

Cruel Optimism in Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from the Aloes*

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Abstract:

This research investigates the manifestation of "cruel optimism" in Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from the Aloes*, specifically analyzing how the characters experience crisis ordinariness, impasse, and misrecognition. The study aims to explicate how these receptive and experiential states shape the characters' responses to personal and socio-political ordeals under apartheid.

The analysis employs Lauren Berlant's theoretical framework of cruel optimism, which describes the emotional attachments to desires or objects that ultimately disrupt flourishing. The findings reveal that each character is enmeshed by forms of cruel optimism: Piet clings to the ideal of resilience and belonging, yet this attachment deepens his sense of displacement. Gladys yearns for psychological safety, but her efforts are overwhelmed by trauma and the persistent threat of betrayal, leading to a perpetual state of impasse. Steve's hope for solidarity and escape is undermined by suspicion and systemic oppression. His cruel optimism stems from his misrecognition to initiate a better future to his family. The play demonstrates how crisis becomes ordinary and how misrecognition undermines the possibility of genuine connection.

A Lesson from the Aloes offers a pathetic exploration of how individuals attach themselves to sustaining optimistic fantasies that, under conditions of political and personal

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imprisonment, become obstacles to their well-being. The play exemplifies Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and illuminates the affective costs of survival in a hostile environment. Ultimately, Fugard's characters epitomize the paradox of seeking hope and meaning in circumstances that continually frustrate both.

Keywords: Cruel optimism, apartheid, crisis ordinariness, impasse, Misrecognition, Afrikaners.

Introduction: South Africa's Political Landscape in 1963 - the Apartheid Regime's Effects

South Africa in the 1960s ushers into a political upheaval exemplified in the oppressive system of segregation known as apartheid and its consequences on the Afrikaners. However, this oppressive system underscores the individual's failure to approach their hope of a promising future. Apartheid (1948-1994) aimed at controlling black urbanization and "was designed at a national level and progressively set in place to prescribe the conditions and administration of black urban life, ownership of land and mobility, and to impose segregation" (Marutlulle 2)

The segregation dictated disenfranchising black south Africans leading them into poverty and hopelessness. The roots of this oppressive social system started when the National Party won the election in 1948. Thereafter a series of laws were legislated against the black Afrikaners including the banning of interracial relations, dismissal from their home and their confinement into tribal homelands by force, deprived them from education and their right to vote or engage in politics. Eventually, the black's resistance escalated against the white government, but resulted into a brutal governmental reaction where "Series of mass mobilization and campaigns were conducted and during this time, the government arrested and tried many activists and banned all political organizations." (The African Union Commission 1)

Eventually, the blacks' non-violent resistance turned into a violent one in 1960 when 69 peaceful protestors were killed in Sharpeville. A group of protestors, including Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko, embraced the violent choice of resistance as a reaction to spark international attention. Economic ramifications together with the black Afrikaners' continuous resistance throughout years pressured the government to end discrimination in 1994. (Blakemore 1-3) Still, while optimism played a crucial role in mobilizing support for the end of apartheid and fostering hope for a better future, especially after Nelson Mandela's election in 1994, the enduring socio-economic challenges in post-apartheid era have complicated this narrative leading the Afrikaners to suffer cruel optimism. The initial euphoria has given way to a more nuanced understanding of progress, where optimism must contend with the realities of inequality and unmet expectations in post-apartheid South Africa.

Against this historical background Athol Fugard drew his masterpiece *A Lesson From the Aloes*.

II. Cruel Optimism: Definition and Influence

The concepts of optimism and cruel optimism represent different perspectives on hope and desire. While optimism is linked to positive thinking, resilience, and higher well being; cruel optimism impedes these positive aspects in life. It is defined by Steve Marotta as a

problematic attachment that is at once affirming and threatening; such an attachment scaffolds one's world but also has the potential to destroy it. It implies unrealised fantasy, unrequited sacrifice, and unravelling tethers, particularly to the 'good life' imaginaries that have provided anchors for the (white, cishet, colonist) hegemony of western capitalist democracies.(7)

