

The Making of Humans and Their Others in and through Transnational Human Rights Advocacy: Exploring the Cases of Mukhtar Mai and Malala Yousafzai

Someone recently asked me what I thought of the surge of sentiment against global human rights icon Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan: “How could anyone from Pakistan not be proud of her? Doesn’t her work advance women’s rights in your country?” The questioner was genuinely interested in knowing how I, a self-identified transnational feminist immigrant scholar from Pakistan, understood the visceral repulsion in response to Malala within some quarters in Pakistan. “Why,” she asked, “would any educated Pakistani be against Malala? After all, one could expect such attitudes from the illiterate lot, but why the All Pakistan Private Schools Federation?” Implicit in this question are assumptions about women’s rights and education as signs of modernity, enlightenment, and progress. Any critique of Malala, then, is read as regressive, backward, premodern, and against the principles of human rights. Indeed, any critique of the discourse of human rights is made incomprehensible because the discourse articulates itself as universal and morally correct and, in recent times, has exhausted the space for how we imagine emancipatory possibilities and projects (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Kapur 2013). Yet, as feminist and post/de/colonial scholars argue, the very constitution of “human” in human rights discourses is predicated on assumptions about that which is *not* human (Brown 2004; Mignolo 2006; Fregoso 2014). The discourse thus has colonizing and orientaling functions for those who have been, and are, excluded from its imaginary (Yeğenoğlu 1998). In this article, to examine this constitutive role of human rights advocacy and the politics of knowledge-making practices, I explore the making of humans and their others in and through the discursive construction of two global icons of human rights advocacy—Mukhtar Mai and Malala Yousafzai, both from Pakistan.

Specifically, I analyze Mukhtaran and Malala’s discursive articulation in anglophone electronic media to illustrate the ways in which the notions of vulnerability, suffering, and empowerment that cohere around them facilitate the marking of brown, Muslim, Pakistani bodies as threatening the racial, civilizational, and ultimately humanitarian integrity of the white, anglophone, often Christian male subject. Like other feminist and postcolonial

scholars, I illustrate the ways in which the public discourse around Mukhtaran and Malala reinscribes brown, Muslim, female bodies as perennially vulnerable to brown, male violence (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 2002; Abu-Lughod 2013); articulates the violation of their corporeal bodies as a confirmation of their communities and nations as belonging to the time-space of the past; and views empowerment as individualized action against local cultures, families, and communities. Such knowledge-making practices not only secure the continuum of man to beast (Agamben 1998) but also (re)entrench the teleological narrative of liberalism where acquisition of more rights by individuals is assumed to be the only way to secure development and emancipation. This, however, clearly has consequences for those who are excluded from, or made nonexistent by, the liberal humanist project. There is, thus, a need for a reevaluation of the very terms and idioms that inform human rights advocacy.

I take up this task of decolonizing and pluriversalizing human rights (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006) by pointing to alternative conceptions of what it means to be human and to lead a meaningful life that already circulate in the context of Pakistan. Drawing on my fieldwork with adolescent girls in the villages of Khyber and Aliabad, I observe that the autonomous, individual subject of the human rights discourse exists side by side with conceptions of being human that traverse the delicate space between individuality and belonging to collectivities, be they families, tribes, religious communities, or clans. My findings show that the participants experienced their humanity in relational terms; that they viewed themselves as embedded in different systems of living, including nonhuman ones; and that they emphasized a heightened sense of complementarity and interdependency to achieve individual as well as collective well-being. When living that is experienced in such complex ways is reduced to a list of rights, or to legal and state-defined definitions of what constitutes freedom, which close off other emancipatory projects, it can be read as a form of violence (Kapur 2013; Fregoso 2014). Thus, I call for reconstructing the human rights discourse such that it acknowledges multiple and diverse conceptualizations of what it means to be human and how one might live with dignity, giving up its claims to universality. This, however, is only one example of how the project of pluriversalizing human rights can be achieved; other scholars may take up other philosophies and epistemologies of the global South to outline alternate conceptions of what it means to be human and experience human empowerment.¹

¹ An increasing number of scholars are turning toward nonliberal epistemologies to excavate alternate conceptions of human dignity, freedom, and happiness. Amina Jamal (2015) seeks to do so by drawing on the Sufi tradition, and Ratna Kapur (2013) draws on the philosophical tradition of nondualism or *Advaita* to do the same.

The proliferation of human rights and its critiques

In recent decades, the language of human rights has become the dominant idiom in and through which injustices are articulated and redresses sought (Benhabib 2007). In the context of Pakistan, too, the language of rights is gradually attaining the status of common sense. Local and transnational organizations and activists deploy this language to advance the welfare of Pakistani women and girls. Studies show that some activists find that it helps them appeal to a supranational community and reprimand a patriarchal state (Grewal 2005; Khoja-Moolji 2014). In other cases, activists who are cautious of the Western lineage of the language of rights try to figure out ways to lay claim to the same ideals of dignity and protection of women by vernacularizing and Islamizing the rhetoric of rights.² Yet others, recognizing the hegemony of the discourse of human rights, are exploring ways to use it in counterhegemonic, strategic ways. In short, human rights have become the dominant vocabulary of human dignity and empowerment (Santos 2013).

Transnational feminist and postcolonial scholars, however, are wary of this celebratory uptake of human rights discourse. They direct attention toward the kinds of subjects and objects that are produced in and through it, as well as its function in naming and consolidating distinctions between the human and the subhuman, the free and the oppressed, the secular and the religious, the developed and the undeveloped.³ Lila Abu-Lughod (2013), for instance, argues that efforts of Islamizing and vernacularizing human rights retain a common referent—human rights laws and documents—and, hence, do little to contest the assumptions of this discourse. Likewise, Indrapal Grewal (2005) views human rights as a system of truth and an “ethical regime that put(s) into play a whole range of instrumentalizations of governance” (122). She elaborates that human rights discourses have enabled the indexing of the welfare of populations and, hence, facilitate the convergence of geo- and biopolitics. Similarly, my own work in Pakistan explores the disciplinary effects of UN-centric human rights discourses as they delineate specific forms of belonging as worthy of citizenship (Khoja-Moolji 2014).

