

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 16 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to  
Pakistani Anglophone Writing



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## The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing

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### Phoenix rising

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-15>

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**Published online on: 04 Sep 2018**

**How to cite :-** Colleen Lutz Clemens. 04 Sep 2018, *Phoenix rising from: The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing* Routledge

Accessed on: 16 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-15>

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## PHOENIX RISING

### The West's use (and misuse) of anglophone memoirs by Pakistani women

*Colleen Lutz Clemens*

In 2014, I was invited to participate in a college's common reading programme by giving a lecture on Malala Yousafzai's book *I Am Malala* (2013). I took Malala everywhere with me that summer: the beach, coffee shops, doctors' offices, ballet classes. The cover is hard to miss: her bright pink scarf, her eyes looking right at the viewer. People comment on the book when they see it, as most people who follow the news know at least something of the young girl's story.

I start this chapter by sharing two stories of interactions – both with smart women who are readers and friends. In the first, I am sitting in a coffee shop in my town when a friend runs into me. She sees Malala smiling up from my table and begins to gush about how much she appreciated the book, having read it all in a few days. She felt grateful for how much she learnt about Afghanistan from reading it. The second story begins at the kitchen table of one of my tutoring clients. The mother is hovering, nervous about her daughter's upcoming SAT test. The mother sees Malala and begins to remind her daughter: 'Remember her, she was the girl in Afghanistan that the Taliban shot?' The daughter nods her head.

I do not recount these stories to disparage my friends, who are smart women who took the time to read the memoir. They are well-informed and care deeply about women's issues around the world. And yet even they had been lulled by the narrative that there is one essentialised version of the woman in the Muslim world, that all women from those regions have the same experience, and that they are powerless without the intercession of some element from the West. Books that reify these narratives are popular with the reading public in the 'West', a term I use with trepidation because of its slippery nature. This chapter will examine the phenomenon of what I term 'phoenix narratives' that are deployed to reify an essentialist notion of women in the 'East'. Phoenix narratives are the stories of young girls and women who have been beaten, tortured, and oppressed at the hands of misogynistic structures and risen out of the ashes of their suffering to find 'liberation'. Perhaps the most famous of these narratives is Yousafzai's, yet Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honor* (2006) is an important predecessor to Yousafzai's memoir.

An essential notion generalises and limits simultaneously. For example, when one hears the platitude, 'If women were the rulers in the world, there would be no war', one is hearing an essential notion about gender and femininity in relation to violence. The idea behind this quote is that women are naturally not inclined to violence, that women are only soft and peaceful;

and when they are not, there must be a reason or reasons to explain why they are going against their 'natural' inclinations. Essentialist narratives are all around us, and we must unyoke ourselves from the powerful hold of essentialist narratives that hold us all in their grip and have the power to make people feel abnormal or diminished. These narratives – 'comforting myths', as Chinua Achebe calls them – must be deconstructed, and readers must work to create narratives that recognise diversity and the unique experience of the people around us in the world. Essentialism is the force that allows two very smart women who have spent considerable time thinking about Malala to conflate her with women in Afghanistan, even though Malala's story takes place in Pakistan, a country very different from Afghanistan. Do women in those countries share similar structural struggles? Yes. Does the United States have complicated geopolitical relationships with both? Yes. Comparisons can be made, but the conflation of nations and their peoples is a dangerous game.

This chapter will study closely a few of the moments that contributed to the construction of two essentialist narratives of women in the East that have overtaken the West's image of women from this region: the veiled woman and the 'phoenix', a term I apply to the genre of memoirs like Yousafzai's that shows a young woman emerging from the destruction wrought by the Taliban, a group that does not represent the majority of Muslims in the world.

Edward Said argues in the original introduction to *Orientalism* that 'without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively' (1979: 3). This chapter works towards Said's original project of deconstructing orientalist narratives in order to understand how, in the twenty-first century, a single, narrow narrative of women in the Muslim world continues to be (mis)constructed, the impact of reorientalisation on those women, and the use – and often misuse – of these narratives within political discussions.

