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## **War, Dissent and Resistance: An Analysis of Malalai Joya's *A Woman Among Warlords***

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### **Abstract**

The democratic-reconstruction measures that were employed in Afghanistan following the US-led invasion in late 2001 were riddled with problems, one of which related to the composition of the new government. The inclusion of warlords in the nation-building process, although it made strategic sense for the fledgling government, resulted in the reproduction of cycles of violence and was particularly detrimental to the interests of women, whose supposed liberation was at the centre of the War on Terror discourse. This paper examines this phenomenon through the eyes of Malalai Joya, who, in her memoir *A Woman Among Warlords* provides an insightful account of the radical, misogynist warlords who occupied positions of power in the newly formed government. As a young female politician in a historically male domain, Joya is a rare voice of resistance against her government and the American military. In raising her voice against the power holders, Joya subverts the dominant narrative of the war, especially pertaining to the liberation of Afghan women. She argues that by colluding with the warlords, the US and the Karzai administration were complicit in allowing violence to continue in political and social spheres. This paper argues that the US-led invasion largely failed to make any concrete ideological transformation and instead aided the reestablishment of oppressive power structures, especially in Afghanistan's provinces.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, War on Terror, 9/11, Taliban, Warlords, Women's Studies.

### **Introduction**

The invasion of Afghanistan by the United States of America following the 9/11 terror attacks resulted in the ouster of Taliban while laying the building blocks for the formation of a nation-state based on a largely Western model of democracy that was far removed from the realities of Afghan sociopolitical apparatus. The democratic-reconstruction model which emerged after the Bonn conference in December 2001 proposed to establish in Afghanistan a new political system that would ensure representation of all ethnic groups and liberation of women, along with setting up proper channels and infrastructure backed by capital for driving social and economic growth. (Ottaway and Lieven, 2002) While the prospects of a liberal democratic state emerging from the ruins of nearly three decades of war seemed promising on paper, the ground reality was entirely different: the international community's reconstruction model was doomed from the start primarily due to the undue influence of strongmen in key provinces and the highly decentralized nature of the state. The warlords who formed the Northern Alliance front assisted the US-led forces in defeating the Taliban and naturally expected to be included in the nation-building process, especially given their control over peripheral and remote territories that were out of reach of the state. However, their inclusion, though it made strategic sense for the fledgling government, dashed the hopes of ordinary Afghan women and men who believed that a democratic government would get rid of the warlords and end their brutal provincial

regimes. On the contrary, the warlords ruled their territories with impunity, with some, like Ismail Khan of Herat even replicating the Taliban regime. Ultimately, most of the warlords who shared their ideological beliefs and radical leanings with the Taliban continued to reproduce the cycles of violence and oppression against the civilians.

A voice that has emerged in resistance to the power exercised by the warlords and the state is that of Malalai Joya, Afghanistan's youngest parliamentarian who, in her memoir *A Woman Among Warlords* sharply criticises the warlords, the Karzai government and the US for failing Afghans. In doing so, she subverts the dominant narrative of the war especially concerning the liberation of women and charts an alternative narrative that offers a deep insight into the realities of the war. This paper aims to examine her response to the Afghan state building measures and how the inclusion of violent power holders undermined the larger goal of transforming Afghanistan from a failed state to a liberal democracy. She points out that by supporting the warlords, the US and the Karzai administration were complicit in allowing violence to continue in political and social spheres. This paper argues that the US-led invasion largely failed to make any concrete ideological transformation and instead aided the reestablishment of oppressive power structures especially in Afghanistan's provinces.

