (*Politics of Piety* 5). In other words, Mahmood contends with the normative claims of the secularist discourse which excludes those women as agentic who prefer to express their subjectivity through community-oriented values or who set their "coveted goal" as submission to a transcendental will—and thus, in many instances, to male authority (*Politics of Piety* 3).

Her project of examining the lives of pious Muslim women in Cairo from 1995 to 1997 was mainly executed with an objective of foregrounding how Muslim women cannot be defined through the supposedly liberal and democratic ideals of feminism. The hidden paradox is that the Western project of reforming and liberating Muslim women from Islamic patriarchy is, once again, an oblique reaffirmation of imperial hegemony. This neo-colonial practice is in complete disregard of the specific context in which a Muslim woman defines and asserts herself. A Muslim woman's definition of subjectivity and agency is, therefore, not in any way at par with the Western ideals of females striving for freedom and visibility.

Mahmood reacts against the premise that freedom for a Muslim woman has the same meaning as the one that defines a Western woman. In *Politics of Piety*, she avers that in liberal political theory, an individual is considered at liberty only when "her actions [are] the result of her own choice and free will rather than of custom, tradition, transcendental will or social coercion" (148). She questions the "liberal presuppositions that have become naturalised in the scholarship on gender"

(*Politics of Piety* 13). Liberty, she propounds, is not necessarily contingent upon a challenge to the societal norms and prescribed traditions. The prevalent image of a Muslim woman is that of a docile, passive being without agency or free will. She is considered agentic only in her act of rebellion against her religious norms and mores. This secularist paradigm presupposes an "instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores that used to enchain them" (*Politics of Piety* 3). This concept of a socially and morally autonomous individual inadvertently influences any study of a Muslim woman. She appears to the Western eye as necessarily confined, persecuted and desperate to break herself free from chains. In her essay, "Feminism, Democracy and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror," Mahmood dilates upon Islam's mistreatment of women which "is used as a diagnosis as well as a strategic point of intervention for restructuring large swaths of the Muslim population if not the religion itself" (95).

Mahmood's anthropological work between 1995 and 1997 was based on the Mosque Movement of Muslim women of Egypt and expressed them through a different mode of agency that incorporated the Islamic values of shyness and modesty. This concept of agency was not based on resistance and opposition as is endorsed by Western feminism or secular liberal thought. For instance, in *Politics of Piety* she cites the rigorous efforts of a group of four women to indoctrinate the virtue of modesty and shyness. Mahmood explains the unique concept of "haya" which implies "being diffident, modest and able to feel and enact shyness". She also concedes to the fact that all Islamic virtues are "gendered"; when applied, their "measure" and "standard" vary for men vs women. But this is nowhere truer than in the case of the virtues of "shyness and modesty, (al-haya)" (*Politics of Piety* 156). Such gendered injunctions have always posed a problem for secularist modes of thinking and for "current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of liberal progressive imaginary" (*Politics of Piety* 155).

Mahmood contends that both secularist modes of governance and post structuralist feminist theory are necessarily "liberatory" in approach. The sanctioned concept of agency is postulated on the binary model of "subordination and subversion" (*Politics of Piety* 14). Drawing upon her anthropological focus on a Muslim woman's exclusive subjectivity, our contention is that representation in Muslim women's memoirs is more in accordance with the secular modes of being. This kind of portrayal, of either vying for the kind of liberty and empowerment guaranteed by secularism or of justifying Islam as a religion that ensures the same kind of rights enjoyed by women in the West, leaves much to be

desired. For one, it makes the lives of those women seem underprivileged who believe in living a religious life and who are not struggling for the coveted ideal of individual empowerment. What mystifies the West, according to Mahmood, is the ambivalent relation women have with the social structure that seemingly narrows down and curtails their authority, that Muslim women, whether in their home countries or living a diasporic existence, should favour whatever seemingly goes against their own freedom is "a dilemma for the feminist analysts" (*Politics of Piety* 5). This confusion springs from the false assumption that secularism is universal and so is the desire to aspire for a separation between religion and politics. It is presumed, erroneously of course, that freedom of the individual is only guaranteed in secular ideals. Hence, secular liberalism is the most publicised and the most sought-after ideal for the West and of feminism that is patronised by the West. Mahmood criticises this tendency to take the secular liberal woman as the normative benchmark against which a woman with religious inclinations should be measured.

