

**IN THE AFTERMATH OF A PANDEMIC:  
LAUREN BEUKES'S *AFTERLAND* REVISITED**

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**Abstract:** *In her recent novel, Afterland (2020), award-winning South African writer, Lauren Beukes, envisages a post-pandemic scenario of a world without men in it. I argue that, whereas most post-apocalyptic fiction is ominously sombre, Beukes's artistic flair combines contemplation with social critique and sharp psychological observation, while also making use of satirical commentaries on prejudiced thinking regarding gender and power in an imaginary matriarchal system of governance. While boldly distancing herself from 'either/or' types of feminism, Beukes is also skeptical about the utopian idealisation of female innocence and virtue. Last, but not least, the novel stands out within its fictional genre for the delicate representation of parent / child bonding in times of catastrophic change. Beukes's exploration of motherly presence, resilience and grit takes centre stage in this haunting novel, memorable not only for its fresh take on today's world projected into an imaginary future, but centrally, because of placing love, 'tough love', at the heart of it.*

**Keywords:** *Afterland, post-apocalyptic novel, dystopian matriarchy, parent/child bonding, 'tough love'*

## **1. Introduction**

This article aims to analyse the narrative complexities of the plague novel *Afterland* (2020), one of the more recent works by award-winning South African novelist Lauren Beukes. Written in the tradition of *noir* speculative fiction, artfully blended with aspects of the American epic chase novel, *Afterland* is, at a deeper textual level, a novel of ideas and psychological finesse.

“What is particularly striking about this book is just how timeless it is” (Karam 2020: 151). Although it had been several years in the making before its publication in early 2020, it reached the reading public – coincidentally – at the same time that the Covid-19 pandemic struck. The action of the novel was envisioned to take place in 2023, in a post-pandemic United States turned into a truly dystopian American “afterland”.

In this novel, Beukes imagines a world devastated by a plague that has killed almost the entire male population globally. She envisions such a world in a sombre register, with the few surviving men being held captive in so-called Protection of Men facilities. It is against this bleak background that the reader is introduced to Cole and Miles, mother and teenage son, who are forced to hit the road to escape Miles's capture by an all-female military squad meant to enforce male-only quarantine. The escape trip undertaken by the pair offers a narrative frame for a reflection on American society, as well as an exploration of motherly love at a time of global devastation.

## 2. Brief overview: ‘Post-apocalyptic’ novels, dystopias of the future

Beukes’s *Afterland* echoes several novels that imagine a dystopian future for humanity, in the aftermath of a potential catastrophe. According to Hicks (2017: n.p.), the genre “finds its roots in the New Testament’s *Book of Revelation*, and while contemporary apocalyptic fiction tends to be largely secular in its worldview, important traces of Christianity linger in these texts”. Post-apocalyptic imagery is associated with near-total devastation of human life and people’s desperate fight for survival. The protagonists find themselves in settings that have become barely recognizable, thus echoing the Lacanian dualism of simultaneous recognition and misrecognition of the known, coupled with the anxiety of displacement and uprootedness. Societies in the wake of a catastrophe are imagined as dystopias based on a worst-case scenario: e.g., near-extinction of life, mass starvation, vicious scrambling for resources, ruthless oppression.

A sub-genre of post-apocalyptic/dystopian fiction is linked to issues of aggravated gender exploitation and inversions of power relations. In P. D. James’s novel, *Children of Men* (1992), for example, mass infertility leads to the threat of extinction of both sexes, with depopulation giving rise to tyranny and violence. Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* (2016) projects a vision of bizarre female empowerment manifested as an extraordinary capacity to project electrical shocks, which occasionally degenerates into the mass murder of men. Lauren Beukes’s *Afterland* is in conversation with several dystopian novels that problematise issues of gender, and most notably, with Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Atwood envisions the aftermath of a biological catastrophe which affects the entire female population, reducing women to mere reproductive ‘handmaids’ of men in an America that has become a theocratic dictatorship. It is interesting to point out that, in her own novel, Beukes has boldly turned the tables on Atwood’s vision of gender exploitation: instead of women becoming ‘handmaids’ of men – in *Afterland* – it is men and boys whose bodies are instrumentalised by state control.

