

Understanding the American ethos

Shahid Alam studies a work that exercises minds

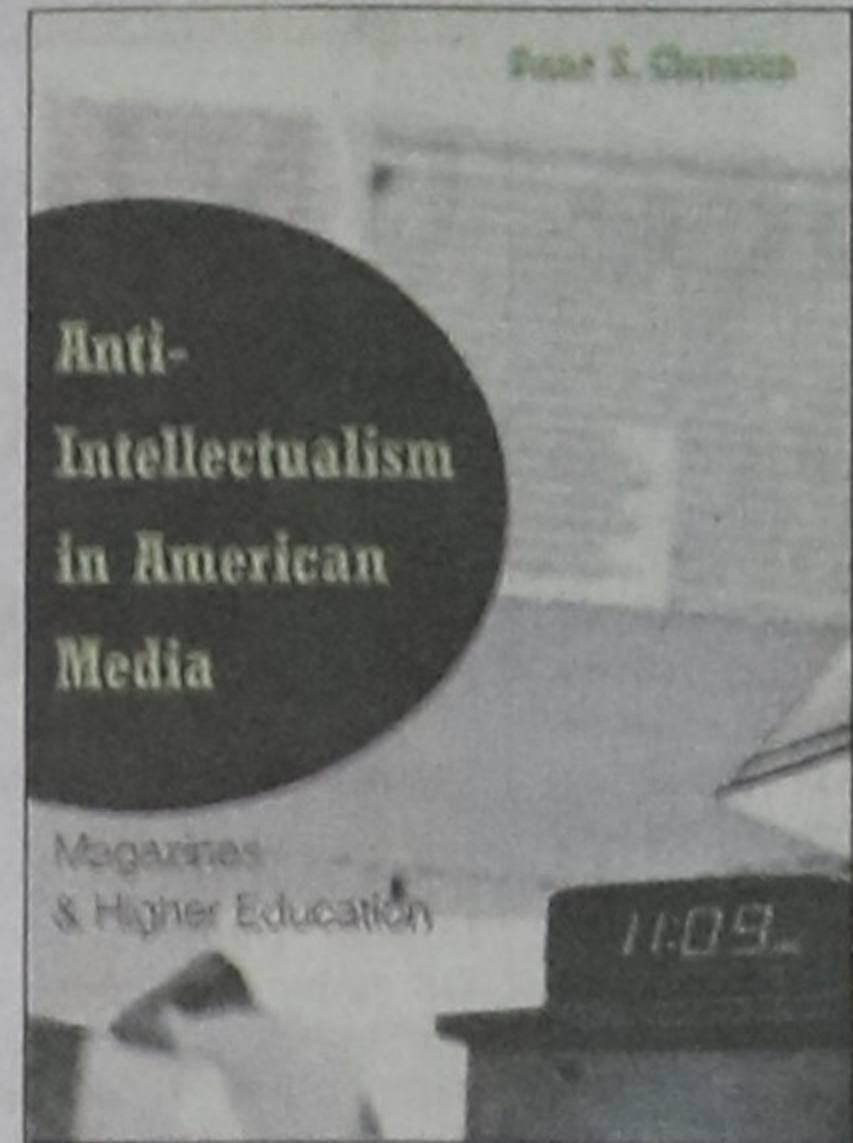
IMPATIENCE with theories, ideas --- the entire practice and process of abstract thought --- is perhaps the most common manifestation of anti-intellectualism throughout American popular culture and average Americans' day-to-day lives. Therefore, it should be no surprise when that attitude is found even in magazine coverage of higher education --- the one institution in which Americans have expected (not to say preferred) and perhaps even tolerated this core requirement of intellectual activity. Although these lines are to be found towards the end of an absorbing book, in a chapter (6) pertinently titled "Unreflective Instrumentalism, Hedonism, Sexism, and Age Discrimination", they encapsulate the general drift of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Media: Magazines & Higher Education*. And the author, while ending the previous chapter (5), entitled "Populist Anti-Elitism and Higher Education", bemoans such a state of affairs thus: "However, the needs and opportunities in the United States in the areas of arts, sciences, government, journalism, retail politics, and the overall American culture and American society --- even the complexity of day-to-day life for the average citizen --- suggest that more citizens, not fewer, should be learning, and not only a finite amount for a degree, but learning more and more over a longer period of time. Unfortunately, American anti-intellectualism makes the idea of even necessary, let alone optional, lifelong learning a tough sell."

