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**SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN GIRLS' EDUCATION WITH REFERENCE TO 'I AM MALALA'**

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**ABSTRACT**

Education is the most critical area of empowerment for women. Giving them their right to basic education is the only way of providing them power and creating a better tomorrow for all of us. 'I am Malala' by Malala Yousafzai with Christina Lamb is the fearless memoir of Malala Yousafzai who stood up for the education of the girls and was shot by the Taliban on October 9, 2012. She says, "I come from a country which was created at midnight and when I almost died it was just after midday." Her solo motive has now become a voice of millions of girls around the world who are denied their right to education. At just at the age sixteen, she has become the symbol of peace and the youngest Nobel Laureate in the year 2014. The present study will critically review the tale of a strong and brave girl whose voice is inspiring the change in the world.

Key Words: Gender-equality, girls' education, empowerment, terrorism

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"Let us pick up our books and pens,  
They are our most powerful weapons." -Malala Yousafzai

Gender equality has not just been a women's issue, it has emerged as a development issue all over the world. Women's empowerment by educating them is essential for economic growth and development as well and yields significant social benefits. Education and gender equality are intertwined with each-other but gender inequality is critical pathway for girls' education. Gender equality requires the investment in education for both boys and girls. Education has economic and social benefits both for public and individuals. And when the women are empowered through education, they are able to overcome their self doubt. "There is a simultaneous relationship between women's economic and social status and economic growth. The evidence shows that women's lack of education, health care, and economic and social opportunities – both absolutely and relative to men – inhabits economic growth while, at the same time, economic growth leads to a reduction in women's subordinated condition. In countries with the lowest average income and where agriculture remains the main source of economic activity, women's lack of education, health care and employment opportunities prevents them from being to benefit fully from improved microeconomic environments, hindering economic growth" (Stotsky).

Malala Yousafzai realized the investment of education at a very early age and started working towards it. The memoir *I am Malala*, co-written with Christina Lamb, a British journalist should be read not only for its drama but for the message of girls' education. Malala Yousafzai, a Pashtun girl from Swat valley, born to an illiterate mother, brought up in her father's school and read Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" by the age of eleven. The story begins with the father of Malala, Ziauddin Yousafzai who was filled with deep love for learning from his boyhood days. Ziauddin's dream was to establish a school where the students could learn to their highest potential. He came from a tribe that had migrated from Kabul and settled in Swat valley.

Malala Yousafzai was born on July 12 1997, when her father was struggling to establish a school against all the odds like deeply corrupt government officials, a mufti who objected to the girls' education which he denounced as offensive to Islam. It was the time when school bombings began and Maulana Fazlullah known as Radio Mullah, a young extremist, direct arm of Taliban, spread terror over Swat valley through brutal killings. "Some people are afraid of ghosts, some of spiders or snakes – in those days we were afraid of our fellow human beings" (Yousafzai139). But no one spoke up - no one and Ziauddin hated this fact. He always kept a poem by Martin Niemoller in his pocket who had lived in Nazi Germany:

First they came for the communists,  
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.  
Then they came for the socialists,  
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the jews,  
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a jew.  
Then they came for the catholics,  
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a catholic.  
Then they came for me,  
And there was no one left to speak for me (116).

Fazlullah clearly announced the closing of girls' schools and banned the girls' education. Malala thought, 'Sometimes I think it is easier to be a twilight vampire than a girl in Swat' (197). She further said that she wanted to change one centuries-old verse:

If the men cannot win the battle, O my country,  
Then the women will come forth and win you an honour.  
Wanted to change into  
Whether the men are winning or losing the battle, O my country,  
The women are coming and the women will win you an honour (250).

