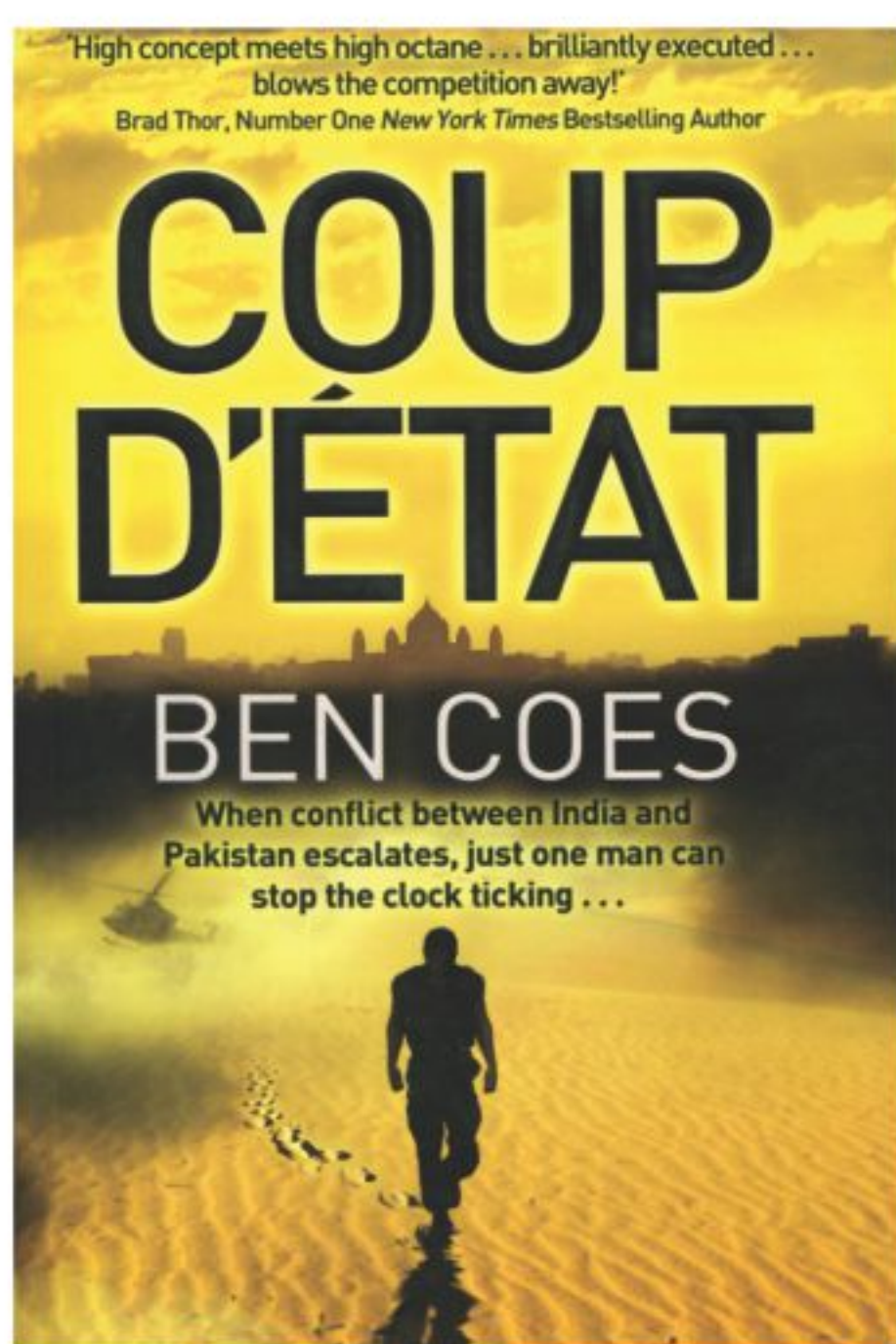


Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan Lessons in leader disposal.....