Dane S. Claussen is Associate Professor and Director of the Graduate Program in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Point Park College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. He is a newspaper management consultant, and a former editor and publisher of daily, weekly and monthly newspapers. In addition to a PhD in the media field, Claussen has an MBA degree to boot, thereby combining within himself the qualifications of a practising journalist, academic, and a high educational background in both the media and business studies. He has evidently brought all these attributes into the mix that has gone into the writing of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Media*. And his has not been a bad effort either, although the book reads more like an extensive review of literature and content analysis on the subject rather than a

lengthy discourse of his thoughts. The literature review is formidable, though, and Claussen uses it judiciously to arrive at his conclusion that the news media has fed vocationalism and self-doubt in higher education, and anti-intellectualism throughout American culture. His criticism on this count is striking, though probably right on the money: "Several times I have been asked my opinion about life in a hypothetical United States that is 'too intellectual' rather than (sic) 'too anti-intellectual.' Such a possibility is so infinitely remote that none of us need to worry about it" (note 1, Chapter 7).

Claussen draws liberally on the classic work of Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, to present his views, but he also refers to other writers and commentators to delve into the roots of American anti-intellectual propensity. For example, he presents Heidi K. Goar's profound observations that being an intellectual in American culture is the same to being un-American, and, therefore, unpatriotic, and that anti-intellectual ideologies may be internalised by Americans "through the fear of being seen as deviant and therefore ridiculed or ostracized." As Claussen provides a number of evidence on the issue, there is good reason to believe that in the country of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, et al, widespread anti-intellectualism should not come as that big a surprise. Hofstadter maintains that the US had almost always been anti-intellectual, while Daniel Rigney, in discussing Hofstadter's thesis, demonstrates that, in Claussen's words, "it was anti-elitism and religious fundamentalism that originally caused the U.S. population to be anti-intellectual and uninterested in (or even hostile to) formal education, economic considerations perpetuated it."

And it would not be remiss to remind ourselves that the United States has a religious fundamentalist root in the form of the Puritan English colonists (it comfortably remains the most religious-minded of all the advanced Western countries), and that it has all along been a country with a healthy preference for material pursuit and economic considerations. Little wonder, then, that Hofstadter has found that American educational institutions in general push narrow vocationalism, discourage purely theoretical work and devalue intrinsic



Anti-Intellectualism in American Media
Magazines & Higher Education
Dane S. Claussen
Peter Lang

rewards of learning. "Useful intelligence" is preferred over the "pure intellectual", and the mass media follows the routine. Claussen elaborates on this point: "...while the mass media may sometimes portray intellectuals regarded as 'theoretical' or 'abstract' as overly idealistic, out-of-touch, and so on, others who are highly educated and often quite intelligent (physicians, engineers, lawyers, MBAs, and so on) are shown as valued for their skills --- while their education and intelligence often go unremarked. More commonly intellectuals are simply not covered at all.... Surely part of this picture is America's common confusion of education with intelligence (and) professors and experts with intellectuals."

Claussen sets forth "a comprehensive study of the role of media in U.S. anti-intellectualism that would answer two general questions. First, are mass media a primary actor in creating and/or perpetuating anti-intellectualism? Second, do the mass media have significant potential to resist pervasive American anti-intellectualism?" These are questions not lightly asked, if just a sampling of media coverage of presidential candidates' attributes is perused. In 1828 John

Quincy Adams had been criticised for "book learning", and, in 1952, the cerebral Adlai Stevenson, as well as Adams in 1828, were ridiculed for their "gifts of language". On the other hand, Dwight Eisenhower's non-intellectual, and Andrew Jackson's anti-intellectual qualities both received more coverage than Stevenson and Adams' intellectual qualities. The point is that anti-intellectualism in American culture is pervasive, and has its roots in Puritan colonial times. The brilliant English philosophy professor Isaiah Berlin shrewdly observed that anti-intellectualism is rampant even among American scholars. And the media have consistently given prominent coverage to such distinctly non-intellectual activities in colleges and universities like sports, tomfoolery, campus protest, joining fraternities and sororities, and, most significantly, finding jobs.

Heidi K. Goar finds that the popular media is a major factor in American anti-intellectualism. Her rationale for holding such a view is worth quoting: "The media influences not only individual tastes and desires, it seems to affect the entire mood of the country. It tells people what they should find important; it shows them how to behave; it informs them what to value and what not to value. What an ideal climate of anti-intellectualism for those in control!" She argues that anti-intellectual ideologies are so ingrained in American social institutions that intellectuals have little power in comparison with corporate executives, religious leaders, politicians and other prominent figures who are not intellectuals. As the media extol the non-intellectual facets of college students, the students, including many of the brightest, give primacy to careerism, which will provide them with social status and prestige, job security, high income and public recognition. The common denominator is that, to the average American, intellectualism is only worthwhile while pursuing if it leads to material benefit. It all fits in perfectly with the American non-sense, consumerist, materialistic, any venture leading to a clear and productive end result psyche. Intellectualism will have to conform to that scheme.