### The 'veiled' woman in Western rhetoric and imagination

It should be no surprise that the narrative that leads to Yousafzai's memoir begins on 11 September 2001.

On that day, my second period Honours English class and I watched as planes flew into buildings. A roomful of seventeen-year-olds implored me to make sense of what was happening on the screen just as I had shepherded them through Hamlet's soliloquies and feminist readings of *Jane Eyre*. But I had nothing to offer them. That moment was too big for all of us, and only now are we starting to make sense of it and our response as a nation to what would become the moment by which many of us would measure our lives; from that morning on, many Americans lived in the 'post-9/11' world, and my research is one small piece of a larger body of work investigating this 'new' world and the ways we speak about each other in it.

After September 11, a trajectory of anti-Islamic sentiment began. Starting with an overt 'othering' of the Muslim faith, the US government under the purview of George W. Bush worked to focus attention on the oppression of Islamic women, a progression meant to provide a rationale for eventual military action taken in the name of the 'oppressed women' instead of in the name of US interests. Suddenly, names that had never entered the national discourse on a broad scale became household words uttered with a mix of contempt and confusion: al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, Sunni and Shia. Areas of the world previously known for oil or unrest within their own borders – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan – housed an enemy that professed a hatred for all things Western, a hatred about which those outside of academic or governmental circles knew little, up until 9/11. As Americans watched a new national department being created

overnight, they began to speak about a world that, on 10 September 2001, had been of little interest to them.

An interest in the differences between the 'East' and the 'West' grew nationwide as people found these foreign words slipping off their tongues. I heeded Said's warning against essential concepts such as 'East' and 'West' – that neither term 'has any ontological stability' – and recognise that no clear boundary exists between these two concepts (1979: xvii). He reminds readers that we must 'insist that the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like "America", "the West", or "Islam" and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse cannot remain as potent as they are', comments he makes in the new preface he added in 2003, after witnessing the 9/11 attacks and their political aftermath (1979: xxviii).

After the attacks, new images entered the living rooms of millions of Americans: bearded men in white turbans sat in caves and laughed at the unanticipated success of the attacks of 11 September, while women in light blue *burqas* wandered dusty streets between ruined buildings. Until that historical moment, many viewers had never considered the global tensions between East and West, between nationalist movements and fundamentalist religious factions. The events of 11 September forced the American population out of its ignorance as it witnessed on its own soil a tragic manifestation of a problem that certainly was not new to the rest of the world.

I witnessed a growing, rampant nationalism I had never seen before. Within days, reports of attacks against Muslims grew to higher numbers than ever before in this country. Anyone who could mistakenly be identified as a Muslim based on traditional garb was in danger, such as the Sikh Balbir Godhi, who was shot five times outside his gas station because his attacker, Frank Roque, assumed Godhi's turban meant he was a Muslim. Within the six days after the attacks, the Council on American-Islamic Relations received double the number of complaints about harassment than they had received during the entire year before. The Council estimated that, at that time, seven million Muslims lived in the United States. Though many of these millions of Muslims denounced the attacks, a fear of 'the Other' grew through binary rhetoric. Gender binaries and a Western attachment to female 'liberation' quickly found its signifier: the 'veil'.

Once Islam entered the US' national discourse, the 'veil' became a powerful symbol of women's oppression under the Taliban and in 'the East'. Images of veiled women ran on television and many public officials evoked the image to rationalise the War on Terror. Freeing women living 'under the veil' became a rallying cry to justify invasions to change the ideologies of nations. As President Bush stated just days after 9/11, 'This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom' (2001: n.p.). The assumption follows that women living in countries where veiling is practised were not allowed 'freedom'.

Deployed by the Bush administration to gender the conflict, Laura Bush made similar rhetorical gestures in her Thanksgiving 2001 radio address focusing on women; she drew attention to the US' use of women's oppression to validate military action, thereby continuing to gender the ensuing conflicts:

I'm delivering this week's radio address to kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban. That regime is now in retreat across much of the country, and the people of Afghanistan – especially women – are rejoicing. Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: the brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists.

