

## Rediscovering nature's splendence

Syed Badrul Ahsan delights in a study of birds

EVERYONE should go back to nature every once in a while. For Sourav Mahmud, though, nature is part of the everyday pattern of life. Which is why he moves from one spot in the country to another, to rediscover all those dimensions of nature that have consistently enriched Bangladesh's environment. Mahmud is young. The brutal frankness these days is that you do not expect much of the enterprising from the young, for reasons that have to do with urbanisation, indeed that have to do with the relative ease that has come into the conduct of life through means of technology.

And yet that is not what you can hold against Mahmud. He brings back to us, as it were, all the sights and sounds which once punctuated life in the hamlets and villages of this land. Having spent much of his yet young life in a rural clime, Mahmud remains committed to a preservation of it, through noting the characteristics which have helped create the heritage of our essential Bengali culture. In this work what you therefore run into is something much more consequential than birds, in this instance the shalik that has all so often defined our links with nature. Mahmud goes into a portrayal of legacy through some of the finest manifestations of nature in Bangladesh. *Banglar Ebong Jibanananda-er Shalikera* has a poignancy about it that you cannot miss.

The poignant is in the writer's evocation of Jibanananda's poetry. The poet, historically noted for the sensuousness and romanticism of his verses, remains the fulcrum on which any discussion of nature moves. Sourav Mahmud thus feels free to take his cue from the poet. He goes out in search of the varied species of the shalik bird inhabiting the various regions of the country. There is a richness that he thus brings



**Banglar Ebong Jibanananda-er Shalikera**  
Sourav Mahmud  
Oitijhya

into our contemplations of nature. Note that Mahmud does not deal with the question of nature per se. He brings poetry into the discourse, reminding us that in Jibanananda as also in Tagore, the shalik has been a pivotal presence in poetry. A commingling of poetry and nature is thus achieved. And so it is that the writer proceeds into an exposition of the role the shalik has played not just in poetry but also in the collective life of the multitudes in this country.

Did you know that altogether there are a hundred and forty eight varieties of the shalik bird? Sourav Mahmud informs you that the tiniest of shaliks, just six inches in all, is Kenrick's Starling, or telshalik in Bengali parlance. And the largest is the yellow-faced mynah and the long-tailed mynah. Each is about a foot in length and weighs 225 grams each. Mahmud organises the work in review in chapters which again focus on the many varieties

of the bird. The names come to us in Bengali (along with their scientific terms and English names), which is as much a reminder of the traditions we have grown to adulthood with as it is an exploration of the nature world yet defining Bangladesh's landscape. The bhat shalik always makes it a point to arrive at the end of the rice harvest, when paddy is being dried in the sun. Mahmud takes you through a journey, stopping at a good number of points along the way. He spends a fairly good length of time educating you on the one-legged bhat shalik he spots at Curzon Hall of Dhaka University.

And, to be sure, no discussion on the bird can be complete without reference to the gaang shalik, which is shrewd enough to understand that it must make a home for itself at places where the river swallows the land in that historical happenstance called erosion. As the day pales into twilight, it is the turn of the jhoonti shalik to call out (to the heavens?) in all its charming shrillness. There is too its cousin, the dholatola shalik. The names, with all their imagery and splendence, keep coming. The writer recalls the moment when a photo-journalist captured on his camera lens the scene of eleven go-shalik warming themselves in the winter sun in Rangpur's Darshana region. It is a sight Mahmud has come across quite often on his way to Jahangirnagar University from Dhaka. There are times, he notes, when as many as eighty or ninety of these go-shaliks are spotted together in such locations as paddy fields and chars.

Sourav Mahmud refers to the pati-kathshalik spotted by the visiting bird expert Paul Thompson at Patenga, Chittagong, in 1993. Earlier, these birds were observed on St. Martin's Island in the early 1980s by Dr. Reza

Khan, a well-known nature observer of the country. The writer would have us know that this variety of shalik is generally to be seen in regions with a cold climate, notably Europe and west Asia. The pati-kathshalik is a most colourful bird, with different colours giving it an appearance like no other. And then there are those shalik that are not to be seen on a regular basis. Think here of the chitipakh telshalik. The records show that the bird was seen in Sylhet in the nineteenth century. In more recent times, this variety of shalik was observed in Dhaka in 1974 and then again in Sylhet in 2005.

