

Between reality and fantasy

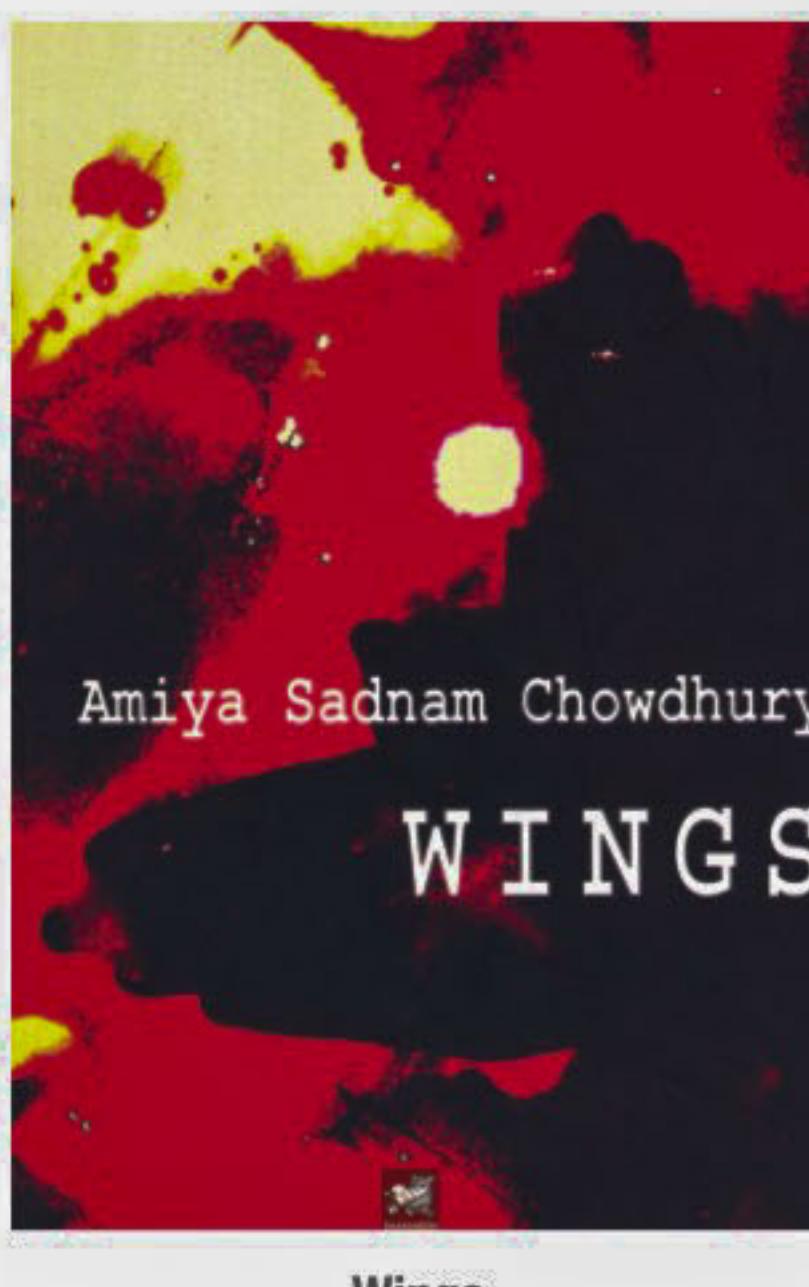
Ali Ahmed is intrigued by an unusual work

I was not surprised when presented with a printed copy of Amiya Sadnam Chowdhury's debut English novella *Wings* as I had earlier had an opportunity to have a glimpse of the typed manuscript. What really surprised me was this young writer's grasp of the English language as it is not his mother tongue, nor was he brought up, as far as I know, in an ambience where this foreign language could be a part of his being. But it's not just the language of the novella that kept me almost glued to its pages. His very attractive art of storytelling pulled me along the pages of the rather slim volume of this novella.

