

The Price of Survival: Violence, Kindness, And the Emotional Calculus of Selling Children in Rita Chowdhury's Chinatown Days

Bhagirath Boruah¹ and Rachel Bari²

Abstract

This paper examines the harrowing scene in Rita Chowdhury's novel Chinatown Days where famine-stricken parents are driven to sell their children into slavery. By applying Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis and Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory, the study explores how the complex interplay of psychological and environmental factors shapes this agonizing decision. The parents' seemingly emotionless demeanour, particularly that of the mother, is analysed to reveal how famine, as a pervasive force, erodes societal norms and compels individuals towards extreme survival strategies. Ultimately, the paper grapples with the ethical ambiguity of their actions, questioning if selling their children, despite its inherent cruelty, can be rationalized as an act of love and sacrifice or constitutes an act of violence against them.

Keywords: Emotion, Decision-Making, Chinatown Days, Violence, Slave Trading, Famine, Survival, Somatic Marker Hypothesis, Prospect Theory

INTRODUCTION

Rita Chowdhury's *Chinatown Days* (2018) tells the sweeping story of the Chinese Assamese community, but at its heart lies a deeply unsettling scene: a famine-stricken family forced to sell their children into slavery. This act of agonising desperation, depicted vividly in Chapters 3 and 4, forms the central focus of this paper. Rather than simply judging the parents as cruel or indifferent, the analysis delves into the complex interplay of psychological, social, and environmental factors that lead to this heart-wrenching decision. Through a close reading informed by Damasio's (1994) Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH) and Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) Prospect Theory, this paper explores how famine shapes parents' perceptions of gain and loss, pushing them to prioritise their children's survival over societal norms and their emotional anguish. By focusing on the mother's seemingly emotionless demeanour, the analysis argues that her outward stoicism masks a calculated calmness, revealing a desperate attempt to reconcile love with the brutal logic of survival. Ultimately, by dissecting this pivotal event, this paper grapples with the unsettling question of whether selling one's children, even under duress, constitutes an act of violence or a warped form of kindness, blurring the lines between love and indifference, sacrifice and selfishness.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

A comprehensive search of major databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science, using keywords such as "emotion," "decision-making," "Chinatown Days," "Rita Chowdhury," "violence," "kindness," "slave trading," and "famine" in various combinations, revealed a significant gap in the existing scholarship. While several articles discuss broader themes in this novel, no research has specifically addressed the disturbing incident of child selling through the lens of modern neurobiological and psychological theories of emotion and decision-making. This gap is particularly notable due to the complex interplay between emotion, decision-making, and environmental factors shaping human behaviour under duress, as depicted in the novel. Examining extreme scenarios through a scientific lens provides insights into the multifaceted nature of decision-making and affection, enhancing our understanding of the human capacity for both compassion and violence during existential crises. Furthermore, such studies offer critical frameworks for analysing similar difficult decisions in both literary and real-world contexts.

¹ Research Scholar, Department of P. G. Studies and Research in English, Kuvempu University, Shivamogga, Karnataka, India

² Research Supervisor, Department of P. G. Studies and Research in English, Kuvempu University, Shivamogga, Karnataka, India

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How can we explain the seemingly emotionless demeanour of Ho Han's mother during the sale of her children, and how does this relate to the decision-making process that leads Ho Han's parents to sell their children into slavery?

Can selling children into slavery, even under the duress of famine, be considered a form of violence against those children, or can it be rationalized as an act of love and sacrifice aimed at ensuring their survival despite its inherent cruelty?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis draws upon two primary theoretical frameworks to unpack the complexities of the chosen passage: Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis and Prospect Theory.

SOMATIC MARKER HYPOTHESIS

Antonio R. Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH) offers a groundbreaking perspective on the relationship between emotion and decision-making. Traditionally, rationality has been viewed as a purely cognitive process devoid of emotional influence. Damasio challenges this view, arguing that emotions play a crucial role in rational decision-making by providing a system of somatic markers that guide choices (1999).

According to Damasio (1999), *emotions* are complex mental states characterised by physiological responses, subjective feelings, and expressive behaviours. He distinguishes between emotions and feelings, defining *feelings* as the conscious experience of emotions. In his view, emotions are the underlying processes that generate these feelings.

Somatic markers are physiological responses that become associated with specific emotional experiences (Damasio, 1999). These markers include bodily changes such as heart rate fluctuations, muscle tension, and hormonal releases. They serve as indicators of what the body undergoes when an emotion is experienced. Additionally, somatic markers have a neural component, acting as representations of these bodily sensations in the brain (Damasio, 2003).

Somatic markers can be either positive or negative. Positive markers are linked to pleasant emotions such as happiness and pride, while negative markers are associated with unpleasant emotions like fear and sadness (Damasio, 2003). These markers help the brain quickly assess the potential benefits or dangers of different options during decision-making.

Damasio (1999) explains that somatic markers develop through classical conditioning. This process involves repeatedly pairing a specific stimulus with an emotional experience, leading to an automatic physiological response to the stimulus. Over time, this conditioned response becomes so ingrained that the mere thought of the stimulus can trigger the associated emotion, even in the absence of the original situation.

When making decisions, different options activate their corresponding somatic markers, generating feelings for each choice (Verweij & Damasio, 2019). These gut-level responses help individuals quickly evaluate their options, often without conscious deliberation (Damasio, 2010). This mechanism enables faster and more efficient decision-making by incorporating emotional insights into the process.

PROSPECT THEORY

In 1979, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky presented the Prospect Theory. This theory offers a crucial perspective that helps us understand how individuals weigh losses and gains and make decisions in times of uncertainty. This theory, a cornerstone of behavioural economics, provides insights into our decision-making processes. To simplify their theory, consider an individual playing a game where they can either gain or lose money. According to this theory, that individual will feel the pain of loss more intensely than the joy of gaining money. This means an individual might take more risks to avoid a loss rather than to achieve a gain. This phenomenon is known as *loss aversion*. When faced with two choices leading to the same outcome, but one is presented as a loss and the other as a gain, individuals generally choose the option framed as a gain because

losses often generate a stronger emotional response than equivalent gains. Furthermore, this theory suggests that individuals exhibit *diminishing sensitivity* to changes in outcomes (both gains and losses) as those outcomes increase in magnitude. For example, saving Rs. 5 feels more impactful when it's a significant portion of a smaller purchase like Rs. 15 (1/3) than when it's a fraction of a larger purchase like Rs. 125 (1/25), even though the absolute amount saved is the same, Rs. 5. This phenomenon is called diminishing sensitivity. In other words, it's not just about the absolute value of the gain or loss; it's about how significant that gain or loss is relative to the entire context. The sense of loss and diminishing sensitivity occurs due to the reference point, usually the individual's current situation. This concept is known as *reference dependence* where the reference point determines whether an outcome is perceived as a gain or a loss. However, individuals are not inherently diminishingly sensitive to gains and losses per se. Instead, they are sensitive to the magnitude of the overall transaction or scenario. The critical distinction lies in how the entire context/price/deal is encoded, whether as a loss or as a gain, which Prospect Theory assumes. Moreover, this theory asserts that individuals often overestimate the possibility of rare events, and this overestimation explains why individuals buy lottery tickets or insurance policies. This phenomenon is referred to as *probability weighting*.

DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE

To address the question of whether selling children into slavery constitutes an act of violence, we turn to the World Health Organization's definition:

"The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." (WHO, 2002)

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method grounded in close textual analysis of Chapters 3 and 4 of Rita Chowdhury's *Chinatown Days* (2018). The study focuses on the parents' dialogue, tone, and silence, as well as the author's use of descriptive language and imagery. The goal is to understand their emotional states and the impact of the famine on their decision to sell their children. The analysis utilises direct quotes from the novel, emphasising specific words, phrases, or passages that reveal the characters' emotions and thoughts. These textual details are then interpreted through the lens of theoretical frameworks described before. By weaving together close textual analysis and theoretical insights, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing desperate choices in this heart-wrenching scenario.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In Rita Chowdhury's novel *Chinatown Days* (2018), the scene of Ho Han's family selling their children is nothing short of harrowing. Chowdhury immerses us in the brutal reality of early 19th-century China. Famine has ravaged Ho Han's village, turning death into a constant companion and forcing his parents into an unthinkable choice: selling their children to ensure survival. The arrival of slave traders, their wealth a stark contrast to the family's emaciated forms, marks the beginning of a chilling transaction where human lives are bargained for like livestock. The girls are sold first, their parents' outward stoicism contrasting sharply with the gravity of the situation. With meagre proceeds, they eat, their hunger momentarily eclipsing the magnitude of their loss. They hide the rice and money, clinging to a desperate hope—that they might move to Kwangchow and start anew. But fate, as Chowdhury portrays it, is cruel. Robbed of their meagre provisions by equally desperate neighbours, they face a horrifying truth: selling their sons is their only remaining option. All the boys are sold, and six-year-old Ho Han begins his journey as a slave—a journey that will eventually lead him to Assam.

