

EXPLORING CRUEL OPTIMISM IN DIGITAL DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVES: A STUDY OF PON'S *WANT*

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Abstract

Speculative fiction has served as a predictive representation of technological developments and totalitarian governance. Dystopian literature addresses modern issue of environment, economic injustice, moral discrepancies of technological progress. This research aims to investigate the portrayal of digital dystopia in Want by Cindy Pon through the theoretical framework of Lauren Berlant's concept of "Cruel Optimism" (2011). This study filled the significant gap by focusing on three concepts of Berlant's "Cruel Optimism". The objectives of this study are fulfilled by analyzing characteristics of digital dystopia in Pon's Want by incorporating Berlant's concepts like "Impasse", "Slow Death", and "Lateral Agency". Using in depth qualitative methodology, this study reveal the treatment of elites through sense of "hope" and "false promise" imposed on lower class. This research aids in paving lens of critically thinking about dealing with moral, social, and political crisis worldwide. The findings of the study asserts that the novels portrayed digital dystopia by alarming and reclaiming the repressive systems and making reader think about possible measures for bringing change in this digitized world.

Keywords: Digital Dystopia, Cruel Optimism, Impasse, Slow Death, Lateral Agency, Hope, Want, Cindy Pon

1. Introduction

The 21st century is an age of three M's; Men, Machines and Media (Bhattacharjee and Gope 2022). This generation has been leading towards hyper-real environment where human values, ethics are devalued and favor of digital media has termed this generation as 'generation of idiots'. With the passage of time language is changing due to technology. Users of the virtual platform often encounter profound feelings. The word "sublime" held a delightful connotation throughout the Roman classical period. Longinus describes the sublime as "lifting out of oneself." Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant both examined the notion of the sublime. The experience of the sublime is beyond human comprehension. Humans sense both awe and apprehension as they observe the object before them. This prompts an individual to see the entity or phenomena as superior. The notion of the "digital sublime" was established in the 21st century by the distinguished academic Vincent Mosco in his acclaimed work "*The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*". This is the unfathomable emotion experienced by a member of the current generation when observing remarkable programming languages on a computer screen. The computer algorithms enhance the subject's attraction and distinctiveness. Individuals are amazed by the intelligence and speed of the results, with the algorithms acting as the supervisor that directs the computer system's functions. The dominance of machine systems is not negative unless it alters the world into a dystopia, according to a critical analysis. The human intellect suffers by the utilization of digital technologies, resulting in a reduced recognition of one's true potential. Thus, this sublimity benefits humanity rather than causing harm.

The emergence of digital technologies has revolutionized societies, providing unmatched connectivity and ease. Nonetheless, this change has also sparked worries regarding surveillance, erosion of privacy, and mental health impacts. Dystopian environments manifest through a variety of strict control mechanisms, including hegemonic authorities' use of violence, punishment, and restricted access to information, as well as restrictions on human freedom.

Dystopia refers to the digital society prevalent with technology that controls public and private aspects of human life. Digital Dystopian narratives have sparked notable interest because they push boundaries of established paradigms while offering alternative views of contemporary and future scenarios as well as providing warnings about present behavior consequences (Greco, 2025). Dystopian fiction has been becoming popular among young adults as they think that while reading they can relate with the characters and the issue they are facing at that time. The Guardian posts that these texts let “readers connect to someone similar in mental state” (Mallan, 2017).

Dystopian literature is a part of the current scenario and it has become very flexible in from of various social media platforms like dystopian films, documentaries, TV series, digital games, graphic novels (Isomaa et al., 2020). Dystopian features and the concepts related to it are widespread nowadays in very field of art, literature and cultural accumulation. It could be seen as a genre of Anthropocene, which refers to human effects on the planet. This concept is related to the ecological phenomenon and its relationship with human beings. In dystopian fictions, since 21 century this genre has been widely discussed (Correia et al., 2018; Isomaa et al., 2020).

The most popular 21st century books like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Hunger Games* reflected dystopian society as bad and characters are rebelling against the society. Such stories are different from the classical stories and contemporary stories prefers to shows survival skills and symbol of hope at the end. The newer fictions seems to be growing entertainment value (Grubisic et al., 2014).