The story opens in a semi-deserted, late night street of an unnamed city, probably Dhaka, and the protagonist, Arnab Hassan, an Oxford physicist, walks the streets for nearly half an hour to reach a lake and meet another man there. They go together to a nearby all-night coffee shop, get stranded there by rains and thunderclaps and Arnab Hassan starts narrating the story to his barely-known companion. The entire story spins around Oxford, where Arnab Hassan teaches, and revolves round a multi-billionaire Irish industrialist, Edward Lark. This hard-to-define complex character, getting drawn to Dr. Hassan after reading a couple of his articles in a journal, approaches him to make him a pair of wings to fly with.

This, as could easily be imagined, is not a fantasy, nor is it a fancy of the super-rich, who offers Hassan up to fifty billion dollars for the project. Edward Lark takes the reader back to the days of his tormented childhood in Ireland, where his morbid fear of spiders first drove into his brains the fantasy of flying with his own wings to escape those creeping insects and the fantasy has stuck there since.

Arnab Hassan's acceptance of the offer provides the story with an unbelievable twist. An Oxford physicist, providing occasional glimpses to the reader almost throughout the entire length of the story of his disbelief in the practicality of the project, accepts the offer nonetheless and launches the mad venture. The climax to the story comes when Lark arrives on a rather windy midnight. They both conspire to lie to Arnab's wife to get out of the house and to the roof of a twenty-seven-storyed hotel building of Lark's. There the pair of hitherto-untested wings are put on two sides of Lark and, after some hesitation, he is pushed from the cornices of the roof to the windy voids of a dark night. Arnab hurries down the lift, enlists the support of the ground-floor night guard and together they rush to the nearby lake in Lark's very expensive car. And Lark, lo and behold, appears overhead in the rainswept and heavily



Wings
Amiya Sadnam Chowdhury
Shambabesh (sister concern of Pathak
Shambabesh)

windy sky! He cannot reach the nearby lake, as originally hoped for, and falls to the ground. The result is a predictable smashing of a few of his body bones and he is taken to hospital. He survives, and the story, for all practical purposes, ends there.

Amiya Sadnam Chowdhury's story,

though it promises to be a thriller or a ghost story when it opens after midnight in a nearly vacant lakeside, turns out, finally, to be an unusual tale of two diseased minds, namely, those of Arnab and Edward. Edward's childhood fright of spiders lingers on in his psyche, pushing him to the point of insanity. His reckless pursuit of the dreadful fancy of winged flights stares probable death straight in the face while Arnab's not-so-secret collaboration in the impossible task bares his contorted soul. The writer very skillfully portrays their complex characters through a rather simple tale.

The novelist's eye for detail and his capacity to present the reader with a rather unbelievable flight of fancy in a thoroughly realistic manner speak eloquently of his power of writing. His use of apt references in appropriate places of the narrative interspersed with wit and humour reveals a surprising depth of his reading and of a very intelligent mind. This debut novella of Amiya Sadnam Chowdhury is, no doubt, a remarkable addition to our rather narrow stream of original English writings. It truly deserves a wide readership.

