

From the Centre/Periphery Dichotomy to Implicated Readers: Reading Tash Aw's *We, The Survivors*

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Abstract

In this article, I shall examine the problematic disposition of voice and agency as described in the London-based Malaysian author Tash Aw's latest novel *We, The Survivors* (2019). The novel is constructed in the form of an oral testimony, narrated by the protagonist, an impoverished third-generation Chinese-Malaysian, Ah Hock, who is convicted for a culpable homicide of a migrant worker. It is framed by the non-intrusive presence of a Malaysian scholar, Su-Min, who interviews him as part of her field research project, and publishes his life-story in a book form. However, in the course of my discussion, I shall contend that Aw not only problematises the issue of voice appropriation in storytelling, but also questions the deeply residing chasms lying inherent in the existing societal structures. Drawing from Michael Rothberg's proposition of the implicated subject and Hannah Arendt's views on collective responsibility, I shall argue that Tash Aw's "we" attempts to dismantle the stereotypical boundaries of centre and periphery. Through its specific focus on the predicament of the immigrants in Malaysia, the novel eventually strives to create a network of implicated subjects which includes not only the author and the readers, but also everyone else in society.

Keywords

Tash Aw, *We, The Survivors*, implicated readers, collective responsibility, centre/periphery dichotomy, voice and story, migrant workers

Introduction

One of the still-contested ideas in postcolonial studies is the centre/periphery binary, which highlights hegemonic Eurocentric discourses that evolved due to colonising practices. This dichotomy, on one hand, indicates an essentialisation of the West and the rest in terms of culture, civilisation, and agency, and on the other hand, questions the problematic representation of the Other. It examines

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the systematic inequality and the historical conditions behind it which perpetuates this uneven power dynamics. However, since the late twentieth century, multiple modes of migration across diversely distinctive socio-economic and political contexts have become a reality. This voluntary and forced movement of people across both internal and international boundaries is prompted by many different factors. While some move in search of higher education and better work opportunities, others are displaced due to wars, disasters, ethnic conflict, economic oppression, or climate crisis, ravaging their homelands. Movements are also prompted by the increasing need for labour force worldwide in certain sectors such as industry, construction, plantation, and domestic work. According to the UN International Migration Report 2020, the number of international migrants is estimated to be almost 272 million globally, with nearly two-thirds being labour migrants (IOM). In addition, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports that at the end of 2020 there are 82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, which include 26.4 million refugees and 4.1 million asylum-seekers (UNHCR). Such an exponential rise in global human mobility not only creates heterogeneous social structures and transnational communities, but also unfolds multiple facets of global neoliberal capitalism and multilateral South-South alliance, further problematising the issues of agency and power relationship, leading to a need for re-evaluating the existing concept of the centre/periphery binary.

Given this context, in this essay, I shall read Tash Aw's latest novel, *We, The Survivors* (2019) in order to examine the complexities of agency and authority, appropriation, and representation, under the aegis of storytelling. Aw, whose paternal and maternal grandparents were immigrants from southern China, is a third-generation Chinese-Malaysian, who initially grew up in rural Malaysia. His mother's family was from Parit in the state of Perak, and his father's family moved through Temangan and Machang, eventually settling down in Kuala Krai in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan.

We, The Survivors is constructed in the form of an oral testimony, narrated by the protagonist, a third-generation Chinese immigrant in Malaysia, Lee Hock Lye, commonly known as Ah Hock, who hails from a poor fishing village in rural Malaysia. Tash Aw's novel is also framed by the non-intrusive presence of the Malaysian scholar, a doctorate in Sociology, Tan Su-Min. Ah Hock is convicted for a culpable homicide of a Bangladeshi migrant worker, and has already served a three-year sentence in prison. Subsequently, Su-Min interviews Ah Hock for her field research project, and eventually publishes her collected material in book form, narrating Ah Hock's life-story, directly through his own voice. However, during the successful book launch ceremony, Su-Min ecstatically remarks: "Everyone's fascinated by your story." In response, Ah Hock nonchalantly observes: "I think they are more interested in your book"

(Aw, *We* 239). Thus, the inevitable discordance between whose voice and whose story are being narrated has become apparent.