Undergirding these critiques is a recognition and contestation of the humanist philosophies and Eurocentric assumptions that inform human rights discourses (Merry 2006; Mignolo 2006; Benhabib 2007). Within the doctrine of humanism, only particular kinds of subjects are recognizable as human, and all else is constituted as the other or the repressed other through

² See Abu-Lughod (2013) for a review of such organizations and activists.

³ See Wynter (2003), Grewal (2005), Hesford and Kozol (2005), and Esmeir (2011).

practices of racialization, sexualization, and naturalization (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Wynter 2003; Braidotti 2013). Therefore, to explore the politics of human rights advocacy we have to examine the constitution of the (non)(sub)(in) human and the process of dehumanization. Indeed, Wendy Brown (2004) insists that we interrogate the self-articulation of human rights as an anti-political project and ask questions not only about its political functioning but also about the processes of politicization that it sets in motion. I therefore set out to examine the archives of Mukhtaran and Malala, as case studies, to argue that their production as particular kinds of vulnerable, suffering, and empowered subjects in and through the language of human rights has the effect of (re)installing the white anglophone male as representing full humanity.

Analyzing cultural productions

Electronic media today have become some of the most powerful ways to shape public discourse and, hence, make for productive sites for analysis (McDermott 1995). I examine Mukhtaran and Malala's representations in popular electronic media outlets primarily located in the global North to explore the dominant discursive tropes and formations in and through which they are articulated. Focusing on media and public intellectuals from the global North is a way to understand the constitutive force of those discursive practices as they are put in play from positions of strength (including positions of wealth and relative power). Indeed, discursive representations originating from the global North have a "distributive currency" (Said 1978, 23) that is often not available to their counterparts in the global South. Furthermore, their dominance is also a function of their recuperation and re-citation of sedimented tropes, which awards them prominence (Stoler 1995). Analyzing elite media productions, then, is one way to unpack these dense assemblages. Indeed, transnational feminists have long argued for such analyses in order to make visible the processes of abstraction and spectacularization that cast particular individuals as either ideal-victim subjects or empowered/rescued subjects (Hesford 2011; Abu-Lughod 2013).

Data sources for this article include images, writings, and speeches featured in magazines such as *Time*, the *Economist*, and *Newsweek*; newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*; and online news sites such as CNN, the BBC, and the *Huffington Post*; as well as the public discourse of journalists and figures such as *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof and the former prime minister of the United Kingdom and current UN envoy for global education, Gordon Brown, both of whom have been prominent in speaking about Mukhtaran and Malala, among others. I also examine the webpages of Western organizations that have presented

Mukhtaran and Malala with accolades in order to explore their narratives around such formal recognitions. My intent in this article, however, is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the public archives around Mukhtaran and Malala (much of that appears in Khoja-Moolji 2015) but to consider some elements for illustrative purposes to explore the operation of human rights advocacy.

Objects and subjects of human rights advocacy

In 2002, Mukhtar Mai was gang-raped in Meerwala, Pakistan. The rape was intended to serve as retributive justice for alleged sexual advances made by her twelve-year-old brother, Abdul Shaqoor, toward a woman, Naseem, from the more powerful Mastoi clan. While a tribal council had earlier agreed that Shaqoor would marry Naseem and Mukhtaran would marry Naseem's brother Abdul Khaliq, two arbiters from the Mastoi tribe—Ramzan Pachar and Ghulam Farid Mahmood—rejected the proposal. They decided instead that dishonoring someone related to Shaqoor would be the appropriate way to resolve the issue.⁴ As a consequence, Mukhtaran was raped by Abdul Khaliq, Allah Ditta, Muhammad Fiaz, and Ghulam Farid Mahmood.⁵ She filed a case against them, which led to fourteen men being arrested, four of whom had committed the rape while the others were part of the tribal council. Of these, Abdul Khaliq, Allah Ditta, Muhammad Fiaz, Ghulam Farid Mahmood, Ramzan Pachar, and Faiza Muhammad were found guilty. The men appealed the court's decision, and in 2005, all but Abdul Khaliq were ordered to be released upon payment of a bond. In 2011, the Supreme Court upheld this verdict.⁶

Mukhtaran's case received significant attention from human rights organizations and media outlets when the then-president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, disallowed her to travel to the United States to share her story. It was believed that such a retelling would tarnish an already problematic image of Pakistan in the United States. Musharraf's decision was condemned by the media, and Pakistan's legal system was criticized. Since then, a broad range of groups and individuals have rallied around Mukhtaran to amplify her voice and story, and to seek justice for other women in Pakistan. For instance, in 2005, *Time* magazine named Mukhtaran one of its 100 Most Influential People, and *Glamour* magazine declared her its Woman of the Year. In 2007, she was awarded the prestigious Council of Europe North-

⁴ See Supreme Court Pakistan, *Criminal Appeal 163*, <http://www.pakistanlaw.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Mukhtar-Mai-case.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 5. For more information about Mukhtar Mai's case, see Khoja-Moolji (2013).

South Prize, which seeks to honor efforts made to advance human rights and strengthen North-South relations. In receiving this award, Mukhtaran joined the likes of the Aga Khan, Kofi Annan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Queen Rania of Jordan, among others. In 2013, she was invited to speak at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy. Mukhtaran has also established a welfare organization in Pakistan with some of the funds that she received from prize monies and from the government of Pakistan. Wikipedia lists Mukhtaran's occupation as "human rights activist," which is one of the clearest indications of how her activism in the aftermath of her personal tragedy is articulated.⁷

Similar to representations of Mukhtaran's suffering and advocacy, the international media coverage of Malala Yousafzai also situates her as both an object and a subject of human rights advocacy. In 2012, Malala, then fifteen years old, was shot in the head upon the exhortations of Mullah Fazlullah (also known as "Radio Mullah"), an emerging leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. The shooting was organized by a group of ten men led by Zafar Iqbal. Malala had been writing against the atrocities of the Taliban militants in her native valley of Swat, particularly on their call for school closures. Her activism included appearing in two documentaries produced by *New York Times* journalist Adam Ellick and writing a blog for BBC Urdu. Her father had been vociferous on this issue as well, especially since he owned and operated a school, which was his primary source of income. The shooting was aimed at halting their activist work. As with Mukhtaran's case, this event too attracted international attention, with people inside and outside of Pakistan condemning the attackers. Pakistani state institutions immediately provided medical assistance to Malala. She was taken to an army hospital and later transferred to a hospital in the United Kingdom. Malala recovered shortly thereafter and now resides in the United Kingdom.