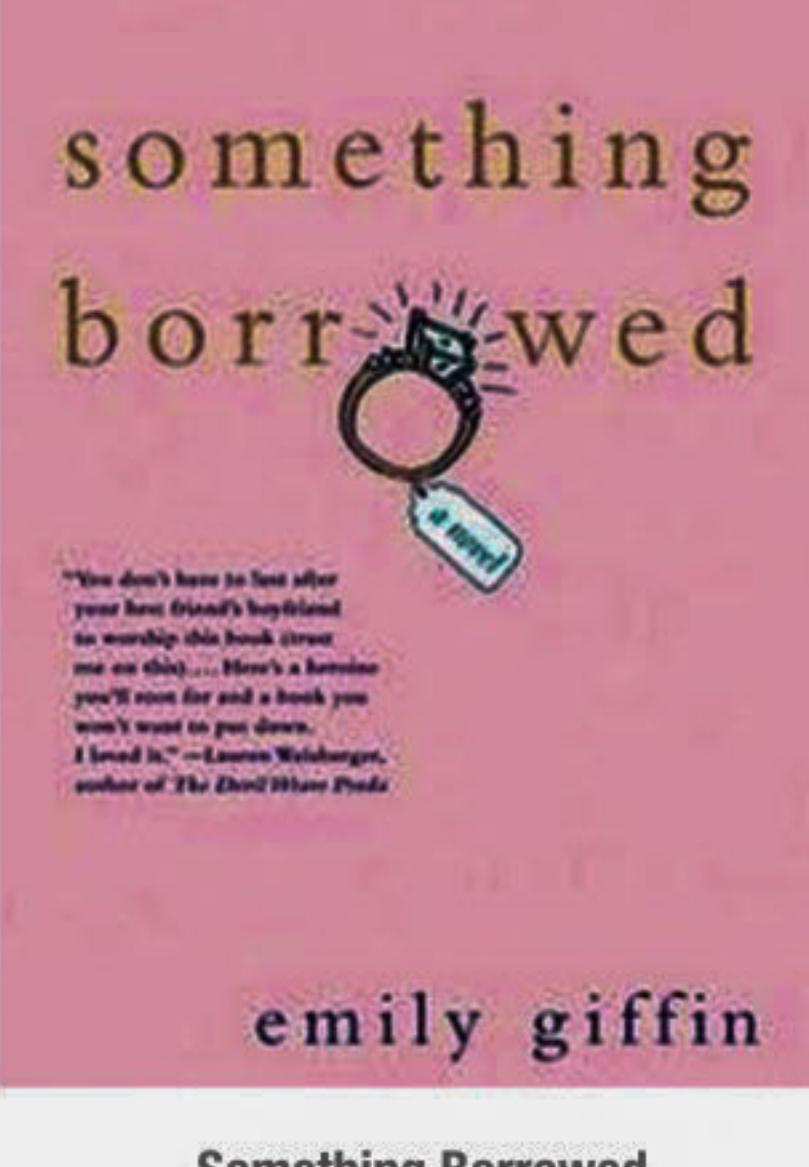
Ali Ahmed, a former member of the National Board of Revenue, is an essayist, literary critic and translator. He has 10 publications to his credit.

Friends in emotional upheaval

Tulip Chowdhury burrows through love's crisis

Something Borrowed is now a major motion picture that people are crowding to watch. This is a book for all people who have friends and know that the world can be a lively place when friends are around. The story is about loyalty to friends and about betrayals. Rachel and Darcy have been friends ever since their childhood. Both girls have grown up as neighbors in Indiana, USA. They have been best friends throughout their elementary and high school. And now both are in New York and are working; and the great thing is that they are still the best of friends. Rachel, the lawyer, is the quiet and steady one and Darcy, working for a private firm, is loquacious, the one who can be out partying all the time.

Rachel, the protagonist of the story, has been waiting for her thirtieth birthday with dreams of celebrating it with a good husband and loving children. However, before she can settle down to her dreams Darcy is already engaged to be married when she is in her twenties. Dexter, a friend to both the young ladies, is the lucky man. He has been courting Darcy for seven years before they decide to settle down. Darcy is busy with plans for her wedding. There are times when she has pitying remarks for Rachel, saying that she is single and so does not understand many things



Something Borrowed
Emily Giffin
St. Martin's Griffin

about boyfriends. Rachel feels hurt but she is used to Darcy being outspoken. Rachel had dated Nate for some time but they had broken off when Nate's ex-girlfriend came along and they got together again. And then there had been Ethan. Such sporadic relationships

had taught Rachel to wait till she could find the right person. She has no wish to rush on to some relationships and then come out wounded and bleeding.

There are other friends, Hilary, Les and Cheryl. Though all the friends hang out from time to time, at the end of the day Rachel and Darcy are together to take stock of their joys and sorrows. Then along comes Marcus, the dashing young man with a good job, and starts to date Rachel. Darcy continues to implore Rachel to take Marcus seriously and start thinking about getting married. Just when Rachel starts to think about Marcus she comes across a strange part of her own self that she does not understand. She finds that it is not Marcus whose thoughts and actions move her but it is someone else, it is Dexter, the fiancé of her best friend. Her thoughts are puzzled as she wonders,

"How can I be so thrilled to be near Dex, so deeply moved by his e-mail and still want, on some level, for him to marry Darcy?"