The term of cruel optimism was first coined by American scholar, cultural theorist, and author Lauren Gail Berlant (1957-2021). In the introduction to her book *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant presents the concept of cruel optimism that is based on reality and fantasy, a situation where the individual is compelled to attach himself/herself to the cruel present through imagination just because it gives him/her the sense and the hope of attaining the "good life", which in reality might not be attainable. She describes cruel optimism as

a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/ scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (24)

Berlant further demonstrates the fact that, psychologically speaking, not all the individuals perceive or interpret the attachment to certain situations, things, or concepts in life the same way. Thus, there is no intersubjectivity whatsoever and that is why people's sense of attachment differ from one another. (Ibid. 26) Thus, emotional attachments to certain political ideals like freedom, identity and the belief that reforms will lead to a better life, can lead to disappointment and suffering while still being difficult to abandon thinking about these ideals as is affirmed by Berlant who says: "It is this difficulty in detaching 'from what is already not working' that makes optimism for a better life cruel" (qtd. Lockwood in 2)

Moreover, an individual who suffers from cruel optimism, Berlant illustrates, can mostly cope with his present crisis and return to the real and normal life; an approach to life that she terms as "crisis ordinariness". Such an approach will accompany an individual rather than excluding him from the fabric of his routine life. She asserts that in her book *Cruel Optimism* when she refers to the disparities between trauma and crisis stating:

A traumatic event is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact

takes form, becomes mediated. Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming. (10)

Berlant also affirms people's inclination to attach themselves to optimism even if it is a cruel one. They might resort to their imagination and weave stories of overcoming the crisis or even being defeated by it just to delude themselves to remain steadfast, "even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least" (Ibid).

Next to crisis ordinariness, according to Berlant, is the impasse. Unlike crisis ordinariness, it is a stage of stagnation where the individual's focus is on restructuring present existence rather than seeking future progress. There is no normalization of crisis into the fabric of daily life, rather they are unable to move forward. They feel trapped in their circumstances acknowledging their resignation to overcome the crisis while navigating their life. It is described by Berlant as,

a thick moment of ongoingness , a situation that can absorb many genres without having one itself- is a middle without boundaries,

edges, a shape. It is experienced in transitions and transactions. It is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. (Ibid. 200)

Furthermore, Steve Marotta emphasized the middleness of the impasse when he says:

The impasse is an affect world, an atmospheric attunement to structural transformation in which crisis is normalised and people become at once hyperaware of potential threats and exhausted by the constant management required to fend those threats off. (9)

Also worth mentioning Berlant's analysis of the individuals' emotional responses that shape how individuals relate to their circumstances or respond to the impasse. The emotional investments in societal structures often lead to feelings of expendability and degradation, particularly among those struggling economically. Thus, social change will be a complicated process since the individual is overlapping between hope and despair. Yet, Judith Butler and etal. explain that Berlant still believes that

we have to lose the falsifying ideals of the nation in order to begin to imagine anew a common life in which the basic goods of social democracy, including health care and education, are public values, where every life is valued, however "productive" it is judged to be within the scheme of market values. Berlant was not against optimism *per se*, but only the cruel kind that lands you in the ditch.(4)

Berlant's third concept in her framework of cruel optimism is the misrecognition. This concept typically refers to the misunderstandings or misinterpretations individuals have regarding their situations and desires, often influenced by the conditions of crisis ordinariness and the experience of impasse. She defines misrecognition as a psychological process that assists the individual's fantasy to manage ambivalence related to interpreting attachment. She states in her book *Cruel Optimism* that misrecognition is a

psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire: its operation is central to the state of cruel optimism. To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities -which it might or might not have. (122)

Thus, to Berlant it is a process that highlights the ambivalence that is inherent in the individuals' personality, specifically the marginalized groups' comprehension of the attachment to their object of desire that help them sustain an identity within societal structures.

III. Cruel Optimism and the Apartheid Regime:

Berlant's cruel optimism refers to the attachment individuals or communities have to certain aspirations or conditions that may ultimately be detrimental to their well-being. In the context of the apartheid regime in South Africa, this concept can be applied to understand how certain communities maintained hope and attachment to systems that were inherently oppressive. Yet, the question is did the black Afrikaners keep their sense of optimism or even cruel optimism during that time? And the other question is related to the white Afrikaners, did they suffer from the sense of cruel optimism caused by the apartheid regime just like the black ones? And if so, then in which way?