Malala's activism had already started gaining attention in Pakistan before the shooting. In 2011, for instance, she was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize. However, after the shooting, attention toward her increased manifold. Gordon Brown launched a petition called "I am Malala" to put pressure on the Pakistani government to address girls' rights to education. In 2013, Malala, like Mukhtaran, was named one of the 100 Most Influential People by *Time* magazine and Woman of the Year by *Glamour* magazine. Like Mukhtaran, Malala has also come to symbolize human rights struggles in Pakistan—in 2012 she was awarded the Rome Prize for Peace and Humanitarian Action, and in 2013 she received the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament, the Human-

⁷ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mukhtar_Mai.

itarian of the Year award from Harvard University, the Ambassador of Conscience award from Amnesty International, and the UN Human Rights Prize from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013, and again in 2014, when she won, along with Kailash Satyarthi. That year she also received the Anne Frank Award for Moral Courage.

The public discourse around both Mukhtaran and Malala is constituted in and through the language of UN-centric human rights. This includes an articulation of their suffering as a violation of human rights but also a reading of their courage as an enactment of individual autonomy and a recognition of rights, as demonstrated by the numerous awards they received. In addition, both take up the language of rights to explain the specifics of their personal experiences and to frame their desires for girls and women in Pakistan. For instance, while acknowledging the advances made by state institutions in Pakistan to improve the conditions for women, Mukhtaran writes that the United Nations “can and must do so much more” (Mai 2013, para. 13) and calls on the organization to help victims of violence in Pakistan: “The UN can help rape victims like me, and other unempowered women in Pakistan, by calling on Pakistan to implement its international undertakings to respect our *universal right to human dignity and equality*, and to truly guarantee access to education” (paras. 15 and 16; emphasis added). Malala, too, has productively used the language of rights to draw attention to women’s and girls’ issues. In a statement made after the announcement of her winning the Nobel Peace Prize, she said, “a girl has the power to go forward in her life . . . she should have an identity. She should be recognized, and *she has equal rights as a boy*” (quoted in Kumar 2014; emphasis added). In her acceptance speech for the same prize, Malala again articulated her activism through the language of rights: “This award is not just for me . . . it is for those voiceless children who want change. *I am here to stand up for their rights*. . . I am just a committed and even stubborn person who wants to see every child getting quality education, who wants to see *women having equal rights* and who wants peace in every corner of the world” (Yousafzai 2014; emphasis added).

Hence, Mukhtaran and Malala can be read as both objects *and* subjects of human rights advocacy. That is, observers draw on discourses of human rights to make sense of their suffering and activism, and Mukhtaran and Malala draw on the same idioms to constitute themselves and others as rights-bearing subjects. Mukhtaran and Malala traverse what I am terming the “chain of vulnerability-suffering-empowerment” established by and within contemporary human rights regimes, which transforms them from vulnerable and suffering to empowered women/girls. The metaphor of a

chain is productive for me as it draws attention to the teleological and progressive linking of these subject positions in the dominant discourse of human rights—that is, a brown woman inevitably has to travel through this chain in order to achieve the kind of empowerment recognized by the liberal humanist discourse of rights.⁸ Such forms of legibility, as feminist post-colonial scholars have shown, are an effect of discourses about Islam and Muslim men that displace brown, Muslim bodies from dominant performances linked to being human.

“Monsters rule in Pakistan”

The production of the Muslim world/Orient as antagonistic to the rights of women and embroiled in premodern sensibilities is made possible through an invocation of the binary of vulnerable Muslim women and threatening Muslim men.⁹ From the British colonizers and missionaries’ calls to save “Moslem women” from the practices of purdah, polygamy, and child marriage to the contemporary calls by human rights advocates to give Muslim girls an education and rescue them from backward cultures, oppressive families, and child marriage (note the sturdy trope), the construction of Muslim women as silent and vulnerable has a long discursive history. In the context of colonial India, for instance, these tropes enabled Victorian social reformers to inaugurate their humanitarian-cum-regulatory projects of education—including zenana visitations whereby female missionaries and teachers entered the homosocial spaces of Muslim households to educate women—and sanctioned rescue/emancipatory missions (Montgomery 1910; Burton 1994). Echoes of such constructions can be heard in the more recent public discourse of human rights as it relates to Mukhtaran and Malala.

Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Thor Halvorssen, the president of the New York-based nonprofit Human Rights Foundation, for instance, titles his commentary about Mukhtaran’s rape “Monsters Rule in Pakistan; Rape Is Public Policy” (Halvorssen and Pizano 2011). Here, Pakistan is discursively produced as a haven for rapists and Pakistani leaders—mostly Mus-

⁸ I am inspired by Nancy Lesko’s use of the term “chains of reasoning” (2001, 180) to theorize the story lines of Mukhtaran and Malala as traversing chains of vulnerability-suffering-empowerment. There are, however, moments when both Mukhtaran and Malala break this chain—for instance, when Malala uses international attention to discuss issues related to Palestinian children or drone strikes in Pakistan—yet the chain is operative when it assimilates their activism back into its dominant codes. To argue against this chain is to argue for messy, nonlinear ways of being, as I will discuss later in this article.

