

Izabela Morska

Practising “Cruel Optimism”: Eight Months on Ghazzah Street by Hilary Mantel

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s statement about Fanny Fern, namely, that “[t]he woman writes as if the devil was in her,” could well be applied to Hilary Mantel¹. It might be a touch risky to acknowledge a compliment from a misogynist who feared competition from female writers, but perhaps what Hawthorne had in mind was not diabolical seductions but an inner determination or any act, no matter how simple, that liberates the mind and strengthens its resolve not to merely reject “the restraints of decency” but rather to probe and scrutinize their content, as reasoned in Immanuel Kant’s *What is Enlightenment?* (1784). The same could also be said of Lauren Berlant.

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1 L.M. Freibert, B.A. White (eds), *Hidden Hands: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1790–1870*, Rutgers UP, New Brunswick 1985, pp. 356–357.

Recently, we lost them both; a disciplined cultural theorist who used *she/her* pronouns in her personal life but *they/them* professionally, and a writer who identified as a woman, although as a child, as she once noted in *Giving Up the Ghost*, she thought she'd rather be a knight². Berlant, who proved that a detailed analysis of narrative threads in a movie or film series can reveal the key to the riddle of our culture, died of a rare form of cancer on June 28, 2021; Mantel on September 22, 2022, of a stroke, having been afflicted by a disease, which unrestrainedly kept gnawing its way within her body until she correctly diagnosed herself with endometriosis. Having influenced tremendously the fields within which they chose to develop their talents, both left behind various legacies of fierce, unbridled, and imaginative cultural analyses, plenty of threads to pick up, and paths to carry on along.

This text is an attempt to interpret Mantel's novel *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* using Berlant's tools, starting with the already firmly established definition of cruel optimism taken from the introduction to their [Berlant's] book bearing the same title³:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially⁴.

As Berlant famously argues, "all attachment is optimistic"⁵, optimism in the universe of affect theory being "the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own"⁶ but which "a person,

2 H. Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost (A memoir)*, Picador, New York 2003.

3 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, HarperCollins, London 2004; *eadem*, *Women in Pain: American Marriage*, 1988, in: *Mantel Pieces: Royal Bodies and Other Writings from the London Review of Books*, HarperCollins, London 2020, pp. 8–17.

4 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2011, p. 1.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 1.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 2.

a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene”⁷ evokes. Here of course we sense a certain dependency or (hopefully) interdependency. The basic cultural tenets as we know them may prompt us to be entrepreneurial (*per aspera ad astra*; the American dream), for optimism is most often lauded as a force able to propel us, as if by means of teleportation, from a dreaded cul-de-sac to a place of many opportunities. Berlant writes that “optimism is ambitious,” and yet “at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of “the change that’s gonna come.”⁸ In case of underlying trauma or thwarted expectations, the change-bearing events are, indeed, likely to be welcomed with apprehension.

What optimism desires the most, Berlant argues, is everybody else’s idea of a good life; that is, “conventionality, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate”⁹, this based on an underlying assumption that the good life must be equally good for everyone. A successful life is measured by conventional material goods, a house and a car, and a good salary to maintain a certain standard of living, or a multiplication of those: thirty three sport cars including a Bugatti (the exact number Andrew Tate bragged about to Greta Thunberg before he got burned by her reply), a walk-in closet stacked like in *Dubai Bling* series on Netflix, a mansion or a couple of mansions, whereas the other side of the equation consists of only one bleak message: If you aren’t making enough money then perhaps you are not as smart as you claim¹⁰.

What happens when a desired change is not forthcoming? The hapless subject returns to their pipedream (a kid from a working-class background being told that education is a guarantee of success—particularly if this is a degree in some well-respected and secure profession, such as law or engineering; yet the success here seems disproportionately meagre

7 *Ibidem.*

8 *Ibidem.*

9 *Ibidem.*

10 G. Thunberg, replying to Andrew Tate, Twitter, December 28, 2022, <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1608056944501178368>, accessed: 12.28.2022.

compared to the effort it took). This return, Berlant postulates, “enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way”¹¹; a solution may be adding yet another degree to a collection of MFAs and PHDs, or remarrying after three failed marriages, or writing another book if the three previous ones did not sell, or emigrating (again), or anything that brings one close to Einstein’s definition of insanity. At last the moment comes when optimism, or hunger for change, or a desire to better oneself in the world, instead of liberation offers entrapment: Poland; parents; any inherently harmful relationship from which one is not able to extricate oneself. In short, be careful what you wish for, as you might *not* get it; the promise of a good life is a mirage by which you will end up a slave to the unfulfilled desire forever.