Beukes’s novel also enters into an intertextual dialogue with Cormac McCarthy’s famous novel, *The Road* (2006), in which a father and son hit the road in an America devastated by an unspecified catastrophe. The strong bond between parent and child is central to McCormack’s novel of love in a dehumanised world. Beukes, for her part, also highlights the power of love in overcoming the extreme hardships of survival; the road trip undertaken by mother and son in *Afterland* becomes a pretext for the exploration of human bonding across shades of tenderness and tough love, resilience and grit. Unlike *The Road* – which ends in tragedy – *Afterland* offers a redemptive counter-narrative: the family manage to escape chaos and degrading exploitation, with love triumphing against all odds. In this article, I will therefore first address Beukes’s representation of various facets of the post-pandemic “afterland”, to conclude with a closer look at the intricacies of family bonding under extreme circumstances.

## 3. On the road: fleeing the New World order

Having acknowledged that she had drawn on McCarthy’s novel, *The Road* (2006), as “a reference point” (Moonsamy 2020: n.p.), Beukes’s American chase novel is also centred on a parent / child duo: in her case, a mother and son (disguised as girl). With men having succumbed to the killer virus, Cole and Miles are forced to run for their lives without husband/father protection. The new world

order is an authoritarian matriarchy, inversely similar to the now-defunct patriarchal system, in which the few surviving men are forced into total submission to medical experiments – in the interest of so-called “national security” (Beukes 2020: 112). Apart from being chased by a state security agency, Cole and teenage Miles are also hunted down by Cole’s sister, who – having joined a violent, all-female trafficking ring dealing in “white gold” [sic!] – aims to capture her nephew. The stakes of the chase are high, and the duo’s main objective is to escape capture, with the ultimate goal of fleeing a disintegrating America. The pair find themselves relentlessly on the run, as they encounter and escape various female-only communities and state organisations.

The novel’s tone ranges from melancholic reflection on the current devastation, to dark humour and sarcasm. The tone is melancholic when the duo is shown driving through ghost towns with abandoned churches, “[e]xcept that their cathedral is an abandoned gas station restroom, where the rows of empty stalls gape like broken teeth in the pre-dawn light, toilet seats long since wrenched off by vandals” (idem: 7). They drive through many towns that are haunted by the stark absence of men, the only sign of their previous existence being memorials and “statues of naked cement men [like] Pompeii’s ashen dead, frozen in place” (idem: 146).

While on the run, the mother/son pair come across unusual people and communities, all of which – in different ways – lay claim to their freedom of movement. These encounters are metaphors of present-day American society, presented in a fresh light. As Stephen King (2020: n.p.) said: “This is your basic neo-noir, coast-to-coast chase novel, and Beukes, who is from South Africa, sees America with the fresh eyes of an outsider”. Beukes had also made use of the “outsider” trope in her earlier America-based novels – *Broken Monsters* (2015) and *The Shining Girls* (2014) – both of which present a country seen through the eyes of the poor and socially marginalised. For, as Andrea Spain (2017: 261) has commented, “Lauren Beukes might be said to be writing an ‘ex-centric’ people’s history of American cities”: whether foreigners, or the working poor, these are outsiders who have a sense that the American Dream has failed.

With the majority of the male population now extinct, the protagonists’ road trip across America may prompt an expectation of a more compassionate (female) world order to take shape. What we find, instead, is a reverse mirror image of the old patriarchal power system, now in women’s hands: a system driven by similar political impulses of greed, force, and violence as before. Asked to clarify her own position on gender issues in this novel, the writer confessed in an interview that she has provocatively flipped the story: instead of a woman / girl being the image of victimhood, it is a teenage male figure, Miles, who is victimised, and whose “bodily autonomy and agency are under threat, [for] a world of women is not necessarily going to be a kinder, gentler world” (Moonsamy 2020: n.p.).

#### 4. Disintegration of the social fabric

As mentioned earlier, I will first address Beukes’s dystopian projections of several “Afterland” social spaces, ranging from state-controlled quarantine facilities, to an anarchists’ commune, and finally to depraved religious institutions. Each one of these social spaces presents the reader with yet another angle on the new power relations unfolding in the imaginary post-pandemic future.

#### 4.1. Centralised state power and quarantined life

The two protagonists' effort to flee America is foiled on charges of attempted trafficking of a male, considered to be a so-called "national resource for future security" (Beukes 2020: 112). Upon their heavy-handed arrest by female officers, mother and son are interned in a navy base turned quarantine facility, in which Miles (along a few other surviving males) is to be subjected to numerous debilitating experiments. While the teenager was held in what he referred to as "a boy zoo" (82), his mother feels "guilty and ashamed" of her "new status quo" (114) as a parent who has failed to save her son from capture.

From the siren-howling military base, emblematic of outright suppression of personal freedom, the pair are transferred to another federal facility (113), which gave the impression of being less draconian. The latter facility looks, deceptively, like a luxury wine estate dotted with modern buildings and a well-endowed hospital. The writer's sarcastic tone is unmistakable when she has Cole speculate that this facility must have been built by "the rich douches of Silicon Valley [...] the Zuckerbergs or Brinos or Bezoses [who feared an uprising by] disgruntled Uber drivers, or sex robots" (131). The tongue-in-cheek commentary is a sarcastic reflection on social inequality and AI excesses as driven by the greedy American techno-elites. Wealth, for these elites, also translates into an appetite for "total security", based on digital surveillance (132). A reminder here of Beukes's earlier dystopian novel, *Moxyland* (2008), offered as a grim foreboding of totalitarian corporate surveillance procedures.

Cole and Miles find themselves trapped in the luxury quarantine facility, a form of emotional hell: for even if "wrapped up in suffocating luxury like cotton wool [...], heaven is its own kind of hell, if you're not allowed to leave" (Beukes 2020: 132). The establishment is cynically named 'Ataraxia', in reference to the same-name Stoic virtue of dignified acceptance of hardship as a prerequisite for inner peace. However, as pointed out by Léa Salje (2023: 254), while a state of muted affect can refer to emotional "freedom from mental disturbance", it can also suggest a "harrowing state of emotional vacuity" (idem: 257). The semantic ambiguity of 'ataraxia' is not lost on the reader. The depressed human guinea pigs of Beukes's Ataraxia are counselled by a psychiatrist on how to arrive at inner acceptance of their quarantined imprisonment. Upon Cole directly confronting the psychiatrist, she gets a patronising response: "humanity is counting on us [and] you have to find a way to live with that. You have to make do" (Beukes 2020: 134-135). A bland, soulless comment demanding acquiescence at the cost of mental anguish and deprivation of freedom.

#### 4.2. Escaping the "handmaidens of chaos"

The pair manage to escape from quarantined life (Beukes 2020: 98) and find shelter in a commune run by a group of women who seemed to live outside the law. Although this is offered for reflection as an alternative social space, Beukes continues to be less than flattering in her descriptions of the commune dwellers, whom she depicts as anarchists with vaguely feminist-socialist-utopian visions of Afterland. The pair are taken aback by their ostentatiously unconventional behaviour, verging on the promiscuous and lawless. Mother and son are welcomed here by eccentric, self-declared "liberated women", fully tattoo-ed, their arms "twined with snakes and flowers" (100). Beukes offers us a glimpse into the life-

style of anti-establishment rebels without a cause; a commune where stray dogs and cats answer to names such as Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, or Fanon and Spivak – suggesting their owners’ dabbling in philosophy and postcolonial ideology.

In this section of the novel, Beukes plays lightly with a mixed-bag of anarchist/progressive aspirations. Throughout this section, she also hints at various recent social movements and tendencies that shape contemporary American discourse. One of the dwellers drops a hint at the “*What You Need* Movement [which] encourages people to leave their doors open, and let people help themselves” (102; emphasis added). Here, the implicit reference is to the radical feminist #*MeToo* movement, expanded to mean an ‘anything goes’ attitude that includes redistribution of ill-gotten goods. This section abounds in satirical innuendos expressing Beukes’s own playful way of grappling with eccentric attitudes: holding them lightly, and yet triggering the reader’s own reflective speculation around the social issues hinted at.