Coups d'etat were once a very fashionable thing, in Asia, Africa and Latin America. That was in the days when democracy was no more than a pious expression of sentiment, when people power was as yet an unknown phenomenon. And in these past two decades or so, coups have somehow retreated not merely into the past but into the innermost recesses of our minds as well. Ben Coes, however, takes us back to that lost world of coups. Of course, there is little of the glamour of old which comes through his definition of a coup. But what does come through is a slight remembrance of the many ways in which western governments often tried bringing down governments not very much to their liking. The instances are innumerable --- Sukarno, Fidel Castro, the Diems, Joao Goulart, Allende, Nasser and more.

It is somewhat a recalling of the old coups that Coes makes readers go into in *Coup d'Etat*. Broadly speaking, though, Coes' coup, fictional as it is, is set in the aftermath of a changed world. The change is something you can link with America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its struggle against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In this riveting account of a nuclear conflict that threatens South Asia, Coes builds on recent history. In his telling of the tale, Pakistan falls into the hands of the fundamentalist Omar el Khayab, not through a revolution or a putsch but through an election that has placed him in the country's presidency. El Khayab is blind, permanently assisted by his brother and driven by an inordinate zeal to wipe out Hindu-dominant India. A sense of recent history assails you here. You almost see, or think you see, the blind Mullah Omar, lately of Taliban-driven Afghanistan. The blindness in Pakistan's fictional president and that in Afghanistan's real former ruler may not quite be a coincidence, for an analysis of the two reveals other character traits which show up their propensity for destruction. Mullah Omar's regime destroyed culture and society in Afghanistan. In this tale, Omar el Khayab, possessed of a determination to wipe out the enemy across the frontier, drops a nuclear bomb on a village in India.

And then begins the scramble, on America's part (America is the only country, even in fiction, which can bring warring nations together), to limit the damage. And for that to be done, New Delhi's hand must be stayed. India's political leadership, led by President Rajiv Gandhi, is ready to strike back. But that response must be prevented at all costs, which means a swift journey to the Indian capital by the United States President Allaire in the company of his national security advisor Jessica Tanzer. India's president running the



Coup d'Etat
Ben Coes
Pan Books

show? The book yanks you away, for a long while, into a study of the Indian political system, where parliament is the fount of all authority. Ben Coes may have missed a step here where comprehending the Indian state framework is concerned. That the president of India, in constitutional terms, is a figurehead and that the prime minister is the spokesperson for the system is a reality which has been lost sight of. Gandhra has his prime minister and other ministers in thrall, almost, to him. In demeanour he is like any other politician in office relishing his hold on power. Bristling in indignation at El Khayab's perfidy, he is raring to go through dropping nuclear bomb on Pakistan in retaliatory fashion. But American diplomacy comes in the way.

The focal point of the tale is the need for the Americans to engineer, in the aftermath of El Khayab's nuclear act, the ouster of Pakistan's president. Only that and nothing else will satisfy the Indians. And yet the idea comes from Jessica Tanzer, whose role in the story shines all the way in a combination of colours. She is beautiful, she has the president's ear and she decides Washington's political strategy. And, yes, she is in love with Dewey Andreas, the central character in the work. The former special agent is not merely the man who will free Pakistan of El Khayab but is also the heroic figure for whom Tanzer waits in the fullness of passion. Andreas must be the man to rid Pakistan, and the world, of El Khayab

and his outfit. But that would call for the possibilities of a coup in Islamabad and a willingness by a senior military officer to replace the president. General Karref is discussed but is soon dismissed. He dies beside his mistress, per courtesy of Andreas. The Americans, relieved that an unreliable army chief is finally out of the way, then zero in on Field Marshal Xavier Bolin.

