

RESEARCH BRIEF

Mapping the Contemporary Writer: A Survey of Critical Works on Tash Aw's Novels

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This essay introduces a framework for understanding contemporary literature based on Giorgio Agamben's philosophical ideas. In doing so, we focus on the works of the novelist Tash Aw; in particular his four novels, namely, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), and *We, the Survivors* (2019). By surveying the critical literature on his works, we endeavor to chart a cartography of critical perspectives to open new lines of research.

We suggest that the contemporariness of Tash Aw's works can be further philosophically understood if we make a reference to Giorgio Agamben (2009), an Italian philosopher who offers enabling reflections on the notion of the "contemporary" (p. 39). He conceived of the contemporary as one who is endowed with an unparalleled capability of mediating his relationship with his own time:

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. (Agamben, 2009, p. 41)

The second attribute Agamben (2009) deemed indispensable when thinking of the contemporary is that the true contemporary overshadows others by capturing "an obscurity" and "darkness" in lieu of the light of his own time (p. 45). Here, Agamben does not

disavow the significance of light nor simply interprets darkness as a deprivation of light but formulates a dialectical explanation of the inseparability between light and darkness:

The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness...To perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability. (Agamben, 2009, p. 45)

Aside from resting one's gaze on the darkness, the contemporary entails tremendous gallantry to extract within the darkness the light that is both alienating and moving toward us. This singular experience of time, "too soon," "too late," "already," and "not yet" (p. 47), is further expounded by Agamben's (2009) emphasis on the contemporary's ability to heterogenize monotonous linear time and to weave intricate yet justifiable networks of different times and generations.

Now we have a sense of what makes someone contemporary, and in what follows, we will suggest that Tash Aw's works dramatize this aspect of the contemporary. But before that, we will first provide a brief introduction of Aw and his works.

Born in Taiwan, raised in Malaysia, and educated in Britain, Tash Aw is a Malaysian-Chinese anglophone writer. His first novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, is set in 1940s Malay(si)a, a time of

conflict between two colonial powers present in the region. The book won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region Best First Book), and was longlisted for the 2005 Man Booker Prize. His second novel, *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), tells a story against the backdrop of the 1960s newly independent Indonesia. His third novel, *Five Star Billionaire*, explores the dynamic tumult of 21st-century Shanghai, China, and made it to the 2013 Man Booker Prize longlist. The most recent novel, *We, the Survivors* (2019), is set in the present but moves to the investigation of social inequality in Malaysia.

As a Malaysian-Chinese anglophone writer, it is fair to say his multiple spatial-geographical movements and multicultural background paved the way for his cosmopolitan and multitemporal consciousness. We suggest that his contemporariness resides in what Agamben (2009) termed “a singular ability” (p. 45) that one must possess to “divide and interpolate time,” “perceive the darkness,” and “grasp the light” (p. 53). Aw excels at presenting heterotemporalities as his four books traverse history, from colonial Malay(si)a to a newly independent Indonesia to modern-day China, and finally to contemporary Malaysia featuring a thematic movement from colonized (*The Harmony Silk Factory*) to independent (*Map of the Invisible World*) to reinvention (*Five Star Billionaire*) and to reflection (*We, the Survivors*), which enunciate the meditation of the harrowing past and mist-shrouded present/future of the (post-)colonial condition. Aw’s novels, therefore, focalize their lens onto the darkness and the light within, which in his works are reified as the marginalized and underrepresented individuals and also repressed even warped history. In *The Harmony Silk Factory*, the striving of Johnny seems to challenge the stereotype of Chinese and Communists, which is against the mainstream discourse of past and present Malay(si)a. In *Map of the Invisible World*, a world with clear boundaries is imagined through the suffering of Adam, eliciting a wish for a cosmopolitan world without boundaries. In *Five Star Billionaire*, Phoebe reinvents herself from an underprivileged village girl to a dream seeker, which subverts the conventional image of subservient Asian women. *We, the Survivors* constructs a level playing field where Ah Hock, from the lowest echelon riddled with racial discrimination and capitalist exploitation, can

represent himself rather than being represented by the upper class.

