

# CRUEL OPTIMISM AND EMOTIONAL WELLNESS, FANTASY OR REALITY? A CRITICAL STUDY BASED ON TASH AW'S *WE, THE SURVIVORS*

By

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## Abstract

*We, The Survivors* by a prominent Chinese Malaysian author, Tash Aw is considered a crucial literary work as it provides an alternative view, diverging from the mainstream notion of what it means to be a Chinese living in contemporary Malaysia. This novel portrays the lives of three generations of Chinese living in Malaysia and their struggle to carve out a life for themselves in a host country, Malaysia. Even though this novel offers a panoramic view of the Chinese community, the author focuses on individual characters very closely giving more weightage to the vivid portrayal of the inner thoughts and emotions of individual characters. This study aims to analyze how the novel portrays the emotions of characters and whether emotional wellness is an achievable goal considering the impact of cruel optimism. This study used textual analysis within the theoretical framework of Affect theory and probed into the key concepts proposed by Lauren Berlant in her seminal work *Cruel Optimism* (2011). The study concluded that even though emotional wellness is highly encouraged and is a path to real success, attaining it is not feasible for Chinese Malaysians due to the workings of cruel optimism disguised under race, class, gender, political and social inequality, poverty, lack of education, natural disasters, lack of job security and fate.

**Keywords:** *optimism, cruelty, emotional wellness, chinese-malaysians, trauma.*

## Introduction

The idea of mental well-being and illness has been represented in English literary works since time immemorial. Starting from the medieval era to the post-modern era, from Chaucer, Virginia Wolf and William Shakespeare

to Sylvia Plath and Alice Walker, numerous writers have depicted characters with mental complications in their writings either “implicitly or explicitly” (Garcia 2022). Sadly, it is a pathetic situation that mental illness and mental well-being are not given prominence as physical well-being.

The very talk of mental problems is highly stigmatized in any given society across time. Mental illness was viewed negatively as “demonic possession” and treated with fear and hostility (Garcia, 2022). Moreover, people with mental complications were considered “less-than-human” (2022). However, there was a green signal to the discussion of mental health in various disciplines including English literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the advancement of medicine and science. This awareness was reinforced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the notion of trauma began to be discussed widely as a result of the two world wars. In fact, the formulation of psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud acted as a catalyst in bringing mental health as a prominent discipline. At present, literary works predominantly scrutinize the psyche of the characters more deeply rather than the portrayal of events and ideas.

In the discussion of mental well-being, the role of emotion is pivotal as the former largely depends on the latter. Hence, emotional wellness promotes mental well-being. Emotional wellness is “the awareness and control of feelings, as well as a realistic, positive,

self-valuing and developmental view of the self, ability to deal with conflict and life circumstances, coping with stress and the maintenance of fulfilling relationships with others” (Adams et al.,1997). According to this definition, having a stress-free and fulfilling life is the core of creating a positive perception of life, which eventually leads to emotional wellness. Nevertheless, achieving emotional wellness is not as simple as discussing it as this is a highly time-consuming and inconsistent process because one cannot maintain the same level of emotional wellness as it fluctuates within an hour given the circumstances. Scholars state the different factors contributing to creating emotional wellness ranging from “competency; optimism; being respected; self-acceptance to engagement and interests; meaning and purpose; supportive and rewarding relationships” (Hu et al., 2008; Gilbert, 2007; Veenhoven, 2008 qtd in Miller & Forster, 2010).

Optimism is deemed as a key factor in emotional wellness because having a positive outlook on life gives a positive vibe during times of calamities which greatly helps to keep our emotions

under check. Optimism is defined as the “inclination to hope” that is inevitable to live a “higher quality of life” (Conversano et al, 2010). Several studies have suggested that there is a close connection between optimism and mental well-being (Conversano et al, 2010; Scheier & Carver, 1985). In other words, having optimistic thoughts and feelings is necessary to promote emotional wellness “the higher one’s sense of optimism the more one will experience positive outcomes resulting from the events and experiences of life” (Miller & Foster 2010). According to the mainstream discourse on emotional wellness, optimism is the key to self-satisfaction and a fulfilling life. Interestingly, there is a counter-argument to this notion which suggests that optimism becomes a barrier to emotional wellness, this is termed as ‘cruel optimism’ by Lauren Berlant (2011). Even though this word sounds paradoxical, an in-depth analysis of the correlation between cruel optimism and emotional wellness brings out new insights on emotional wellness questioning whether achieving emotional wellness is a realistic goal in contemporary times.