(2001: n.p.)

She then shifted to note that those in the Taliban are not civilised, alluding to the idea that it is the responsibility of the 'civilized' (read: 'the West') to police those who cannot live civilly (read: those in 'the East'). The latter do not respect 'their' women, whereas 'we' in 'the West' do. Not to want to preserve this respect is to be inhuman.

She reinscribes the binary between 'East' and 'West', stating that in the United States, 'We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters', and then holds up the West as liberators: 'Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes [...] The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' (2001: n.p.). Finally, Bush seals the dominant narrative that Western women are liberated while Eastern women are disempowered and she reminds the American listening audience of how lucky they (women) are to be in the United States, for only the United States can ensure the safety of women in the 'East':

After the events of the last few months, we'll be holding our families even closer. And we will be especially thankful for all the blessings of American life. I hope Americans will join our family in working to ensure that dignity and opportunity will be secured for all the women and children of Afghanistan.

Laura Bush focuses on the brutality 'the terrorists' commit against women's bodies as if it were a new problem that just at that moment the US would need to disrupt. Her reification of the binary between East and West relies on gender and the idea so often deployed at that fraught time: that women in the East lack agency and must find a Western intercessor to initiate the liberation process. Interestingly, up until the morning of 9/11, the Feminist Majority Foundation's pleas to the White House for a discussion of women in Afghanistan had gone unheeded. In *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi (2008) reports that suddenly, after 9/11, women's organisations were summoned to the White House to give briefings on an issue about which it cared little before the attacks. The White House even held a conference on Afghan women, and eventually President Bush signed the Afghan Women and Children's Relief Act in December 2001 as part of his 'crusade'. In a moment, women in Afghanistan were the locus of the US administration's interest, which waned once the war on terror began in earnest.

By focusing on the violence perpetrated against women, Laura Bush set up an opportunity to argue that one can only undo this violence with violence; clearly, these people, if they torture their women, cannot be stopped without force. She invokes family life in the US, recently shaken by the attack of 11 September 2001, and uses 'the blessings of life' as the antithesis of women who are denied the right to care for their children. Women in Afghanistan (and soon after the 'axis of evil') are denied their 'natural' life of being mothers and wives; they can do nothing but 'rejoice' at the Coalition of the Willing's efforts to liberate them from their state-imposed chains. Government rhetoric about women in Afghanistan often focused on veiling and the West's reading of the practice as oppressive in every situation. An essential notion of women who veil became embedded in rhetorics of gender and women in connection with war and liberation. Veiling practices were directly connected to women's experiences in the East and were conflated into the same essential idea of the oppressed woman in the East in need of Western military engagement for personal liberation from 'the veil'.<sup>1</sup>

To Americans, the 'veil' became a signifier of all the perceived negative aspects of Islamic culture: patriarchy, lack of freedom of expression, tyranny, and fundamentalism. Much academic work has been done to illustrate this purposeful construction and misreading of veiling. Now we in the West must unpack that powerful signifier and show its complexity – its meanings shaped by nationalist state dictates, governmental laws, women's desires, and anti-nationalist

movements – if we are ever going to change the national discourse surrounding women in the East, a topic clearly of interest to Western readers based on the popularity of books like Yousafzai's.

As I remind my students and those attending my lectures, there is, in fact, no one essential 'veil', no singular definition of what it means when a woman places a *hijab*, *burqa*, *niqab*, or any other covering on her body.<sup>2</sup> Hence, when discussing this issue, I use the term 'veiling' to dismantle the limiting idea that there is such a single essential entity as 'the veil' and to acknowledge the dynamic nature of this signifier. Said succinctly reminds readers in his preface that 'the worst aspect of this essentializing stuff is that human suffering in all its density and pain is spirited away' (1979: xxi). The focus on veiling in discussions of women in the Islamic world became the cornerstone of the construction of the essential notion of the 'woman' in those regions.

