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Research Article

Malala's Life as a Stage for Identity and Change

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Abstract

This paper explores Malala Yousafzai's autobiography, I Am Malala, through the lens of identity performance and transformation. It argues that Malala's life, as narrated in her memoir, functions as a stage where multiple identities are enacted and transformed over time. Drawing upon theories from performance studies, particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Richard Schechner's theory of restored behavior, the paper analyzes how Malala performs her gender, cultural, and activist identities in response to social and political challenges. The analysis also considers how trauma and global recognition contribute to her identity change and the ways in which she reshapes the narrative of Muslim girlhood. Ultimately, this paper shows how Malala's life is not just a story of survival but a powerful example of identity as a dynamic and performative process.

Keywords: Malala Yousafzai, identity, change, performance studies, gender, activism, performativity

Introduction

In the contemporary era, identity is no longer perceived as static or biologically determined; rather, it is understood as fluid, performative, and shaped by context (Butler 1990; Hall 1996; Goffman 1959). This shifting notion of identity is evident in the life of Malala Yousafzai. Her transformation from a young girl in Pakistan's Swat Valley to a global symbol for girls' education illustrates how individuals actively construct and negotiate their identities within cultural and political frameworks. In her memoir *I Am Malala* (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013), identity is not simply narrated—it is consciously created and enacted for a worldwide audience.

Malala's life story extends beyond resilience and her campaign for education; it also represents a performance of change that adapts to shifting social, political, and cultural contexts. Schechner explains performance as "twice-behaved behavior," which is rooted in social conventions but open to reinterpretation (2002). Malala's activism, speeches, and writings embody

this performative aspect, allowing her to continuously reshape her identity on both national and international stages. As Hall argues, identity is not fixed but a “production” that evolves constantly, influenced by historical and cultural conditions (1996). Malala’s identity construction reflects this process as she maneuvers through the cultural norms of her Pashtun background, the gendered constraints of Taliban-era Swat, and the liberal, human rights-oriented narratives of the Western world.

The assassination attempt on Malala in 2012 was a turning point not only in her personal narrative but also in global discussions surrounding education, terrorism, and women’s rights. Caruth views trauma not merely as an experience of suffering but also as a catalyst for new stories and identity reconstruction (1996). In this sense, Malala’s recovery and emergence as an international icon represent a symbolic and performative transformation. Her appearances at the United Nations, interviews with global media, and advocacy through the Malala Fund demonstrate a carefully constructed identity that reflects Goffman’s theory of the “presentation of self in everyday life” (1959).

Additionally, Malala’s story must be understood within the larger socio-political context that shapes its reception. She speaks from a post-9/11 global environment where Muslim women are often represented in oversimplified ways—either as oppressed victims or celebrated heroines (Abu-Lughod 2013). Malala’s narrative both resonates with and resists these Western frameworks, producing a more complex performance of identity. While critics argue that her international recognition can be read as reinforcing a Western savior narrative (Ali 2015; Kapoor 2012), others emphasize Malala’s agency in reclaiming her voice and articulating her cultural and religious identity (Mahmood 2005).

This paper explores how Malala Yousafzai’s life operates as a performative stage where multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities are enacted. Using frameworks from performance theory, feminist critique, and narrative identity studies, it examines how Malala constructs and reconstructs her identity in response to both local traditions and global audiences. The central argument is that Malala’s life is not simply a sequence of biographical events but a dynamic performance that reveals the politics of identity, representation, and change in a globalized world.