Thus, this study is crucial as it applies the key concepts of cruel optimism in analyzing the novel, *We, The Survivors* by Tash Aw as an attempt to show the difficulty in achieving emotional wellness not only due to external factors such as class, family circumstances and education but also due the workings of cruel optimism, which makes emotional wellness an unrealistic goal. In order to familiarize with the objective of this study, it is imperative to discuss about the novel and what it entails.

*We, The Survivors* (2019) was written by a prominent Chinese Malaysian author Tash Aw. He was born in 1971 in Taipei, Taiwan to Chinese Malaysian parents and moved to Kuala Lumpur when he was two years old. Despite being born into a working-class family, he had the opportunity to educate himself in a government school. Aw began to write and established himself as a writer when he was in the UK for his studies. He has authored *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), *The Face: Strangers on a Pier* (2016) and *We, The Survivors* (2019). Besides long fiction, he has also written many short fiction and non-

fiction including essays. He is one of the leading writers known to the international community as his works have received many prestigious awards and critical acclaim for his vivid portrayal of the Chinese community. His novel *Harmony Silk Factory* was “translated into more than 20 languages and enjoyed world-wide readership” (Wah, 2013). His works predominantly portray the lives of Chinese Malaysians while also bringing in other ethnic groups and nationalities to represent the multicultural setting of Malaysia.

Understanding what it means to be Chinese in Malaysia, knowing the history of this community is vital. Chinese were taken to Malaya as laborers during British colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th century. Thus, Chinese Malaysian / Malaysian-Chinese are the “Chinese descendants of migrants from different parts of China, especially Fujian (Hokkiens) and Guangdong” (Beng 1997, p.104). Being migrants from China, the first generation Chinese in colonial Malaya had a strong attachment to their homeland whereas the subsequent generations had their loyalty and

“rootedness in Malaysia”. (Gabriel, 2014, p.1212).

Being migrants, they encountered discrimination at several levels. Primarily the ‘Divide and Rule’ policy by the British segregated Chinese from the native Malays. This division was further strengthened when the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) triggered the division between Bumiputera (translated as “prince of soil”) comprises of “Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak” and non-bumiputera, comprises of “ethnic Chinese, Indians and other non-indigenous people” (Balasubramaniam 35). Thus, the Malays had all the privileges like access to public-sector jobs, business licenses, rent opportunities, government contracts, educational scholarships and admission to public universities through a race-based quota system” (Balasubramaniam, 2007, p.35). Hence, the Chinese, despite being the second largest ethnic group of non-Malays in Malaysia, are marginalized due to their diasporic status. Apart from the discrimination and marginalization by the state, they are the victims of class-based marginalization as the affluent

Chinese Malaysians inevitably discriminate against the lower-class Chinese.

Even though they have been living in Malaysia for generations, they are excluded not only by nation and class, but they are also underrepresented in the nationalist discourse, and their claims to be national are constantly rejected by the majority (Gabriel, 2014, p. 1211). For them, the only way of asserting their identity is through social mobility. At this juncture, every Chinese Malaysian aims for social mobility either through education or business. Hence, transcending social class has become the goal of the Chinese Malaysians across generations.

This community makes strenuous efforts to transcend their social class in order to carve out a space for them in Malaysia. The amount of effort they make shows that they are optimistic about a change in their lives, yet the very optimistic outlook on lives causes a hindrance to their social mobility due to the workings of social injustice and fate.

The protagonist of this novel, Ah Hock has a very optimistic outlook on life. He

tries very hard to climb up the social ladder so that he can become an affluent Chinese Malaysian. Being born into a working-class family, he has faced innumerable difficulties in life since his childhood, such as poverty, the divorce of his parents, his mother's difficulty in being a single parent and her decision to re-marry uncle Kiat, not having access to good education and medical facilities. He is traumatized and left unattended and as a result he drops out from school and starts working as a labourer. He has done several menial jobs for many years, and he has been rejected in many job interviews due to his lack of educational qualifications. Despite working so hard, he faces many failures which resulted in him ending up in prison for an alleged murder. Thus, the very optimism is hindered by social circumstances, turning out to be cruel optimism. Moreover, throughout his life, his level of optimism fluctuates, making it difficult to achieve emotional wellness.

On the contrary, attaining social mobility does not guarantee emotional wellness as they were in constant fear of losing their affluence. Thus, it cannot be generalized that the optimistic

instinct for social mobility does not ensure their emotional wellness. The ones who are trying to climb up the social ladder with optimism, do not have emotional wellness at all while those who have attained social mobility do not have the guarantee of emotional wellness due to their diasporic status.

