

Katherine Fishburn

DORIS LESSING: LIFE, WORK, AND CRITICISM

Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1987. Pp33. \$6.95

Reviewed by Amin Malak

Brief but thorough, *Doris Lessing: Life, Work, and Criticism* represents a lucid, informative introduction to the world of one of the prominent figures in contemporary British fiction. Given that Doris Lessing is a prolific and impressively inventive writer as well as being an articulate defender of the marginalized and the dispossessed, the diverse dimensions of her creative output have not as yet been fully analyzed. Happily, this lack of comprehensive evaluation is partly due to her never ceasing to surprise her readers as she experiments with genres, techniques, and motifs.

Following the format set probably by the editor of the series in which it appears, Katherine Fishburn's book has three major parts: a biography of Lessing, literary biography, and critical response; it also contains a useful chronological list of Lessing's works till *The Good Terrorist* (1985), as well as a selected, annotated bibliography of Lessing's criticism.

While Fishburn argues that Lessing is a socially and politically committed writer, she cautions against the reductive reading of her fiction as ideological pamphleteering. Emphasizing the metafictional innovation of *The Golden Notebook* as Lessing's magnum opus, Fishburn respectfully disagrees with those who regard it "as a kind of feminist casebook or bible" (20).

The book's most illuminating part is its "Critical Response" section, in which Fishburn assuredly and knowledgeably surveys the major critical approaches undertaken so far in studying Lessing's work. At times sketchy and cryptic, Fishburn's swift summaries of the critical and scholarly writings done on Lessing's fiction may nevertheless motivate the reader to seek the original works themselves. Fishburn perceptively concludes her book by charting the new territories that need to be developed in Lessing's criticism: more appreciation of her achievements as a writer of short stories; more analysis of the influences of African culture and Marxism (I might add Sufisim) on her work; and more "attention from poststructuralists, phenomenologists, and Lacanians" (23).

Chenjerai Hove

BONES

Harare: Baobab Books, 1988. Pp. 135

Reviewed by Charles Sarvan

Doris Lessing in "The Black Madonna" mocked the cultural aridity of white-ruled Rhodesia. If art requires leisure, then here was a society with plenty of it—since the black majority did the actual, physical work—and yet it neither

had produced anything creative itself nor had an interest in or appreciation of what others had. The picture today is very different: young Zimbabwe, independent only since 1980, expresses its vigor in cultural terms too. Already the country can boast of the works of writers such as Dumbudzo Marechera and Charles Mungoshi, and Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* is another, remarkable addition. (It won the 1988/89 Zimbabwe literary prize, is being translated into three European languages, and the original [English] version will be republished in England.)

The story is of Marita and is told by Janifa. (In a conversation with me in Giessen, West Germany, on the 17th of June 1989, the author told me that Marita was based on a woman he'd met—one who, two years after independence, was still searching for her son.) Marita is childless and, unable to face the resulting gossip and malice in a society which places a premium on children, she and her husband leave and find work on the land of a white farmer, "Manyepo." (They call him Manyepo, meaning "lies," because he is always suspicious and disbelieving where they are concerned.) Eventually, Marita has a son, an only child, but the boy runs away from school and joins the Zimbabwe freedom fighters in their struggle against the Ian Smith government. Time passes; there is no word from or of him, and Marita decides to go to the distant and "foreign" city, hoping to get news of him there. Janifa (Jennifer) is like a daughter to Marita: years ago, when Janifa and Marita's son were classmates, the boy had written her a love letter. This is all of him that remains, and Marita persuades Janifa to read the letter to her, over and over again, day after day. In the city, Marita falls under suspicion since her son is a "terrorist"; she is sexually humiliated and tortured: fatally. Meanwhile, Chisaga, the white man's employee and, therefore, privileged, rapes Janifa abetted by the latter's own mother. The war over, Marita's son returns, wanting to marry Janifa but she is now in an asylum for the mentally disturbed.

The novel is remarkable for the intense atmosphere it creates and sustains; a mood that is gentle and melancholic (despite the appalling cruelty), and yet also hard and fierce. It is largely Janifa's lament over Marita: "But Marita, now that you are dead, who will show me where there are dark holes and stumps on the path. . . ? Who will tell me the songs that made my heart sit in one place" (33). There are other voices too: that of Marita's husband, for example, silently expostulating with and reproaching the farmer (21-22); the voice of Chisaga, a man doing what in traditional society is woman's work: cooking. Even what appears to be dialogue in the fictional present is but a remembered conversation (47-48). The different voices combine to form a rich, convincing idiom. The operative term is verisimilitude: the work creates in English a feel of Chishona (the Shona language); an air of authenticity both linguistic and experiential for its fictional purposes. "Come behind the ant-hill so that no one can steal with their ears" (2); "the city is like the throat of a crocodile: it swallows both the dirty and the clean" (13); "talk is the medicine for the burdens of the heart" (30).

Since it is the distracted voice of Janifa remembering and talking through grief, there is incoherence, discontinuity, and narrative disruption. The vividness of recollection makes Marita seem alive to Janifa who often either addresses her directly or talks of her in the present tense. (Besides, in traditional, black African society, the dead are not "dead" but living, watching pres-

ences who are addressed and invoked.) The blurring of time sequence and phases lead us abruptly from the days of the struggle for independence to the present (94). However, the white minority continues to wield economic power, and Manyepo can boast: "There is nothing the government in the city can do. I rule here" (120). This moving forward into the historical present; the traditional proverbs and sayings; the use of fables and folktales; the frequent references to nature, to insects, birds, and animals suggest a continuity, a permanent "human condition" that is not free from pain and suffering. E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* wondered whether a good novel could not be likened to a symphony; and here the cadence of a rural Chishona rendered creatively into English; the "music" of suffering and sadness, of endurance and courage; of forgiveness and wisdom persist through--and after--this short, moving novel.

Louise DeSalvo

VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE ON HER LIFE AND WORK

Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. Pp. 372. \$22.95

Reviewed by Annis Pratt

Many of us who read, teach, and write about Virginia Woolf have been dismayed by biographers who discount her as "insane" and undervalue her courageous attempts to tell the truth about her childhood. Informed by "insights from the disciplines of feminist inquiry, the history of the family, Victorian studies, and the changes in psychoanalytic theory that stress personal history rather than internal drives as causative factors in neurosis," Louis DeSalvo's carefully researched study of Woolf's childhood, juvenilia, and portrayals of childhood and adolescence in her mature fiction puts an end once and for all to such dismissals (xvi).

Unimpressed by the Freudian idea that children's memories of incest are invariably imaginary, so convincingly does DeSalvo describe Woolf's sexually abusive family (in which Laura Stephen, Stella Duckworth, and Vanessa Stephen were also victimized) that we cannot help but agree that "Any view which explains Virginia Woolf's behavior as madness is archaic: too much is now known about the behavior of victims of childhood abuse to support such a description" (xvi-xvii). DeSalvo depicts the rebellious young Virginia, growing up with her half-sister Laura drugged and imprisoned in the attic as a punishment for disobedience, compelled to save herself from the same fate by teaching herself the art of writing. In *The Experiences of a Pater-Familias*, written when she was ten years old, she "explores in graphic detail . . . the experience of child abuse and child neglect . . . at a time when biographers of Woolf generally maintain that she was well protected and cared for" (134); while in "Terrible Tragedy in a Duckpond," written at the age of 17, she desperately tries to communicate the Duckworth brothers' longtime sexual abuse of herself and Vanessa. Forced to witness the uncontrollable lusts of her cousin J.K. Stephen, a rapacious, knife-wielding misogynist who was allowed access to Stella (and who some contemporaries thought might have been Jack the Ripper); and of Stella's fiancé Jack Hills, whose sexual demands probably contributed to her death of peritonitis a few months after her wedding, she