Statement of Problem

Despite the extensive attention Malala Yousafzai’s *I Am Malala* has received in academic and public discourse, much of this engagement centers on themes like education, feminism, human rights, and political resistance. However, there remains a significant gap in examining how Malala’s identity is constructed and performed across cultural, political, and media platforms. Her multifaceted roles— as a Pashtun girl, Muslim, activist, and survivor—are not static representations but fluid, strategic performances influenced by various audiences and contexts. While existing literature discusses her inspirational status and political significance, few studies have applied a performance studies lens to explore how her identity is actively enacted and continually reshaped through narrative and public engagement. This research addresses that gap by analyzing how Malala stages her evolving identity as a form of agency and resistance in an increasingly globalized world.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore how Malala Yousafzai performs and constructs her multifaceted identity throughout *I Am Malala*, using the lens of performance studies. This research aims to uncover the ways in which Malala’s roles—as a Pashtun girl, Muslim, survivor, and global activist—are strategically enacted and negotiated across different cultural and political

contexts. By applying theories of performativity and restored behavior, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of identity as a dynamic, performative process rather than a fixed attribute. Ultimately, the study intends to contribute to scholarship on autobiographical narratives, identity formation, and global activism by highlighting the active performance embedded in Malala's life story.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* has predominantly examined her autobiography through feminist, postcolonial, and human rights frameworks. Hesford (2011) explores the gendered politics of Malala's representation in global media, emphasizing how her narrative both challenges and is shaped by humanitarian discourses. Banet-Weiser (2018) situates Malala within popular feminism, highlighting her role in contemporary narratives of empowerment and popular misogyny. These works often stress the importance of voice and agency in her story but rarely attend to the performative dimensions of identity construction.

Performance studies scholars such as Butler (1990, 1997) and Schechner (2003) provide conceptual tools to understand identity as a series of enacted behaviors rather than fixed traits. Butler's theory of performativity reveals how identities-including gender and ethnicity-are continuously constituted through repeated acts within social contexts. Schechner expands performance beyond theater, seeing it as a mode of social interaction and cultural expression. While these theories have been widely applied in gender and cultural studies, their application to Malala's narrative remains limited.

Additionally, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation offers insight into how individuals manage their identities across various audiences, a framework useful for analyzing Malala's navigation between local, national, and global stages. Chouliaraki (2013) and Dolan (2005) further contribute to understanding how mediated performances create spaces of resistance and utopian hope. Pollock (2005) emphasizes testimony as a performative act that shapes memory and political identity, relevant for analyzing Malala's recounting of trauma and activism.

This literature reveals a significant opportunity: to integrate performance theory with existing feminist and postcolonial critiques to analyze how Malala's identity is not only narrated but performed in multiple registers-through speech, media, and embodied presence-across diverse cultural and political contexts.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in performance studies theory to analyze Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala*. Through close textual analysis, it examines how Malala's identity is actively performed and constructed via speech acts, narrative strategies, and embodied presence, drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity (1990, 1997) and Richard Schechner's idea of restored behavior (2003). The research also considers the influence of global media and socio-political contexts that shape and amplify her identity performances (Chouliaraki, 2013; Hesford, 2011). By integrating literary analysis with performance and media studies, this methodology reveals the dynamic processes by which Malala negotiates, enacts, and transforms her multifaceted identity as a Pashtun girl, survivor, Muslim, and global activist.

Theoretical Framework: Identity as Performance

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in performance studies, with a particular focus on the works of Judith Butler and Richard Schechner. Judith Butler (1990) revolutionized the understanding of gender and identity by introducing the concept of performativity. According to

Butler, identity is not a stable or inherent essence but a series of actions and behaviors repeated over time within a regulated framework of social norms. Gender, for example, is not simply something one is, but something one does-repeatedly and publicly-through stylized acts of the body, speech, and conduct that conform to expected roles. This performative view of gender has since been extended to broader conceptions of identity, including ethnicity, religion, and activism (Ahmed, 2012; Puar, 2007).

Building upon this, Richard Schechner (2003) offers a broader definition of performance that extends beyond theatrical contexts. His notion of “restored behavior” refers to actions that are rehearsed, repeated, and consciously performed within cultural and social settings. These behaviors are not necessarily spontaneous but are shaped by learned practices and established norms. According to Schechner, everyday life is filled with such performative acts-ranging from greetings and rituals to public speaking and resistance-that reflect and reproduce cultural meanings (Taylor, 2003).