⁹ See Said (1978), Bhattacharyya (2008), Shehabuddin (2011), and Charania (2015).

lim men—likened to monsters: “You see, rape is standard punishment in Pakistan for women and girls who have brought dishonor to their families or communities. . . . Violence of this sort is common practice in Pakistan, considered part of an ancient ethical code, commonly referred to as ‘honor revenge’ and ‘honor killings’” (2011, paras. 2 and 5).

Such discursive maneuvers produce Pakistan and Pakistanis as embroiled in premodern sensibilities and as harboring ill will toward women and girls. Instead of analyzing the complicated sequence of events that led to Mukhtaran’s rape, including the nascent and still struggling system of law and patriarchal attitudes, as well as the good will of the many people who stood up for her, including her own parents and the mullah of the local mosque, what we find is an image of Pakistanis as less-than-humans or as monsters. Similarly, *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof, who has written extensively about Mukhtaran, also constructs Pakistani citizens and cultures as threats to Mukhtaran. In an article titled, “Sentenced to Be Raped,” Kristof exclaims, “I did encounter a much more ubiquitous form of evil and terror: *a culture, stretching across about half the globe, that chews up women and spits them out*. We in the West could help chip away at that oppression, with health and literacy programs and by simply speaking out against it” (2004; emphasis added). Elsewhere, in a video produced for the *New York Times* titled “The Courage of Mukhtar Mai,” Kristof (2006) notes, “When she is being welcomed at the White House or receiving thunderous standing ovations in New York, it is easy to imagine that she is safe. But when the spotlights go down, she returns here to the village in Meerwala where many people want to kill her for threatening the existing repressive order.”

These discursive practices produce the Western subject as free, empowered, and humanitarian, and the people and culture of Meerwala and Pakistan (Muslims in this case) as repressed and backward, harboring ill will toward women. In order to present himself and others like him (“we in the West”) as liberal and humanitarian, Kristof draws on the tired strategy of blaming local cultures and traditions for bad behaviors, which feminists have critiqued incessantly (Volpp 2000; Massad 2015). Similar invocations are also made in cartoonist representations around Malala in elite newspapers, featuring visual and textual rhetoric that portrays the undifferentiated mass of bearded men, Islam, and the Taliban in stark contrast to Malala, books, and education.¹⁰ Here, the latter stands in for the cherished ideals of civilized/progressive people, and the former signals its lack.

¹⁰ The selection of images from elite newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine is one of the ways in which I attempt to delineate the loudest, most dominant discourse about Muslim women and men.

Consider the systematicity in visual representations of men in figures 1 and 2 with stereotypically ethnicized noses, excessive hair, deep frowns, and screaming, wide-open mouths; in figure 2, in particular, the trope of the uneducated Muslim, which has a long history in British writings about Muslims in colonial India (Sarkar 2008; Batsha 2010), is reinvigorated.¹¹ These images evoke what Jasbir Puar (Puar and Rai 2002; Puar 2007) describes as the terrorist-monster-fag assemblage, a necessary set of othered bodies—often orientalized and racialized—that enable the constitution of the American (hetero)homonormative citizen. In this case, the discursive representations of Muslims and Pakistanis as monstrous help to define the key elements of humanity, which is conflated with the West.

Affects play a critical role in rendering the Muslim male body as monstrous and in- or subhuman. Writing about the constitution of the Latina/o citizen-subject, José Muñoz argues that Latina/o identity is not simply a cultural marker but also an affective performance—a performance in relation to an “‘official’ national affect” of whiteness (2000, 68). Since the Latina/o citizen-subject is displaced and blocked from accessing majoritarian and official paradigms, it is impossible for her/him to perform official citizenship and normativity (Muñoz 2000). While Muñoz focuses on identity constructions within the United States and, hence, links whiteness with “national affect,” I extend this line of inquiry and draw on arguments about the embeddedness of present ways of conceptualizing the human in Eurocentric paradigms (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Braidotti 2013) to theorize whiteness as the official *human* affect as well. Human affect, when linked with whiteness, entails reason, control, and drabness. Within such a construction, “excess” affect marks a displacement and, therefore, those displaying such excesses are constituted as less than human. In the case of brown, Muslim men, dominant cultural productions in the media mark them as figures of excess, rage, and unpredictability, thereby constituting them as a displacement from official human affects, which are linked with control, rationality, and reason. In figures 1 and 2, for example, anger jumps off of the pages and seeps into the viewer’s skin; the viewer affectively feels the threat of brown men, and feelings of care and protection cohere around the innocent girl. These affects rely on the re-citation of orientalizing tropes to maintain their effect. Consider the images on the cover of magazines such as *Newsweek* in September 2001 and September 2012 and the *Economist* in January 2008, as well as television shows, such as *Homeland* (see Shah 2014), where

¹¹ Readers can also see images in the *New York Times* (particularly, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/opinion/heng-cartoon-malala-yousafzai-shot-by-taliban.html>); author was unable to secure permission to reproduce the image.

