Tash Aw. *We, The Survivors*. London: Fourth Estate, 2019. 326pp. ISBN: 978-0-00-831855-0.

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Combining naturalist writing and the confessional narrative, the fourth novel by Malaysian-born writer Tash Aw explores the interrelated plight of working-class Malaysians and migrant workers, and the painful realities they face due to their socioeconomic disenfranchisement and state of unbelonging. In doing so, Aw also returns to Malaysia for his setting, which he has not attempted since his first novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005). But this is where the similarity between the two novels ends. If the protagonist in *Harmony* is an ambiguous individual whose narrative is unreliable because what is known about him remains largely shrouded in mystery and hearsay, the first-person narrator and hero, Ah Hock, in *We, the Survivors* is a subject who expresses unmitigated transparency and truthfulness resulting from his deep-seated desire to set the records straight for the terrible murder he committed that precipitated the story.

Told in a series of interviews with a journalist over three months after his release from prison for killing a migrant worker in a friend's defence, the novel recounts Ah Hock's lifelong struggle since adolescence when his father abandoned him and his mother in the backwaters of Kuala Selangor, to his resumption of friendship with a childhood companion years later that culminated in the fateful murder. Unmistakable is how systemic his social disqualification and lack of opportunity are due, on one hand, to the country's tacit discrimination against ethnic minorities, and on another, to the absence of welfare that could provide him with necessary assistance. Such a scenario is palpably brought home to Ah Hock at one point in the novel when the house and farm land he shares with his mother are destroyed by a flood, after which he recognizes that applying for a loan or subsidy from the government "to buy a new place … was hopeless. 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 even trying" (202).

With this revelation is a theme rarely featured in anglophone Malaysian literature also introduced in Aw's novel — the acute marginalization of, to use Ah Hock's phrase, "no-money Chinese people". While the works of other Malaysian Chinese writers like Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Lee Kok Liang have, in various ways, dealt with the issue of subtle discrimination against this particular ethnic group by the Malay-dominated state, they almost always revolve around middle-class, educated Chinese, who to some extent have the wherewithal to refuse socio-political circumscription often by relocating to greener pastures elsewhere, as evident in Lim's novel, *Joss and Gold* (2001) and, less directly, in Lee's posthumous narrative, *London does not Belong to Me*

(2003). The protagonist in Aw's novel, however, does not have recourse to such an option and realizes that crime is sometimes inevitable in times of desperation although it is a path he stringently avoids not so much out of fear of punishment, but due to his personal convictions and the values with which he was brought up.

For this reason, Ah Hock gains much sympathy from the reader. Distinct from the type of narrator frequently enlisted in much contemporary, often postmodern-inflected, fiction whose unreliability implies a degree of duplicity or ignorance on his or her part, Ah Hock is an unquestionably honest narrator who is devoid of any impulse to minimize his responsibility for the heinous act he had committed against a migrant worker, who like him, is only trying to eke out a living in a harsh and abusive environment. And that he does not accuse his childhood friend for his role in the crime even though he was its catalyst, but instead blames himself for mixing with the wrong company, only attests to his non-malicious personality, thus further endearing the reader to Ah Hock and his valiant and often hopeless struggle against socioeconomic deprivation. At no point does the novel suggest that Ah Hock is being mendacious or attempting to embellish the truth; instead, the guilt he expresses is consistently genuine, and the compelling story he tells clearly evinces his deep-seated desire to find some relief from the awful burden he is compelled to carry. Indeed, implied in Ah Hock's manifest understanding of and empathy with migrant workers and the tribulations they daily endure is his profound acknowledgement of the similar fate shared between "no-money" Malaysians who are ethnically non-Malays and these workers, thereby investing this confessional novel with a powerful socio-realist persuasion.

Curiously, if Ah Hock remains an uncomplicated character throughout the narrative, the same cannot be said of his interviewer who subsequently turns his story into a book. Ah Hock suspects that her motivation is more than just, as she admits, to ensure his side of the story is heard, and the manner of their interaction certainly hints at this possibility, although the novel fundamentally stops short at disclosing what it might be. In fact, that she is at times overly familiar with Ah Hock such as bringing him medication and food when he is ill and divulging her private life to him, while exuding distance and strict professionalism on other occasions certainly complicate their relationship and underscore her intention with a degree of suspicion even more. Adding to this equivocation regarding her intention is the conclusion of the narrative when Ah Hock abruptly leaves in the middle of the book launch without any clear reason, as if he suspects something which he nonetheless decides not to articulate. For a man who has been used and manipulated by others nearly all his life, perhaps he finally recognizes the journalist's self-centred agenda to advance her own career, and that her demonstration of concern for him hitherto had been likely nothing more than a ruse to elicit from him a compelling story to serve her end. Hence, if this reading is tenable, is the endless cycle of exploitation that Marx observed concerning the capitalist system whereby the uneducated poor will always be taken advantage of by the educated and financially able.

There is much to admire in *We, the Survivors*, most of all its penetrating study of unavoidable adversities faced by the local poor and migrant workers that sometimes force them into competition with each other to culminate in tragedy while the rest of polite society, which includes their exploiters, carry on in their blissful ignorance and/or apathy. Nonetheless, there is a feature in the novel (also conspicuous in *Harmony*) that, while not exactly a shortcoming, is nevertheless telling in its deliberate oversight in what is otherwise its obvious predilection towards candid representation: its refusal to engage characters belonging to other ethnicities (e.g. Malays and Indians), thereby resulting in a depiction of Malaysia that is curiously unreflective of its multiracial condition. In this regard, Aw's novel continues to perpetuate what I term "authorial insularity", which is the practice of skirting away from issues involving ethnic communities and religions outside those of the writer's own that is peculiar to anglophone Malaysian literature.