Joya's activism began at an early age in the refugee camps of Pakistan where she grew up, like most Afghans of the war generation. Owing to her father's progressive beliefs and activism, she was able to pursue education despite the limited opportunities, and later take up classes for women and young girls. During the Taliban regime, Joya conducted underground classes for girls in defiance of the militants' dictates. After the collapse of the Taliban, she initiates projects in her province to provide the deprived population access to healthcare and education in association with Organisation for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC). A staunch activist for women's rights, Joya constantly resists dominant powers and pushes boundaries enforced by radical Islamists that keep women out of public spaces. Inspired by the activism of her pro-democratic father and her grandfather who resisted the police when they came looking for his son, Joya positions herself within the "patriarchal legacy of resistance and struggle for democracy and human rights," and "transgresses masculinist logics of protection" while also "reinforcing such logics." (Châteauvert-Gagnon, 2018, p. 100) Speaking from the position of an insider who has suffered through decades of war, and from the margins of a province far removed from the capital of Kabul, Joya earns the status of the protector who struggles for the rights of women and raises her voice for her fellow Afghans in the highest echelons of power. What sets her apart is her outright and outspoken rejection of the power politics played out in the name of democracy. In a country where extremism has become deeply entrenched as a result of wars and a radical version of religion has penetrated the psyche of the masses, especially among the men, Joya recognises that "[w]omen's rights are not something given to you. It has to be taken...." (Joya, 2011, p. 91).

The presence of warlords and fundamentalists in the nation-building process thus poses a major challenge for Joya in her campaign for women's rights and for the rights of Afghan civilians. Not only do the warlords have a dismal history of committing crimes against women, their ideology is not in sync with the principles of democracy and equal rights. However, neither their track record nor their power intimidates Joya. At the first Loya Jirga (grand council) held in December 2003, Joya bravely denounces their inclusion in the constitutional processes. Terming the warlords "criminals," she tells the assembly that their presence brings into "question" the "legitimacy and legality" of the Loya Jirga. Pointing to the warlords, she says:

It is they who turned our country into the center of national and international wars!  
They are the most antiwomen elements in our society who brought our country to this state and they intend to do the same again... They should be prosecuted in the national

and international courts! Even if these criminals were to be somehow forgiven by our people – the barefoot Afghan people – our history will never forgive them. (Joya, 2011, p.71)

While Joya's speech receives rousing applause from a considerably large section of the audience, her microphone is cut off midway as incensed warlords and their supporters charge at her. Several people, especially young men and women, rush to defend her and protect her from being harmed, indicating their agreement with her words. Beatrice Chateauvert-Gagnon argues that by publicly denouncing the warlords, Joya engages in an act of parrhesia or the notion of "speaking truth to power." The act involves the question of positionality: that is, while the speaker speaks the truth to the dominant power, she is also placing herself above the people she is speaking for. (Chateauvert-Gagnon, 2018, p.19) While Joya's appointment as a delegate to Kabul places her in a position of power, her reference to the "barefoot Afghan people" affirms her role as their "protector." The act of parrhesia emerges out of a sense of moral duty to the people placed below the speaker in the political hierarchy. As a representative of the people of her province, Joya takes on the warlords and in turn becomes a saviour of a figure that people look up to. Time and again, she pledges to defend the rights of her people who not only form her support base but also come to her defence in times of need, thus becoming an inherent part of Joya's resistance movement. While the warlords are granted power by the state and the US and is thus contingent upon various external factors, Joya's power to resist emerges from and is consolidated by the support of the masses.

In the Afghan socio-political context, the violent crimes committed by the warlords during the civil war period between 1992 and 1996 are often glossed over in the dominant narrative, such that what remains is only a selective memory of the tales of heroism during the Soviet war and not their criminality. The speaker of the house and the warlords brand Joya a "Communist" and an "infidel," two terms that are often used to evoke anti-Soviet sentiments among the public. Despite this attempt at slandering her to nullify the impact of her words, the popular support that her speech generates confirms to Joya that "the Afghan people knew exactly whom I was talking about... The warlords could not hide their crimes." (Joya, 2011, p.75) In speaking against the warlords at the Loya Jirga, a practice which, M. Jamil Hanifi (2004) argues, has traditionally served as a conduit for producing and reinforcing hegemony of the dominant class, Joya not only refuses to advance the hegemony as done by most of the officials and representatives at the Jirga, she also disrupts the boundaries of normative behaviour expected of her sex in a traditional society. By making her voice heard in an overwhelmingly patriarchal power structure and disrupting its mechanism, she breaks away from the cultural norms to push for the rights of women and men in a way that is both inspiring for some and repulsive for others. As Joya points out, it is her status as a woman that most riles the fundamentalists and warlords, as her action not only questions their power, it also offends their sense of masculinity:

One of the reasons that my speech had sparked just a rabid reaction is the fact that I am a woman, and a young one at that. For fundamentalists, a woman is half a human, meant only to fulfill a man's every wish and lust and to produce children and toil in the home. They could not believe that a young girl was tearing off their masks in front of the eyes of the Afghan people. (Joya, 2011, p.73)

Joya's stint as a parliamentarian is repeatedly marred by disruptions whenever she attempts to address the members. Unlike other parliamentarians, she refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the warlords and fundamentalists who occupy positions of power in the government. Time and again, she disrupts the smug comfort of the representatives, most of whom were elected, Joya claims, under the shadow of guns. Her relentless criticism ultimately

gets her suspended from the Parliament. Even after her suspension, Joya continues to fight for the rights of women, demanding transitional justice for victims of the warlords' crimes, and withdrawal of US and NATO forces, which, she argues, has only served to increase violence in her country. Though a considerable women were also elected to the Parliament, Joya argues that most of them were merely symbolic, propped up by fundamentalists to further their agendas. One woman, for instance, who insulted Joya at the Loya Jirga, later apologises and confides in her that she had been a victim of violent warlordism and had lost two sons, but had no choice but to support the warlords for the safety of her family. Joya's argument is proved when Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador for Afghanistan, claims that the mere fact that "Joya was able to voice [her] criticisms illustrated the admirable democratic process that was being established in Afghanistan." Joya points out that Khalilzad however failed to address the "substance" of her speech and in doing so had "exposed the charade of the 'showcase democracy' the United States wanted to install" (Joya, 2011, p.108).

Collusion with the warlords meant that the Karzai administration and the US failed to effect any ideological transformation in the provinces. The warlords were beneficial to the administration as they held power and sway in remote territories that the state had historically failed to reach. The highly decentralised nature of the Afghan state made the Karzai administration dependent on powerful proxies to be able to have some form of legitimacy. The strongmen's extensive local knowledge combined with their control over illicit economy of drugs, weapons and covert cross-border trades led to an "alignment of incentives" between the warlords or strongmen and the Karzai regime. Though this undermined the US-sponsored liberal democratic project, the support of the warlords "actually gave Kabul greater subnational influence" and "yielded provincial governance." (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p.2) However, many of the warlords imposed misogynist restrictions inspired from the Taliban and the preceding Mujahideen regimes. As Hafizullah Emadi (2015) argues, representation of women in the post-Taliban government was merely a "token... which neither ended women's oppression nor led to improvement in their status." With opium being the chief revenue generator, warlords with foreign ties continued to hold power, and as Emadi notes, even the educated and semi-educated people in the bureaucracy were wary of antagonising the warlords and therefore chose to "remain loyal to their own religious and political groups." (Emadi, 2015, p.247) Joya dwells on this dilemma when she says that "people who call themselves 'intellectuals' have compromised" with the warlords, thereby emboldening the latter. (Joya, 2011, p.151) Consequently, violence against women especially in the provinces has continued largely unabated in the post-Taliban period. For instance, when Joya prepares to attend the first Loya Jirga, she has to cover herself with the robe-like burqa with a mesh covering the eyes, a common sight during the Taliban years. She has to halt at Herat, a province governed by extremist warlord Ismail Khan. Joya describes:

The warlord and governor of Herat, Ismail Khan, had remade his own version of the Taliban's 'Vice and Virtue' squads to enforce his primitive fundamentalism. Like the Taliban, Khan's men roamed the province harassing men for dressing in Western clothes; smashing and burning video and music cassettes at the markets; and terrorizing women. They even dragged women off the streets – if they were found with a male companion who was not a close relative – to conduct humiliating medical examinations to make sure they were 'virtuous.' (Joya, 2011, p. 65 )