The integration of Butler’s and Schechner’s theories provides a compelling framework for examining identity formation in autobiographical narratives. When applied to Malala Yousafzai’s *I Am Malala*, these theories help frame her autobiography as a performative text in which identity is enacted in response to socio-political pressures and cultural expectations. Malala performs multiple roles throughout her memoir: as a daughter grounded in Pashtun traditions (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013), as a practicing Muslim, as a young girl defying fundamentalist ideologies, and eventually as a global icon advocating for girls’ education. Each of these roles is shaped by social scripts, and each represents a form of “twice-behaved behavior” that evolves as she moves from local to international contexts.

Further, Performance theory underscores the dialogic character of identity, suggesting it emerges not in isolation but through exchanges with audiences. This is particularly evident in Malala’s case, where her narrative is shaped by global media, international institutions, and her co-authorship with Christina Lamb. Her identity is constituted not only by her actions but also by the ways diverse audiences interpret and respond to them (Chouliaraki 2013; Hesford 2011). Public addresses, media appearances, and the publication of her memoir function as performances designed to shape her public image.

Scholars such as Dolan (2005) and Banet-Weiser (2018) argue that performance can create spaces of utopian possibility and feminist empowerment. In this sense, Malala’s appearances-whether at the United Nations, as a Nobel Prize recipient, or as an ongoing activist-can be interpreted as aspirational performances that project alternative futures for women and girls living under restrictive conditions. Performance theory therefore illuminates not only the ways Malala constructs her public identity but also the ways she envisions and enacts social transformation.

This performative framework enables a nuanced analysis of Malala’s life as a series of dynamic, situated performances. Her narrative exemplifies how identities are continually enacted, revised, and resisted in response to complex cultural and political environments. It invites readers to reconsider autobiography not as a reflection of a static self, but as a living script where change is always possible and always unfolding. Building upon this, Richard Schechner (2003) offers a broader definition of performance that extends beyond theatrical contexts. His notion of “restored behavior” refers to actions that are rehearsed, repeated, and consciously performed within cultural and social settings. According to Schechner, everyday life is filled with performative acts that draw from previously experienced or socially learned behaviors. These behaviors are not necessarily spontaneous but are often shaped by cultural scripts and social expectations.

Applying performance theory to Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* allows her autobiography to be understood as a space in which identity is enacted in response to surrounding socio-political forces. Malala assumes multiple roles throughout her life: a daughter within Pashtun cultural norms, a devout Muslim, a schoolgirl resisting Taliban oppression, and ultimately a global advocate for education and women's rights. While each role is influenced by social and cultural frameworks, they are also flexible, open to reinterpretation and transformation.

Performance theory also highlights the audience's influence in shaping identity. Similar to a theatrical production, Malala's public persona is developed in interaction with both local and global audiences. Her self-representation is therefore relational rather than solitary, mediated through media interviews, speeches, and her memoir. This perspective enables an analysis of how Malala negotiates competing cultural expectations, asserts agency, and cultivates a fluid, empowered identity across diverse contexts and stages of her life.

In the opening chapters of *I Am Malala*, she emphasizes her upbringing as a Pashtun girl in Swat Valley, drawing attention to cultural norms, gender roles, and restrictions placed on girls. "I was a girl in a land where rifles are fired in celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain" (Yousafzai and Lamb 13). This statement serves both as cultural critique and affirmation of her Pashtun roots. Malala deliberately positions herself within a patriarchal society while simultaneously challenging and resisting its constraints. Her enactment of girlhood is therefore simultaneously authentic and subversive, illustrating how she navigates identity through cultural scripts.

