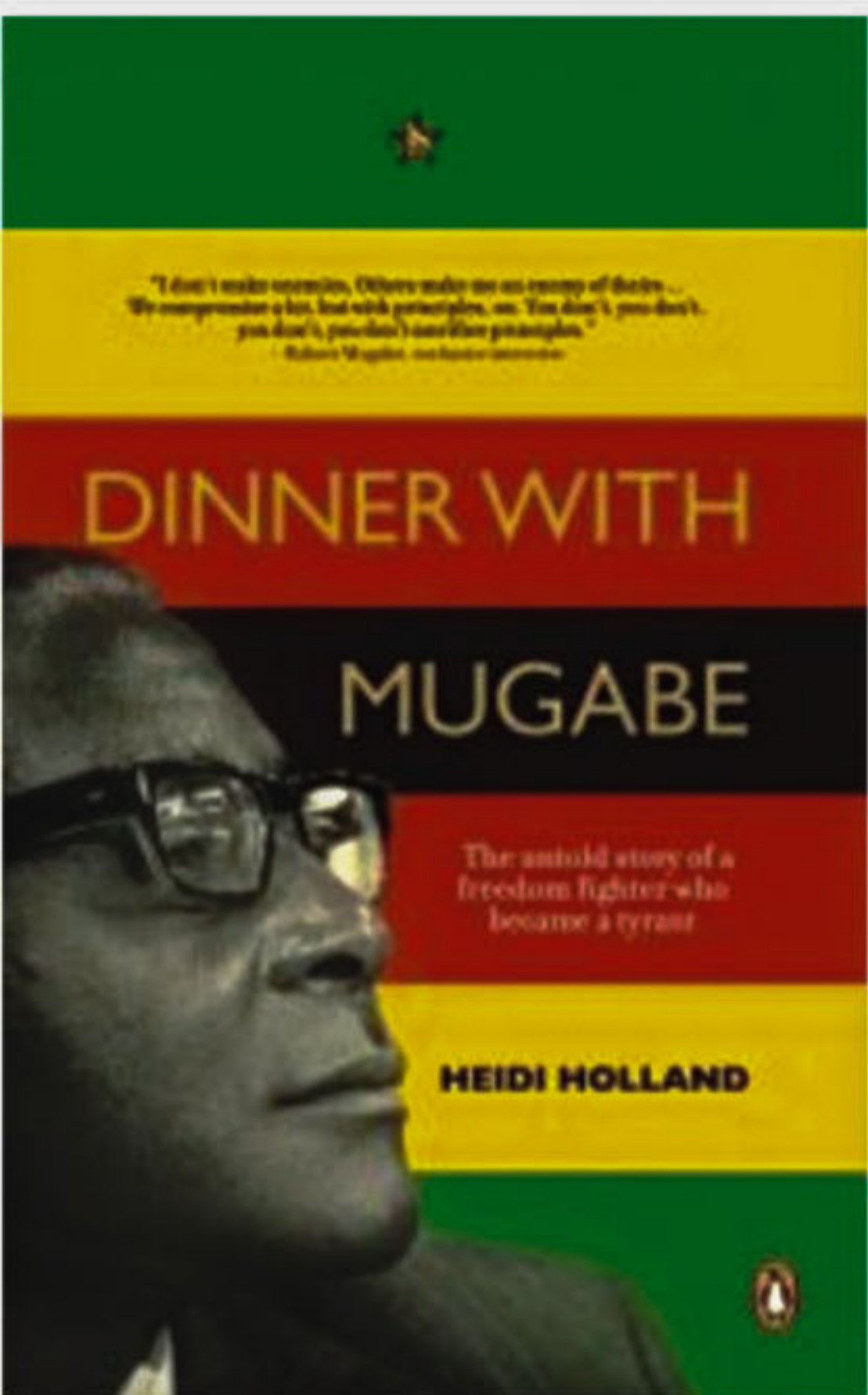


Syed Badrul Ahsan reviews three works on Africa

The star, until the sun came out...

HEIDI Holland subtitles her otherwise revealing work on Robert Mugabe as 'the untold story of a freedom fighter who became a tyrant.' That, if you remember, is how the West has portrayed the president of Zimbabwe for the past many years. To be sure, Mugabe has himself provided his critics with the ammunition to fire away at him. His increasing intolerance of dissent, his refusal to accept what was perceived to be a clear victory not long ago at the presidential election for Morgan Tsvangirai and his condoning of a land grab by his followers (who called themselves freedom fighters) have in a big way tarnished his reputation worldwide but especially in the West. Even so, Holland's assessment of the man who has led Zimbabwe since it achieved freedom in 1980 through the Lancaster House agreement reached the previous year appears to be directed at discovering as many signs of the 'monstrosity' Mugabe has become over the years.