The work takes you away from the world of mundane realities and into a poetic landscape where nature's wonders are predominant. Mahmud takes you back to Jibanananda's poetry, the better to instil the point in you that the shalik and by extension the natural world have been integral units of the Bengali literary consciousness.

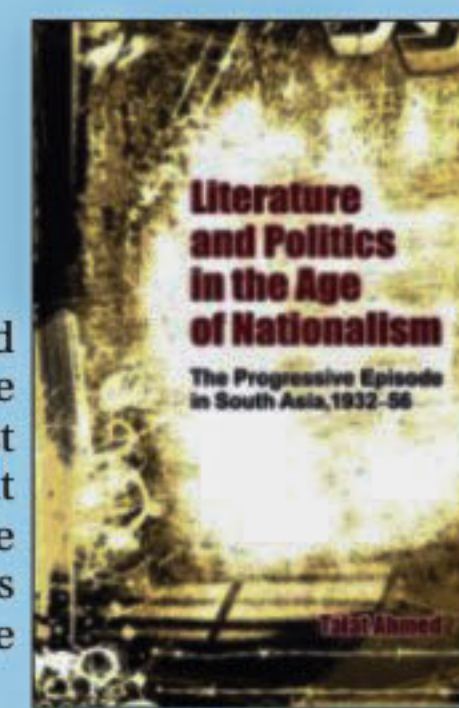
*Banglar Ebong Jibanananda-er Shalikera* is a necessary lesson in how not to let modernity push the natural environment to the fringes. It is, additionally, a call for a return to some of the basics, indeed values, which have shaped sensibilities in our part of the world. Long ago, in our adolescence, we climbed trees in the rustic clime to observe birds' eggs in their well-ordered nests. Having observed, and felt, the eggs, we replaced them in the nests. Sourav Mahmud has passed through similar experience.

The generations thus connect. And all of us must perform connect with the world of birds, for birds remain a potent and profound symbol of Creation.

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## AT A GLANCE

*Literature and Politics in the Age Of Nationalism: The Progressive Episode in South Asia 1932-56*  
Talat Ahmed  
Routledge



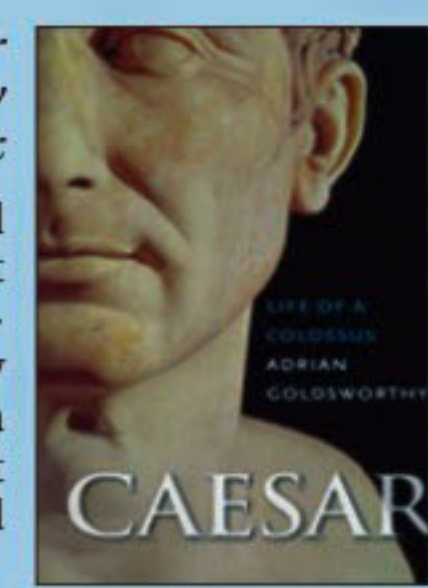
Clearly it is a vast subject Talat Ahmed deals with here. And the period he covers happens to be one of the most formative in the history of India as it was before as well as after Partition. He delves into how literature and politics shaped the nationalistic spirit in the run-up to vivisection and after.

*Red Star Over China*  
Edgar Snow  
Grove Press, New York



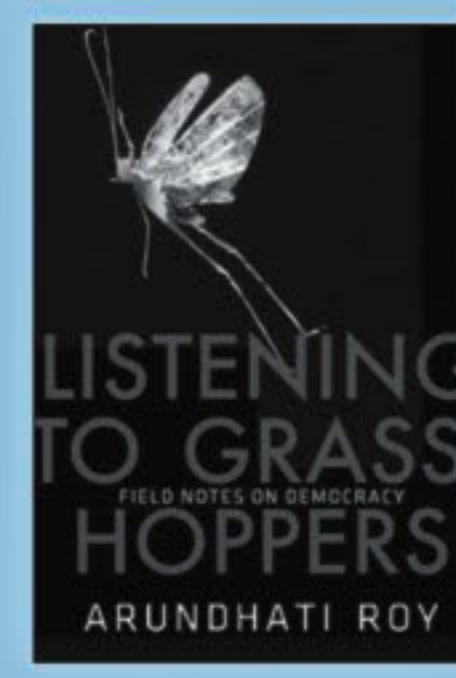
This is a famous old book, the chances being that it is not to be found easily. Written in 1937, it is a first hand account of Snow's interaction with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai years before the communist revolution in China. Reading it makes you understand why that revolution was inevitable.