Tash Aw's novel not only problematises the issue of voice appropriation in storytelling, but also questions the deeply residing chasms lying inherent and often unnoticed within one's own familiar surroundings and in ordinary day-to-day interactions with others. He conceptualises an impoverished, third-generation Chinese-Malaysian as the protagonist, who has initially survived as a manual labourer, and eventually become a foreman in a fishing farm, supervising other labourers and mostly migrant workers, before being embroiled in "the culpable homicide not amounting to murder" (Aw, *We* 3). Writing within the Malaysian context, Tash Aw, thus, attempts to undertake a multilayered deconstruction of Malaysian society. He further examines the complexities of existing systematic inequality and rampant corruption, which is exacerbated by the increasing arrivals of both documented and undocumented migrant workers, along with a large number of refugees and asylum-seekers, on the Malaysian shores in recent times.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) in its quarterly briefing on Malaysia (January-June 2021) estimates that there are about 1.98 million regular migrant workers working in Malaysia as of September 2019, constituting about 20% of the country's labour force (ILO). The main countries of origin of these migrant workers are Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. Undocumented migrants are estimated to be around 2-4 million as of 2018 (IOM). In addition, there are some 179,390 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia as of 2021. Most of them belong to different ethnicities from Myanmar, and the rest are Pakistanis, Yemenis, Somalis, Syrians, Sri Lankans, Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians, and other nationals. However, even though these migrant workers are contributing to the economic growth of the country by relieving labour shortages in some selected sectors of the economy, they are regularly subjected to negative biases and serious labour rights abuses. Moreover, political and public discourse repeatedly portrays the migrant workers as "a potential threat to national security and detrimental to the country's long-term social and economic development" (ILO). Malaysians barely give them a thought when they see them at work, where they are mostly appointed to do the 3D jobs, that is, dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. However, Tash Aw's novel forces the readers to take note of the presence of these migrant workers around us, who are always visible, but remain unnoticed.

Tash Aw, in several interviews, has emphasised that he has consciously restricted Su-Min's point-of-view to regulate and inflect Ah-Hock's story in the narrative of *We, The Survivors* in order to accommodate Ah Hock to self-represent his felt experiences. However, he also acknowledges that the non-invasive presence of Su-Min is necessary and unavoidable. Ah Hock lacks Su-Min's middle-class upbringing and educational background. Therefore, it is

Su-Min, who is capable of narrating Ah Hock's story, using appropriate language and syntax. She can also negotiate with the publishers so that Ah Hock's story could be disseminated among the targeted readers. Even though Su-Min is aware of her responsibility and always asks for Ah Hock's permission before recording his voice, the entire act of reproducing one's story through the disposition of the other implies an underlying power dynamics.

Such an act of appropriating the voice of the "other" recalls bell hooks's foundational essay "Marginality as Site of Resistance" (1990), where hooks, as a black woman in a predominantly white America, locates the space where the "other" is being systematically marginalised and re-written, and examines how that marginal space could be transformed into a space of radical possibility and resistance. She identifies the colonisers' voice of representation thus:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself.... I want to know your story. And then I will tell you back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk. (343)

Yet, hooks also asserts: "We are re-written. We are 'other'" and "This 'we' is that us in the margins, that 'we' who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance" (343). hooks' evocation of the marginal space as a site of resistance simultaneously recognises the dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised, and generates a counter-hegemonic discourse in its attempt to eradicate the coloniser/colonised binary. However, even though hooks highlights the discrepancy between whose voice and whose story are being narrated within the context of representation of the colonised ones, which apparently reflects a similar backdrop when Su-Min is representing Ah Hock's story, Tash Aw's novel attains an alternative perspective as it is set in a different socio-economic predicament. hooks's "we" are the "we" who are relegated to the margin, therefore highlights a distinctive separation between "we" and "they". However, Tash Aw's "we" attempts to dismantle the stereotypical boundaries of centre and periphery and expands itself to accommodate readers, authors, and the subjects in a fictional representation to converge on the same level playing field, who often remain disconnected and estranged to each other, while sharing the common space of a fractured society. Therefore, apart from alluding to the problematics of power dynamics underlying in representation and storytelling, Tash Aw's novel forces us to examine the reader/author-subject divide to the extent of implicating us, the readers of the novel, who, I contend, are being particularly encompassed by the "we" in *We, The Survivors*. Consequently, in the following section, I shall first discuss Michael Rothberg's proposition of the idea of an implicated subject, before proceeding to analyse