Digital dystopia has been discussed by delineating the potential results of data integration via private and government platforms. Jean Tirole in his book “*Digital Dystopia*” emphasized the understanding of pathways to a dystopia society as a crucial part of the formation of legal and constitutional safeguard to protect the citizens from potential abuses of power. The study examines how governments exert social control by managing information about people's behaviors especially in authoritarian states where social scoring systems create compliance and stifle dissent (Tirole, 2021).

Digital dystopia is not only limited to control and surveillance rather it has penetrated into themes of social supremacy, implications of data integration and dystopian outcomes. “*The incorporation of the individuals' social graph in their social score further promotes soft control but destroys the social fabric. Both bundling and guilt by association are most effective in a society that has weak ties and is politically docile*” (Tirole, 2021).

Aldous Huxley in his October, 1949 letter to George Orwell commenting on his masterpiece 1984 expresses his belief that: “*Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and these ways will resemble those which I described in Brave New World*” (Tirole, 2021: 5). The quote suggest the nuance that the powerful will gain more efficient and less resource-intensive methods of dominance, mirroring the dystopian governance portrayed in “Brave New World.” Huxley’s “Brave New World” is dystopian vision that tells the tale about the menace of such society where individuals are forced to act upon or live upon into predetermined roles that end up suppressing their identity and individuality. This concept of digital dystopia is related with the contemporary issues and discourses in which technology penetrate in every aspect of human life (Huxley, 1952). This research clearly explores the addition of digital dystopia from the concept of “Cruel Optimism” (2011), as proposed by Lauren Berlant. This concept refers to the attachment and the false hopes that individual attach with unrealistic and harmful aspirations, which ultimately ends up hindering flourishing and reformation.

1.1 Research Question

- What insights does the selected novel provide about digital dystopia and its consequences on the modern society?
- How does *Want* represent the concepts of cruel optimism?
- How do the characters demonstrate a state of “Impasse” and “Slow Death” within dystopian setting?
- In what ways do the protagonist in the novel resist the dystopian society in the form of “Lateral Agency”?

1.2 Research Objectives

- To explore digital dystopia and its consequences on the modern society in the selected novels
- To examine the representation of cruel optimism in *Want*
- To study demonstration of the state of “Impasse” and “Slow Death” within dystopian setting
- To investigate the ways through which the protagonist in the novel resist the dystopian society in the form of “Lateral Agency”

1.3 Significance of the Research

The digital dystopia and cruel optimism discourses examines the layered relationship between positive technology expectations and negative outcomes. This research can be used to create dystopian books, movies, and internet regulations that affect freedom perception and experience. This study could also contribute to English Literature by creating creative and critical discussion on dystopian narratives. This research is feasible for Future scholars as it may explore similar themes in literature and media, which would improve our comprehension of widespread exploitation within digital societies.

2. Literature Review

This part of research deals with concerns and ideas that has been reported by previous scholars and thinkers. It brings together all related theories and studies that related with the concept of cruel optimism in lives and scenario of dystopian fiction. By looking at the previous books, articles and observations on dystopia and its related issues, this chapter built on a foundation of theorizing what has been previously done. It explains how the concept of optimism has been explored in digital cultures, how dystopian discourse impact people's thoughts, plans, fears and aspirations. It also shows the manner in which Berlant's theory describes the emotional ties people develop even when such connections and attachments might not cater their desires well. This section also shed light upon scholarly discussions regarding digital dystopias, mainly those who concentrate upon online worlds, technological surveillance, digital identities and contemporary sense of crisis. Various scholars and researchers have addressed how digital spaces can confront as well as assist human optimism. Certain researchers argue that digital dystopias illustrate people entangled in systems cannot be escaped, while others argue that these narratives still possess instances of hope, defiance and interpersonal connection. Examining these existing studies, this section explains where the selected text *Pon' Want* sits well in the larger debate, and how it illuminates a novel dimension related to optimism within problematic digital worlds.

Desai (2024) in his article “Representation of the Dystopian nature of technology in literature” critiqued the influence of AI literature and dystopian society. The text of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, McEwan's *Machines Like Me* and Lem's *Solaris*, has been chosen to analyse the pros and cons of technology in the form of an AI. It stresses that duality of technology in benefiting as well as forging void to misuse the moral framework of technology like atomic energy. The author ended up alarming the generation about the upcoming time through text and hazardous effects of AI into ethical development of human being.

Bharatbhai and Nimavat (2024) traced the emergence of digital dystopian novels, defining the sub-genre as literature that foregrounds technology as a tool of control, surveillance, and manipulation. It surveys seminal works such as Orwell's 1984, Gibson's Neuromancer and Stephenson's Snow Crash, showing how themes of surveillance, virtual reality, AI and identity have evolved. The authors argue that these narratives act as "cautionary lenses" that expose contemporary anxieties about unchecked technological power, and they highlight the interdisciplinary value of studying these texts for cultural, social and philosophical insight.

According to Shaw (2015), interactive stories serve as instruments for fostering community and promoting emotional sharing in addition to being games or narratives. Characters maintain their optimism through cooperation even though they are imprisoned in a virtual environment that watches over and manipulates them. According to this perspective, hope originates from the strong social and emotional connections made with people within the "cage" of the system rather than from breaking out. The act of protecting one another is what prevents the spirit from collapsing (Shaw, 2015). Fisher (2001) expands on this concept of internal power by pointing out that digital narratives let people try out many identities and perspectives. Thus, optimism arises from analysis and personal development. By examining who they are and how they choose to respond emotionally, characters discover hope even in the face of a harsh and unchanging external environment. It implies that although you may not yet be able to alter the world, you are still capable of altering yourself (Fisher, 2001). In addition, Firth and Preston (2025) explain that when characters truly understand how they are being controlled, they can move from feeling helpless to "strategizing resistance." In their view, optimism isn't just a vague "positive feeling". it is a practical, calculated, and social tool. By using their knowledge of the system, characters can create out "small pockets of hope" or secret cooperative spaces where they can connect and act together. Authors asserted that resistance is a team effort built on clear eyed strategy rather than blind luck. The modern novels promotes a style of promoting such genre in which fulfillment of desire is necessary. This creates a sense of "cruel optimism," where novels generate desires that cannot be fulfilled. The essay traces the evolution of the romance novel, showing how it mirrors the evolution of capitalism.

Everyday emotional lives are influenced by the "promises" offered by digital systems and media. Because technology promises us security, comfort, and an integrated awareness of who we are, we invest in it rather than merely using it. The emotional attachment persists even in cases where these systems fall short. In digital dystopian fiction, these promises of creation and connection serve as a kind of "deeply internalized hope." Characters are unable to envision a life. Still others an identity aside from that digital architecture since the system has effectively molded their very desires, keeping them bound to it (Anderson et al., 2024).

2.1 Research Gap

For Pon's *Want*, this framework illuminates the ways in which characters hold on to digital promises, negotiate emotional landscapes, and maintain hope in a complex, uncertain world. Nevertheless, despite all the general research available, there remains a gap in applying Berlant's idea of "Cruel Optimism" to the character and narrative formations of digital dystopian fiction such as Cindy Pon's *Want*. Filling in such a gap, we will be able to establish the theoretical framework within which the wants of the characters will be analyzed, revealing how the most important desires and emotional attachments towards each other are shaped by a combination of a real hope and unyielding difficulties of the system.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This research focused through the lens of "Cruel Optimism" by Lauren Berlant. This theory has been incorporated in each part and aspect of the novel having textual implications.

Berlant in detail talked cruel optimism in her book “Cruel Optimism” (2017). when the world around us breaks down and everything seems to be falling apart, we still stick to the dreams that might actually hurt us. 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).

3.1.1 Impasse

There are many concepts given by Berlant such as “Impasse”, “Slow Death”, “Lateral Agency”. *Want* by Cindy Pon feature protagonists trapped in societies that offer freedom, beauty, and safety while enforcing strict surveillance and demanding social conformity and emotional control. The yearning for acceptance and survival transforms into a dangerous trap that makes people feel valuable. These systems give people hope which gradually transforms into a slow process of suffocation.