*Caesar*  
Adrian Goldsworthy  
Phoenix



There is Shakespeare, always, to remind us of the tragedy of Julius Caesar. But here at last is a comprehensive biography of a man the ancient Romans knew as a dictator but who, in reality, was a consummate politician, a brilliant general and, overall, a ruler who cared for his people. It is a gripping read.

*Listening to Grasshoppers*  
Field Notes on Democracy  
Arundhati Roy  
Hamish Hamilton



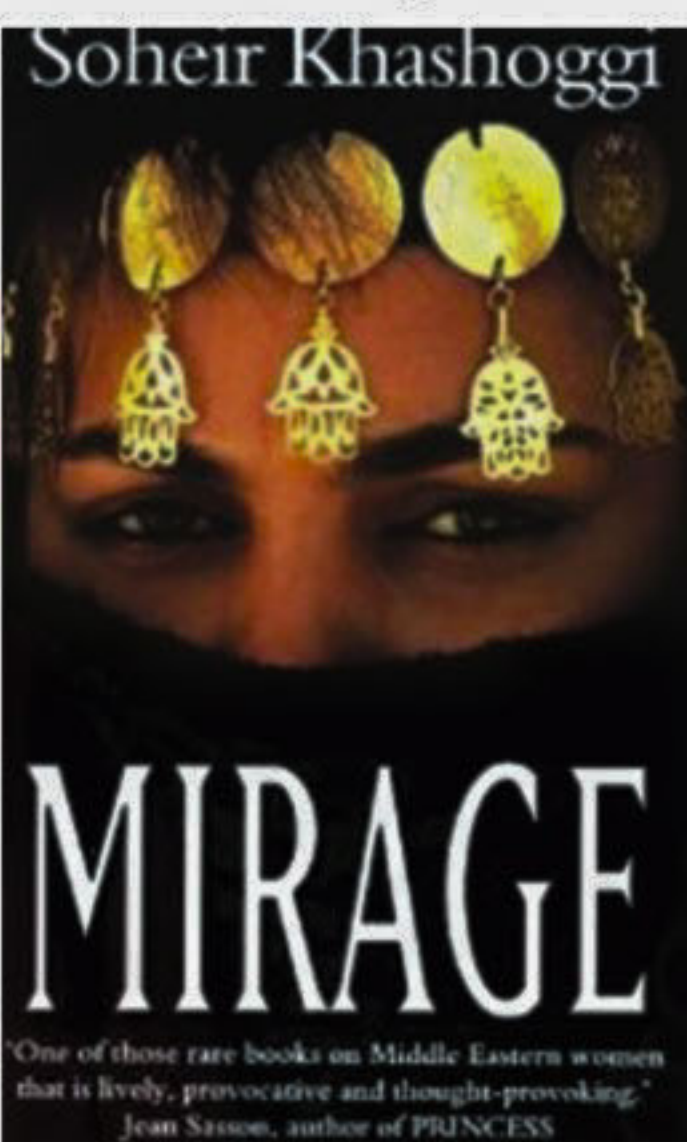
Arundhati Roy does it again. In this collection of essays on various aspects of Indian and global politics, she mines no words in her forensic analysis of conditions. It is always a pleasure coming by her convictions. And it is doubly so because of the position she has adopted as spokesperson for the underdog.

## A tortuous struggle in defence of dignity

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is moved by an Arab woman's tale

ONE hears the story of an enchanting land comprising people who are a world unto themselves in terms of ways of living their lives, their demeanour, emotional outbursts, moral standards set by themselves, however wide the deviations might be from the edicts of religion entailing double standards and many others. A reader keeps on peeling off layer after layer of darkness only to discover a nadir of darkness sown in their character as reflected particularly in their private lives unknown to the world outside. One common factor that binds all such people in all such families is that they are all 'obscenely rich'; their men are free to do as they like while women as lesser beings are ruled by them and are the arbiters of their fate. There is dissatisfaction, resentment, fear and sorrow among the womenfolk but all in a hush-hush way. Then the reader is startled coming face to face with a rebel, a belligerent young woman who is determined to fight tooth and nail for her freedom as a human being, knowing full well the price she will have to pay for it. In other words, Amira, the protagonist, later known as Jenna Sorrel in America, risks her life along with her baby son to win freedom.