Tash Aw's novel and examine how it transcends from the traditional centre-periphery dichotomy to implicating the readers.

The implicated subject and collective responsibility

Michael Rothberg proposes the term “implicated subject” in discussion related to the issues of power, privilege, violence, and injustice as he identifies that such complex societal issues suffer “from an underdeveloped vocabulary” (1). He refers to the etymology of the word “implication” which stems from the Latin *implicare*, implying a close connection, but not complicity. Rothberg defines his notion of implicated subjects in the following manner:

Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles. (1)

Rothberg's idea of implicated subjects, who are not directly responsible for causing any harm or injustice, but could be obliquely responsible in perpetuating invisible chasms and unwarranted power dynamics in a fractured society, invokes Hannah Arendt's explication of the term — collective responsibility. Arendt's use of the concept of collective responsibility hints at the necessity of assuming the “vicarious responsibility of things we have not done... taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of” because it is “the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men” (Arendt 50). Arendt, therefore, weaves an invisible network of relationships within a community where all should be responsible for the actions undertaken by the members of the community. This sense of being responsible, and thereby implicated, whenever applicable, should emanate not just from the point of view of the victim and the perpetrator, who might be located within the margin and the centre of a societal construct respectively, but also from the viewpoint of those who might unthinkingly indulge in passive consumption and value judgement or become indirect beneficiaries of the system, thus dismantling and complicating centre/periphery boundaries.

Rothberg rightly contends that an approach, based on implication and implicated subjects, provides an opportunity to probe into “a wide range of social and political struggles” and “forms of violence and inequality [taking] shape in small-scale encounters and large-scale structures”, allowing us “to address these different scales and temporalities of injustice” (2). He determines that implication could be produced and reproduced both diachronically and synchronically, where present predicaments could be affected by historical antecedents as well. He also proposes that implication could assume multiple

forms and is often induced unconsciously in a subject, which might be incurred by differentiated modes of distribution, recognition, or representation, or might also be symbolised by differing cultural identities or political affiliations or even marked by unequal material well-being. In evoking the notion of the implicated subject, Rothberg significantly clarifies that the implicated subject is not an ontological category, but it occupies “particular positions at particular junctures in space and time” (22). That particular position often assists in creating an alternative space which could accommodate exploring the ways “power functions through complex and sometimes contradictory articulations” (22). Such possibilities, according to Rothberg, facilitates to establish “a network of implicated subjects” (12), in tune with the notion of collective responsibility, which leads, not only to an interrogation of power dynamics, and the dynamics of violence and injustice, but also, contrarily, to novel ways of conceptualising an idea of “long-distance solidarity — that is, solidarity premised on difference rather than logics of sameness and identification” (12). Therefore, as I read *We, The Survivors*, I shall attempt to explore how Tash Aw, in the course of narrating Ah Hock’s story within the framework of Su-Min’s transcription, strives to implicate himself as an author, and us, the readers simultaneously. As referred to earlier, I shall further examine how this notion of implication eventually implies a wide solidarity which is signified by the word “we” in the title of the novel.

The implicated writer-subject divide

We, The Survivors brings together two individuals, who belong to two completely different societal statuses and would probably have no opportunity of interacting with each other in any ordinary, normal social circumstances. As Ah Hock and Su-Min tentatively attempt to dismantle the invisible boundaries between themselves, the readers realize that in spite of the inevitable chasms and fractures between Ah Hock and Su-Min, they too belong to the same society. Tash Aw admits: “[I]t is the most personal novel I’ve ever written. It is very close to my heart” (Allardice). In a personal essay, Aw recollects his past and refers to his parents: “Neither had much money, and life in those isolated provinces often resembled a series of battles — against hunger, illness, floods and the lack of work” (Living and Writing). His family never questioned their fate and accepted suffering as a natural part of their lives. However, as Aw, who is fortunate enough to be able to move from being a student in a local government school in an unremarkable suburb in Petaling Jaya to have graduated in England, witnesses how just in one generation, members of the same family could start inhabiting in two disparate worlds. While he has established himself as an award-winning novelist, writing in English, some of his cousins continue working in factories, or as waiters or bus drivers in small, provincial towns, who, according to Aw, “are no less intelligent or hardworking

than the people I know who work in investment banks in Kuala Lumpur, but their lives couldn't be more different" (Living and Writing). Belonging to and straddling these two contradictory worlds present a complex dilemma to Tash Aw who notices an ever-widening gap between these two existences. He observes that the "story of my life is the story of modern Southeast Asia" (Living and Writing). Aw is painfully aware that the life of the privileged few and the lives of those who struggle for bare survival, are part of the same narrative, but it is also practically impossible to bring these two together on the same platform. Therefore, he, in the novel, attempts to question the ingrained class divisions, systematic inequality, and value judgement towards failure, violence, and wrongdoings.

The protagonist of the novel, Ah Hock, is a third-generation Chinese-Malaysian, who is born in an impoverished fishing family in the remote village of Bagan Sungai Yu. His village was initially disconnected from the nearby town of Kuala Selangor, as the Selangor River flows in-between his village and the town. At the beginning of the novel, Ah Hock comments nonchalantly: "You want me to talk about life, but all I've talked about is failure, as if they're the same thing, or at least so closely entwined that I can't separate the two (Aw, *We* 3). It sets the tone for the narrative straightaway. Tash Aw, himself being brought up as an immigrant descendant in Malaysia, focuses his attention on exploring the experience of differential immigration in the country, ranging from the multi-generational ones to the latter day labour migration and refugee arrivals. In representing the convicted murderer Ah Hock's life-story throughout the novel, Tash Aw pertinently questions the stereotypical trope of initial struggle and eventual success for immigrant stories to be accepted as valid or valuable. He introspects: "Why there this deep need to tell these sanitized stories about ourselves?" (Aw and Lin). He also attempts to draw our attention to the inevitable presence of the migrant workers around us who rarely get any visibility in any form of serious literature: "every house, every road that's being built is being built by migrant labour — and how absent they are in formal literature" (Aw and Lin). As Su-Min strives to unearth the motivation behind the murder throughout the course of her several interviews, Aw's novel pivots on the complex divide "between those who are able to interrogate the situation and those who are not" (Aw and Lin). Tash Aw admits that writing *We, The Survivors* is similar to having a dialogue between two parts of himself. As a part of an immigrant family, he has seen his parents, to whom normalising hardship is common and bare survival is of supreme importance without questioning any existing injustice or inequality. But because of his education he is also a part of the privileged section of society. Aw, therefore, increasingly experiences a disturbing dilemma of confronting his splintered selves. In the novel, Ah Hock and Su-Min apparently represent these two parts of society. Even though belonging to the opposing sides of the divide, they ironically realise that they

belong to the same story or the narrative. As Tash Aw confesses that he wants to implicate himself through the process of writing the novel, through “questioning on which side of the writer-subject divide I lay” (Chin “People”), the novel also compellingly implicates the readers, who usually belong to the educated upper and middle-class individuals but would eventually find themselves being entangled in the complex web of social hierarchy.

