

CHERYL FROST

BREAKDOWN AND REGENERATION: SOME MAJOR  
THEMES IN DORIS LESSING'S LATEST FICTION

Doris Lessing. *Shikasta*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1979. 365 pp.  
Hard cover \$20.00.

Doris Lessing. *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and  
Five*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980. 245 pp. Hard cover  
\$19.25.

Doris Lessing is still seen by many people as an advocate of women's liberation, but the truth is that sexual equality is merely one of her fundamental assumptions—"that filter which is a woman's way of looking at life has the same validity as the filter which is a man's way . . ." She wrote this in 1972 in a preface which she added to *The Golden Notebook*, protesting against ten years' misreading of it as a trumpet for the women's movement. Then the idea that the sexes' different viewpoints were equally valid may have seemed radical. Even now it does not seem particularly current, either in theory or in practice. Probably readers at the time took from *The Golden Notebook* what they most needed—a deeper understanding of women and their perspectives—a process of which Lessing might have been expected to approve, since she encouraged reading according to current development, though not wilful misunderstanding. Among several signposts for critics in the preface is the following statement of the novel's main point:

Yet the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise.

The setting of barriers is life-destroying: from the rubble resulting from the painful breakdown of personalities spring new organic sprouts.

Despite her early commitment to Communism, her propagandist novella, *Hunger*, and her uncompromising study of

South African and Rhodesian racism in *Going Home*, Lessing in her fiction is no simplistic espouser of causes. Her novels and short stories are primarily attempts to understand, on the one hand the social causes and on the other the individual failings which contribute to suffering. This is clear even in her earliest and least complicated novel, *The Grass is Singing*, published in 1950. She insists here that better social arrangements than white patriarchy exist, but this is not her sole point. An interest in psychological and spiritual phenomena beyond consciousness emerges in her later work.

A similar approach and preoccupations pertain in the two most recent novels, which are characterised by experiments with form. *Shikasta* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* are the first in a projected series of five novels professing to be archives of the planet Canopus, in Argos. Canopus is a totally benevolent colonising power, highly advanced, technologically and morally. On earth, which the Canopeans first name Rohanda, they establish a perfectly harmonious society, instructing the inhabitants by the psychic vibrations of Canopus, which are known as SOWF, Substance of We Feeling. A misalignment of the planets diminishes the supply of SOWF and provides an opportunity for subversion by Shammat, of Puttiora, an evil, backward planet. Egoism destroys the ideal society, and causes the inhabitants to degenerate, mentally and physically: their thousand-year life-span contracts; the sexual urge becomes haphazard and difficult to control; animals, formerly friends and companions, are hunted for food; and life is led barbarously in forests while the refined and beautiful cities decay. The Canopeans re-name the planet Shikasta.

In telling the painful history of Shikasta, Lessing concentrates on early times, and on the period preceding the catastrophe at the end of the twentieth century. She rewrites events of the Old Testament, such as the flood, the tower of Babel, the choosing of Abraham, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Canopean terms. The moral law is understood as the attempt of successive emissaries from Canopus to place rational limits on destruction; visitant angels and gods are the forms which the emissaries assume in Shikastan minds (shades

of von Daniken); and religions are interpreted as offering distorted vestiges of truth, while doing as much harm as good as institutions. The novel is an imaginative *tour de force* and although some elements are paralleled in earlier literature, they do not detract.

These elements are mostly related to Lessing's satirical perspectives. Against the background of the "golden age" Shikastan history appears as a progressive degeneration—Lessing obviously embraces the early Greek and the Hindu views rather than the common Western notion of progress based on technology. The first-person narration by the Canopean emissaries, especially Johor, provides an even more powerful contrast. Despite their life-spans of millennia and their vast knowledge, the Canopeans freely obey the Necessity, even to the point of accepting the limitations and suffering of human incarnation. Cross-cultural satire of this kind was a feature of eighteenth-century works like *Rasselas*, *A Citizen of the World*, and *Candide*. In the twentieth century C.S. Lewis, among others, had adapted it to science fiction, but Lessing offers a new and fascinating development.

Various interests are brought over into *Shikasta* from her earlier fiction. The imaginary racial situation towards 2000 A.D. reverses the real one analysed in *The Grass is Singing*, *The Golden Notebook*, the "Children of Violence" sequence, and many short stories, since the coloured nations have won political and economic dominance over the whites. In his incarnation as George Sherban, Johor counters an attempt to condemn the whites in open trial, the message being, apparently, the futility of revenge. Other continued preoccupations are forms of government; insanity as a means of reconstruction and as a guide to truth; psychic powers; cats; and, inevitably, the imminence of global destruction. The oppression of women is taken as a fact of Shikastan history—emissaries rarely incarnate as women, since that would multiply their difficulties. As in earlier novels, there appears to be little deliberate feminism. George's sister, Rachel, takes over as narrator for some time, but Lessing's concern, as in her portraits of Anna and of Martha Quest, is to reveal immaturity and to plot interior growth. Rachel is not characterised as a representative woman.

The symbol of the ideal city, of great significance in the "Children of Violence" novels, is structurally significant also in *Shikasta*. The cities destroyed in the beginning as a result of the misalignment are rebuilt in different forms at the end of the novel, following the catastrophe, when the flow of SOWF is sufficient again for the diminished population. On the global as well as the human level, therefore, a breakdown into violence and chaos deepens experience in preparation for new growth. The ending of *Shikasta* expresses Lessing's realistic optimism, which does not underestimate suffering and obstacles.

In contrast to *Shikasta*, which is crammed with issues and events, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* is a simple work. While the earlier novel is set mostly in the physical world of planets and stars, *The Marriages* deals with the psychic universe at right angles to *Shikasta*. The genre has changed, therefore, from science fiction to fantasy, though satirical commentary continues. In *Shikasta* Johor introduces the geography of the psychic realm, but action in it is confined to Zone Six, which is peopled by wraiths, some of whom are rejecting in terror the prospect of human rebirth while others have accepted it as essential for spiritual growth and transcendence of the Zone. *The Marriages* is set in the Zones further on.

In Zone Three heavenly cities flourish in a pastoral landscape and the people produce every kind of art and craft. They live in content, untouched by jealousy, anger or greed, and unversed in war. Government is by counsel and consent, and although there is a matriarchy, the sexes are considered equal. It would be truer to say that the possibility of inequality does not arise. When the novel opens, however, there is a fundamental disturbance in the Zone, most obvious in the behaviour of the animals, who are refusing to mate. The command comes from the Providers—who are never disobeyed by the inhabitants of the Zones—that Al'Ith, the queen of Zone Three, is to marry Ben Ata, the king of Zone Four. This marriage and the maturation it causes in both partners but especially in Al'Ith are Lessing's main subjects.

The reader descends with Al'Ith from the radiant mountains of Zone Three to the dank and dreary lowlands of Zone Four, where government is by coercion and war is the only art. Since

all the men are in the army from boyhood to old age, the women provide what food and shelter there is, and raise the children. The men are inept at love-making, resorting frequently to rape and maintaining domestic control by violence. The women nevertheless meet regularly in secret to chant ancient songs and to gaze at the distant heights of Zone Three, a practice which has long been unlawful. In fact they have kept alive spiritual aspiration, otherwise forgotten in both Zones and the cause of the unease currently afflicting them. Al'Ith instructs Ben Ata in love, government and the arts, but finds that she herself is gradually conforming to Zone Four emotionally, though not mentally. She bears him a son, who will rule Zone Four after him, and after a long struggle their marriage attains momentarily to perfection. Then it ends. The Providers order her back to her own country, and Ben Ata must marry Vahshi, the queen of barbarous Zone Five—mobility is to be extended further down the line.

Al'Ith's experiences have healed Zone Three, but have matured her so that she is no longer the appropriate queen for that comfortable place. She retires to the border of Zone Two, which appears to her to begin with as a "curdling blue mist," inhabited by spirits of flame. In the end she moves permanently into the higher Zone.

Since Al'Ith's physical and emotional descent into Zone Four is the essential ground for her advancement, *The Marriages* can be read as a romantic re-statement of the theme of breakdown and regeneration. Lessing's point is also that aspiration stung into existence by adversity is a higher state than content, no matter how perfect:

Teach me to love my hunger,  
Send me hard winds off the sands. . . .

Perfect content is not a problem with which most of us have to grapple, so the view that the state of striving is superior is consoling. The point is saved from triteness by the reality of Al'Ith's adversities, which also allow Lessing to approach the problem of evil—in the words of the Zone Three chronicler who is the narrator of the tale:

Yet there is a mystery here and it is not one that I understand: without this sting of otherness, of—even—the vicious, without the terrible energies of the underside of health, sanity, sense, then nothing works or *can* work. I tell you that goodness—what we in our ordinary daylight selves call goodness: the ordinary, the decent—these are nothing without the hidden powers that pour forth continually from their shadow sides. Their hidden aspects contained and tempered.

The reader inevitably contrasts life in the Zones with earthly experience, but the satire is less explicit than in *Shikasta*. Once again the feeling is not that Lessing is consciously advocating women's liberation, though more features than usual in her fiction lend themselves to feminist interpretation: the feminine Zone Three is the highest Zone to be described in detail; Al'Ith and the women of Zone Four are the saviours of their Zones, the conscious vehicles of regeneration, while Vahshi too is moulded on heroic lines and is superior in war and administration to the men of Zone Five; furthermore—and here Lessing's satire does seem consciously feminist—the masculine domination of Zone Four is both a symptom and a cause of its joylessness. On the other hand, impartiality is evident in her treatment of Ben Ata, who is seen sympathetically from the inside and who is as capable of learning and growth as Al'Ith.

George Turner's review of *Shikasta* in *Australian Science Fiction News* (March/April, 1980) expressed reservations about its "longueurs," and perhaps the thoughtfulness of the Canopean novels marks them as unconventional members of their genres—if such a thing is possible when the genres are science fiction and fantasy. Both novels are insightful and interesting, and can offer a great deal to a reader, whether a science fiction devotee or not, whether a committed feminist or not.

## ELIZABETH PERKINS

### GOOD, DURABLE MATERIALS

Hilarie Lindsay, *One Woman's World*. Leichhardt: Ansay, 1980. 80pp. \$5.50 softcover. Enquire 19 Beeson Street, Leichhardt 2040 for leatherbound.

Hilarie Lindsay, who grew up in Sydney, began writing seriously in 1965, since when she has twice won the Grenfell Henry Lawson Prize for prose. This collection of poems is her fourteenth publication, and among her other work are books on toy-making, a play, children's stories, cookery books and books edited by her. In 1974 Ms Lindsay received the M.B.E. for Services to Literature, so her writing activities must carry with them considerable community involvement.

The softcover edition of *One Woman's World* is a small, attractive volume, decorated with motifs of doves in flight, with typesetting and lay-out by the author. A special limited edition, numbered and signed by the author, and handbound in leather, is also available, and would make excellent gifts for older readers.

For older readers, because these verses of a mature woman are true homecraftship, made from good, durable materials and sensitive observation. Only the few that torture some inoffensive words into the vertical, when the horizontal does just as well or better, have a slight plastic appearance. Her subjects are women and their husbands and families, the things they see on the way to the office or while driving in the country, and their thoughts when alone in the house. Several, like *The Honey Man*, are like character sketches in verse, and might be even more appealing as prose pieces.

In many poems there is in the background a faint murmur of the earlier poetry of Judith Wright and Elizabeth Riddell, rather than of Emily Dickinson or Mary Gilmore, which is only to say that it is Australian and of the mid-century. The poems that please me most for originality and economy of means are *The Fat Girl's Phantom Lover* and *The Blind Man's Eyes*, the latter, about a blind man married to a dwarf, ends:

She'll press her lips  
on sightless eyes and say:  
'I would not have you  
any other way.'  
He is the tall strong lover  
of her night.  
She is the window to his world  
his light.

She writes of women's menstruation with barely suppressed anger that many women of her generation share for the years when taboos and the discomfort of inadequate toiletries were incommensurate with sensible decency or health:

My mother gave me  
a clean white rag  
two pins  
and a length of tape  
a little flag  
to hoist between my thighs.

This poem, *The Secret Spring*, is complemented by another on the same subject, *The Curse*, and although the creative, positive way of thinking about menstruation is present in both, perhaps more deliberate celebration of what Hilarie Lindsay calls "the ancient sensuous spring" is needed to balance the negative legacy.

Usually the poems in this collection are not unduly careless of the anguish of the other half of humanity, but their bias and solicitude are naturally for the female, and there is something of the polemical about some of them. A wide concern for waste and suffering is their dominant note. Technically, perhaps, the use of rhyme, intermittently, without any discernible good effect, is the most jarring element. Otherwise, these are the poems of an intelligent woman who has lived and felt, and found pleasure in words. The tendency, perhaps, is not to stop soon enough. For example, the first stanza of *Discords* is perfect in itself, saying all that the poem says, and does not need more:

When I tell my daughter  
stories of the past  
she curves her slender arm

into a violin  
and with her fingers  
plucks the empty air  
and mocks me  
with the mirror of her eyes.

#### NANCY WALLACE

Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane. *Uphill All the Way: A Documentary History of Women in Australia*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. 335 pp. Cloth \$22.95; Paper \$10.95.

During my first history lesson in secondary school our teacher asked the class to give him a definition of 'history.' Confronted by a predictable silence the teacher stepped smartly to the blackboard and promptly wrote 'HISTORY = HIS STORY.' Beaming, smug, self-satisfied, he faced the class and read his definition aloud for further emphasis. Silence again prevailed. Not one of the female students even thought to question this historical apartheid, this culturally ethnocentric and simplistic view of history. History was, for the most part, written by white males who assumed that women, like Aborigines and other minority groups, played no role in Australian history, or, if they did, it was considered too slight an occurrence to warrant mentioning.

It wasn't until the mid 1970's that a serious challenge was mounted against this pervasive, male-orientated view of Australian history. Dissatisfied with traditional interpretations, a num-