Nuclear war between India and Pakistan is eventually averted. President Omar el Khayab and his brother, led out of Aiwan-e-Sadr, the presidential palace, are disposed of. Bolin takes charge in shaky circumstances and then, sooner than expected, persuades himself into believing that he can emerge free of the American shadow over him. He has two of Andreas' companions murdered in treacherous fashion before putting Andreas on an aircraft to Lebanon, where the father of a terrorist in the American had earlier taken out waits for him. But the thrill takes a new turn. Israelis, responding to US appeals for help in rescuing Andreas, storm Beirut airport. The results are predictable. Andreas is safe, at a cost.

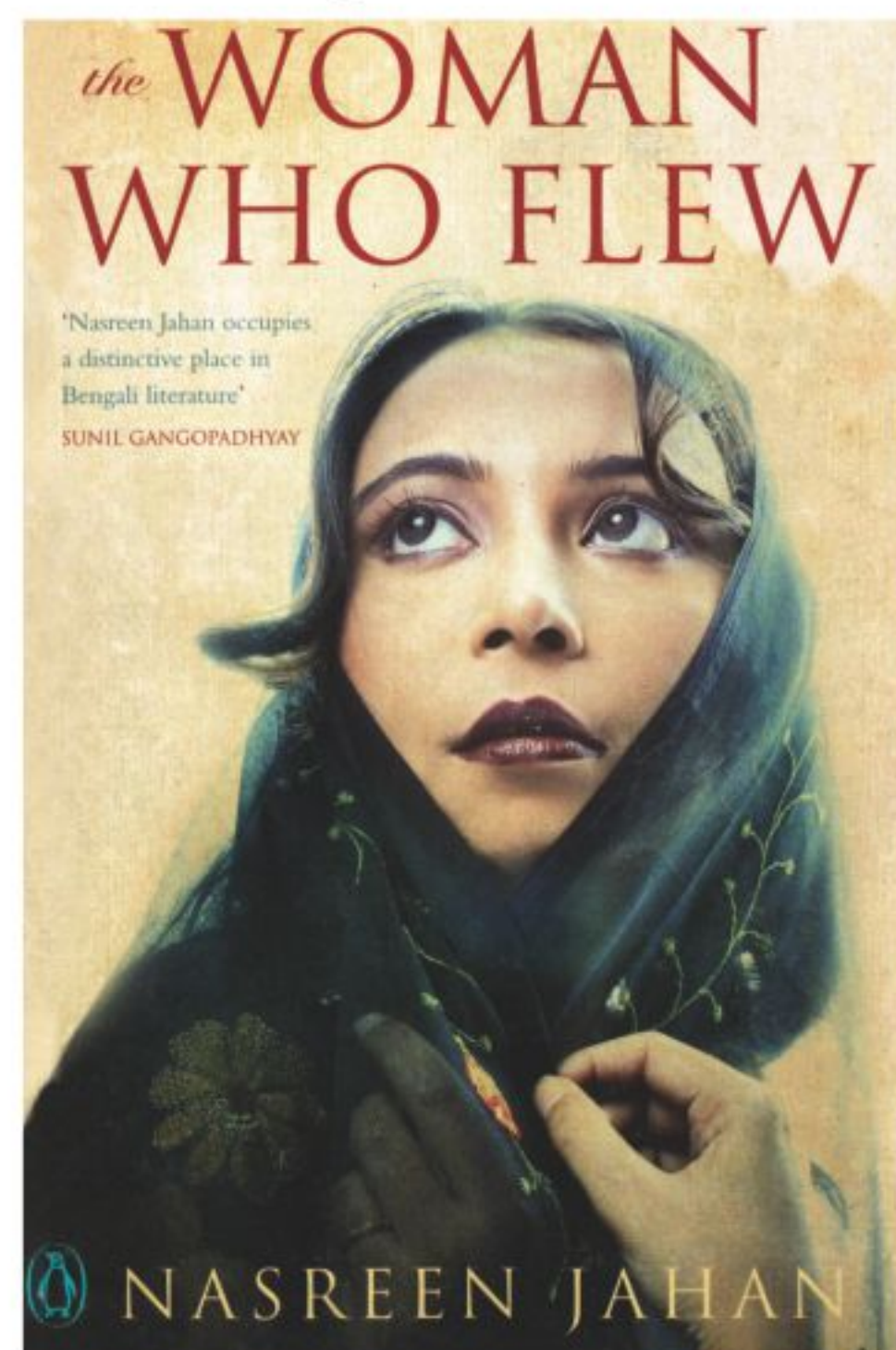
Pakistan's military leader Xavier Bolin will soon be dead.