### **The construction of Eastern women's essential identity in Western readerships' collective imagination**

In American popular culture, literature attempting to show the Islamic oppression of women is *de rigueur*. In his talk 'Translating for Bigots', Adam Talib argues that the covers of books from the East, particularly those about women, share a reliance on essentialist discourse in the West. He says (at 7:30 in the video):

the books that are doing quite well commercially often present themselves to the reader in this way [showing a slide of a variety of covers]. There is still an exotic, orientaling marketing technique [...] you're tapping into a popular news and political discourse around a part of the world that is going to affect even literary translations.<sup>3</sup>  
(2013: n.p.)

Veiling is often deployed as a rhetorical device on the covers of books with female protagonists in the East written for a Western audience. For example, though Marjane Satrapi's main character's extra-diegetic gaze from the centre of her cover could indicate some semblance of agency, the imposing red cover overtakes her small figure. Her look of defiance is there, but small. The rest of the women on popular covers look away; some do not even have faces. The cover of Debbie Rodriguez's *Kabul Beauty School* (2007) advertises that an American woman goes 'behind the veil'. In fact, what she does is go to Kabul to teach hairdressing, but the title intimates that she infiltrated some dark, secret world where Americans never really want, or dare, to go. The author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi, has even been criticised by fellow Iranian writers for going too far in her depiction of women in Iran and offering an easy target to Republicans who wanted more fuel for their military fire. While she rejects all these accusations, she hasn't been able to shake off the stigma branded upon her by her fellow writers. But even though I argue that her text shows women resisting an oppressive theocracy, the cover gives no inkling of such resistance (Clemens (2013b)). The images of women on these covers work towards creating an essential notion of 'the veil', as if all women in some kind of covering are the same and require outside forces to liberate them.

Meyda Yeğenolğu argues in *Colonial Fantasies* that studying the way in which the West represents 'the veil' teaches more about the construction of Western identity than that of the women who veil:

By taking the representation of the veil as a test case, I suggest that the presumption of a hidden essence and truth behind the veil is the means by which both the Western/

colonial and the masculine subject constitute their own identity. Moreover, by demonstrating the structural homology between the representations of the Orient, veil, and feminine, I suggest that the discourse of Orientalism is mapped powerfully onto the language of phallogentrism and thereby point to the inextricable link between representations of cultural and sexual difference.

(1998: 11)

Western political action often relies on this mythical ‘truth’ of the veil: that it is oppressive, demeaning, dangerous, and antithetical to the ‘Western’ desire for freedom. The ‘veil’ signifies all that is wrong with the ‘Orient’, and anglophone narratives are often the first point of contact for a Western audience to engage with this essentialist narrative.

Those in the West who are on a ‘crusade’ – the language George W. Bush used when discussing the war on terror – often construct themselves as the saviours of women. In *The Terror Dream*, Faludi argues that Americans ‘were also enlisted in a symbolic war at home, a war to repair and restore a national myth’ (2008: 16). If the myth of America is a place where women are safe and free, there must be another side to the binary in which the women who live under the ‘enemy’ must be covered and lacking in all freedoms. In these cases, the West uses the trope of ‘the veil’ as a means of constantly replicating its belief in the dominance of its ideologies, specifically those of freedom and democracy. Yeğenolğu concludes her Introduction with a similar argument:

the desire to unveil women should not be seen simply as an uncovering of their bodies, but as a *re-inscription*, for the discourse of unveiling is no less incorporated in the existential or embodied being of Oriental women than the discourse of veiling.

(1998: 12; emphasis added)

While, in the West, the idea of unveiling is equated with freedom, Yeğenolğu urges caution in simplifying the act. The West has a vested interest in maintaining the idea that women who veil do it under duress and suffer greatly because of it; thereby, in Western discourse, those who work to ‘save’ those women will be ‘greeted as liberators’.

In an interview on National Public Radio in February of 2002, then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld exploited this essentialist narrative of women in the ‘East’ and talked about the ways in which the US, in a short time, was able to ‘free’ Afghani women from the *burqa*:

Women have stopped being repressed. They can actually walk out in the street and not have their entire faces and bodies covered by burkhas [*sic*]. They can laugh on the street. They can go to a doctor, which they couldn’t do. They can go to school, which they couldn’t do.