### **Literature Review**

There is a dearth of literature available on this novel given that this novel was published quite recently in 2019. Hence, the existing scholarship is limited and focuses on how class acts as the major factor for discrimination and inequality (Poon, 2021)), how migration is deemed as the only avenue for social mobility of this community (Haq, 2021, p.39), how emphasizing the fluidity of this community is important to resist the homogenous portrayal (Chandran and Foong; Barta, 2005, p.105), Fragmented story-telling (Uy, 2022, p.13) and the importance of challenging the centre-periphery dichotomy (Dalal, 2022). These studies primarily focus on the social factors that contribute to the plight and

marginalization of this community, disregarding the emotional aspects.

Besides these researches, reviews of this novel also highlight the role of class and race in contributing to the subaltern position of this community. Ng in his review shows that this novel offers a vivid portrayal of the plight of the Chinese Malaysians and migrant workers narrated through the first-person narrator Ah Hock, which makes his novel different from his previous novels and other novels written by Chinese Malaysian writers as the latter focuses on middle class Chinese lives. (177-179). Similarly, Leon's review of the book shows the impact of race and class division in curtailing the upward mobility of Chinese Malaysians despite their constant hard work (2019, p.177). Thus, it is evident that the previous studies clearly focus on the factors such as race, class, family circumstances, fate and other external factors as the reasons for the predicament of this community. Hence, there is hardly any research done focusing on the emotional aspects of the characters.

Thus, this study is significant as it delves deeper into the psyche of the

selected characters in the novel, to probe into the emotional status of these characters to assess whether achieving emotional wellness is a possibility for them, being Chinese Malaysians. Hence, this study gives a nuanced analysis of this novel incorporating the key ideas of Cruel Optimism, intending to shed light on how cruel optimism has an impact on determining emotional wellness.

### Theoretical Framework

This research based on textual analysis by incorporating a deductive theoretical approach, engaging with already established Affect theory, Cruel Optimism by Laurent Berlant. It also uses descriptive analysis to expose the emotions of characters to show that they lack emotional wellness due to several external factors like race, class, family circumstances and personal predicaments. As for the definition, “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” (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). In a way, this definition suggests that all attachments turn out to be cruel to

the extent that it negatively affects one’s emotional wellness. Another crucial concept of cruel optimism is the idea of holding onto “fantasies” including “upward mobility”, “job security”, “political and social equality” and “durable intimacy” (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). One of the key triggering factors of fantasies is the desire to live a “good life”. This very desire becomes a cause for having stress and eventually leads to emotional trauma as opposed to emotional wellness. In fact, this notion of “good life” or “normal life” is often attached to “labor”, “family wage” and upward social mobility”. (Berlant, 2011, p.19). Another crucial point of this theory is the shared nature of “affective atmosphere” as opposed to being “solitary”, which demonstrates how cruel optimism affects people in the same environment. (Berlant, 2011, p.21).

### Findings / Analysis

*We, The Survivors* (2019) gives a panoramic view of the lives of Chinese living in Malaysia across generations. There are Chinese belonging to the lower class like Ah-Hock’s grand mother, mother, Ah- Hock, and Keong while Su-Min, Jenny, and Uncle Kiat

belong to the affluent class. There is a striking difference between the two classes. Needless to say, the lower class people constitute the majority and their lives are extremely difficult as they are not only deprived of basic facilities given by the government but also the government uses their place to dump the industrial waste which causes pollution and diseases. As a community, they lack both physical and emotional wellness. "We were the wrong race, the wrong religion... We knew that for no-money Chinese people like us, there was no point in even trying" (Aw, 2019, p.202). Even though they try to change their living condition, long-standing ethno-politics, class, lack of access to education, deprivation of basic living, poverty, natural disasters, fate and social injustice put them in even more vulnerable positions, making them feel stressed about life as a result of having fantasies of a "good life". This stress is converted into trauma, which affects their emotional wellness.

Describing the living conditions of working class Chinese Malaysians, Aw shows that many houses in the village is "half-wood, half-cement" is gapped and it has to be constantly patched up

"with pieces of biscuit tins (152). Adding to their misery, there is high risk of frequent natural disasters like flooding, they sleep and when they wake up "the sea is in my bedroom" (Aw 200). Thus, in a nutshell, their lives is vividly described by Ah Hock, "trapped in obscurity, hard to get in, hard to get out" (Aw, 2019, p. 27).