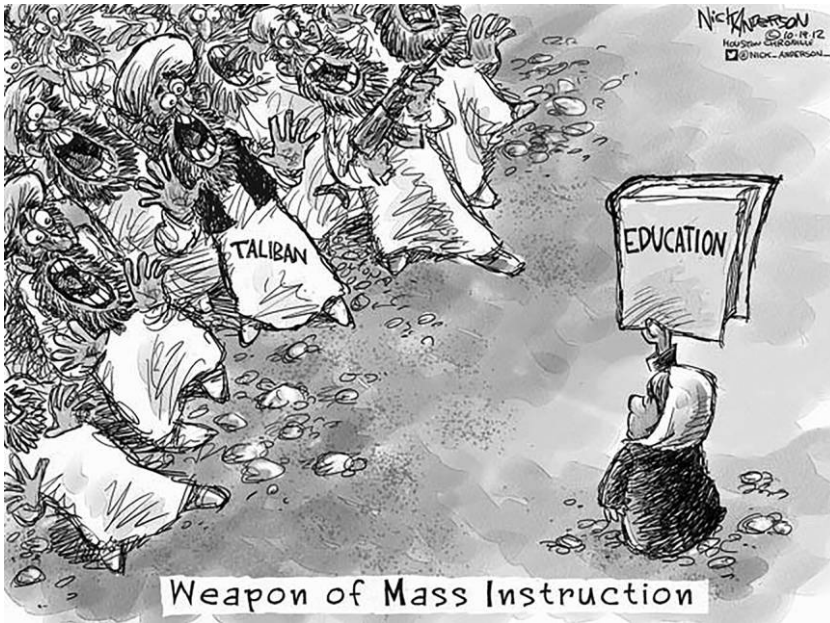


Figure 1 “The Mortal Threat” by Nick Anderson, cartoonist for the *Houston Chronicle* (October 18, 2012). © 2012 by Nick Anderson. Image courtesy of Nick Anderson, the *Washington Post* Writers Group, and the Cartoonist Group. A color version of this figure is available online.

the trope of the angry, brown, Muslim man looms large. Without the repetitive use of these tropes in dominant media, or what we can describe as processes of dehumanization, such representations would lose their historical connection to Muslim, brown bodies.

This trope, however, is repeated with difference (Deleuze [1968] 1995) every time a new victim-subject emerges. That is, it adjusts itself with every repetition, making way for anomalies and exceptions. For instance, in Malala’s story, her father Ziauddin appears as supportive, visionary, and a human rights activist. His dominant articulation, much like Malala’s, is that of an exception against the background of the presumably known entity of Pakistani Muslim men and a patriarchal society. Shiza Shahid, the CEO of the Malala Fund, praises Ziauddin, writing: “He had no qualms about his organization being run by a 24-year-old girl, *an openness to gender and age which is unheard of where he comes from*” (Yousafzai and Shahid 2014; emphasis added). According to this rhetoric, Ziauddin’s desires and practices of encouraging his daughter are not grounded in local environments but against them.¹² That is, particular kinds of attributes and activism—espe-

¹² See Mohsin (2013) for an example of such writing.



Figure 2 “Malala Yousafzai Wins the Nobel Peace Prize; The Taliban’s Reaction” by Ann Telnaes, *Washington Post* (October 10, 2014). © 2014 by Ann Telnaes. Image courtesy of Ann Telnaes and the Cartoonist Group. All rights reserved. A color version of this figure is available online.

cially those that are valorized in today’s neoliberal context—are assumed to be properties that one acquires due to exposure to Western/Enlightenment/humanitarian ideas and education. Thus, what we have is a discursive and affective impossibility for Muslims and Pakistanis as a collectivity to inhabit spaces that are constituted as human, with all of the liberal humanist paraphernalia of freedom, democracy, and rationality.

The production of collectivities such as Muslims, Muslim men, and Pakistanis as belonging to the time-space of the past—either as embroiled in premodern sensibilities or as subhumans or monsters yet to develop into full humans—has consequences for their treatment as a group (even as individuals from such groups—such as Mukhtaran and Malala—may be spared that treatment). When having a qualified life as a human is linked with whiteness, a state of exception (Agamben 1998)—a time-space sanctioned by sovereign power where laws can be suspended—can be created around non-whites.¹³ It is Pakistanis/Muslims/Muslim men’s already constituted status

¹³ A large number of Pakistanis in northern Waziristan have been displaced as a consequence of the clashes between the Pakistani/American state and militants. Due to the continuing high rate of drone strikes, many are unwilling to return to their homes (*Press TV* 2014). The success of these strikes, according to a report by the United Kingdom-based *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, is around 12 percent; of the total 2,379 people killed, only

of being less than human that allows for a devaluation of their political subjectivity in relation to the American state. They can thus be subjected to state violence without raising the same kinds of legal and humanitarian dilemmas that might be operative in other contexts and in relation to those who are deemed fully human/*bios*. This is illustrated by the overpolicing of brown bodies in the streets of American cities, torture in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the invasion of sovereign states such as Iraq, the declaration of a War on Terror against Pakistan, and drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The certainty about the *inhumanity* of brown bodies produces an ease with which their human rights are relinquished. Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998) reminds us that the West's project of global domination has entailed defining and imposing universally applicable norms of modernity, development, and progress that deny freedom and autonomy to native cultures. Likewise, in defining universal measures of humanity—through the enumeration of rights, or by waging a war to protect human rights, for instance—particular subjects are denied this very humanity. Here, politics, religion, and gender mesh in meaningful ways to show that not all political lives are equal, and state violence draws on, and reproduces, cultural expressions of some populations as bestial. In contrast, Mukhtaran and Malala's suffering occurs outside the domain of state-sanctioned violence, helping to rearticulate the threat constituted by Muslim men, Islam, and local cultures. These frames of recognition come together to make their suffering legible within humanitarian regimes of care (Ticktin 2011). What is at stake here, then, is that the horrendous crimes committed against particular victim-subjects such as Mukhtaran and Malala by specific men are grafted onto an entire set of people who are turned into bare bodies.

The particularized vulnerabilities and sufferings of Mukhtaran and Malala are also grafted onto the state of Pakistan, rendering it simultaneously a vulnerable nation incapable of addressing the needs of its own population, and hence requiring aid and assistance, *and* a threatening, suspect nation with nuclear capabilities, and thus in need of regulation and, possibly, punishment. This paves the way not only for unsolicited military interventions and sanctions but also for humanitarian projects. In Pakistan, humanitarian projects have precipitated the privatization of public goods and services, which does little to strengthen state institutions.¹⁴ Furthermore, foreign aid to Pakistan has often been contingent on the state implementing structural adjustment programs, which include provisions for decreasing spend-

295 can be identified as militants (Serle 2014). The probability of a civilian being killed, therefore, is fairly high, engendering vulnerability at a societal level.

¹⁴ See Keating, Rasmussen, and Rishi (2010) for a critique.

ing on social services. Hence, there is a circularity at work here—the vulnerable state needs aid, which comes with contingencies that further weaken state institutions, causing the state to require additional aid in the future.