Here comes in a drama of human emotions, emotions that are caught between moral values and the confusions of the heart. Cheating over her best friend is not for Rachel and yet she is caught between her own tormenting emotions and doing what is right, what

is wrong. Then she is yet more puzzled when Darcy confides that she is not seeing much of Dexter. What is she to make of the whole drama, especially when wedding preparations are going ahead for Darcy and Dexter? When she tells Hilary about her confusion, Hilary says that she always thought that not Darcy but Rachel was the perfect match for Dexter. This throws Rachel into a greater nerve racking world. Was she forcing herself to go along and keep dating Marcus when her heart craved for another? But what is there for her to cling to when Dexter is making his suits for the wedding and at the same time hinting that he likes to be with her! The story goes through emotional uphill and downhill until it takes a breath taking turn and leaves the reader fascinated with the word mastery of the writer.

Caught in the real drama of human lives, readers of *Something Borrowed* will sit through the night to read to the end of the book. The characters of the story are palpably real and human emotions really weave a great saga. This novel is moving and smart and might leave the reader rushing on to lay hands on the next Emily Giffin book.

Tulip Chowdhury, poet and short story writer, sends this review from Arkansas, USA.

An inquiry into Hindu philosophy

Subrata Kumar Das recommends a fascinating work

Three separate long essays on the Vedas, the concept of God in Hinduism and the philosophy of the Gita comprise the book *Sonaton Sonskriti* (Hindi Culture). The title is well enough to make one understand the contents of the book written by Subrata Bhattacharya, a philanthropic knowledge-seeker of Kurigram, Bangladesh. The worthy introduction by the noted naturalist Dwijen Sharma along with lucidity in language and simplicity in presentation have made *Sonaton Sonskriti* a good handbook for every reader, irrespective of religious beliefs or inclination.

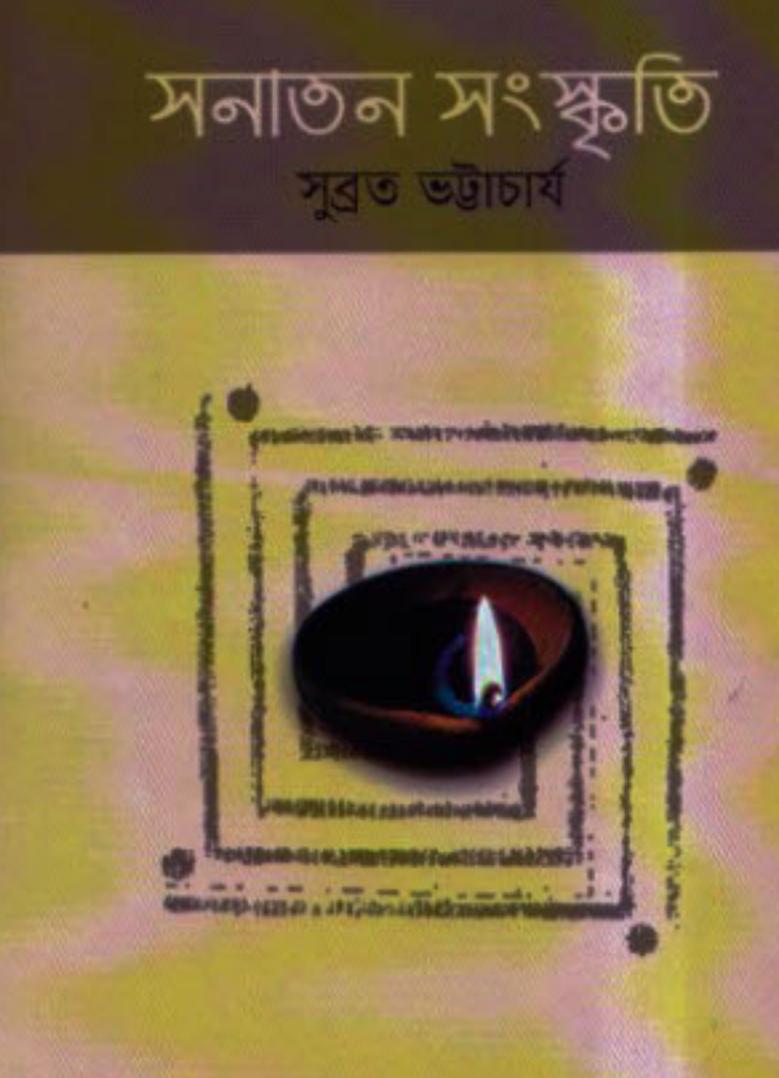
Sonaton Sonskriti is not a book that speaks of the orthodox or of mere traditional dogmas. Rather it exhibits the unfathomable knowledge that is stored in the ancient scriptures, called the Vedas. As the author rightly says, the 'Vedas are for everyone, all humans under the sun'. Dwijen Sharma also asserts in his introduction that it was the Vedas that first discovered the existence of life in plants. He thus emphasises the need for all who are in search of knowledge to read the work.

