

"A DEAD WOMAN WALKING"

Story of Malalai Joya

Johann Hari

Afghans have forgotten to live in peace. And today's Afghanistan is a living hell for women. "I am not sure how many more days I will be alive," Malalai Joya says quietly. The warlords who make up the new "democratic" government in Afghanistan have been sending bullets and bombs to kill this tiny 30-year-old from the refugee camps for years—and they seem to be getting closer with every attempt. Her enemies call her a "dead woman walking". "But I don't fear death, I fear remaining silent in the face of injustice," she says plainly. "I am young and I want to live. But I say to those who would eliminate my voice: I am ready, wherever and whenever you might strike. You can cut down the flower, but nothing can stop the coming of the spring."

The story of Malalai Joya turns everything people have been told about Afghanistan inside out. In the official rhetoric, she is what people have been fighting for. Here is a young Afghan woman who set up a secret underground school for girls under the Taliban and—when they were toppled—cast off the burka, ran for parliament, and took on the religious fundamentalists.

But she says: "Dust has been thrown into the eyes of the world by western governments. They have not been told the truth. The situation now is as catastrophic as it was under the Taliban for women. America and western governments have replaced the fundamentalist rule of the Taliban with another fundamentalist regime of warlords. (That is) what their soldiers are dying for." Instead of being liberated, she is on the brink of being killed.

The story of Joya is the story of another Afghanistan—the one behind the burka, and behind the propaganda.

This writer meets Joya in a London apartment where she is staying with a supporter for a week, to talk about her memoir—but even here, her movements have to be kept secret, as she flits from one safe house to another. It is told not to mention her location to anyone. She is standing in the corridor, small and slim, with her hair flowing freely, and she greets with a solid handshake. But, when the photographer snaps her, she begins to giggle girlishly: the grief etched on to her sallow face melts away, and she laughs in joyous little squeaks. "I can never get used to this!" she says.

Then, as talks proceed through her life-story, the pain soaks into her face once more. Her body tightens into a tense coil, and her fists close.

Joya was four days old when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. On that day, her father dropped out of his studies to fight the invading Communist army, and vanished into the mountains. She says: "Since then, all we have known is war."

Her earliest memory is of clinging to her mother's legs while policemen ransacked their house looking for evidence of where her father was hiding. Her illiterate mother tried to keep her family of 10 children alive as best she could. When the police became too aggressive, she took her kids to refugee camps across the border in Iran. In these filthy tent-cities lying on the old Silk Road, Afghans huddled together and were treated as second-class citizens by Iran. At night, wild animals could wander into the tents and attack children. There,

word reached the family that Joya's father had been blown up by a landmine—but he was alive, after losing a leg.

There were no schools in the Iranian camps, and Joya's mother was determined her daughters would receive the education she never had. So they fled again, to camps in western Pakistan. There, Joya began to read—and was transformed. "Tell me what you read and I shall tell you what you are," she says. Starting in her early teens, she inhaled all the literature she could—from Persian poetry to the plays of Bertolt Brecht to the speeches of Martin Luther King. She began to teach her new-found literacy to the older women in the camps, including her own mother.

She soon discovered that she loved to teach—and, when she turned 16, a charity called the Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC) made a bold suggestion: go to Afghanistan, and set up a secret school for girls, under the noses of the Taliban tyranny.

So she gathered her few clothes and books and was smuggled across the border—and "the best days of my life" began. She loathed being forced to wear a burka, being harassed on the streets by the omnipresent "vice and virtue" police, and being under constant threat of being discovered and executed. But she says it was worth it for the little girls. "Every time a new girl joined the class, it was a triumph," she says, beaming. "There is no better feeling."

She only just avoided being caught, again and again. One time she was teaching a class of girls in a family's basement when the mother of the house yelled down suddenly: "Taliban! Taliban!" Joya says: "I told my students to lie down on the floor and stay totally silent. We heard footsteps above us and waited a long time." On many occasions, ordinary men and women—anonymous strangers—helped her out by sending the police charging off in the wrong direction. She adds: "Every day in Afghanistan, even now, hundreds if not thousands of ordinary women act out these small gestures of solidarity with each other. We are our sisters' keepers."

The charity was so impressed with her they appointed her their director. Joya decided to set up a clinic for poor women just before the 9/11 attacks. When the American invasion began, the Taliban fled her province, but the bombs kept falling. "Many lives were needlessly lost, just like during the September 11 tragedy," she says. "The noise was terrifying, and children covered their ears and screamed and cried. Smoke and dust rose and lingered in the air with every bomb dropped."