Intriguingly, in spite of their insistent attempts at virtue-signalling inner liberation from rigidly conventional thinking, the anarchists are actually attracted by authoritarian structures/ regimes. In the name of feminist liberation, they support the government’s importing female IT programmers from tyrannies such as Qatar and Egypt (ibid.). As for organising protest actions, they proudly announce their association with rogue elements: “We’re not doing a lot of direct protest action anymore. It’s more behind-the-scenes. We have friends in Russia and Iran, ex-troll farms, [helping us] make the world better” (idem: 106). The mere reference to illegal internet activities by trolls and surveillance agents as tacitly employed by controversial state actors (to supposedly make the world a better place) has an unmistakable sarcastic tone about it. The mere suggestion that such tactics can be seen as improving the lot of humanity is even more controversial today, that is, a few years after the novel’s publication in early 2020. Since then, a major war of attrition was started by Russia’s 2022 invasion of a sovereign state; and, in Iran, a young woman – Mahsa Amini, like many others before her – was assassinated, in 2022, for daring to defy the “morality police” by not wearing her hijab.

“Making the world a better place”, as flippantly suggested by the commune anarchists, refers to Robin Hood types of interventions, such as “wiping out debt records, bringing down banking” (ibid.); and the “expunging of immigration records [because] borders are as imaginary as money. So are property rights” (idem: 106-107). In the absence of real-life solutions to world problems, the disruption of the social order through violence and expropriation is desired as the new norm. The radical solutions suggested by these “handmaidens of chaos” (107) point to irresponsible ideologies advocating full-blown anarchy without a credible alternative in place. As can be gauged from her sarcastic tone, Beukes does not support the idea of a total dismantling of the current world order, and so we see Cole and Miles rushing for an exit from this deceptively free-thinking commune.

#### 4.3. Escaping the “neon nuns”

Having taken her protagonists through two radically-opposed post-pandemic experiences – from enforced quarantine, to anarchist group-think – Beukes further explores the impact that encountering an eccentric religious sect has had on the mother / son couple. The Church of All Sorrows is run by itinerant nuns, who make their presence felt in casinos and malls across the country. Echoing “Revelation’s representation of women as the cause of apocalyptic destruction” (Hicks 2017:

n.p.) – as literally understood – they preach a trivialised form of repentance for the near-extinction of the male population. The nuns’ improvised gospel is adjusted to the current disaster in an effort to manipulate the gullible women’s need for absolution and consolation. The nuns know that, although the old, predictable world order has imploded, people’s emotional need for finding ground under their feet has not disappeared. This is, intriguingly, illustrated by the gambling frenzy taking place in the Casino (the site where the nuns operate): women desperately searching for any kind of “ritual that is comforting in the predictability of the result”, which – in the case of gambling – is the ritual of “anti-hope” (Beukes 2020: 179). Intriguingly, even the Casino’s predictability of “nothing, no match, no meaning” can offer some comfort, because, paradoxically, it seems to act as life-affirming: “we play the gambling games because we know the rules” (ibid.).

It is this kind of thirst for grounding oneself in the familiar that is exploited by the itinerant nuns, who promise the all-female Casino patrons easy absolution. The choice of a casino as improvised place of worship verges on the farcical, as does the way these nuns are first presented: “women in colourful robes, so lurid they rival the casino carpeting [and neon lights], their outfits printed with one word in big bubble letters: ‘*sorry-sorry-sorry-sorry*’” (ibid.; my emphasis). This is, of course, a tongue-in-cheek trivialisation of the repentance ritual presented to the gullible as a way to bring the men back to life. The “neon ninjas” accost people everywhere in the city, and many women “succumb to the onslaught of personal interventions” (180). Beukes, here, gives free rein to her dystopian fantasy of power and manipulation in religious organisations. Masses of desperate women are made to feel inadequate by the itinerant “neon nuns” (179-180), whose ultimate aim is to gain control over their minds.

