

Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and the What*: Challenging Patriarchal, Cultural and Social Traditions as a Kind of Cruel Optimism

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Abstract:

This research explores the concept of cruel optimism in the context of challenging patriarchal, cultural, and social traditions in Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and the What*. Cruel optimism, a term coined by Lauren Berlant, refers to the paradoxical attachment to positive aspirations that may ultimately obstruct personal fulfillment and well-being. This study examines how individuals who resist patriarchal norms and entrenched cultural traditions often face significant emotional, psychological, and social challenges. Through a multidisciplinary approach, including literary analysis, sociological perspectives, and psychological insights, the research delves into the lived experiences of those who strive for autonomy, equality, and self-realization. It highlights the inherent conflicts and sacrifices involved in such resistance, including strained familial relationships, social alienation, and internal turmoil. Despite these adversities, the act of challenging oppressive structures remains vital for fostering social change and promoting more inclusive and equitable norms.

Keywords: *The Cruel optimism, disintegration, the veil, crisis ordinariness. ambivalence. the good life.*

من وماذا لإياد أختار: تحدي التقاليد الأبوية والثقافية والاجتماعية كنوع من التفاؤل القاسي

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الملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث مفهوم التفاؤل القاسي في سياق تحدي التقاليد الأبوية والثقافية والاجتماعية في مسرحية إياد أختار من وماذا. يشير مصطلح التفاؤل القاسي، وهو مصطلح صاغته لورين بيرلانت، إلى الارتباط المتناقض بالتطورات الإيجابية التي قد تعيق في النهاية الإنجاز الشخصي والرفاهية. تتناول هذه الدراسة كيف يواجه الأفراد الذين يقاومون الأعراف الأبوية والتقاليد الثقافية الراسخة تحديات عاطفية ونفسية واجتماعية كبيرة. من خلال نهج متعدد التخصصات، بما في ذلك التحليل الأدبي، ووجهات النظر الاجتماعية، والرؤى النفسية، يتمتعن البحث في التجارب الحياتية لأولئك الذين يسعون جاهدين من أجل الاستقلالية والمساواة وتحقيق الذات. وهو يسلط الضوء على الصراعات والتضحيات المتأصلة التي تنتظرونها على هذه المقاومة، بما في ذلك العلاقات الأسرية المتواترة، والعزلة الاجتماعية، والاضطرابات الداخلية. على الرغم من هذه الشدائد، يظل تحدي البيئات القمعية أمراً حيوياً لتعزيز التغيير الاجتماعي وتعزيز معايير أكثر شمولاً وإنصافاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفاؤل القاسي، التفكك، الحجاب، أزمة الاعتقاد. التناقض. الحياة الجيدة

1.1 Introduction

The intersection of gender, culture, and societal norms has long been a fertile ground for scholarly exploration, particularly when examining the ways in which individuals challenge patriarchal structures and traditional customs. This research delves into the notion of challenging patriarchal, cultural, and social traditions through the lens of cruel optimism, a concept developed by Lauren Berlant. Cruel optimism refers to the attachment to compromised conditions of possibility, where the pursuit of an optimistic goal paradoxically sustains a state of dissatisfaction and impediment.

In many societies, patriarchal and traditional norms are deeply entrenched, shaping the behaviors, opportunities, and identities of individuals, especially women. The act of challenging these norms is often fraught with significant personal and societal repercussions. While the pursuit of equality, autonomy, and freedom represents a hopeful aspiration, it simultaneously exposes individuals to the harsh realities of resistance, marginalization, and the persistent reinforcement of the very structures they seek to dismantle (Alias, 2021, p. 8)

For example, in Pakistani society, the traditions of veiling and arranged marriage are deeply embedded cultural practices that significantly influence women's lives. The veil, or hijab, often symbolizes religious devotion and cultural identity but some women see it as a tool of control over them and their freedoms. Similarly, traditional marriage practices can impose restrictive gender roles and limit women's autonomy. While challenging these traditions can be seen as a pursuit of personal freedom and achieving a good life, but it frequently results in social

backlash and personal conflict, encapsulating the essence of cruel optimism (Al-Samarraie, 2022, p. 7).

This research examines the literary text of the play *The Who and the What* (2014) by Ayad Akhtar that portrays the struggles of Zarina, the protagonist woman who resists the patriarchal and the traditional constraints by writing a novel about gender politics. By analyzing this play, the study aims to uncover how the protagonist's efforts to subvert and transcend these norms are met with various forms of opposition and how these efforts embody the concept of cruel optimism. Zarina's journey often reflects a duality where their aspirations for liberation are entwined with ongoing struggles, highlighting the precarious balance between hope and disappointment.

The Who and the What is a thorny comedy drama with accurate and complicated depiction of Muslim identity in America. According to Akhtar, he sought to create a work of theater that shows the tensions between tradition and modernity, and the individual and the community. It was referred to *The Who & the What* as "a powerful and thought-provoking play" (Isherwood, 2012).