Apart from the racist people in South Africa who were responsible for legislating the oppressed apartheid regime, Afrikaners in general, like any community, were aspiring for a just society and a genuine attempt to abolish inequality that the oppressed regime kept on hindering. Around 1963 South Africa's apartheid era can be acknowledged as a complex interchange between hope and disillusionment. The political promises of reform and the international global condemnation of apartheid were pivotal in activating hope in the activists. However, the promises of reform proposed by the apartheid government failed to materialize leading people to suffer disillusionment, repression and even violence. Sharpeville Massacre in March 21, 1960 was an evidence to the government's deception and betrayal met by the activists. Black African groups led by Robert Sobukwe, who was 35-year-old leader of the Pan Afrikanist Congress, arranged a demonstration against apartheid. Yet, they were met with violence causing a massacre when the " police fired on a crowd of Black people, killing

or wounding some 250 of them. It was one of the first and most violent demonstrations against apartheid in South Africa." (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica 1)

Still, Figures like Sobukwe inspired hope among activists but also faced brutal repression. Sobukwe's call for peaceful protest against pass laws was met with violence, illustrating how aspirations for nonviolent resistance were thwarted by state brutality leading Afrikaners to suffer cruel optimism due to their still ongoing attachment to their hope of salvation and freedom. Thus, in the context of apartheid, cruel optimism manifests itself in the belief that post-apartheid South Africa would automatically lead to equality and improved living conditions for all citizens. A form of life that will not work, but still people fear departing it for fear of losing their optimism to live a better life in the future.

IV. Athol Fugard's Life Under Apartheid:

The dramatist, actor, and director Athol Fugard was born on June 11, 1932, in Middelburg, South Africa, and grew up in Port Elizabeth. His upbringing in a racially divided society profoundly influenced his worldview. His father was an Afrikaner, while his mother was of English descent, which exposed him to conflicting cultural perspectives. While his father held prejudiced views typical of many white South Africans at the time, Fugard's mother instilled in him a sense of justice and empathy for those oppressed by apartheid policies. (American Academy of Achievement 4)

Athol Fugard's relationship with the concept of "cruel optimism" can be understood through his life experiences and his body of work, particularly in the context of apartheid South Africa. Fugard worked in Johannesburg as a clerk at the Native Commissioner's Court. Therein, the court was to give its sentence against the violations done by the blacks regarding the passbook that restrict their movement in apartheid South Africa. Fugard himself commented in an interview by Brad Schreiber on the injustices he witnessed in that court stating:

I really saw at firsthand what the policy of apartheid was doing to innocent people ...the accused lined up outside the door to the courtroom, in the prison yard and then let in one at a time. And dispatched for times ranging from two weeks, three weeks, two months, and also, you know, thrown out of Johannesburg, sent back after they had served their sentences, into the country where there was no work, no chance of earning a living, where their families were hungry and their children starving. Uh, man, I'm telling you, it was a nightmare. I saw how my country worked.(3)

Living through the establishment and entrenchment of apartheid, Fugard utilized his career as a writer to document the Afrikaners' emotional and psychological toll of living under such a brutal regime that stripped them their humanity. He creates his characters who are held onto hope for change

irrespective of the reality they are facing, a matter that is at the core of cruel optimism. True liberation for him is linked not just to political change, but also to the massive social transformation towards race and identity where people experience optimism, not cruel optimism. However, though Fugard is not explicitly align his philosophy with the concept of cruel optimism, his works resonates with themes that can be related to this concept. He illustrates characters who navigate their harsh realities while holding onto fragile hopes, they aspire for change in an environment that continuously undermines their efforts reflecting a form of cruel optimism. Fugard's storytelling not only reflects the struggles of his characters but also invites audiences to grapple with their own attachments to ideals that may ultimately prove elusive.

V. The Crucial Role of Port Elizabeth in 1963 as a Setting to Fugard's *A lesson from the Aloes*

The 1963 South Africa was marked by tension and resistance due to the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. Port Elizabeth, the setting of Fugard's *A Lesson from the Aloes*, is known for its mixed communities and a history of political activism. The play, Misha Berson illustrates in his article " 'A Lesson From Aloes': South Africa's Divisions Made Painfully Real", is "set in the 1960s, at a turning point for the resistance movement" A time when the government reacted violently towards black leaders and some white allies, eventually "[t]he utopian dream of a successful, nonviolent, interracial revolution shattered." (1-2)

However, the significance of this setting crosses the political dimension to reach into a broader zone; into the core of human's psyche where issues of identity, resilience, or even withdrawal are to be embodied.

The concept of cruel optimism is expressive initially from the title of the play since the aloes symbolize the characters' attachment to their land, as well as their struggle to survive its harsh and inhospitable environment. The aloes, confined in their environment, require extra care to survive, mirroring the characters' need for vigilance to cope with their circumstances. Identity is what distinguishes human beings and giving them their sense of attachment to their surrounding and the first lesson the aloe can give is the importance of a name that distinguishes it from the other types of the aloes and this what Piet Bezuidenhout, an Afrikaner living in South Africa with his wife Gladys, is searching for in a book of plant species at the beginning of the play. He demonstrates the relatedness of identity to an individual's name giving himself as an example. He states:

PIET. when other men say Piet Bezuidenhout it is me they are talking
about. Yes! That is what in a name. My face, my story in mine,...I
will remain positively identified as Petrus Jacobus Bezuidenhout;

Species, Africaner; Habitat, Algon Park, Port Elizabeth, in this year
of our Lord, 1963 ... and accept the consequences"

(*A lesson from the Aloes* 5)

Thus, the Anonymous aloe foreshadows the plights of the main characters in the play. "Having the right name or words for an object or an occasion has become important for Piet, since they also provide him with a sense of order and meaning, which are lacking in this world of great racial conflict"(13), states Wendy Perkins, a professor of twentieth-century American and British literature and film.

Piet, like the aloes, is trying to survive the harsh and inhospitable environment that he is attached to. Yet, "[h]is name and his classification as an Afrikaner give him his identity but appear at odds with the cause of racial equality to which he is devoted, which includes the fight to overthrow the South African government and establish civil rights for all the country's inhabitants."(Ibid. 14)

Thus, the title alludes to the fact that how apartheid regime confines and isolates the Afrikaners, both Whites and Blacks, creating an unhealthy and dangerous system against nature, where adapting and coping within this unequal system cannot be called living. Piet, Gladys, and Steve are all attached to the idea of a better future in South Africa, whether through political activism, personal relationships, or a sense of belonging. However, their attachments become a source of disappointment and suffering turning their optimism into a cruel one.

VI. The Exploration of Cruel Optimism in *A Lesson from the Aloes*

The problematic attachment or the ideal that may not materialize is what cruel optimism means. Starting with Piet, his cruel optimism stems from his sense of crisis ordinariness within the context of apartheid-era South Africa. His character grapples with; his identity as an Afrikaner, his failed political activism, his wife's deteriorating mental state, and his strained relationships, all of which contribute to his sense of displacement and need for purpose.

Though having a strong connection to his African heritage, Piet is confused to the fact that white Afrikaners themselves are part of the oppressive apartheid regime, a crisis he is trying to cope with through attempting several means to sustain a comforting vision of his homeland and his place in it. Affected by Steve's speech, he describes to Gladys the moment of his disillusionment, regarding the cruel system of apartheid and its application by the white Afrikaners realizing the fact that the word NO is decisive to settle and kill any oppressive system. He says:

PIET. My first lesson from Steve, and the most important one. An
evil system isn't a natural disaster. There's nothing you can do

to stop a drought, but bad laws and social injustice are man-made and can be unmade by men... We can make this a better world to live in. (*A Lesson from the Aloes* 37)