(2002: n.p.)

Historically, we know that many of these victories were short-lived, and women continue to struggle against structural oppression, but of most importance to this chapter’s argument is Rumsfeld using women’s rights as a sign of improvement in a country, an issue and a population in which his administration had very little interest months before.

### **Rising from the ashes: the phoenixes Mukhtar and Malala**

This notion of liberation, of freeing women, forces readers and scholars to consider a second essentialist character borne out of texts popular in the decades following 11 September 2001: the



phoenix. Among an anglophone readership, the phoenix narrative genre came to enjoy success in the academic community and among a public reading audience.

Before Malala, there was Mukhtar. Mai is also from Pakistan, where she lived without access to the same privileges that Malala enjoyed. Mai's 2006 memoir *In the Name of Honor* tells of her desire to die after being gang-raped as retribution for her younger brother flirting with a girl from another tribe. But instead, Mai chooses to fight Pakistan's laws on rape and sues the government. Mai's story would easily have been lost if it were not for the attention paid to it, and to her, by *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristoff. In his preface to *In the Name of Honor*, he concludes his introduction of Mai to his readers thus:

I think you will find a story that is tremendously inspiring rather than one that tells of brutality and despair. By the alchemy of her courage and stubbornness, Mukhtar has taken a sordid tale of gang rape and turned it into something heartwarming and hopeful.

(2006: xvi)

Kristof must make the case to readers that while what they are going to read is in part a 'sordid tale' of structural violence enacted on Mai physically by tribal entities and psychically by national politics, the reader will leave the text feeling hope with a warm heart. Mai's rise out of the ashes, so to speak, inscribes her account with a feeling of do-goodery common in texts telling the stories of women forced into the margins of society by patriarchal family, tribal, cultural, and governmental structures.<sup>4</sup>

The most recent of the books that fall into this genre – and perhaps the one with the most cultural currency – is Malala's story. These two texts contribute to the constructed image of women in the Muslim world. Mai's text is mediated through a Western journalist who found the story of the young girl and wanted it to be heard. This element of assistance gives a clear indication that the audience for Mai's texts is a Western one – and of course the fact that the books were originally written in English illustrates that although both women are Pakistani, their audience is the anglophone world. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, yet these phoenix narratives enjoy a strong currency in the West<sup>5</sup> and are of less interest in the native regions of the authors (Kugelman 2017). These narratives make us Western readers feel better about our own systems, our own treatment of women, and our military engagements pursued in the name of these women.

The covers of these phoenix narratives utilise the veiled woman trope – but in a different way. The phoenix covers play on imagery with which the West has become familiar in the years since 9/11. But in the case of these particular phoenix narratives, we see the actual subject of the text on the cover, not some stock image of Eastern women huddling passively. Also, Mai and Yousafzai engage a more direct gaze on their covers. Mai's cover may be seen as a bridge between the desire for the defeated woman trope, as is evident in the previously discussed book covers, and the emergence of these phoenix narratives from the Muslim world; her look is not direct, but there is a defiance in her face – and readers see her face. Yousafzai looks directly at the viewer, inviting engagement in a partnership between author and reader.

Interestingly, both Mai and Yousafzai were named Woman of the Year by *Glamour* magazine. There is something disconcerting about a magazine dedicated to perpetuating, in the West, the mythology of what a woman should be and using these Pakistani women as their women of the year in 2005 and 2013. Both of these women deserve to be honoured for their work and deserve to be heard – I have no interest in silencing women – yet this chapter's concern is *how* these women and their stories of survival are being deployed for other purposes



that conflict with their messages – such as putting Yousafzai in front of a L'Oréal banner or using Mai to sell fashion magazines. When their stories are used for other purposes, readers and consumers must be concerned for these girls and women and hope that they are not being used in the same way 'veiled' women in the Muslim world were used as objects of orientalism instead of being seen as agents of change in need of allies and partners – not in need of saviours.

