

A Representation of the Shattered Selves in Post Khmer Rouge Cambodia: A Study of Vaddey Ratner's Novels

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Abstract: *The novels, In the Shadow of the Banyan and Music of the Ghosts are interweaved with a sense of belonging, displacement and nostalgia which this study attempts to explore; of how the Cambodian novelist and Khmer Rouge survivor, Vaddey Ratner, succeeds in taking on the responsibility of accounting the collective experiences of the diaspora, representing contemporary situations of fragmented identities, or the shattered selves, thus allowing for the challenges that her protagonists encounter, vis-à-vis, the relation to both the lost homeland (Cambodia) and the new homeland (USA).*

Keywords: Homeland, identity, nostalgia, displacement, memory.

Vaddey Ratner is a Cambodian writer who survived the Khmer Rouge that rose to power after its victory in the Cambodian Civil War and captured the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, in 1975. The merciless mass killings that took place during the Khmer Rouge brought about the chaotic reversal of Cambodian society where in the end, Ratner says, "only the deaf, the dumb, and the mute would survive" (*In the Shadow of the Banyan* 277). Vaddey Ratner is a descendant of King Sisowath, who ruled Cambodia early in the twentieth century. In 1970, Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, her father's cousin, led the coup that ended the monarchy in Cambodia to establish a short-lived republic, which was soon engulfed in the chaos of the broader Vietnam War. Vaddey Ratner was five years old when the Khmer Rouge came to power and thousands were forcibly evicted out of the capital city, Phnom Penh, into agrarian work camps, which also implied that the royal name, which once meant protection and comfort, marked Ratner and her family for death. Ratner and her mother escaped the genocide after four years of enduring forced labour, starvation, near execution, and having lost all her family members. In 1981, she arrived in the United States as a refugee and was placed under the Torre de San Miguel housing project in Saint Paul, Minnesota. While tracing the historical developments of Cambodia, Vaddey Ratner has made an important attempt to record the predicament of displacement as she interrogates the act of straddling two cultures and coping with new worlds in a new language.

Vaddey Ratner's novels *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and *Music of the Ghosts* reflect the collective trauma rendered by the Khmer Rouge genocide which has also led to a significant turning point in the country's immigration history, causing significant population displacement. Displacement or exilement from one's homeland often leads to the issue of identity and the complex longing towards the homeland of that past which Ratner has vividly depicted in her novels. William Safran's concept of "homeland" in his article, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" suggests the significance of looking back to the homeland of the past, retrospectively the concept of homeland defined by memories. Homeland no longer becomes a

physical space but that which is in the memory of displaced persons like Ratner. This homeland, in the memory of Ratner, is then reified through certain elemental aspects used by the author to bring out the homeland that the Khmer Rouge has destroyed. Reification which is the ability to concretise the abstract may help build a strong commonality within the diasporic community because homeland no longer becomes a geographical entity but one that constitutes the dynamics of culture, psychology, and history. Reification of homeland, thereby, becomes a strategy that also serves the purpose of identity formation.

In the article, "Displacement and Identity Discontinuity: The Role of Nostalgia in Establishing New Identity Categories", Melinda J. Milligan asserts that "displacement leads to identity discontinuity and that nostalgia provides one way of maintaining or regaining identity continuity" (381). Ratner's sense of nostalgia may be further understood as that which Svetlana Boym has stated as being "a sentiment of loss and displacement" but that nostalgia may also be a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. ("Nostalgia and its Discontents" 7)

"In Crossing Borders Citizenship, Identity and Transnational Activism in the Cambodian Diaspora", Khatharya Um asserted that "Even when diasporic preoccupation is centered on local integration, the ancestral homeland remains, for many, an important referent" (199). In her first novel, *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, Ratner reveals the richness of Cambodian culture, art and literature struggling to survive through the catastrophic mass killings of the Khmer Rouge period. The novel exhibits not only the terrors of the Khmer Rouge but also the spirit of survival and an eerie sense of what was lost. It reveals significant post-Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot conditions that reveal multifaceted challenges of survival. With the depiction of the pre-war events, there is sufficient clarity of the underlying matters that may prove essential for survival. In this novel, one may find that the author is addressing the strategies put forth by

herself and her mother to survive the genocide by providing a glimpse of what they had before the horrendous Khmer Rouge took over. This traumatic effect of the genocide complexifies the notion of survival which Ratner is trying to impart to her readers. She addresses this complex nature of survival which not only means survival of the genocide but the survival of the shattered selves as has been exemplified through the protagonist, Suteera, in *Music of the Ghosts*. She was first forcibly evicted from her home in Phnom Penh and likewise taken away from her country to be placed in a different country with a different culture and different people altogether which further complicates her self.

Svetlana Boym called nostalgia a curable disease, “dangerous but not lethal” (“Nostalgia and its discontents” 11) and further emphasises the importance of returning to one’s homeland to be cured of this sense of longing. The novels *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and *Music of the Ghosts* exemplify this concept purported by Boym of returning to one’s homeland. Boym divided this feeling of longing for the past or nostalgia into two parts- restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia emphasises ‘nostos’ which means home and attempts a trans-historical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, puts more focus on ‘algia’ which is the longing itself and “delays the homecoming-wistfully, ironically, desperately” (“Nostalgia and its Discontents” 13). Restorative nostalgia dwells on the notion of rebuilding the lost home and patches up the memory gaps. This type of nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia but rather as truth and tradition. It has two main plots- the return to the origins and conspiracy. Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. With reflective nostalgia, details are given more importance than symbols. Restorative nostalgia is not just about the past but rather about universal values, family, nature, homeland and truth. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, emphasises upon the need to grab the fleeing present. Boym further asserts that “[w]hile restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one homeland with paranoid determination, reflective nostalgia fears return with the same passion. Instead of recreation of the lost home, reflective nostalgia can foster a creative self” (*The Future of Nostalgia* 354). Reflective nostalgia may be regarded as an effective tool in *Music of the Ghosts* where it aids in the protagonist’s inquiry into previous truths of the self or formulations of identity produces a change in consciousness, however traumatic, by taking the protagonist on a transformative journey that does provide relief and recovery.

Ratner says “Teera, like myself, is an individual who struggles with divided selves. She has these two sides, these two selves — one Cambodian, one American. I think Teera, when she’s in America she feels this longing for Cambodia; she feels more Cambodian than ever. But once she arrived in Cambodia she realizes that she’s a stranger and that she feels very American. And her journey is a journey of trying to reconcile these two selves that she embodies” (*The Reality* 2). The nature of closure is another theme that may be traced in the novel and as Ratner herself puts it, “We can confront tragedy and we can live with that sense of loss, but still life is about taking all that in and [moving] on in the

best way we can. Closure isn’t static; closure is a process, it’s an ongoing process” (3).

Being a resident of America and Cambodia complexifies Ratner’s identity. In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie raises the important point of duality in an author’s identity which provides him/her with a point of view that is relevant within the parameters of their narratives: “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy” (Rushdie 15). The more a person rethinks of his/her past, the more he/she is attracted to it.

In his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod defines home as that which is, *Imagined* in diaspora communities. The concept of ‘home’ often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong. As an *idea* it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort (although actual experiences of home may well fail to deliver these promises). To be ‘at home’ is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves. (210)

In her second novel, *Music of the Ghosts*, Ratner appropriates the notion of grieving and reworks it into a survival strategy that enables the retrieval of silenced memories and the rediscovery of forgotten selves. Landscape may serve as a conduit for these silenced memories and literature as the medium that connects with the survival of a people,

It follows that taking away a people’s literature, their stories and their language, is the first step toward destroying them...The main characters may feel rather generalised and never quite live off the page, but as the great human drama unfurls in this sensitive and impassioned telling, it is impossible not to be moved by the spectre of famished victims in this ravaged land (Hoffert 1).

It is the landscape of the past, the land of the traumatic experience that finally explains the mystery of her past and her father’s disappearance. In both novels, nature is presented as a refuge from the turmoil encountered by both the female protagonists, enacting the discourse of place which interacts with that of the father whose symbolic implication governs the narrative text in both stories. The father in *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is present in only the beginning but his presence is felt and kept alive throughout the novel through the memories of Raami. In *Music of the Ghosts*, the absence of Suteera’s father becomes essential in constructing and deconstructing the identity of Suteera who straddles between two cultures, that of Cambodian and American. The deep sense of loss and dislocation from which the female protagonists suffer in the two narratives is related to the absence of the father who, connected with fictional space, is nothing else but a discourse in process, a process of signification where the search for meaning and the quest for identity call on the reader to embark on a journey into ambivalence. She first recounts the child

survivor's experience of the Khmer Rouge. Her idolisation of her father marks the anguish of unfinished trauma and is emblematic of post-traumatic stress disorder. Her continuation of the search for her father in the second novel, *Music of the Ghosts*, through the character, Suteera, suggests that Ratner has not been able to come to terms with the disappearance of her father. She still wonders whether he is dead or alive. This is something which then leads to the question of belonging as she (Suteera) no longer feels that she is Cambodian and feels estranged to even hear people converse about Pol Pot so casually on her flight to Cambodia for the first time after she migrates to the United States.

The landscape offers referential points to comprehend the knowledge of self and reality. The relation between knowing and not knowing is mediated by the physical environment. By locating the perimeters of the external reality, Ratner hopes to outline the limits of her internal world. This conceptual orientation of self in which identity is connected to a landscape, continues to be expressed throughout the novel in Suteera's relationship to the new landscape in America, and the previous landscape of Cambodia she had known when she was a child:

It's been more than half an hour since the plane took off from Kuala Lumpur, leaving the colourful landscape of duty-free shops for the blankness of transboundary skies. They've reached cruising altitude, the captain announces. Teera feels herself hurtling. Toward what, she doesn't know. The future and the past lie in borderless proximity. (*Music of the Ghosts*12)

The re-conceptualisation of the self may be paired with a reevaluation of the protagonist's relation to society and a specific place or landscape, thus expanding the identification of self and world. *In the Shadow of the Banyan* depicts the expanded identification of self and the revision of the relationship between self and society that arises from traumatic experiences. Raami's recovery in the novel depends upon accepting her identity as one who is connected to a specific natural landscape, which contains stories of her ancestors and their role in Cambodian society. *Music of the Ghosts* portrays how trauma coerced Suteera into a profound inquisitive state in which the meaning of experience and the process of conceptualising the self and world are precisely assessed. The novel demonstrates this process of questioning as the crux of the plot in terms of the reconstruction of the idyllic homeland of Cambodia. The traumatised protagonist's inquiry into previous truths of the self or formulations of identity produces a change in consciousness, however painful this might be, taking the protagonist on a transformative journey that does not necessarily provide relief or recovery. Thus, the places of traumatic experience and healing in a novel foreground the social dimensions of the character's individual experience, which shapes the value of the events and its expression.

This scene exemplifies the moment of loss that continues to inform the character's sense of self in the new nation, or in this case, her place of origin. The agony of departure and the desire to maintain a connection to her origins is expressed as a wish for physical contact with the land. The fear of separation from the land is an anxiety of losing the self she

identifies as entwined with the landscape and culture of Cambodia.

In *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, the landscape of Cambodia provides a referential framework for Raami to understand the self because the land contains historical and cultural values. She positions her self to the land during her eviction from her home in Phnom Penh as a way to define the self and explain her loss of culture and community. Her home in Phnom Penh is an entity that contains and transmits knowledge of her sense of self. The conceptual orientation of positioning the self in relation to a landscape and in particular the banyan tree suggests that identity is formed by and through a relation to place, a view that expands mythological and psychological considerations of identity formation.

In conclusion, Vaddey Ratner's profound narrative in her novels, *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and *Music of the Ghosts* transcends mere storytelling to become a resonant chronicle of displacement, survival and the quest for identity. Through her poignant portrayal of characters grappling with the remnants of their shattered past and the challenges of assimilation in a new homeland, Ratner masterfully illustrates the complexities of diasporic experience. Her novels not only offer a compelling insight into the Cambodian experience under the Khmer Rouge but also universalise the struggle to maintain cultural identity amidst loss and change. By weaving themes of nostalgia, homeland, and survival, Ratner underscores the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity and the enduring quest for a sense of belonging. Her novels stand as a testament to the power of memory and storytelling in preserving history and shaping personal and collective identities in the context of displacement and cultural transition.

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