Mahmood must be given credit for exposing the limitations and normative claims of secular modalities which, according to her, is another way of reaffirming the pre-eminence of Christianity. This prevailing bias, as Mahmood sees it, has its origins in the "self-understanding of Europe as essentially Christian and simultaneously secular in its cultural and political ethos" (*Religious Difference in a Secular Age* 8). Mahmood thinks that present secular ideals are having deep links with neo-colonial designs. At this point, an important fact that should not be overlooked is that secularism gained currency in the postcolonial world. This entanglement of secularism with imperialism in the aftermath of 9/11 is vociferously articulated by many writers. For example, Talal Asad in his book, *Formation of Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, explains that West European history has "profound consequences for the ways that the doctrine of secularism has been conceived and implemented in the rest of the modernising world" (25). Mahmood seems to second her mentor's thoughts in her essay, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation" dilating upon the efforts of U.S. Department of State to "change Islam from within" to bring it closer to secular ideals and to "ward off the dangers of religious strife" (323-325). Sunaina Maira in her article "'Good' and 'Bad' Muslims Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists and US Orientalisms" discusses the categorization of good and bad Muslims by the US to justify the War on Terror. Maira purports that this war is based on a "binary framework" (632). She further explains that "practices of state terror are often justified by distinction between premodern and modern

subjects, "civilised people" who deserve rights versus those who are evicted from the modern political community"(633).

This distinctive theory of Muslim women's subjectivity and agency provided by Mahmood allows us to problematize the representation of Muslim women in the memoirs coming from within the Muslim world. We claim that these writers have internalised the principles of secularism and the subjectivity of women as defined under this ideology. They are either desirous of individual empowerment, as is evident in the case of Malala, or they are desperate to equate Islamic values with secular ones, thereby holding them as compatible. Malala, in her vulnerable position, stands as a proof of the oppressed Muslim girl who must be rescued and taken to a safer place to realise her potential. Her injured state is an oblique criticism of her society which cannot guarantee her freedom, agency and privileges that her new sanctum promises. On the other hand, throughout her account, Hasan reiterates the primacy of secular values and how Islamic tenets neatly fit within that frame. Such depictions, we argue, undercut the role of a woman who prefers to sacrifice her individual goals for familial bonds and who, as per this definition of subjectivity, does not seem empowered enough. Secondly, and more importantly, this demarcation is a major source of the recasting of Muslim women as the objects of patriarchal as well as religious oppression.

At this point, a brief background of the two selected writers is necessary. Malala's name hardly needs any introduction since she became famous after being the victim of a Taliban shooting in 2012. The celebrity treatment that she was accorded in the West made her a highly polarised figure in Pakistan. Her memoir, co-authored with Christina Lamb, was published in 2013. The second version of the same memoir, meant for children, was co-written with Patricia McCormick in 2014. It tracks down the struggle of Malala against the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, highlighting her resistance against Taliban authority and was resultantly shot by one of their members. Malala has not only been an iconic figure but a winner of many accolades and awards. Asma Gull Hasan, on the other hand, is a highly prolific and versatile figure working as a lawyer and making regular appearances in Fox News and CNN. She aims to reinstate Islam and inform the foreign audience about "what is really cool being a Muslim" ("Girls Just Want to Have Fun"). The account "mixes autobiographical material with feisty insights into Islam and the many misconceptions people have about it" (Brussat and Brussat).

The selected memoirs are symptomatic of many others of their type. Almost all of these memoirs come up with the claim of dispelling stereotypes about Muslim women and yet, what distinguishes them is a repetition of specific

thematic patterns so that their stories become almost identical, reinforcing the worst platitudes about Islam and Muslim women. Among them are accounts such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, *Love in a Headscarf* by Shelina Jan Mohamed, *Threading My Prayer Rug* by Sabeeha Rehman, *Laughing All the Way to the Mosque* by Zarqa Nawaz and a number of collections which contain such personal accounts as *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak, Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*. All of these works come with proclamations of presenting an unalloyed version of Islam. However, Hala Halim, in her review of the book *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, throws in a note of warning. Halim concedes to the fact that these books indeed prove successful in "modifying stereotypes" but the "Muslim Women" in the title may run the risk of "operating from within the terms of discussion dictated by Western neo colonial discourse" (146). We thus question their representation of claiming to stand for a true and pure Islam which, we argue, rests on the model of subjectivity propounded by secularism and neoliberalism. In case of stories like that of Malala Yousafzai, the protagonist asserts her difference from the prevalent and supposedly restricting customs. Yousafzai emerges as an exception for she is an "outspoken, strong… a kind of shadowy sister-self to the American female, if not, the feminist reader (Ahmad 108). She is the symptomatic case of being a victim of an oppressive culture, waiting to be rescued to an enlightened land of liberty and empowerment. On the other hand, writers like Asma Gull Hasan make strenuous efforts to prove their affinity with the progressive sisters of the West.