And yet it was not like this or should not have been like this. In 1975, as the author reports, it was Ahrn Palley, the white Rhodesian with sympathies for the black struggle against Ian Smith, who first notified her about the impending arrival of a guest for dinner. The times were out of joint. Holland, a journalist, was not aware of the identity of her visitor. Nevertheless, she set to preparing a meal. Moments later, Palley turned up. The man, the guest who came along with him, was the recently freed Mugabe. It was a clandestine meeting and a quick dinner that Mugabe barely touched. After that it was for Holland to



Dinner With Mugabe  
Heidi Holland  
Penguin Books

drive him to the local railway station, where the future leader of Zimbabwe would catch a train into oblivion, only to emerge triumphant in the future. The memory of that dinner is what comes back, in the form of the title of the book.

There is little question, though, that the work is a meticulous study of Zimbabwe's long-serving president. Judging by the way his career developed from his boyhood and right up to the burgeoning resistance to white minority rule in what used to be known as Rhodesia, politics is certainly not what Mugabe had in mind as a profession. And yet he knew, through a belief instilled in him by his mother Bona, that there was a destiny which waited for him. His father had walked out on the family; his elder brother had died. It thus fell to young Robert, bookish and without friends (he showed little need for companions even at that early stage of his life), to take charge of his family and particularly of his strong-willed and yet vulnerable mother. It was his chore every morning to take the sheep out to graze outside the village. As the sheep made themselves merry on the grass, Mugabe read in the shade of a tree. Reading was a passion that would sustain him throughout his life. At school in Kutama, missionaries like Father O'Hea encouraged his scholarly behaviour. Mugabe read his way to the point where it became necessary for him to choose a career. He opted for teaching, travelled to Ghana and met another teacher named Sally.

Life might well have turned out differently for Mugabe had he not been drawn to Sally's interest in politics. As a young woman enthused by Kwame Nkrumah, she appeared to be drawn to a political career in Ghana. She and Mugabe talked, the conversation marked by clear intellectual overtones. And then they fell in love and married. Robert Mugabe came back home with his Ghanaian bride and, before truly knowing where he was headed, found himself in the political arena. Men like Ndabaningi Sithole and Joshua Nkomo were already there, about to give concrete shape to the anti-Smith resistance. At that particular point, despite getting into the resistance, Mugabe did not much look forward to rising to the top of the political leadership. First Sithole and then Nkomo were looked upon as the leader who would bring majority rule to Rhodesia. All these men and others of their camp suffered under Ian Smith, especially after his announcement of UDI in November 1965. To this day, Mugabe refuses to speak of the torture he was put through in jail. The white warders made him stand on one leg for hours in order to compel him to misbehave. He responded, despite the pain, with extraordinary fortitude. Psychologically he clearly remains traumatized at the memory of the authorities' refusal to permit him to attend the funeral of his child.

But if imprisonment embittered Mugabe, it also changed him from the guerrilla he was into a man willing to forgive his tormentors. Between 1975 and 1980 he waged desperate battles in the bush war, eventually upstaging Nkomo. And by the time the new Conservative government in Britain under Margaret Thatcher decided to steer Rhodesia to black majority rule by bringing the rebels and the white regime to a conference in London, Mugabe was patently looked upon as one of the men who would shape Zimbabwe's future. In the event, as the pre-independence elections in 1980 were to show, his party, the ZANU-PF, became the sole arbiter of the country's destiny. Mugabe ruled well, indeed as a model leader, for the first decade after Zimbabwe's liberation. But that has never obscured the truth of such atrocities as the Gukuruhundi massacres of the early 1980s, when Mugabe presided over the death of thousands of Ndebele tribesmen who had dared to oppose him. As the years went on, questions about his role in the murder of such influential ZANU-PF men as the guerrilla commander Josiah Tongogara have been raised. He has had his share of dissidents, ranging from Edgar Tekere to Jonathan Moyo, the latter falling out with the president after vociferously defending the seizure of white farms in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Robert Mugabe went into an extramarital relationship with his secretary Grace even as his influential wife Sally turned increasingly ill. Having sired children with Grace out of wedlock, he eventually married her once Sally died. Mugabe's love for Sally remains undimmed, though. Something else remains undimmed as well: Zimbabwe's leader has never been able to come to terms with his loss of eminence in Africa following the emergence of South Africa's Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990. It was for Mandela to quip, famously, on Mugabe's behaviour: 'Mugabe was the star, until the sun came out.'

