

THE CONCEPT OF THE “PERFECTLY VIRTUOUS WOMAN”: CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY OF KHMER WOMEN FOR THE NATION¹

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Abstract

The Concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”: Constructed Identity of Khmer Women for the Nation aims to explore Khmer women’s constructed identity as it has changed throughout Khmer history.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” (ស្រី គ្រប់ លក្ខណ៍) refers to the practices of women: proper manners, roles according to their social status as the perfectly virtuous daughter, wife and mother, and how to live free of sexual denigration. The concept does not have a single or fixed meaning. It has been interpreted, adjusted and added to, thus creating new meanings throughout Khmer history from Pre-Vietnamization until the present time.

The concept began before Vietnamization through role models in the oral tradition and literature influenced by religion.

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Klairung Amratisha, my thesis advisor who suggested the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” and Mr. Noah Keone Viernes, a doctoral student at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, who edited a few pages of this article. Special thanks go to Mr. Rodney Haynes, who gave useful suggestions and helped organize this article.

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During Vietnamization, the concept was used to save the nation from assimilation. Then, the concept was adapted to be the role and duty of Khmer women to save their race. During the French Protectorate, the concept was modified by the Civilizing mission of the French. Under the Khmer Rouge, the concept was replaced by the equality of men and women as the children of Angkar. After liberation from the Khmer Rouge, the concept was revived to rebuild the country. In the post UNTAC phase until the present, the concept has been re-introduced to understand Khmer society.

Throughout Khmer history, the concept has been constructed by the ruling class. Therefore, the concept contains hidden political objectives and has been applied to force women to perform various kinds of state assignment without question.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” discusses what a Khmer woman should be and what in fact she is. Whether the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” will survive in the twenty-first century or not, is the main question for Khmer women.

Introduction

The Concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”: Constructed Identity of Khmer Women for the Nation aims to explore Khmer women’s identity and power as it has changed throughout Khmer history.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” (ស្រី គ្រប់ លក្ខណ៍) is widely recognized in the Khmer language. It refers to the practices of women: proper manners, their role according to their social status as the perfectly virtuous daughter, wife and mother, and how to live

free of sexual denigration. The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” (ស្រី ត្រង់ លក្ខណ៍) does not have a single or fixed meaning. It has been interpreted, adjusted, and added to, creating new meanings at different times in Khmer history ; that is to say during Pre-Vietnamization, Vietnamization, the French Protectorate, the Khmer Rouge, Liberation from Khmer Rouge and Post UNTAC until the present. Throughout Khmer history, people in Khmer society, especially those from the ruling class, constructed the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. Hence, it contains hidden political objectives and has been applied to force women to perform various kinds of state assignment without question.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is essential for the survival of the nation’s identity. Whether Khmer society will survive or not, has been and is considered an essential part of the Khmer woman’s role, duty, and behaviour. The loss of Khmer identity, has depended and depends on how Khmer women have performed and perform within the framework of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”(Ledgerwood 1990 : ii). In this sphere, the “Perfectly Virtuous Women” have performed successfully: as leaders of families, in managing domestic economics, planning their children’s education and futures, solving family problems and being able to correct their husband’s behaviour. Those women who are successful in these matters are elevated, accepted, respected and honoured as “Perfectly Virtuous Women”. Men are also honoured by their association with “Perfectly Virtuous Women”.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” has meaning for Khmer women

in two ways. Firstly, it is the channel that women utilize when they act in relation to social traditions. Secondly, cultural identity encourages the view of women as cultural preservers. It seems that the concept indicates how being a “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” gives them a constructed identity. Paradoxically, the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” allows Khmer women to have influence over men but in reality the extent of women’s identity is limited to small units of society such as the family or communities.

Method

This article is part of the dissertation: *The Concept of Perfectly Virtuous Woman in the works of Cambodian Female Novelists*. The article aims to explore Khmer women’s constructed identity of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” as it has changed throughout Khmer history. Thus, the evidence is based on both historical evidence and literature related to “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” and when a period of Khmer history lacks the related literature, the author has applied historical evidence to clarify the concept.

Pre-Vietnamization: Originating the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”

The oldest evidence that exists for the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is in the oral tradition and written literature. Images of women appear in the oral tradition and literature around the 14th century (CE). In the 16th century (CE), the vital contributor was the *Ramayana* especially chapters 1-10. The concept was further elaborated by images in *Lpaen* or *Satra Lpaen* in the 18th century (CE)

(Khing Hoc Dy 1997: 81, 83, 100). Hence, for 400 years literature shaped the Khmer image of ideal women.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is repeated continuously in *Sita* and *Madri* and provides two role models for Khmer women. The ideal wife and mother [especially the image of the wife] who has to be faithful and loyal to her husband, is derived from *Sita* in the *Ramayana* or the *Reamker* as it is in the Khmer. The image of the wife who dedicates herself to serving her husband and shares happiness and sadness whenever the husband is confronted with any kind of hardship is referred to as *Madri*. *Madri*, who appears in *Vessantara Jataka*, is the typical image of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. The ideal wife has to perform domestic work efficiently and display a beautiful manner filled with merit. She is, ideally, intelligent, provides good advice for her husband and does not insult him. The ideal wife, then, exhibits great merit filled with a spiritual potential that can protect her husband and bring prosperity to him and the family. These images are derived from selections which present a convergent combination of images influenced by the Braman and Hindu religions, the Buddhist religion and the local wisdom of the Khmer people. In the 16th century (CE) when Hinayana Buddhism replaced Vaisnavism, the influence of Buddhism had a more significant impact on the criteria for the spiritual aspects of women because its precepts corresponded appropriately to the Khmer political and social conditions at that time.

In the 14th to 17th centuries (CE), Cambodia experienced political turmoil arising from two factors: firstly, were the

wars with Ayudhaya; a neighbouring country. These wars tried to extend the power of Ayudhaya into Khmer territory. The second factor can be traced back to the internal struggles between various dynastic families. The result was a crisis. The Khmer population decreased in number due to military recruitment for the wars and deaths among men from fighting increased the proportion of women in the population. However, women were still confined to being farmers and nurturers. Patronage increased as people sought access to scarce resources.