Ghazzah Street, or a Buffer Zone

In *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, the short novel of 1988 by Hilary Mantel, Gothic and postcolonial motives converge¹². Frances Shore, the protagonist, has just joined her husband in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Tempted by an exorbitant salary Andrew would never be offered in England, or Botswana (where his contract has just ended), the couple, after due consideration, decide to grab the opportunity of an unexpected job offer in the Middle East. They want to leave financial uncertainty behind: if they returned to England now, they would have to live with their in-laws. A contract in Jedda is a lucky break: the agent, a distant acquaintance, appears at just the right moment. Vaguely aware of how living under the restraints of Sharia law may affect them both, Frances in particular, they opt to act like two mature adults and accept the challenge: the promise of financial independence is within their reach. They are on the move from precarity to what Lauren Berlant after Giorgio Agamben calls the new “planetary petty bourgeoisie”¹³.

11 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

12 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*.

13 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 191.

While Andrew will have more opportunities to suppress or sidestep this knowledge amidst the various challenges that come with navigating between his British employers, Saudi sponsors, and Yemeni workforce, it will soon become obvious to both husband and wife that Frances will be the one to carry the burden of cultural isolation. Despite the promise of a good life, equally enticing to both and crucial to the neoliberal order, each will be reduced in turn to a nervous wreck. Andrew's frustration will, doubtlessly, be linked to unsolvable work problems, whereas Frances will find herself wrestling with a situation in which both her sharp, analytical mind and native curiosity will find no outlet. As her new friends, Yasmin (a Pakistani) and Samira (a Saudi), assert with a bit of a smirk, pitying her sacrifice, Frances is "in love with her husband,"¹⁴ but their joint attempt to convince her that "what being in love secures is evidence that you have had an impact on the world by being a condition of possibility for someone else" will not bring Frances much consolation in the meantime¹⁵.

While Andrew devotes himself entirely to his work, supervising the construction of tall buildings in the Islamic spirit, Frances experiences the unfriendliness and hostility of the city firsthand. The drivers revel in what, elsewhere, is considered reckless driving: "Each intersection bears an accident that has just occurred"¹⁶. Men honk and plough through the afternoon traffic; the back seat is reserved for children who play, unbuckled, seatbelts scorned. The concept that "Allah has appointed a term to every life"¹⁷ seems to effectively excuse carelessness and lack of empathy for human or feline suffering. (Frances notices feral cats at every turn; not fluffy, friendly, pampered creatures, but huddled up and taunted; the very culture of a country is seen as shaping both its human inhabitants and its feline population. Palpably unbridled hostility, which might be construed as harmless banter, is reserved for women walking down the street alone or in the company of other women, but then Frances is almost run over by a car, driven by a local youngster. As if preparing to

14 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 114.

15 L. Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2008, p. 218.

16 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 60.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 72.

vouch for Frances's unblemished character in a sexual harassment case, the narrator reports that: "She wore her baggiest smock, flat sandals"¹⁸. Even without the mayhem resulting from unchecked sexism, the city flaunts its misanthropy at every turn. Here is Frances on her first solitary venture around the block:

Every few yards it was necessary to step down from the eighteen-inch high kerb and into the gutter; the municipality had planted saplings, etiolated and ill-doing plants inside concrete rectangles, and it did not seem to have occurred to anyone that the saplings would block the pavements, and that pavements are for walking on. But clearly they are not for walking on, she thought. Men drive cars; women stay at home. Pavements are a buffer zone, to prevent the cars from running into the buildings¹⁹.

Thus Ghazzah Street: a buffer zone. The city attacks Frances's senses as well; as she passes "a row of half-built shops, wires snaking from the brick-work", the air is "full of the clinging unsavoury fragrance of the sea". Further down, she encounters the first wall of many, "enclosing nothing"²⁰. The construction boom is waning.

When Frances first hears that Andrew is about to sign a contract with Turadup, a company which had been operating in Saudi Arabia since 1974, the year is 1984, and her gut response is a *mélange* of dread, hope, curiosity, anxiety, and ambition (typical symptoms of optimism); she crumples under the weight of the news, "clearly stabbed by avarice like a peach with a silver knife". The new post is set to double his previous salary, which will be paid in riyals, tax-free. In addition, the company is offering "free housing, a car allowance, paid utilities", and paid school fees – for people with children. And yet, because he has heard that it was a part of the world where the voice of women counts for nothing, they will not go without her consent. Soon she will ponder about how easy it was to say, "I want to"²¹ without any awareness of what her agreement stood for or and its possible consequences, including some irreparable damage to her

18 *Ibidem*, p. 62.