Implicated readers and collective responsibility

The life-story of Ah Hock reflects a familiar story of the fragile Asian Dream which believes that hard work is the key to overcome rural poverty and fulfil urban aspirations. However, Tash Aw points out that there are intricate structures inherent in society that perpetuate different types of exclusion, which has been exacerbated by various forms of neoliberal capitalism and more recently, by environmental degradation and climate crisis. Ah Hock recalls his childhood period when his entire village survived on fishing. As the narrator puts it: “The men out in the boats at sea, the women sewing the nets in the village, the children gutting the fish in rickety shacks perched on stilts over the muddy banks” (Aw, *We*, 28). However, he also recollects how their lives change when a bridge is built across the river, connecting their village to the town. Tash Aw identifies how the establishment of big industries and factories in nearby villages and rivers, have become instrumental in depriving the fishing families. They are forced to sell their fresh catches cheaply to the middlemen to be cleaned and processed in the factories, eventually to be distributed to the big supermarkets in the cities. However, they are also subjected to increasing pollution, which affects their health and livelihood. Steady stream of floating plastic bags and poisonous chemical wastes emanating from the factories and industries choke the river, resulting in major loss of their catches. Ah Hock’s observation of such developments that prompt most of the younger generation to leave their village in search of better opportunities in the cities encapsulates the inevitabilities of capitalist tendencies. As Aw states: “But that’s the way things go: the big swallow up the small, everything becomes part of something else” (Aw, *We* 22). Moreover, when the ever-increasing high tides have become regularity, wiping off vast tracts of their lands, Ah Hock realises that they are even excluded from accessing any kind of governmental compensation. He informs Su-Min dispassionately:

We were the wrong race, the wrong religion – who was going to give us any help? Not the government, that’s for sure. We knew that for no-money Chinese people like us, there was no point in even trying. (Aw, *We*, 202)

This points to the practice of institutionalised discrimination which prioritises the major ethnic race, the Malay-Muslims, over the other races in Malaysia. Tash Aw himself recalls how he was subjected to phrases such as “Balik Tongsan”

(Go back to China) throughout his childhood and observes how even after more than hundred years of immigration through multiple generations in Malaysia, ethnic Chinese people are still referred to as “pendatang” (immigrants/outsideers) and “penumpang” (passengers/freeloaders), perpetuating the notion of exclusion (Chin). Such practices of ethnic divisions and resultant discrimination evoke Rothberg’s idea of diachronic implication where the present predicament of Ah Hock and such poor, non-Malays in Malaysia is impacted by long-held socio-political configurations.

Aw’s novel does not solely portray the traditionally existing societal binaries of inclusion/exclusion, which predominantly depends on ethnic identities. It significantly highlights how these hierarchies could alter in different predicaments. As the marginalised locals in Malaysia interact with the dark-skinned and foreign migrant labourers, particularly from “Bangla, Myanmar, Nepal” (Aw, *We* 6), it could reinscribe a shifting dynamics of power relationship. Surviving in larger towns and cities is a challenge for younger people from remote villages such as Ah Hock’s Bagan Sungai Yu. With little education and lack of experience they could be easily lured by false get-rich-quick schemes or are dragged into gangsterism and drug-dealership in which Ah Hock’s village friend, Keong has become embroiled. Ah Hock tells Su-Min that he has undertaken mostly manual labourer’s job after leaving his village, in addition to being a waiter, a bottled gas delivery man or a night security guard for his survival. He also informs her that these experiences provide him with opportunities of interacting with migrant workers, which eventually reveals complex and intersecting layers of power dynamics in a class-conscious society.

In providing Ah Hock with a voice, even though through the well-meaning and empathetic Su-Min’s transcriptions, Tash Aw strives to construct a space where the readers of his novel could vicariously access, encounter, and experience the predicament of the migrant workers, whom we always see around us, even enjoying the fruits of their labour, but never pay any attention to. As Ah Hock maintains: “Without them, the whole damn building would collapse. In fact, take these workers away and the entire country would crumble” (Aw, *We* 249). Thus, Tash Aw endeavours to draw the readers into the world, saying: “I wanted them to be actively part of a society which is fractured” (Chin). Therefore, Aw’s portrayals of the physical toil of the migrant labourers, who usually remain nameless to their bosses, and who are perceived only as bodies expected to go beyond their limits, and get sacked if they are sick, is acutely visceral and upsetting. However, Ah Hock, in conversation with Su-Min, who is aware of such discrimination and indignity, and supports the demands of basic human rights and minimum wage, indicates how the class division, despite being well-meaning to each other, fails to identify the fundamental issue. Ah Hock refers to the human rights campaigns that highlight how migrant wages degrade and humiliate the soul. He remarks:

They didn't understand that it wasn't the pay that destroyed the spirits of these men and women, it was the work – the way it broke their bodies before they could even contemplate the question of salaries. The way it turned them from children to withered old creatures in the space of a few years. (Aw, *We* 45)

Tash Aw thus unpacks the complexities of representation and displays the apparent discrepancies lying between the voice and the story. Ah Hock could not recognise himself when he was represented by a competent lawyer, who has worked for free in order to help him, during his trial in the court. He recalls:

I listened to her speak about me, and though the facts were true, I felt as if she was describing someone else, someone who had grown up close to me, maybe in a village a couple of miles up the coast. (Aw, *We* 20)

He re-emphasises the issue of exercising power in structuring the narrative, indicating the disconnect between whose voice and whose story the readers get access to.

However, Aw's novel does not merely simplify or generalise any such centre/margin boundaries in terms of the author/subject divide, but, as already indicated, also examines how power relations could constantly shift in regards to particular circumstances. He rightly notes that immigrant experiences are complex and there cannot be any single, archetypal model of migration storytelling. He clarifies: "In fact, the more important story is about how Chinese people see Bangladeshis, how Malays see Nepalese. This is a story that needs to be told" (Allardice). This points to the rapidly increasing complex, multilateral South-South relationships. When Ah Hock is promoted from being a farmhand to a foreman he is instructed by his boss, Mr Lai, that he does not need to work alongside the foreign workers anymore: "Why you waste your time doing this kind of work? ... Foreman also do this dirty work? Give them instructions already can, no need to join in" (Aw, *We* 46). Ah Hock suddenly realises that he could hold power over those people, "whose bodies work like mine" (Aw, *We* 46). This abrupt change of perspective precipitates a sense of guilt in him. As his fellow labourers continue toiling with the same intensity without even recognising his presence, he understands that "[i]t was as if they knew that something had changed, that I had detached from their world, and no longer belonged to it. I didn't know what to do" (Aw, *We* 46). He recalls that he has to force his body to remain still and he lets Su-Min know that "the more my inaction frustrated me, the louder I shouted at the workers" (Aw, *We* 49). It signifies how the sense of being empowered and implicated at the same time could result in unintended consequences which even realigns and widens the existing and invisible power dynamics within a particular societal construct.

The novel also draws the attention of the readers to interrogate the stereotypical understanding of wrongdoings and value judgement as Su-Min attempts to build a portrait of Ah Hock, not just as a murder convict, but as a human being. When the foreign workers in Ah Hock's farm are affected by a cholera epidemic during a crucial period of production and delivery, Ah Hock, in desperation, seeks help for additional manpower, and Keong, who by then works as a human smuggler in the name of labour contractor, tries to alleviate the labour shortage. However, instead of the group of newly-arrived Bangladeshis whom Keong has already paid for, they encounter "a shipment" (Aw, *We* 250) of famished and exhausted Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, who are incapable of undertaking any kind of physical labour. When Keong confronts the Bangladeshi contractor, demanding his money back, and the contractor brings out his knife, Ah Hock, without realising, grasps at a two feet long branch of a tree and strikes his head repeatedly. However, he also informs Su-Min that even though he is not hiding it has taken more than two months for him to get arrested. He clarifies that police do not really care "when the victim is that sort of person.... Yes, that kind of person. A foreigner. An illegal. Someone with dark skin" (Aw, *We*, 6). All these emphasise the existing institutional callousness towards the foreign workers in Malaysian society.

Although the entire novel traces the life-story of a murder-convict, Tash Aw deliberately describes the crime in a brief and unpassionate way. Ah Hock's pragmatic response to Su-Min who strives to uncover the motivation behind such a violent act apparently foregrounds the fact that there is no meaning or sense in such violence. He maintains:

But the truth is that there is no *because*. And because there is no *because*, there is also no *why*.... Or maybe the *because* was buried so far in his past that it's impossible to figure out what it is, so it ceases to be real. (Aw, *We* 221, emphasis in the original)

Ah Hock's observation highlights that even though violence could be outwardly seen as senseless it often reflects an unforeseen outpouring of emotional intensity at any crucial juncture. Deep-rooted burden of marginalisation and deprivation could suddenly burst through and strikes at anything immediately at hand without any sense of logic or rationality. Tash Aw states that his motive behind conceiving such a story where Ah Hock, who has been judged as a failure and a convict by the privileged sections of the society, is to emphasise that there should be no place for simplified value judgement in a societal structure, which is marked and demarcated by multiple fault lines. He proclaims: "I wanted to write a book that mirrored the senseless violence but also tried to make clear that violence is rarely senseless. There are always societal conditions at play" (Aw and Lin). Hence, both Ah Hock and Tash Aw attempt to establish a connection between them and their listeners and readers respectively through an evocation of an unknown and unfelt sensation in all of us through their

storytelling. Their stories are expected to unfold the perception that even though we are unconsciously aligned to a specific faction of a society, we are also a part of the same narrative, and consequently we should all bear the collective responsibility for perpetuating the existing fault lines lying amidst us.

Ah Hock's recollections often contain gruesome descriptions. He states how human smugglers overload the decrepit boats, how they throw the dead bodies overboard, often slashing the bodies and the stomachs so that it could sink quickly, how the barely surviving bodies are transported across the land suffocated under sacks of rice or cages of live chickens, and how they are being forced to dig their own graves, so that they could just be pushed in when they collapse. However, Ah Hock does not aim to evoke any simple sympathy in Su-Min. He, rather, acknowledges that even though he intends to avoid such unpleasant details, he fails to control himself. Yet, instead of feeling any repentance he asserts:

as I was talking I realised that I wanted her to be a part of that pain, to make sure that it seeped into her world, her clean, happy world. I wanted it to be a cloud that hung over her everywhere she went, just as it does over me, all the time. (Aw, *We* 306)

Whenever he sees the migrant workers are at work under the harsh sun without any respite and might just fall dead or decide to end their lives at any time, as it is “a battle to finish the job before it finishes you” (Aw, *We* 260), he is reminded of his days as a manual labourer. He points out that it is impossible to forget the physicality of such hard labour: “Our bodies – every fibre of every muscle, every tiny nerve – they remember what our minds forget” (Aw, *We* 260). However, Tash Aw also shows how one's gradual change in social hierarchy unwittingly changes their perspective on the underprivileged. Ah Hock detects the same patronising tone in Keong, as he is used to hear from his boss, Mr Lai. When Keong has elevated himself to the position of a labour contractor, or in other words, a human smuggler, he starts using devious ways, including bribing the officials to produce fake permits. As he delivers undocumented workers and refugees in plantations, constructions, or other service sectors, he also starts regarding these workers with contempt: “Which Bangla need papers? Once I have them, I'll sort things out.... Rohingya, Bangladesh – whatever. You're all the same” (Aw, *We* 275). Tash Aw, in this regard, also insinuates the perpetual practice of corruption at different levels of society. When Ah Hock has to bribe the officials to get Su-Min's car released, which was detained without any valid reason, Su-Min is dismayed by the extortion which reveals her naivety:

Corruption is a two-way thing. The victim doesn't even know they're a victim. In fact, you could say that the victim becomes not only the enabler of corruption, but the perpetrator. (Aw, *We* 281)

She also reminds Ah Hock that there are regulations and rules and laws against exploitation and brutality, however, Ah Hock remarks with a sense of finality: “So? Just because something’s illegal doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen” (Aw, *We* 305). Even though Su-Min rightly points out that victims could even act as perpetrators in specific circumstances, Ah Hock’s observation emphasises that societal injustices could also be perpetuated without any direct involvement of any victims and perpetrators. Consequently, Tash Aw’s novel signals that belongingness to the same societal narrative could induce a sense of implication in us, tearing down the ostensible author/reader-subject divide.