The narrative voice, through its use of terms like "brutishness," "cruelty," and "selfishness," at the very beginning of the chapter encourages the reader to condemn the parents' actions (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 24). This perception is amplified by their actions immediately following their daughters' sale. Rather than succumbing to grief, they prioritise their own immediate needs – cooking and hiding the rice they secured, clutching the money as a lifeline. However, are they truly cruel, lacking affection, driven solely by self-preservation? Could their seemingly callous behaviour be a manifestation of the very desperation and societal breakdown the narrator

condemns? A closer examination, informed by Damasio's SMH and Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory, offers a more nuanced understanding.

Chowdhury masterfully establishes the devastating impact of the famine on both the physical environment and the characters' psyches. The famine is not merely a backdrop; it is a pervasive force that permeates every aspect of their existence, eroding social norms and dictating the boundaries of what is possible. The opening lines paint a visceral picture of desolation and despair:

It was a grey and dusty village. A village struck by famine. In a corner of this village lived Ho Han... The entire village was quiet, devoid of any sign of habitation. Death had become a familiar fact of life. (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 24)

The repetition of "famine" underscores its all-encompassing nature, while the description of the village as "quiet" and "devoid" of life evokes a haunting silence, suggesting that death has become commonplace. This omnipresent threat of mortality creates a high-stakes environment where traditional moral codes are tested and survival becomes the paramount concern.

The famine's devastating impact extends beyond individual suffering, leading to a disintegration of societal structures and a shift towards a more primal, survival-driven existence, as evidenced by the following passage:

Those who could afford to had left the village earlier... Those left behind were Ho Han's family and others like them, families living in such an utter state of brutishness that it seemed as though they were still in the pre-civilised ages. Cruel, selfish and without an iota of shame. (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 24)

This passage underscores the stark divide between those who have the resources to escape the famine's grip and those left behind, trapped by their circumstances. The language used to describe those who remain – "brutishness," "cruel," and "selfish" – suggests a regression to a more primal state where survival trumps social conventions. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential bias within this description. The narrator, as an observer, projects his own judgment onto the villagers' actions. The terms "cruel" and "selfish" do not necessarily reflect the inherent moral failings of those caught in the clutches of famine but might represent the harsh realities of their survival strategies, strategies warped by the all-consuming need to survive.

This nuanced perspective must be kept in mind while examining the parents' decision-making process. The famine, with its impending threat of death, thrusts Ho Han's parents into a maelstrom of conflicting emotions and agonising choices. It is within this crucible of despair, their general point of reference for cognition, that the interplay of somatic markers, loss aversion, and the human capacity for both love and ruthlessness becomes most apparent. The seemingly emotionless demeanour of Ho Han's mother raises questions about her character. Does her behaviour indicate a heart hardened by the famine, a lack of maternal affection? The following passage offers a compelling example of this tension:

Ho Han's father looked at his wife. With weak and unsteady strides, she went inside the house. After a while, she returned with both her skeletal daughters... Without any sign of emotion, the mother pushed her two daughters towards the buyer. (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 25)

Later on, during the time of selling the boys, it describes: "All the four boys cried weakly and pleaded not to be taken away, as their mother watched from the veranda. Her face was grim and lacked any emotion except her desire to survive" (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 28). The seemingly 'emotionless face' of Ho Han's mother is particularly striking in a situation that would typically elicit intense emotional displays and raises questions about her character. Does her behaviour indicate cruelty and lack of affection? The third-person narration, however, presents a potentially skewed perspective, as it doesn't explicitly state Ho Han's mother's inner thoughts. Therefore, we must prioritise her actions over the narrator's uncritical portrayal of her as emotionless.

Critically examining the description- "without any sign of emotion," we recognize that her "weak and unsteady strides" may reflect not only physical weakness due to famine but also the inner turmoil of a mother facing an impossible choice. Dressing her emaciated daughters in their "best clothes" hints at her inner affection and desire to preserve dignity for her children, even as they are about to be dehumanized through the selling process.

The description of her “emotionless face”, we claim, doesn’t contradict her actions; rather, it reveals a profound psychic truth.

We can analyse this disparity between outward stoicism and possible inner turmoil through Damasio’s SMH. The fear of her children starving to death might trigger intense negative somatic markers, while the thought of selling them—even through the desperate measure of selling them as slaves—activates potentially less powerful, albeit still agonising, somatic markers. The mother’s decision-making revolves around avoiding the most powerful negative somatic markers associated with her children’s certain death by starvation. Her seemingly emotionless facial expression could mask a maelstrom of grief and guilt, a calculated calmness born from her greatest fear.

Ho Han’s father replying to his wife says: “They will all die. They won’t live to look after us. What will you do taking them with you? How can you be sure that we will be alive? (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 28). Ho Han’s father’s words expose the brutal logic driving their choice. His actions, though seems ruthless, stem from a deep-seated desire to protect his family and provide them with the best possible chance of survival in an unforgiving world. The parents’ final prioritization of their children’s safety and survival indicates that they are not selfish; their final actions are pragmatic and stem from affection and care.

Prospect Theory, with its emphasis on loss aversion, provides further insight into the parents’ decision. The parents’ agonising decision can be further understood through the principles of diminishing sensitivity and reference dependence, both central to Prospect Theory. Their immediate reference point is the brutal reality of the famine and the imminent threat of death. Faced with this horrifying baseline, the choice to sell their children, while morally reprehensible, becomes a means of avoiding the most immediate and emotionally unbearable loss – the death of their children by starvation. This desperate calculus pushes other crucial considerations – the horrors of slavery, the potential for a life worse than death, the violation of their moral principles – further away in magnitude from their immediate reference point. This distancing effect diminishes their sensitivity to the long-term suffering that slavery represents, not because they are inherently callous, but because the sheer scale of the immediate threat overshadows those future possibilities. They are, in a sense, overweighting the probability of their children’s survival if sold, while downplaying the very real possibility that slavery could bring equal or even greater suffering. Damasio’s SMH offers a complementary perspective, suggesting that the fear of their children starving to death triggers intensely negative somatic markers, far more powerful than those associated with selling their children into an uncertain fate. Saving their children by selling them represents a potential gain, however fraught with ethical complexities while losing their children to starvation is a certain, unbearable loss. The parent’s choice to sell their children is thus driven by a loss aversion strategy, where the pain of a guaranteed loss outweighs the potential—and uncertain—benefits of a risky gain. Their actions also align with a utilitarian framework: the choice that preserves the most lives, even at a significant moral cost, is deemed the most ethical. However, the tragic reality of their situation is that there are no true “wins” in this equation, only varying degrees of unimaginable loss.

It is important to note that these rationalisations took place long before the arrival of the slave traders. The text hints at this in the way the mother prepares her daughters:

It was all the same to them, whether they were sold or not. Their mother had already told them that if they remained at home, death was a certainty. If they were sold, perhaps they would get food to eat at their master’s house and discarded silk dresses to wear. These dreams were floating before their eyes like a hazy mirage. (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 26)

The mother, in her desperation, clings to the hope, however faint, that selling her children might offer them a chance at survival they would not have otherwise. While this is extremely harsh, it reveals the impossible calculus of a situation where even love becomes entangled with the brutal logic of survival.

This struggle between love and desperation is further evidenced by the father’s actions. His bargaining with the slave traders—pleading for a higher price, not out of greed, but to secure additional resources—highlights the extreme position they are in, forced to commodify their children in a transaction where human life is reduced to a monetary value. Yet, within their desperate calculus, every copper, every grain of rice, represents a chance

to postpone the inevitable, to cling to life for another day. His outburst upon seeing his sons' "wild greed" for the rice likely stems from a surge of shame and inner turmoil, a struggle to reconcile his paternal instincts with the knowledge that he has committed a morally reprehensible act (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 27). Witnessing his sons' hunger—a hunger he undoubtedly shares—amplifies the moral weight of his decision. The father's abrupt silence following the slave trader's callous remark, - "Girls are nothing but a commodity, anyway," speaks volumes (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 25). It is a moment of profound psychic pain, a recognition of the dehumanising nature of the transaction and his powerlessness to challenge it. The weight of his situation, the impossible choices he is forced to make, and the trader's blunt commodification of his daughters leave him speechless, trapped in a web of grief and despair.

Even in this moment of ultimate despair, a glimmer of the father's enduring love for his child surfaces. After making the unbearable decision to sell his sons, he includes a small, but deeply symbolic, comfort: "Placing four bowls and four pairs of chopsticks in the baskets, the father picked up the long bamboo pole on which the baskets were hanging, and slowly began walking" (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 28). This act of placing bowls and chopsticks in his children's baskets before sending them away takes on a profound significance, speaking to the enduring bond between them. These simple objects, intended to allow him to have food wherever he finds an opportunity and thereby obtain some comfort and relaxation, become a poignant symbol of his enduring love—a testament to his hope for their well-being, even as they are torn from his care. This bowl and chopsticks his father gave stayed with Ho Han throughout his life, passed down to his progeny in Assam as a sign of his inheritance, a history of sorrow and endurance, a tangible reminder of the family ties that even the cruelty of the slave trade could not entirely tear apart.

However, the question remains: can the act of selling children, even in desperate circumstances, be considered anything other than a form of violence? Commodifying vulnerable children strips them of agency, denies their right to safety, and exposes them to exploitation and abuse, aligning with the World Health Organization's definition of violence, which includes "deprivation" and "psychological harm" (WHO, 2002). However, judging Ho Han's parents solely through a modern moral lens overlooks their harsh reality. The famine has eroded social norms, placing them in an environment with no government support, scarce resources, and crumbled community support, leaving them with only harmful choices. This systemic neglect reflects structural violence, exacerbated by social and political failures. Their decision to minimize harm and ensure their children's survival is a desperate act of love and sacrifice rather than violence from their perspective. This is because, without the factor *intention to harm*, legally no action can be labelled as violence.

Ho Han's eventual freedom offers hope but does not erase the trauma or diminish the moral ambiguity of his parents' decision. Judging their actions solely on the outcome ignores the possibility of unimaginable suffering. Ho Han's story showcases their resilience, not a justification for a system necessitating such choices.

The limitations of third-person narration complicate interpreting this scene. Despite offering a panoramic view of events and the famine's impact, it leaves us to decipher actions and dialogues without insight into inner feelings. This narrative strategy, emphasizing the starkness of their circumstances, creates space for ambiguity, allowing readers to grapple with the unsettling possibility that love, under duress, might manifest in ways that defy easy categorization.

Understanding the role of emotions in this decision remains challenging. To address this, we turn to Damasio's SMH and Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory. These theories reveal a complex interplay of emotional and cognitive factors, culminating in a unidirectional path where this horrific choice emerges, shaped by the brutal realities of famine. Ho Han's parents' morally reprehensible actions become tragically understandable in their struggle for survival. Chowdhury compels us to confront our judgments and recognize the context's influence on behaviour. In a famine-ravaged world, the line between love and desperation blurs, providing insight into human nature's complexities and moral ambiguities when survival pushes individuals to their limits.

CONCLUSION

While the specific circumstances of 19th-century China may seem distant, the forces shaping individual destinies and behaviour under scarcity and existential threat remain relevant today. Hence, this scene of *Chinatown Days* offers a timeless lens to examine our capacity for both compassion and cruelty.

Disclaimer: We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- Chowdhury, R. (2018). *Chinatown days* (R. Chowdhury, Trans.). Macmillan. (Original work published 2010)
- Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes' error: Emotion, reason, and the human brain*. Putnam.
- Damasio, A. R. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Harcourt Brace.
- Damasio, A. R. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, sorrow, and the feeling brain*. Harcourt.
- Damasio, A. R. (2010). *Self comes to mind: Constructing the conscious brain*. Pantheon Books.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>
- Overskeid, G. (2021). Can Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis explain more than its originator will admit? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 607310. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.607310>
- Verweij, M., & Damasio, A. (2019). The somatic marker hypothesis and political life. In W. R. Thompson (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.928>
- World Health Organization. (2002). *The world health report 2002: Reducing risks, promoting Healthy life*. World Health Organization.