

THE BRAVEST WOMAN IN AFGHANISTAN

By Sue Jackson

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Malalai Joya doesn't look like a warrior. She is small and slender, with delicate skin and shiny black hair, and appears far too young to be a seasoned veteran of numerous battles. But that's what she is.

I first heard of Malalai from my parents, who had seen her interviewed on television. In a very different life stage themselves, they were awed by the thirty year-old's composure in the face of assassination attempts and the possibility of an imminent violent death.

She sounded like a remarkable person, so when I learned that she was to be guest speaker at a fundraising dinner organised by Melbourne Pen (the local branch of the international association of writers dedicated to promoting literature and defending freedom of expression) I rushed to buy tickets.

On sale at the fundraiser was Joya's recently-released autobiography, *Raising My Voice*. A reluctant autobiographer, who feels her country is full of courageous, outspoken people, equally worthy of attention, she only agreed to write her story when friends persuaded her of its potential effectiveness in shedding light on the suffering of her compatriots.

As Malalai indicates in her book, the last thirty years have been hellish for her people. Any Afghani her age or younger knows nothing but war; they have never lived in peace. First, Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviets, and when the Russians de-camped,

the country fell into civil war, with ruthless warlords, many of whom were fundamentalists, fighting each other for control, killing and raping fellow Afghans in the process. They were succeeded by the Taliban, who smothered Afghanistan for a further five years, until the start of the ‘war on terrorism’ following 9/11.

As a consequence of these interminable wars, Afghanistan has the largest number of refugees per head of population, the most landmines in the world and numerous amputees and orphans.

At Abbotsford Convent’s *Lentil as Anything* café, most appropriately on July 14 - Bastille Day – Malalai Joya spoke passionately to a packed audience about the tragedy of her country and some of her own personal battles.

Malalai made world headlines in 2003 when, as an elected delegate to the Loya Jirga – a convention to decide on the new constitution - she publicly denounced Afghan’s leaders and their supporters, many of whom were present in the hall. In the resulting uproar, with the bulk of the predominantly male audience on their feet shouting, she was forcibly ejected from the convention room.

This historic event was captured on video and can easily be viewed on YouTube. All you have to do is google ‘Malalai Joya’ and click on ‘December 2003 the Brave and Historical speech of Malalai Joya’.

When you do, you will see the young teacher and social activist stepping up to the microphone, which needs angling downwards, while trying unsuccessfully to anchor her slipping headscarf. One of the ‘kids who can’t get a word in’, finally awarded three minutes to have her say, Malalai looks nervous. And no wonder. She takes a breath and launches straight in:

‘I wish to criticize my compatriots in this room. Why would you allow criminals to be present at this Loya Jirga, warlords responsible for our country’s situation? ...They should be prosecuted’. With these words, and knowing exactly what she was doing, Malalai instantly turned herself into a marked woman.

Since then, she has had to travel in her country concealed in a burqa and surrounded by body guards – part of the need for fund raising is to cover their salaries. She has no home of her own and moves from one safe house to the next, sometimes on a daily basis, to avoid detection. Although Malalai married in 2005, she cannot live with her husband, whose identity is carefully guarded. Even overseas she is not safe. Yet none of these depredations have quelled her passion.

She has remained unequivocal in her opposition to the warlords. She argues that with the overthrow of the Taliban, they have merely re-branded themselves as patriots and with the support of the Americans and their allies have resumed control of the country. Malalai insists they are just as destructive as the Taliban. She quotes an old Afghani saying to describe the current leadership crisis – ‘It’s the same donkey, but a new saddle.’

But returning to the Loya Jirga confrontation, Malalai was astonished at the level of support she received for her stand. She returned to a hero’s welcome in her home province of Farah. ‘Old women and young girls, in particular, clamoured to hug and kiss me... This moving response from the people of Farah showed me just how deep their hatred of the warlords runs, and how much they hope for a future where Afghanistan will finally be rid of this terrible burden’.

It was to keep faith with these people that Malalai made the hard decision in 2005 to run for the new parliament as an independent. Subsequently, she became the youngest Member of Parliament, until her suspension in May 2007 for insulting her fellow representatives during a television interview.

That suspension has led to international protest, with public figures like Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein speaking out on her behalf, and defence committees being formed in Afghanistan and other countries.

Since 2003, Malalai has been on a mission. She has travelled the world pleading with democratic nations not to forget Afghanistan. She argues that Western journalists too often accept the fables spun by Afghan's current leaders.

To Laura Bush's assertion in 2005 that as a result of the invasion by America and its allies: 'Tyranny has been replaced by a young democracy and the power of freedom is on display across Afghanistan', Malalai retorts:

“‘The power of freedom’ was – and remains –available for the warlords, drug-lords and Taliban’ (who are experiencing a resurgence) ‘to brutalise people, particularly women. Women are “free” to beg in the streets under the cover of the burqa; they are “free” to resort to prostitution to feed their families; they are “free” to sell their children instead of watching them starve to death; they are “free” to commit self-immolation as the only way out of the cycle of humiliation, destitution and despair.’

