

The girl on a mission

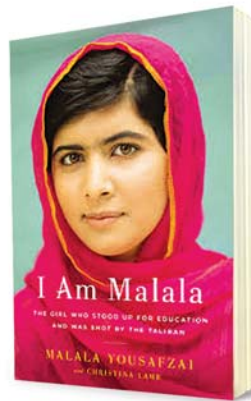
How can one read this marvellous book and remain unmoved? It is a tale of grit, courage, and determination told with good humour. A 14-year-old girl, passionate about education being every child's right, is shot in the head and nearly killed but miraculously recovers. She makes it to the world's highest forum, the United Nations, where she gets a standing ovation, and makes it her life's mission to fight the forces of demented religiosity.

[By Pervez Hoodbhoy]

One senses the deft hand of British journalist Christina Lamb behind the narrative of the book but this shadow-writing impacts only the form, not the substance of a precocious and courageous child's autobiography. Malala's childlike radiance shines through the book: the joy of being at school; her back and forth with her school friend Moniba; the fear that the Taliban would close down her school; the feeling of dread at night on hearing distant explosions, and the horror at the sight of headless corpses strewn around Mingora's Khooni Chowk (Bloody Square).

After the army operation against the Taliban in 2009, over a million people fled Swat, including Malala's family. Ziauddin Yousafzai, her father, was a marked man for owning and operating a school — the Taliban had blown up hundreds of schools in the area and executed teachers. Believing that only good politics could bring peace to Swat and Pakistan, Malala wanted to become a political leader. Today, after being nearly killed, she wants to be prime minister someday. Why not?

I Am Malala is not without flaws. For instance, the young author sometimes chooses to give opinions on matters about which she has no direct knowledge. One that particularly



stands out is her pronouncement of Benazir Bhutto as a paragon of parsimony, based upon her wearing cheap glass bangles at her wedding. Malala, perhaps, has never heard of Bhutto's Surrey Palace and her Swiss bank accounts.

Sadly, this remarkable book will be little read in Pakistan, as few books are. Reading and thinking are fast disappearing habits. For many of her compatriots, Malala is a dupe; the Nobel Peace Prize proposed for her being part of a grand conspiracy against Pakistan and Islam. There were even widespread doubts, propagated by some local television talk show hosts, whether she was actually shot, considering that she still

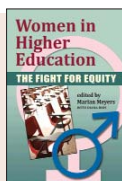
survives. It mattered little to such sceptics that, shortly after the event, a joint statement of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Harkat-e-Islami Uzbekistan took credit for the attempted killing. Their joint spokesperson said Malala would not be allowed to escape the second time around, and gave a set of detailed arguments on why she must be killed.

Unfortunately, such inconvenient truths matter little and many young university students I have spoken to consider Malala Yousafzai to be Malala 'Dramazai', an 'Illuminati Psy Op', a willing tool of imperialism, a pawn in the hands of such men as Richard Holbrooke, Gordon Brown, and Ban Ki-moon. Some claimed that she and her ilk are out to badmouth Pakistan and make it appear unreasonably dangerous. They buy into the paranoid notion that Pakistan's enemies are paving the way towards destabilising the country, followed by an invasion to snatch our precious nukes.

The world celebrates a girl who nearly lost her life fighting for the finest cause that there could be. Yet, Pakistan's bazaars and public places are filled with posters of a very different heroine — Aafia Siddiqui, the cause célèbre for the al-Qaeda and the Taliban. For a large number of Pakistanis, Siddiqui is persecuted because she stood up to the Americans, whereas Malala sits in their lap, thus deserving abuse, denigration and, perhaps, another bullet. Malala's enemies are equally likely to be Islamists or America-obsessed leftists and post-modernists. These days, it is so hard to tell them apart. ■

Women in Higher Education: The Fight for Equity edited by Marian Meyers with Diana Rios, 2011

This book brings to light discrimination faced by women graduate students and faculty in their work lives by drawing upon theory, research and personal narratives.



Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid, 2000

Rashid offers an in-depth account of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in this New York Times' best-seller.



The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank, 1947

A beloved classic, the diary of Anne Frank communicates the life of an adolescent girl in hiding, during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