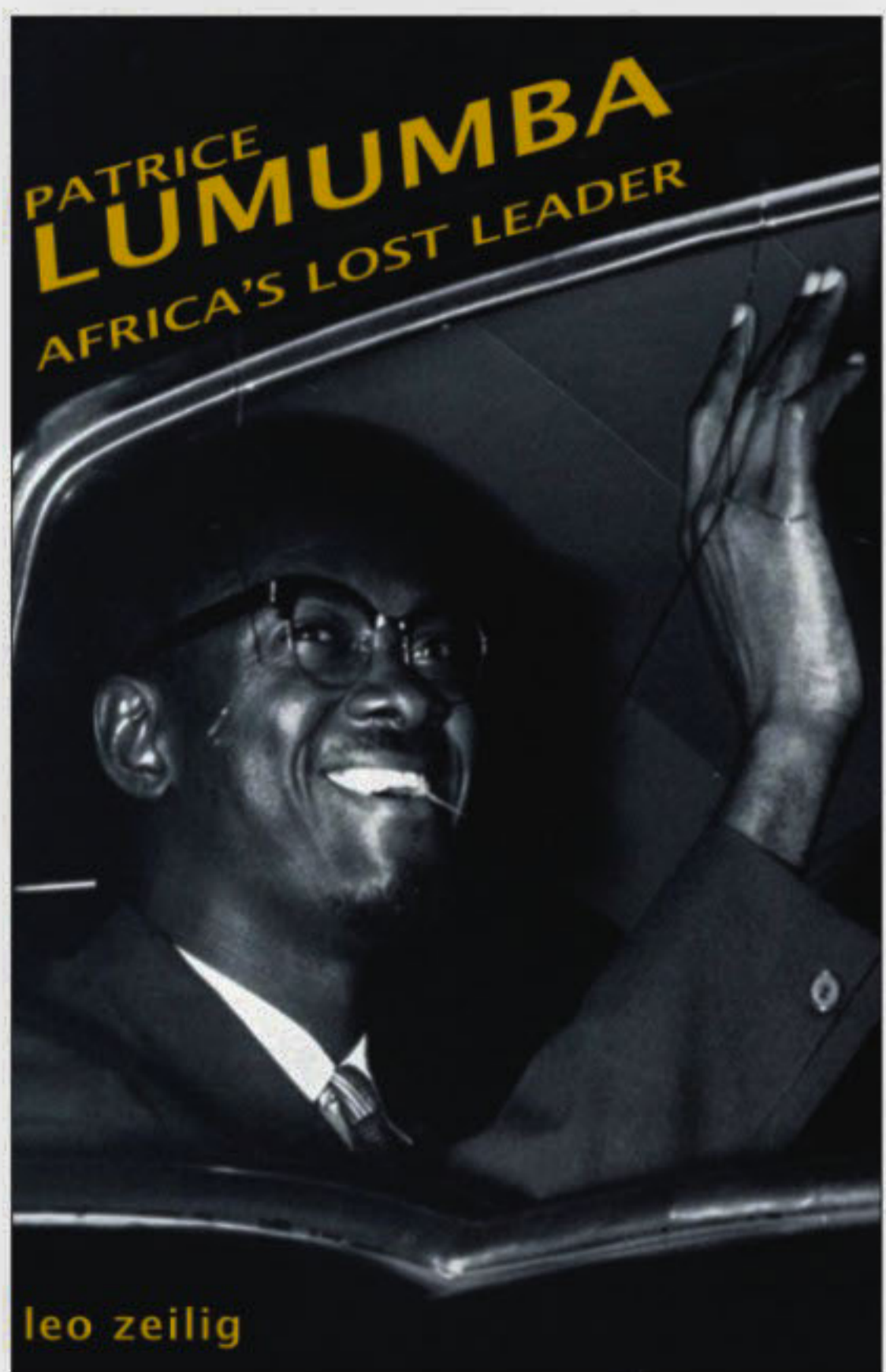
The collapse of a dream...

NEARLY fifty years after his murder, Patrice Lumumba continues to inspire passion in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Of course, in the days when the Soviet Union was around, Lumumba was accorded immortality through the establishment of a university after him in Moscow. On top of everything, men who have waged bitter struggles against western colonialism around the globe have been relentless in their remembrance of the man who became the Congo's founding prime minister and who, soon afterwards, was pushed to a death in the most horrible of circumstances.