The didactic codes or *Cpap’ Sri*³ which already existed before the 15th to 17th centuries (CE) were used to motivate people to accept and obey more powerful patrons. Combining these codes with precepts of the Buddhist religion, and focusing on the acceptance of hierarchy in society facilitated the patriarchy and patronage that enabled Khmer society to move forward (Santry 2005: 53). During this time, women remained the main group that society needed to control in order to benefit in terms of economic, social and political security. A powerful process began towards the construction of the woman’s ideal image: a beautiful body, mind and manners and the intelligence to promote and support the husband. This support of the family and its relationship with patronage based on the point of view of patriarchy strengthened the system of patronage.

Nevertheless, these images of women from the oral tradition had different focal

³ The Old or Ancient Codes of Conduct came in 4 versions, namely, *Cpap’ Kun Cau* or Code of Conduct for Children, *Cpap’ Kerti Kal* or Code of the Heritage of the Past time, *Cpap’ Rajaneti* or Code for a King’s Conduct of Affair, and *Cpap’ Kram* or Code of Principle

points when compared with the images of women in written literature. In some cases these images have remained until present and are admired by the majority of people in Khmer society. For example, using her intellect for secular benefit or being a good intellectual woman who violates sexual taboos without punishment from society. Their intellect was considered as something that could increase the resources and property of their family. All of these examples are indicative that those images of the ideal woman in Khmer society were not based solely on one source of thought and belief but were combined from various sources. The fact that Khmer society has allowed some images to challenge strict norms and be communicated up to the present, indicates that Khmer society has often provided a space for transforming its meaning.

To sum up, during this period, the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was used to describe the characteristics of two role models moderated by the social roles of women during the turmoil of war and post war periods. The first was beauty in body, mind and manners. The second was domesticity but with women being intelligent and promoting and supporting their husbands. Lastly women were needed as farmers who were the main group in society and therefore had to be controlled by society for its economic, social and political security.

Vietnamization: Saving the nation

In the middle of the 18th century (CE), the fear of assimilation by Thailand and Vietnam led the Khmer to protect the lineage of their own race. At this time, Khmer poets chose the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” to redefine a symbolic meaning for Khmer women as

the frontier of their race to protect it against assimilation by the Thais or Vietnamese.

The evidence for this interpretation comes from consideration of the biography of the Khmer poet *King Aung Duong*. The king experienced chaotic in fighting within his extended royal family and political intervention from Thailand and Vietnam. He became an exile when he was 15 years old and lived outside the country for 20 years before returning. The literature that illustrates his adaptation of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is *Lpaen Kaki*. According to Khing Hoc Dy (2003: 27), this was written by *King Aung Duong* in 1815 when he was 19 years old when the young prince was living in exile under the king of Siam’s protection. The aim of *Lpaen Kaki* was to use Khmer women as the frontier to maintain the purity of Khmer blood by preventing marriage with other ethnic groups. Protection of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was the protection of the purity of Khmer blood.

Kaki presents images of women who have been dishonored or are impure and flirtatious. The obvious fault of *Kaki* is the violation of the sexual taboo of having sex with men who are not her husband. Unfortunately, the men, whom she has sex with are men from other ethnic groups and they include Garuda and a Musician in Heaven. The events in *Kaki* are like the situation in Cambodia. At that time, foreign men lived all over Cambodia. The anxiety about assimilation made *Kaki*, who committed adultery, blame worthy because this was unacceptable behavior within Khmer society. According to the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”, it was understood that she could not protect the pure blood of the Khmer

people. Therefore, according to a Buddhist proverb, the behavior of women like Kaki was punished severely. They had to compensate in hell for their bad deeds. This topic illustrates the need for society to control women's sexuality.

The plot of *Lpaen Kaki* contains the characteristics of the law that can preserve the Khmer ethnic group through Khmer women. The story of *Lpaen Kaki* seems to be a solution to the crisis at the frontier at that time. *Lpaen Kaki* has a symbolic meaning that reflects the need for the king who wrote it to protect Khmerness. The literature functions as a warning to Khmer women not to have sexual relations with men from other races, by which is implied Thai and Vietnamese men. This concept was re-emphasized 22 years later due to the policy of Vietnamization (between 1835 and 1840). This was an acute moment of crisis for their culture in the eyes of the Khmer people.

In 1837, or over 22 years after the composition of *Lpaen Kaki*, the didactic codes or the *Cpap' Sri* of King Aung Duong's version appeared (Khing Hoc Dy 2003: 36), at nearly the same time as the didactic codes *Cpap' Sri* of *Meun Mai*'s. The two versions of the didactic codes for women warned them to preserve the purity of Khmerness but they were also developed as a principle to control Khmer women. The preservation of a cultural frontier to control women was condensed so as to ensnare the chastity of women in the most detailed of ways. The content of both versions of the didactic codes can be divided into two main issues. The first issue is the nature of the good wife and the bad wife. The second issue concerns principles as to how women are to behave including manners, behavior with people,

their role in everyday life and issues of sexuality.

The *Cpap' Sri* of King Aung Duong was intended strictly to control the issue of sexuality. It pointed out that society would like to control the practice of women's desires in an appropriate way. For instance, a woman should have sexual relations only with her husband and be willing to respond to any desire her husband had for her body. Expressing her sexual desire for a man who was not her husband or one with whom she had had sexual relations was taboo for a woman. The *Cpap' Sri* of *Meun Mai* emphasizes how women should perform in their relationships with other people in everyday life, the responsibilities of their role, and the duties of women as wives. There are three main points. The first is the do's and don'ts to practice with a husband. The second is how women should behave with their mother, father and relatives. The third is conduct that should be avoided in order to make them "Perfectly Virtuous Woman". Both the didactic codes of the *Cpap' Sri* of King Aung Duong, and the contents of *Meun Mai*'s have clear characteristics to control the correctness of domestic practice.