Akhtar employs comedic techniques in writing *The Who and the What* like wit and humor to show a compassionate blood relationship with Muslim Americans. According to Basu, *The Who and the What* is based on Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* (1623), both of them are similar in the comic style which highlights the conflict between a person's romantic selection of the partner and the patriarchal authority's attempt to match up their offspring according to their will. But *The Who and the What* "offers a far more progressive vision of gender and racial equality than *The Taming of the Shrew*" (2018, p.118). Additionally, it "offers a representation of Islamic womanhood that directly challenges many patriarchal assumptions of Islam and is not afraid of confronting religious orthodoxy to seek gender equity" (Ibid).

1.2 *The Who and the What*: A Close Look

The Who and the What consists of two acts with nine scenes and Epilogue. The drama centers on Afzal, a widowed Pakistani immigrant living in Atlanta, Georgia, who is deeply devoted to his religion and traditional values. Afzal is the father of two daughters, Zarina and Mahwish. Zarina, the elder daughter, is a brilliant and independent-minded writer who is working on a novel on Islam and woman's freedom, concerning wearing veil (hijab) and gender roles.

Afzal, concerned about Zarina's single status and eager to see her married to a suitable Muslim man, takes it upon himself to create an online dating profile for her without her knowledge. Through this profile, Zarina meets Eli, a white American who converts to Islam and runs a local mosque. Despite their cultural differences, Zarina and Eli form a deep connection based on mutual respect and intellectual compatibility (Herbert, 2016).

However, tensions arise when Afzal discovers the nature of Zarina's book about the predicament of women in Islam. This disagreement leads to a rift between Zarina and her father, as she insists on pursuing her intellectual freedom and truth, even at the risk of alienating her family.

As the conflict escalates, Zarina's relationship with Eli faces strain, with both external pressures and internal doubts threatening to tear them apart. Ultimately, Zarina is forced to confront her father's ultimatum: renounce her book or risk losing her family. In a powerful and emotional conclusion, Zarina chooses to stand by her work and her beliefs, even at the cost of her familial relationships. She cuts off from her father two years. After disclosing her pregnancy to him, Afzal reconciles with his daughter and offers prayers for her. Also he offers her some instructions on how to show her unborn child care (Richards, 2017)

The Who and The What delves into themes of cultural identity, religious faith, and the complexities of familial relationships, offering a nuanced exploration of the immigrant experience and the universal quest for acceptance and self-realization.

1.3 Zarina's Cruel Optimism of Unattainable Good Life

Berlant's idea of the cruel optimism can be applied as a one of the major ideas that affects the life of the characters in the play *The Who and the What*, but from a gender point of view. It reveals the difficulties that protagonist Zarina encounters when she strives for self-expression and empowerment as a Muslim American woman. Zarina embodies an insightful and realistic examination of the tenacity and perseverance of women who are working to achieve independence and self-discovery in the patriarchal society despite cultural norms.

Akhtar seeks to reconcile the traditional Islamic beliefs with the contemporary secular existence in his drama *The Who and the What*. The sisters, Zarina and Mahwish, who were born in America but have Pakistani ancestry, are introduced to the audience as they attempt to exploit the most of chances to live a good life in a contemporary society that is full with misrecognition about Islam and its teachings. Their traditional father Afzal, who runs a well-known taxi business, is an American who has achieved his dream.

When Afzal's old world customs clash with the new world principles, the family experiences its worst circumstances and Afzal's attempts to instill traditional values in his two daughters struggle with the current modern standards. For example, Zarina adopts the English language and this contradicts with her father who "retains a very noticeable Indo-Pak accent" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 13). This distinction shows that identity orientation and cultural belonging vary. In the opening scene, Zarina cuts avocado for salad in defiance of her father and sister wishes. This highlights her a resolute and rebellious attitude:

MAHWISH (Suddenly): Why are you cutting an avocado?

ZARINA: For the Salad?

MAHWISH: We hate avocados.

ZARINA: I love them. (Akhtar, 2014, p. 7)

The sisters' crisis ordinariness is embodied by their conflict with the patriarchal society. Zarina pretends to be satisfy of staying single, whereas Marwish, the younger sister, feels constrained by Afzal's traditional rule that the oldest sister has to marry firstly and this stands as an obstacle to wed her life partner, Haroon. As she states:

MAHAWISH: Z.. if you don't start showing some interest, Dad is not gonna let

ZARINA: (cutting her off): You don't need me to get married for you and Haroon to get married (Akhtar, 2014, p 5).

Zarina's interruption of Mahwish's statement indicates her assertiveness and independence. By cutting her off, Zarina asserts her agency and challenges the assumption that her marriage is solely for the benefit of her sister or family. The use of the phrase "You don't need me to get married for you and Haroon to get married" suggests Zarina's awareness of the societal pressure placed on women to marry and fulfill familial expectations. She implicitly rejects the idea that her marriage should be arranged for the convenience or desires of others, including her sister.