Leo Zeilig, in his study of the rise and fall of Lumumba, joins that select band of intellectuals who have looked upon the late Congolese leader with sympathy despite the harangues and emotional outburst he was often prone to. Take here the instance of his well-framed but nevertheless harsh speech denouncing Belgian colonialism on the day the Congo won independence. It was 30 June 1960. Lumumba, naturally present at the independence celebrations as the free country's first leader, was not expected to speak at the ceremonies which were graced by the presence of Belgium's King Baudouin. And yet something stirred in the man who had educated himself, had almost single-handedly convinced the world that his country needed to be free. After ages of domination by the Belgians, whose ruler Leopold made it a point in the nineteenth century to steal as much of the Congo's wealth as he could and whose grasping nature thereafter emboldened his Belgian subjects to follow suit, Lumumba was unwilling to be patronized on the dawn of freedom. He delivered a peroration that roused his people to good cheer and brought for him endless applause. The king of the departing power was outraged. Every Belgian present went livid with rage. Suddenly they realized that with Lumumba in charge, the idea of Belgian neo-colonialism in the Congo would dwindle into a pipe dream.

There was of course the conspiratorial Moise Tshombe in the mineral-rich province of Katanga, ready to secede from the new country and go its own way. The Belgians were only too ready and willing to assist him in his struggle against Lumumba. The uncouth Tshombe was thus pitted against the scholarly Lumumba. Within days and weeks, the Congo would begin to unravel. Ill-equipped to run an administration, because of the sheer absence of educated Congolese (the Belgians all through their colonization had made sure that the Congolese people remained outside the perimeters of education, the better to blunt any urge on their part for freedom), Lumumba was now faced with the collapse of a country that had barely been put into shape. Tshombe, with much arrogance and pomposity, declared Katangan independence. Other men in other areas were trying to do the same. It was a curious picture of decolonization: where Lumumba was moving heaven and earth to put a modern nation-state in place, his enemies were busy carving out their own tribal fiefdoms through defiance of the new government. The Belgians were gleeful.

Zeilig's work is a composite study of the Lumumba character, beginning with his early years and going on to his work in the postal department like any other subject of a western colonial empire. Rebellion was not part of Lumumba's personality in the early years. Indeed, it was precisely the opposite of what he subsequently turned out to be. Impressed with the lifestyles of the Belgian colonizers and observing at the same time the emergence of a black elite determined to emulate the white rulers, Lumumba went into a pursuit of everything that would reshape him in the image of a gentleman, ready to clink glasses with the colonizers. He needed to be part of the *evolues*, black Congolese who had evolved, so to speak, from the status of the politically enslaved to a measure of dignity that would bring them socially closer to the Belgians. Lumumba read books, indeed read everything he could lay his hands on. He travelled to Belgium, came back home impressed and plunged into writing for journals. It remains a question as to how many Congolese, seeing that few of them were able to be autodidacts as their future leader was, were able to read the articles, to say nothing of mulling over them. And then came time for Lumumba to be carted off to prison. As always with men inhabiting lands under colonial domination, he emerged with a new perspective on the conditions his country was mired in. Increasing stridency now marked his writing. He was into politics. His speeches turned radical. The Belgian power was jittery, but Lumumba was on his way.



