

EDUCATION

CLASS DIVIDE

In the West, Malala's Nobel Prize is celebrated. In Pakistan, it is widely criticised or ignored. But what really matters, says **OMAR WARAIKH**, is the reason she won it in the first place

Tucked away in a corner of a modest neighbourhood in the Pakistani capital is the government-run Islamabad Model School for Girls. In between rows of small redbrick houses where government employees live, it is distinguished only by a peeling blue sign that arcs over its gates.

When Malala Yousafzai was first nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize last year, girls at the school had followed the lead-up to the announcement anxiously. Like Malala, many of them are ambitious teenage girls who want to go on to lengthy careers as doctors, engineers and psychologists. "We're not going to stop working after we get married like some women do," Sharmeen Farooq, 14, stressed.

They keenly followed Malala's progress. "When we saw Malala, we were very happy," Wajiha Batool told me. "She's a source of pride for us." Her admiration began with Malala's defiance of the Taliban. "She was so brave," said Wajiha, who is just two years younger than Malala. "She became a wall in front of terrorism."

For them, Malala's plight was not an isolated incident. "There are thousands like her," Azka Yamin, who is also 14, told me. One of Azka's friends, from a tribal area near the Afghan border was being denied the chance of an education by her family. "When I heard her brother say, 'what are you going to do with education?' I wanted to slap him!"

When Malala became the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize last week, however, much of the attention fastened on to her long-standing critics in Pakistan. Notoriously, a journalist falsely claiming to be the editor of a



national newspaper told the BBC that Malala was "a normal, useless girl".

There was no dearth of voices wildly alleging that Malala had never been shot, despite the Taliban's eager claims of responsibility and the fact that Pakistan's army recently arrested her attackers. Others said that there were worthier recipients, like drone victims, or the celebrated Pakistani humanitarian, Abdul Sattar Edhi.

Pakistanis have grown so accustomed to hearing bad news that they have trouble reconciling themselves to a positive development. Afiya Shehribano Zia, the noted scholar and activist, wrote, "If this news is about or made by a woman, you can bet there's going to be a backlash."

No Pakistani woman who has achieved global prominence has been spared such attacks, whether it was the Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the human-rights campaigner Asma Jahangir, or Oscar-winning film-maker Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy. The misogyny often mingles with a virulent form of religiously inspired nationalism.

With levels of anti-Americanism cresting high, those embraced by the West are spurned. The opposite applies, too. When Aafia Siddiqui, the scientist accused of terrorist links, was arrested and transported to the US, many Pakistanis proudly declared her a "daughter of the nation".

Not all Pakistanis think this way, of course. A Pew poll earlier this year found that only a fifth of the country has an unfavourable view of Malala. Half the population was indifferent, while 30 per cent supported her. The most vocal critics are among the urban middle classes, who have never had a problem going to school or sending their children there.

What has been obscured, almost to vanishing point, is the fact that most Pakistani children don't enjoy such opportunities. Education is a right enshrined in Pakistan's constitution, but even the most basic form of schooling has, for decades, been denied to vast swathes of the population.

The girls at the Islamabad Model School are the lucky ones, studying at one of the largest and best-funded government schools in the country. Elsewhere, there are 25 million Pakistani children currently out of school and 61 per cent of them are girls. Looking at the statistics, Malala was defying remarkable odds even before she survived the Taliban's assassination attempt.

In Malala's home district of Swat, the Taliban's campaign of violence saw many girls' schools torched. But to start with, the government had only built half as many schools for girls as it did for boys. Gender discrimination was built into the local education system. And,



today, just 3 per cent of the district's children make it to high school.

In a different part of the country, where the Taliban have never had a serious presence, the picture is just as bleak. Larkana in Sindh is home to three generations of Oxford-educated members of the Bhutto dynasty. In a quarter of the schools there, there is only a single teacher.

For Pakistan's rulers, military and civilian alike, education has never been a priority. Local politicians have often used schools as sources of patronage, appointing loyal supporters to jobs for which they are unsuited. A common problem at government schools is that it is the teachers who play truant. Education is just one

part of the story. Malala shared her Nobel with Kailash Satyarthi, a child-rights campaigner from India. For two countries that have long insisted on their separateness, India and Pakistan have a similarly privileged nuclear arms race over the future of their children.

Both countries rival each other when it comes to malnutrition, infant mortality, child slavery, child labour, and child trafficking. On either side of the border, for example, more than 40 per cent of all children are underweight.

By 2050, Pakistan is set to become the world's fourth most populous country. An overwhelmingly young population can be a boon, if today's children are educated and

Class act: Malala Yousafzai (far left) was defying odds by going to a school in the Swat district (above), where the Pakistani government had only built half as many institutions for girls as it did for boys, and the Taliban torched those that did exist to deter attendance AP; AFP

can find jobs. If they aren't, a series of social disasters will ensue.

Malala's critics are at least honest about their positions. They don't pretend to like her or value her cause. The government and the main opposition parties, however, hastened to laud Malala as "the pride for Pakistan", the words emblazoned across large newspaper ads.

The Nobel represents an achievement for Malala, the girls of Islamabad Model School and the millions of children who brave daunting odds to go to school each day in Pakistan. But it is also a damning indictment of the many leaders who have repeatedly failed to protect and educate them. ●

On top of the world: Cate Blanchett and Richard Flanagan
EPA/DAVID SANDISON



CULTURE

WIZARDS OF OZ

If there was still a myth that Australians lacked culture, then the latest Man Booker win for Richard Flanagan has put paid to that. And about time, too, says **GILLIAN ORR**

"What's the difference between Australia and yoghurt?" goes a much-loved joke among Brits. "After 200 years, Australia still doesn't have any culture."

Zing! Of course, anyone who has actually been to the land of Oz would know that that's not true. The daughter of an Australian, I lived there for a little while, and all anybody seemed to do was put on a comedy event/art show/dreaded poetry night. Yet while Australians are celebrated for their sporting achievements, they fail to be taken seriously culturally on the world stage. But is that finally changing?

Lovers of xenophobic gags were certainly dealt a blow this week when Richard Flanagan won the Man Booker prize for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, the third Aussie to do so. He insisted that it was a "golden time for Australian writing". But even he is the first to admit that it has not always been this way. Appearing on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme the morning after his win, the 53-year-old agreed that Australian culture has been lacking in the past. "Peter Carey is the greatest Australian writer," said Flanagan. "He, like me, grew up in a country that was a colony of the mind, where we didn't have our own culture. Australian publishing really is only about 40 years old. Australian film, Australian television, Australian music, all these things are younger than I am."

Sure enough, a documentary shown on BBC4 this summer looked at influential Australians in the 1960s who felt that they had to head for London to progress in their chosen fields. *Brilliant Creatures: Rebels of Oz* profiled four key arrivals - Clive James, Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries and Robert Hughes - and their search for British "sophistication". They came to "beat us at our own game", as the show's presenter Howard Jacobson (who missed out to Flanagan in this year's Booker race) put it.

But, today, while it might be true that plenty of Australians still come over in a bid for success and fame, the view of Australia being a cultural backwater is simply out of date.

"The Australian literary scene has always had an incredible richness - though I do think that there has been increasing international attention in recent years," says Jemma Birrell, the artistic director of Sydney Writers' Festival. "Prizes shed light on particular writers and consequently Australian writing more generally. Then there are writers such as David Malouf, Tim Winton, Alexis Wright, Helen Garner, Michelle de Kretser and Steve Toltz who have

gained a wide readership throughout the world. But, generally, I do think that there is a long way to go in terms of recognition."

For the author Kathy Lette, it's about time her home country received the respect it deserves. "So many English people see we Antipodeans as a recessive gene; the Irish of the Pacific," she says. "We never seem to boast about our more intellectual pursuits. Did you know, for example, that Australians read more books and attend more cultural events per head of population than any other country in the world?"

A burgeoning literary scene aside, Lette points out that our friends Down Under are excelling at just about everything. Sadly, however, the work sometimes doesn't make it out of the country. "It's a really exciting place now; I think they've really grown up" says Dan Schreiber, a London-based Australian comedian and writer. "There's a TV show called *Danger 5* that is probably the funniest comedy around at the moment. But no one here has heard of it."

And not only does the country boast dozens of award-winning actors, from Cate Blanchett to Geoffrey Rush, but the Australian movie industry is thriving. Yes, Baz Luhrmann might get all the headlines, but Blue-Tongue Films, a collective consisting of directors David Michó (Animal Kingdom) and Justin Kurzel (the upcoming *Macbeth*) is considered by filmmakers to be one of the most exciting around.

Meanwhile, music in Australia goes from strength to strength. The mid-Noughties embarrassment of Jet and Delta Goodrem has made way for some of the most revered acts around the globe. In 2012, artists such as Tame Impala, Courtney Barnett and Jagwar Ma inspired *NME* to call the Australian music scene "easily the most exciting in the world". OK, so they haven't had a mainstream pop star hit the big time since Kylie (although Sia and Iggy Azalea are giving it a go), but in the world of indie they are "killing it". Just don't mention Gotye.

It would seem, however, that the art scene hasn't translated so well abroad. An exhibition of Australian art at the Royal Academy last year, the first major survey of its kind in London for 50 years, was dismissed as a "cascade of diarrhoea" by one unimpressed critic.

But that's not to say that there is no interest in art. Tasmania's MONA gallery, for instance, is a must-visit. And, as Howard Jacobson says in *Brilliant Creatures*, "If you want to know which gallery a famous picture hangs in, just ask an Australian." Fair dinkum. ●