



**A DIACHRONIC CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF LIBERAL FEMINIST
IDEOLOGY IN MALALA YOUSAFZAI'S SPEECHES**

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of Malala Yousafzai's speeches, whose stance has never been scrutinized through the lens of transformation. It focuses on the liberal feminist discourse evolution in the speeches of Malala from 2013 to 2026. Focusing on her 2013 UN address and her 2018 speech upon returning to Swat Valley, Pakistan and her 2026 UN: Justice cannot not be selective address. It centers on the linguistic features, pronoun shifts lexical choices, vocabulary, metaphors, modality, and rhetorical style, exposing the individual agency to collective action and how they construct liberal feminist meanings. Its accommodation across different contexts and audiences. This study is guided by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which allows for the investigation of language as a social practice at three levels. This paper identifies the way discourse can be a strong instrument at the disposal of social resistance and advocacy by paying attention to the issue of feminist language use. This research encompasses evolution, adaptation, and progression from individual narrative to collective international advocacy. It provides a nuanced understanding of Malala's speeches and responds to limitations in existing literature and fills a scholarly void of unexplored work on the evolution of her speeches.

Keywords: Malala Yousafzai, Norman Fairclough's, CDA, Liberal feminism

Introduction

This research intends to present the critical discourse analysis of the speeches of Malala Yousufzai, delivered at 2013 UN address, her 2018 speech upon returning to Swat Valley, Pakistan and her 2026 UN: *Justice cannot not be selective* addresses through the lens of liberal feminism and its evolution over the span of thirteen years.

On 12 July 1997 when the youngest Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai, was born. She is from Pakistan, is a potent and seminal figure for female education and the empowerment. She is often called Malala. The correspondent of Deutsch Wells' Kyle McKinnon once said that Malala is "most famous teenager in the world." (McKinnon, 2013) She is a renowned human rights bolster, chiefly the education of women in general and children specifically in the northwest of Pakistan in her native place Swat Valley, where the indigenous radicals once tried to condemn girls from joining school. She was against the Taliban because they imperiled her right to education. She becomes illustrious and starts to give interviews in newspapers and on television also, she has also been designated for the international children's Peace Prize by South African cleric and activist Desmond Tutu.

On 9th October 2012, after finishing a school day, she was returning home in a car in the Swat Region, Malala and two of her friends were shot by a Pakistani Taliban manslayer in an eradication attempt in retribution for her activism; the sniper escaped. Yousafzai was shot in the head with a bullet and lingered lifeless and in critical condition in a hospital; however, her condition later ameliorated. The endeavor to silence her turned into a worldwide flood of support for Malala.

This incident not only modified her life but also brought revolution in the lives of thousands of girls who once just dreamt of going to school. The notion of change once again got validation

when a girl whose ambition was to bring change to her town became a reason for reform in the world by founding Malala Fund, a non-profit organization. *I Am Malala*, is a multinational bestseller novel written by Malala in 2013. In 2014, she was honored with Noble Peace Prize along with Kailash Satyarthi from India. She has been introduced as one of the world's most influential people globally by The American weekly news Times.

Her struggle for women education, equal rights and gender-based violence makes her a global activist and an important personality in the world. Her impact on the global forums became evident when she was called time and again on UN for speeches.

The study analyses the evolution of Malala as a speaker. The way of presenting herself, putting her stance forward, choosing topics to speak on, has changed. The aim of this study is to focus on that evolution as speaker. The compendium comprises three primary speeches by Malala Yousafzai: her 2013 UN address and her 2018 speech upon returning to Swat Valley, Pakistan and her 2026 UN: *Justice cannot not be selective*.

Literature Review

In the past few years, the role of feminist activists who utilize speeches as an influential tool for stirring awareness and advancing social change, in response of the demand for gender equality has earned escalating importance in society. Greater attention to gender issues got stimulated by the speeches which not only mirror feminist dogma but also demonstrate the substantial use of language as a cogent tool.

In terms of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Anderson and Holloway (2018) state that discourse analysis is a valuable tool for understanding how and why something happens rather than simply focusing on what happens or whether it happens. Similarly, (Altam & Pathan, 2021) state that Fairclough (1995) describes language as being connected to society through its role as the core ideology and its function as a site and opportunity for power struggles. Fairclough links micro, meso, and macro levels in text or linguistic analysis.

This concept is represented in Van Dijk (2014) proposed theory of mental models, which offers a perspective on how discourse context interacts with society, a cognitive form as mental models, which are created and stored in memory.

Feminist speech refers to a form of language that is intended to promote women's rights, gender equality, and challenge patriarchy through a linguistic structure known as feminist rhetoric, which emphasizes dialogic and collective identity (Glenn, 2020).

Nurfazri (2026) study political language in Zohran Mamdani's victory speech. The study operates at three levels employing Norman Fairclough's CDA. At micro level, reflecting the framing of electoral victory because of collective struggle and the utilization of lexical, rhetorical metaphorical and modal verbs constructing the agency. At meso level, the linkage of victory speech with the ongoing struggle through historical cross-referencing. At macro level, operating ideologically, challenging neo-liberal and oligarchic hegemony (Nurfazri, 2026). This study presents the application of CDA on Zohran Mamdani which has been employed on Malala Yousafzai's speeches.

An Application of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional CDA Approach to Fraser Anning's Speech in Australian Senate. The objective of this study was to underline impression markers, determine key concerns, and depict social as well as cultural consequences of a speech delivered by William Fraser Anning. Muslim immigrants were labelled as "welfare-blunders", "terrorists", "gang-terrorists", "criminals", and "illegal occupants". The speech was followed by an extremist attack on a Mosque in New Zealand. This study utilized Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis three-dimensional approach drawing the relation between William Fraser Anning, ethnicity, immigration and race (Hassan, 2019).

A recent study analyzing feminist discourse within China state in this work, Revisiting feminism–nationalism dynamics in China: a diachronic critical discourse analysis of gendered controversies surrounding Black Myth: Wukong. It reveals how discourse is not neutral, it has

layered meanings associated with society, power, and ideology. It exhibits the discursive shift in the form of linguistic evolution across different sequential phases (Feng, 2026). It resonates with the present study of diachronic development in Malala's speeches ranging between 2013-2026.

The role of Sophie Neveu in the *Davinci Code*: "A study of liberal feminism". The primary objective is to examine how Sophie embodies the principles of gender equality, rationality, educational rights, freedom of choice, and resistance to discrimination through the lens of liberal feminism (Suretno, Halomoan, 2025). It resonates with Malala's stance which has been presented in this study.

Liberal Feminism focuses on equality, rights, education, agency and legal reform. Work has been focusing on individual empowerment, access to education and equality before law in the work of, *Voices of resistance: a feminist stylistic analysis of Malala Yousafzai's 2013 UN speech through Sara Mills' theory*, investigation focuses on the social resistance, advocacy, and feminist language use but using Sara Mill's feminist theory (Suleman, Khan & Abbas Khan, 2025). That has not been applied to Malala Yousafzai's discourse.

A Comparative Study of Feminist Speeches: Malala Yousafzai and Angelina Jolie through Critical Discourse Analysis, discusses the Malala Yousafzai's UN 2013 and Angelia Jolie's 'Equality for women' speeches through the perspective of Norman Fairclough CDA fusing it with feminist theory but in a comparative manner between two speakers (Chawong *et al.* 2025). *Critical Discourse Analysis on Novel I am Malala by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb*. This study focuses on the gender-based violence, injustice and inequality towards women but through the prism of Fairclough's CDA (Syamsiah, 2016).

The need of this work arises because previous works have focused on just one perspective (Nurfazri, 2026, Hassan, 2019, Feng, 2026, Suretno, Halomoan, 2025, Sapkota, 2021, Syamsiah, 2016, Suleman, Khan & Abbas Khan, 2025, Chawong *et al.* 2025) analysing it either through Fairclough's CDA or Liberal Feminism utilizing only one speech or novel. Pre-existing works have focused integration of CDA into feminist theory but not in a comparative manner. It focused on the evolution of Malala Yousafzai's speeches in the span of thirteen years from 2013 to 2026. It focuses on the discursive shift in Malala Yousafzai's speeches using Norman Fairclough's CDA in the light of Liberal feminism.

This research embraces evolvement, refinement and transformation from individual narrative to collective international advocacy. It provides a nuanced understanding of Malala's speeches and responds to limitations in existing literature, fills a scholarly void of unexplored work on the evolution of her speeches. This study focuses on the transformation in her speeches while focusing on lexis, sentence structure, vocabulary, modality and shift in them. Furthermore, it focuses on the progression of liberal feminist discourse. Discourse alteration across varied assemblies and contexts. The discursive shift in her speeches from individual narrative to international espousal.

The second section of this study analyzes the theoretical backbone, employing Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis while integrating it with liberal feminism. The third section comprises the results which focus on how evolution has been done through textual and discursive practice. Then, we have fourth section which discusses social practice, connecting speeches to wider context. Finally, conclusion discusses the crux of the study.

