

A POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH TO REFUGEE LITERATURE: DECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE OF VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by the relentless flow of displaced populations, refugee literature stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit. This research intends to delve into the unheard narratives of refugees, particularly women and children, through the literary work of Cambodian writer, Vaddey Ratner. It highlights the ongoing and postwar difficulties and experiences that refugees face during their stay in homelands and host environments. This research will shed light on different phases of refugees' lives from royalty to traumatic life, loss to guilt, and hope to silence. Cambodian people suffered from massive violence in the form of genocide when the Khmer Rouge attacked the country in the name of communism. Extreme violence and forced displacement lead to aggression and prolonged trauma in a refugee's identity. Frantz Fanon's postcolonial perspective on violence and Freudian principles of psychoanalysis have been employed in the research to analyze oppressive models and cogitate refugee crises. This research suggests that refugee literature is deeply rooted in the historical legacies of colonialism.

Keywords: Violence, Genocide, Trauma, Displacement, Refugee women

INTRODUCTION

Refugee literature encapsulates a diverse array of voices, each offering a unique perspective on the profound upheavals caused by forced migration. This body of work serves as a prism to view different aspects of refugees' lives in exile. A refugee is one seeking shelter to escape danger. The danger can be a fear of being persecuted due to class, caste, nationality or political reasons. Refugee writers belonging to different regions worldwide have penned down the atrocities faced by refugees in the form of poems, short stories, autobiographies, and novels. Moreover, notable authors like, Khaled Hosseini from Afghanistan, Viet Thanh Nguyen (a Vietnamese writer), Mahmoud Darwish (a Palestinian writer), Vaddey Ratner (a Cambodian author), and many other refugee writers have tried to draw from personal experiences and the collective narratives of their

communities to offer insights into refugee experiences. This research intends to look into the autobiographical literary masterpiece of a Cambodian author, Vaddey Ratner, *through a postcolonial lens due to its relevance to colonial strategies and postcolonial issues*. Overpowering, overthrowing, massacring an entire region can be articulated as colonial agendas.

Vaddey Ratner's novel, *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, written in the year of 2012, speaks through the innocent voice of a female child narrator, depicting the physical, emotional, and psychological sufferings of the refugees of Cambodia. It has also brought to attention the condition of refugee women and children who belonged to royal families and had to experience an atrocious transition due to war and displacement. The novel is an autobiographical fiction, based on the 1975-1979 Cambodian

genocide. Vaddey Ratner was five years old when the Khmer Rouge Regime broke into Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This was the time that marked the beginning of her displaced life, being a refugee. Vaddey Ratner's autobiographical novel depicts different types of loss that the protagonist and her family go through when the new government of the Khmer Rouge overpowered the capital city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The purpose why "the story of the destruction is told from the point of view of a seven-year-old girl, Raami" (Villanueva, 2013, p. 23) is to depict the events in their true essence through the voice of a child who herself witnessed and experienced loss of home and family.

Objectives of the Study

To present how during war, external forces execute strategic plans to overpower everyone, even the ones with power, money, and influence.

To explore the reasons why some of the royal families of Cambodia could not resist the impacts of war despite having power.

To analyze the narratives of refugee women and children to identify their transition from a privileged life to a life of prolonged agony and trauma that resides in memory.

Research Questions

1. How does refugee narrative portray genocide as an extended version of colonial oppression?
2. What are the impacts of war on refugee women and children who experience a transition from royalty to displacement?