Both works were presented to the public after Vietnam had tried to Vietnamize the Khmer for two years. Therefore, King Aung Duong and *Meun Mai* also shared the experience of being oppressed by the policy of Vietnamization. Being governed by Vietnam, which included an effort to change Khmer culture, had a severe effect on Khmer people's feelings. It was urgent for the Khmer people that they hold on to their cultural frontiers. At the least, they had to defend the purity of their own ethnic, social and cultural identity. The didactic codes of the *Cpap' Sri* of King

Aug Duong emphasize Khmer women in their role as the last defense in preserving Khmer identity in terms of protecting the purity of the race. The *Cpap’ Sri* of *Meun Mai* responds to the demands of society by using the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” to allow Khmer women to preserve the cultural frontier. The *Cpap’ Sri* of *Meun Mai* also emphasizes women’s roles and preserves the manners of a good and virtuous wife according to the Khmer definition. This means Khmer women should remain faithful to their Khmerness.

Another adjustment of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is shown in two social rituals, related to women, namely, the ritual of ‘putting into the shade’ (*Chol mlop*) and the marriage ritual. These rituals clarify the social meaning of women’s bodies and allow young girls to become “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” when passing from girlhood to maidenhood. The application of the *Cpap’ Sri* in these two rituals emphasizes two important elements. The first is the theoretical part which refers to the *Cpap’ Sri*. The second is the practical part which refers to knowledge that has been passed on by mothers about how to be a good housewife.

‘Putting into the shade’ was performed when young girls became women. It was a ritual during which young girls were confined to their houses when they begin maidenhood that is defined by the first menstruation. The length of confinement was for about three to six months or in some cases it could be extended to one year. During confinement, both parents usually performed the ritual of ‘digging the nettle’ for the young girls. It was said that nettle powder made people have itchy symptoms. So they had to dig a whole

trunk of nettle bushes in order to not suffer any effects from it. It was a ritual to teach women not to have itchy symptoms. To clarify, scratching the buttocks was compared to being unable to stay at home and to walking around other people’s houses. Scratching the feet was compared to walking around. Scratching the hands was compared to taking other people’s property. Scratching their mouths was compared to gossiping. This ritual would be re-emphasized once they married. Therefore, the ritual of ‘digging the nettle’ had the objective of healing women from all itchy symptoms in order to have the characteristics of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” (Nguon Yil 2005: 79–84, 89–92).

During the marriage ceremony, there was also a ritual called ‘healing teeth’. This emphasized the conduct with the ‘three fires’⁴ that women, who were wives, had to preserve according to the contents of the *Cpap’ Sri* of *Meun Mai*. In this ritual, Kru Khmer (Khmer ritual providers) would find water that had a variety of tastes; half-bitter and half-sour, sour, bitter, salty, and spicy and give it to a bride to hold in her mouth. She was not allowed to swallow it. After she had held it in her mouth for about three to five minutes, she had to spit the water into a small vessel made from banana leaves. She had to do this three times. The objective of the ritual was for women to understand that from now on they had to accept all words that tasted bitter, half-bitter and half-sour, and spicy. These represented blame from other people. When she accepted the conditions and did not swallow the water but held it in her mouth and spat it out in places that were out of people’s sight without allowing other people to know, it meant

⁴ “Three fires” refer to mother-in law, father-in law, and husband.

that if she heard any gossip about herself or other people, she would not tell others. She would listen and let it be without conveying to others what was said in order to prevent dissatisfaction and conflict.

Therefore, in 'Putting into the shade', the *Cpap' Sri* was a cultural code to supervise young girls in how to use their bodies and to express the expectations of society transmitted through their parents who functioned as the family institution. 'Putting into the shade' was a wise strategy to control girls during their reproductive period by keeping them under their parents' supervision. The marriage ritual introduced conduct from the *Cpap' Sri* as rituals to control women who were housewives. After attending both rituals, every Khmer woman's body would become the complete body of Khmer identity.

In conclusion, the concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" that existed in all literature and rituals constructed the social meaning of women's bodies in terms of sexuality. It declared that women's bodies, that had passed through the rituals, were bodies that could perform in ways determined by society so as to be good wives and mothers. It emphasized that women had to behave themselves appropriately in order to preserve the purity of the race and the cultural identity because society needed women to be a fort to protect it against assimilation and to provide the cultural identity of the Khmer nation.

French protectorate: Civilizing the concept

Cambodia requested to become a French protectorate to guard it against the power of Thailand and Vietnam. During this

period, concepts from the West contended with the traditional concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman". The result of this so called "civilizing mission" changed Khmer women's physical appearance.

The civilizing mission refers in this case to the French attempt to change the image of Khmer women. In the eyes of the French, the faces of Khmer women were similar to those of men. Women had close-cropped hair, chewed betel nuts, had betel-stained teeth and wore the *sompot* in a diaper-like fashion between the legs and knotted at the belt. These images were not to the French taste (Santry 2005: 63). To make Khmer women feminine, the French encouraged women to wear skirts and high heeled shoes and to cut their hair in a bobbed style as did French women in order to visibly differentiate the physical appearances of women and men more clearly and appropriately. Not only did the French encourage the style of dress but they also demanded that Khmer women have more "civilized" manners. The French chose the *Cpap' Sri* to introduce a concept of the modern housewife similar to that in the West. The French supported schools for Khmer women to learn how to be Modern Woman through courses such as how to be a housewife, household management, dress-making, caring for new born babies, basic mathematics and the Khmer and French languages. The aim of the French was to make these young girls ready to be the wives of high-ranking officers in the neo-feudal system. This became the vital motivation for young girls to enter the new school system.