The gradual loss of agency is also powerfully illustrated by the main protagonist’s initial attraction to the nuns’ pseudo-salvic solution. Worn out by the trials and tribulations of being a fugitive, Cole desperately and naively reached out to one of the nuns, confessing that: “I am lost, I am struggling. I have come to be found” (187) – upon which, she was offered temporary admission to the monastic order, on condition that she submit herself to further intensive confessions of her “sinful” ways, whether real or imaginary. Cole was willing to cooperate with what was to become an arduous process of “unspooling her soul” (246) to the nuns, aware that this was the price she had to pay for cover from her chasers, and, equally aware that this process was “sandpapering her nerves” (ibid.). Throughout, Cole was not blind to the seductively comforting nature of submission: “She gets how easy this is, how neat, to give yourself over to someone else’s care, their rules. You don’t have to think, you don’t have to make decisions. Except keep the lies straight” (248).

As it happened, the nuns’ over-zealous pressure for Cole to repent takes a macabre turn when she is forced to undergo a process of ‘Mortification’ [sic] – which was supposed to be “about shedding your dead self, your dead name, and being reborn” (315), but – which was, in effect, an act of extreme violence and physical humiliation. Forced to undress and “wearing only her shame” (316), she is repeatedly hit with a broomstick and dragged across the room to have her face shoved into water to the point of near-drowning (ibid.). Presented by the nuns as ‘spiritual initiation’, this was just a depraved demonstration of symbolic power over somebody in a position of total subordination. During this ordeal, Cole manages to uphold her sense of self while addressing them in her self-talk: “you, bitches, you don’t know what I am, she thinks” (idem: 318). She is someone whose

ultimate goal was to “make sure her son survives” (ibid.) post-apocalyptic America. To this end, she is able to endure humiliation, for, “she knows how to survive. She can endure them. She has to endure them, for just a little while longer. And then, they can find their way home” (idem: 319).

What is perplexing in Beukes’s novel is the total inversion of expectations about gender violence: for, in this dystopian matriarchal society, women are brow-beaten into submission by other women, by those who have now replaced men in positions of authority, whether at the level of state, corporate, or religious organisations. In fact, as Beukes suggests elsewhere in the novel – in a scene depicting the violent interactions between hardened traffickers (all women), chasing after Miles’s ‘white gold’ – it is suggested that, as a woman “‘you have to hit harder, meaner, crueller if you want to step into the Big Men’s shoes [...] You don’t have to be as good as a man. You have to be worse. It’s about escalation, proving your’re the baddest [sic!] bitch in the room’” (idem: 240).

The scenes of woman-on-woman violence echo the writer’s comments elsewhere (in Moonsamy 2020: n.p.): “I’m not big on the binary idea of masculine versus feminine [...] A world of women is a world of people, still, with full capacity for good or evil. Because women are just as capable of being power-hungry, violent, abusive and evil as men can be”. It can be argued that Beukes’s bleak dystopian vision of a future matriarchal society is an indirect attempt at counter-balancing early feminist utopias – e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1979 (1915)) – which tended to envision all-female societies as sites of flawlessly harmonious co-existence. By contrast, as also pointed out by Maureen Corrigan (2020: n.p.), “Beukes’s women carry machine guns, issue orders and generally belie the fantasy that a matriarchal society would be kinder and gentler”.

### 5. Tough love: survival, resilience and grit

As a dystopian novel, *Afterland* leaves the reader wondering whether Beukes has any hope for the future. One could ask, rhetorically (in the spirit of Jonathan Swift): we know what she is against, but what is she for? I argue that, in spite of her bleak overall vision of the future, the writer does offer a glimmer of hope. For one thing, the novel is based on the ancient motif of the hero’s journey: the hero ventures out into the chaos of life, where s/he has to overcome obstacles, eventually to return home a wiser person. All along their road trip across America, fugitives Cole and Miles escape several places of entrapment. They finally manage to flee the American continent by ship and return to their homeland, thanks to their capacity to endure, reframe and overcome obstacles and malevolence on the way.