19 *Ibidem*.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 62–63.

21 *Ibidem*, pp. 14–15.

psyche or her physicality. The first warning then, the premonition, arises on the plane when a garrulous passenger, a man sitting across the aisle, mentions a certain Helen Smith, a young nurse:

a young girl dead outside a high-rise block, after a wild party – you ask yourself, did she fall or was she pushed? Take it from me, it’s a funny place, Jeddah. Nobody knows the half of what goes on²².

Such a rambling monologue appears to have been written in the spirit of *Heart of Darkness*, as a blatantly casual comment in a conversation on dwindling business opportunities: “Ivory? I should think so. Heaps of it, stacks of it. The old mud shanty was bursting with it. You would think there was not a single tusk left either above or below the ground in the whole country”²³. Nobody knows the half of what goes on; everybody relies on rumours and the myth of a golden age: once upon a time, “the Jeddah sky was black with helicopters ferrying bags of cement from ships that packed the harbour”²⁴. But when the Shores arrive in Jeddah (just as Marlow, slightly tardy) they can only listen to the tall tales of past glory, naively disregarding the fact that they have arrived in a country where the power of the House of Saud commands is reliant on two ruthless military bodies, the army and the National Guard, and where “far worse things [are] happening than people being raped in the souk”²⁵. The company that hires Andrew, Turadup, started out “in late 1974, a few months before King Faisal was shot by his nephew, when oil revenues were riding high”, soon to expand into Kuwait and the Emirates as well; their ultimate success, as the narrator dryly notices “is due in no small part to... adaptation to Middle Eastern business practices: tardiness, doublespeak, and graft”. The construction workers first came from Britain: “The physical stress was crushing, their hours were ruinous, and pay packets enormous”. When in the end all kinds of trouble stemming from the unrestrained consumption of illegally brewed liquor coupled with offenses against the tenets of Islam

22 *Ibidem*, p. 18.

23 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin, London 1983, p. 85.

24 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 42.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 150.

followed, the company dispensed with the services of British labourers and moved on to recruit its manual labour from Korea: “yellow, track table men, reeling through a desert landscape: indentured coolies, expecting nothing”²⁶. When this comes crushing down, Andrew will have to work out “how to pay our Indian labourers”²⁷. In this landscape, race matters insofar as harnessed directly to profit.

The project that Andrew is overseeing the completion of is in Jeddah (“a very stimulating place to work if you’re in the construction business”²⁸) and is expected to outdo and “defy, for scale and cunning, the green giant of the Petroline building, and the Ministry of Labour’s silver and chrome fantasy on Al Hamra Street”. As well as several other buildings. Even more so this skyscraper is bound to be a miracle incarnate, “compound of all the elements, of earth, air, water and fire; as if to convey the mysterious grandeur of the Ministry’s activities, the transcendent quality of its paper shuffling”²⁹, fulfilling the ambition of the royal family who runs a country as if it were a private family business. Just like Henry VIII had some five hundred years before. Andrew’s wife, in the meantime, is meant to step aside and create a supportive circle of women friends, which had been nothing new for a British housewife up to the mid-twentieth century. But instead of befriending the company wives, Frances sets about shaping friendships with local women, Pakistani and Saudi, her neighbours, and thus crossing the social and racial barrier – a transgression which will not go unnoticed.

Why Architecture Is Not Innocent? The Autocrats’ Love for Tall Buildings

The Jeddah construction project, which requires “the biggest transportation of ready-mixed concrete in the history of the human race”³⁰ suggests an instant association with the series of financial and human-rights abuse

26 *Ibidem*, p. 42.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 203.

28 *Ibidem*, p. 16.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 84.

30 *Ibidem*, p. 16.

scandals linked to the World Cup in Qatar, which already have earned the nickname “Qatargate.” Belgian prosecutors recently admitted that a Gulf state was trying to buy influence in Brussels; this had been known for more than the last four months and resulted in at least three MPs in the European Parliament, including its vice president, being recalled from their posts (Eva Kaili a Greek lawmaker, denies the charge)³¹. Qatar is an independent Gulf state, but based on the recent press coverage, it resembles Saudi Arabia in a capsule—at least the Saudi Arabia in Hilary Mantel’s novel, where bribery is rampant making the world go round in the fenced-off arena of high-rise construction (“We all know how things are done,” is one of the first lines Frances hears, still before landing, accompanied by the rubbing of “finger and thumb together, rusting an imaginary wad of notes”³². When taken with a grain of salt, corruption in a country with no shortage of ready cash might be taken as a tool to oil the wheels of bureaucracy, except that it also sheds some light on the unseemly connection between tall buildings, zero comfort for pedestrians, and a waft of totalitarian predilections³³.

Simultaneously with the announcement of the Qatargate, on December 13, 2022, the *Times of Israel* released the material on how Albert Speer Jr., now-deceased, one of Germany’s most successful postwar urban planners and architects, was instrumental in Qatar being chosen to host the World Cup³⁴. Although Speer declared many times that he wished to distance himself from his father’s legacy, he nevertheless hired himself to work for brutal, autocratic regimes, among which the *Times of Israel* includes China and Saudi Arabia. Speer himself authored the “masterplan,” which helped the Qataris convince FIFA to allow it to stage the World Cup already in 2010, before he died at 83 in 2017. His ecologically-sound project included

31 *European Parliament VP Eva Kaili stripped of role amid corruption scandal*, Dec. 13, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20221213-european-parliament-moves-to-strip-vp-role-from-lawmaker-accused-of-corruption>, accessed: 12.13.2022.

32 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 7.

33 *European Parliament VP Eva Kaili stripped of role amid corruption scandal*.

34 R. Philpot, “How the son of ‘Hitler’s architect’ helped to bring the World Cup to Qatar”, *Times of Israel*, Dec. 13, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-the-son-of-hitlers-architect-helped-bring-the-world-cup-to-qatar/?utm_source=The+Weekend+Edition&utm_campaign=weekend-edition-2022-12-18&utm_medium=email, accessed: 12.13.2022.

using solar energy to cool several stadiums, twelve in total, “in order to guarantee optimal match conditions.” Then, rumours started emerging about the hundreds of migrant workers who may have died due to unsafe working conditions, which corresponded to Qatar’s “abysmal human rights record” and “allegation of rampant corruption” in addition to the “staggering environmental cost”³⁵, until at last the commentators from around the world noticed that Qatar has the highest per capita carbon emissions in the world³⁶.

Speer’s work, despite his outright protestations, does not appear to be distant enough from his father’s, Speer Senior’s, legacy. As his oldest son, born in 1934, Speer Jr. remembered Hitler as a good-uncle figure, and claimed that as a ten-years old in 1944, he couldn’t understand any adults’ talk. (One can now pause to think of countless displaced children, war orphans, or even underage family providers who at the same age and at the same time understood plenty and certainly more than any child their age ever should). Not a mere party apparatchik, Speer Sr. gained the party’s trust with the 1933 Nuremberg rally and the rebuilding of the Reich Chancellery; his masterpiece, never completed, planned for the victory in war, which never came to be, was a plan to rebuilt Berlin. The plan included a monumental People’s Hall (twice as high as St Peter’s in Rome) connected by a grand avenue with a Great Arch (three times the size of Paris’s Arc de Triomphe). Tall buildings must compete with one each other like spacecrafts about to take off into the stratosphere.

One would need to re-examine the architecture in Orwell’s *1984*, where certain ministerial buildings produce the sense of dread, terror, and reverence in the hapless denizens of Oceania. In Jedda, the building that Andrew is bringing into being, clearly designed for the purpose of glorifying the state as an expression of religion and the law, is planned to be just as formidable: “At the time of Maghreb prayer, when the sun dipped into the ocean in a great flaring gaseous ball, its glass walls would melt and

35 *Ibidem*.

36 “Qatar is by Far the Largest per Capita CO2 Polluter”, *World Economics*, Dec. 26, 2022, <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Thoughts/Qatar-is-by-Far-the-Largest-per-Capita-CO2-Polluter.aspx>, accessed: 12.26.2022.

grow liquid. It would glow on the darkening skyline, a terror and a portent, a Koranic column of fire³⁷. The tale related to the construction blitz in Jeddah or the twelve stadiums in Qatar mirrors the never completed “Germania” project, which began in the late 1930s under Speer Sr.’s supervision, with thousands of Berliners, most of them Jews, having been forcibly displaced to make room for the dome, the arch, and the avenue. For Speer Sr, the Nazi Party chief architect, as well as Adolf Hitler’s closest friend and admirer (the friendship was requited), the whole city would be transformed into a monument testifying to the Reich’s grandeur. Thousands of prisoners in uniforms marked by various triangles were dispatched to the mines to haul out vast quantities of granite and marble without any regard for their safety and duly perished only to be replaced by new arrivals, so that the state could show itself off.

The beloved vision that Speer Sr. and Hitler shared, as Kate Connolly observes in the *Guardian*, is a city “nightmarish to live in: hostile to pedestrians... and with a chaotic road system,” its citizens “variously impressed and inhibited by the towering structures around them.”

As such, it strangely resembles Jedda, as presented by Mantel—more a daunting, theatrical expense than an attractive living space for its citizens. The chaotic road system features prominently both in the main narrative and in Frances’s diary (the book alternates between the first and the third person) because Frances Shore is a cartographer. Or rather—used to be one, back in the times when she, a woman, was allowed to have anything resembling a profession. Before she knows any better, Frances is deemed “redundant” by her interlocutor on an airplane.

Too bloody secretive to have maps. Besides, the streets are never in the same place for more than a few weeks together.

They move the streets?

Certainly do. They’re always building, you see, money no object, but they don’t think ahead. They build a hospital and then decide to put a road through it. Fancy a new palace? Out with the bulldozer. A map would be out of date as soon as it was made. It would be wastepaper the day it was printed³⁸.

37 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 84.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 18.

Gothic literature abounds in haunted houses. But what about a haunted town, transmogrified into a hostile labyrinth?

Gothic Femininity

In “Ghosts in the Attic: Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* and the Female Gothic,” Carol Margaret Davison recalls the term “female Gothic”³⁹, which Ellen Moers coined in her 1974 article⁴⁰. The concept was then taken up by theorists of the female Gothic, Juliann Fleenor and Joanna Russ, who noted that women’s repressed fears and desires fed into Gothic fiction “were socially contingent and differed dramatically from those of their male counterparts”⁴¹. These responses may include women’s suffering induced by institutions that purposefully exclude them. The female Gothic castle/house reflects the heroine’s affective ambivalence of entrapment, vulnerability, and longing for protection. Frances’s journey takes her to a world in reverse; stripped of her autonomy, although she shares mutual concerns with her husband, she finds herself subordinate to her husband under law, just like a Gothic heroine.

Foreshadowing is a fixture in this novel. The information sheet in the company library ends with a plea to “make EVERY effort to return your books if you have to leave the Kingdom hurriedly and unexpectedly”⁴², signaling that the life of a professional for hire brings along some unexpected twists and turns. But the life of a professional woman suddenly demoted to housewife is infused with extra doses of trepidation as well. Before her first trip to souk, Frances receives a veil from her new friend Yasmin, with a note instructing her to “leave open the face,” a recommendation which for the sake of a dress rehearsal she foregoes, spooking her husband.

39 C.M. Davison, *Ghosts in the Attic: Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic and the Female Gothic*, in: A.R. Federico (ed.), *Gilbert & Gubar’s the Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, University of Missouri Press Columbia and London 2009, p. 205.

40 E. Moers, “Female Gothic: The Monster’s Mother”, *New York Review of Books*, March 21. 1974, pp. 24–28.

41 C.M. Davison, *Ghosts in the Attic*, p. 205.

42 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazal Street*, p. 73.

As if heralding a scene in *Wolf Hall* when Anne Boleyn receives an ominous drawing featuring “Anne sans tête,” Frances announces: “Hi, Andrew. I’m a headless monster”. But soon crestfallen, alone in the bathroom, she admits to herself: “Perhaps Jeddah life is making me slightly deranged”. She clearly hears, carried down the plumbing, the sound of a woman sobbing, trickling “from the floor above”. On the following day, on her way out from the building for the aforementioned trip to the souk, she double-locks the door, drops the keys, and muses about how incompetent she is becoming “about even quite ordinary things”⁴³. Frances starts writing a diary because

the first two weeks have changed her. Introspection has become her habit. There are things she was sure of, that she is not sure of now and, when her reverie is broken, and first unease and then fear become her habitual state of mind, she will have learned to distrust herself, to question her own perceptions, to be unsure – as she is unsure already – about the evidence of her own ears and the evidence of her own eyes⁴⁴.

Consequently, the plot progresses alternatively via first and third-person narrative as if a diarist’s voice needed to be confirmed by a storywriter’s account, not necessarily more impartial or unbiased.

The house, Davison writes, “a central image in women’s novels generally (...) assumes a more symbolically charged dimension in Gothic fiction.”⁴⁵ One could surmise that a haunted house is a semi-alive organism that mirrors and magnifies the heroine’s feelings, usually the repressed and uncomfortable ones. In *A Discovery of Witches* (a book and a movie series on HBO Max), the haunted house actively reacts to household members, especially when they argue or grieve. The unknown woman, her voice reaching Frances through the pipes, may be one of her neighbors or a manifestation akin to a woman behind the bars from “The Yellow Wallpaper,” unbound and expressing Frances’s despair by proxy.

Mantel’s short story *Someone to disturb: a memoir*, which appeared in the *London Review of Books* in 2009 and which later opened the collection of

43 *Ibidem*, pp. 74–75.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 55.

45 C.M. Davison, *Ghosts in the Attic*, p. 207.

her short stories *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* in 2014, presents a nameless character surrounded by a similar set of entrapments: the air heavy with insecticide in an ongoing war against giant cockroaches, the city humming with traffic, interrupted only by calls for dawn, midday, and evening prayers. The first-person narrator is doing her best to learn Arabic from a phrasebook, repeating sentences such as: “*I’m living in Jeddah. I’m busy today. God give you strength!*”, listening to the *Eroica* while doing the ironing, and fending off an increasingly intrusive Pakistani neighbour, until she clearly sees the armchair trying to levitate:

An armchair was leaning to the left, as if executing some tipsy dance; at one side its base rested on the carpet, but the other side was a foot in the air, and balanced finely on the rim of a flimsy wastepaper basket. Open-mouthed, I shot back into the bedroom; it was the Eid holiday, and my husband was half-awake. I gibbered at him. Silent, he rose, put on his glasses, and followed me. He stood in the doorway of the sitting-room. He looked around and told me without hesitation it had nothing to do with him. He walked into the bathroom. I heard him close the door, curse the cockroaches, switch on the shower.

The narrator, who – as it is revealed in the closing paragraph – is the writer herself, will not succumb to a mental breakdown. Nor will she commune with ghosts: the circumstances are strange enough as they are, it would have been superfluous to adorn them with an artificial layer of the uncanny. A personal essay included in a recent collection, *Mantel Pieces*, explains why Mantel sounds so implacable when writing about Islam; it’s not just that the Sharia law transforms her, as a woman, into a nonperson; more crucially, she seems to be personally offended by “the Bookless City”⁴⁶, where supermarkets are swamped with all kinds of goods, catering to the wealthy, yet often preposterous, but in the whole affluent, sophisticated town, one is not able to find a single bookcase (“Diary: Bookcase Shopping in Jeddah, 1989”).

This quest for both a bookstore and a bookcase takes place before the Kindle culture; as Mantel explains further, some books could be brought from vacation, although, as they would have to pass through customs, it was impossible to predict which titles would give offence. Her sentiments

46 H. Mantel, *Diary: Bookcase Shopping in Jeddah, 1989*, p. 21.

(unlike Frances, Mantel lived in Jeddah for four years) are best summed up in the line that concludes *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*: “When you come across an alien culture you must not automatically respect it. You must sometimes pay it the compliment of hating it”⁴⁷.

Contrary to the reticent husband, appearing in short intervals in “Someone to Disturb,” as if he was made from the mold of withdrawn husbands who, “whistle and sing and slam doors,” and “if they answer, it may be completely at random” presented in *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality*, which Mantel reviewed for *London Review of Books*⁴⁸, in *Eight Months of Ghazzah Street* husband and wife actually talk, interact and share ideas with one another; although, most often, not in the compound, ironically named Dunroamin (the name stands for hominess; the closest associations are adjectives such as comfortable, homy and cozy—as if to contrast it with all the uncanny tapping and noises carried down the pipes), but outside—while in a car, going or returning from shopping. Since Andrew has been in Saudi Arabia longer (his wife flies in to join him), and because he can talk to other guys at work, he readily explains to her how things really are (tellingly, he more readily accepts things as they are).

Frances’s inquisitiveness is bound to be her undoing; once, she asks Andrew why her neighbour Yasmin doesn’t seem able to distinguish between private morality and public order, and receives the answer that Islam doesn’t either. No private vices exist under Sharia law. “So there is no difference between sins and crimes”, Frances muses⁴⁹. Tirelessly she proceeds to untangle the Gordian knot, discovering at last that religion and culture must be distinguished from one another even when religion and law have blended. From the *Arab News*, she learns that “there is no original sin”, and so the concept of primordial guilt should not affect people’s minds. Frances arrives at her original conclusions based on the popular press and rumours: “Shabana told her that Adam and Eve were reconciled to God”. This religion is, at its heart, optimistic, and thus, if

47 Eadem, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 278; quoted from “Last Months in Al Hamra,” *Spectator*, January 24, 1987.

48 Eadem, *Women in Pain: American Marriage, 1988*, p. 14.

49 Eadem, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 71.

“people are naturally good, and they have free will, and Allah does not ask very much of them, certainly nothing unreasonable”, then such a religion, Frances concludes, should produce a benevolent, reconciliatory penal code. And yet clearly this is not what has happened: “The rules take account of human weaknesses; they are easy to keep. But the penal code does not reflect this optimism. Nor does the general tenor of society”⁵⁰. Perhaps then this disparity between a benevolent religion and a harsh penal code is precisely cruel optimism in all its addictive glory.