Performing Pashtun Girlhood

In the opening chapters of *I Am Malala*, Yousafzai foregrounds her identity as a Pashtun girl from Swat Valley, frequently drawing attention to the cultural norms, gender roles, and restrictions imposed on girls in her society. "I was a girl in a land where rifles are fired in celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain" (Yousafzai and Lamb 13). This assertion functions as both a critique of patriarchal values and an affirmation of her connection to Pashtun traditions. It underscores the influence of Pashtunwali, the traditional code of conduct, which prioritizes male honor and visibility while restricting women to domestic and symbolic silence (Ahmed; Zine). Malala deliberately situates herself within this patriarchal framework, yet she simultaneously questions and resists its limitations. Her awareness of gender inequities is enacted through her speech, choices, and actions, transforming traditional expectations into a space of contestation.

Through depictions of her schooling, interactions with siblings, and public speaking, Malala exemplifies what Butler (1990) describes as the "performative instability" of gender, illustrating that identity is continually subject to reinterpretation and resistance. Her passion for reading and her engagement in debates with boys serve as embodied challenges to the conventional expectations of Pashtun girlhood. By performing her girlhood in ways that defy cultural prescriptions, Malala simultaneously invokes and subverts social norms, asserting her intellect and courage in a manner that seeks acknowledgment and validation from the broader community.

Malala's father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, significantly influences the development of her performative identity. He encourages her to voice her opinions and models behaviors that challenge traditional male authority, turning the domestic sphere into a space where public performances can be rehearsed. Scholars such as Dolan (2005) and Taylor (2003) argue that performance can generate utopian moments-opportunities for new identities to emerge. In this context, Malala's experiences at

home, school, and within her community constitute spaces of performative potential, allowing her to navigate the dual roles of a culturally embedded Pashtun girl and a critical social actor.

By emphasizing her ethnic identity while simultaneously contesting restrictive gender norms, Malala enacts a nuanced form of Pashtun girlhood that is both grounded in tradition and resistant to its limitations. Rather than rejecting her cultural heritage, she selectively incorporates aspects of it to create a new performance of girlhood—one that integrates pride in her roots with aspirations for educational and social advancement. This tension, as BanetWeiser (2018) notes, is characteristic of contemporary performances of empowered girlhood, especially in global contexts where identity must navigate both authenticity and strategic visibility.

Voice, Silence, and the Power of Speech

Malala's narrative highlights performance through her strategic use of voice, both literally and symbolically. Early in her activism, her voice takes on a public role as she participates in local radio broadcasts, blogs anonymously for the BBC, and speaks to international journalists. As a young girl in a Taliban-controlled region, these acts go beyond simple communication. Following Butler's idea of performativity, Malala's speech functions as a political act that produces tangible social consequences while simultaneously provoking opposition (Yousafzai and Lamb; Butler).

Malala's near-fatal shooting by the Taliban results in the literal loss of her voice, an act that also symbolizes the broader silencing of women and opposition in patriarchal, extremist contexts. However, her eventual recovery and the global recognition of her advocacy illustrate resilience and transformation. This progression aligns with Adriana Cavarero's concept of "narrative selfhood," which highlights the centrality of voice in reclaiming one's subjectivity (Cavarero 2000).

In Malala's memoir, the regaining of her voice signifies more than survival—it demonstrates her renewed agency. Her address at the United Nations on her sixteenth birthday transforms her into a symbol of global activism rather than just a victim. Within this framework, performance serves as a form of political intervention. Jill Dolan argues that such acts of performance open "utopian" moments, offering fleeting visions of hope capable of sparking wider social change (Dolan 2005).

Malala's experiences of silence and speech can be understood through Hesford's concept of "spectacular rhetorics," which considers how human rights narratives—both visual and verbal—function within global media networks. Her public addresses and interviews are not isolated events; they are circulated and interpreted by audiences around the world. This widespread dissemination amplifies the performative power of her voice, enabling her to symbolically speak for countless girls who lack representation (Hesford 2011).

