

WOMEN, SEXUALITY AND POLITICS IN MODERN CAMBODIAN LITERATURE: THE CASE OF SOTH POLIN'S SHORT STORY¹

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore the political messages found in the work of Soth Polin, one of Cambodia's influential writers in the 1970s. Soth's short story, Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek [My Dear Husband...My Body Was Torn Apart] illustrates how Cambodia was in a state of physical and moral decay during the Vietnam War as a result of attacks from Vietnamese Communists and American influence over the Cambodian leaders during the Vietnam War. In Soth's stories, pornographic, philosophical and political elements are artistically interwoven. The author uses women's bodies and sexuality as both a site of patriarchal control and as a site of negotiation between the female subject and the patriarchal power. The feminised body of Cambodia symbolizes the political oppression of foreign powers and resistance to these powers. Soth's text shows the continuity of traditional concepts and new creativity in modern Cambodian literature.

Introduction

Modern prose literature of Cambodia emerged as a result of Western influence in the 1940s, with the sentimental novel as the dominant genre. After independence, the Cambodian novel and short story underwent tremendous growth. Almost one thousand works were created between 1953 and 1975, and many new types of writing such as political, philosophical, historical, adventurous as well as erotic texts appeared. In the active community of writers in Phnom Penh during the late 1960s and, at the start of the 1970s, Soth Polin was considered one of the most influential figures. His writings were highly controversial and very popular among the reading public. His novels and short stories can be categorised into many groups: philosophical, political and pornographic writings. This article aims to explore the relationship between these three different aspects as seen through the sexual behaviour of Soth's women characters in one of his short stories, *Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek* [My Dear Husband...My Body Was Torn Apart]. In the first part of the article, the background of the author and his writing as well as a synopsis of the studied text is given. The second part deals with the concept of women's sexuality in traditional literature and its influence on Soth's short story. In the last part, the connection between sexuality and politics during the Khmer Republic period (1970-1975) is examined in detail.

¹ The author is grateful to Mr. Korath Norin for sending her Soth Polin's short story collection studied in this paper.

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The author and the text

The literary works of Soth Polin have always been highly provocative since their first publication and, until today, they have been well received both by critics and readers. What makes his novels and short stories distinguishable from the works of other writers is that his writings consist largely of philosophical, political, as well as pornographic elements. As a former student and lecturer of philosophy, Soth was strongly influenced by Existentialism which was popular around the mid-twentieth century with the works of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.³ In his writings, the concepts of individualism, individual freedom, and subjectivity are so apparent that he has been called by critics the Khmer Existentialist and the pioneer of philosophical novels (Khing 1993:175-176). However, the existentialist elements in his works seem to have been too difficult for the masses and his readership was, initially, limited to small groups of intellectuals and university students (Hak 2005: 36).

Aside from being a lover of philosophy, Soth had a strong interest in politics and chose to make journalism his main career.⁴

³ Soth began studying philosophy in his last year in a French lycée and majored in French literature when he was at Phnom Penh University. His first job after graduation was as a philosophy lecturer. In an interview, Soth remembered that at high school, he “read certain books of Sartre and Camus so many times that when he wrote his own works, their ideas came to him as if they were his own works” (May, 2004:12).

⁴ Soth was the nephew of Sim Var, the editor-in-chief of the first Khmer language newspaper *Nagar Vatt* which played an important role in the nationalist movement in the 1940s. After independence, Sim Var was the Prime Minister

In the mid-1960s, when Cambodia's stability was threatened by both internal and external forces, Soth founded his *Nagar Dham* [Big City] newspaper which soon became an influential opposition paper. Direct criticism through news reports and commentaries in *Nagar Dham* resulted in the shutdown of the newspaper on several occasions. Soth also inserted indirect criticism of society and politics in most of his novels and short stories, and some of them were banned immediately on release.⁵ A Khmer critic has pointed out that Soth's works were successful among young readers of his time because they dealt with social problems (Hak 2005:114).

Another aspect of Soth's writings is that they contain a lot of sordid sexual encounters, another reason why his books were banned. A number of his novels were labelled as *Ās Ābhās* 'obscene', and women readers were warned against his works.⁶

between 1956 and 1958. He later became an aggressive critic of Prince Sihanouk and launched his *Khmer Ekarāj* newspaper to attack the regime. Soth was the editor of *Khmer Ekarāj* before he founded his own newspaper (Corfield and Summers 2003: 373-374, 401 and Soth and Sin 1982:221).