Methodology

The data comprises three primary speeches by Malala Yousafzai: her 2013 UN address and her 2018 speech upon returning to Swat Valley, Pakistan and her 2026 UN: *Justice cannot not be selective address*. This study adopts qualitative design using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Three significant speeches are chosen to compare the liberal feminist discourse in global and local contexts. The study took place in three steps, first being the textual analysis exploring the lexical choices, vocabulary, pronouns,

modality, and rhetorical style, exposing the individual agency to collective action, moving towards the discursive practice of examining the interpretations meanings, production and its reception then, the final stage of social practice whereupon connecting linguistic characteristics to international vs. national context, power relations, and socio-political background.

This research is steered by the three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Norman Fairclough's, which allows for the examination of language as social practice. The exploration of how discourse reproduces and establishes social norms, ideologies, and power dynamics is facilitated by this model. Additionally, the framework of liberal feminist theory contributes to analyzing how Malala Yousafzai negotiates education, gender, and agency in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Three dimensions of Fairclough's model where the textual dimension examines lexical choices, sentence structures, and rhetorical devices to display ideological meaning. The discursive practice dimension focuses on the production and consumption of discourse, including audience positioning and intertextuality. Finally, the social practice dimension stations the discourse within wider sociopolitical contexts, examining how power, ideology, and gender norms are strengthened or challenged. The study displays the evolution of liberal feminist discourse from emotive and repetitive to narrative then finally assertive and declarative.

Liberal feminist theory stressing individual rights and moral agency, emphasizing that women should claim their rights and access opportunities conventionally repudiated to them. These interpretations provide a lens to examine how Malala's speeches evolve over the span of thirteen years in local and global advocacy.

By integrating CDA with liberal feminist frameworks, this study evaluates both the linguistic and ideological dimensions of Malala Yousafzai's speeches. Lexical choices, modality, and pronoun shifts demonstrate how Malala constructs individual authority, equality, and the claim of women's rights, reflecting the principles of liberal feminist discourse. This approach enables a complex comprehension of how feminist theory is constructed across local and global contexts.

CDA, being a multi-layered approach, incorporated Liberal feminism in each of its layers. In textual analysis the word choice like voice, choice, and justice depicts the liberal feminist ideals. In discursive practice, the utilization of terms "rights", "equality", "justice", "privilege", "gender apartheid", reflecting the notion behind her words which is deeply interweaved in her speech. The relationship between society, politics, power and global conflicts is highlighted by social convention. This study spotlights the complex bond which has been created between Fairclough's CDA and Liberal feminism which became the core of this investigation.

Results

The results focus on the analyzation of speeches through textual and discursive analysis to comprehend the evolution. Textual analysis is the analysis of the language used in a particular text or discourse. It positions to find out the vocabulary, pronouns, modality, and rhetoric employed within a given text. Malala Yousafzai's UN speech comprises approximately 1800 words whereas Swat speech is around 800 words, and the UN 2026 comprises approximately 485 words, the disparity in length highlights the discursive scope and communication purpose. The text includes "rights", "education", "peace", "hope", "dream", and "changing the world", revealing a dual orientation toward universal advocacy.

The lexis used in her speeches is very simple. In UN speech, declarative and assertive tone aligns with global appeal while reflective and moderate structures resonate with national audience. She uses first person narrative like, "I" in the Swat speech, shows her individual experience and "We", "their", in the UN speech, representing collective struggle for equality. The deliberate use of pronouns mirrors a mature manufacturing of agency, where "I" constitutes authority, "we" constructs collective responsibility, and "they" displays disenfranchised subjects, bolstering a liberal feminist emphasis on voice and representation.

She exercised strong modal verbs and directive structure in UN speech, “must”, “will”, “call upon” to express the authority. Conversely, in the Swat speech, wields softer verbs “could”, “would”, “hope” demonstrating aspiration, then the employment of persuasive model verbs in the sentences like “we must ask”, “we must move”, “we must explicitly recognize”, “we can protect women”, pointing towards the social reform and the use of verbs “cannot” in the sentences like “women cannot go to work”, “cannot be treated by male doctor” reflects the suffocating condition of Afghan women in Malala’s 2026 UN declamation.

The repetitive structure employed by Malala in her UN 2013 speech in the sentences, ‘Their right to live in peace reinforces the emphasis. “Their right to be treated with dignity. Their right to equality of opportunity”. The repetition of “their right’ puts emphasis on the need of rights and equality and in the sentences, “I speak not for myself, but for all girls and boys”, she voiced in simple declarative form which resonates with liberal feminist ideals of equality for all.

