According to Joya, many of those in power in Afghanistan today should more rightly be tried for war crimes.

Normally I like to review fiction; short stories and novels, with a predilection for anything Australian. So it is an extreme departure for me to feel impelled to review *Raising my Voice* by Malalai Joya (co-written by Derrick O'Keefe*). Subtitled, *the extraordinary story of the Afghan woman who dares to speak out*, it is a book not easily forgotten once read and I would recommend it to anyone interested in the history of Afghanistan but, more particularly, those who seek answers about Australia’s military involvement in the country.

In the introduction, Joya (a pseudonym adopted to protect her family) writes that most Afghans her age and younger “have known only bloodshed, displacement and occupation”, a situation that doesn’t appear to be going away any time soon given the current “foreign occupation and an American-backed government filled with warlords who are just like the Taliban” (1).
Born in Afghanistan, Joya’s family fled to Iran when she was four, then moved to Pakistan when the dangers, deprivations and lack of education in the refugee camps became too much to tolerate. After almost sixteen years in exile, the family returned home to Afghanistan so that Joya could set up classes for girls in defiance of the Taliban.

Joya gives us snippets of life as a woman in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. For example, women were permitted to eat ice cream but, unlike the men, they were rarely supplied with seating and had to learn how to hold up the material of their burqa enough to eat it. The Taliban forbade any sort of formal education for women and girls. Lashings, beheadings, hangings: the tactics of the Taliban have been well-documented elsewhere but those of us unaware of Afghanistan’s history may be ignorant of the atrocities perpetrated by the warlords; apparently equally abhorrent. So when the US-led forces allow – and in many cases, even facilitate – these same warlords to enter back into the power rooms, the people of Afghanistan are no closer to democracy and the women and girls no safer than they were under the Taliban.

When the Taliban first swept into power, many Afghans welcomed them because it meant an end to the killings (80,000 deaths in Kabul alone during the civil war of 1992 to 1996). According to Joya, the United States played a pivotal role “in nourishing a violent, fundamentalist mentality in generations of young Afghans” (218) which started in the 1980s with the publication of books through the University of Nebraska that were filled with talk of jihad and warlike images. The books were shipped into Soviet-occupied Afghanistan to fuel a jihad against the Russians but remained in the system long after.

Today, women remain caged and without access to justice. Most of the time, women are still prevented from appearing in public uncovered and require a male relative as a chaperone. Rape goes unpunished. Joya says that, “in Afghanistan, killing a woman is like killing a bird” (3).

According to Joya, many of those in power in Afghanistan today should more rightly be tried for war crimes. She was “shocked and appalled” to see such warlords and other war criminals seated in the first row at the Loya Jirga (official traditional gathering) in Kabul: fascists; fundamentalists with bloody pasts; a sponsor of Osama bin Laden and trainer and mentor of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (the alleged mastermind of the World Trade Centre attacks); Jamiat-e-Islami fundamentalists who had issued rules for women that were as bad as the Taliban’s; men known for their ruthlessness; former Soviet puppets and civil war criminals. Here they all were, after having bribed and muscled their way back into positions of power. A
Raising My Voice by Malalai Joya: Book Review

Written by Karenlee Thompson blog
Sunday, 08 January 2012 00:00

A lesser woman would have been left speechless. But not Joya.

The voices of the countless widows who had told me of their suffering rang in my ears as I looked around the room. It was terrible enough to hear about these men and their crimes, but seeing them in person running this Loya Jirga and listening to their speeches was like torture for me. I had to speak out. (81)

And speak out she did and, despite concerted and continued efforts to silence her, she continues to do so.

I have often heard the argument that Afghan women themselves insist on backing the outrageous laws of the Taliban and the warlords and vilifying their sisters who take a stand against them. Joya gives credible explanations for this phenomenon, not least of which is the fear that churns within the women (not only for themselves, but also for their children), keeping them in check and ensuring that they tow the party lines. One woman who harangued Joya after her speech at the Loya Jirga, later begged Joya’s forgiveness. “I had to threaten you with death and attack you. I was forced to,” the woman told her.

Joya herself seems to be fearless. When Lawyer and activist Kellie Tranter interviewed her in Hobart last year for the ABC, Joya confirmed that she doesn’t think about death, concentrating instead on the hopes she has.
The voice she raises is not just the voice of a woman: it is a human voice, working tirelessly for the likes of Sayed Pervez Kambaksh, sentenced to twenty years in prison after his death sentence was commuted. His crime? ‘Blasphemy’: he allegedly downloaded and circulated an article critical of women’s rights in Islamic societies. After enormous public pressure, the Afghan student was pardoned 20 months later.

In a book laden with difficult truths and traumatic word images, I did find something to laugh about. Of all the movies that might have flourished on the black market in Afghanistan, I was surprised and amused to read that it was James Cameron’s Titanic that was the most popular. Children and young adults would organise secret ‘Titanic’ parties. Market items were named after the movie: Titanic clothes and shampoo, Titanic tomatoes and onions. Joya found the naming of vegetables after a Hollywood movie especially funny. So did I.

Afghanistan’s history is bloody and complicated but Joya’s message is simple really; summed up by “no nation can donate liberation to another nation”. History, Joya tells us, shows that democracy is not something that can be imposed by foreign troops. She believes that the democratically minded people who have been struggling for human and women’s rights in the country for decades, must be left to continue the fight themselves. Tough call, but that is the reality, according to Joya.

Pulling no punches, she writes that the truth about Afghanistan and its history has been “hidden behind a smokescreen of words and images carefully crafted by the United States and its NATO allies and repeated without question by the Western media”. (2) But she goes further than that:

The people of Afghanistan can see very clearly that the warlords are supported and protected by the United States and other foreign troops. They could not continue their fascist agenda for even one day without the backing of the United States and NATO. (246)

Jonathan Steel is critical of Joya’s “frequent lapses into self-righteousness” and the singularity of her voice (rather than its connection to a movement) in his 2009 review for The Guardian. 
nd Jennifer Moreau reminds the reader in 'Lifting the Veil' that BBC polling indicates a majority of Afghans support the presence of US forces. I am not able to comment knowledgeably on the politics of Afghanistan but Malalai Joya certainly seems like a voice worth listening to.

If you want to know more about this incredibly brave woman, there is a wealth of information available at The Defense Committee for Malalai Joya site.

*Raising My Voice* was published in the US and Canada as *A Woman Among Warlords*.

* Derrick O'Keefe is the co-writer of *Raising my Voice*, yet I was surprised that his name does not appear on the cover (he is credited as co-author in Joya’s acknowledgements). On Canada’s ‘Rabble’ blog, an excerpt is headed “‘A Woman Among Warlords: the Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice’ by Malalai Joya and Derrick O'Keefe”, but features the book cover with Joya’s name only.

BOOK DETAIL: