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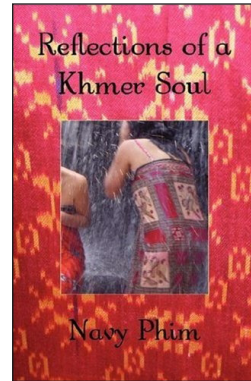
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Reviewed by SOPHIA CHHOENG



Cambodians in the United States largely emigrated in a single wave during the early and mid-1980s, after enduring four years of the Khmer Rouge's communist experiment in which one to two million Cambodians lost their lives. Thus, many Cambodians in the U.S. have lost loved ones and are moving forward with fragmented families. In her self-published book, *Reflections of a Khmer Soul*, Navy Phim offers a deeply personal narrative of a woman who learns to cope with being a “child of the killing fields” while growing up in America. Certainly, other works have addressed the individual experiences of survivors of the Cambodian genocide, most notably *First they Killed my Father* (Ung, 2000) and *When Broken Glass Floats* (Him, 2001). Phim contributes to this literature by recounting and addressing many issues relevant to those that are part of the Cambodian diaspora.

The book is divided into seven parts. Phim introduces herself to her readers in the book's first part titled *Reveries and Memories*. Here she describes that she was barely a week old when the Khmer Rouge soldiers marched into the Cambodia's capital city and forced the evacuation of the city dwellers into the countryside. Phim notes that, “As a believer of what was written in the stars, I was meant to be born on that day, at that time, in that country, with that soul. A Khmer soul. A soul that has questions, a soul that needs to vindicate the actions of her countrymen and fellow human beings” (p. 6). Writing from her home in Long Beach, California, the largest Cambodian community in the US, Phim provides a brief and easy to read history of Cambodia circa 1960s, when this small Southeast Asian nation was seemingly caught up with the Cold War politics of the US war in Vietnam. Cambodia's subsequent political instability contributed to the eventual communist take over by the Khmer Rouge, an ultra-Maoist group that sought to transform the country into an agrarian communist society. To carry out their plan, the regime forced the country's population into the jungles and rice fields, often working its citizens to the point of starvation and death.

Phim's earliest memories, however, are of growing up in Khao-I-Dang, a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. These memories ranged from running away

from Thai soldiers, whom she feared, to learning about hospitality and generosity at a time of hunger. Food was scarce in these refugee camps. Phim reflected upon how different families in the camps often argued with one another but once they arrived in America they all struggled to become American together. The second part, appropriately called *Snippets*, is a discussion of a variety of topics, seemingly in random fashion. In one piece for example, Phim explains the importance of having three mothers: her biological mother, mother Cambodia, and mother nature. Each of these mothers has provided her with nourishment and courage to be a strong woman. Later in this section are Phim's thoughts on the issue of skin color for Cambodians and how whiter skin tone for Cambodians is associated with certain standards beauty. A more interesting discussion might have ensued had the author capitalize on this opportunity to discuss how this "color of beauty" is not necessarily unique to Cambodians. As well in this section, she explains how Cambodian traditions of using specific titles, rather than names, to address elders tend to result in confusion and humor as they settled into American life. The goal of part two was apparently to explain the different dimensions of Phim's Khmer soul but Phim would have done well to pull these stories together in a more coherent manner. The book's next two parts are fortunately much stronger.

Part three, aptly entitled *Embrace*, focuses on Phim's Khmer identity. She emphasizes Cambodia's beauty including its people, culture, and modesty. At the same time, America is a place of comfort and safety while the depth of her soul is consumed by memories and visions of Cambodia. In her own words, Phim shares:

Cambodia is my homing beacon, although it has not been home for a long time. I attend the call of Cambodia to fulfill an inner yearning of the soul. In Cambodia, I am a stranger who is uncomfortable with the temperament of the land and the nature of the people. I leave Cambodia and return to America to find the comfort of home, a place whose disposition I understand. I am home in Cambodia and home in America, but America is the home of comfort. I feel safe in it.

The author also describes her strong connection with the traditional garments of Cambodia including the sarong and the sampot. She feels soft and feminine wearing a *sarong* and *sampot* because it represents a traditional style of Cambodian women, particularly those in the countryside.

The next part, *The Journey*, documents the process of how Phim has come to terms with being a child of the Killing Fields. Here, Phim tries to understand her

feelings towards the Khmer Rouge. In many ways, her narrative reads much like a full blown OpEd piece on the matter. This free expression of opinion however is a luxury that the author admits is available to her because she lives in the United States. She discusses the difficulties of figuring out who to blame for the Cambodian genocide. In the end, she argues that if Cambodians choose to play the blame game all sides lose out. She poignantly remarks:

I struggle with the history of Cambodian and the evil we [emphasis added] have unleashed on each other. I need to educate myself for healing and understanding. I need answers. How can people be so evil? How do they live with themselves? I want to know about their remorse, shame, and guilt. (p. 68)

Phim is also critical of those who she feels misrepresents the Cambodian experience. In particular, she cites Loung Ung's national bestseller *First They Killed My Father*. She points out a number of inconsistencies in Ung's stories about her family's Khmer Rouge experience and agrees with the wide criticism that Ung was simply too young to have the particular memories she writes about. Phim firmly states, "I hope the Cambodian community will reach a point where our need for heroes will not surpass our need to recognize and challenge inaccurate stories that misrepresents Cambodia's tragedy" (p. 80). The author's aim is to not allow the experiences of those affected by this tragedy to be depreciated by the inaccurate stories of a few.

Part five gives readers a glimpse into Navy's life as a world traveler, including a number of visits to Cambodia where the majority of her most touching experiences occur. First, she summarizes her experiences of her travels abroad including trips to England, India, Nepal, Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Thailand. Though each of these countries left a unique impression on her, it was in relation to her Khmer soul that she was able to discuss these places. She developed a connection to these lands while also locating pieces of Cambodia in each of these remarkable cultures. The next section takes readers into Phim's life in Long Beach where she believes that the anger and confusion left over from the Killing Fields is clearly visible in her Cambodian community. For example, Long Beach is the site of an annual Cambodian New Year's Parade that symbolizes both old and new Cambodian traditions. During one particular year, a major controversy broke out in the Cambodian community about a proposed April 17th parade date. This was coincidentally the same day of the Khmer Rouge's invasion of Phnom Penh and the parade's date was met with opposition by many in this tight-knit community. Phim recalled one confrontation in particular:

I broke down when I was confronted by a woman who kept screaming about her brother who was killed by the Khmer Rouge. When I asked her to go inside, she screamed about all the family that she lost, her parents and her brother, about their death and that the Khmer Rouge had killed everyone in her family. She cried. My chest constricted and I too cried. I touched her arm and told her that the date was changed. (p. 121)

This controversy provides a window into the intense emotions that remain in the Cambodian community 30 years after the Khmer Rouge regime's collapse. The author brings much needed attention to some of these issues in the book's final section, including urging Cambodians abroad to engage in issues of social justice and human rights for Cambodia. Moreover, it is important to remember that the Khmer Rouge engaged in a systematic elimination of the most educated Khmer including most of its professional and culturally learned classes. As such, it is not surprising that many Cambodians in the US have had a more difficult time adjusting into American society; Cambodians as a people had to start all over again. This could also help explain why Cambodians, unlike other Asians, have some of the lowest educational attainment in the U.S. (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Phim addresses the popular notion that rural background Cambodian families simply do not value education and that is why their children struggle in school. These beliefs are often held by Cambodians themselves. The author's own parents worked hard for their children and did odd jobs just for survival. She explains that Cambodian parents want their children to pursue college but that their children must be reached at an early age.

This book is not without limitations. A major problem seems to be the often scattered fashion in which Phim's stories are sequenced which might feel frustrating to some readers. Mostly though, she provides a narrative that coherently reconciles her past and present self that a number of audiences would find interesting. Certainly, Cambodians (particularly women) can relate to Phim's stories yet others will find her perspectives on femininity, immigrant adaptation, and the longstanding tension between old and new world values enjoyable and informative. Finally, we found this book particularly useful because it is written by a person who comes from a rural background and consequently, as the author admits, her family likely did not suffer in the same way that city dwellers suffered during the Cambodian genocide. Perhaps it is in part because of this that Phim is consistently able to focus on the goodness and beauty of Cambodia and the Khmer people, wherever they reside.

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