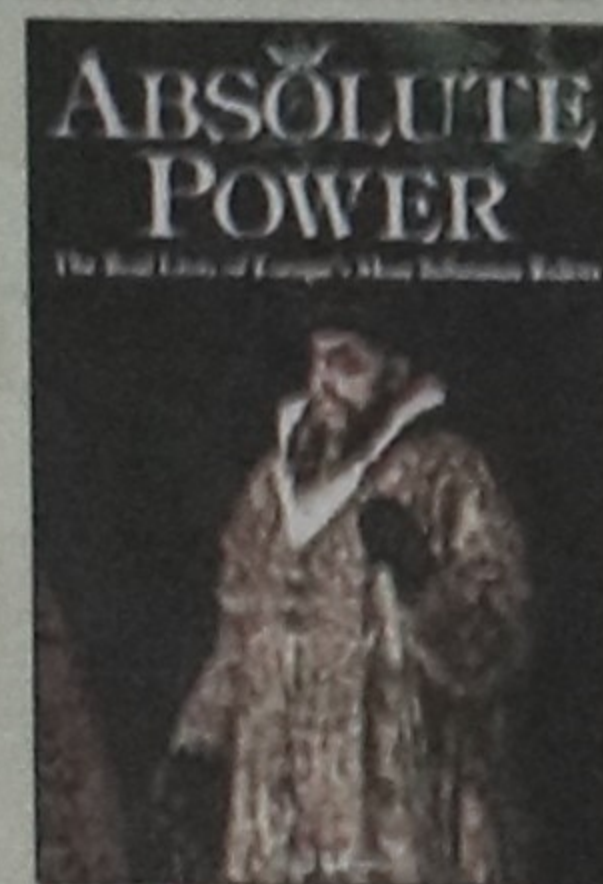
Therefore, as David Brooks, another author cited by Claussen, finds, today's intellectuals are savvy enough to develop

policy and research niches, then market themselves to and through TV appearances, op-ed pieces and conferences, "often ending up making high incomes while still not saying or writing anything original, helpful, or even interesting." And Norman Birnbaum believes that today's journalists have become like career foreign service bureaucrats in that "they combine abject servility to power and complacent ignorance in equal measure." Claussen elucidates on another anti-intellectual dimension of the media: "...profit-driven media seeking large audiences naturally tend toward lowest common denominator content and audiences, which would be non-intellectual anywhere and likely anti-intellectual in a broadly anti-intellectual culture." In their book, *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman provide a compelling rationale for such media behaviour: that the mass media in the US, far from being defiant of ruling circles, are in fact supportive and compliant towards those who hold power.

Dane Claussen is manifestly unhappy about anti-intellectualism in general in the US, and, in particular, the media's role in it. "The American public's long-time anti-intellectual attitude eventually was reflected in and by a presidential candidate, and then president (George W. Bush)," he says, "who was perhaps the least intellectual occupant of the White House in more than seventy-five years and perhaps the most anti-intellectual one in about 165 years." And "today...journalists should be asking themselves to what extent their profession is at fault for a man such as George W. Bush becoming a presidential nominee and then president." He has offered several suggestions to redress the unsatisfactory state of affairs, but one feels that he does not expect anything significant happening in the way of making intellectualism more acceptable to the general American public. Perhaps Claussen might want to resign himself to the words of one of the authors he has cited, Jacques Barzun: "We should expect that in an age of egalitarian democracy 'anti-intellectualism' would increase, for everyone now has the right to resent whatever looks like privilege and eminence."

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At a glance



Absolute Power
The Real Lives of Europe's Most Infamous Rulers
C.S. Denton
Arcturus

A riveting series of essays on all the cruel men and women who once ran riot across Europe. But there are the helpless and misunderstood ones as well, such as Louis XVI and his empress. It is a work that brings alive the darkness that for long pervaded Europe until thoughts of democracy began to make inroads.

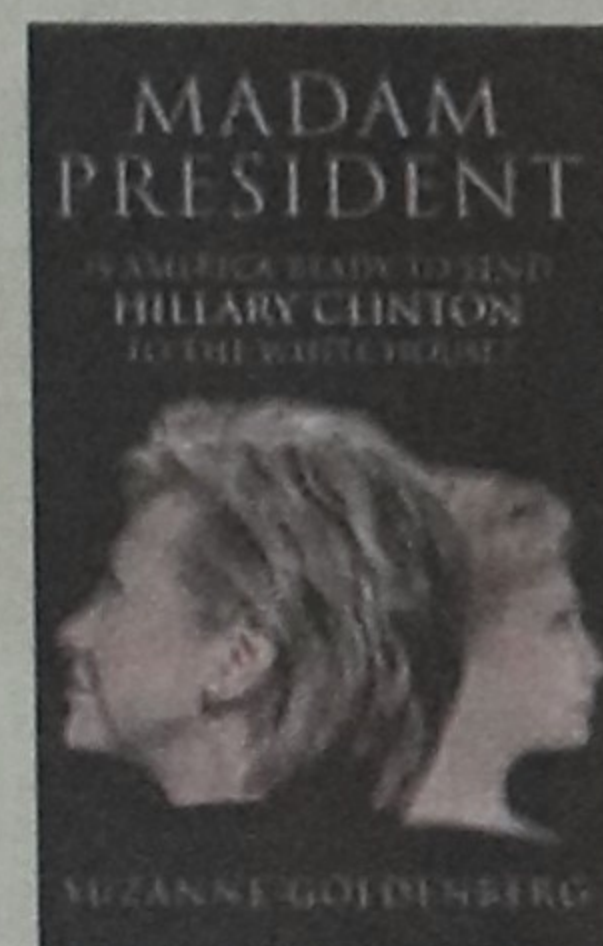
AParliamentaryAffair
Edwina Currie
TimeWarner