Modern woman spinning in the medieval

Nasreen Jahan has always been a vocal writer. That in essence has meant her making forays into a literary world that is much noted for its diversity as well as for its vitality of expression. When quite some years ago, she came forth with *Urukku*, there was the subtle and yet the unambiguous message that a writer had arrived. Not that Jahan had not written before. Indeed, as she has told your reviewer more than once, the urge to write within her has been a consistent theme of her existence for years on end. The agony of a writer --- and writers cannot operate without agony --- has tested her for much of her literary career. That desire to know more in order to give, to her readers, even more has been part of her approach to writing. *Urukku* and the other chunks of fiction which have issued from within her imagination are emblematic of this sublime madness, if you might want to call it, which has egged her on.

So *Urukku* was there, making waves among

the Bengali literati and, more pointedly, among the general mass of readers. There was a certain, if sometimes indefinable, boldness about *Urukku*. The radicalism which underscored *Urukku* has now transferred itself on to the English translation of Jahan's work, one she would like people to know as *The Woman Who Flew*. *Urukku* is never a complacent woman. Pliant submission to authority, often to decadent social norms, is never a difficulty with Nasreen Jahan, for she is not one to be submissive. She happens to be one who has been able to shed her inhibitions in order to stride fully and confidently into the world of the living. Hence *Urukku*, hence the



The Woman Who Flew
Nasreen Jahan
Translated from the Bengali by Kaiser Haq
Penguin Books

English rendering of the title.

The Woman Who Flew is that simple march of consistency for the protagonist in the tale. Nina watches the world go by, perhaps with a tinge of salt and a dash of defiance. And that is where the Bengali woman's predicament comes in. Nina's is in knowing of her fundamental loneliness, her inability to revolt against established mores, though the urge to rise against historical prejudice endlessly rears its head in her perceptions of people and circumstances. That is what you have a glimpse of in this work. Married and then

divorced, Nina is clearly in the mood to deal with the world on her terms. You watch her carry herself and you ask if it is the liberated woman in her that you see walk past you. She has a common enough job, though she is clearly qualified for a better position. And, together with that, she is ensconced among colleagues defined by attitudes which generally assail the middle class in Bengali society.

Is Nina happy? The answer depends on individual definitions of happiness. At one level, Nina appears to relish her freedom now that she is no more a married woman. Her life is her own, which thought Nasreen Jahan often brings up, especially through a juxtaposition of the protagonist and Shanu. Nina does not complain, not even when the landlord berates Shanu and her husband over Nina's 'questionable' lifestyle. The absurdity of the situation is what strikes her. Life, in that overall sense of the meaning, is absurd. The man who leaves his bedroom stealthily in the night for sex with the woman from the nearby slum, the insinuation from Nina's colleagues that she and her boss, having incidentally been absent from work on the same day, may have been spending time together, her sloshing through mud and rain looking for the home of a relative she hardly knows --- all these are part of the pattern of absurdity for Nina.

Enter Rezaul, in all his diffidence. Ex-husband, worried man, individual driven by envy, he hovers around Nina. Did she sleep with Salauddin? His question irritates his former wife. She has not, she knows. She tells him a different story. Yes, she says. It is in her dealings with people --- with Satyajit, with Salauddin, with her colleague Sultana, with her brother, with sister Ranu --- that Nina assumes the roundness of a literary character. In Irfan Chacha, there are mysteries to be resolved, art to be revived in the soul. In her dash to get into buses, in her need for loans from Sultana, in her embarrassment at discovering compromising photographs of women in the pages of her brother's books you come across a modern woman engaged in a resolute struggle to break free of the circle of medievalism she could well be besieged by.