Tash Aw, in conversation with YZ Chin, posits that “writing is universal in its specificity” (Chin “Why”). In exploring the multi-dimensional societal structures and fractures in Malaysia, Aw remarks that similar to many other places, the country also “functions on the politics of exclusion” (Chin “Why”) which refuses to acknowledge the contributions made by every single member of society on an equal basis. He explains:

We’re obsessed by finding ways of defining ourselves in the narrowest possible manner, in which various groups of people are pitted against each other rather than left to form naturally inclusive communities.
(Chin “Why”)

While excluding someone indirectly implies belonging to the other, it induces a sense of uneven empowerment. Citing his personal experiences of partly belonging to rural Malaysia because of his family background, and partly to the urban middle-class, because of his education and professional achievements, Tash Aw repeatedly emphasises that he constantly questions himself how to negotiate his position in society. He has to precariously juggle his multiple and divided selves which remind him of his privilege to which many do not have access. He often feels dislocated from either side which forces him to question this constructed social hierarchy. He asserts:

[I]t is impossible to ignore the people left behind in a rapidly globalizing world. As hard as we might try, they are still there, still surviving, a constant reminder that we are in danger of losing our humanity, as well as the optimism that made all this growth possible in the first place. (Aw, “Living and Writing”)

Tash Aw’s conscious choice of fashioning a disturbing and disconcerted world in *We, The Survivors* can thus also be read as a testimony of the author’s divided and implicated self. He symbolically constructs these two disparate worlds of Ah Hock and Su-Min in such a way, where both could realise that even though they probably could never belong to each other’s world, they could at least try to develop a humane understanding of each other. Therefore, despite the conflict between whose voice and whose story is being narrated, the empathetic portrayal of the uneven power dynamics in storytelling and also in society could transcend the barriers of the rigid centre/periphery dichotomy. The novel

eventually invites the readers to consider their positions and belongingness within their own societies, and urges them to explore how power dynamics could be transpired through shifting social divisions.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this article, my reading of Tash Aw's *We, The Survivors* has initially focused on the apparent discordance between the voice and the story that usually ensues while representing the other. However, as also explicated in the above, Tash Aw's narrative not only highlights the problematics inherent in representing the voice of the underprivileged by someone who belongs to a higher social class, but also reveals the institutionalised discrimination and systematic inequality that prevail in rapidly advancing, upwardly mobile, class-conscious Malaysian society of the twenty-first century. Aw concentrates specifically on the predicament of immigrants in Malaysia, ranging from the century-old, multi-generational immigrants to the recent arrivals of documented and undocumented migrant workers and refugees. Through Ah Hock's recollection of his life-story, Tash Aw explores how certain societal conditions, despicable perceptions, and exploitative practices against migrant workers continue to be exercised, creating deeper fractions and fissures within already complex and layered social structures, manifesting alternative dimensions of power dynamics.

However, as I have referred to earlier, Tash Aw's foremost motive in explicating the ignominy of bare poverty, the gruesome details of hard, physical labour, and eventually the nonchalant presentation of the absurd violence is to prod and alert the readers to the deep-seated societal chasms surrounding them. Through my discussion of Rothberg's proposition on the implicated subject and Arendt's views on collective responsibility, I have attempted to argue that the novel's predominant aim is to implicate the readers, who usually belong to the educated, upper and middle-class and remain completely unaware of the other side of the story. The readers are obviously not direct victims or perpetrators of such existing social fractures. But the privileged class are the unwitting beneficiaries of such historical conditions and social formations that perpetuate this age-old systematic inequality and injustice. Their passive and indifferent attitude to such discriminations holds them collectively responsible for sustaining these fault-lines, as they are also a part of the same social system. Thus Tash Aw, in conceptualising *We, The Survivors*, strives to create a network of implicated subjects, where both authors and readers are cognizant of their precariously privileged positions, which aligns them with voice and power, but also reminds them of the forgotten and the forsaken, who are included in the same story. Consequently, Aw's "We" implicitly endeavours to incorporate every one of us within a meshwork of difference, where we are all connected with each other in our own struggles for survival.

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