It is a sizzler of a novel you have here. A pretty, young woman is elected to Parliament and soon finds herself caught in a vortex where ambitions and back-room deals become the staple of politics. All of that is again made excruciatingly charming by the tales of satisfying sex along the spaces of Westminster.



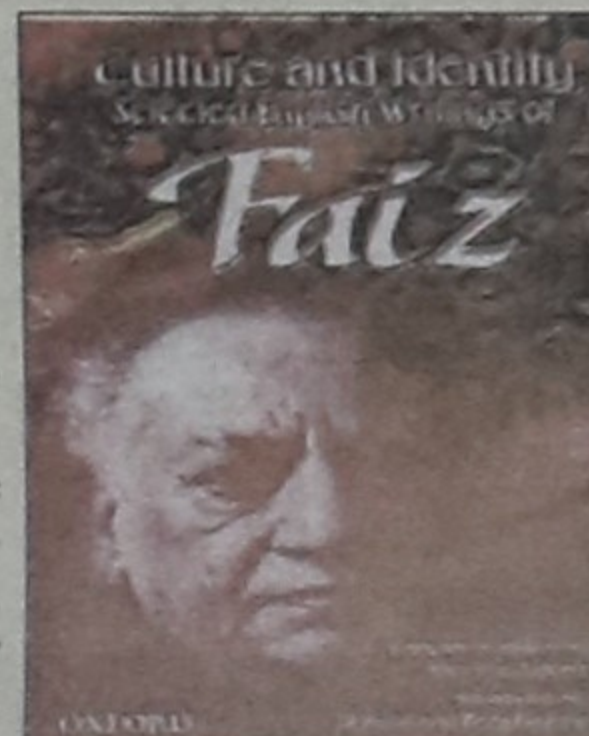
Madam President
Suzanne Goldenberg
Guardian Books

In a year when the former First Lady struggles to become America's first woman president, Goldenberg examines the chances. Are Americans ready to send Clinton back to the White House, this time as their leader? In the run-up to the primaries, the conventions and finally the elections, this is a superb work.



Culture and Identity
Selected English Writings of Faiz
Compiled by Sheema Majeed
Oxford University Press

Faiz Ahmed Faiz comes alive again. But, then, he has never died where literature and aesthetics in South Asia are concerned. In this eclectic collection of essays by the poet on a whole range of issues, from politics to poetry to the deeply personal, Majeed reminds people once more why Faiz remains relevant. A reflective read.



Reflections, reminiscences and beyond

Syed Badrul Haque is moved by tales of nostalgia and loss

PARTLY nostalgic narrative, partly political diatribe and partly a journal of self-discovery, *Tirtha Amar Gram* (Holy Is My Village) is an amalgam of poignant, vibrant pieces by Dr. Mizanur Rahman, an expatriate in Canada for over five decades now. It is an impressive example of a new genre, a dovetailing of reminiscence sketches with the prevailing socio-political agenda. He first wrote these pieces for Bangla journals published from Ottawa, New York and New Jersey.

After one has reached a certain age, reflections on yesteryears are more compelling scenes than going up the career ladder. Rahman's thoughts resonate at myriad levels from salad days to manhood and now the sere and yellow stage. The vernacular essays are so lovingly penned that even the reader who has never heard of Hasnabad will recognise the book as a letter from home. The writer draws a memorable picture of his childhood lived in the shadows of his dear and near ones; there is an intensity and innocence in his account of a world he cannot fully understand, but the beauties and dangers of which he is keenly aware of.

Rahman takes a sweeping pejorative look at the prevailing socio-economic scenario of our country. He finds that the high moral and ideological ground on which the Liberation War was fought is now lost in a welter of corruption, greed and erosion of values. He laments that the underprivileged, especially the vast multitude of farmers who were buoyed up with optimism for better days after liberation, are now rudely shocked by what they find. They still continue to be



Tirtha Amar Gram
Dr. Mizanur Rahman
Karim Book Corporation

exploited through the enrichment of townspeople. He considers that, apart from the socio-economic implications, it is hugely callous from a human standpoint.