The image of Khmer women changed to a Neo-Angkor identity during World War II as the status of the French in Indo-China began to weaken. The French realized this

and started to implement policies that were more flexible towards Khmer people. One such policy was the encouragement of a maternal identity linked to the ideal of Khmerness in the Angkorean Period, especially at the time of *King Jayavarman VII* (Chandler 2003: 260). The French used the metaphor that the prosperity of the civilization in the Angkorean Period could be compared to that at the time of Emperor *Napoleon*. The French also emphasized images of a government regime similar to the situation where a father governs a son by performing tactfully as a father-patron to sons. One selected policy of the French was a campaign to promote national identity and the issue of women throughout Khmer history. The French explained that Khmer women were a vital part of civilization in the prosperous past but their status had declined over time but they, the French, intended to return Khmer women to their rightful position. They told stories of French heroines such as *Joan of Arc* which they connected to stories of Khmer heroines to create new versions of the latter and emphasized the modern didactic codes for Khmer women. The attempts to create the ideal Khmer women were used to turn the attention of people in society away from the contemporary reality that the French were becoming steadily weaker and weaker (Santry 2005: 64). Ultimately, the Civilizing mission of the French meant the creation of images and roles of women according to French tastes. Nevertheless, it resulted in tactfully changing and adding cultural currents to what had previously existed. Although the new dress and hair styles for women seemed to be strange and intrusive compared with the traditional standard of Khmer beauty, the French did not abolish the traditional roles and duties of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. It can be concluded that the concept was only

physically adjusted to include methods of managing households by using French standards. But the concepts that dealt with the roles and duties of women associated with the care of family members and household issues, were almost exactly the same as before the French Protectorate.

As another part of the Civilizing mission the French provided Khmer women with a modern education system. This provided the basis for literate scholar groups whose members had a critical perspective about French colonialism. When this was combined with nationalism, it supplied points of view about the traditional concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” with two currents of thought. The first encouraged women to challenge and criticize the concept as a chain that bound women. Moreover, in this current, it was agreed that the concept did not develop Khmer women as the equals of women in civilized nations. Finally, from this viewpoint, the concept would affect the overall development of the country. From the viewpoint of this group, the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” became something that retarded civilization and the development of women. Between 1945 and 1946, the posing of questions about the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” and its criticism continued. The atmosphere of this debate was within the main atmosphere of resistance to colonialism, consequently, it did not appear much in the media. On the contrary, the second current of thought was influenced by conservatism, which was the main trend of the country at that time. This called for women to be good mothers and wives for the nation. It maintained the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” according to tradition. This current of thought, based on

conservative nationalism, finally overcame the first current of thought.

The outcomes of the Civilizing mission were only the adjustment of women's dress and the opening of the home or domestic life to public policy. Khmer women were not only good mothers, wives and citizens of the nation but they also studied and worked outside the domestic sphere for other people's benefit.

Sihanouk period: "The Modern Woman" in the Post Independence period

The French gave independence to Cambodia in 1953. In general, Cambodia independence is called the Post Independence period or the period of Prince Sihanouk. The latter governed from 1955 to 1970. Prince Sihanouk intended to develop the country into a modern country in respect of its economy, society and education. There were four goals that he intended to achieve, namely; nationalism; independence; Buddhism; and monarchy. In order to achieve all these missions, Prince Sihanouk had the strategic method of bringing back the prosperous past of Khmer to motivate the pride of the Khmer people and make them realize their own rights, benefits and traditions in order to stimulate them to build the nation as strenuously as possible.

The acceleration of the country's development, especially that of education, led to two elements that seemed to benefit Khmer women. The first was it extended fundamental education to Khmer girls. The second was it gave rights to Khmer women to participate in political activity. The policy of national education produced an increased number of literate Khmer women. The Khmer women in rural areas

had the chance to go to school and had the right to vote in the election in 1955 (Santry 2005: 66). However, education for Khmer girls was limited to primary school level. The number of Khmer girls who went to secondary and high schools decreased. Moreover, those girls who studied at a higher level of education were usually clustered in the big cities. Thus, the provision of education for Khmer girls at that time was to gain the popular vote and with the expectation of a high growth of development in education, the economy, society and political aspect of the country were advanced rather than the thought and capacities of women (Frieson 2000: 7-8).

The development of the political aspects of women followed the trend of nationalism and was intended to create a good image of Prince Sihanouk and his policies. The Association of Women's Friendship was founded in 1958 with the declared aim to campaign for the political progress of women. In reality, the association was formed to serve the government, so the role and duty of women in the association was to promote and give support to the main missions of the government. An action plan identified that the association's role was to *provide food for the foreign honorable guests in order to save the government budget* (Frieson 2000: 8). It demonstrated that the association was the political tool of "The People's Socialist Community" (*Sangkum Reastr Niyom*) of Sihanouk. It was understood that the association regarded the role of Khmer women to be as housewives taking care of the cooking or saving expenditure from the government budget. Khmer women did not step out of their traditional role.

As for Khmer women in the rural areas or in villages throughout the country, their

thought about the role and status of “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” did not change. When they finished studying at primary and secondary school level, their fathers and mothers often asked them to quit school in order to take the traditional role of women, that is, getting married, having a family and taking care of their family members. *Cpap’ Sri* was implanted by the ruling classes as the ideology of women in order to maintain a family institution of patriarchy that was no different from the previous governors in the past (Santry 2005: 69). The rural Khmer women who were the majority group of the country seemed to have their own destiny to serve the family institution, society and the country according to culture and tradition. Their aim for life was not assisted by the current trend of education and development for women that mashed national policy. On the contrary, the provision of personal development was only for Khmer men.

During the Post Independence period, there were conflicting goals for women that the government requested them achieve. While the government asked Khmer women to follow the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” and express their Khmerness, they also asked them to acculturate as Western Women who could present a modern image to the Western World. To clarify this, since the policy of nationalism required the public image of the country to be modern or needed other countries to realize that Cambodia had developed in the same direction as Western civilized countries, it led the governors emphasize the image of modern Khmer woman. Modern Khmer woman had to have a chance of education, to work outside the home and to develop themselves to be Modern Woman like Western woman. However, Khmer society

had become used to the traditional family where women, as housewives, were “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. Khmer women had to take care of the cooking, cleaning the house and nurturing the family members as usual. As well as this, the traditional concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” had never disappeared from Khmer society, but was reproduced continuously in both the formal education system in school and in the nurturing of the family and in rituals such as ‘putting into a shade’ (*Chol mlop*) and the marriage ritual. Therefore, the relationship between women and the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” in the society of the Post Independence period cannot be explained by a single set of explanations due to the different expectations of the governors and people in society as to the role of Khmer women. The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was not a change in the ideology of society but it was a phenomenon in the current of nationalism that persuaded women to establish the images of civilization.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” that existed in novels during the Post Independence period was a resistance to the arranged marriages which had appeared in novels since they had begun to be published (Amratisha 1998: 225). In this period, the plot of the arranged marriage would be reproduced frequently because the arranged marriage had become a major obstacle and the focus of the plot in sentimental novels. The sentimental novel was the type of novel that gained popularity and had the most readers. The extension of education produced a new group of readers. Arranged marriages were criticized as a traditional way of thinking. The tradition was a chain to fasten Khmer women so that they would not find real happiness in their lives. According to the

concept of human rights, the writers of these sentimental novels took it as their mission to speak for Khmer women. As individuals, they had the right to have real happiness because they were equally human. Besides this, to force children to marry those they did not love, was regarded as a violation of personal rights that a civilized country would not countenance. Thus, the authors that presented these plots played an important role in liberating Khmer women from the chains of this tradition. They also required resistance to the violation of personal rights in order to make Khmer society accepted in the eyes of foreign countries. The criticisms of the arranged marriage in the novels were a phenomenon of nationalism at that time.