The final link in the chain of vulnerability-suffering-empowerment articulates a transformation of Muslim women and girls into empowered subjects. However, a narrow conceptualization of empowerment is produced here. Empowerment is constituted as an individualized act, where the subject makes her concerns audible by deploying the language of human rights in opposition to local configurations of patriarchy, families, or communities. This is apparent in the ways in which both Mukhtaran and Malala are produced as empowered. Malala, for instance, is valorized for standing up against the collective of Taliban/Islam/terrorists. Popular American blogger Sam Harris writes that “Malala is the best thing to come out of the Muslim world in a thousand years. She is an extraordinarily brave and eloquent girl who is doing what millions of Muslim men and women are too terrified to do—*stand up to the misogyny of traditional Islam*” (2013, par. 17; emphasis added).

Likewise, Gordon Brown (2013) titled one of his articles for CNN “How Malala Forced Terrorists onto Defensive.” And Malala herself titled her coauthored autobiography *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013). In 2013, Mukhtaran wrote an article for the *National Post*, a Canadian newspaper in which she too emphasized Malala’s individualized performance of voice and speaking up for rights: “Malala showed Pakistani women that they now have a voice: a voice to demand their rights” (Mai 2013, para. 5). Similarly, across public media archives, what seems to mark Mukhtaran as empowered is her decision to pursue a legal case instead of committing suicide.¹⁵

These articulations collectively narrate empowerment as an individualized action undertaken by women—standing up, speaking against, forcing, demanding, fighting back—against the Pakistani legal system, its culture, and its people. Empowerment in such discursive formations is theorized as a delinking of girls and women from specific forms of attachments (to their families, communities, and nation) and a developing of new kinds of attachments (toward human rights laws, schools, and the labor market [Dingo 2008]). Under this dominant logic of empowerment, women who align with their husbands and families or who enact different versions of self and communal care do not feature as empowered. This is clearly illustrated by

¹⁵ See Mukhtaran’s brief biography, under 2006, in the Council of Europe’s list of previous laureates for the North-South Prize (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/nscentre/NSP/winners_NSP_en.asp).

how women who subvert imperialist ambitions in the context of Pakistan or enact transgression in unfamiliar ways are often not invoked as working toward human rights.¹⁶ This includes women who engage in guerilla warfare to resist American military establishments in Pakistan (and Afghanistan), those who protested Pakistan's alliance with the United States against the Taliban in 2007 as part of the siege of Lal Masjid, as well as the hundreds of women who (as I write these words) have been participating in a sit-in in Islamabad for the past hundred days to expose the alleged rigging in the elections that brought Nawaz Sharif to power. These exercises of women's empowerment do not always employ the language of rights, are enacted in concert with men, argue for a balance between collective and individualized well-being, and often contest colonizing practices undertaken by Western institutions as well as the elite within the country. They are, therefore, not intelligible as enactments of empowerment within present discursive frames of human rights.

In short, dominant public representations of victim-subjects such as Mukhtaran and Malala in and through archetypal frames of vulnerable women, threatening men, or a vulnerable/threatening state do little for the project of extending our understanding about others. Instead, they reify the binaries of human/monster and the contours of othered identities.¹⁷ What we are left with, then, are reductive story lines that produce stable, knowable third-world subjects. It should now come as no surprise that some people have taken it upon themselves to observe "anti-Malala" days to contest their own and their state's marginalization that results from dominant discourses about Malala. The specific slogan of the campaign launched by the All Pakistan Private School Federation, "I am not Malala, I am Muslim, I am Pakistani" (*Express Tribune* 2015; Ghani 2015), is a clear indication of the group's resistance to the ways in which Malala has been taken up to define Pakistanis and Muslims, something that has real, material implications for their everyday living. The paradox, however, is that any resistance to Malala is often viewed as a sign of backward cultures and not as a serious critique of imperial knowledge-making practices. Even in their political resistance, Pakistanis and Muslims often are unable to disentangle themselves from entrenched conceptions of who they are and what they represent. What, then, might be viable alternatives to, or extensions of, the vocabulary of human rights? How might we (re)think the human such that it creates space

¹⁶ See Mahmood (2005) and Jamal (2015) for alternative enactments of piety and/or transgression.

¹⁷ See Nakamura (2006) and Queen (2008) on the consumption and commodification of such identities.

for those who have been historically dehumanized? What conceptualizations might Pakistanis themselves offer to reclaim their personhood and collectivity?

Pluriversalizing human rights

As I note above, particular conceptions of what it means to be human undergird human rights discourses, wherein assumptions about autonomy and self-determination are sometimes valorized to the extent that individuals appear to be delinked from their human and nonhuman environments. Feminist scholars have traced the history of human rights to show the many subjects who have been excluded from this discourse (Wynter 2003; Esmeir 2011; Phillips 2015). One way to disrupt the dominant claim of human rights is to contest the very terms that inform it by pluriversalizing it. Decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo (2013) uses the term “pluriversality” to denote the existence of universalizing principles across all civilizations rather than only the Western ones. That Western epistemology and hermeneutics appear universalistic is then seen as part of the larger imperial project. This does not mean that these universalisms exist in harmony—histories of colonialisms clearly show the relations of power that structure epistemologies. To disrupt these hierarchies entails dwelling in the border spaces across epistemologies and rewriting dominant discourses by introducing multiplicities. Said differently, it is critical to contest the hegemonic terms in and through which societies make sense of their present, to recognize their Eurocentric origins and, simultaneously, to attempt a retrieval of indigenous concepts to pluralize knowledge fields (Mignolo and Tostanova 2006; Santos 2012; Mignolo 2013). The remainder of this article is my attempt to explore one such alternative way of being human in Pakistan.¹⁸

As an immigrant from Pakistan who teaches about gender and education in the United States and returns to Pakistan every year or so to work with Pakistanis, I inhabit what Mignolo (2013) might recognize as border space or what Keita Takayama (2011) calls double knowing, which enables me to do dialogical work across different epistemologies. Reconstructing human rights from this space and from this knowing entails “shifting the geography of reason to geo- and body-politics of knowledge” (Mignolo