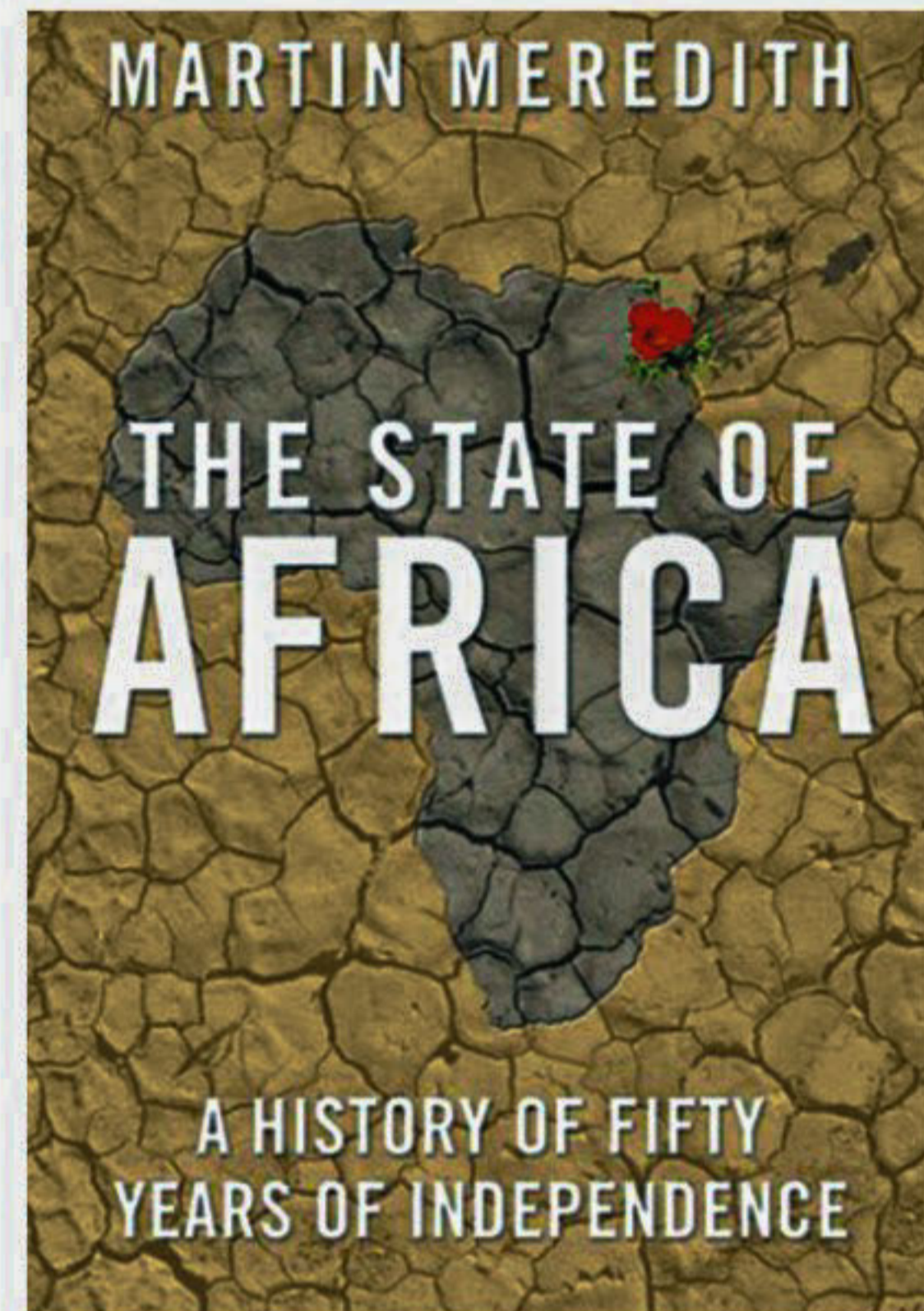
Patrice Lumumba  
Africa's Lost Leader  
Leo Zeilig  
Haus Publishing London

The author dwells on the major characters in the story of the Congo even as he keeps his focus on Lumumba. Joseph Kasavubu, Joseph Mobutu, Antoine Gizenga, Tshombe (and every other Congolese enmeshed in the crisis) draw appropriate assessments from him. In the six months he was to live between his ascendance to power in June 1960 and his assassination in January 1961, Patrice Lumumba fought a battle that looked increasingly futile. The Belgians were propping up Tshombe's secession in Katanga. The United Nations, to which he repeatedly appealed for assistance to swat his rivals into submission, played a dangerously delaying game. Mobutu, the commander of the army appointed by Lumumba, was almost given a free hand to push the prime minister from power. Euphemistically placed under protective custody along with two of his comrades, Lumumba eventually escaped. That would prove to be his undoing. Captured by Tshombe loyalists, the three men were subjected to severe beatings before being taken, bound and bruised, before Tshombe. Lumumba and his comrades were shot as dusk fell on 17 January 1961. A bunch of happy Belgian officers helped the Katangans obliterate all traces of the Congo's first prime minister and the other two men. The bodies were treated to acid. Whatever little remained, a few bones or so, were burnt to ashes.

It was the end of a dream. The Congo would for decades lurch from one nightmare to another. Joseph Kabila's difficulties today are a sign of the bad legacy inaugurated through the elimination of Patrice Lumumba. And do not forget that the Congo crisis was to claim the life of Dag Hammarskjold, secretary general of the United Nations, shortly after Lumumba's sad end. #

Continent on a bumpy ride...

MARTIN Meredith writes with feeling about Africa, about the blight it has lived in since the Gold Coast emerged as the free nation of Ghana in 1957. In other words, the author covers the period beginning with that seminal year and ending somewhere in 2007. Within that pretty long stretch of time, of course, a whole lot has happened in the continent, not much of it to the benefit of its peoples. A particular strength of the work comes through Meredith's examination of the separate nation-states moulded, for better or worse, out of the myriad tribes by the western colonial powers, of course in their own narrow selfish interests.



The State of Africa  
A History of Fifty Years of Independence  
Martin Meredith

That should be easy enough to understand. That the boundaries which bind one African state to another are beyond the normal, indeed are absolutely unnatural, can be observed by the eerily geometrical lines that are purportedly the frontiers of these states. An examination of Asia, Europe and the Americas will give you a good idea of what natural frontiers are or can be. Not so in Africa.