Significance of the Study

This research is significant as it intends to humanize the refugee experience by connecting the mass audience with refugee women and children and creating not only awareness but also empathy towards refugees. By bringing forward intricate stories and minute details of refugee experiences, this study can encourage action and advocacy for policies, addressing the challenges, promoting human rights, and providing shelter and better treatment to displaced individuals. There is a dire need to bring forth the unheard narratives of such refugees who are first exiled from their homeland and then displaced even from the host country. They live a life of tyranny and hostility till their death. The

study offers a new dimension in viewing and analyzing refugees by shedding light on their psychological struggle and the role of memory in their lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Refugees are defined as "subjects living in and with terror as an element structurally incorporated and exercised in their everyday life, whether it is perpetrated by state or non-state actors" (Perera & Traverso, 2011, p. 2). An important point is that they flee from their homeland to escape terror but the word "terror" does not leave them the whole life, sometimes in the form of hallucinations, the other times in the form of nightmares. Even, though they are misunderstood as terrorists by the host country, the reality is that refugees are the victims of terrorism. When they leave their homeland, they become displaced entities. Importantly, home provides shelter and a sense of protection. As, the refugees move from place to place, again and again, their identity gets scattered on the streets where their belongings get scattered one by one. "Consequently, what happens is that the intolerable violence destroys their hope – the possibility of security" (Pugliese, 2009, p. 156). Millions of times, they rebuild their hope and again, it is shattered badly, which continues shattering their soul.

All refugees experience some kind of loss in different ways. This sense of loss is responsible for casting a lifelong impact on refugees' psychological state. Vaddey Ratner's autobiographical novel depicts different types of loss that the protagonist and her family go through when the new government of the Khmer Rouge overpowered the capital city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The purpose why "the story of the destruction is told from the point of view of a seven-year-old girl, Raami" (Villanueva, 2013, p. 23) is to depict the events in their true essence through the voice of a child who herself witnessed and experienced loss of home and family. It describes what dangers refugee children face and how the bloodshed of their loved ones shapes their emotional being. They are always indulged in fear. It is fear that flusters Raami to reveal her father's identity in front of the soldiers who take him with themselves, which sows the seed of guilt in her. Guilt is another psychological trait that travels with Raami throughout the novel. Children are highly sensitive

and when they are separated from their caregivers, they get frightened and confused about the hustle and bustle going around themselves.

A study was conducted in a refugee camp of those Cambodians who survived the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge genocide. It shows the following results :

More than 85% reported lack of food, water, shelter, and medical care, brainwashing, and forced labor; 54% reported murder of a family member or friend; 36% reported torture; 18% reported head injury; and 17% reported rape or sexual abuse... Half of the respondents met the threshold criteria for depression and 15% for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. (Mollica et al. 1993, p. 581)

The study of the refugees' mental condition shows that brutally killing people including kids and the old by hitting, shooting, and hanging them with ceilings traumatized the ones who were left alive. In such cases, everything gets picturized in their minds due to which they suffer from heavy fear and depression. The article based on the contemporary refugee crisis and associated mental health challenges states that personality of refugees becomes dislocated and conflicted from the outer world. As a result of continuous injustice, deaths, separations, and traumatic loss, they exhibit grief and sudden anger pangs. In addition,

Refugees face different hard challenges also after the war, when they have to adjust to their new environments; such as insecurities from the host country... and most important and common, the rude attitude of the host society, showing racism and xenophobia. (Silove et al. 2017, pp. 133-135)

According to an in-depth study of Jewish refugees who survived World War II, it is found that those refugees suffered from insomnia, fatigue, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, and depression (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995, p. 228). Terror is one of the main reasons behind these traumatic condition. The continuous war, the bloodshed, the starving deaths of their children, and the slaughtering of their parent's cause terror in their minds that prevents them from living a normal life once again. Beiser claims that refugees have the ability of resilience; they gradually accept their situation because they have this tendency to live in the present and not think about the haunted past (2014, p. 77). Though they indeed become resilient due to perpetual and never ending struggle and changing circumstances, but it is inevitable to

believe that they forget their past or overcome the memories. They are commonly taken aback by the horrible flashbacks of their life.