Rage defines Nina. Intensity of desire, in varied degrees, drives her on, to more rage. Which is as it should be. Which gives you an opening into the many crevices of her soul. You will likely spot Mahim, in all his masculine splendour, gathering Nina in the crucible of his passion, only to turn his back on her.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

With warmth and vibrant hope...

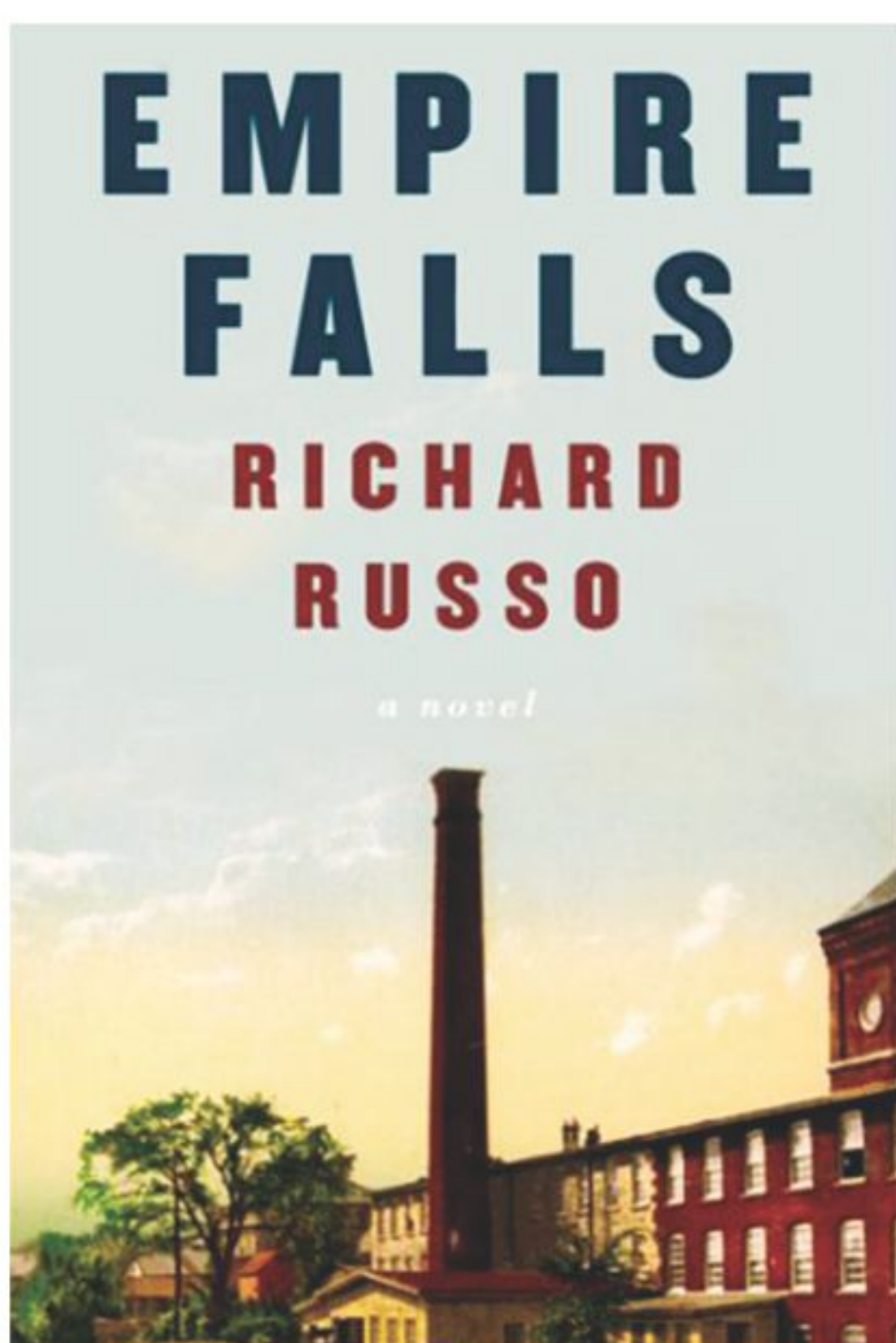
Tulip Chowdhury reflects on tears and laughter