⁵ A good example can be seen in the case of the novel *Camtit It Āsūr* [Showing the Buttocks Without Pity], which criticised Prince Sihanouk. Soth explained that the title was ambiguous. *Camtit* could mean to make love or to provoke, therefore the book was like offering his backside to the king who had put to death many intellectuals. The word *Camtit* could also suggest absolute indifference to the government. Readers thought the title referred to making love but the authorities knew that he was provoking them. In his opinion, the novel was very successful because the government banned it (May, 2004:14-15).

⁶ Given that sex is a physical need was seen as perfectly natural for Khmer men but not for

However, this pornographic characteristic seems to have been the source of immense popularity among the mass of readers: his "obscene" novels being reprinted many times, each time 5,000-10,000 copies.⁷ This enabled Soth to earn his living solely from being a novelist and journalist. However, it is not correct to assume that the author added the sex scenes in his writings only as a quick way to increase the sale of his novels. Indeed, sexual elements, as well as philosophical and political elements, are artistically interwoven in his stories and together they play an important role in conveying the messages Soth wants to send to his readers. This article examines one of his short stories, *Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek* [My Dear Husband...My Body Was Torn Apart], which was written in the early 1970s when the Vietnam War spilled over into Cambodia. In 1973, it appeared in a short story collection *Maraṇa: Knuñ Tuon Citt* [Death in the Heart] which was reprinted in October 2003.

Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek best reflects all the outstanding and controversial aspects of Soth Polin's works. *Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek* tells the story of Sany and her teenage daughter, Thina, who are escaping from the artillery shells fired by Vietcong⁸

women and that most Khmer women were never told about sexual relations, this warning is comprehensible.

⁷ Another work of Soth, a short story collection *Oy Bañ Dhvoe Aī..Pañ Dhvoe Ṭaer* [Whatever You Order Me..I Will Do It], which is very philosophical and has no sex scene, was entirely unsuccessful.

⁸ Vietcong is the contraction of the term Viet Nam Cong San (Vietnamese Communists), the name applied by the governments of the United States and of South Vietnam to the communist insurgents in rebellion against the

soldiers at their village. Two years previously Sany and her daughter had moved from Svay Rieng to live with her parents in Prey Veng after her husband and her son were killed by the Vietnamese. But again, they have to escape when the Vietnamese invade the village and kill Sany's parents. While running away, Sany and Thina stop at a temple to pray to Buddha for protection. There, Thina is raped by almost 20 Vietcong soldiers while Sany is hit on the head and loses consciousness. The mother and daughter then come to Phnom Penh to live with Sany's brother-in-law. While there, Thina becomes a lover of Saroueun, a womaniser who already has a wife and children. Sany cannot accept the 'prostitute-like' behaviour of her daughter but Thina will not listen to her. One night Sany's brother-in-law comes to her room and persuades her to become his minor wife because "the country is at war." Sany is confused. She cannot decide whether she should keep her virtue by being loyal to her husband or enjoy herself. For many reasons, she eventually agrees with him and he promises to give her a house.

Women's sexuality: from traditional to modern literature

Women have held an important place in Cambodian society since ancient times.⁹

latter government. As used in the Khmer Republic, the term applied to South Vietnamese communist troops operating in South Vietnam and in Cambodia as well.

⁹ This makes many scholars from Leclère (1899) to Porée-Maspero (1962-1969) and continuing today (Nguon 2000) claim that Cambodian society is organised along matrilineal principles. Modern Anthropologists such as Ebihara (1974), Martel (1975), Kalab

Judy Ledgerwood, in her study on Khmer conceptions of gender in modern times, finds that the Khmer focus on women, and this focus is linked to their proper behaviour. According to Ledgerwood (1990), the symbolic expression of femaleness concerns not only what it is to be female, but also what it is to be Khmer. There is a linkage between gender, social order and ethnicity. To be Khmer means to live in accordance with a certain hierarchical order of society, which can be more fully understood through the examination of the gender roles of that society. To move outside these roles is to enter the realm of chaos where, having lost what it is to be female in Khmer terms, one also loses what it is to be Khmer.