'Ognimile Purohit', 'Sorbeswarbad Sonaton', and 'Shorodorshan O Gita' are the three chapters of this helpful handbook, which borrows the first title from the first hymn of the Rig Veda that

reads 'I Laud Agni, the chosen Priest, God, minister of sacrifice / The hotar, lavishest of wealth'. The second one explores the many diversified beliefs regarding God that are available in the Hindu scriptures while the third chapter is the evaluation of the Gita as a genesis of all the philosophies that prevailed in the millennia before the birth of Christ.

In the four sections of 'Ognimile Purohit', the four Vedas have been briefly dwelt upon. In each of those the author showcases the elementary information of all the Vedas, namely, Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva. Along with the basic data, the philosophical aspects that abound in the Vedas are also studied in detail.

Let us not forget that Hinduism manifests monotheism as it does not refute polytheism. Neither does it cancel out idolatry. *Sonaton Sonskriti* tries to explain how these outwardly contradictory beliefs emerged in ancient Indian society and how they complement each other and thus highlight a religion that encompasses some of the best and profoundest of thoughts on life and faith. It enumerates the different beliefs that the ancient sages of our soil spoke of regarding everything around us. The author gradually places before us a list of the many



speakers of the Vedic hymns along with their female counterparts. Moreover, he expounds the interpretations that we have been recipient of on the Vedas during different ages. While delving into the most enigmatic stanzas of the scriptures, the author makes references and

cross references, whenever necessary, and thus upgrades his book as a good read for a wide range of readers.

In the chapter on Gita and its core philosophies, the author inquires into the existing philosophical schools called Samkhya, Yaga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta that prevailed in earlier ages and all together created an upheaval of a lofty and cosmopolitan trend of ideologies which, till date, have proved to be worth reading and are the subject of research across the globe.

Anil Sen, a working journalist and a former student of Subrata Bhattacharya, during his school days, is the key man behind the work. His has been a vital role in encouraging his teacher to write the book, which deals with a very sophisticated arena of knowledge. It is remarkable that the work has been published from a Dhaka publishing house. In Bangladesh society, where books on Hinduism, well written from a modern point of view, are scarce, *Sonaton Sonskriti* may be cited as a worthy example for the general run of believers as well as the intellectually advanced literati to draw inspiration from.

Subrata Kumar Das, freelance teacher, writer and author of the web site www.bangladeshinovels.com, can be reached at subratakdas@yahoo.com

The sorry end of a nationalist

Syed Badrul Ahsan recalls an African martyr

Fifty years after his murder, Patrice Lumumba continues to inspire spirited 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 the colonizers realized that with Lumumba in charge, the idea of Belgian neo-colonialism in the Congo would dwindle into a pipe dream.



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

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 parameters of education, the better to blun 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 *evolus*, 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.

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 ascendancy 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 Hammarskjöld, secretary general of the United Nations, shortly after Lumumba's sad end.