Discussing the popularity of Muslim women's autobiographical genre, Mahmood, in her essay, "Feminism, Democracy and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror," elucidates that "the popularity and ideological force of this literature owes largely to the ability of the Muslim woman author to embody the double figure of insider and the victim" (97). This portrayal discredits the subjectivity of those Muslim women who do not let themselves be classified via the attributes of liberty and individual empowerment that are the characteristic features of Western feminism. Mahmood speaks out against this "singular and reductive conception of religiosity" that implies a "narrow vision of gender enfranchisement" blinding us to the power that "nonliberal form of religiosity command in many women's lives" (98).

Malala: The Victimised Icon

Malala, because of the iconic stature that she enjoys internationally, has come to

assume an equivocal position of a miserable Muslim woman and an empowered individual. She is now seen as a victim of the societal mores she needs to be rescued from, and simultaneously, as an affirmation of the enlightened values of the land she has sought shelter in. Malala's injuries invoke sympathy for the helpless victim and derision for the society and its values which failed to protect her. Such nuances, as those that are linked to her rescue, imply that it is only a secularist society that can vouchsafe the rights of women. When she was in Pakistan, her own country, Malala lived *sans* agency, freedom or choice. However, in her salvaged position, she appears as an apostle of human rights.

Figures like Ayan Hirsi Ali, Mukhtaran Mai, Farah Ahmed and last but not the least Malala, gain their ascendancy in international circles by reaffirming the rampant clichés about the suppressed figures of Muslim women. Malala, as Abu-Lughod remarks, stands as an instance of "sanctimonious championing of distant women" (5) a "plucky individualist" (Ahmad 108) who gets credence in her rescued harbour by maligning her own culture. As Shelina Khoja-Moolji remarks about Malala that she "embodies a transnational, secular modernity exemplified by her emphasis on the autonomous self, enactment of choice, advocacy for freedom and arguments for gender equality" ("Defending Malala").

Malala's memoir contains a substantial critique of a culture she considers backward. For instance, she writes that "the women of the village had to hide their face whenever they leave their homes and they could not meet or speak to men who were not their close relatives" (Yousafzai and McCormick 21). She dilates upon the custom of keeping the women illiterate since, "she doesn't need an education to run a house" (22). This reflection culminates in a seemingly natural cry of despair and helplessness from a girl who was "confused and sad" to see the "hard" life of the women of Swat (22). Thus, she asks, "Why were women treated so poorly in our country?" (22). Malala's intercession as a writer is very deftly placed. The narrative voice is quite candidly reaffirming the suppressed stature of women in her culture and expressing her own dissatisfaction with it. Malala, however, has apparently overlooked many instances of Pashtun women whose priority is to remain within their own norms and ethos and that too by their own choice. Their subjectivity, unlike Malala's, is not contending for a break from the cultural ties in which their identity is rooted. Malala's own mother is one telling example; she chose not to go to school although she had the support of "a father and brothers who encouraged her to go to school" (Yousafzai and Lamb 33). And yet the age she was in, "playing with her cousins," "cooking, cleaning and bringing up children" (33), appeared far more fascinating than a life of dull drab studies.

Malala, we are told, is named after a great fighter resisting British imperialism. The fact that Malalai was a source of inspiration for people of Afghanistan and the "Afghan king build a Maiwand victory monument in the centre of Kabul" (Yousafzai and Lamb 15) bears testimony to the fact that she is remembered and respected in history. Her case seems to be an indication of the space enjoyed by Muslim women even when they are acting against their recommended roles. Malala, however, cleverly bypasses such events to specify those which are indicative of a conservative society. For example, she mentions in her memoir, one girl who takes her life because the tribal customs do not permit her to marry the love of her life; this event is described in detail. Another girl who was sold by her father to a much older man is also highlighted. These tales of misery are accompanied by the writer's explanation, that "in our society for a girl to flirt with a man brings shame on the family, though it's all right for the man" (Yousafzai and Lamb 51). Yousafzai is dilating upon a disagreeable state of affairs but the unpleasantness is surprisingly only felt acutely by Malala alone as she expresses her discomfort with an accepted practice in society. She is told by her father of the even worse scenario in Afghanistan where "women were being beaten and locked up just for wearing nail varnish" (Yousafzai and Lamb 52). As she "shivered" to hear such atrocities committed by Taliban, Malala cherishes her situation of being "free as a bird" (Yousafzai and Lamb 52). Here it can be argued that Malala is acting in the role of an "unofficial spokeswoman", imparting an air of "credibility to some of the worst type of prejudices and stereotypes" (Mahmood, "Feminism Democracy and Empire" 100) that are rampant about Islam.