Empire Falls in Maine, USA, is like any other American small town. But for Miles Roby this place is his life and blood. He runs a small restaurant, *Empire Grill*, in this place. The Whiting family had been the owners of almost half the town for generations. They owned the restaurant as well. Miles has been running the restaurant for the last decade and his mother, Grace Roby too has been working for the Whittings until the last days of her life. Like a tree reaching out with its branches, Miles life is branched out to different sections of people in this town. But *Empire Grill* is like his roots. Through breakfast, lunch and dinner the people living around the town came here. Just a "Howdy" was like speaking up for the day's news and ends. Like a spider's web everyone seems to be connected to life at Empire Falls and that web seems to be present here in *Empire Grill*.

Richard Russo holds out a picture perfect life of small towns in America. He seems to lead his characters by the hand and the story that unfolds through the remarkable mastery of words has the reader turning pages. The protagonist Miles is a man who likes to mind his own business while the others live their own. Miles likes a peaceful life but fate seems to have other designs and his family life comes to disruption as his wife Janine decides to file a divorce and marry Walt Comeau, owner of a local health club. Their teenage daughter Tick is an art student who can hardly stand her mother. She has a better understanding with her father and comes in every once in a while to lend a hand in *Empire Grill*. Tick is young and compassionate. She brings in Jean Vusso, the weirdo in her art class, to work at the restaurant. Glum and silent Vusso is grateful for the chance and his long grateful looks at Tick speak for his gratitude. Somewhere deep down Miles appreciates his daughter's sympathy for the boy.

David, Miles' younger brother helps out at *Empire Grill*. When the writer brings in David there also comes a flashback at Grace Roby's early life. Miles' father Max Roby and Grace were not exactly a happy couple. Here enters Charlie Mayne, the secret love of Grace. Miles had seen Charlie when he and his mother had gone on vacation at Martha's Vineyard. But it is long after his mother's death that Miles suddenly finds a picture of Charlie Whiting and the truth dawns on him about the real identity of Charlie. He also remembers that it was after their trip to Martha's Vineyard that his mother had become pregnant with David. Miles knew that he could never let out this secret for his mother's sake.

While life goes on with tales of tears and laughter at Empire Falls, Miles struggles to keep *Empire Grill*



Empire Falls
Richard Russo
Vintage Books

running. From time to time the reader is taken to flashbacks that give him a varied light on characters who are not the limelight of the on-going story but who had very important roles in shaping the history of Empire Falls. People like the Whittings, who still own so many properties of Empire Falls, reshape the story and give it some historical insights about the early days of the town. There is Jimmy Minty, Miles' childhood buddy who seems to think that David has something to do with the local drug addicts. Jimmy is the county sheriff and his interference in David's life is not welcomed by Miles. Further, Jimmy's son Zack has a crush on Tick and the young man is constantly brewing trouble for the girl. Tick on the other hand in love with Sam, a young man from the south. Zack suspects Vusso of being in love with Tick and creates trouble for the boy. The emotional pendulum of the young people in

American society is portrayed like a kaleidoscope by the author.

Miles is involved with the painting of the local church. It is his voluntary community service. Mrs. Walsh is the housekeeper of the two priests of this church. According to her God was at the top of the chain that held His angels, cardinals, bishops and priests. And to Mrs. Walsh housekeeping for two God's people was a part of religion as well. Miles' father Max often moves with Father Tom and so Miles often lent them a hand with the painting of the church and gives them rides occasionally. Miles is generous with his father and often supports him with his financial shortcomings.