Moreover, Chouliaraki (2013) argues that the ethical significance of media communication depends on how vulnerability is portrayed and interpreted. In Malala's case, her early experiences of violence and injury highlight her vulnerability, yet she converts this into a source of empowerment through her vocal expression. This illustrates how silence and speech operate together as forms of identity performance, with silence representing oppression and speech signaling both recovery and political assertion (Chouliaraki 45).

Restaging Trauma: Memory and Testimony

Malala's narrative of surviving a Taliban attack and undergoing medical recovery can be understood as a reenactment of trauma. Instead of keeping her trauma private, she transforms it into a public and performative testimony. Pollock (2005) emphasizes that testimony goes beyond simply recounting events; it is an embodied act that revives memory and gives it political significance.

Through sharing her experience of being shot and recovering, Malala not only conveys her suffering but also constructs a new identity as both a survivor and an activist (Pollock 12).

In her memoir, Malala presents the shooting not as a conclusion but as a critical turning point that allows for the formation of a new sense of self. She declares that “They thought that the bullet would silence us, but they failed” (Yousafzai and Lamb 262), a statement that is both declarative and performative, converting violence into a moment of empowerment and public defiance. Drawing on Butler’s theory of performative speech acts, Malala’s account demonstrates how a traumatic experience can be reshaped into a source of resilience and visibility, making the performative narration of trauma central to her personal transformation (Butler 124).

Malala’s storytelling reflects Diana Taylor’s (2003) distinction between the archive and the repertoire. While the archive consists of written records and official histories, the repertoire includes embodied knowledge and performative expressions. Malala’s narrative spans both: her memoir serves as an archival text, whereas her speeches, public appearances, and visible scars contribute to a living repertoire of resistance (Taylor 19).

Malala’s experience of trauma is situated within broader global discussions of human rights and humanitarianism. Hesford (2011) suggests that when women from the Global South share their suffering with Western audiences, their narratives can be turned into commodified spectacles. Malala, however, challenges this perspective: although her story circulates widely in global media, she maintains agency by telling her own story and framing her experiences in her own words. This control over her narrative enables her to resist a passive victim identity and instead assume the role of a powerful witness, connecting both local and international audiences (Hesford 102).

By narrating her trauma performatively, Malala reclaims her own agency and simultaneously serves as a symbol for girls worldwide who encounter systemic violence. Her memoir illustrates what Dolan (2005) terms “utopian performance,” in which experiences of suffering are reconceived as opportunities for transformation, and identity is reconstructed through the act of bearing witness (Dolan 38).

Global Stage: Performing Activism

Following her recovery, Malala assumes the role of a global human rights advocate. Her evolution from a local schoolgirl to an international activist exemplifies Schechner’s concept of “twice-behaved behavior,” in which individuals intentionally perform roles that have been rehearsed, internalized, and presented to different audiences. Malala’s appearances at international forums, such as the United Nations and her Nobel Peace Prize speech, are not spontaneous expressions of identity but deliberately constructed performances influenced by media, political expectations, and humanitarian discourse (Chouliaraki 45; Banet-Weiser 22).

Malala’s public performances fulfill several purposes: they convey her advocacy, reinforce her identity as a figure representing girls’ education, and reshape perceptions of Muslim girlhood on a global scale. Her address at the United Nations, for instance, functions not merely as activism but as a form of global theatrical expression, employing rhetoric, symbolism, and imagery to project a vision of resilience and optimism. In this way, she demonstrates what Dolan describes as “utopian performativity,” using performance to envision and enact more hopeful futures (Dolan 45).

Malala’s advocacy does not exist independently of broader representational contexts. Hesford notes that depictions of women’s suffering and empowerment in the Global South are frequently interpreted through Western humanitarian lenses (Hesford 122). However, Malala challenges these interpretations by asserting her own agency and controlling how her story is

told. By consistently presenting education as a universal right rather than a Western imposition, she resists portrayals of herself as a passive victim and positions herself as an active leader on the global stage.