Malala seems to be quite aware of the response that such details are likely to accrue. She is positing her own struggle as a "voice of dissent" (Dabashi 17) and is thus rewarded for standing in opposition to the religious oppression of Taliban. One other significant point is that figures like Malala are taken as essentially representing the oppressive status of Islamic culture, whereas in their liberation, they stand for the enlightening virtues of a secular society which rescued and empowered them.

It is well known that Malala has been brought up on the notion of being an exception. Contrasting her life with the lives of the other girls of Swat, she tells her readers that the day a girl is born is a "gloomy day", since her "role in life is simply to prepare food and give birth" (Yousafzai and Lamb 14). This shocking condition is then juxtaposed with the following claim, "but I was different—I never hid my desire when I changed from wanting to be a doctor to wanting to be an inventor or politician" (Yousafzai and Lamb 11). This realisation of being a

distinct individual gets consolidated with time and later Malala made conscious efforts to substantiate her image as an agent of transformation in society. An opportunity was thrown her way when a BBC correspondent approached her. He wanted to do a program in the tradition of *Anne Frank's Diary*, the Jewish girl who used to give voice to the atrocities of Nazis. Malala was quick to respond and started to air the outrages of the Taliban in Swat. Purportedly, the aim was altruistic; however, the flip side of the picture is that Malala was making acquaintance with a new world of dazzling lights and loud microphones. She got lured into a fascinating domain as her thirst for visibility and attention increased, making her sign one project after another. Significantly, she used such platforms to express her discontent against the Taliban but did not link this with the gruelling task of bringing any tangible change in the people of her area.

Whether the people of Swat saw any improvement in the situation because of these programs is another story, but one thing is certain that this international attention boosted up the image of Malala. Malala rose, as it were, like a phoenix out of the smouldering remains of her own destruction "embodying the feisty, girl-power inflected mode of contemporary Postfeminism and (post) humanitarianism" (Koffman et al. 6). This projection of the unrest and mayhem experienced by the people of Swat gives Malala leverage. Interestingly, her own father, Ziauddin, exhibited exceptional eagerness to build the unique status of his daughter. He engaged her, as Shahan Mufti puts it, in a "delicate dance" He cites Adam Ellick's remarks about the obsession of Malala's father about her visibility in media, "pushing their kid to become the next tennis star or beauty pageant winner" (qtd. in Mufti). What is ironic in this instance is that Malala got so used to this media attention that when she was attacked, she was actually expecting a "microphone to be thrust to her face and instead saw a black Colt.45" . This hunger to be in the limelight has a particular resonance with the secularist, neoliberal paradigm. It imbued her with a consciousness of her exceptional status. Her subjectivity was constructed around resistance to traditional mores with an emphasis on individual empowerment and freedom of choice. She started viewing herself as an agent of change who could plead with foreign emissaries like Richard Holbrooke for girls' right to education. Malala was just twelve years old then. Her pride at her exceptional status is obvious from such remarks; "I sat next to him" (Yousafzai and Lamb 136). It was through her appearance at such public platforms that she established her singularity. However, unfortunately, she was in a high-risk environment because of the presence of the Taliban and hence had to be bailed out to a safer place.

The dichotomy present in the rescue missions has been amply borne out by the lop-sidedness of these missions. Some selected figures were provided sanctum by Britain, while others like Kainat Riaz and Shazia Ramzan, the two girls who got injured along with Malala, were left to fend for themselves. They were provided amenity only when their case was pled by none other than Malala herself. The skewed exegeses of these missions, therefore, have a political nuance. They are employed and mediated, according to Khoja-Moolji, for "(re)installing the white Anglophone as representing full humanity" ("The Making of Humans and Their Others" 380). Malala's censure of the tribal practices and the codes and ethos of the Taliban assumes a special significance in such a scenario. She informs with condescension about the kind of education delivered in madrassas: "They learn that there is no such thing as science and literature that dinosaurs never existed and that man never went to moon" (Yousafzai and Lamb 80). Malala, by contrast, has a fondness for Justin Beiber's songs, the Twilight movies and skin whitening creams—items not even remotely linked to her indigenous culture. In her new home, Britain, she undergoes a metamorphosis as it were, emerging as an empowered and emboldened figure. However, significantly, she has to be thankful for these qualities to her rescuers who have brought in such refinement and finesse in her personality. As a consequence, the freedom of choice that she is granted is not an innocuous activity. Rather, she becomes a ploy in the hands of her supporters to market a specific brand of empowerment which is the hallmark of secular and neoliberal forces. In promoting the transformation stories of these wretched young women, the West expediently overlooks the sordid history of its own women who have been the victims of state violence. It measures women's power and agency with the only yardstick they have of how much a subject is able to assert and sustain its individual free will against societal pressures. Cases like Bibi Aisha of Afghanistan, with her mutilated face, have a special significance for the West, since it brings home the oppressive patriarchal structure of Islam. The disfigured picture of Aisha was published in *Times* magazine in 2010 with the caption running, "What happens if we leave Afghanistan" (Stengel). It is in relation to such politics of representation that Mahmood points to the limitations inherent in such a definition of agency and subjectivity; it occludes and undercuts the women who prioritise familial bonds and for whom collective welfare rather than individual betterment is the target. The emphasis on individual will and struggle restricts the concept of women's subjectivity to the binaries of subservience and subversiveness. Malala, in her rescued status, emerges as a representative case of the reinforcement of these binaries. The kind of compassion that her injured body