It beggars belief that the middle class people of our society, who otherwise have had a bright track record in the political arena, have failed to keep the nation on the rails. The author reasons that the 'subordinated psyche' we inherited from the historic past is mainly to blame for this debacle. It will be quite a while before we can get rid of it, he feels.

His concern for the younger generation is quite palpable. He shudders to think that many of them would trade life even for some bucks. In such a scenario, what kind of future can the country look forward to? He holds our leadership responsible for giving short shift to this much disquieting aspect in the nation's life.

The author's reference to the Kuttis, a Dhakaite community known for its typical sense of humour and repartee that was once an inseparable part of Dhaka culture, is significant. The Kuttis evoke memories of a now lost heritage. They are a vanishing breed, almost forgotten. Theirs is a story of how a minority culture is overwhelmed by a more powerful one. Or should we say it's a cultural compulsion?

Of all the pieces, *Bibi* touches a reader most for its sheer celebration of humanity par excellence, one that overcomes social barriers, and remains unyielding to the cruel passage of time. In the manner of a seasoned writer, Rahman lights up the long-dusted earthy fairy tale of adolescent love in crisp and telling strokes. Given its thematic dimension, the piece holds the promise of a full-blown literary venture of a classic variety.

The portrayals of male violence and pettiness of village life and the sexually predatory nature of well-off people are quite revealing.

Moving through the labyrinth of old Dhaka, a sad mood descends on the writer when he finds that his once favourite restaurant, Beauty Boarding, is no longer there and the neighbourhood has changed almost beyond recognition since he left these shores decades ago. It

conjoins my memories with those of the writer, the hours that we often used to spend together along with Sadek Khan, columnist; AZM Obaidullah Khan, poet and bureaucrat; Nazrul Islam, ex-foreign secretary and Harunar Rashid, ex-Chief, BSFIC, at a restaurant called Moti Bhai in Luxmibazar which too is now gone. But the changes are obviously the price we pay to suit our ambitions in urban renewal.

If one has to stretch one's mind, the worrying issues the writer raises point-evidently define our time. They are no less the spillover of the cultures that intrude into our domain from outside. However much we decry it, we might have to endure this special ugliness of our time in the global village.

The author, in his career shuffle, retired as professor at Carlton University, Canada. He identifies himself as a Bangladeshi-Canadian, finds meaning in his adopted home, though he acknowledges the immense personal toll it exacted on his life. A fractured identity in a global diaspora is a tragedy and the scar born of it hardly goes away, or so he believes. It will rather linger in a time warp enveloping his personal drama. It is at this moment of interaction that the reader vicariously feels the author's own pain, his own role in the saga he weaves as an expatriate. He is in two minds if his children, born and brought up in Canada, will ever identify themselves as unloyal Canadians. His heroes are they who would never leave their shores to settle elsewhere.

In personal terms, his haul in life is enviable. He rose to international eminence as co-author of the Basic Hyper

Geometric Series published by Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. The Russian translation of the title won him the country's award for the best book on mathematics for the year 1993. After a success spree in his career that now betrays his mental peace, he confronts a kind of hollowness that so easily pales all his life's harvest. He has arrived at a definitive moment of truth: that ultimate success in life is to be measured only in terms of one's contribution to society and not being an achiever only. In the present razzmatazz of life, when consumerism has its irresistible sway, these philosophical reflections ring a call on behalf of society and are deservedly a candidate for a bigger audience.

The book launches out with a rainbow of real life pieces and melodramatic tearjerkers that are essentially a portrayal of life in its varied dimensions. The pieces, seemingly isolated from each other, have a commonality in as much as they form part of a human scenario. A note of pessimism, is, however, quite discernible in many of the pieces.

When a book is so well-endowed with scholastic integrity, one feels, it could afford to brighten its narrative with some informed speculation.

The disarming candour that graces the pieces is indeed the hallmark of Rahman's writing. He luxuriates in details worthy of an artist. His prose is precise and well-crafted. They are a gripping read with a lot of depth and many layers for the reader to peel off. A startlingly good debut.

Syed Badrul Haque, a contributor to the Daily Star, is former PRO to the President of Bangladesh.

A tale that no one might remember

Jackie Kabir bumps into flat, undeveloped characters

WHAT started out as a short story titled *Sundowners* in The New Yorker in 2006 later developed into the novel *Alentejo Blue*. It is Monica Ali's second novel. Her much acclaimed first work *Brick Lane* was about a Bangladeshi village girl named Nazneen, who moved to London after her marriage. The novel of 400 pages revolves around her life along with a parallel story of her sister Hasina, who lives a perilous life on meagre earnings.