¹⁸ It is important to remember that this project does not call for a denial of the (human) subject; I align with postcolonial and women-of-color feminists who point to the embodied dimensions of identities and violence. This project, instead, is about how our dominant vocabularies of the human and human rights structure the kinds of emancipatory projects that we imagine. Deepening our understanding of the multiple ways in which human dignity is thought and felt can be fruitful in our quest for social justice.

and Tlostanova 2006, 210) and “thinking from different imaginaries of the *human, humanity, and rights*” (Fregoso 2014, 587). It entails an orientation toward human rights that simultaneously seeks to unsettle its coloniality, attend to its multiplicity, and maintain space for its strategic use. Below, I draw on my experience of organizing a human rights education camp for adolescent girls in Pakistan and then revisiting the community a few years later, to illustrate the multiple ways in which individuals live out their humanity. In doing so, I aim to restage conceptualizations of the body/self that undergird human rights discourses. One reason to focus on the body is that it is often viewed as the only site of humanity and, hence, used synonymously with the human. The quest for commonality through assertions of universalisms then gives way to an acknowledgment of diversity and a conscious effort to work through them.

During the summer of 2011, I, along with a colleague, organized a series of human rights summer camps for adolescent girls in the province of Sindh, Pakistan.¹⁹ At the camp in the village of Khyber, some students contested the emphasis that human rights declarations (such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child) placed on the individual. Participants often saw themselves as linked with the welfare of their families and communities, with each having a particular set of responsibilities to further the well-being of the entire unit—whatever that unit might be. For instance, some proposed that a gendered division of labor, with women undertaking reproductive labor in the household, was a logical choice for them as opposed to entering the labor market. While they wanted to complete twelve years of schooling, they did not necessarily connect schooling with future income generation via partaking in the formal workforce, a connection that we, the educators at the camp, made as we rehearsed the normative link between calls for girls’ education and skills development. Figure 3 is a pictorial representation by one of the participants about what she calls “responsibilities of women in different working fields.”

Here, the reproductive labor of cooking in the home and unpaid labor in the agricultural fields are placed at the same level as the waged labor of teaching at a school or participating in sports (I assume professionally).²⁰

¹⁹ I later critiqued my own practices in Khoja-Moolji 2014.

²⁰ It is interesting to note the reference to sports here, since professional sports for women in Pakistan are still a rare occurrence. I conjecture that the student may have been inspired to think about this given our discussion of the then-recent ban on the Iranian women’s football team by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association due to their dress code, which included a headscarf.

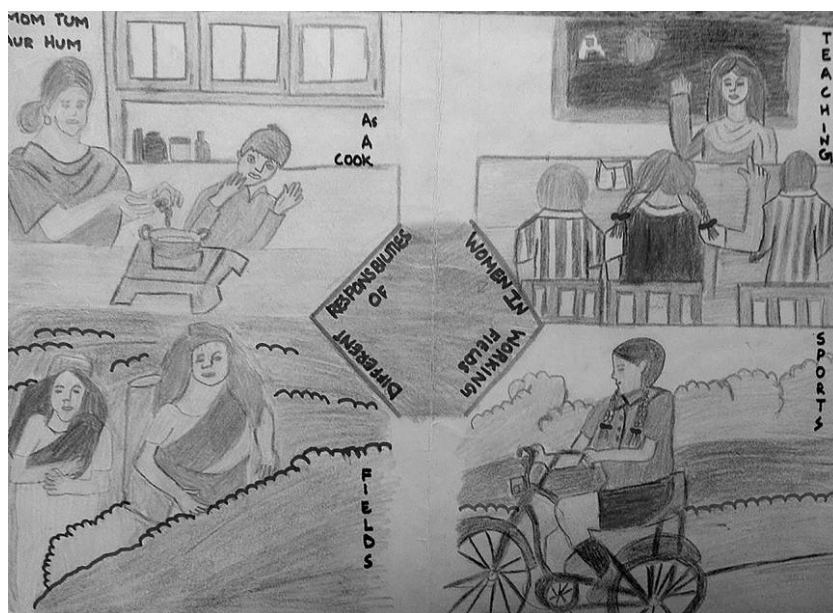


Figure 3 Shehneela Shaukat Ali's artistic rendering for Women Leaders of Tomorrow summer camp in 2011. © 2011 by Shehneela Shaukat Ali. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

My students' contestations illustrated their conceptions of the body as relational, linked with the welfare of others, and experienced within systems, supportive as well as nonsupportive, human as well as nonhuman. Such a conceptualization of the body poses a challenge to human rights discourses that abstract the body in its experiences of vulnerability and empowerment. My students hinted at an ethics that decolonial and posthumanist scholars see as "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism" (Braidotti 2013, 49–50). In such modes of living, the human body is no longer the center but a component in a wider network. This was visible in Khyber. Living in a largely agricultural community, villagers emphasized a reciprocal relationship with the land such that human needs did not supersede those of the land. These ethics informed their practices of reflective farming, which included dedicating time for the land to recover so that it would bear fruit in the next season instead of exhausting all of its potential. That which allowed for the sustenance of humans (the Urdu term *rozi* and the Sindhi term *hayati* were used) featured in the villagers' talk as part of the "family" that made claims on them for its survival and well-being. Their talk of complementarity between the environment and their bodies highlighted the significance of the sheer inter-

dependence of humans and their environments. During these conversations, I was reminded of Native American activist Katsi Cook's struggles against the environmental contamination caused by General Motors (LaDuke 1999). Indeed, indigenous feminists have long emphasized their spiritual, cultural, economic, and political relationship with the land, blurring the boundaries between bodies and environments. Such relationships are not only ceremonialized but also appear in the ways in which native languages assign animate status to that which in Western discourses may appear as inanimate (Nixon 2015).