generates also creates contempt for the invader. Her heroism in rising against odds is, in the words of Khoja-Moolji, "the successful performance of an empowered subjectivity" ("De-Stabilizing the Emergent Binary of Empowered Girl vs. Muslim Girl"). Her rescue and her empowered stature in Britain, her adopted home, imply that this privilege is only possible in a liberated environment.

Mahmood postulates that agency is not essentially a synonym to resistance, but "a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (*Politics of Piety* 18). Agentic capacity "is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norm" (*Politics of Piety* 15). Agency should not be tied to "emancipatory politics" (*Politics of Piety* 19). Individual heroines, with Malala being the characteristic example, are celebrated in secularist democracies because of their asserting their agency in opposition to their societies. In the course of her memoir, Malala frequently refers to the tenacious life style of the women of Swat, of how "[t]here were no proper shops, no universities; no hospitals or female doctors… and they could not meet or speak to men who were not their close relatives" (Yousafzai and McCormick 21). Malala is pointing to a state of affairs where difference of code for men and women is normative. In addition, she refers to the veil, wearing which is quite an obligatory norm in Swat, as constricting: "Living under wraps seemed so unfair—and uncomfortable. From an early age, I told my parents that no matter what other girls did, I would never cover my face like that. My face was my identity" (Yousafzai and McCormick 17). One is reminded of the case of Mukhtaran Mai.[1] The Western media notes with satisfaction an unveiled Muslim girl shaking hands with dignitaries as an essential sign of a Muslim girl's liberated status. Nicholas Kristoff, for example, is pleased to note in the case of Mukhtaran Mai that "the world will not end if her scarf drops" (qtd. in Charania 76). Mahmood has the following remarks to offer about the forceful reaction of the West regarding the veil controversy, "the reason the veil elicits such strong response is that it continues to assert a kind of religiosity that is incommensurable with and inimical to those forms of public sociability that a secular-liberal polity seeks to make normative" (*Politics of Piety* 75). She further notes the inconsistency in responses, that is, the visible endorsement when men wear religious symbols such as turbans or yarmulkes, and a vehement rejection when women use veils. Typically, an uncovered head is taken as an instance of a free and empowered woman. These proclamations are an oblique affirmation of the pre-eminence of

[1] Mukhtaran Mai was gang raped by four tribal men by order of the tribal council as a punishment for her brother's illicit relation with a woman of another clan. Her story was highlighted in international media as an instance of women's oppression in Pakistan.

secular neoliberal modes of governance and by implication an undermining of religious approaches of life.

Asma Gull Hasan: The Moderate Muslim Woman of the West

Rescue narratives like Malala's, which stand as a testimony to the oppressed stature of Muslim women, are counter-affirmed by memoirs of another kind. The central figure in such tales, however, is not in the need of liberty and empowerment. Rather, the protagonist already enjoys the benefits because she belongs to an enlightened society. The main thrust of all such memoirs, we argue, is to retrieve Islam from the enclaves of terrorism and extremism and demonstrate to the West how it is also a progressive and liberal religion ideally compatible with the modern ways of life. Mahmood, in her essay, "Feminism, Democracy and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror" warns against the "gradual but incessant" process of reform "from a variety of quarters, for secularising and liberalising Islam so that Muslims may live an enlightened existence" (121). In this regard, the memoirs coming from Muslim women are viewed very "positively by liberal political pundits" because they are seen to be embedded within an "emancipatory model of politics" eliciting admiration from "feminist readership" ("Feminism, Democracy and Empire" 96-97). Admittedly, these writers have to face the maligning campaign against Islam as a religion promoting terrorism, and therefore, they are extraordinarily cautious in proving themselves different from the extremist brand of Islam. However, their ambassadorial overtures, to explain the true spirit of Islam to a foreign audience, is quite clichéd.