Malalai, of course, has first hand experience of restrictions on freedom, not only in her personal life but in her professional life as a parliamentarian. Her current suspension, for instance, is not only unprecedented and unlawful but is of unlimited duration.

While she entered Parliament on a wave of popular support for her policy of exposing the warlords and ensuring they pay for their crimes, with 60 per cent of her fellow ministers comprising warlords and their allies (according to a Human Rights Watch report) she is unlikely to succeed in that objective, certainly in the short term.

Yet her convictions and her electoral mandate make it impossible for her to compromise – ‘The day I compromise with my enemies, I may not be in danger any more, but I will be regarded as a traitor by the Afghan people, who are the real power in the country. Without them, I would be nothing.’

This stance makes it virtually impossible for her to work within the Afghani parliamentary system. In fact, during her two years as an MP she was constantly insulted and her microphone was frequently cut off when she tried to speak, undermining her capacity to represent her constituents.

Fortunately, even though she has been thwarted within parliament, Malalai skilfully uses her high public profile to publicise what is really happening in her country, and to challenge the West’s complacency about Afghanistan.

In response to my parents’ awe at Malalai’s courage and because I am a family therapist, I can’t resist a brief look at the impact of Malalai’s family background on the extraordinary choices she has made in her short life.

I’m reminded of a comment made many years ago at a workshop by one of the doyens of family therapy, Betty Carter. She asserted that whenever you are talking alone with someone there are nevertheless at least three generations present in your consulting room. That was certainly the case for Malalai, who had great respect for her maternal

grandfather, whose qualities of honesty and feistiness in opposing corruption, despite the personal cost, I suspect she has tried to make her own:

‘My maternal grand-father had been an honest and well-respected tribal leader or Malik, for forty years. The people of Ziken called him the ‘stick holder’, because he was famous for having beaten someone with his stick after he saw him taking a bribe. Even though tribal heads in Afghanistan are among the richest men, my grandfather was too honest to keep anything for himself. When he died nothing was left for his children, but the surrounding villages helped support my mother and her siblings.’ There couldn’t be a much greater contrast with the rapacity of the warlords.

Another significant role model, I am sure, is Malalai’s own father, whom she sees as an exceptional person. His capacity to think for himself, to serve others and to treasure education are all integral to his daughter’s make-up.

Malalai’s father sacrificed his ambition to become a doctor and withdrew from his medical studies to fight for his country against the Russians. Despite losing a leg, he manages to support his wife and ten children via a range of manual jobs and periodically offers medical advice to neighbours.

As an Afghani man, he was most unusual in his determination to provide an education for all his children, seven of whom are daughters. The school he sought out when the family was living in a refugee camp in Pakistan was the only one in the entire region that accepted girls, so his daughters were able to join the mere 15 per cent of Afghani females who are literate.

Malalai has always been most grateful for her father’s gift of reading. She loves biographies and has taken inspiration from the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Che Guevara,

Patrice Lumumba and especially Nelson Mandela. She is also a great poetry fan and has committed to memory passages like this one from Bertolt Brecht:

There are men who struggle for a day and they are good.

There are men who struggle for a year and they are better.

There are men who struggle many years, and they are better still.

But there are those who struggle all their lives:

These are the indispensable ones.

Malalai's father has always been a staunch supporter of his eldest daughter, returning to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan with the whole family so she could take up a post, despite the danger. Once there, as well as resuming his role as the primary provider, night after night he helped Malalai prepare her lessons for the next day.

Though Malalai's mother has had a hard life, no education, suffers depression at times and is usually restricted to the home, she too has been there for her daughter at key moments.

When as a young teenager in Pakistan, Malalai nervously started teaching adult women to read and write, her mother was one of the first students to enrol.

And it was at the very moment the young activist was setting out on the fateful journey to the Loya Jirga, that her mother broke the habit of a lifetime to raise her voice in public. When a UN worker warned Malalai against speaking out on the grounds that she would be unlikely to receive support in the big city, her mother interrupted saying: 'Why won't anyone support her? I will be there to support her, and I am sure many more will be on her side.' Malalai comments in her autobiography: 'I was so proud of my mother for speaking up for me. We had all come a long way.'

At the end of Malalai's talk, I stood in the queue waiting for her to sign my copy of her autobiography. I fully expected a perfunctory signature. Instead, she took pains to ensure that she had the names and the spelling in the dedication exactly right, before signing off 'Love, Malalai Joya'.

In that moment, I felt I was simply in the presence of a dedicated young teacher, and the warrior seemed a long way away. The tragedy is that, given the plight of Afghanistan, the warrior can only ever be in the background momentarily.