Despite the terror around them, Malala and her family continued to fight their battle in their own way. Malala thought, 'How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?' (118), "they could take our pens and books, but they couldn't stop our minds from thinking" (122). She continued to go to school with books hidden under her shawl, gave public speeches on importance of education and wrote BBC blog about her experience to live under the Taliban terror under the pen name Gul Makai. She said, 'Education is education. We should learn everything and then choose which path to follow. Education is neither Eastern nor Western, it is human' (136). She had a father who always said, 'Malala will be free as a child. I will protect your freedom, Malala. Carry on with your dreams'. Only with this unconditional faith she dared to live her dream in such a conservative society. Even in 2009, they were forced to abandon the violent area in 'the biggest exodus in Pashtun history' which strengthened their voice even more for girls' education and invited strong warnings from Taliban on which she said: 'Hearing I was targeted didn't worry me. It seemed to me that everyone knows they will die one day. My feeling was that nobody can stop death; it doesn't matter if it comes from a Talib or cancer. So I should do whatever I want to do' (188).

On Tuesday October 9 2012, she paid the price and was shot in the head at point blank range while returning to home with her friends in school bus. 'who is Malala?' the gunman demanded. She survived, became the global symbol of peace and the youngest ever nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. They didn't attack Ziauddin because 'they wanted to kill two birds with one stone, kill Malala and silence me forever' he uttered after Malala was struggling for her life in Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, UK. When the whole world was praying for her well-being, her Pakistani brothers and sisters were against Malala by calling her struggle 'a teen lust for fame' (262). She responded:

I don't mind. I know people say these things because they have seen leaders and politicians in our country who make promises they never keep. Instead things in Pakistan are getting worse every day. The endless terrorist attacks have left the whole nation in shock. People have lost trust in each other, but I would like everyone to know that I don't want support for myself, I want the support to be for my cause of peace and education. (262)

She also added:

While I was hovering between life and death, the Taliban issued a statement assuming responsibility for shooting me but denying it was because of my campaign for education. 'We carried out this attack, and anybody who speaks against us will be attacked in the same way', said Ehsanullah Ehsan, a spokesman for the TTP. 'Malala has been targeted because of her pioneer role in preaching secularism...She was young but she was promoting Western culture in Pashtun areas. She was pro-west; she was speaking against the Taliban; she was calling President Obama her idol'. (216)

*I am Malala* is the remarkable tale of a family uprooted by terrorism, fight for the basic right of education and Malala's parents' love for their daughter in such a society that prizes sons. Malala herself admits, 'I knew that any of the girls in my class could have achieved what I had achieved if they had their parents' support' (181). She has one mission now – educating girls all over the world who are denied their basic right to go to school because one child, one teacher, one book and one pen can make the difference. As a teenager she thought she was short so measured her height almost every day and said: "Today I looked at myself in mirror and thought for a second. Once I had asked God for one or extra inches in height, but instead he made me as tall as the sky, so high that I could not measure myself. So I offered the hundred *raakat nafl* prayers that I had promised if I grew" (264-265). On every step of her journey towards education, Malala thanks God for blessing her with such courage to fulfill her dream:

I love my God. I thank my Allah. I talk to him all day. He is the greatest. By giving me this height to reach people, he has also given me responsibilities. Peace in every home, every street, every village, every country – this is my dream. Education for every boy and every girl in the world. To sit down on a chair and read my books with my friends at school is my right. To see each and every human being with a smile of happiness is my wish. I am Malala. My world has changed but I have not. (265)

*I am Malala* is the remarkable narrative which carries the story of role model for all youth around the world – Malala Yousafzai. Her honest dedication towards education, sincerity towards accomplishment of her dream and her strong belief in Almighty make Malala Yousafzai a class apart from rest of the people. Every year on July 12 is celebrated as 'Malala day' after her incredible speech at United Nations on July 12, 2013 where she says, "Malala Day is not my day. Today is the day of every woman, every woman, every boy and every girl who have raised their voices for their rights". The text narrates the whole incidents through Malala's voice that's why the readers can easily relate to her heart-wrenching experiences. The values of faith, honesty and respect are depicted in the text along with the struggle of Malala Yousafzai.

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