A detailed study on the life experiences of Cambodian refugees *After The Open Cell: The Cambodian Refugee Experience* talks about the memories, Yate states, "Memories evoke powerful emotions, some of which hurt us like sharpened knives in our guts, and others are murderous and come at us in the middle of the night to strangle us in our sleep. And, some memories are scars" (2009, p. 226). According to his survey, the refugee respondents got upset and had tears in their eyes while talking about their own history of the Cambodian war. One of the respondents did not remember the names and faces but did remember the suffering and still felt the pain that she suffered. Despite the pain associated with the memories, some people wanted to talk and share their experiences, which may be interpreted in this way they wanted to remember their loved ones and they wanted to catharise their agony.

So far, extensive research has been conducted with sociological and historical perspectives on statistical data and experiences of refugees. This research particularly explores the struggles of survival and retaliation of the royal families of Cambodia who despite having a capitalist, powerful background, faced tyrannies of oppressors. Therefore, this paper intends to examine the strategies or tools of oppressors that overpower even the powerful individuals of a society. Besides, it will explore the impacts of war specifically on refugee women and children's transition from privileged lives to displaced lives where they have to make their survival possible by not only coping with multiple traumas but also fulfilling their financial needs amid ongoing war and postwar destruction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research will be a qualitative study in which the selected text will be analyzed through Frantz Fanon's postcolonial perspective. The reason for incorporating a postcolonial theoretical framework is to manifest that the concept of genocide was constructed to fulfill the ulterior motives of the colonial powers. The oppressor-victim relationship of settler-native proposed by postcolonial theorist is very much relevant to the scenario of oppression

faced by Cambodian characters in the selected work. Furthermore, Freud's Psychoanalytical perspectives, particularly his views regarding an unconscious mind and traumatic neuroses elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* will be significant to make a textual analysis. This theory will help to analyze the impact of the Cambodian genocide on the psychological behaviors of refugees. Moreover, it will deconstruct the coping mechanisms of those refugee women and children who were once a part of the most privileged families in Cambodia.

DISCUSSION

Frantz Fanon's postcolonial notions provide a framework for understanding the social and psychological dimensions of oppression and forced displacement depicted in Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan*. The novel follows the story of a young girl named Raami, whose family belongs to the Cambodian elite. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the Khmer Rouge's rise to power in the 1970s. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, implemented radical and brutal policies to control the masses. The use of oppressive tools to gain power over the entire Cambodia is similar to the historical legacy of colonialism that contributed to the displacement of the masses for the ulterior motive of overpowering natives. Policemen and soldiers become the spokesmen of the settlers (Fanon, 1961, p. 38), who use violence to control the natives as it is the most powerful tool of dominating people. The novel begins with the depiction of a beautifully constructed, huge house of the Raami's royal family living a privileged and peaceful life. However, this peace gets disrupted as soon as the soldiers of the Khmer Rouge start attacking the natives of Cambodia.

Violence has the power to create a sudden rush of fear and havoc all around. The first attack on the protagonist's family is marked by the kidnapping of its maid who went missing one day and never came back. A few days after this incident, the soldiers directly attacked the house forcing everyone to flee their homes and endure the hardships of the genocide. According to Fanon, "It is obvious here that the agents of war speak the language of pure force" (1961, p. 38). This violence disrupts the environment in such a way that power is communicated only through tyrannical actions. War

created chaos and mayhem in the surroundings that led to the separation of family members from one another. Likewise, Raami's family also experienced separation as her father was captured by the military when they sensed that he could resist or fight back. Her family was of a royal belonging and Khmer Rouge was specifically targeting the elite class. Cambodians belonging to the elite class were trying to hide their identity from everyone. As Raami was a child who was unable to understand this thing, she revealed her father's identity in fear when a soldier inquired about her. Her father lied that only he was Sisowath to save his family and was taken by the soldiers. It is believed that settlers fear that natives can take their place. "It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place" (Fanon, 1961, p. 39). The Khmer Rouge settlers could see people like Raami's father who had the intellectual abilities to unite people for resistance. That is why, they made sure to torture or kill the natives right away to avoid retaliation.