Besides describing about the community, Aw also shows the mental trauma of individual characters. Ah Hock's grandmother, Po Po, first generation Chinese, lives with the fear of persecution. She says "to be invisible is safe" (27). This clearly shows the mental trauma she could have undergone. Similarly, Ah Hock mentions about the emotional trauma of an old Cantonese woman who lives a solitary life "had no family, no phone, no one to keep her company" (Aw, 2019, p.79). Moreover, Ah Hock's mother's plight is even worse. Being a single mother, she is trapped in cruel optimism, she works hard desiring "a good life" yet all her hard work goes futile, and she dies of a tumor at a young age due to her inability to spend on her medical expenses, Ah Hock says "my mother's life had run out of possibilities. Her life is frozen when



she was not even forty years old” (170). These instances show how they are trapped in cruel optimism.

The novel gives an in-depth portrayal of the protagonist, Ah Hock. Ah Hock is a “Hokkien” who lives a very desolate life after being released from prison for allegedly murdering a Bangladeshi worker, Ashadul. Then the novel goes back to the childhood, adolescence and married life of Ah Hock. Being born into a fishing family in Bagan Sungai, Ah Hock’s life is filled with suffering and difficulties due to abject poverty. Besides physical hardships, he also suffers emotional deprivation. The traumatic departure of his father at the age of four leaves him to be raised by a single parent, which gives him more “stress” in childhood (Aw, 2019, p. 154). Since his mother is forced to work which involves “longer shifts at night”, he lives a very isolated life (162). This distance between him and his mother is further strengthened when his mother decides to move to Uncle Kiat’s house. He is extremely frustrated and feels “trapped” always “desiring to flee” (168).

Moreover, Ah Hock’s emotional wellness is further affected as he finds

it difficult to fit in with other children and his society. Children laugh at him and run away from him, calling him “mad” (174). In addition, his society also corners him as his mother is a divorcee and she is in a relationship with Uncle Kiat out of wedlock. This discrimination not only causes trauma but also creates a negative idea of home. He never feels a sense of belonging to anywhere, “my family, my home, everything- were strange and foreign” (18).

Due to trauma, “he lost interest in school” (190). However, it is emphasized in the novel that education is the only way that guarantees social mobility, “education is your future. Study hard so that you don’t end up like me” (63). Berlant names this desire for social mobility as a fantasy which is cruel optimism. In fact, after dropping out from school, Ah Hock’s perception of life changes towards making money and gaining social mobility, so that he can live a ‘good life’. Ah Hock works very hard. Notably after the death of his mother, he is forced to earn in order to survive. He moves to KL in search of jobs, he did menial jobs including “Bottled- gas delivery man”, “waiter, night security

guard” until he finally moves to work in the fishing farm owned by Mr. Lai (78). Despite Ah Hock’s heavy manual labor, he is a victim of labour exploitation, lack of job security and intimidation by the police. Every time he is promised of promotion and salary rise, yet they are “empty promises” (116). This causes mental trauma as the desire for “social mobility” and “job security” are perceived as causes of cruel optimism. Even though Ah Hock is aware of his exploitation, he could not do anything because he has no option. As he has previously done many menial jobs which were worse than his present job under Mr. Lai.

In fact, for the working-class Chinese Malaysians, there is no job security. For instance, Ah Hock was sacked from previous works without any valid reasons. One of his previous employers said one day, “it’s better you stop work” (Aw, 2019, p 15). Similarly, Ah Leng Chee sacks Ah Hock accusing him of stealing, “you want money for what, buy drugs” (Aw, 2019, p.42). Hence, there is no job security. This lack of job security affects social mobility., which eventually causes frustration and stress affecting his emotional wellness. Moreover, Ah Hock is feeling

emotionally drained when he is ill-treated by his employers. Even though he wants to shout at his employers for being rude towards him, Ah Hock suppresses his emotions, “I feel like screaming all kinds of swear words and smash the glass with my bare fists” (42). Thus, it is evident that Ah Hock is not only denied of his labor rights but is also denied of his basic human rights which shatters his dignity and makes him feel humiliated.

Besides Ah Hock’s frustration and stress at workplace, he also feels emotional draining in his personal life. As Berlant rightly points out that love is also a cause of cruel optimism, Ah Hock is traumatized in his married life not because he does not love his wife, but because he intensely loves his wife and he is afraid of losing her love. In fact, Ah Hock’s desire to earn more money increased after his marriage to Jenny. Jenny belongs to affluent class. Their relationship becomes complicated day by day and Ah Hock feels distanced from Jenny. The very problem starts with poor housing, they take loan on housing and both have to work very hard and for long hours to repay the loan. This causes distance between Ah Hock and Jenny. There is

no intimacy between husband and wife to the extent that Ah Hock even feels scared of touching her. This clearly shows the emotional detachment.