A movie was made based on Ali's book and created a lot of commotion among the Sylheti community, which makes up nearly 90% of the UK's Bangladeshi population. The film makers were forced out of the Brick Lane area after a public declaration that the book would be burnt on the streets like that of Salman Rushdie, another controversial British born Indian writer. The movie was then filmed elsewhere and the well-known feminist writer Germaine Greer noted in her article in The Guardian, "It hurts to be misrepresented, but there is no representation without misrepresentation."

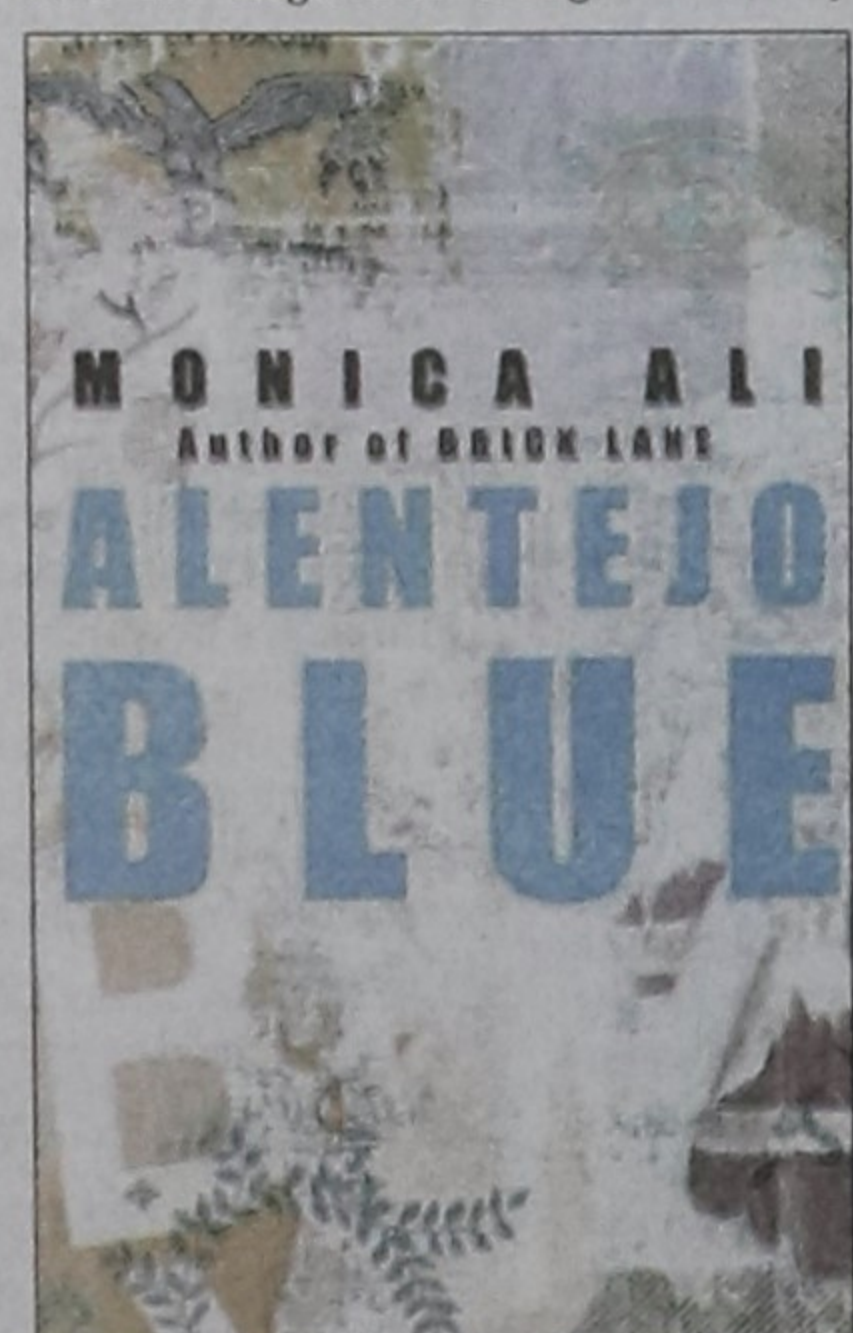
Monica Ali was supported by writer Salman Rushdie, who became a target of wrath after publishing the book *Satanic Verses*. A fatwa was declared by Iranian spiritual leader Ayatullah Khomeini, who ordered that the writer be killed.

This second Ali novel is set in a very different environment, away from Bangladesh or even the United Kingdom. There is no central character in the novel. Rather a number of protagonists appear in the tale from time to time. One of the protagonists is an English writer, Harry Stanton, in a rural landscape in the west of Portugal. He gets entangled in the lives of the Potts, a family living in a farmhouse. "Alentejo." The name of this southern province of Portugal is stressed on the third syllable. A-len-TAY-jo- and the 'j' is similar to the French 'j' in 'Jolie.' This is how Monica Ali introduces her second novel to her readers.