As soon as the Taliban retreated, they were replaced—by the warlords who had ruled Afghanistan immediately before. Joya says that, at this point, "I realized women's rights had been sold out completely... Most people in the West have been led to believe that the intolerance and brutality towards women in Afghanistan began with the Taliban regime. But this is a lie. Many of the worst atrocities were committed by the fundamentalist mujahedin during the civil war between 1992 and 1996. They introduced the laws oppressing women followed by the Taliban—and now they were marching back to power, backed by the United States. They immediately went back to their old habit of using rape to punish their enemies and reward their fighters."

The warlords "have ruled Afghanistan ever since," she adds. While a "showcase parliament has been created for the benefit of the US in Kabul", the real power "is with these fundamentalists who rule everywhere outside Kabul". As an example, she names the former governor of Herat, Ismail Khan. He set

up his own "vice and virtue" squads which terrorized women and smashed up video and music cassettes. He had his own "private militias, private jails". The constitution of Afghanistan is irrelevant in these private fiefdoms.

Joya discovered just what this meant when she started to set up the clinic—and a local warlord announced that it would not be allowed, since she was a woman, and a critic of fundamentalism. She did it anyway, and decided to fight this fundamentalist by running in the election for the Loya jirga ("meeting of the elders") to draw up the new Afghan constitution. There was a great swelling of support for this girl who wanted to build a clinic—and she was elected. "It turned out my mission," she says, "would be to expose the true nature of the jirga from within."

As she stepped past the world's television cameras into the Loya jirga, the first thing Joya saw was "a long row with some of the worst abusers of human rights that Afghanistan had ever known—warlords and war criminals and fascists".

She could see the men who invited Osama bin Laden into the country, the men who introduced the misogynist laws later followed by the Taliban, the men who had massacred Afghan civilians. Some had got there by intimidating the electorate, others by vote-rigging, and yet more were simply appointed by Hamid Karzai, the former oilman installed by the US army to run the country. She thought of an old Afghan saying: "It's the same donkey, with a new saddle."

For a moment, as these old killers started to give long speeches congratulating themselves on the transition to democracy, Joya felt nervous. But then, she says, "I remembered the oppression we face as women in my country, and my nervousness evaporated, replaced by anger."

When her turn came, she stood, looked around at the blood-soaked warlords on every side, and began to speak. "Why are we allowing criminals to be present here? They are responsible for our situation now... It is they who turned our country into the centre of national and international wars. They are the most anti-women elements in our society who have brought our country to this state and they intend to do the same again... They should instead be prosecuted in the national and international courts."

These warlords—who brag about being hard men—could not cope with a slender young woman speaking the truth. They began to shriek and howl, calling her a "prostitute" and "infidel", and throwing bottles at her. One man tried to punch her in the face. Her microphone was cut off and the jirga descended into a riot.

"From that moment on," Joya says, "I would never again be safe... For fundamentalists, a woman is half a human, meant only to fulfil a man's every wish and lust, and to produce children and toil in the home. They could not believe that a young woman was tearing off their masks in front of the eyes of the Afghan people."

A fundamentalist mob turned up a few hours later at her accommodation, announcing they had come to rape and lynch her. She had to be placed under immediate armed guard—but she refused to be protected by American troops, insisting on Afghan officers.

Her speech was broadcast all over the world—and cheered in Afghanistan. She was flooded with support from the people of her country, delighted that somebody had finally spoken out. One dirt-poor village pooled its cash to send

a delegate hundreds of miles across the country to explain how pleased they were.

An extremely old woman was brought to her in a rickety wheelbarrow, and she explained she had lost two sons—one to the Soviets, one to the fundamentalists. She told Joya: "I am almost 100 years old, and I am dying. When I heard about you and what you said, I knew that I had to meet you. God must protect you, my dear."

She handed over her gold ring, her only valuable possession, and said: "You must take it! I have suffered so much in my life, and my last wish is that you accept this gift from me."

But the US and NATO occupiers instructed Joya that she must show "politeness and respect" for the other delegates. When Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Ambassador, said this, she replied: "If these criminals raped your mother or your daughter or your grandmother, or killed seven of your sons, let alone destroyed all the moral and material treasure of your country, what words would you use against such criminals that will be inside the framework of politeness and respect?"

She leans forward and quotes Brecht: "He says, 'He who does not know the truth is only a fool. He who knows the truth and calls it a lie is a criminal.'"

The attempts to murder her began then with a sniper—and have not stopped since. But she says plainly, with her fist clenched: "I wanted the warlords to know I was not afraid of them." □□□