Literature Review

The Harmony Silk Factory

Tash Aw’s debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, tells the story of a controversial Malaysian Chinese, Johnny Lim, by juxtaposing three conflicting narratives, which are told from the point of view of his son Jasper, his wife Snow, and his confidant Peter.

In an interview with Barta (2005), Aw expounded his intention of writing *The Harmony Silk Factory*: to break the stereotypes of both suzerains and subalterns, which aligns well with Agamben’s (2009) criteria of being a contemporary. To fulfill that intention, Aw deliberately reversed the stereotypical images of Snow and Peter, making Snow an atypical Chinese woman who is androgynous and ruthless and Peter a marginalized Westerner. Among the limited research on this novel, genre and identity are the two most explored lines of argument. The controversy embedded in the genre is that the novel is more like historical fiction or fictional history. Fan et al. (2010) posited that Aw, as a Malaysian Chinese, is writing to disclose the stigmatized and repressed history of his ethnic group. The novel is based on Aw’s two-year research on the colonial history of Malay(si)a. In another article by Fan (2013), she underscored her opinion by adding that the historical truth is the most interesting part of the novel, and the purpose of the novel is to unearth the profile of the Malayan Communist Party. Hsiung (2017) and Saxena (2022) further consolidated this stance as they both proposed that Johnny’s character is based on a real historical figure named Lai Teck, whose intricate experiences are nearly the same as Johnny’s. Janoory et al. (2016) suggested that the novel is “an intellectual production with strong fictional elements” (p. 187), which can be fathomed through the problematic juxtaposition of the narratives. Biography (the narrative of Jasper), diary (the narrative of Snow), and memoir (the narrative of Peter) are combined by Aw to create a well-rounded image of Johnny. But, the deviation of the juxtaposed descriptions is quite sharp, which destroys the historical veracity of the novel and, at the same time, highlights a sense of fiction (Janoory et al., 2016).

Identity, which entails political and cultural

identity (Grossberg, 1996), has long been a focal point in postcolonial criticism. Critical work on the novel has zeroed in on the deconstruction of the identities of the male characters. For instance, the typical “Chinaman” identity of Johnny is strongly affirmed by Hsiung (2017) and Saxena (2022) by analyzing how Johnny becomes a tycoon through unscrupulous means, which aligns with the stereotype of Chinese. Another focus is on the confusing identity of Jasper. According to Aw (2005), the skin of Jasper is “not brown, not yellow, not white” (p. 28), which corresponds with the skin colors of the Malay, the Chinese/Japanese, and the British (Hsiung, 2017). Jasper is, obviously, a hybridity with an ambivalent identity, which, as well, is in accordance with the image of a nascent postcolonial state (Sim, 2011). Peter, the key to smoothing out the ruptures of the whole plot, is a “non-typical typical” Englishman. Newton (2008) asserted that Peter has an “uprooted and transplanted self” (p. 172), which makes it easy for him to adapt and integrate into the non-English world, thus making a foreign land his homeland and transforming himself from an outsider to an insider. Meanwhile, Newton (2008) also excavated the hidden “Englishness” of Peter through his hegemony in the design of the garden. He claimed that, except for the seeds of the plants, Peter is trying to plant English language and English culture, thus “creating a stronger synthesis” (p. 180). The argument is afterward strengthened by the assumption of Zainal and Yahya (2009) that Peter is reconstructing a small colonization under his instinct as a colonizer behind the gloss of constructing a garden to commemorate Snow.

The critics of the novel reveal how Aw interpolates time, interlacing the past and the present. In this case, Aw is not trapped in the darkness of either past or present, writing with the mainstreams or disciplines of whichever period; instead, he jumps out of the time, searching for the beam of light embedded in the darkness, that is, authentic historical records from various sources, and bringing it to the forefront for further speculation. Aw’s contemporariness thus becomes a wedge of contention on how to place the book properly, as fiction or as history. The complicated identity of the characters shaped by Aw and dissected by the researchers supplementally validates Aw’s skillful control of time. To specify, all those mentioned characters, Johnny, Jasper, and Peter, are portrayed

from three synthetical but independent perspectives with three staggered but overlapped timelines. Their images, as well as identity, are hence multi-layered and always-in-forming, alternating between darkness and light, which also corresponds to the features of contemporary. Still, the identity/image of Snow, which is more complicated as she is not only a woman but also an untypical male-like Chinese woman from the middle-upper class willing to marry a low-class man, has not been scrutinized yet.

