

Oh Malala: Why Make a Film on Trans 'Women'?

What about girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan? Honor killings, forced marriage, polygamy, wife and daughter battering?



by Phyllis Chesler

You are the brave young woman who was shot in the head when you were fifteen in Pakistan because you wanted an education and who was rescued, both medically, economically, educationally, and in every other way by the Brits; and then awarded a Nobel Peace Prize by the Scandinavians. But now you've decided to criticize Western filmmakers for failing to use South Asian actors and staff because they are "too brown and too poor."

How many white people star in Bollywood films?

Isn't this a bit like biting the hand that fed you—and just in order to please the politically correct crowd that now seem to run things in the West? Of course, I understand, you may also want to use your celebrity power to help other “brown” people.

Fair enough—but now, you have produced a film titled [“Joyland.”](#) You say that you view film making as another form of “activism...in which we challenge the social norms that deny women their basic rights, their dignity.”

Is “Joyland” about girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan? About honor killings, forced marriage, polygamy, wife and daughter battering? Or about the trafficking of girls and women? It most definitely is not. The daily massacre of women in the Punjab and in Kabul are not what your film is about. Author and activist Yasmine Mohammed agrees. In an email, she wrote:

“I feel like Malala could have lent her voice and her influence to the women in Pakistan fighting for their basic rights. Perhaps she could have supported a movie to show how the feminists in Pakistan and Afghanistan are risking their lives to live as autonomous human beings. How girls are banned from school and university and even parks in Afghanistan. How women are scared to go to parks in Pakistan because of how common it is to be assaulted in public. There are countless women's issues that need attention and addressing in those countries. It felt very performative to me that she would jump on the popular bandwagon of supporting men who want to transition to being trans women while ignoring, along with the rest of the world, the women who are being persecuted because they were born women.”

Sikh feminist activist, Mandy Sanghera, pointed out that “transgender women are well known in India and yes, they are usually rejected by their families.”

In India and Pakistan, transgender women are known as “khusra” which Pakistanis translate as a “eunuch,” though the meaning is broader than a castrated man. Besides transsexuals, it also includes hermaphrodites, and people with both male and female genitalia. They are also known as hijra and are recognized as a third gender.

It is true that transgender women in Pakistan and India are demonized and exiled by their families; many have to become “sex workers,” (or choose to do so happily), as the only way they can economically survive. Some are initiated into hijra tribes.

It is also true that Afghan warlords kidnap or buy young boys and turn them into sex slaves and “dancing girls.” If they survive the prison-style rape/sex, such boys often grow up to buy, kidnap, and train new young boys in the arts of such dancing.

Many Afghan warlords are also married and the fathers of many children. They just do not like women all that much except as domestic servants and reproductive beasts of burden.

When I lived in Kabul, I saw men walking down the street, holding hands, with a rifle flung over each man’s shoulder. One might have a flower in his hair. When I told my Afghan family what I believed I’d seen—gay men—they laughed at me and said that Americans don’t understand very much.

We were both right. Male homosexuality is omnipresent in most Muslim countries but it is not considered “gay” in Western terms. It is just something that men do but do not discuss. If you are the do-er, the taker in the relationship you remain as manly as every other man. If you are the “bottom,” you may end up as the main character in author Khaled Hosseini’s “Kite Runner,” a tragic narrative about the gang-rape and shaming of a Hazara (Shi-ite) boy by other Sunni Afghan boys.

No one is claiming that the transgender women of

Pakistan/India or the dancing boys of Afghanistan are accepted by society or that they can rise and lead dignified lives filled with love and approval. (Anyway, how many of us can?)

My question to Malala is this: Why have you chosen to join the cast of "Harry Potter" in the belief that transgender women ARE women and that they, too, are persecuted for whom they love and how they dress? Your film is about transgender love (born male, identity female) in Pakistan. You call it a "queer love story" and you are "grateful that the trans role was played by a trans woman."

If I were aggressively mischievous, I would challenge you for being the executive producer of this film—even though you are not a transgender woman.

Pakistan immediately banned your new film but then, with some edits, allowed it to be shown, but not in the Punjab where it is set. It is available in the UK.

Malala, you are a woman who knows how to live dangerously. Haven't you heard about the recent near-assassination and serious wounding of Salman Rushdie? Perhaps you're so privileged or well-guarded that you feel invulnerable, easily able to go out on a limb for what you believe is a human right wronged.

Mohammed, above, makes an excellent point about the fact that there are actually many feminist groups on the ground in Pakistan fighting for women's rights and researching women's wrongs. There are several groups, (the Aurat Foundation is among them), that have done an excellent job of counting the number of honor killings in Pakistan and in the Punjab and their work is very important.

I hope that your next film is about an honor killing in the Punjab, one which shows that the transgressive man can buy his life and his freedom but that the woman must die.

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