The memoir which has been selected for investigation with this angle in mind is Asma Gull Hasan's *Red,White and Muslim*. Diasporic writers like her feel it obligatory to bail out Islam from the constricting strictures of the Taliban. A self-explanatory zeal is the highly distinguishing feature of these writers. Ironically, they begin by acknowledging their own version of Islam as the true one, while the rest is dismissed as a cultural innovation. Hasan's memoir is no different. Throughout her narrative, an exclusive enthusiasm to hold at par the values of Islam with that of secularism is observed.

In the first chapter of *Red,White and Muslim*, titled, "Note to the Reader" Hasan parallels the Quran and the perfect ideals of the American society and calls them "strikingly similar" (ix). The irony of this stance is compounded by the fact that it is shared by other Muslim writers of diasporic origins as well– Ali-Karamali is one such example. Like her, Hasan is also full of praise for the enlightened ideals of American society she is proudly a part of, claiming that "We American Muslims love our country, favour secularism and see that it is

reconcilable with Islam" (215). What is significant here is that such claims tend to turn a blind eye to the complicit role of hegemonic powers in creating a pliant version of Islam acceptable to the West which attempts to construct a "generation of obedient Muslims whose first loyalty lies with their countrymen" (Haddad and Golson 499). Therefore, it should not be surprising when Hasan comes up with such self-explicatory notes in which she showcases her difference from the Talibanised version of Islam:

> The Islam that I practice is not the one depicted by Osama bin Laden, or by Al Jazeera, cable news, or the fear-mongers. I am not a member of a secret society of terrorists nor do I plot the death of non-Muslims. What Islam is really about is so different from the many misconceptions. (ix)

These illustrative overtures achieve the two-pronged aim of maintaining the distinct identity of a Muslim girl, albeit different from that of her oppressed sisters in various parts of the Muslim world, and yet these impress the audience with their oblique connection with her empowered friends in the West. This unthreatening appearance has been termed by Rey Chow as "self-mimicry" (112) which caters to what others desire to see rather than what one actually is. Judith Butler echoes the same thought when she says that any narrative is grounded in how it will be received by the addressee (36). In like manner, Hasan's memoir is one of the typical examples of such memoirs which are teeming with the anxiety to establish the author's kinship with her inhabited land which, in her case, is America. Apparently, these narratives proclaim that they reveal to the world the diversity of Islam, though, in reality, these are closely akin to misery memoirs in showcasing an Islam which is much similar to the progressive secular ideals of the Western world. Hasan in her account is faithfully eulogising the values of justice, equality and individual rights, values which are associated with the Western world. Ironically, she sees her own version of Islam as the only authentic version and typically condemns the more "conservative minority" who are flaunting "repressive principles and cultural, tribal attitudes" (xiii). These, according to her, are only a "handful Muslims" whose Islam runs counter to the "progressive values [she] describe[s] in this book" (xiii). Hasan thinks that the dictum which asks women to be standing at the back rows of mosques or prohibits women from attending the funeral of their relatives is a patriarchal interpretation of the Quran. She avers that these "emotionally destructive interpretations" (xiii) must be protested against. The "ugly head" (xix) of Islam must be snubbed and disparaged by the educated and enlightened women like her. Throughout her account, she is at pains to draw parallels between the secular values which are the hallmark of American culture and her own religion and finds them, to her

satisfaction, strikingly similar. She feels herself blessed to be part of a country where Muslims do not have to meet the hostile grounds that has been the lot of "Muhammad and first Muslims" (147). Hasan's naïve claim that "in America, Islam has the chance to fulfil the values it truly stands for without politics or patriarchy to hold it back" (147) seems to overlook the horrendous treatment Muslim had to face in America and elsewhere in the aftermath of 9/11. Her memoir remains poignantly silent as regards the stealthy campaigns of Pew Centre[2] and its like whose aim is to collect data which consolidates the proofs of the incompatibility between the West and Islam. Lamiya Khandaker, in her work, *Politicizing Muslims: The Construction of a 'Moderate' Islam*, elaborates that the method of collecting data used by forums like the Pew Center is designed on "negative tropes" (8) about Muslims and therefore biased.