The work is a collection of loosely-woven stories narrated by many different voices. The narration also goes back and forth through the past and present. A reader has to pay a lot of attention to keep track of the different episodes. There are far too many characters which do not develop even as the novel concludes. It is like listening to a traveller who has journeyed along southern Portugal, getting glimpses of different villages or communities as he passes by. The book starts with Joao finding his life-long best friend and lover's body hanging from a tree. Suicides among the Portuguese males have been on the rise lately.

The book is living proof of the plight of

western Europe's poorest region coupled with the stagnation brought about by



Alentejo Blue
Monica Ali
Doubleday

forty years of rule by the dictator Antonio Salazar. The writer who tries to befriend the family gets physically involved with both the mother and the daughter. The portrayal of an ancient city like Evora is drawn with extreme dexterity. Foreigners are also abundant in Alentejo Blue. The couple Huw and Sophie come to visit the southern province before their wedding as they want to ease out the pressure of their wedding. There are other characters like Teresa, who dreams of leaving Portugal for England and making it big there.

A lot of comparisons with England are also made in the book; glimpses of the cultural differences are there, like no birthdays are celebrated with friends. Parties almost always involve immediate and extended family members. One of the plots takes place in Mamarossa, a village where which retains its traditional way of life and which is threatened by a big businessman named Marco Alfonso Rodrigues, who has come to invest in big hotels. People like Vasco, the local pub owner, find his presence very threatening. The writer may have wanted to show the consequences of the exploitation of unspoilt rural landscapes. A murmur spreads through Mamarossa as the villagers feel that it may be prey to civilization and Vasco may never have his pigs'

ears and tails salad to be sold.

There is another couple, Eileen and her husband, the latter like a fact freak who takes all opportunities to belittle his wife. They have a son whose homosexuality is not discussed by his father and thus not paid any attention to. The couple Huw and Sophie are really bird watchers. Sophie is more like a neurotic who has nervous fits every now and then. Numerous characters like Telma Ervanaria, Antonio and the taxi driver Silvio make the book a bit ill-suited for reading at leisure everyday. It is a work that should rather be read at one go so that one doesn't forget who is related to whom and what they were doing prior to the present situation.

The narrative style also has to be kept in mind as a reader goes through the book. Otherwise it may so happen that one will get confused as to who the narrators are.

Brick Lane remains Monica Ali's much acclaimed book which has already been made into a film. *Alentejo Blue* may not even be remembered or have the kind of impact that *Brick Lane* had.

Jackie Kabir teaches English language; she can be contacted at jackie.kabir@gmail.com.

In thrall to an agent of change

Jerald Posman spots devotion in a writer

RASHIDUL Bari is on a journey. It is a journey with many twists and turns and the destination is not clear from the onset.

It is a journey of a person with a strong sense of his national identities and yet it is a journey of a citizen of the world. It has taken him from his native Bangladesh and away from his family to study in the United States. It has removed him from the safety and security of his native language of Bengali, in which he is extremely articulate, to a new language -- English -- where he must grapple with expressing his imagination through different words and cultural nuances. Lastly, he is moving from being an accomplished journalist and author, in only his 20s, to new careers and professional opportunities.

There is a guide for Bari in this journey. It is the man whom he calls The Saint --- Muhammad Yunus. Through Yunus' personal and professional life, Bari sees a path to follow. Yunus left Bangladesh to study in the United States, developed a universal message of possibilities that transcended local languages and, most importantly, developed creative solutions, which are constantly being re-imagined, to seemingly intractable problems.

Bari is currently a student at York College, a baccalaureate-granting institution of the City University of New York where I am the Chief Operating Officer/Vice President for Administration. I have known and worked with Bari for the past two years.

I was approached initially by Bari, who was representing a group of individuals with a Bangladeshi background, to arrange for the use of the college's theatre to host a speaking engagement by Professor Yunus, the originator of the worldwide microfinance movement. In these first discussions, Bari and I discovered a commonality of interest in world affairs, the importance of global interchange and a passion for the work of Dr. Yunus and the organization that he formed, Grameen Bank.

I had lived and worked overseas in and with developing countries; and am on the Board of Trustees of Project Enterprise, a New York-based non-profit organisation modelled on the objectives and lending practices of Grameen Bank. At the first meeting with Bari, I discovered that he had written a biography of Dr. Yunus in Bengali and was a prolific author at a very young age on a range of subjects.

As a result of our encounter, Bari and I decided to work on a project to develop a scholarship fund for students from Grameen families in Bangladesh to attend York College. In addition, we also worked on a joint summer internship exchange programme where students from York College would work with Grameen Bank and Bangladeshi students would come to the US and be affiliated with a Grameen-oriented institution.