Moreover, Ah Hock's emotional suffering at its extreme level is portrayed in the incident where he felt "a kind of helplessness standing in front of that pile of excrement" (Aw, 2019, p.119). This is a crucial instance because on seeing the pile of excrement he does not feel disgust rather he feels sadness, this bears testimony to his emotional state.

For lower class Chinese Malaysians like Ah Hock, the role of fate is crucial as it hinders social mobility, thus testifying cruel optimism. Aw gives a parallel between Ah Hock and Keong to interrogate the notions of fate and hard work in determining social mobility. Ah Hock moves up to a managerial position after several years of consistent hard work and he is on the verge of climbing up the social ladder "I got married and bought a house. We started going out of town, a five-day tour of Bangkok" but the alleged murder, puts him in the lowest position of social hierarchy, making all his efforts futile (Aw, 2019, p. 50). The

murder not only puts an end to his social mobility but also pushes him down to a more vulnerable position where he completely depends on "Chinese charity", and "basic groceries" from the church because he completely lost the ability to work due to the leg injury he suffered in prison (Aw, 2019, p.11).

Both Ah Hock and Keong hail from a similar background, but Keong can climb up the social ladder through illegal economic means. On the contrary, Ah Hock's possibility for social mobility was curtailed as he was bound by morals. Moreover, Aw clearly emphasizes the impact of fate in curtailing social mobility. The idea of fate is repeated many times in the novel. Starting with the settlement of Chinese in the coastal area, being born into poverty-stricken families, being pushed to work at a young age and Ah Hock's friendship with Keong and the unintended killing of Ashadhul, all these events are the play of destiny. Ah Hock questions "whether I was destined to be me" (34). If one carefully reads the novel, it is very clear that Keong had the intention of killing Ashadhul whereas Ah Hock did not even intend it. In fact, in the

murder scene, “I back away, I need to get out of here, but I stumble backwards” (319). The entire murder scene clearly shows that the murder is unintentional, fate works against Ah Hock, as he accidentally kills him whereas Keong is saved by his fate. It is ironic to note that the very desire for social mobility prevents him from achieving it.

Al throughout, it is evident that the aspirations of working-class Chinese Malaysians to live a good life leads them to be trapped in cruel optimism which affects their emotional wellness. So one may question whether the affluent Chinese Malaysians have emotional wellness because they are financially well-off as they have already climbed up the social ladder. It should be noted that emotional wellness does not only depend on affluence. For instance, Su Min is an affluent Chinese Malaysian who has attained social mobility through education. Unlike Ah Hock. She has a good life and job security. Yet, she does not have emotional wellness because she is in constant fear of losing her affluence due to her race. This constant fear makes her feeble and she is stressed out. As Berlant points out

“Social and political equality” is also crucial in determining emotional wellness (2011, p.3). Even though Su Min is educated and financially stable, she feels discriminated against because of her race and gender which makes her hopeless about her future, this negatively affects her emotional wellness.

Su Min’s voice is suppressed in the political arena. In the incident where she wanted to complain about the rat in the supermarket, instead of taking her complaint, all the people laughed at her making her humiliated and defeated. Similarly in another incident, her car is being “towed away” and she is demanded a fine. But when she raises her voice to question the injustice of demanding for a fine, she is laughed at and degraded not only for her race but also for her sex. She is called using the degrading name “Ei Moy” which Su Min herself feels is “misogyny”, yet she cannot do anything about it except shouting and arguing. But even her words fall on deaf ears and eventually, she loses the fight (Aw, 2019, p. 278). Her car has been redeemed after paying money (bribe). So, it is evident that she neither has social equality nor political equality.

## Conclusion

Chinese Malaysians have been living in Malaysia across several generations. Yet, they do not feel at home as they face discrimination at multiple levels. As a community, they lack both physical and emotional wellness. Even though they try to change their living condition, long-standing ethno-politics, class, lack of access to education, deprivation of basic living, poverty, natural disasters, fate and social injustice put them in even more

vulnerable positions, making them feel stressed about life as a result of having fantasies of a “good life”. This stress is converted into trauma, which negatively affects their emotional wellness. The cause for not having emotional wellness for the working class Chinese Malaysians is primarily due to economic instability while for the affluent Chinese Malaysians, it is due to social and political inequality. Thus, it is clear that emotional wellness is not a realistic goal due to cruel optimism.

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