She comes of an exceptionally affluent family in Al-Remal, which means 'The Sand' a name, although fictitious, yet gives hints to the



**Mirage**  
Soheir Khashoggi  
Bantam Books

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The reasons are not difficult to guess, particularly in view of the fact that Soheir Khashoggi, the author, spells out the names of many other countries that come within the purview of Islamic culture and tradition. She also takes the names of the people who are 'men of substance', of course, in their own

estimation; but in a very circumspect way she refrains from taking the name of only one country. Such cautiousness is rightly understood by a sensible reader.

Amira spends a childhood of fairytales, grows up under the tutelage of a Dutch governess who is her window to the world and who herself is heartbroken in her personal life; witnesses odds, discriminations, maltreatment of her mother at the hands of her overbearing, autocratic father and always suffers from a sense of insecurity for the life awaiting her. Meanwhile, she is haunted by the fate of Laila, who was her idol and was stoned to death for bearing the child of Malik, Amira's brother, outside wedlock. Her emotional syndrome gets acute soon after marriage and drives her to break away from the cruelty, raw sensuality and an all-out irrational savagery of her husband Ali, who is a prince of the kingdom of Al-Remal. She becomes a living witness to a conglomeration of vices that Ali manifests in his daily life both at home and outside that were so long absolutely inconceivable to Amira. Eventually, with the assistance of Dr. Philippe Rochon, a French family physician whom Amira loves, she ventures to escape from Al-Remal to America through an arduous journey by plane, by road and last of all by sea. She gets herself highly educated there and finds herself as a practising psychologist, a writer of best selling

books championing the causes of women. Nevertheless, for her a peaceful life centering on her son Karim turns out to be a mirage, an illusion.

Jenna Sorrel is distraught and devastated at hearing the news of her adolescent son Karim's going back to Al-Remal, having discovered that he is a prince of that kingdom and that his mother had lied to him all along about the identity of his father. A great fighter that Jenna Sorrel is, in this case, she feels defeated. A mother's determination is shaken and her sacrifice for so long reduced to rubble. At this stage the reader encounters the word 'mirage' in its full impact although at the beginning of the prologue there appears two quotations using the word 'mirage', revolving around life, that apparently are in contradiction to each other in their connotations. The first one has longed for 'sweet mirage' as opposed to ".....bitter, barren truth"; the second one is a warning to guard life in such a way that it does not get transformed into a mirage that is so fragile. There is much food for thought right here and also in many other places in this book on a powerful drama of life. Last of all, having gone through trials and tribulations of various kinds and of various degrees, Amira emerges triumphant and perceives that she is ready after all this time to be with Brad Pierce, who has loved her passionately and persistently since his loving wife's death and whom Amira has turned down on

more than one occasion earlier. She feels the need of his vibrant presence in her life that so far has been mired in pain and panic.

Some other writers as well have been drawn to the apparently enchanting but repressive and tragic tales of women in veils in the affluent segments of societies in the Middle East. Nevertheless Khashoggi's *Mirage*, stands out as more reliable and therefore an authentic portrayal of Middle Eastern women's lives in their environs because of the fact that she herself hails from the region, thus validating the stories taken from the primary source. However, she deals with the sequence of events in a rather tortuous way, bringing forth a big crowd of characters with long deliberations that eventually brings about a kind of reading fatigue. Oftentimes a reader does not see the woods because of the trees. Nevertheless, this distinctive style of writing of Khashoggi does not fail readers: it makes them feel the poignancy contained therein. A moving story that demonstrates a woman's courage to not only withstand travails but also fight for victory in times of dire adversity. Soheir Khashoggi creates a great hero in the character of Amira. And in that lies her achievement.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, critic and music enthusiast, is Principal, Radiant International School.

