

Nuruddin Farah

Gifts

Harare: Baobab Books, 1992. Pp. 242

Reviewed by Derek Wright

Farah's *Gifts*, his first novel in six years, is essentially a love story. Its protagonist and heroine is Duniya, a twice-married, thirty-five-year-old single parent who slowly succumbs to the loving gift offerings of the widower Bosaaso. Duniya is that familiar figure in Farah's fiction: the Somali woman imprisoned by patriarchal Islamic tradition, her position negotiated by men. At the outset of her marital career she is herself a "gifted" property, given by her father in a customary marriage to a man three times her age, and one of the subsequent "givens" of her destiny is to be controlled by the uncles, half-brothers, and husbands, whose charge she is, and in whose houses she is temporarily accommodated.

The personal story opens out, however, into the wider perspective of international gifts from First to Third World countries, each chapter ending with a newspaper snippet about American and United Nations aid to famine-stricken nations in the Horn and other parts of Africa. Political gifts to nations, like personal gifts to people, bind together donor and recipient in ways which change their relationship. All gifts have their conditions and built-in dependencies, which has caused Duniya to grow wary and distrustful of them. As her ex-husband writes in a newspaper article, "Every gift has a personality—that of its giver. . . . Every foreign-donated sack of rice is stamped with the characteristics and mentality of its donor" (195). The recipient is expected to take over that gifted mentality, language, and value system, and express his or her gratitude.

In this exquisitely patterned novel, Farah moves deftly from microcosm to macrocosm, from private sensibility to public catastrophe. Each chapter begins with gift-spurning dreams in Duniya's waking consciousness and progresses, through a series of personal and social "giftings"—lifts to work, restaurant meals, blood donations, rent-free tenancies, food parcels, coins to beggars, an illegitimate foundling child (Allah's gift)—to the media spectacle of international aid. The reader is presented, however, with a series of imaginative leaps and metaphoric transferences, not a network of logical correspondences, and the book's subtle double focus is contrastive as well as comparative, concerned with points of both departure and convergence and carefully marking the limits of the parallels. Significantly, it is after reading the article on the dangers of international aid that Duniya decides to "make a gift of her body" to Bosaaso that night. Put crudely, Duniya needs Bosaaso's unexpected gifts and is able to receive them as an equal, without loss of pride, dignity, and independence: Somalia may not need their political equivalents and is not in a position to accept them on the same terms (*Gifts* was written against the background of the Ethiopian famines of the 1980s and has, inevitably, been overtaken by the Somali crisis of the 1990s, though the basic arguments about the political engineering of famine and misuse of aid still hold good).

Gifts is Farah's first African-published book and it is clearly aimed, stylistically, at a broader and more African-based readership: thus the learned epigraphic allusions to Western literature which open the chapters in the earlier books have been replaced by captions briefly summarizing the events that follow. This is a new, different Farah, interspersing his narrative with the familiar poetic dream-literature and oral folklore of Somali tradition but in a much more accessible form than hitherto. The new novel is the most radiant and sunny of his books, its humor gentle and teasing, its two central characters delightfully created. The quirky, enigmatic dovetailing of private and public themes is informed by a boldly original metaphoric conception and carries some subtle analyses of the complex psychology of donorship, its binding ties and dependencies. *Gifts* is both a poetically evocative and a politically provocative work, full of unexpected echoes and startling insights. It was six years in the making and will not disappoint Farah's patient readers inside and outside Africa. The best gifts are worth waiting for.

Cheryl K. Bove

Understanding Iris Murdoch

Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993. Pp. xii + 216. \$29.95

Reviewed by John Fletcher

This latest volume in the series *Understanding Contemporary British Literature* shares the aim of the other student guides or companions that are its stablemates, namely to "provide instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers, identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience" (ix).

This Cheryl K. Bove, a leading authority on the work of Iris Murdoch, does admirably. She begins with an outline of Murdoch's career, then gives an overview ("The Modern Realist") in which she stresses that Murdoch has contributed not only to the development of the novel but has also advanced the human condition as well. There then follows a lucid, concise exposition of Murdoch's aesthetics and moral philosophy, for which students of literature not taking courses in philosophy will be especially grateful, and from which even those majoring in philosophy will derive benefit.

The next four chapters form the core of the book: they contain the description and analysis of the "major" works of fiction, divided into four periods: early (1954-1962), middle (1968-1973), later (1978-1980), and latest (1983-1989). Few would disagree with this periodization of Murdoch's output, although some might not share Professor Bove's view that the "major" novels are *Under the Net*; *The Bell*; *An Unofficial Rose*; *The Nice and the Good*; *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*; *The Black Prince*; *The Sea, The Sea*; *Nuns and Soldiers*; *The Philosopher's Pupil*; *The Good Apprentice*; *The Book and the Brotherhood*; and *The Message to the Planet*. I myself would have dropped *An Unofficial Rose*, which I have always found a slight if charming work, and included in the canon of major novels *A Word Child*, which seems to me one of Murdoch's greatest achievements, both from a technical