Moreover, continuous oppression, and loss traumatized Cambodians and deteriorated their ability to fight back despite belonging to influential families. Freud (1949) defines the traumatic phase as "excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (p. 29). According to him, the human brain is covered with a membrane that protects it from the outer stimulus, and if the outer stimulus crosses this membrane, it directly creates its effect on it. This effect acts as a wound for the human mind and Freud named this wound as trauma. In the same way, Raami was protected by her home and her father but war acted as an outer stimulus that destroyed her shelter and traumatized her soul. When her father surrendered and the soldiers were about to take him, it was one of the most emotional and heartbreaking parts of the story; she narrated, "Papa's hands grew cold and heavy on my shoulders. I heard heartbeats, fast and thumping, but I couldn't be sure if they belonged to me or Papa, or even the soldier" (Ratner, p. 99). Psychoanalytic criticism seeks glimpses of the emotions, memories, and experiences of the author within the novel. Raami, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel reflects the real-life experiences of the author when she confronted the Cambodian exile. The situation of the horrific war that Raami has

narrated is the projection of the Khmer Rouge's oppressive rule on Phnom Penh which is the real-life experience of the author. The novel begins with the line, "War entered my childhood world..." (Ratner, 2012, p. 6). The author might not remember clear faces but the trauma that war brought into her childhood can be seen in the character of Raami. She lost her father whom she was so close that even after he was gone, sometimes she used to imagine him, talked to his shadow, and often dreamt about him. "He was my god, peaceful and self-contained (p. 102). Raami considered her father a godly figure. The reason why the author has so beautifully and repeatedly shown the connection between Raami and her father takes us to Ratner's unconscious mind which is full of her father's memories; a seven-year-old child's memories. It is noted that Raami has mentioned the comfort zones of her house; the balcony, the banyan tree, blossoming flowers, the courtyard, and her room. This refers to the nostalgic belonging of the author who misses the comforts and security of her home not only during the war but also after resettlement.

Imagination, sometimes, serves as an escape from the horrors of reality. "The realm of imagination was seen to be a "reservation" made during the painful transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle to provide a substitute for instinctual satisfactions which had to be given up in real life..." (Freud, 1989, p. 64). Raami's father has told her about an imaginary world; which is a world of fantasies.

This other world of which Papa spoke, where the lost was found, where a part of you always resided. It was quiet and lush, at once earthy and ethereal. No rockets or bombs were exploding, no people crying or dying, no sadness, no tears, no mourning. There were only butterflies, fluttering their gossamer wings, each as brilliant as a dream. (Ratner, 2012, p. 23)

Whenever she feels sad, this dreamy world soothes her and lets her towards hope. Similarly, the fantasization towards her missing father reflects her desire to escape the war and meet her father.

In addition, anger is also a psychological impact of suffering that comes as a reaction from the victims. Reaction formation is a stage of defense mechanism proposed by Freud as well as discussed by Fanon. When an individual represses his feelings, a reaction

comes out as a response. There are many times in the novel when we see that the people repressed their emotions because they were badly shattered. However, their repressed emotions came out sometimes in the form of silence and sometimes in the form of anger. As a consequence of facing prolonged violence, that same violence can get channeled into the minds of the oppressed people. "The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones" (Fanon, 1961, p. 52). When the character of Big Uncle was looted by the soldiers, his ego got hurt for the first time, the ego of a royal king. At that moment, he should have been frightened as others were but he showed an opposite response. First, he had a strange smile on his face looking at the looter, and when he went off, "Big Uncle roared, his anger as magnificent as his bulk and height. Damn them all!... Their revolution and their gods!" (Ratner, 2012, p. 55).