Although plot was used to criticize the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”, the characteristics of the female characters in some sentimental novels reproduced the traditional concept. The females in these novels had two kinds of character. The first one was the young girl who behaves very strictly in the traditional concept. These characters have a formal and modern education but finally they are exploited by the tradition. The second one was the character like “The Modern Woman” (*Nari Samay*). This group displayed behavior like Western women such as drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and dressing in a sexually provocative style. Finally, these women will desert their ex-lovers who are poor and turned to men who are rich and modern (Amratisha 1998: 225). Although the characteristics of the female characters in the first group went along with criticisms of arranged marriages, the image behind the scenes was in keeping with the current of nationalism that required a good image for the country in

the eyes of other countries. Compared with the policy of extending educational choice that was the national policy, arranged marriage was emphasized as being an out-of-date tradition. However, the female characters in the second group reproduced the traditional concept. “The Modern Woman” was a contrasting image to the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” in both dress and behavior because of the imitation of Western women. It was not a good model for a Khmer daughter to follow. In the eyes of Khmer people, some images of Civilizing mission reflected the real desire of Khmer society about the need for Khmer women to be tidy, soft, sweet and abstemious like the traditional woman.

However, the novels in the Post Independence period still presented issues that related to the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” in another way, that is, the need to liberate women from the tradition that controlled their lives. These novels present the problems of women, such as the fight for Khmer women’s lives in the new modern era, migration to work in urban areas, sexual abuse and exploitation because of the patriarchal family. These problems had their roots in the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” (Amratisha 1998: 241-242). It was adjudged that these problems were caused by the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. Khmer women who were trained to be sweet, silent, and obedient and had to follow and serve their family members may have succeeded in the past but such characteristics could not cope with the changes that were occurring in the country at that time. The need of Khmer women was education for self-development. They also needed the attitude of people in Khmer society to open-up and to give more chances to women. Nevertheless, it should be

emphasized that the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was attacked because it was against the current of nationalism that required the civilized development of the country at that time. Furthermore, the government needed to do a favor to women because of their proportion in the popular vote and because they were the main resource to develop the country. Therefore, whether the authors intended to respond to the demand of government or not, it caused criticism of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was being influenced by the image of the “Modern Woman”, based on Western ideas and where this would have led to will never be known because the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975 and destroyed the monarchy and the associated traditions of the Khmer.

The Khmer Rouge: Tearing up the concept

The Khmer Rouge regarded themselves as the liberators of the farmers who had been oppressed by a corrupt and cheating urban society and a privileged class. All of them believed that a fast and decisive revolution would get rid of all Western influences in Cambodia. So the Khmer Rouge erased all previous political regimes, government apparatuses, economic systems, the hierarchical order of society and all culture and tradition. Khmer women were the group that the Khmer Rouge promised to liberate from any type of oppression but the outcome was simply to change the controller of their fates. It was a false promise of women’s liberation from oppression.

Traditionally, in Khmer society women were supervised by the father and mother. In the Khmer Rouge Period, the life of all Khmer women was to be under the supervision of *Angkar*⁵ through the moral rules of the party. In this period, the *Angkar* dominated through its policy towards women. It appeared as if the Khmer Rouge had released women from the social relations and the original standards of the traditional concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” and religion.⁶ Theoretically, the result was the equality of men and women due to the destruction of religion. In addition to this, both men and women had equal status with the children of *Angkar* and had an equal chance of being good children and serving *Angkar*. Practically, the cancellation of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”, and the cutting of women out of previous social relations made women lose their power of negotiation at the level of the individual which women used to have within their families and communities and transferred all power to *Angkar*.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” that had determined women’s lives in previous eras was erased from the culture by the Khmer Rouge. They replaced it for Khmer women with equality but it was an equality that meant working as hard as men. Married women and grandparents had the role of caring for

⁵ There are four meanings of *Angkar*, namely, organization, Communist Party, the population (Khmer Rouge), and *Pol Pot*. The organization is the literal meaning which is often used as the direct meaning of *Angkar*. See also Amratisha 1988: 293)

⁶ Religion, which was a system of “prestige” or social honour, value and reputation that had placed women under men since birth lost its importance.

small babies when their fathers and mothers went to work. Unmarried women were sent to work in very far-away rural areas such as rice fields, water resource construction areas and battle fields. Women not only joined battles but also had to bring military supplies to the front line. Khmer women in villages had to cook for and to feed soldiers. They had to support soldiers on the front line and in far-away rural areas through many kinds of work including watching the enemy. Furthermore, they had to distribute information about *Angkar*'s revolution to all villagers (Frieson 2000: 10). The vigour and power of young girls, who behaved like young men in the army, on the battle field and in the reserve, made them come to be regarded as "not having Khmerness". Therefore, after the liberation from the Khmer Rouge, the traditional concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" was reinstituted in order to recreate Khmerness among Khmer women.

Hence, the consequence for women under the Khmer Rouge was that images of the traditional concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" were torn-up. The Khmer Rouge destroyed both religion and the concept of virtuous women that had been used to control women in earlier times. On the other hand, they enforced equality with men, meaning conditions of heavy labor and gave women the role of participating vigorously in all areas of the country in the same way as men.⁷ However, women discovered that they no longer had rights and could not make decisions about their own lives. Every part of their body had to serve *Angkar*, even in

marriage. Previously, marriage had seemed a life-reward that gave the opportunity for women to have their own power to manage domestic work by themselves but during the Khmer Rouge Period, marriage was considered as only a means of reproducing the population in order to serve the *Angkar*.

Liberation from the Khmer rouge: Reviving of the concept

On January 7th, 1979, the Vietnamese army joined with the Khmer army to capture Phnom Penh and on January 10th, 1979, the People's Republic of Kampuchea was established under *Heng Samrin* as the president. But what they captured was the country's ruined infrastructure. The economic and social fundamentals of the country had totally collapsed. The Khmer people, who were used to living through tragedies such as the American bombing and wars during eras of *Lon Nol*, *Pol Pot* and the invasion by Vietnam were confronted with two missions, namely, their personal survival and the re-building of their ruined country.

Although women were suffering and in a grievous situations, they were the main workers in repairing and reviving their country under the supervision of Vietnam according to the Vietnam framework of a socialist state for Cambodia. Even though, Khmer people were allowed to build new families, all individuals were still under the leadership of the Party of *Heng Samrin*. They had to attend various organizations which were set up by the state, especially Khmer women who were the majority of survivors from the Khmer Rouge. *The Revolutionary Women's Association of Cambodia* (RWAC), known as the right hand of the state, was established in 1979 in order to motivate

⁷ The country was divided into community areas, agricultural areas and labouring areas for building embankments or joining battle fields.

women to perform missions for their country. It was used to disseminate various policies to all levels of the female population around the country.

The RWAC was the vital tool of the state to communicate with women. In 1984, the RWAC published the pamphlet of *Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh* (RWPP). The contents of the pamphlet urged a reconstruction of the role model of the ideal mother and woman of the country in order to motivate women around the country to implement the state's policies. At that time, the state brought the original concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” or *Cpap’ Sri* to blend in with discourses of nationalism in order to call women to participate in building their nation. Many articles in this pamphlet campaigned to steadily elevate the image of women. An example was the picture of comrade *Yok Naret* who was the young girl who had dedicated herself to the Vietnam army in order to liberate Cambodia. After war, she became a teacher and a medical provider and in her private time worked to increase agricultural production (pamphlet of *Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh* 1986: 4, 7). Other characters were mothers who had been extremely patriotic such as *Auntie Nuan Seang*, a widow and leader of a union group. She was the model woman in building the nation by cultivating rice, vegetables and other crops and feeding livestock. These efforts gave group members a better quality of life and in addition their products were sent to feed the army. The important honor for *Auntie Nuan Seang* was to support her brothers to join the army (pamphlet of *Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh* 1986: 9, 22).

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was re-introduced as a way of

continuing the existence of the Khmer people. The government fought the Khmer Rouge for a long time, and the mission to produce a young generation to continue the Khmer race was still the state's main mission for Khmer women. This was not different from their expected role in the Khmer Rouge Period. The state also expected single women to take care of handicapped soldiers. Marriage to a handicapped soldier could be compared to an heroic performance, akin to going in the battle field. For example, in the pamphlet *Revolutionary Women of Cambodia*,⁸ the government praised *Miss Um Salee*. She was a 16-year-old young girl who agreed to marry *Heng Dy*, a soldier who lost a leg fighting the Khmer Rouge. The article named “Being Handicapped for the Nation Is Really a Source of Noble Pride”(pamphlet of *Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh* 1986: 31–32) was written from *Um Salee*'s point of view towards handicapped soldiers. Women like *Miss Um Salee* were model citizens. The state elected to praise them particularly because people like them decreased the burden of taking care of the wounded.

Another vital process that the state applied as a tool for the construction of the ideal of women, was the revival of a textbook, a revival of the *Cpap’ Sri*, to the school curriculum and organizing literature's contests. Although the *Cpap’ Sri* returned, the contents of the literature in the category of *Cpap’ Sri* were different from previous times. The criterion of the government was that the contents relate to the ideals and objectives of socialist politics.

⁸ The old name was *Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh* (RWPP).

Consequently, we see that the *Cpap' Sri* for Khmer women was used without exception in every Khmer government. *Cpap' Sri* was a type of literature, that was selected by the state and that prioritized the first level of importance for the Khmer identity. The emphasis on the moral codes in the literature always dwelt in the depth of Khmer people's minds. Furthermore, it is interesting that whatever the ideology, Khmer women were controlled closely by the state. The missions that women had been assigned by the state were the reproduction of their race, to preserve the national identity and to protect the frontiers of the Khmer race and culture.

The rebirth of the traditional concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" in another way happened through handwritten novels. In the *People's Republic of Kampuchea* (PRK), any kind of written literature had to follow the perspectives of *Marx* and *Lenin* and the publication had to be licensed by the government. This meant that the authors had to write within framework determined by socialist trends. The escape for writers, who want to be free from the policies of the party or government, was to write underground novels by the duplication of handwritten works. These included love stories, mystery stories and detective stories and were different from the socialist approved works. The handwritten novels were considered as anti-communist books. In the 1980s, even though handwritten novels were illegal. Although their authors were arrested and the books were confiscated, their publication and readership expanded rapidly. The writers used pen names to avoid arrest.

There were writers such as *Golden Hands Writer on Love* [a pen name for *Pal Vannareerak*], *Rabbit* [a pen name for