To maintain social order, and thus Khmerness, traditional literature has the concept of the *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa*, the 'perfectly virtuous women' as the epitome of Khmer womanhood. *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa* literally means 'a woman who possesses every characteristic.' Khing Hoc Dy (1977: 15) explains that in current usage, *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa* means an accomplished woman, a woman full of merits, a woman with an irreproachable or remarkable character or conduct, a 'true' woman. Since the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the theme of virtuous women has been prevalent in traditional Khmer literature, especially in the genre of folktale, verse novel and didactic poetry. Several folktales and verse novels provide models which demonstrate proper and improper behaviour and explain the results of this behaviour in terms of society's order. A large number of them reflect the belief of the Khmers that a happy destiny is in the hand of the *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa*.

(1982) and Ledgerwood (1990), however, are in agreement that Khmer kinship is bilateral.

Famous folktales and verse novels such as *Rōeñ Puras Kamjil Mān Prabandh Grap' Lakkhaṇa* [The Story of a Lazy Man Who Has a Perfectly Virtuous Wife], *Rōeñ Samlañ' Bīr Nāk'* [The Story of the Two Friends] and *Mā Yoeñ* [Our Uncle] tell stories of virtuous women who marry poor or lazy or stupid men but, on the basis of their virtues, enable their husbands to become kings or gain prosperity in life.¹⁰ The genre which directly sets the rules for virtuous women is didactic poetry, especially the poems called *Cpāp' Srī* [Code of Conduct for Women].¹¹ In *Cpāp' Srī*, women as daughters and wives are taught their proper place in society and correct behaviour in three main aspects, namely, comportment, activity, and sexuality. In terms of sexuality, the unmarried *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa* is a virgin and her value lies in her purity. In *Subhāsīt Cpāp' Srī*, the poet compares a young woman to a precious gem. If one lets it fall and crack, the gem will lose its value. Like a gem, once the woman loses her value, she also loses her reputation and the reputation of her family. Girls are also compared to a fruit which will taste good and be ready to be eaten only when it is fully ripe. Girls should not hurry but should wait for the right time to marry. They should do it properly, step by step (Ind 1959). These two metaphors of women are euphemisms for protecting the

¹⁰ For details of these stories, see Khing 1977.

¹¹ *Cpāp'* or Codes of Conduct is a genre of didactic moral poetry which teaches people how to behave. There are a large number of *Cpāp'* which address "good people" in general but there are also Codes of Conduct for special social groups, such as *Cpāp' Prus* [Code of Conduct for Men] and *Cpāp' Srī*. The three best known *Cpāp' Srī* belong to King Ang Duong (1837), Meun Mai (undated, believed to have been written in the nineteenth century) and Ind (first published in 1934).

virginity of girls and a warning against premarital sex.

As for the married *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa*, she is a loyal wife who sleeps only with her husband. The concept of the virtuous woman as a sexually faithful wife might derive from the idea of one couple being destined to be united and then, once finding each other, staying together until death, even to the point of being loyal beyond death, as a widow ideally should not remarry. Ledgerwood (1990:146) points out that there are no corresponding circumstances in which it is permissible for a woman to have sexual relations outside marriage. Infidelity was grounds for divorce in Cambodia for the man if the woman strayed but not vice versa. The teaching about virtuous women, both unmarried and married, clearly shows that for Khmer women, sex is considered neither a natural physical need nor a source of joy to them. If a woman has to perform a sexual act, it is only to serve her husband.¹² Therefore, the basis of a woman's honour lies in the control of her sexuality.