## 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", comments 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, Pittsburg, 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, "if 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 religion-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 rewards of learning. "Useful intelligence" is preferred over the "pure intellectual", and the mass media



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

follows the routine. Claussen elaborates on this point: "...while the mass media may sometimes portray the 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 pursuing if it leads to material benefit. It all fits in perfectly with the American no-nonsense, consumerist, materialistic, any venture leading to a clear and productive end result psyche. Intellectualism will have to conform to that scheme.

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 longtime 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."

(The review is a reprint)

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## Of reputations proper and misplaced

Anisur Rahman finds a polemical work pretty appealing

SWEDISH linguist Sven Ohman (1936-2008) knew differently, and it would be even harder to imagine why he believed that Noam Chomsky (b. 1928--) has never been a linguist. It is something hard to believe for anyone who is familiar with the name of Chomsky and the reputation it carries. Formerly an Uppsala University professor of linguistics, Sven Ohman in his book, *The Essence of Language: A Philosophical Problem*, has successfully established his observations and findings denying Chomsky's position as a linguist.

The book is a concise presentation of some linguistic questions as well as answers to those questions, writers' own opinions, reflections and dismissal of definitions of linguistics that have been in vogue to date. All these provide something of a personal account which the writer has featured in the book in a convincing way for readers inside and outside the ramparts of the linguistic and philosophical world. This slim volume includes a whole range of thoughts --- basic ideas of traditional grammar phonetics, phonology, the concept word, the use of the human voice in spoken language and much more. Obviously, they are aimed at shattering the 'myth' of Chomsky's standing as a linguist despite the fact that some of Chomsky's books are an integral part of syllabi on linguistics at universities in various countries. Sven Ohman, a scholar and academic, taught linguistics at different universities and studied and conducted research on the same at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and elsewhere. The more interesting, rather ironic, part of the story is he even enjoyed the lectures on linguistics by Chomsky at MIT. The book under review is a result of detailed scholarly scrutiny, focusing as it does on the unsettled linguistic debate and anatomy of linguistics centreing on Chomsky.

Ohman frankly notes that he took Chomsky's teachings to his heart, and had several friendly discussions with him in connection with his classes. It is clear that he feels there was a relation of friendship between them. And yet, perhaps his being six years younger and his deep respect for the man Chomsky were obstacles in the way of a true, fulfilling intellectual friendship. Sven Ohman's findings aim at demonstrating that Chomsky's language theories cannot replace traditional linguistics by appealing to mathematical constructions. For that approach does not have much to contribute to our general understanding and use of actual languages.

Ohman belongs among those who feel that Chomsky's ambitions completely undermine his grand project regarding linguistics. However great a linguist Chomsky may be projected in the media to be, Sven Ohman continues to maintain that linguistics is a study of the actual use of what everyone knows as language. The book is a clear attempt at showing that Chomsky is not a linguist at all but an intellectual soldier of fortune. Ohman makes a note of MIT linguistics being just a media hoax!

The suspicion is that Noam Chomsky has never received any formal training in any academic discipline and has not submitted a doctoral thesis for examination in any subject. Ohman tries to establish this suspicion as fact by simply pointing out Chomsky's saying: 'we try to show...'. The writer thus suggests that Chomsky confirms the suspicion that for him linguistics is, of course, a branch of applied mathematics, in which he makes assumptions from which he mathematically derives conclusions which he may feel rhyme more or less well with what he takes to be linguistic facts.

In connection with Chomsky's visit to Sweden in 2002, Sven Ohman wrote a long article for Svenska Dagbladet, a morning newspaper in Sweden, to explain that Chomsky is not a scientist at all, but a political ideologue who started out in the 1950s by seizing power over American linguistics through overthrowing the somewhat provincial behaviorism that had reigned supreme in indigenous American psychology since the early 20th century and to which American linguistics the Bloomfield school lent its allegiance.

Ohman makes some interesting observations over a Nobel Prize vis-a-vis Chomsky. He notes that that there is of course the prize in literature but it is only awarded to poets and writers of fiction. Chomsky's writings do not qualify for this distinction.

There is finally the Nobel Peace Prize, but Sven finds it hard to believe that the committee will consider Chomsky eligible on political grounds. Well, ... who knows? If Henry Kissinger and Barack Obama could get it, why not Chomsky as well?

Anisur Rahman, a journalist, is at present doing research in Sweden.