So the meaning of a good life here is not about achieving the American Dream and social mobility, but the good life here is representing by rebellion against the traditional and the patriarchal system, reinterpreting the Islamic teachings to suite the person's whims, and searching for the gender equality. Zarina's desires are summed up by her seeking to prioritize her individuality and autonomy over compliance to the societal norms with misrecognition what she will end with and this is the first sign of her cruel optimistic view which in turn refers to a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant, 2011, p. 24).

Although of Zarina's refuse to the patriarchal authority and her motivation for Mahwish to disregard their father's traditional expectation, She accepts her father's order about leaving her non-Muslim lover, Ryan. This represents what Berlant called it the ambivalence where Berlant defines ambivalence as "a state of simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards an object, idea, or situation which is characterized by conflicting feelings or desires that coexist within an individual or a collective." (Berlant, 2011, p. 33).

Also Zarina's resistance against patriarchal authority in *The Who & The What* is primarily manifested through her act of writing a novel about the freedom of woman. Through her writing, Zarina challenges traditional gender roles and expectations placed on women within her community. Instead of conforming to societal norms that prioritize women's domestic roles and obedience to male authority, Zarina asserts her right to engage in intellectual pursuits and express her own opinions and beliefs. The purpose of writing such a novel is to show the reason for imposing the veil (hijab).

Akhtar employs Eli, the white American, as defender of Islam and its symbols while the Muslim one, Zarina, as critic. Where Eli views the hijab or veil with a symbolic significant that refers to the loyalty, faith, and pride when he states, "There are a lot of young women who wear the veil in my mosque and are proud of it" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 38).

Eli, a white American convert to Islam who runs a local mosque, likely presents a more nuanced view of the veil. He understands that the veil can be a source of empowerment for some women, representing their agency and identity within their faith. However, he also recognizes that the veil can be perceived differently depending on cultural and social contexts.

In Islam, the veil (hijab) holds significant religious and cultural meanings. It is often seen as a symbol of modesty, piety, and a commitment to Islamic principles. For many Muslim women, wearing the veil is a personal and voluntary act of faith and devotion. *The Holy Qur'an* encourages both men and women to dress modestly to maintain moral decorum and social ethics. The veil is seen as a physical manifestation of a commitment to these principles. The veil also

symbolizes privacy and respect for personal boundaries. By covering, women maintain a level of privacy that helps protect them from unwanted attention and preserves their dignity (Saeed, 2022, p.17). According to Afzal's opinion, Zarina should get rid of this novel and write another one:

AFZAL: You'll write another book, behti. With more wisdom. I know you will.

ZARINA: It's four years of my life.

AFZAL: Something that will bring light into the world. Not this cancer. This darkness.

ZARINA: Don't ask me to do that.

AFZAL: I'll never ask anything of you again. You have to destroy it. (Akhtar, 2014, p. 81)

In these lines, Afzal orders Zarina to get rid of this book. This underscores his patriarchal authority. He assumes control over Zarina's creative and intellectual pursuits. This language implies that he sees her work as a threat and something that needs to be eradicated. So he orders his daughter, "You have to destroy this book-you can write another book," calling it a "cancer" and "darkness" which is destroying their family's happiness.

But her attachment to the idea that the individualism and disobedience of the patriarchy will achieve the good life , leads her to resist her father's will and her society's norms in order to establish herself as a writer.. She is now rejecting the idea of giving up her book and will not allow herself to be forgotten or covered up, according to her protest, "You covered me up, Dad. You erased me" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 79). Zarina chooses to stand by her book, prioritizing her integrity and principles over familial harmony. This decision results in an emotional and physical separation from her father and sister, symbolizing the broader struggle between individual freedom and societal expectations. Ultimately, Zarina's choice highlights her commitment to her own path, even at the cost of her relationship with her family. Thus, she gets the bad life of disintegration instead of the good life she has searched for.

In general, disintegration and misrecognition of identity that result from family struggles occur when intense conflicts over values, beliefs, or expectations lead to the breakdown of familial relationships. Disintegration refers to the fracturing of family bonds and communication, often due to irreconcilable differences. Misrecognition of identity happens when family members fail to understand or accept each other's true selves, leading to feelings of alienation and misunderstanding (Musir, 2018, p.187)

Conclusion

In conclusion, challenging patriarchal, cultural, and social traditions as a form of cruel optimism reveals the complex dynamics between individual aspirations and deeply entrenched societal norms. Cruel optimism, as conceptualized by Lauren Berlant, describes the attachment to seemingly positive aspirations that, paradoxically, can hinder personal fulfillment and well-being. In the context of resisting patriarchal structures and cultural traditions, individuals often find themselves in a struggle to balance their desires for autonomy, equality, and self-realization against the weight of societal expectations and familial obligations.

The examination of this phenomenon highlights the emotional and psychological toll on individuals who strive to redefine their identities and roles within a rigid framework. The pursuit of personal freedom and progressive ideals can lead to significant sacrifices, including strained family relationships, social alienation, and internal conflict. Yet, despite these challenges, the act of resistance remains crucial for fostering social change and promoting more inclusive and equitable norms.

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