Never mind that, as the author appears to be saying. But focus on the Big Man factor that defined, in the 1950s and right up to the 1960s, the urge for political freedom in Africa. For those who have grown into adulthood with memories of idealistic international politics, here is one opportunity for you to return to those days of happy innocence. The manner of Kwame Nkrumah's rise to prominence, the time he spent in Britain as a young man and then as an imprisoned nationalist in his captive country is what you are reminded of. And with him come all the other Big Men --- Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Modibo Keita of Mali, Leopold Sekou Toure of Guinea, the Francophile scholar Ahmed Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Patrice Lumumba of the Congo. These men as also others like them (think here of Ben Bella in Algeria) made sure that freedom came to their peoples, visected into tribalism as they were. Uhuru, that rousing call to freedom, applied not just to Kenya but to the entirety of Africa.

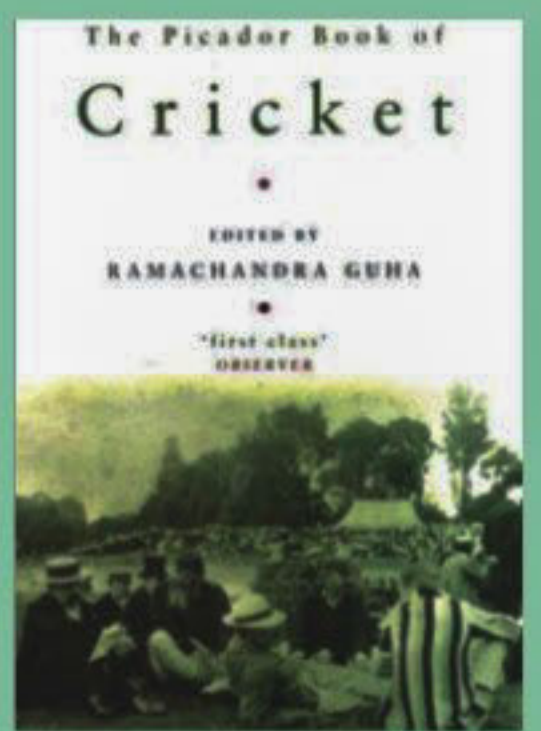
And then, somewhere along the way, Africa's politics of idealism collapsed as many of these newly free nations found themselves captive, in rapid succession, to corrupt military rule. It began with Ghana, with Nigeria. Nkrumah was ousted by his army as he landed in Peking on a state visit. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and his ministers were murdered in their homes by soldiers. Ben Bella was overthrown by his defence minister and cast into dark oblivion. Where the military did not intervene, corruption or weak government did. Nyerere's socialism did not work and Kaunda held on to power long enough for a lesser man, Frederic Chiluba, to beat him at elections. Kenyatta did pretty well, but then his successor Daniel Arap Moi became a byword for corruption. Meanwhile, in countries not yet free, an increasing resort to armed struggle for liberation was all that mattered and for good reason. Mozambique, Angola and Rhodesia (or the future Zimbabwe) were throwing up politicians in guerrilla mode. The men of apartheid in South Africa thought they could hold back the tide. They would bite the dust before a radical-turned-rationalist named Nelson Mandela.

This is one historical tract that sets you thinking, for a long time.

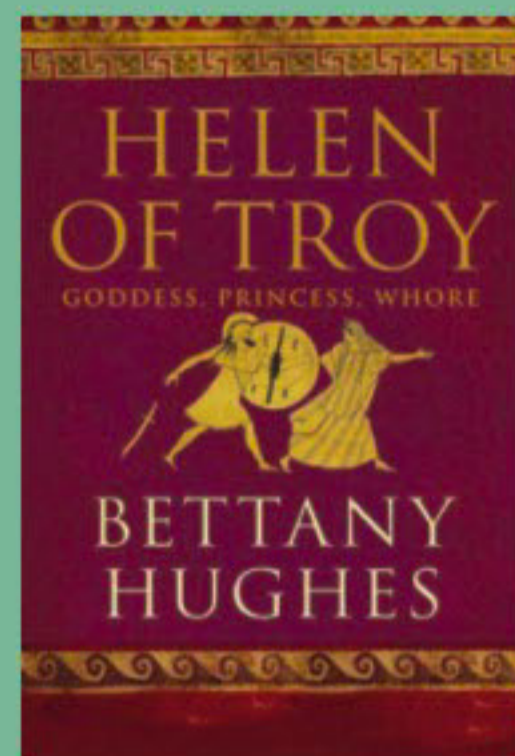
Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