I visited the community again in 2015 at a different site called Aliabad and saw additional examples of alliances across bodies, as well as new precarities. This time I was in the community to conduct focus group conversations with girls who had decided to drop out of school. One day, I saw a man sitting, having lunch, near the area where I was conducting my conversations. During the entire time, there were several houseflies on his plate of food, but he did not shoo them away. Intrigued by this, I inquired about the reason and he said, "*Beta*, flies too are Allah's creatures; they have to eat as well. So I am sharing what Allah has given me."²¹ My focus group participants shared this sentiment and did not find anything unusual in this behavior. While this practice may be critiqued from a public health perspective, what I am pointing to here is a radically different understanding of what it means to inhabit (and then leave) this world. In this village, the demarcations between self and other, animal and earth, were absent at some moments and present at others, pointing to a delicate balance between individual identities and collective, cooperative living. There was a strong ethic of alliance with, and interdependency across, all forms of living, even as villagers sought to improve individual well-being. Hence, complex and relational subject-subject, subject-object combinations replaced the unitary subject of human rights or the delinked body that is alternately vulnerable, suffering, and empowered.

A final example from the same community points to the precarity of bodies, resists assumptions about free/autonomous selves, and reveals the potential of human rights advocacy to reinstate normative gender and sexual orders. During the focus group conversations, I learned that many girls dropped out of school after their fathers had fallen severely ill or passed away. The high occurrence of this response compelled me to inquire further into the causes of the illness, and I was told that over the past year the pipeline that brought water to this community had been contaminated and the open sewage canal (near the fields where mostly men worked) played a

²¹ *Beta* is an Urdu term for "child."

role in weakening men's bodies. After the death or ill capacity of male members of their households, many girls decided to stay back and help with reproductive tasks as their mothers engaged in waged labor. In this context, assertions of education as a right could not deter these girls from prioritizing household responsibilities over school. Their choices were an effect of a whole range of other practices, which included corruption in state bureaucracies, lack of infrastructure in low-income areas, a hospital without a doctor, and so on. Any advocacy around human rights that fails to recognize these complex ways in which life unfolds inevitably remains incomplete. In fact, an imposition of laws around compulsory education via human rights advocacy, in this case, could have the effect of increasing the economic precarity of these households as adult women would be required to return home to accommodate girls' attendance to school and, hence, lose their already meager income. In such cases, human rights advocacy could actually have disempowering effects for the most marginalized.

The examples above show the multiple axes along which humans experience their humanity. The sense of complementarity prevalent in Khyber and Aliabad was quite different from the hierarchies (men over women, public over private, humans over land, humans over animals) that dominate Western humanist thought, including mainstream feminism.²² Indeed, different idioms, histories, and languages inform the contemporary struggles of people in the global South and, as decolonial scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2012) points out, their ontological conceptions of being and living may be quite distinct from Western individualism. A strong sense of community and family, as well as an acknowledgment of interdependencies, circulated in Khyber and Aliabad, which was balanced with a sense of individualism. However, within the human rights discourse, one exists either as an individual or a state (Santos 2013). Thus, modes of living that are collective are made nonexistent or absent. It is precisely this tension between individual and collective rights that leads to the valorization of Mukhtaran and Malala (as individuals) and the simultaneous disciplining of Muslims and Pakistanis (as a collective category). Indeed, in relation to Muslim women, there seems to be an inability to conceive of them as individuals *and* members of a collectivity (Jamal 2015). There is, hence, a critical need to center conceptions of human living that reflect the complex, relational, and deeply interdependent ways in which people live their lives.

Applying these analytics to the case studies of Mukhtaran and Malala would entail a careful look at the ways in which their lives are embedded

²² See Nixon (2015).

in the histories of the many collectivities to which they belong and the registers of support and human dignity other than human rights that they draw upon. For instance, if we closely analyze Mukhtaran and Malala's enactments of empowerment, we find that even as they both choose to deploy the language of human rights, they also draw on the language of Islam and work toward the well-being of collectivities. Malala, for instance, explicitly places her advocacy within the Islamic tradition and sutures together philosophies of nonviolence with human rights, thereby extending the normative human rights discourse (Hesford 2014). Elsewhere, I show that reading Malala's coauthored autobiography (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013) against the grain reveals complex Pakistani political subjectivities and the extensive local alliances that are needed for women to experience empowerment (Khoja-Moolji 2015). As an example, her autobiography details the Pashtun ethics of care and support, which create an authorizing environment for women, including her. Likewise, Mukhtaran names the male members of her local community—her relatives and the local imam—who came to her support (Mai and Cuny 2006). In fact, she has established a school for the people of the same city of Meerwala whom Kristof (2006) marks as threatening her well-being.

Thus, Malala and Mukhtaran as well as my experiences with adolescent girls in Pakistan reveal a multiplicity in how women and girls enact empowerment, casting doubt upon dominant constructions. They point to the possibility of noneconomic forms of empowerment, demonstrate the availability of spaces of empowerment outside the context of schools and the labor market, signal the necessity of alliances and the inevitability of interdependence, and portray ethical registers outside the language of rights. Any articulation of women's complexly lived lives through teleological discursive chains, as described above, serves to make nonexistent myriad ways of actually being and acting in this world.

One of the obstacles, however, that prevents us from recognizing alternative conceptions of human dignity and ways of living is the false assumption that the discourse of human rights has won over all other conceptions, that it is, in fact, a universal good, with ethical and moral superiority over all other philosophies. Santos calls this the "illusion of triumphalism" (2013, 19), which hides the hegemony of Western modernity and the historical relations of power, and delinks the present dominance of the discourse from its powerful mechanisms of transmission—such as UN institutions, global declarations, and more recently, corporate philanthropy. A robust critique of this discourse's situatedness, its partiality, and its uses is thus required. The task, then, is to excavate conceptions of human dignity—which may include turning toward nonliberal philosophies and epistemologies of the

global South—that transform human rights from a call to commonality in spite of differences to a call that acknowledges differences and seeks to practice pluralism.

*Program on Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism
and Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
University of Pennsylvania*

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