Map of the Invisible World

The question of identity, which is explored in *The Harmony Silk Factory*, is further examined in Aw’s *Map of the Invisible World*. Set in 1960s Indonesia and Malaysia, Tash Aw’s second novel, *Map of the Invisible World*, tracks the adventures of Adam and Johan, two brothers orphaned and adopted respectively by an Indonesian Dutch and a Malaysian couple at an early age.

“Uncertainty,” a keyword repeatedly mentioned by Aw in an interview with Rintoul (2009), is located in identity, relationships, and the past. The book delineates a “map” of the “invisible world” where everything is connected or in the process of connecting but where nothing is clear. Aw is trying to straighten out the intricacies while making them justifiable networks, which is a significant ability of the contemporary, according to Agamben (2009).

The discussions sparked by the novel are sparse but can be sorted out into three groups: individual boundary, national boundary, and historical boundary, which constitute the aforementioned “invisible world.” Sim (2011) explored individual boundaries by analyzing the relationships among the characters. Then Chai (2013) bridged individual boundaries with national boundaries by metaphorizing the relationships talked about by Sim. More recently, Chang (2020) examined nationalism and historical nihilism to further correlate national boundaries with historical boundaries. Sim (2011) examined the relationships among the characters through the dissection of several “sublimities” based on the theory of “sublime” from Kant (1963). For instance, the action that Johan commits suicide to leave the opportunity of adoption by the wealthy Malaysian couple to Adam elicits the “sublime of destructiveness,” which “aims at an expansive notion of fraternity” (p. 303). Moreover, the romance of the two pairs of lovers (Karl and Margaret,

Adam and Zubaidah) draws forth the “sublime of love,” which helps to weaken the “tradition notions of racial engagement” and highlight the possibilities of “social border-crossing” (p. 304). In the end, Sim concluded that the “invisible world” gestures at an “inclusivity yet to be born” (p. 308), which heads towards cosmopolitanism.

Chai (2013) extended Sim’s idea that bridges individual boundaries and national boundaries. She correlated the characters’ relationships/loves with countries’ relationships through metaphor. To specify, there are four kinds of relationships/loves, namely “the love between brothers” (p. 368), “the love between lovers” (p. 370), “the love between adopter and adoptee” (p. 371), and “the love between orphans” (p. 372). According to Chai, the love between brothers (Johan and Adam) implies the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia, which is harmonious at first, but later breaks down and becomes tense because of external factors; the love between lovers (Karl and Margaret) symbolizes the relationship between the Netherlands and America, and their changeable intimacies project their intricate attitudes towards Indonesia; the love between adopter and adoptee (Karl and Adam, Malaysian couple and Johan) satirizes the full-of-border countries with borderless family affection; the love between orphans (Adam and Zubaidah) reflects how the “rootless” people struggle with their ethnicities and nationalities.

Historical boundary lies in the self-recognition of a country; that is, how a country treats its past and how it reflects on its present. Chang (2020) averred that Aw lashed out at nationalism through the sufferings of the characters. He proposed two questions: “What makes a nation stay together” (p. 6) and “Does the presence of diverse communities within a nation allow it to forge stronger internal bonds” (p. 7). Through the scrutiny of the repatriation of Karl, Chang answered the first question that imagination unites the nation because imagination can lead the nation to “go beyond race and pre-colonized experiences” (p. 18). Karl, as a “physical reminder of Indonesia’s colonial past” (p. 8), thus becomes an imagined enemy hindering the union of the imagined nation, which means he must be eliminated. For the second question, Chang noted that “diversity within unity is essential” (p. 26), but at the same time, he used the instance of Karl again to give the warning that people should be cautious about internal division, which may transform an imagined nation into a full-of-

imagined-enemy nation. Moreover, Chang criticized Indonesia’s deliberate amnesia about its colonized past. Under the speculation of Aw’s covert intention embedded in the novel, he reminded that revising the past helps to “open doors to the future” and prevent the recurrence of history.

Border-crossing is a common theme shared by the aforementioned researchers, which implies their contemporariness in Agamben’s (2009) sense, as they are trying to determine the possibility of constructing a world without boundaries. Their intentions are consistent with Aw’s implication knitted in the arrangement of the plots, where Aw emphasizes the significance of finding one’s real past veiled by darkness—multiple man-made obstacles and glosses, so as to eliminate the boundaries and usher in the light.

Five Star Billionaire

Differing from *The Harmony Silk Factory* and *Map of the Invisible World*, which are set in the past, *Five Star Billionaire* initiates Aw’s journey of recording and focusing on the development of contemporary Asia. The novel situates 21st-century contemporary Shanghai, a burgeoning metropolis of modern-day China, as an ideal destination, alluring five Chinese Malaysians from disparate social distinctions to pursue economic aspirations. The theme of migration for Aw is an unavoidable issue due to globalization and the supposed Asian century. As Aw mentioned in an interview with McDonnell (2013), the “superficial ethnicity” of all *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) characters drives them to search for fortune in their ancestors’ homeland and makes them no different from outsiders in their root place. In the book, five *huaqiao* in Shanghai express profound nostalgia for the Malaysian past. It appears that their relationship with the geographical place where they make money is irrelevant to their conditions, yet the irrelevancy reinforces their relevancy to the place where they grew up.

Stadtler (2015) analogized New York in Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* and Bombay/Mumbai in Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* with Aw’s Shanghai. Both Garner (2013) and Byrnes (2013) focused on moral anxiety, loneliness, and social alienation disturbing five characters concomitant with booming Asian capitalism, characterized by a yawning gap between the haves and have-nots, seemingly transplanting the so-called American dream in China.

Erstwhile literary critics pay extra attention to the issue of capitalism and investigate whether postcolonial places and people are entirely assimilated into Eurocentric capitalism without any specificity or individuality. Finch (2018) broached a theory of “personal finance” (p. 5) generalized from Aw’s depiction of the financial activities of Phoebe and Justin mediated by gendered desires of items and nostalgia towards the history and past to replace the American model featuring “a techno-futuristic affectless speed” (p. 1). Finch averred that Aw’s words strive to accentuate sentiments and feelings to escape universalism and the homogeneous temporality of modernity and capitalism. By the same token, Naruse et al. (2018) found in *Billionaire* a distinctive form of contemporary capitalism and modernity: “multiple, plural, alternate, blended, or simply non-Western” (p. 4) through exploring postcolonial subjects in the postcolonial setting.

Cho (2018) contributed her subversive view by examining fakes and counterfeits pervasive throughout the novel, from Phoebe’s exterior items to her identity along with Gary and Walter Chao. Furthermore, Cho juxtaposed the tide of Chinese counterfeits flowing out to the world and the counter-migration whereby all of Aw’s characters leave Malaysia for China to capitalize on the potentialities of the fakes. In Cho’s reading, Aw is foregrounding the “potential transformation and ascendance” (p. 54) of fakes rather than categorically disavowing and condemning them according to “the moralizing binarism demanded by global capitalism” (p. 54). In Blum’s (2020) essay, she comprehended the book’s genre and Aw’s translation of the name of each chapter as an invitation to facilitate “the human, cross-culture, even sentimental connection” (p. 76). The form of self-help and literariness of content manifested in Aw’s depiction of each character’s affects and sentiments, as Blum noticed, is Aw’s tentative endeavor to neutralize self-help’s “capitalist corruption or cultural contamination” (p. 76). In a similar vein, idioms and epigrams as titles of each chapter are presented in English and Chinese, yet in Blum’s reading, Aw is wittingly blurring their origins.