Mao Sumnang], *Crab from the Far Away Land*, *Morning Star*, *Crab from Rice Field* etc. (Pal Vannareerak 2006) who produced sentimental novels for several book rental shops. *Pal Vannareerak* was a female writer who had won the first prize in the literature contest, so her works were distributed and accepted among Khmer readers. *Mao Sumnang*, on the other hand, produced handwritten works that gained popularity among readers of the underground market. The novels of *Rabbit* or *Mao Sumnang* were produced for the market unlike other writers. Her novels gained popularity because they entertained people and they presented the concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" clearly and steadily. The female characters were both heroines [virtuous women] and anti-heroines [virtueless women] in *Rabbit's* novels and had characteristics of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman's concept". For example, the heroine named *Busiba* in *The Wave Swashes the Sand* and *Leena* in *Wind from the South West* have the characteristics of "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" in both the natural beauty of their physical appearance and proper dress without showing their bodies. *Mao Sumnang* wrote that "it is the proper dress of the daughter of Khmer" (Mao Sumnang 2004: 14). Moreover, both heroines have gentle manners, are good housewives and have good minds and know how to show gratitude. Anti-heroines or virtueless women such as *Pavee* and *Setthee* have characteristics that contrast with those of heroines. For example, they wear short skirts to reveal white thighs, have a showy make-up and are unable to cook, wash and manage household work. They use harsh words to threaten the good and gentle heroines with their jealousy. Furthermore, anti-heroines use seductive behaviour with men, conduct that is taboo to Khmer women.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is also used to show how heroines successfully overcame obstacles in their lives and have loving relationships with the hero with everything ending happily. At that time, the happy ending plot accorded greatly with the feelings of the readership. This phenomenon presented the influences of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” that existed in the depth of people’s minds and was ready to be reawakened when a channel to communicate it became available.

The concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” was brought back by another channel, namely, the literature contests held by the government. The concept was a new way of serving the nation. In 1989, there was a contest to write a novel to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the liberation from the Khmer Rouge. The novels that won the first and second prizes were those of *Pal Vannareerak: The Waning Moon Had Already Gone* and *The New horizon of Hope*. The female characters were exactly the same as the women’s images that had appeared in the pamphlets of *Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh* and *Revolutionary Women of Cambodia*.

The issues and methods that the state used to celebrate women were a combination of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” and nationalism in order to motivate women to perform their mission or to revive the nation. The state constructed images of the ideal woman by selecting discourses of sacrifice and dedicated motherhood, including characteristics of good heartedness, kindness and gratitude to parents that were based on the traditional concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. Dedicated

mothers, who hated the Khmer Rouge and declared support for the government in any mission, namely, patriotism without selfishness and supporting their sons to be soldiers on the front line were the same as *Madri*. Moreover, the dedicated mother was a grateful daughter to the government of *Heng Samrin* because the government could be compared to a father who gave new life to the motherland. Daughters like her had to show gratitude to the government.

Young girls, just like the heroine named *Maldee*, had to work to revive the nation. This meant, being a good housewife, farming, feeding animals for additional income and being the main care giver for the elderly. If anyone married a handicapped soldier, she would be praised by the government. This was because she had a good mind which meant she could act heroically. At this point, the *Heng Samrin* government performed a role similar to that of a parent looking for men to be selected as partners for the daughters of Cambodia.

However, an observation must be made about relationship between Khmer women and the revival of the nation. Normally, the concept of nationalism begins from imagination, humiliation, anger and a hope to revive the nation according to masculine discourses. This means that the related issues or experiences of women are never the beginning point or central idea of nationalism (Enloe 1990: 44). The point is, that in Khmer history, female novelists and their written works were considered as participants who joined the process of reviving the nation rather than men. Both the female novelists: *Pal Vannareerak* and *Mao Sumnang*, are key and outstanding players in building the nation by producing in their novels the typical

models of women for Khmer women to follow.

The re-building and revival of the nation under the government of *Heng Samrin* followed a traditional pattern in which Khmer men played the key role as citizens, members of the nation, activists, and leaders to determine the direction of government. Khmer women were supporting actors subordinate to men. But, because of historical conditions after the Khmer Rouge period where there were more Khmer women survivors than men, the government used Khmer women as an icon⁹ to achieve its goals. The government also created the ideal women as survivors who would be the main source of labour to rebuild the nation. The government needed ideal Khmer women as female survivors to follow as role models. *Pal Vannareerak* was the female writer who responded to the needs of the government. Therefore, the written works of *Pal Vannareerak* and the female roles she creates clearly support government under male leaders. The government wrote scripts that the *Pal Vannareerak* promoted until the underlying mission was completed.

Unlike *Pal Vannareerak*, *Mao Sumnang*, who was an underground writer, did not serve the government directly. The relationship between the government as the script writer and *Mao Sumnang* as a citizen of the nation was complicated. The government was a socialist government, so *Mao Sumnang's* works, which were sentimental novels, detective stories, or mysteries were not acceptable to the government because they did not follow

the required plots. But the love stories of *Mao Sumnang* began to respond to the needs of the government when the images of ideal women represented the ideal women before the Khmer Rouge period. These ideal women moved readers. The lives of the heroines in her novels brought readers back to the peaceful and secure world of the old days when good and bad deeds received the reward and punishment the justly deserved. The novels of *Mao Sumnang* became the supporters of the revival of the nation in another way. They functioned as healers for readers who were war survivors and encouraged them to fight for their lives. However, the case of *Mao Sumnang* clarified the fact that, in the masculine discourse of nationalism, male leaders controlled everything and made women serve and respond to imagination and dreams only in a masculine pattern. Coincidentally, the novels of *Mao Sumnang* were able to serve the mission because the heroines in the novels of *Mao Sumnang* referred to the tradition of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman". Intentionally, the government brought back the *Cpap' Sri* because it promoted "Perfectly Virtuous Woman", had them published and included them in the school curriculum. Thus, when *Mao Sumnang* distributed her novels related to love and the family, it was beyond the imagination of the government at that time because the government would not allow an imagination like her to enter and compete with what the government had determined beforehand. *Mao Sumnang's* works were only to fulfill and respond to the dreams of the underground readers. She took time to be accepted and publish her written works on the public market. Finally, she had to use the channel of literature contests held by the government in the following two decades in order to survive.

⁹ The icon was the creation of the images of Khmer women in relation to the meaning of the nation as the mother land that Khmer men have to fight for.

Post UNTAC-Present: Reviewing and understanding the concept

Cambodia was isolated from the world for 12 years after the withdrawal of the Khmer Rouge in 1980 until the arrival of UNTAC in 1992. Actually, after the withdrawal of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia was under the protection of the socialist army of Vietnam from 1980–1989. After the army of Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia, socialism ended and the economic and social disruption of Cambodia was made evident to the world. In Paris, on October 23rd 1991, the four Cambodian political factions, namely, *the Front Uni National pour un Cambodge indépendant neutre pacifique et cooperative* (FUNCINPEC), *the SOC's Cambodian People's Party* (CPP), *the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party* (BLDP) and *the Democratic Kampuchea Party* (DKP), signed the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict. The agreement called for free elections in 1993. During the transition period from 1991 to free elections in 1993, *the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia* (UNTAC) arrived to monitor the situation.