Lauren Berlant (2011) described the *impasse* as a stage in life where progress feels blocked, but people continue to live as if movement is still possible. It is a situation where time seems stuck, and the future feels uncertain or unreachable. The impasse is not a sudden crisis, but a slow awareness that life is not going as expected. People in this state continue to hope, plan, and desire, even while feeling trapped. Berlant used this idea to explain how everyday life keeps people in a state that is neither fully collapsing nor improving, where one must keep going despite real limitations.

“*An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dog paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure*” (Berlant, 2011). The concept of impasse is important because it shows how people keep dreaming about “good life” having known that those dreams will never come true. An impasse is actually a state in which an individual get stuck and world never let the person gain what he dreamt of. It can be any reform or purpose. It could be success, stability, love, or respect.

3.1.2. Slow Death

The key concept of slow death refers to the “gradual wearing down of life” caused by long term stress, trauma, poverty and environmental factors. (Berlant, 2007). Unlike sudden violence, slow death happens quietly and continuously. It affects daily life, such as breathing polluted air, working dangerous jobs, lacking healthcare, or living in unsafe conditions. Slow death is not only personal; it is produced by political and economic systems that constantly put some groups at risk (Cvetkovich, 2012).

The notion of “good , normal life”, is often linked to “labor”, “family wage” and upward social mobility” (Berlant, 2011; Seefa, 2024). “*Slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence* (Berlant, 2011).

The concept of slow death has caused by various other factors out of which is that inequality. Some communities faces extreme to hard environment, climate change, criminal violence, ecological toxins, surveillance and other systemic injustices which is inscribed on their bodies and expression. This framework helps us comprehend why how some groups are trapped in lifelong cycles of harm without any escape and healing. “*In the political economy of his world, that system does not produce rest or waste but slow death, the attrition of subjects by the situation in which capital determines value*” (Berlant, 2007).

3.1.3. Lateral Agency

The third concept is “Lateral agency”, which refers to the small, everyday ways people cope when they cannot change their larger conditions (Berlant, 2011). Lateral agency involves actions that allow people to survive, connect, or temporarily escape pressure rather than doing

dramatic rebellion or total surrender. Such actions will help in making individuals emotionally and physically stable in situations as it may not create major political changes (Ahmed, 2014).

Lateral agency also about simple gestures like sharing food, telling stories, forming friendships, or creating small moments of pleasure. In society like dystopia having full of cruelty and fatigue, such acts give relief. Lateral agency is a negation of all the above two concepts given by Berlant. It present people how to fight back, strive and survive impasse and slow death without fully escaping from them. It also highlights creative, psychological and emotional strategies that protect people from complete collapse (Ngai, 2005). It aims to “*continue the struggle for existence in painful, costly and obsolete forms*” (Berlant, 2011)

Lateral agency is indirect resistance to oppression and Berlant argues that lateral agency is small acts of endurance, resistance, refusal that allows individuals to live within, or around broken system. It is a way to surviving without necessarily winning. (Berlant, 2011). Foucault also argues in The History of Sexuality that “existing power-systems are not inevitable or fixed, but can be resisted or changed” (Shohini, 2006).

3.2 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method, particularly an in depth textual analysis of *Want*. The gap in the literature that has been identified is, therefore consistent with the objectives and questions of this research. It has also complemented more nuanced understandings of digital dystopia and its effects on the 21st century. This study will be able to capture and interpret several instances through an in-depth textual analysis. To this end, this research tries to explore feelings, ideology, attachments, and structures through which individuals attach hopes. Mostly false promises are made by authorities in dystopian societies. The study incorporated deeply with secondary sources, existing scholarly articles, theoretical frameworks, and critical essays that discuss dystopian fiction, affect theory, and socio-political criticism.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This analysis explored the emotional and social realities of characters in Cindy Pon’s *Want* through the lens of Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism. By applying the concepts of impasse, slow death, and lateral agency, this section reveals how attachments to unattainable dreams influence behavior, relationships, and strategies for survival.

4.1 Dystopia and Its Consequences

Cindy Pon created a world where pollution, digital control, and class difference shape every detail of life. The novel shows that technology does not help everyone equally. Instead, it becomes a barrier that protects the rich and harms the poor. This is similar to ideas shared by Van Dijck who argues that digital society gives safety to those who already have privilege and leaves others behind (Dijck, 2022).