Later, critics emphasized diasporic identity and temporality. Lim (2021) identified *Billionaire* as a revision or even a subversion of familiar or stereotypical conceptions of diaspora observed in anglophone Chinese diasporic literature and Chinese Malaysian

diasporic literature, that is, East-West migration, to elude impoverishment, political persecution, and social chaos in China, which is substituted by East Asia as an alluring and promised land; conventional narratives of the policies of protectionism in Malaysia driving the Chinese to leave is never to be seen. Poon (2021a) postulated that diasporic temporalities are entailed to undermine chronological temporality demanded by the world of neoliberal globalization and to reverse the mantras of “re-invention” and “self-authoring” (p. 176) disseminated in the self-help book. In Poon’s reading, misreading amidst characters and ambiguity of meanings due to metafictional strategies used in the self-help book occasion the novel’s success in disrupting the absolute authority and control manipulated by the neoliberal.

Studies in world literature are also employed by the latest critics to dissect this novel. Cheah (2022) attached prominent importance to the conception of diaspora yet more to the blending of it and cosmopolitanism. Cheah examined a proliferation of Bildungsromans, *Five Star Billionaire* included, to espouse his arguments that diasporic temporalities are emaciated in postcolonial globalization and “a return to an original worldliness offers some respite” (p. 251). Phoebe and Gary’s returns to the world to seek new connectedness and formulate new unifications for acting in alignment become a necessity countenanced by Cheah’s elucidation about “worldliness”: “not the place of biological birth but its ontological ground” (p. 273) inasmuch as the new diasporic Chinese neither find solace in postsocialist China nor inclusion in Malaysia where discrimination against non-indigenous peoples was and is rampant.

Finch’s (2018, p. 5) “personal finance,” Cho’s (2018) approval of counterfeits, and Blum’s (2020) unusual interpretation of self-helps are outcomes of the contextualization of Asian corporatism and capitalism. Lim (2021) perceived a crucial motif that Aw attaches prominent significance to: how Asians see Asians matters the most (Allardice, 2019). Polemic about diasporic temporalities between Poon (2021a) and Cheah (2022) brought Aw’s interpolation of different times to the forefront, which renders his contemporariness manifest. Notwithstanding, the scholarship of *Five Star Billionaire* so far has been disposed to regard Shanghai as a copy or a revision with local hallmarks of London, Paris, or New York, the society of which is seen as a repackaging of capitalism

and a product of globalization, which may convey one aspect of how Malaysians see China. More attention may move on to the dynamics of interaction between five *huaqiao* characters and two Chinese characters, Zhou X. and Yanyan, who are rarely analyzed, to comb out more multidimensional networks for enriching regional research in Asia.

We, the Survivors

We, the Survivors stays in the present and moves its setting from Shanghai to another metropolis, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It unfurls in the form of an interview with Ah Hock, an ethnic Malaysian Chinese, dominantly voicing his own story of criminal violence, to an interviewer, Su-Min, who is gleaning materials for her doctoral dissertation. This novel, not dissimilar to *Five Star Billionaire*, addresses contemporary Asian issues. For Aw, as he said in an interview with Chan (2020), he distinctly expressed his yearning to write about those who are shut out of mainstream literature when he chose Ah Hock as his protagonist. Furthermore, depicting people striving for success in Southeast Asia is another prominent topic in the work.

Critics of this book continue to investigate how colonialism and postcolonialism bear on the present day. On top of that, issues of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class are also examined. Whether this novel can be categorized as postcolonial or world literature is also discussed. Poon (2021b) was concerned about issues of subalterns' racial identity, that is, racial discrimination, stereotyping, marginalization, and subjugation, and captured the colonialist shadow cast upon postcolonial Malaysia by employing Robert Young's term, "postcolonial remains" (p. 609) which refers to a hangover continuously constructing postcoloniality derived from the colonial period. In addition, she discerned a crisscross between globalization localized in Malaysia and its postcoloniality, whereby she subsumed Malaysian anglophone literature within world literature and attached equal importance to both locality and universalism. For Poon, Aw's twists and turns created for Ah Hock, his portrait of labor, land, and nature, as well as his metaphorical rhetoric of evolution and survival, reveal a predicament of racial discrimination and segregation for Chinese minorities and newer migrants in Malaysia and invoke a "Darwinian discourse" (p. 610) for