AT A GLANCE

The Picador Book of Cricket  
Ed Ramachandra Guha  
Picador



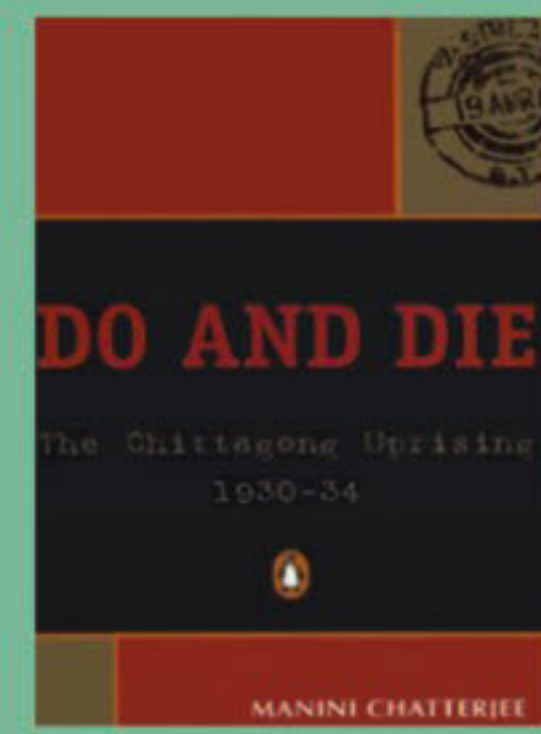
It is a work that makes you fall in love with the game all over again. Guha has travelled huge distances garnering all the articles here, each of which is as fascinating as the next one. Not even an individual less than educated about cricket can remain unimpressed. Humour, pathos and good thinking are all here.



Helen of Troy  
Goddess, Princess, Whore  
Bettany Hughes  
Pimlico

The biggest truth is that Helen was the world's most beautiful woman and yet no one knows what the dimensions of her beauty were. But read this book and you will have a fairly good idea of how this woman plunged two nations into a war that remains etched in our minds. A very good read.

Do and Die  
Manini Chatterjee  
Penguin Books



The uprising in Chittagong in 1930-34 had little chance of success. Politicians ignored it and people all over India seemed not to care. Not many heard about it. But in this detailed work, Chatterjee gives you all the reasons to think why Masterda Surjya Sen's act of rebellion against the British was a defining moment in history.

Romeo and Juliet redux

Charles R. Larson dwells on a twice-escaping writer

HOW many times has the Romeo and Juliet story been retold? Having asked that question, I'm not certain that Eritrean writer Sulaiman Addonia had Shakespeare in mind when he wrote his evocative story of two star-crossed lovers, not in Eritrea but in Saudi Arabia. However, the publishers of *The Consequences of Love* highlight the connection to a story that depicts the near impossibility of love in such a stultifying and repressive country. The young lovers, Naser and Fiore, have Eritrean parentage, but the obstacle they encounter as foreigners attempting to fulfill their love is not familial but religious: fundamentalism.

Naser and his younger brother, Ibrahim, were sent out of Eritrea by their mother, who feared that they would be killed during the war with Ethiopia. After a brief period of time in Sudan they were sent on to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to be taken care of by their mother's brother. The boys are ten and thirteen, respectively, when they meet their uncle. He turns out to be not much of a protector; in fact he uses Naser to pay off his obligation to his kafeel, or sponsor, which every non-Saudi has to have in order to reside in the country. It's an insidious practice, as we shortly see, of turning young boys into sexual toys for married Saudi men to exploit in the most degrading manner. Naser's uncle's kafeel rapes the teenager, and there's little that he as a youth and as an immigrant can do about it.

By the time of the rape, Naser has already observed the hypocrisy surrounding him no matter where he goes and what he observes. The country's religious police are everywhere, like maggots living off the flesh of the young and the innocent. If the police catch a young man and a woman together, the couple can be carted off and imprisoned, flogged, even stoned to death or beheaded. The clerics have one constant litany: women are evil, and they constantly try to tempt innocent men. (It's really the opposite, but that's a moot point in a society as misogynistic as this one.) Worse, men constantly abuse younger men and boys up until the time of their marriages. So ubiquitous is this practice that one might conclude that homosexual sex is preferable to heterosexual sex. There are even cafes with rooms set off for men (of all ages) to have sex together.

All of this duplicity is quite horrifying. Other aspects of the repressive society are equally revealing: western pornography, obviously also forbidden, appears to be everywhere. Young men sniff glue and drink perfume (because of its alcohol content) in order to get high. But, in this novel, homosexual activities take centre stage, providing an ironic twist to the title. One of Naser's friends explains to him, "My dear, in a world without women and in the absence of female glamour, boys like you are the perfect substitute. Why hide your attractiveness and your tender physique like a veiled woman? You are the closest my customers have to a beautiful and sensual person roaming freely in their world. So why sit on your beauty like a bird without wings, when you can fly?"