However, in his need for a purpose in life to be attached to, Piet is overlapping between adaptation and avoidance of reality. His crisis ordinariness is manifested in many ways. He resorts to political activism, isolation, and farming; including raising aloes, that may help him manage the heightened threats within the context of everyday living. Living in a society structured around inequality and oppression creates Piet's internal conflict where he suffers the clash between his commitment to racial equality and his being a white Afrikaner. Such a state creates knots in his psyche that are hard to untie just like the roots of the aloes being contained within a tiny tin giving no vent to the plant to flourish. He says: "It's the roots that upset me. Even with all my care and attention they are still going to crawl around inside this little tin and lie themselves into knots looking for the space creation intended for them"(Ibid. 9). Due to his political activism, he is accused of being an informer after Steve's imprisonment, a state leading to the community's mistrust and into his eventual isolation embedding him in a state of "crisis ordinariness". Piet limits his activities into tending plants as an alternative way to cope with. He develops a protective shield; aloes, to survive in a harsh political environment reflecting the "crisis ordinariness" of adapting to difficult circumstances. He says, addressing Gladys and naming a lesson one may learn from the aloes:

GLADYS. Is that the price of survival in this country? Thorns and bitterness.

PIET. For the aloe it is. Maybe there's some sort of lesson for us there.

GLADYS. What do you mean?

PIET. We need survival mechanisms as well. (Ibid. 16)

Thus, Piet's aspiration of approaching a dream of a successful, nonviolent, interracial revolution is shattered leading him to maintain optimism through a survival mechanism that eventually contributes not to optimism, but to his cruel optimism. However, in his attempt to materialize the ideal, Piet succeeds in creating a smaller world for himself sharing it with aloes. He finds solace in personal pursuits in exchange of the unattainable political goals, a shift in focus to cope with his sense of cruel optimism.

Unlike Piet, Gladys' cruel optimism is manifested through the state of the impasse where there is no normalization of crisis to cope with in the future. Instead, she focuses on restructuring the present rather than seeking future progress. Gladys is obsessed with fears due to the oppressive regime of the apartheid. She suspects everything around her even the aloes that Piet is tending. She states addressing

Peit and describing the aloes: "they're turgid with violence, like everything else in this country. And they're trying to pass it on to me." (Ibid. 18) Gladys feels entrapped both socially and emotionally and she lost trust in others even her husband due to the government's violation to her privacy when they confiscated her diary. "Her mental state results from the governmental officials reading and confiscating her diaries, which made her feel "violated." (Encyclopedia.com 8).

Thus, her sense of fear or even anger is a state of impasse where she could think of no other safe and optimistic solution to attach herself to. Her conflict stems from her unattainable desire to reach a life free from the pervasive violence. She directs her anger towards her husband accusing him of being powerless to protect her from the political turmoil. She addresses him stating:

GLADYS. [If] you were to tell me once more that they won't come
again ...! To start with. I don't believe you, but even if I
did, that once was enough. You seem to have a lot of
difficulty understanding that, Peter. It only needs to
happen to a woman once, for her to lose all trust she ever
had in anything or anybody. They violated me.

(A lesson from the Aloes 30)

This inability to reconcile her desires with her reality leaves her in a state of paralysis. Though both, Peit and Gladys, share the same circumstances, each follows a diverse way of attachment. The aloes express the state of each one of them through a different perspective. Peit's nurturing to the aloes leads him to the state of crisis ordinariness while Gladys' association to the aloes leads her to experience the impasse. Like the aloe plant, she is entrapped in a life where she cannot thrive or find peace; she is struggling emotionally to survive the harsh reality of the oppressive political regime.

Nevertheless, living in apartheid- South Africa era by- itself is a challenge to the inhabitants. Gladys is aspiring to reach or attach herself to optimism, but is instead losing herself in her psychological conflict and the challenges she is facing to recover her trauma. Unlike the aloes, she yearns for more than survival when she affirms her desire to "live my life, not just survive it" (*A lesson from the Aloes 17*). However, this state leads her to suffer cruel optimism being torn between her desire for a fulfilling life and the harsh realities of apartheid, which ultimately take a toll on her mental and emotional well-being. In her attempt to live her life once more, Gladys is expressing a longing for normalcy and connections with others, namely Steve's family. Yet her obsession with her dairy and her fear about safety ushers her emotional and psychological instability embodied by the state of the impasse. In addition, she is turning to displacement as a defense mechanism to turn toward a target

that poses less risk upon her mental state. She displaces her fear with anger that she is directed towards Piet; a state that can be interpreted as a form of cruel optimism. She reminds Piet of the scene when her dairies were confiscated telling him: "[Y]ou led them in and then stood there next to the doorway. I can't remember much about you after that. ... Then the one in charge saw them on the table, asked you what they were . . . you told him . . . he apologized to me nicely and started to read them." (*A lesson from the Aloes* 27) Gladys attached herself to the illusion that she can re-control her life and emotion by blaming Piet, a belief that offers temporary relief, but do not lead to genuine healing or resolution.