4.1.1 Fear caused by surveillance

Fear caused by surveillance is another consequence of the digital dystopia. Cameras monitor streets, drones scan people, and security machines check identities (Pon, 2017). Jason and his peers must hide themselves, changing their behavior to avoid detection. As Tufekci explains, “digital tools create new forms of control by shaping how people think and act, often without them noticing” (Tufekci, 2020). In *Want*, Jason modifies how he walks, talks, and even breathes when near security devices, showing how technology disciplines bodies and behavior. In this modern digital era, surveillance is not just controlling and technological motioning, rather it is more than that, it is a mechanism of instilling fear and sense of panic on via continuous declaration of power.

Dr. Nataraj states “*Her communication is being monitored.. anything going through my phones or computers*” (Pon, 2017). In addition, on another area he stated “*I was almost run*

over twice this week... It's clear that someone very powerful doesn't want the legislation to ever be presented" (Pon, 2017)

4.1.2 Emotional instability

Surveillance also generates profound emotional consequences. Citizens feel small, afraid, and powerless, unable to claim ownership over their lives. Berlant's concept of cruel optimism aligns with this, as people hold onto desires that cannot be fulfilled (Berlant, 2011).

In chapter three emotional instability is elaborated when sudden loss of Dr. Nataraj shocked Arun and the other. This sudden emotional breakdown reflected in this form, *"No! Mom!... He rocked her, grabbing her hand, rubbing her fingers, as if holding her could somehow bring her back"* (Pon, 2017). Jason is completely destabilized after the death of Dr. Nataraj. In Digital dystopia, emotional disturbance is ensured in the form of grief which is not isolated but traumatic cycle. Jason defines his emotional uncertainty as it feels like *"Sorrow and rage washed over me, and suddenly I was thirteen again, alone, helpless, holding my slack mother in my own arms"* (Pon, 2017).

4.1.3 Growing divide between rich and poor

The novel highlighted the growing divide between rich and poor. Pon depicts two cities in one: *"the upper city glimmered with clean air, tall buildings, and soft light, while the streets below reeked of smoke and congestion"* (Pon 2017). The rich enjoy advanced technology, health, and safety; the poor endure polluted streets and daily danger. There are two classes introduced in the novel in which one class is termed as 'mei' (without) and other class is "you" (to have).

Van Dijck noted that *"digital society produces different experiences for different social groups because access to technology depends on social and economic power"* (Dijck, 2022). In *Want*, when Jason first wears a clean air suit, he realizes how deeply technology shapes life and class: *"He could breathe freely, feel cool, and move without worry...he had never known life could be this easy"* (Pon, 2017). The protagonist of the novel is also from underprivileged class and he is the one faces many backlashes by living in that society. He describes a 'pre born human specimen which is having all benefits of life such as optimal air, clean water, nutrition, medical aid and this elaborates the longest life spans that could be led by them in a state where even if society collapses it won't at all affect it. The main character says *"This was what it meant to be you, to have. To be genetically cultivated as a perfect human specimen before birth, vaccinated and fortified, calibrated and optimized. To have the best air, food, and water, ensuring the longest possible life spans as the world went to rot around them."* (Pon, 2017).

4.1 Cruel Optimism, Slow Death, and Lateral Agency in *Want*

4.1.1 Cruel optimism in *Want*

In her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant explains a situation that many people in modern society experience. People hold on to hopes, dreams, and attachments, even when these desires are unlikely to be fulfilled or when they may actually prevent people from flourishing. Berlant defines cruel optimism as a situation in which *"something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing"* (Berlant, 2011). In *Want*, the city is divided between the rich and the poor. The rich enjoy clean air, safety, advanced technology, body upgrades, and abundant resources. They live in tall, shining buildings with advanced machines that protect their health and well-being.

Cruel optimism in *Want* is not only about material things. It also concerns emotional and social desires. Jason wants friendship, trust, recognition, and belonging. Yet the dystopian society forces him to hide his true self. He has to disguise his identity to navigate the upper city safely, change the way he walks and talks, and control his emotions (Pon, 2017). Pon writes, *"I had to pretend to be someone I was not to survive"* (Pon, 2017).

The novel also shows that cruel optimism can shape how people behave. Jason adapts to the environment, learning to hide, move carefully, and blend in with the rich to survive (Pon, 2017). Jason's careful behavior is a reflection of this attachment. He hopes for safety and better living conditions, and this hope guides his actions, even though the system limits the outcomes.

4.2 Slow Death

The novel *Want* by Cindy Pon (2017) build on the concept of "Slow Death" which clearly defined the tensions, feeling of slowly dying, struggle between hope and desire and the obstacles in fulfilling aims. Slow death is the gradual, nearly invisible damage that social, economic, and environmental systems can work on people over time.

4.3.1 Environmental suffering

The aftermath of pollution, climate change and digital surveillance is so contagious that it not only effect the emotional and mental health of the residents rather it have great embark on the environment in which they are living. The polluted air which inhaled by 'Mei' elaborates as "filth", "dirty brown" which is a continuous breakdown on them. he father of Daiyu has a company that sells body prevention and safety gears. This bio-suit prevents them from pollution, that create a clear barrier between the upper and the poor class. Author narrates: "*The suit ensured that he got the best oxygen available, that his temperature was regulated, that he was always plugged in to the 'you' communication system*" (Pon, 2017)."

Furthermore, burning eyes, coughing, raw throats are micro elements of slow death and it embodies fatal low-level illness rather than enormous disaster. "*The sky used to be blue. I did not know anyone who had ever seen a blue sky*" (Pon, 2017). The chronic low level illness elemnts relfects as "*Gray haze lay thick over Taipei... each choked breath still somehow tasted of ash and dust. My throat felt raw, irritated. The air was still as a held breath. This filth was going nowhere.*" (Pon, 2017).

4.3.2 Economic profit

Economic inequality is asserted in how the "eco-suits" are costly and could not be afforded by the poor. "*If your vices ran deep and you really needed to check out, the suites were available for long-term rental, starting at \$250K a week. Blue and red laser lights darted and crackled over the windows of the tall glass-and-steel building, and a rooftop projector swept a neon green R and K across Taipei's hazy skyline*" (Pon, 2017). People who are poor can't get away from dangerous places, and they can't make things better for themselves because they don't have enough time or money.

4.3.3 Interconnection between cruel optimism and slow death

It is vital to notice that cruel optimism and slow death are interconnected. Cruel optimism is wanting things and being attached to things you can never get. While slow death refers to what happens when you live in a systems where fulfilling dreams are desires becomes impossible. Its is easy to see how Jason story in the novel *Want* has been portrayed as a survivor. He goes through hazardous regions, learns how to adapt and stays alive because he hopes for a better future. But every day he spends on dirty streets, under police watch, and being treated unfairly brings him closer to a slow death. Pon writes, "*I could see what life might be like for the rich and it hurt me to breathe here*" (Pon, 2017). This represents that hope and harm and happen at the same time and both ideas are opposing.

4.3 Lateral Agency

In cruel optimism, lateral agency functions as a coping mechanism. People use small pleasures to lessen the burden of unmet desires. Berlant (2011) showed that surviving harmful systems sometimes requires quiet forms of care, bonding, or creativity. These small acts preserve dignity, identity, and emotional strength, becoming ways of enduring inequality without directly confronting it (Ahmed, 2014).

Jason adopted some behaviors, learn some skills and movements to avoid any detection from the authorities. Simply he disguised himself as part of “you”. Pon reflects about him as *“I had to move like a shadow, speak like a whisper, blend with the crowd, learned every path, memorized every path, every shortcut, and breathe carefully. Every step needed planning. I could not draw attention. The drones scanned continuously. My heart raced with every camera. My body became my tool, I could not make a sound, Even blinking felt risky”* (Pon, 2017).

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Jason and his friend share knowledge and skills to resist back. His friend Arun, Victor and lingyi were good to him and helped him. Victor helped him by disguising as “you” and that’s why Jason kidnapped Daiyu to get money for eco-suit for victor. He assured how society judges you on the basis of how you look. *“Any embellishment like jewels would be real. Nothing but the best for Jin’s suits. So the shinier the suit, the richer the you”* (Pon, 2017).

4.4.1 Resistance by Daiyu (member of “you”)

Jason had a great relationship with Daiyu which creates pivotal role in sending message of resistance in a very human and moral way. In words of great distrust and social and moral silence, Daiyu proved to be a ray of hope who after all challenges decided to stay with the ‘meis’ and resisted her own father who is the antagonist of the novel. Her ways of resistance and taking the right side elaborated in her own way,

“After the kidnapping, I had convinced my father to do the cheaper suits for the meis and stopped spying on him.” Daiyu’s mouth tightened. “But your showing up, and your interest in my father’s company, made me curious again. I began going through his files and saw that he wanted to add the image- and voice-recording enhance in all the cheaper suits. Without telling the consumer” (Pon, 2017).

Daiyu’s voice often cut the glimmer of “you” and she exposed the corrupt by being the part of that. She have reflected much about resistance in the novel. For Jason, her words carry a sharp influence on him and his personality. She is a symbol of “hope”, and “safety”, “resistance”, and “solidarity”.

Lateral agency also has to do with emotions and society. Even when things are hard, Jason and his friends keep their friendships, trust, and support for each other. For readers Daiyu symbolizes as “awakened figure” who bridge the two worlds with her strength. She belief on moral than material worlds. She is a sign to the reader about “us” vs “them” on taking right side and have a heart if empathy. These are what Berlant says short steps of survival. In dystopia world, everyone wants to look good, and lead a good life but in realty Daiyu symbolized “genuine humanity”. Her bold choice of taking side of Jason and entire “mei” spark risk and vulnerability for her and others. However, she proved to be an “agency” within the system. She access the inner system of her father’s company and took hold of it to help Jason destroying it. She is a powerful symbol of “undoing”, “rejecting” the ideologies we are taught since childhood by the society. *“It’s too easy for us to lead sheltered lives, to fall into just one point of view”* (Pon, 2017). Thus, Daiyu’s resistance is more than physical, it reach to the level of spiritual and moral empowerment.

5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed Cindy Pon’s *Want* as a powerful narrative of digital dystopia by using Lauren Berlant’s concepts of cruel optimism, slow death, impasse, and lateral agency. Through close textual analysis, the research has shown how digital technology, environmental

pollution, surveillance, and class inequality shape the emotional, physical, and social lives of the characters. By focusing on Jason Zhou's lived experience, this study demonstrates how hope, suffering, and survival exist together in digitally controlled environments. The study iterates that digital systems are often designed to serve corporate interests rather than public welfare. The optimism is only experienced by "You". However for "Mei", owning a suit and having access to the internal system of the "you" was ultimate hope. The ability to breathe, live longer and eradicate the "slow death" was optimism for them which is quite basic. Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is clearly visible here, as Jason's brief access to safety strengthens his desire for a better life while reminding him that such comfort is not meant for him. The novel challenged the assumption that digital progress leads to social justice and instead exposes the human cost of unequal technological futures. he both classes are facing impasse in their own manner and this shows the true human nature which is not satisfied in any manner. The second element of "Slow Death" is visible in constant exposure to pollution, emotional stress caused by surveillance, and limited access to healthcare. The idea of "lateral agency" becomes central. The resistance is describes in how Jason memorizes routes, avoids surveillance, and adapts his behaviour to blend into elite spaces.

The analysis shows that *Want* is an important book for understanding the twenty-first century. It warns that even though technology can keep track of every breath and move, the ties that hold people together can't be broken completely.

Want ends without offering a complete solution to inequality, which strengthens its critical message. Instead of presenting a hopeful resolution, the novel focuses on survival, care, and endurance. This aligns with Berlant's argument that survival itself can be meaningful even when transformation is uncertain. By refusing a simple happy ending, Pon emphasizes the ongoing nature of digital injustice and environmental harm. The story suggests that hope must be reimagined not as guaranteed success but as the ability to continue caring, resisting quietly, and staying human in oppressive systems. This study resulted in form of creating a space for dystopian fiction in modern era's by alarming and reclaiming that repressive systems and making reader think about possible measures for bringing change in this digitized world. The last line of the novel reflects this idea, "*We had wanted to change the world. This was only the beginning*" (Pon, 2017). The gap of this research could be fulfilled by studying both novels from the perspectives of "ecocriticism", "Marxism". The multiple works of Cindy Pon can be analyzed through the theoretical lens of marginalization and many other contemporary themes.

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