Phoenix narratives do allow the Western reader some satisfaction. Consider why the story of Yousafzai captured the world's attention: a smart, young, spunky girl who used her mind and her body to fight the most fearsome bogeyman in the US' collective imagination, the Taliban. But is this satisfaction really the end goal of Yousafzai's work? I would argue that Yousafzai does not want us Western readers to feel satisfied and applaud ourselves. Yousafzai argues for action – not satisfaction. As she stated in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech,

I dedicate the Nobel Peace Prize money to the Malala Fund, to help give girls quality education, everywhere, anywhere in the world and to raise their voices. The first place this funding will go to is where my heart is, to build schools in Pakistan – especially in my home of Swat and Shangla. In my own village, there is still no secondary school for girls. And it is my wish and my commitment, and now my challenge to build one so that my friends and my sisters can go there to school and get quality education and to get this opportunity to fulfil their dreams.

(2014: n.p.)

She is surely looking to create a community of allies in her fight for gender equity instead of creating a phoenix narrative that one may read and then discard as a story that has ended happily, without even remembering the geographic setting. Yousafzai demands action beyond a 'heartwarming' text; hers is a narrative arc that only *begins* on the book's final pages as the reader should turn to association and activism upon completion of the text.

### Phoenixes are mythical, not material

In 2014, Texas artist Anat Ronen's mural 'Yes You Can!', depicting Yousafzai in the pose of Rosie the Riveter, shows the conflict between the desire for a 'heartwarming' phoenix narrative and the truth of structural oppression enacted on women's bodies and psyches. Rosie the Riveter was an amalgamation of women – there is no one exact person who was Rosie *per se*. Yousafzai is a person, a young woman recovering from a devastating attack and exiled with her family from the country she loves. Conflating Malala and Rosie signals that the world is asking too much of Yousafzai. To be conflated with an icon of war is too much to ask of an individual – for remember, the goal of this chapter is to undo the essentialism reified by the veil and phoenix narratives. Readers should remember that Rosie the Riveter and the women her image inspired were tossed aside and out of factories as soon as the war was over and the country no longer needed women to work in industry. I do not want to see the same thing done with Yousafzai or her story; she should not be tossed aside when she and her story are no longer serving the West's militaristic or nationalistic needs.

Perhaps it is good that Yousafzai ends the main part of her text in this way: 'When people talk about the way I was shot and what happened, I think it's the story of Malala, 'a girl shot by the Taliban': I don't feel it's a story about me at all' (2013: 301). Mai ends her text with a similar rhetorical move, distancing herself from the ways in which the story went beyond her own experience:

I have become, *in spite of myself*, a symbol for all these women who suffer the violence of patriarchs and tribal chiefs, and if this image of me has spread beyond our borders, it can only be a credit to my country.

(2006: 158; emphasis added)

Part of me cringes and feels great sadness for them not identifying their own selves with their narratives of tragedy and recovery. However, this detachment from their stories may be the strategy that saves them, for if the West is asking too much of their narratives – for them to be mythical phoenixes instead of young women – then maybe they can preserve themselves in the rhetorical process, even if they lose control over the way their readers use their narratives.

### Notes

- 1 For further discussion of the use of unveiling as a liberation trope deployed in rhetorics in the West, see Clemens (2013a).
- 2 Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the ways in which the academy uses (and abuses) ‘the veil’ to discuss Third-World women: ‘it is the analytical leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women that must be questioned’ (1984: 347). She notes that though the coverings may look similar, their disparate cultural meanings cannot be conflated.
- 3 Readers can see similar images presented during a talk I gave on *I Am Malala* [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZmwM6\\_rbK0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZmwM6_rbK0) (at 25:30).
- 4 Mai has become an agent for girls’ education in Pakistan. Mai’s Girl’s Model School is at the heart of her work through the Mukhtar Mai Women’s Organisation.
- 5 Indicators of their popularity include Simon and Schuster’s creation of a reading club guide for Mai’s book and the number of Yousafzai’s books sold: over a million since October 2013, according to her literary agency Curtis Brown.

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