However, by the end of the play, she recognizes the fact that she is in need of a return to the mental hospital; she tells Piet "I've got to go back, Peter" (*A lesson from the Aloes* 82), showing the futility of her struggle and the "cruel" nature of her hope for a recovery in an already damaged circumstances. The stress that she is subjugated to, due to her sense of isolation and the lack of support from friends that she already complaining from, accelerates her deteriorating mental state. She, unlike Piet, could not cultivate or develop a "thick skin" to survive a harsh political environment heading herself towards a state of the impasse and her sense of cruel optimism.

As for Steve, he neither develops this thick skin to survive like Piet, nor attaches himself to the illusion of re-controlling his life like Gladys. Instead he decides to liberate himself from the chains of the oppressive political regime, from the illusion of a better future though the prospect may not be promising enough.

Steve represents Berlant's third concept in her framework of cruel optimism, that of misrecognition. Throughout his life Steve misunderstands and misinterprets individuals as well as situations. He resorts to the anti-apartheid movement; as an activist, to friendship, to a promising future for his family, and finally to the emotional attachment to his land. Yet all these causes lead to his sense of cruel optimism at the end. He dreams of social change and justice, yet the harsh treatment he encountered while imprisoned, together with his realization of Peit's disloyalty to their friendship, shattered his dreams. Rumors tell that Peit is the one who informed Steve's activist tendency. These rumors are even more asserted by Gladys' accusations and suspicions towards her husband as being the informer. She declares addressing Steve: "it happens to be the truth. Yes. He is an informer. Peter is the one who went to the police and told them you were going to break your Banning Order and be at the party." (*A lesson from the Aloes* 74)

Thus, the emotional investment in his friendship to Peit, as being one of the pillars to his attachment to optimism, starts to collapse taking him into a dead end of cruel optimism. He is suffering an ambivalence in recognizing his identity. Steve recalls the emotional moments that used to shape his attachment to his friend Peit and his source of identity and belonging, yet these memories are vexed by

the rumors of the latter being the informer. Another misrecognition that leads to Steve's cruel optimism is his illusion of initiating a better future to his family after the apartheid era. A desire that is also proved to be cruel within the current political policies. He is not aware of the fact that "if inspiring hope and optimism are not grounded on solid foundations that can bring about a significant improvement for the person in question, they will lead to shattered dreams and disillusionment". (Al-Gawhari & Hamid 40) He expresses his father's hopes that reflect the dreams of the colored men in general, which were and is still unattainable: "All he wanted from life was to work, feed his family and wait for another big one. That's not asking for a lot, hey? But it was still too much for a Coloured man". (*A lesson from the Aloes* 66) He also adds that the oppressive apartheid regime deprived the Coloured man his memories as well, "[h]e hadn't just lost his house and his savings, they also took away the sea ... he tried the river a few times, but that wasn't for him". (*A lesson from the Aloes* 67)

Like the aloes, he attaches himself to any cause that may help him be resilience in the harsh environment he is living in. However, his new object of desire represented by his hope and optimism to find a safer and more promising future for his family aboard, may end cruelly as well since he is uprooting himself and his family members from their homeland and eventually exposing them to trauma, loss, and instability that may undermine the flourishing he is seeking. South Africa, for Steve, is not only a country he is a citizen in, it is the land that gives him his identity, a sense of belonging, an emotional attachment to his root as an African American. He confesses his inner self to Piet stating: " I don't want to leave this country, Piet. I was born here. It's my home. But they won't give me a chance to live. And they'll do the same to my children" (*A lesson from the Aloes* 80) Thus, Steve's misrecognition, exemplified by the freedom he is aspiring to experience in London and is supposed to be his new object of desire, might lead into a new sense of cruel optimism not only for himself, but for his family members as well.