Joya draws her strength and inspiration from civilians, especially women who approach her to find solutions to their problems. Most of them are victims of persecution at the hands of warlords, commanders or abusive men. In a majority of the cases, the issues revolve around forced marriage of young girls, domestic violence, human trafficking, girls being prohibited from pursuing education, girls being sold off to settle debts or disputes, and so on. Based

partially on a study of interviews of Afghan women in 2013, Lida Ahmad and Priscyll Anctil Avoine observe that in the post-Taliban period “new forms of misogyny and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) have arisen” wherein there has been “an institutional normalization of violence, favouring a culture of rape and impunity”:

New frames of SGBV appear as female genital cutting within marriage, self-immolation, forced prostitution, acid attacks, body part mutilations perpetrated by husbands, and increasing domestic violence partly due to the growing consumption of opium, but also to the presence of powerful warlords in government institutions. (Ahmad and Avoine, 2018, p. 2)

The study revealed that contrary to claims, violence against women had in fact increased during the post-Taliban period. The liberation narrative was bolstered by a unidimensional coverage in mainstream media together with a neo-Orientalist feminist discourse that focused on the oppressed Muslim woman struggling to survive in medieval patriarchal structures of the Middle Eastern nation-states and Afghanistan. (Mahmood, 2009, pp.193-194) The mainstream Western media portrayed skate-boarding women, women cyclists' team, women performers and newscasters and so on as testimonies of the West's success in liberating Afghan women, but there was barely any in-depth probe into the Afghan provinces and impoverished classes where women continued to suffer under abusive patriarchal power structures, or the long history of foreign military interventions that destabilised the country's political and social structures and paved the way for extremism. Joya's stories of women and young girls suffering under the regimes of warlords-turned-governors gives the lie to the claims of women emancipation. In one such case, a girl from Joya's orphanage is forced by her uncle into marrying a drug addict, and dies by self-immolation. Joya says that self-immolation, a “new phenomenon in Afghanistan,” has become an “increasingly common method for women and girls to escape their misery” (Joya, 2011, p. 60). Emadi (2015) notes that in 2007, six years after the US and its allies routed the Taliban, 184 cases of women immolating themselves to escape abuse were reported in the country.

## **Conclusion**

Joya's relentless struggle for the establishment of a true form of democracy free of violent elements, her fight for women's rights, and her persistent demand for transitional justice for victims of crimes committed during the civil war period makes her a rare voice of resistance within a power structure that is fundamentally anti-democratic in form and content. Her fight for her fellow citizens' right to a dignified life of peace and justice has received massive public support, especially among women, but also men, in Afghanistan as well as among people of Western nations. Joya makes a clear distinction between Western governments and Westerners: while Western officials, such as senior coordinator for international women's issues in the US Department of State, consider her an obstacle to the much publicised war narrative, people whose governments supported the war are much more supportive. As Joya travels the world to voice the concerns of her people, her struggle against injustice, abusive patriarchy and her demand for women's rights finds resonance among women in Western nations as well. To borrow from Foucault (2001), what Joya fights against is a specific form of “regime of truth” that has, as a result of long periods of war and cycles of violence, embedded within itself violent forms of patriarchy and masculinity sustained by a whole network of power relations that are not easy to disentangle with top-down approaches like spontaneous imposition of electoral democracy. Resistance to power according to Foucault is a “transversal struggle” not limited to any one country: Joya's fight against the abusive power structure is therefore not isolated; it resonates with women around the world who have, at some point in history or in contemporary times, struggled against injustice and inequality (Foucault, 2001a, p.329). Moreover, it is also a struggle against the “privileges of knowledge” possessed by power holders who with the help

of mainstream media chart the dominant narrative of Afghan women's liberation (Foucault, 2001a, p.330). In resisting forces that seek to keep such exploitative power relations intact, Joya's account of the aftermath of the US-led invasion incriminates both the warlords and the West that has enabled them, while at the same time subverting the dominant narrative of the War on Terror and providing an alternative narrative from the margins.

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### Bio-note

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