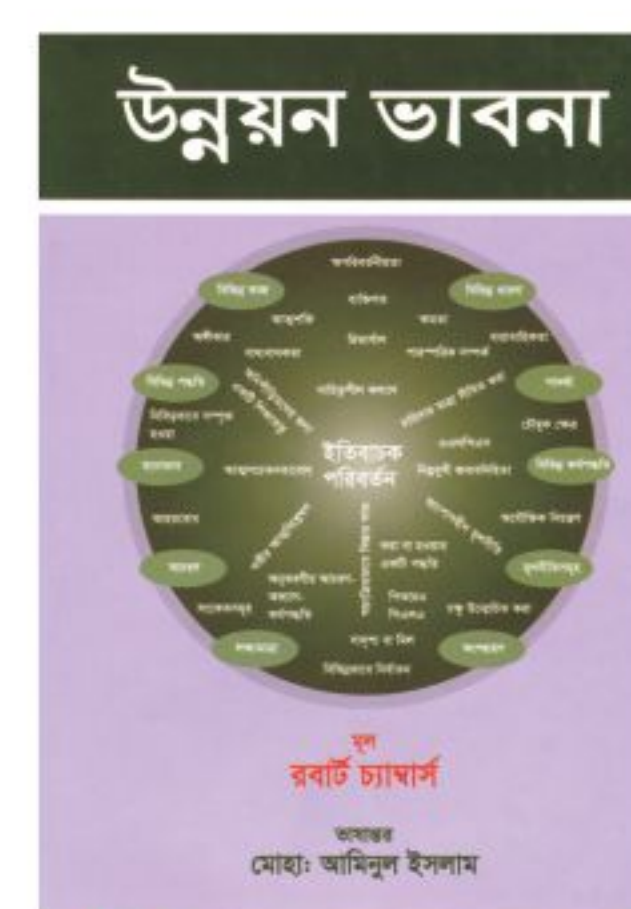
There is a run-down mill owned by the Whittings. One day Miles finds Mrs. Whiting on the property with men from a property developing company. He learns that Mrs. Whiting is selling off a huge portion of her land and people are already taking the heed to move in with new business to the Empire Falls. Miles knows that the place will lose its charm of being the sleepy town. All those slow moving people will be replaced with bustling, busy people. Miles, having known Empire falls for its quiet life, is not ready to accept the changes. At his brother's suggestion he is ready to move to another place.

Richard Russo's remarkable story builds up like a mountain and the reader finds the climb to the climax as Miles prepares to move away from Empire Grill. But the winds of changes that come to Empire Falls and the ways the protagonist is affected by them leave the reader breathless. It blends in history of changes coming to the modern era. In this stormy changes Miles is happy to find himself at peace with his daughter. The truth dawns that what really matters is peace in one's heart and one has to look for contentment, it does not fly into the heart. With all the changes life, like a puzzle does not fit into all the corners for Miles and the other who live around him. The story woven into the past, present and the future of Empire Falls does not fail to make the reader feel the pulse of joy and sorrow of the people affected.

In the whole saga in *Empire Falls* Russo delves deep into the blue-collar heart of America and rolls with hilarity, heartaches and grace. It is a contemporary story and may be one of the most remarkable stories of its times. The story comes with warmth and vibrant humanity that leaves the reader with a feeling of having had a life time adventure through the book.

TULIP CHOWDHURY IS A POET AND SHORT STORY WRITER.