VI. Conclusion

The relationship between cruel optimism and apartheid is deeply intertwined with historical narratives of hope and disillusionment. While the end of apartheid brought about new possibilities for change, the lingering effects of inequality have made it difficult for many to detach from their aspirations for a better life—an attachment that often proves more harmful than beneficial. Cruel optimism in Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from the Aloes* is woven into the fabric of the characters' daily lives, shaping their routines, relationships, and sense of self. Each one of its main characters; namely Piet, Gladys, and Steve, is inclined to attach her/himself to optimism even if it is a cruel one to delude oneself to remain steadfast. Piet cope with his present life under the apartheid regime reaching a state

of crisis ordinariness to help himself be included into the fabric of routine life, than being excluded from the only life he knows which take him into the state of cruel optimism. Gladys, on the other hand, could not normalize herself to the crisis she is encountering, she focused her attention to restructure her present existence, to a stage of stagnation instead of seeking future progress. Like the aloe, she is entrapped in a life where she cannot find peace, she has to struggle an ambivalence between reality and illusion. As for Steve, he is associated with misunderstanding and misinterpreting to his surroundings, a state Berland calls misrecognition. He resorts to many causes to attach himself to in his hope to reach optimism, yet all these causes have failed him leading instead to cruel optimism. To conclude, Fugard alludes to the fantasy of a good life especially under the oppression of the apartheid era. Cruel optimism or the persistent hope for transformation leads the Afrikaners to their continued suffering. They just have to survive like the aloes, but could not thrive or be optimistic.

المستخلص

التفاؤل القاسي في مسرحية درس من الصبار لأثول فيوجارد

إنعام هاشم هادي

يتناول البحث تجليات "التفاؤل القاسي" في رواية "درس من الصبار" لأثول فيوجارد، ويحلل تحديدًا كيف تواجه الشخصيات تجارب الحياة كإدارة الأزمات والمأزق وسوء التقدير. تهدف الدراسة إلى توضيح كيف تُشكل هذه الحالات التقليدية والتجريبية استجابات الشخصيات للمحن الشخصية والاجتماعية والسياسية في ظل نظام الفصل العنصري. يستخدم التحليل الإطار النظري للتفاؤل القاسي للورين بيرلانت، والذي يصف التعلق العاطفي بالرغبات أو الأشياء التي تُعيق الازدهار في نهاية المطاف.

تكشف نتائج البحث أن كل شخصية في المسرحية تعاني من التفاؤل القاسي، يتمسك بيت بمبدأ الصمود والانتماء، إلا أن هذا التعلق يُعمّق شعوره بالعزلة والحاجة إلى وجود هدف. وغلاديس تتوق إلى الأمان النفسي، لكن جهودها تُطغى عليها الصدمة وتهديد الخيانة المستمر، مما يؤدي إلى حالة جمود دائم. أما ستيف فيقوض الشك والقمع المنهجي أمله في التضامن والنجاة. ينبع تفاؤله القاسي من سوء تقديره لأمله ببناء مستقبل أفضل لعائلته بعد حقبة الفصل العنصري. تُظهر المسرحية كيف تصبح الأزمات أمرًا عاديًا، حيث تتكيف الشخصيات مع انعدام الأمن المستمر وكيف يُقوّض سوء التقدير - سواء لفهم الذات أو الآخرين - إمكانية التواصل الحقيقي.

تقدّم مسرحية "درس من الصبار" استكشافًا مُحزنًا لكيفية تعلق الأفراد بأوهام متفائلة والتي تحولت في ظل ظروف السجن السياسي والشخصي إلى عقبات تُعيق رفاهيتهم. من خلال إبراز اعتيادية الأزمات، والجمود، وسوء التقدير، تُجسّد المسرحية مفهوم بيرلانت للتفاؤل القاسي، وتسلط الضوء على العواقب العاطفية للبقاء في بيئة مُعادية. في نهاية المطاف، تُجسّد شخصيات فيوجارد مفارقة السعي وراء الأمل والمعنى في ظروف تُحبط كليهما باستمرار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفاؤل القاسي، نظام الفصل العنصري، إدارة الأزمات، المأزق، سوء التقدير، الأفارقة.

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