Hassan's enthusiasm to equate Islam with the secular values of America seems to signal towards the fact that she, like many other writers of her kind, has accepted the supremacy of American culture, causing her to opt for such defensive gestures. However, this zest for integration appears problematic in more than one way. It signals towards the impossibility of one individual's claim to represent the entire Ummah, which is ironic in view of the fact that she does not accept the rights of others to do the same and calls their interpretation as cultural contamination. In addition, it also hints at her desperate attempts to present the least offensive version of Islam to her foreign audience. This lack of objectivity is glaringly obvious in her critique of what she deems to be the repressive values of Islam against women. Quite understandably, she attributes it to patriarchal interpretation: "The status of women in Islam confuses and terrifies every one alike, even me as a Muslim" (xi). A little later, she remarks, "When the West asserts itself on Muslim men, Muslim men assert themselves on Muslim women in the absence of any reachable target" (xi-xii). Her position testifies to Mahmood's conclusion in her essay "Feminism, Democracy and the Empire," "the autobiographical genre attesting to Islam's Patriarchal ills" (96).

Equally typical is her stance towards veil and hijab. According to her, it is "a conservative concept… sticky for majority of Muslim women who do not wear hijab (including me)" (Hasan xii). According to her, the hijab clad women of Ethiopia, even though they were occupying lucrative positions in Parliament; seem to her as enduring an "imprisonment without bars" (xvi). Their shyness and modesty are misinterpreted as a natural corollary of their oppressive treatment at the hands of men. Hasan actually feels blessed to have been born in a truly free

[2] A non-partisan think tank, based in Washington, which provides information on social issues, public opinion and latest trends that are prevalent in the world.

land where she does not have to experience "misguided religious interpretations" (xix). That is precisely the reason why she retaliates so fiercely against "gangs of Muslim men" who objected to her uncovered head in her Colorado lecture (115): "If you think, I should wear Hijab just because you tell me to, then you don't understand Islam at all" (114). Hasan terms their attitude "coercive proselytizing" which Islam is markedly against (114). Without going into the intricacies of the veil issue, which has come to be regarded as a sign of oppression and patriarchal subjugation of Muslim women, what is noteworthy here is that Hasan establishes the connection between donning the Hijab with lack of agency and empowerment. In her view, it is only an uncovered woman who stands for agency. If she opts for the opposite then she is conveniently bracketed as conservative and her choice is assumed to be imposed by a culture which has nothing to do with Islam. This position of Hasan towards the veil echoes the stance adopted by Amina Wadud and Asra Nomani who are hailed in Western circles for their liberated outlook. Julianne Hammer terms them, "exotic only in ways that are appreciated in the American mainstream, as a spicy addition to the melting pot of American society and culture" (155). The hallmark of this group is the free bashing of "fundamentalists" who, according to them, are guilty of endorsing such measures which are either obsolete or are cultural innovations. Sumbul Ali-Karamali, in her memoir *The Muslim Next Door: The Quran, the Media, and that Veil Thing* also remarks the following about fundamentalists: "The Wahhabis, the Taliban, and bin Laden are all connected in that all come basically from the same mold—the conservative, ultra-extremist fundamentalist Wahhabi mold" (98). This liberal and moderate group is distinguished by its rebellious and transgressive stance towards such injunctions of Islam which are not palatable to the West or which do not fit within the secular modes of life. These are the "rebellious renegades" of Islam as Mohja Kahf calls them (117). In their bid to introduce an enlightened version of Islam, they accept only their own version as the true Islam, all the while declaring other shades of Islam as outdated and conservative. They represent themselves as the "antidote to other Muslim women" who are unacceptable for the secular neoliberal world (Hammer 170).

Conclusion

This paper has questioned the representation of the subjectivity and agency of Muslim women in two memoirs, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* and *Red, White and Muslim: My Story of Belief*. It has argued that the kind of subjectivity and agency the authors of these memoirs are either

craving for—as in the case of Malala—, or are validating—as in the case of Asma Gull Hasan—is befitting only in a secular neoliberal paradigm. In upholding individual empowerment and agency, these representations undermine other forms of subjectivity and agency which opt for remaining within accepted societal and religious norms. In their depiction and ratification of personal resistance and struggle, both memoirs endorse a particular kind of neoliberal empowerment of women whereby a woman is considered free and agentic only in proportion to her capacity to resist, as in the case of Malala, or to assert her independence of conservative modes, as in the case of Asma Gull Hasan. A woman who opts for an alternative course of action, for instance, giving precedence to either her religion or her family, is deemed backward and old-fashioned. This kind of depiction in these memoirs is grounded in the "normative liberal assumptions" (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 5) about human being's desire for freedom. In this regard, Mahmood has one important question to ask, "Have we lost the capacity to be able to hear the voices of Muslim women that do not come packaged in the form of Ayaan Hirsi, Azar Nafisi and Irshad Manji" ("Feminism, Democracy and Empire" 122).