This fragmented rights structure evolved into complex narrative sentences, “When I left Swat Valley, my eyes were closed”, representing emotional past and descriptive reflections, “I saw the beauty of my home”, her personal declarations. The contrasting declarative structure, “I didn’t leave my country by choice”, but I did return by choice, represents agency and autonomy key ideals of liberal feminism.

Advancement into absolute declaration in UN 2026 address, “Justice cannot be selective”, depicting justice as a universal right, at the same time, the rhetorical question, “why justice is a privilege extended to some and withheld from others”, portraying interrogative critical reflection. The final cause and effect style, “By codifying gender apartheid, we can protect women”, embody a result-oriented approach towards global challenge of gender equality center of liberal feminist theory.

Powerful rhetorical devices, repetition and metaphors like “one child, one teacher, one pen, and one book” advantaged the UN speech and the mighty figure of speech “justice cannot be selective” in 2026 UN declamation contrasting with the descriptive imagery leveraged in Swat speech expressed through these words, “never-ending mountain range, greenery, the rivers”.

Discursive analysis is the second level of Fairclough’s model. At this level, researchers need to find out how text is generated, circulated and used in a social set up. The words “rights”, “equality”, “education”, “potential”, “voice” and “weapon of knowledge”, used in UN speech, “my dream”, “my home”, “my family”, “choice”, “peace”, “mother”, “daughter”, in Swat speech, and propagates liberal feministic discourse.

She wielded the words “justice”, “privilege”, as “why justice is privilege”, “accountability, law”, in “speeches cannot but law and accountability can”, “we must call the regime in Afghanistan, by its true name, gender apartheid and must explicitly recognize it as a crime under international law”, “It is a system of segregation and domination”.

She expressed a discursive shift in her discourse. The adoption of more assertive and abstract lexicon centered on “justice,” “accountability,” “law,” and “recognition.” This shift reflects a transition from personalized articulation of agency toward a more systematic expression of equality. The utilization of terms such as “gender apartheid,” “segregation,” and “crime under international law” promotes an intensified stress on legal skeleton and institutional inequity, marking the metamorphosis of liberal feminist discourse from individual account to ethical patronage.

Discussion

Malala utilized global platforms and addressed the universal issue of education, equality, extremism and terrorism, holding world institutions responsible. In contrast, the Swat speech where cultural sensitivity, emotional language, harmony was exercised making it personal. She addresses, “governments”, “countries”, “India”, “Nigeria”, “Afghanistan”, that universalizes the issue of education. This global human rights distress is central to liberal feminism. In divergence to this universal plight, Swat speech addresses the localized Pakistani audience

touching upon the national Pakistan's educational crisis, stripping it away from international liberal assumptions.

In 2026 UN discourse, delivered in United Nations making global leaders, policy makers, and member states held accountable for Afghan women's crisis and structural restriction on women education, work, mobility, and public voice. The speech sheds light on the unequal power dynamics where Taliban's authority dominated the marginalized groups. The ideology of equality, universalism and anti-discrimination was evident through the call for individual rights and legal reform.

The direct confrontation of Taliban's violence, "the Taliban shot me" constructs UN 2013 speech an encounter of liberal feminism while Swat speech avoids confrontation to make it acceptable for audience, in these words, "where the Taliban once headquartered". From UN Secretary General Ban Ki- Moon to President of UN General Assembly, Malala presented herself as a mediator between global institutions and children's education in UN speech. It remains perpetual in Swat speech as well, when she mentioned Malala Fund, Pakistan government, PM, fashioning it an institutional responsibility to provide education, equality and safety.

The shift from individual accounts of agency to collective calls for institutional action demonstrates how Malala's discourse expands liberal feminist ideals, placing her personal voice within wider worldwide frameworks of rights, justice, and equality.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the evolution of liberal feminist discourse in Malala Yousafzai's speeches from 2013 to 2026 across different socio-political contexts. It reflects an evident discursive shift from voice to agency then call for justice while her speeches went through transformation from 2013 UN address being personal and experiential expression of agency to her 2018 speech upon returning to Swat Valley centered on emotional yet assertive structure, and her 2026 UN: *Justice cannot not be selective* address culminating into justice-oriented legal discourse. Throughout the speeches the employment of words agency, equality, autonomy, rights, justice, representation and empowerment displays association with liberal feminist ideals. The employment of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis operated on three levels reflects the integration of language, power and ideology. This study contributes to the existing scholarship on Malala Yousafzai while contributing to the diachronic examination of her speeches which has been less explored.

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