Malala's activism incorporates a variety of performative roles, including the child hero, survivor, Nobel laureate, and Muslim feminist. She adapts each persona depending on the situational context and audience. This approach reflects Goffman's dramaturgical framework, which posits that individuals strategically manage their self-presentation through tailored performances for different observers (Goffman 22). Malala's fluid navigation among these identities highlights her skill in constructing and performing her public persona.

Finally, Malala's advocacy operates across multiple texts and media. In addition to her speeches and autobiography, she communicates through documentaries, interviews, and social media platforms. Each medium serves as a distinct stage, demanding a performance suited to its context. These diverse modes of engagement expand her audience and impact, while simultaneously strengthening her crafted identity as an international advocate for education, gender equality, and peace.

Negotiating Muslim Identity

Malala presents her religious identity in a nuanced and multifaceted way, challenging both extremist distortions of Islam and Western stereotypes of Muslim women. She differentiates her personal faith from the violent, patriarchal interpretation promoted by the Taliban. By portraying Islam as a religion rooted in peace, education, and gender equality, she performs a deliberate counter-narrative to dominant depictions that link Islam to terrorism or female subjugation (Zine; Puar). As she asserts, "Islam teaches us the importance of peace, and I believe in it" (Yousafzai and Lamb 305). This statement functions as a performative act (Butler), positioning her simultaneously as a devout Muslim and a rational global citizen. It also translates cultural meaning for Western audiences less familiar with the diversity within Islam. Through her narrative, Malala resists what Edward Said characterizes as the Orientalist gaze, which frames Islam as static and backward, instead offering a vision of her faith that is pluralistic, peaceful, and empowering, consistent with Chouliaraki's concept of ethical representation in global discourse.

Malala's enactment of Muslim identity is closely intertwined with her gendered and activist roles. She draws on Islamic symbols and texts to support girls' education, referencing historical examples from Islam to validate her advocacy. This approach aligns with Mahmood's argument that agency within religious traditions can manifest not only through overt resistance but also through devout engagement (Mahmood 12). By embodying a Muslim feminist identity, Malala challenges secular liberal assumptions that empowerment must occur outside of religious frameworks.

Malala's public persona is shaped by what Puar describes as "assemblages," the overlapping intersections of race, religion, gender, and geopolitics that complicate fixed identity categories (Puar 12). Her global presence resists simplistic dichotomies such as oppressed versus liberated or religious versus secular. Instead, she occupies a hybrid space, simultaneously embracing her faith, critiquing religious extremism, and advocating for girls' education on a global scale.

In this sense, Malala's Muslim identity is not a background, but an active performance element of her world character. It has been deployed strategically, ethically and politically to challenge the discourse of Islamophobia and to provide an alternative model of Muslim femininity. Her religious identity is therefore not something she leaves behind in her transformation, but that she constantly becomes, improves, and recovers. Malala's

personality has grown from a local girl to a global icon, but her memoirs advocate for continuity. She maintains a connection between her special forces and her past. This duality is part of its performance. It has changed and has not changed, both globally and locally. This tension reflects what execution theorists describe as negotiations between roles and themselves (Schechner, 2003). Malala's personality is by no means static; set of performances that satisfy changing contexts.

Conclusion

Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* presents a rich and layered portrayal of identity, where she continually shifts between roles as a Pashtun girl, student, survivor, Muslim, feminist, and international figure within changing social and political landscapes. Drawing on Butler's idea of performativity and Schechner's notion of restored behavior, her narrative unfolds as a sequence of deliberate acts that both challenge and uphold cultural traditions. Her memoir operates not only as personal testimony but also as a platform where voice, trauma, and faith are reshaped into tools of empowerment. Through this process, Malala constructs her identity across religious, cultural, and gendered dimensions, confronting both Western stereotypes and extremist ideologies. Viewing her story as performance-both in practice and symbol-offers insight into Malala as more than a figure shaped by circumstances: she emerges as an active agent of change who reclaims her story and redefines the meaning of being a young Muslim woman in today's global stage.

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