Malala, the Nobel Prize winner, now enjoys an iconic stature in the West. Yet in this exclusive position, she also stands as an authentication to the failure of her own society which could not protect her. As a natural off shoot of this perception, the rescuing party emerges as triumphant. In addition, this establishes and reinforces the universality of the secular modes of life which, supposedly, can guarantee a woman's security and grant her liberty, agency and empowerment. It is her individualistic struggle and her candid embracing of neoliberal ideals of subjectivity and agency which is given endorsement. But when the Global North is celebrating its achievement by claiming to be the saviour of girls like Malala, one might dare to question how deeply rooted the consequences of this salvage mission have been? Has this liberation been the cause of eliminating justice, inequality or poverty from the society? What improvement has Malala, in her iconic position, vouchsafed for the girls of her area, Swat? A glimpse of recent history will amply establish the truth that other distressed girls have not been lucky enough to be given this exclusive treatment. The approach of providing protection to some becomes all the more controversial because of the asymmetry that enshrouds it. As Fawzia Afzal-Khan puts it, "women's empowerment narratives … lend them to spectacular rhetoric of human rights that erases the possibilities of a meaningful transnational feminism that could actually challenge the causes of global inequality" (159). Empowered figures like

Malala become, at first, the objects of pity for the world citizens and these are then changed into individuals of admiration as "the ideal citizens of our neoliberal times" (Afzal-Khan 168).

Countering the narratives of oppressed Muslim girls are accounts of writers like Asma Gull Hasan. She is grateful for being in an enlightened part of the world which guarantees justice and equality to its citizens, regardless of gender. She belongs to a realm which promotes women's visibility and sets it as a benchmark for determining whether women are modern or backward. In this regard, Mahmood also notes the entanglement of liberal feminism with secular-liberal politics which results in terming those women who are associated in any way with religion as "agents of dangerous irrationality…pawns in the great patriarchal plan" (*Politics of Piety* 2). Therefore, one finds a marked emphasis in Hasan's narrative of the perks of being an enlightened, moderate Muslim and how it is strikingly different from the conservative variant. "Most Muslim women", Hasan tells her readers, "are not conservative in their practice but are moderate" (xii). It is the "Wahhabi leadership" that imposes a conservative concept of Islam (xii). She upholds an enlightened version of Islam such as practised by Sufis, which implies "to remain open to new experiences and encounters which all hold the potential for new enlightenment" (65). She postulates that she enjoys a privileged position because of her living in an enlightened part of the world and therefore sets for herself the task of clarifying the prevalent misgivings about Islam. However, this effort is marred by a desperate attempt to forcibly adjust and align Islam with the framework of a secular neoliberal paradigm. At the same time, she does not forget to maintain her distance and difference from her oppressed sisters in other spheres of the world. In other words, she endorses the schism of Muslims being split in two distinct classes: conservative and moderate. The former is allegedly practising an obsolete version of Islam that is polluted with cultural innovation while the latter is a moderate variety in full control of their destinies. This depiction of Muslim women by Hasan lacks the nuanced perspective that could adequately describe their multifarious and interconnected lives. In addition, her narrative precariously hinges on the amount of visibility that a Muslim woman enjoys in the society. For her, the covered woman or the housewife is not sufficiently empowered or agentic.

In this paper, we have cross-examined the stubborn conviction of "progressive liberalism" (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 39) with which it tries to manoeuvre the lives of those who are not ready to permit their lives to be manipulated by the secular and neoliberal ethos of individual choice and freedom.

It has signalled towards the need for Muslim women writers, to agree not to portray themselves in line with other people's dictates. When the secularist model is employed as a prism to judge the lives of Muslim women, they appear as necessarily oppressed and hounded. This philosophy fails to recognise the norms which value collective living as opposed to cherishing individualistic objectives. In many instances, familial and shared goals are given primacy while sacrificing narrow, personal aims. The pre-eminence which the secularist and neoliberal paradigm gives to individual ambition is incongruous in a society where collective living and ethos are the rule. An interesting alternative to these memoirs is the work of African Muslim writers, where the central characters exhibit their roles outside the rubric of public and political lives and are satisfied with developing a private, spiritual engagement with religion. This pursuit is driven by no other ambition than personal edification through an observance of certain religious practices. Notable among these writings are the works of Zainab Alkali, Hauwa Ali and Abubakar Gimba. Therefore, the secular neoliberal emphasis on individual choice and freedom as a necessary prerequisite for subjectivity and agency is misplaced. Thus, memoirs by Muslim women need to be more inclusive, incorporating the absent and missing voices of those women who opt to work in a "dynamic complementarity with men" (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 7).

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