The key to the resources, viability

and the success of the programme was to obtain not only the endorsement of Dr. Yunus but also to have him make a major appearance at York College. This became all the more important, and somewhat more difficult, when Dr. Yunus was awarded the Noble Peace Prize in December 2006.

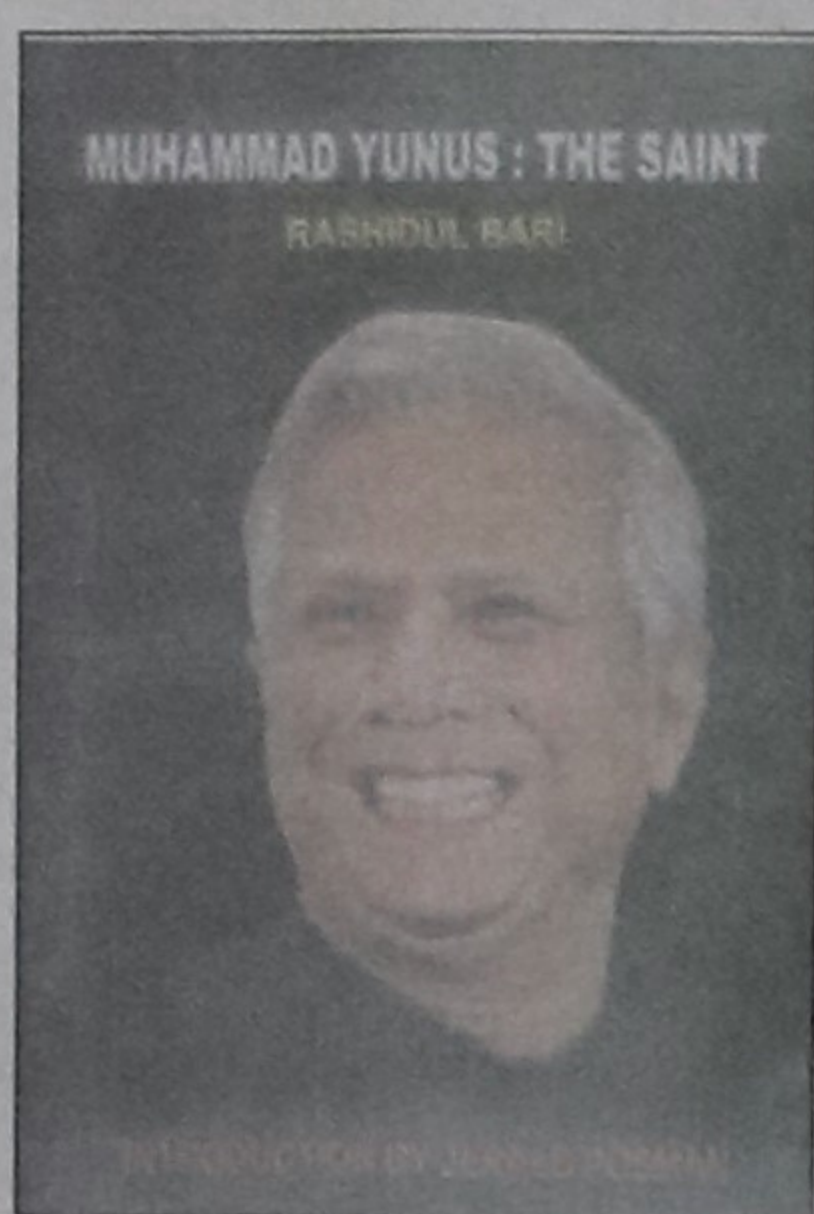
Bari has become a passionate advocate for this programme and a critical connector among all the parties in Bangladesh and the US who are, and should be, involved. He has introduced me to potential supporters and advocates of the program and arranged for a crucial meeting and follow-up with Dr. Yunus' closest advisor and assistant, Muhammad Jahangir. Bari assisted in brokering a scholarship and internship program that met the needs of Dr. Yunus and Grameen Bank, on the one hand, and York College, on the other.

The culmination of all these efforts was a meeting conscientiously pursued by Bari between Dr. Yunus and myself in September 2007. That encounter solidified both the concept and support of the programme.

During this entire time, Mr. Bari has demonstrated an exceptional facility in several areas. All of this is evident from this personal memoir of his encounters with Dr. Yunus and dedication to Yunus' principles. Bari strongly believes that the more one is aware and understands both Yunus the individual and Yunus the agent of change, the greater the possibilities exist for transformative change in two areas, namely, the elimination of worldwide poverty and the empowerment of women.

Bari is passionate about continuing his journey. This book is but one milepost on his travels.

Jerald Posman is Vice President, City University of New York.



Muhammad Yunus: The Saint
Rashidul Bari
Pearl Publications