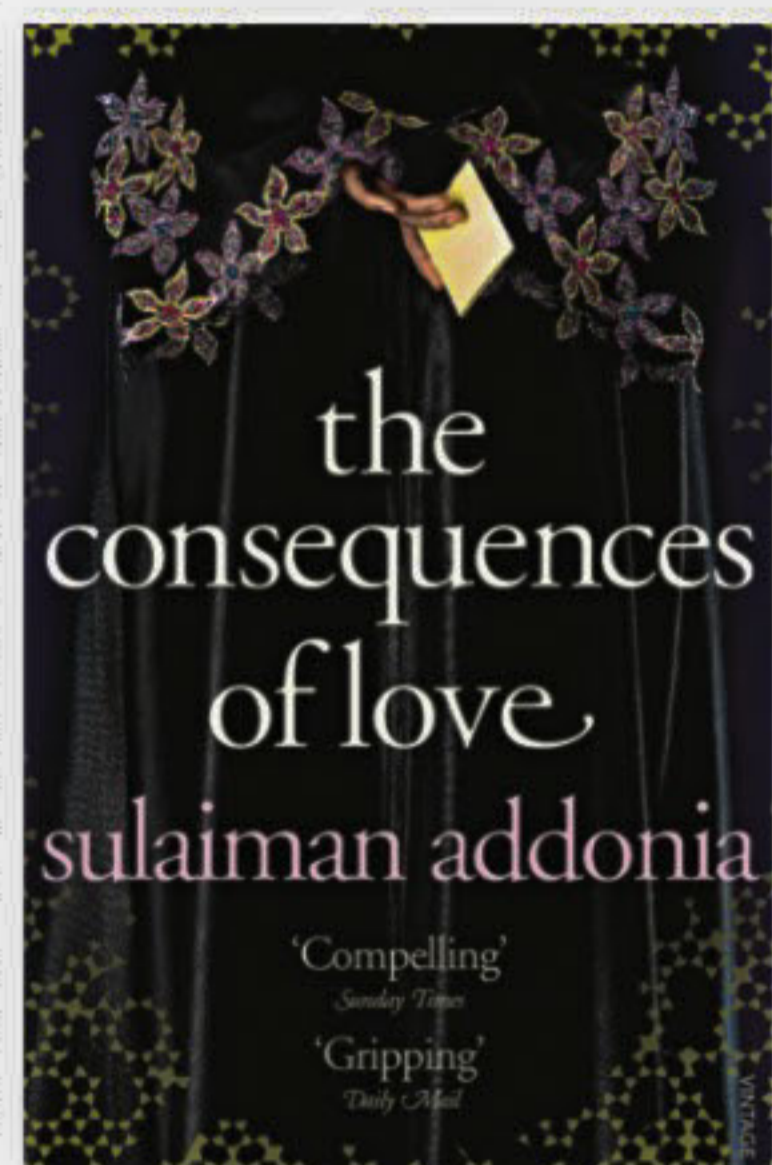
What's a pretty boy to do? Fortunately, Naser gets a job washing cars after his uncle refuses to "protect" him. And then the encounter with the person he hopes is a beautiful young woman begins. I say "hopes" because the person who drops a note on the ground near him is wrapped in an abaya; all Naser can see are the slits that reveal her eyes. She might be ugly or, worse, she might be a man dressed like a woman so that the religious police can trap him.

The machinations needed to resolve this mystery are as inventive and elaborate as those that Shakespeare used in *Romeo and Juliet*. That said, it should also be stated that Addonia's novel is as clever and imaginative as it is critical of Saudi hypocritical morality. Once communication between Naser and Fiore begins, the suspense is ratcheted up and this astonishingly beautiful tale works its way to what can only be described as a breathless conclusion as events and their consequences become bleaker and bleaker. You can't help asking yourself when the final tragic coincidence will be revealed. What's more, there's even a minor character a blind imam whose role is almost the reverse of the well-intending Friar Lawrence in Shakespeare's masterpiece.

The lovers finally do discover of each other's identity. The abaya does conceal a beautiful young woman, who has been smothered as much as Naser by political repression. Yet finally Addonia's title becomes as ominous as it has been since one's first glance at the book jacket. You will say, of course, that all love comes with consequences, yet they are rarely as bleak as those portrayed in this ingenious and disturbing story of love in a diseased society. As Naser observes, "I was in Saudi Arabia, where love had been erased from the dictionary, yet somehow I had found a way to express my passion for another."

Sulaiman Addonia is the lucky one. The jacket on the book says that like his main character he fled Ethiopia following the "Om Hajar massacre in 1976," then went to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia but, later, with his brother "successfully sought asylum in the U.K. as underage immigrants." So he escaped twice, one might say. And then he wrote this sensuous account of love in an inhumane country.

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington DC.



The Consequences of Love  
Sulaiman Addonia  
Random House