Before the arrival of UNTAC, the system of free markets was expanding to Southeast Asia. Consequently, the Cambodian economy became market and profit oriented. Furthermore, resources were smuggled out of the country and sold to buy luxury consumer products for use by a minority inside Cambodia. The minority included a new middle class and government officers who benefitted from new laws, such as the one restoring ownership of land. The majority, which included farmers, who lacked knowledge and bargaining power, were disadvantaged and migrated to urban areas to find jobs.

Among this group were, of course, Khmer women.

Among the people who lacked opportunity, were widows who were family leaders. These were the most powerless group. The collapse of socialism and the cancellation of the cooperative system had rendered widows unable to earn a living. Without a union group (*krum samaki*), widows could not borrow oxen, cows, machines and other resources as they had before. Being unable to support themselves and their families, they moved to urban areas to find jobs. That was the only choice left for them.

The lack of choice was the main factor that pushed Khmer women into becoming migrants and prostitutes. Rural women who did not have the education and skills to work in the urban sector, with no relatives, no accommodation and having nothing but their empty hands, found that if they were fortunate, they were able to work for the lowest wages. If they could not find a job but they had a daughter who was adolescent, that daughter could find a job in a brothel. It was the impetus for daughters to sell sex. If they were unfortunate and could find no other way of supporting themselves, families could survive by collecting something to sell from the garbage or even find food in the garbage.

When UNTAC arrived in 1992, an enormous amount of foreign money was transferred to Cambodia within one night and this was followed by a rapid growth of prostitution. At that time, international non-government organizations saturated the country with various programs to support many of the issues of Cambodia. Khmer women were the main target group for support and development. However,

when the groups worked together with Khmer women for a while, they found that an obstacle to development was a lack of understanding of the cultural background which influenced women's lives and this included the concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman".

Actually, the concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" had had an influence on the personalities of Khmer women and was embedded as an attitude of people in Khmer society. For example, the concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" created the inequality of education between girls and boys. According to the standards of the *Cpap' Sri*, people in society agreed that a man should have an education because a man was the breadwinner of his family, while women had to take care of household work. Therefore, young girls never had the chance to study far away from home because staying far from home meant the loss of a family's reputation. Furthermore, a young girl should not have a higher education because then it might be possible for her to write love letters to a man (Fiske 1995: 22–23). The gap in education led to job segregation on the labor market. Women got wages that were 30-40 percent lower than men. On the other hand, men were advantaged due to having a high ratio of literacy. Previously, the attendance of women at knowledge and skill training sessions was an impossibility, however, social conditions at the time caused women to work outside the home in order to support their family. To be a good housewife according to the *Cpap' Sri* of *Meun Mai*, meant almost all women had to work hard at both household work and at a job outside the home to cover domestic expenditure.

Women's rights were promoted by international agencies so the government of Cambodia introduced national policies on women such as the guarantee of women rights and enacted laws that guaranteed the rights and equality of women.¹⁰ Furthermore, in 1992, the *Office of the Secretary of State for Women's Affairs* (SSWA) was established. SSWA aimed to promote the equality of women and decrease family violence. Article number 23 of the constitution declared that the government would enact law to guarantee the equality of women in both the home and workplace. SSWA was established because the government had signed the international agreement for the elimination of every form of discrimination against and segregation of women in 1991.

In terms of the guarantee of rights in the terms of law for Khmer women, Cambodia was a progressive country in the Asia Region. Nevertheless, at the practical level or in its implementation by society, the outcome of women's development was not satisfactory. The development of Khmer women in Cambodia was a tough task for the government to achieve. Non-governmental organizations and Khmer society, including Khmer women, had to seek the right answers for Khmer women because the practice of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman" had become a limitation to the development for Khmer women.

¹⁰ Article number 72 declares that the state has a health responsibility for all citizens. Article number 25 declares that Khmer citizens have equal rights and freedom without discrimination and segregation, especially an equal right of election.

Conclusion: Questioning Khmer women on the concept

This discussion of the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” covers what a Khmer woman should be and what in fact she is. The obvious phenomenon is the setting of women’s roles and duties for the preservation of social institutions such as the family, society or the country. The state applied the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” as a powerful tool to control women according to state and social demands such as being qualified citizens to handle the rapid change in society and being the main resource for the country’s development. Whether Khmer women paid attention or not, their lives were engaged in duties to the state and society such as building and reviving the nation.

Furthermore, Khmer women became the preservers of the race and transmitters of its cultural identity through the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”. The role of preserver and transmitter according to “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” caused women to be oppressed by a higher power which refers to both traditional power and the power of the state to make women preserve family institutions and continue the existence of a patriarchal society.

Whether the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” survives into the twenty-first century or not, is the main question for Khmer women. At present, currents of change are sweeping around the world through globalization and human rights and women’s rights. These changes call for Khmer women themselves to adjust their role and status in Cambodia in accommodating to the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman”.

From the outsider’s point of view, the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” still remains within the written words and the oral tradition, but in the real world the concept of the “Perfectly Virtuous Woman” is hard to maintain because the situation of Cambodia at present has changed from internal war to a free-trade market. Additionally, the attendance of Khmer women in higher education is a factor that has awakened women’s consciousness to review their role and status. The awakening of consciousness by asking questions about their role and status is just an initial stage on the path of Khmer women, society and the state to find the answers together. It will take time and that period of time will not be short.

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Acronyms

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| BLDP | Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party |
| DKP | Democratic Kampuchea Party |
| CPP | Cambodian People's Party |
| FUNCINPEC | Front Uni National pour un Cambodge indépendant neutre pacifique et cooperative (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia) |
| RWAC | Revolutionary Women's Association of Cambodia |
| RWPP | Revolutionary Women in Phnom Penh |
| SOC | State of Cambodia |
| SSWA | Office of Secretary of State for Women's Affairs |
| UNTAC | United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia |