Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*
Angus and Robertson, Sirius Books, Sydney 1981.

Reviewed by Leigh Burrows

Drusilla Modjeska's book takes a relatively unproblematic approach to questions concerning the mediations of literature and history, gender and national identities. While I respect her efforts to rediscover the work of forgotten women writers of the period 1925-1945 in Australia, we need still to seriously consider the implications of unqualified support for 'novelists' who are 'female', 'Australian' and who wrote between the wars.

Nonetheless, her support and her enthusiasm for these women writers will inspire many readers of her book and lead them, perhaps, to seek the literature out for themselves, getting some idea of the writers' lives, background and associations. Many of the novels introduced by Drusilla Modjeska have been lately re-issued, and new questions will be raised, since her research, on the cultural history of the period and the women writing in it and their art. She has succeeded then, in her campaign for Australian women's writing, as Nettie Palmer did earlier in *her* campaign on behalf of Australian writers of both sexes around the time of the thirties.

Nettie Palmer dreamt of a "flowering" of Australian literature when it was the "Tasmanian poor-relation"[1] to the Great Tradition in English literature, a dream lately echoed by Judith Brett, editor of *Meanjin* that literary journal in the Australian tradition. Interestingly, both women saw their role as one of listening and encouraging, helpfully criticizing and supporting – the one a literary critic, the other a literary editor.

Drusilla Modjeska commends Nettie Palmer for her commitment to the development of a "progressive and national literature",[2] for her encouragement and promotion of Australian literature when it was not even studied in our universities, let alone outside Australia. The support of a national culture is not problematised by Drusilla Modjeska; rather she takes its desirability as given, endorsing even Jack Lindsay's article on Katharine Susannah Prichard as a "still leading critical assessment of her work". She quotes his lines: "(she) builds on the Australian tradition, on the best elements that have come out of the pioneering days. . . ."[3]

This, in a book specializing on the work of women writers, demonstrates a certain one-dimensional approach to the nature of women's relationship to history, language and men.

Unlike Drusilla Modjeska, neither Nettie Palmer or Judith Brett admitted to particularly supporting the work of women writers . . . they had a more 'humanitarian' cause. However, as Agnes Heller has remarked: "The identification with womankind as against mankind means the loss of identity with humanity and the identification with humanity without the specification of gender identity is the loss of female identity."[4]

Self-consciousness about the gender position assigned to us biologically and socially is complex – more so, some would argue, than the self-consciousness of national identity. In her paper on the nature of literary journals in Australia,[5] Judith Brett, however, elevated this consideration to one of importance in a psychoanalytic framework about Australians' particular relationship to language. As I have already noted she sees her role as one of supporting Australian writers and helping to provide a safe space for their creativity to develop. Just as the parent helps the child 'enter' language since it is seen as

Other, as possessed by adults, so the Australian writer needs encouragement since the language is always Other; it is English, hence the "cultural cringe".[6] Unfortunately, she did not extend this interesting analysis to include a consideration of women's particular relationship to language under patriarchy, surely an important part of any view of Australian writing with its investment of pride in a tradition: "that has been viewed as chauvinist, nationalist and confining for women, a legend of mateship, the digger and the Anzac".[7]

As Deborah Jordan indicates, as a woman Nettie Palmer was "one of the mainsprings in the creation of this cultural tradition, fully endorsing Vance Palmer's concept of a virile bush tradition in literature".[8]

This was no easy mix for Drusilla Modjeska in writing her book about Australian women writers. She says she did not want to 'fit' women into an existing history, but this, however, is what she has done. Her book supports Australian culture to a large extent, although she is critical of it in parts and her consideration of the specifically female experience of these women in the thirties tends to undermine the culture itself. Drusilla Modjeska seems to have unavoidably caught herself up in a conflict of allegiances: to Marxism, to Feminism, to Australian history, to literature and to women and men. Working within a loose Marxist-Feminist historical framework her book serves more to concentrate on biographical accounts of the writers' lives and the political climate than on the literature. Her research has produced some fascinating information gleaned from letters, memoirs, records and the existing cultural history but her emphasis on history has led to an inevitable suppression of what I think could be even more fascinating: the contradictions in the literature, the novels, themselves.

Drusilla Modjeska makes little reference to any theoretical work done on the novel, on women's writing or on Australian writing. She seems almost unaware of the plethora of feminist, Marxist psycho-analytic, semiotic, structuralist and deconstructivist criticism which is attempting to come to some closer, some subtler, more complex understanding of the relationships between literature, language, author, reader and society. Her area of study, to be sure, is one more of cultural history rather than literary theory but it is becoming increasingly difficult, I think, to assume that literature is literature and therefore worthy of study. Drusilla Modjeska assumes too much; she spends only one chapter, entitled, interestingly, 'The Detours of Fiction', and near the end of the book, on any discussion of the women's writing, their art. Here she covers nearly twenty novels in thirty-five pages.

To me, the strength of the book lies in its interesting anecdotes, its Australian political history, its enthusiasm and sense of rediscovery of these women writers and strangely, in the sense of pride a woman might feel in reading it. She must tread carefully, however, if she wants to discover the distinctively female or even the distinctively Australian.

NOTES

1. Sneja Gunew, "Migrant Women Writers. Who's on Whose Margins", *Meanjin*, Autumn Vol. 42, No. 1. March 1983, 16.
2. Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, 44.
3. *Ibid.*, 133.
4. Agnes Heller, "The Emotional Division of Labour Between the Sexes. Perspectives on Feminism and Socialism", *Thesis Eleven*, 5/6, 61.

5. Seminar in the Centre for General and Comparative Literature, Monash, 10.5.1983.
6. A. A. Phillips, the first editor of *Meanjin* coined this lasting expression.
7. Deborah Jordan, "Towards a Biography of Nettie Palmer", *Hecate*, 6.2.1980, 65
8. *Ibid*.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Beverley Male, *Revolutionary Afghanistan*, Croom Helm (London, 1982).

Reviewed by V. P. Vaidik

Beverley Male's book on Afghanistan is an example of passionate scholarship. It stands out among the dozens which have cropped up in the wake of the Afghan crisis. It is neither a patchwork based on the newspaper clippings nor a descriptive report on the developments of Afghanistan. Essentially it is a polemical work supported by interpretations which are brilliant but are not tenable in every case.

Revolutionary Afghanistan focusses on Hafizullah Amin. Beverley has defended the case of Amin, asserting that "seldom has any revolution been so widely misrepresented as that which began in Afghanistan in April 1978, or any revolutionary leader so viciously slandered as Hafizullah Amin". It is true that no conclusive evidence is available to prove that Amin was either the agent of CIA or KGB, as used to be alleged both by the Afghan Left and Right as also by the USSR and the US media as and when it suited them respectively. However, what Amin did to the Afghan people and to the ruling party and the way he dealt with the superpowers has turned that beautiful and proud country into a festering international sore. Beverley is not wide of the mark in portraying Amin as an ardent nationalist and an unflinching patriot but she seems to be so swept off her feet by these dazzling qualities of her hero as not to recognize the negative role played by his egocentric approach to the Afghan revolution, which in fact, proved to be disastrous for both himself and his nation.

By virtue of engineering a successful revolution, Amin presumed that he had the innate capability and the people's support to manipulate not only his revolutionary colleagues but also the state policies including those in respect of the super powers. He perceived the presence of the qualities of King Abdur Rahman and Amanullah in his own personality. A man who was not even a member of the politbureau before the revolution, instals himself as the Kingmaker of Afghanistan though he formally occupied the third position in the state apparatus, rebukes his senior colleagues from Parcham in the party in the very first meeting of the Revolutionary Council, forces them to leave the country as ambassadors within three months of the revolution, punishes the Parchamis at large by removing them from their positions in the government and Party and uses the gullible Noor Muhammad Tarraki (The 'Nabega-Tawana' – The Supermost human being – a nomenclature given by Amin to his so-called Master) for initiating unimaginative, unrealistic and harsh revolutionary programmes, which alienated him and his party from the people of Afghanistan. In search of absolute power he ultimately destroys his own master in September 1979. This led to the narrowing down of his already shrunken support in the Khalq faction of the ruling party. He ruled Afghanistan for almost three and a half months with the help of his close relatives and trusted personal friends. The legitimacy of the revolution and its leadership never before were so much in doubt and disdain as they were during the last phase of Amin's rule.