indicating capitalist exploitation, economic disparity, class struggle, and social inequality in Malaysia. Jamie Uy (2022) read the novel as "petroliterature" (p. 13) from the lens of EchoGothic. The uncanny and apocalyptic opening scene Ah Hock describes, according to Uy, mirrors the exploitation of neoliberal capitalism and extractive economy exerted upon the Global South. Ah Hock's haphazard recollection and circumlocutory narration of his crime, in Uy's eyes, indicate human limits, social inequality, and capitalist competition under the context of a Eurocentric economic order. As Uy observed, the novel is Aw's attempt to lay bare the invisible and noxious ecologies of Malaysia.

Dalal (2022) focused on the female character, Su-Min. While Ah Hock, a Chinese minority in Malaysia from the lower echelon of society, can scarcely give his own voice to the world, Su-Min, of middle-class origins with an educational background, tells the story for him. In addition, Dalal conceived the novel as a challenger of a binary conception in postcolonial studies, "the Centre," and "the Periphery" (p. 71). He drew upon Michael Rothberg's "implicated subject" (p. 75) and Hannah Arendt's explanation of "collective responsibility" (p. 75) to argue for the unavoidability of writers, readers, and fictional characters' embroilment into a fractured community. The disposition of representation and voice begs Dalal's exclusive probe for issues of power, authority, and appropriation. With an eye on the "we" in *We, The Survivors*, Dalal posited that Aw attempted to involve every Malaysian and newer migrant in an interconnectedness. Dalal (2022) called attention to the interwovenness among class, race, and gender, and further interrogates the problem of who is represented by whom and who speaks for whom. However, whether the educated female character can give voice to the deprived man remains unresolved.

Another essential issue about the environment and ecology, Uy (2022) averred, is Aw's attempt to unmask the evils of extractive capitalism. The uncanny depictions of surroundings are not only magnified reflections of the present but also a prognostication of an apocalyptic future, which once more demonstrates Aw's excellence in grasping the relationship between different times and how the critic traces the significance of contemporariness embodied in this novel.

Conclusion

This essay introduces Giorgio Agamben's philosophical interpretation of the concept of contemporariness as a new framework to comprehend Tash Aw and his four novels. By investigating a wide range of critiques, we find them conducive and ponderable in a setting of Southeast Asia, yet they appear to gaze in a monotonic direction. For instance, in *The Harmony Silk Factory*, most scholars concentrate simply on the genre of the text or the identity of the isolated male characters, ignoring a far more complicated image of the female character, Snow. In *Map of the Invisible World*, limited research focuses mainly on the interpretation of the "boundary" of the "invisible world," leaving the examination of specific characters aside, such as the "inside outsider" Karl, who gives up his Dutch identity and naturalizes in Indonesia. In *Five Star Billionaire*, the majority of critics revolve around associating the latest discussion and achievements of critical theories, encompassing colonialism, postcolonialism, and world literature with motifs manifested in the book. Macro theories are de facto deficient in their linkage with concrete characters. In *We, the Survivors*, scholars pay more attention to intersectionality among race, class, and gender to lay bare how colonialism bears on subjects living in the present time. However, characters like Ah Hock's mother and wife are scarcely dissected.

In a nutshell, more contemporaries are entailed to break through and transcend prevailing patterns of research, which may descend into ossification sooner or later. Furthermore, the framework brought forth is not applied to the texts per se. We suggest that contemporariness projected from Aw's fluid identity and outlook of cosmopolitanism to his texts and forms can be further and closely associated with Asian issues, from memory and postmemory, trauma, to displacement haunting past, present, and future generations. Cross-disciplinary studies are also encouraged to break limits and integrate penetrating insights from the sphere of Sociology, Anthropology, as well as Ecocriticism.

Contribution of Authors

These authors contributed equally to this work.

Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by our institution.

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