In the situation of war, people get confused between the idea of individualism and union. Sometimes, they are hit upon the learned ideology of individualism i.e. to look for themselves and to save themselves. While, at other times, they have this in their minds either "everyone will be discovered by the troops, everyone will be massacred—or everyone will be saved" (Fanon, 1961, p. 47). This gives them hope to keep going on – the hope to keep struggling for their survival and resettlement. The selected work sheds light on the impact of war on refugee women through the character of Raami's mother. She was a woman with royal lineage who had no idea of violence and financial struggles in her pre-war life. During the prolonged agonies of war, she had to keep herself alive to look after her daughters. In the light of Fanon's postcolonial views, the refugees are "overpowered but not tamed" (p. 53) and they are treated as inferiors but they are not convinced of their inferiority and that might be the only thing that keeps them resilient. Similarly, Raami's mother managed to escape the army of Khmer Rouge and tried to earn through labor work so that she could feed her daughters. By the end of the novel, she was able to flee from Cambodia along with Raami; in the hope of resettling in a foreign land. Although she had to go through huge losses and traumas throughout her life. She lost not only her husband but also her younger daughter when the child was hit with severe health

issues and she could not provide her proper treatment amid the ongoing war.

This paper also explores different types of traumatic experiences in the novel. Trauma has two types: Melancholy and mourning, explained in *Mourning and Melancholia*. According to Freud, these are two different states of expressing grief. Mourning is a short-term state in which the individual recovers after crying for a few days. It disconnects one from the world for some time. While melancholia is a disconnection of one from oneself. The novel shows mourning in so many places because people were facing torture and brutal deaths now and then. The first time Raami experiences mourning is when a few-month-old baby dies during the war. Everyone was mourning his death. There, she says, "His was my first funeral" (Ratner, 2012, p. 124). This again takes us to the author herself who saw so much bloodshed and killings in the age when the parents avoided taking their children to funerals. Later on, when her younger sister, Radana died, her mother couldn't even mourn her death. She was in severe trauma that she acted strangely by singing lullabies. The reason she was not able to cry was the state of melancholy.

With fear and trauma, comes silence. Fear acts as a controlling power for the refugees. They want to return to their homes but they are unable to. They ask this question many times, "What about our home?" (2012, p. 125), but are shut quiet with the bullets. Their voice is silenced by fear. Not only fear, but they also face humiliation. A soldier called Raami was crippled and ordered to throw her metallic brace into the river. She, a princess, had to sleep on the ground. She was forced to labor with her disability and everyone tortured and humiliated her. The more they confronted oppression, the more they became silent. Khmer Rouge had no pity on kids or even old aged, sick people. Tata, Auntie India, and her twin boys were hanged with the ceiling when Tata told them about their royal identity. The grandmother had to live with their dead bodies for several days. This was the reason her mind was so disrupted that she stopped reacting. Once, she said, "The worst irony of motherhood is when you outlive your children." (Ratner, 2012, p. 144); this was when her son was gone missing. According to the Psychoanalytic approach, an individual can hallucinate begins in severe depression. The grandmother started talking

to the ghosts of her dead children. Big Uncle said, "She's closer to them than us... To the spirits and ghosts. She no longer knows who we are. She doesn't know who she is. It's . . . the only reason she's still alive" (2012,p. 231).

CONCLUSION

The postcolonial analysis of the selected literature has presented a nuanced understanding of complex intersections between displacement, power dynamics and oppression. This study suggests that refugee literature has its roots deeply connected with the historical legacies of colonialism. It highlights the timeless and strenuous struggles of the people in exile and displacement not only against the tortures but also against their unconscious psychological traumas. The character of Raami, a refugee child represents how refugee children deal with the inevitable feeling of loss and suffering. The world of imagination created by Raami is a symbol of hope that there is still a way towards a better life. In addition, it can also be inferred that settlers employ intense oppressive models to colonize refugee. Notably, genocide is an extended version of colonial oppression. Apart from that, Postcolonial perspectives highlight how refugees, despite the atrocious challenges, assert their silenced powers and try to push back against oppressive forces but they fail in retaliation which is only possible through equal violence according to Fanon's views.

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