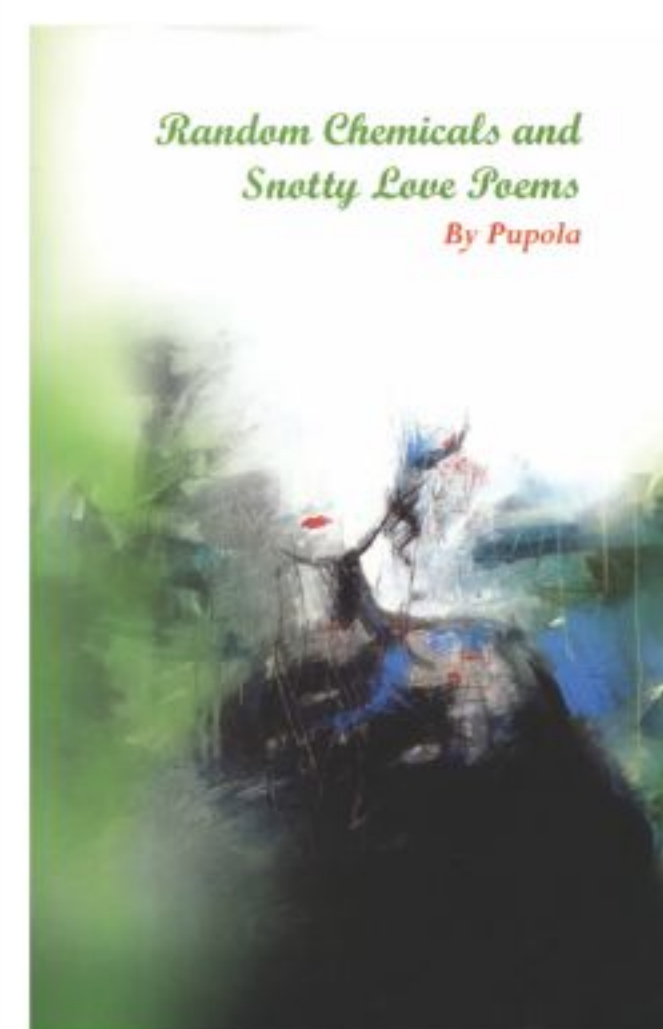
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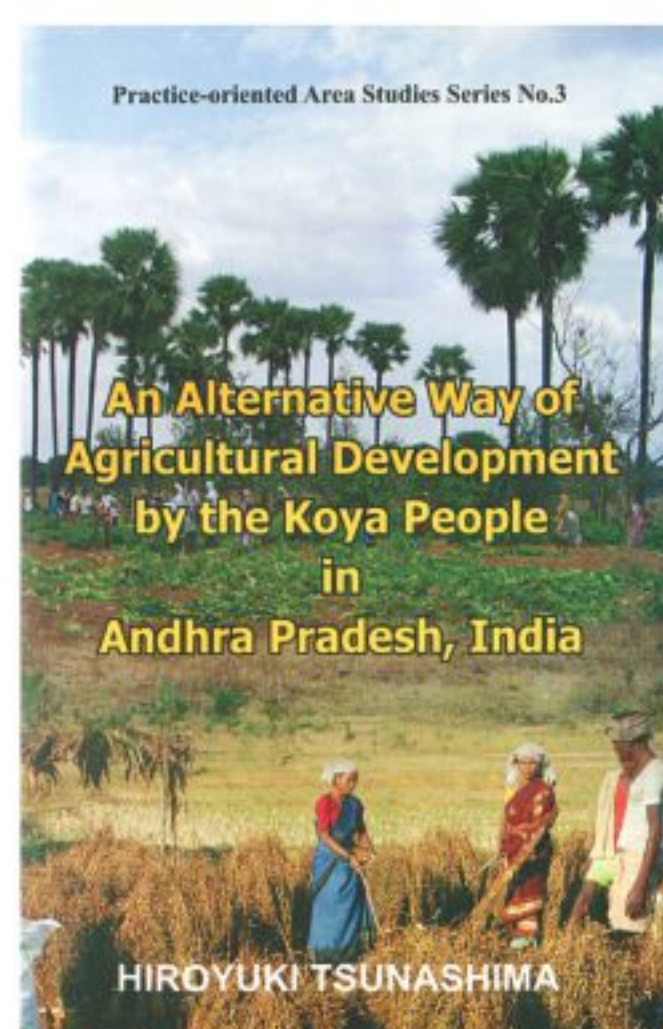
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