This is the moment when we can catch a glimpse into the mind of the future author of *WolfHall* trilogy: if you commit a crime, should you appear before a religious court? But Frances’s professional cartographer’s skills are never put to use, and neither is her empathy. In rare moments when Frances finds herself outside in the street, she notes the presence of stray cats and laments their terrible state: fierce, spitting, howling, and limping, suffering from skin diseases, they resemble vermin and must be considered as such by the municipalities. Their presence provides a constant accompaniment. When passing the Ministry of Pilgrimages’ office, adjacent to their compound, the Shores hear them squalling and squabbling “invisible, behind a wall”⁵¹. No one in the whole Jeddah is inclined to ease the poor creatures’ fate. In a moment of crisis, Frances bares open her soul: “She felt she could no longer live with doing nothing for these cats. Slow tears leaked out of her eyes”⁵². And yet – she never does.

Cruel Optimism: the Spoils of War; a Conclusion

Regardless of the lack of original sin and God’s forgiveness to Adam and Eve, Frances soon notes in her diary: “Yet another letter in the newspaper today, debating whether women are the source of evil and sin”. Such letters are not customarily produced by editors but should rather be written spontaneously by readers—and perhaps they are. When the scale model that has been ordered in Los Angeles finally arrives, Andrew has to go

50 *Ibidem*, p. 133.

51 *Ibidem*, p. 160.

52 *Ibidem*, p. 265.

to the customs to retrieve it, and when he does, finally, he and Hasan (brought along in case the customs men would need to be bribed) place it down on the dining-room table. Andrew sends his wife to a neighbour to borrow an electric drill with a comment: “The Ministry would go mad if they saw this”⁵³. What he means is that

the model-makers had peopled it, and that on its snaky glass escalators, and on its emerald plastic lawn, there were miniature women—pin-thin Californian executive women, in sharp suits, and flossy Californian secretary women, with mini-skirts, and tight sundresses showing off their glossy plastic shoulders and their half-bare plastic breasts”⁵⁴.

Andrew then proceeds to remove the dolls, one by one, with a wire coat hanger and tweezers. While the men complain about how this task is ruining their morning (“have they no bloody idea in Los Angeles?”), Frances collects “the little women” in the palm of her hand. “They were perfect, each one with the same doll’s features, and crushed skull”⁵⁵.

Berlant writes about “crisis ordinariness” that forces people to adapt to an unfolding change”⁵⁶. Caught in a crisis, people cling to obsolete forms in their struggle for existence. Andrew soon reveals to Frances that the impossible has happened: “the money is running out” in Turadup⁵⁷; apparently, it has run out already. As in a pyramid scheme suddenly gone wrong, he is not able to pay the subcontractors, because the government has ceased paying the company: “Because oil has fallen, they’re cutting back. It’s hitting everybody, all the government departments. They’re all fighting each other for cash”⁵⁸. The company doesn’t have vast reserves; in effect, Andrew too is facing the prospects of having his salary withheld. This is when the realization hits him (as Frances records his words in her diary) that he may never see his dream fulfilled: “I don’t think somehow I will ever see the building finished. It is ... just like the rest of the world. You

53 *Ibidem*, p. 163.

54 *Ibidem*.

55 *Ibidem*.

56 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 10.

57 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 163.

58 *Ibidem*, p. 164.

dream about something, but they won't let you do it". He adds, wistfully: "I think I was dreaming about this building before I saw the architect's plan, before I'd ever heard of Turadup. But to them it's just another capital project"⁵⁹. False promises are the only true part of the deal. Oil prices are falling, and floundering, cash-strapped professionals are, as Berlant puts it, "desperately struggling to gain a foothold of any sort in the increasingly global economy"⁶⁰ only to see themselves "falling through the cracks"⁶¹. This may be why Andrew's tragedy does not seem unique enough to elicit sympathy even from his wife or to ever reach dramatic highs – just another man watching his dreams crushed.

Here is a moment of crisis which should be revelatory or life-changing, pushing the characters caught in the crucible to achieve certain clarity of vision. Yet something else is going to happen. As Berlant notes: "Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds into stories about navigating what is overwhelming"⁶². When Andrew complains: "I do think they really cheated me. The promises were false", Frances puts the Californians in her desk drawer: "They looked carefree, even with their mutilations"⁶³. To Frances, they seem like a lifeline.