Apart from external obstacles, a further challenge for Cole is her own son’s growing resistance to a life on the run. What Miles does not yet understand, and therefore deeply resents, is the adult’s difficulty of sharing the ‘whole’ bitter truth around morally complex and entangled decisions with a teenager. As fugitives, Cole’s determination to flee the American “afterland” involved a degree of necessarily deceptive tactics (boy disguised as girl, names changed, omissions and half-truths). Aware that life-on-the-run might alienate her son from her, Cole is nevertheless determined to endure the temporary price exacted for her ‘tough love’. For, she knows that, although being torn between various difficult tactical choices in the everyday rounds, her ‘tough love’ is the only expression of love possible under extreme circumstances. In their tellingly titled article, “The Ethics of Complexity and the Complexity of Ethics”, Minka Woermann and Paul Cilliers

(2012) point out that it is not always possible to expect universally agreed-upon value judgments, thus arguing for the need – under extreme circumstances – to accept a “*provisional ethical imperative*” (idem: 447).

Searching for her own definition of motherhood, Cole has a sudden insight into her own parental role: to trust herself enough to make tough decisions when navigating the chaos of life: “Turns out that I’m a full human being and fallible as shit. You need to hold yourself too; [*to be a good mother*], *you have to be a person first*” (Beukes 2020: 349; emphasis added). Confident in her resilience and inner strength as “a person first”, Cole is capable of acting decisively, and soliciting the support of anybody in a position to help them flee America.

Towards the end of the novel, tensions between mother and son reach a boiling point. The son runs away, leaving his mother heartbroken. In the end, the pair are reunited at the docks, the site of their illegal departure from the disintegrating continent. After a highly emotional moment, Cole finds her voice again:

*Tough fucking luck, Miles. I’m not your friend. I’m your parent. That’s what I do. I make the decisions [...]. I want you to have choices. You have no idea what a privilege that is [...] right now, you are my responsibility, and I will always, always, have your best interests at heart. And these other people won’t*” (Beukes 2020: 377, emphases added).

Her tough love has not hardened Cole. Her capacity to endure hardship does not take away the “primal, deep motherbeast” (idem: 373) of pain she feels when her son is in danger.

Eventually, love is shown to triumph against all odds: the pair manage to escape ‘Afterland’. The novel ends at open sea, with a memorable visual metaphor. Upon sighting killer whales in the distance, Miles points out that this species is organised as a matriarchal society: with “grandmothers and mothers lovingly in charge of the pod” (idem: 389). Associating the protective strength of the maternal killer whales with his mother’s ‘tough love’ is the son’s tribute to Cole’s iron determination to save him out of the choppy waters of enforced exile. A moment of deep reconciliation, a glimpse of hope in the redemptive power of love as counterbalance to the chaos unleashed by calamitous events.

## 6. Conclusion

According to the genre’s conventions, *Afterland* – a post-apocalyptic novel – is meant to focus on a bleak future vision of humanity as a world without men in it. In her boldly provocative dystopian novel, Beukes also exercises a degree of authorial control over the emotional charge associated with such a scenario. While most apocalyptic fiction is ominously sombre, Beukes skilfully combines contemplative reflection with sharp social critique and insightful psychological observations. To lighten the load, she also makes use of an abundance of satirical, even farcical, commentaries, which encourage the reader to detach from one’s own prejudiced thinking about social roles, and more specifically, about gender and power relations. Beukes cautions that a matriarchal society of the future might not, in effect, be much different from the current patriarchal system; and that it might even exercise reverse sexism and exploitation. While boldly distancing herself from positions that tend to vilify men *en bloc*, Beukes is also skeptical about utopian idealisation of female innocence and virtue: “‘Where are the women bad guys?



Where are the incompetents? Where are the evil bosses?” (Beukes qtd in Mallinson 2020: n.p.). Asked, in an interview, to define her own brand of feminism, Beukes said: “I think it is about *being a decent human being* [...] my women are *interesting for who they are*, as opposed to what they can do, or how much arse they can kick, in high heels or leather” (Stobie 2016: 52, emphasis added).

Last, but not least, the novel stands out within its fictional genre for the delicate portrayal of parent / child bonding in times of catastrophic change. Beukes’s exploration of motherly resilience and grit takes centre stage in this haunting novel, a novel memorable not only for its fresh take on the complexities of today’s world as projected into an imagined future, but centrally, because of placing love, ‘tough love’, at the heart of it.

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