The crisis will draw husband and wife apart, but only to an extent. Neither ceases to believe that the system will eventually fulfill its promise (Frances will be the first one to refuse to believe that a country could run out of money), exemplifying Berlant's prediction: "They would call the fragilities and unpredictability of living the good-life fantasy and its systemic failures 'bad luck' amid the general pattern of upward mobility, reliable intimacy, and political satisfaction that has graced liberal political/economic worlds since the end of the Second World War"⁶⁴. Andrew will have to face overwhelming challenges at work, and Frances will continue to occupy herself with the mystery of the empty flat. "In the impasse

59 *Ibidem*, p. 163.

60 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 163.

61 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 163.

62 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 10.

63 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 163.

64 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 11.

induced by crisis, a being treads water; mainly, it does not drown," Berlant notes. "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"⁶⁵. In the last words of her diary Frances reports that the Shores have moved to a new house; she now spends her days alone with two geckos for company, surrounded by freeways which she can observe from the windows. This is a dire, claustrophobic landscape, but at the same time, "the distant prospect of travelling cars"⁶⁶ lets slip the promise of escape.

Frances and Andrew belong to the global, international precarious class. They wouldn't have sought work in Botswana and then in the Middle East if England had offered them an advance on the promise of a good life. Regardless of how strange it may seem that two educated white people seek employment outside of Europe, especially against the presently rising current of immigration, apparently college degrees do not have the power to break through the glass ceiling even for those ambitious enough to leave their families behind and whose background is working class. The Brits, whom the Shores encounter in Jeddah, earn far more than they would anywhere else in the world. Too rich for their own good, they brag about their shares, shop in places such as Miami and Hong Kong, or become parsimonious: promising themselves to stay "until they get a certain sum of money in the bank" and then breaking their promise because there is always more: "They want to buy a house but house prices are rising so fast". Children need private schools; aging parents need private care. "It's called the golden handcuffs"⁶⁷, Frances observes. The Brits, however, are a minority among the Yemenis, the Pakistani, the Indians, and the Filipinos; people with colliding interests, earning far less, and yet much more than they would have in their own countries and for whom this is also always just another year.

Crisis is "a process embedded in the ordinary," Berlant writes. But there should be nothing ordinary about the brutality of such narrow choices

65 *Ibidem*, p. 10.

66 *Ibidem*, p. 277.

67 H. Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, p. 88.

and the mass movements of peoples between continents, a migration in which lives, more often than not, are crushed. Exposing this harshness and brutality should force us, as participants and survivors of such mass movements, to stop normalizing the ferocity of the everyday struggle for survival of individuals who have made themselves believe that mobility stands for upward movement and social advancement, albeit that this path laced with the loss of countless capabilities⁶⁸. Cruel optimism, as Berlant tries to warn us, is a vicious circle. In one of their more heated discussions Andrew observes: “This isn’t a free society. They haven’t had any practice at being free”. In an instant, Frances counters: “Freedom isn’t a thing that needs practice. ... If you have it, you know how to use it”⁶⁹. There is always hope.

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Practising “Cruel Optimism”: Eight Months on Ghazzah Street by Hilary Mantel

The essay “Practising ‘cruel optimism’: Eight Months on Ghazzah Street by Hilary Mantel” delves into Mantel’s novel through the lens of Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism. Berlant’s construct, rooted in the pursuit of conventional notions of a fulfilling existence, highlights the protagonists’ endeavors in Saudi Arabia as a postcolonial adventure bound to end in disillusionment. Mantel’s portrayal of Frances Shore and her husband Andrew illuminates the tension between their aspirations for financial security and the disconcerting realities of cultural displacement and legal constraints under Sharia law. The city’s architecture mirrors Frances’s sense of unease, resembling oppressive structures associated with fascist regimes. The portrayal of Jeddah’s construction environment, echoing totalitarian aesthetic reminiscent of fascist regimes, serves as a compelling allegory for Frances’s sense of entrapment within a society where her agency is circumscribed by gendered and legal strictures. Casting Frances as a contemporary iteration of the Gothic heroine ensnared within her domicile, Mantel explores the disjuncture between the alleged benevolence of religious doctrine and the punitive nature of its legal apparatus. Frances’s interrogation of this dissonance not only underscores the pervasive nature of cruel optimism but also hints at the inherently paradoxical nature of faith systems that simultaneously offer solace and impose constraints. Through its fluid engagement with concepts of cruel optimism, urbanity, and gender dynamics, the essay invites readers to contemplate the multifaceted interplay between individual aspiration and systemic coercion within the affluent and autocratic socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords:

HILARY MANTEL, LAUREN BERLANT, CRUEL OPTIMISM, GOTHIC, SHARIA LAW, FASCIST ARCHITECTURE.