The idea that a woman must have control over her own sexuality is so important that if she fails to do so, she will be branded *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa* 'a woman who is lacking in characteristic or virtue.' A number of traditional verse novels and folktales provide stories of unvirtuous women who act improperly and later suffer the consequences of these transgressions. The most "infamous" *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa* in Khmer literature is *Kākī* in the verse novel *Kākī* [The Story of

Kākī], written by King Ang Duong in 1813. *Kākī*, a wife of a king, falls in love with the Garuda who later takes her to his palace. Her husband sends his musician to spy on them but the musician also sleeps with *Kākī*. When the Garuda discovers this, he brings her back to the king and she is sent to her death on a raft on the sea (Ang Duong 1949). In everyday speech, *Kākī* has come to be the epitome of a bad woman, one who sleeps with many different men, and presumably enjoys it. The story of another "infamous" *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa* can be seen in the folktale *Bas' Keñ Kañ* [The Snake Keñ Kañ], which tells of the origin of various kinds of snake. In *Bas' Keñ Kañ*, a wife has a snake as her lover and becomes pregnant while her husband is away. On coming back, he kills the snake, cooks it and serves up to the wife. He later kills her and snakes of all varieties are born (Commission des Mœurs et Coutumes du Cambodge 1959). We can see clearly from this folktale that proper sexual behaviour is part of being a Khmer woman. If she is not sexually proper, then she ceases not only to be a proper woman but can be seen as less than a full human being.

The stories of *Kākī* and *Bas' Keñ Kañ* both end with the death of the unvirtuous women. This is because the sexual honour of a married woman as well as the virginity of an unmarried woman are of critical importance not only to their own social standing, but also to the social standing of their fathers, husbands and sons. While virtuous women have the ability to influence a man's level of prestige within the community, unvirtuous women can destroy men through their activities and particularly through their sexuality. Once the prestige of a man is taken away, it cannot be replaced until the woman who is the cause of the disaster is

¹² *Cpāp' Srī* strictly teaches that the good woman must take great care, never to be perceived as signalling improper intentions to a man (Ind 1959).

eliminated. This aspect of the relationship between men and women in Cambodian society is best concluded in the Khmer proverb "*Samnāp Yoñ Tī, Srī Yoñ Prus*", which is often translated as: "the rice seedlings depend upon the soil, women depend upon men." *Cpāp' Srī* also stresses that a good wife must be obedient to her husband, serve him and live with him even if he is poor (Ang Duong 1962).

We can see clearly that the representations of women in traditional Cambodian literature reaffirm the subordinate position of women within patriarchal culture. The gender-identity of women, constructed by the concept of *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa* to legitimise male supremacy, requires that women conform to social and cultural dictates. This traditional Cambodian concept seems to fit well with Michel Foucault's idea that the human body has long been the site upon which social powers come to operate. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), points out that the body is invested with relations of power and domination. It is the body that bears the sexual and social norms. Deviation from normality thus requires discipline and punishment. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault postulates that the law that dictates sex is embedded in a binary system – licit/illicit and permitted/forbidden. Sexual deviance has to be suppressed because it is against the social norm. In like manner, juridical law imposed upon criminals' bodies is a manifestation of State power. Foucault also considers the way in which women's bodies and sexualities are shaped by social pressures. Women's bodies, particularly middle-class women's bodies, have been the subject of a vast array of different practices and discursive regimes. (Mills 2003: 93) Foucault's notion of a disciplinary regime – one where one's

comportment is subjected to a series of rules and regulations relating to the control of movement and emotion – can also be applied to analyse the workings of femininity on the female body in the Khmer case. Through traditional literature, particularly the *Cpāp' Srī* which are all written by men, it is clear that patriarchal power has inscribed its ideal femininity in the female body.

However, power, in Foucault's idea, is dynamic. Rather than simply viewing power in a negative way, as constraining and repressing, Foucault argues that even at their most constraining, oppressive measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour. In this sense, the body is the site upon which power is both exerted and subverted. As traditional literature has already shown, the female body is the site on which patriarchal power is enacted and any resistance to oppression will be punished. It is of interest to find out whether forms of resistance to control are possible in modern literature or if the disciplinary control will continue to be exerted.

In *Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek*, the author follows the traditional concept of women in many aspects. First of all, the story focuses on the change in the two main characters, Thina and Sany, from virtuous to unvirtuous women and this change is particularly demonstrated through their sexual behaviour. Thina is a perfectly virtuous woman who is "pure and clean, knowing nothing about evil deeds and with full respect for her parents." (p.10) However, after she loses her virginity to the Vietcong, her behaviour changes drastically. She is described by her mother as being

“unconcerned” by the rape. She can eat, drink and enjoy washing herself in the river. She even “rolls up her sarong to her groin to lay bare her ‘femaleness’ to water, wind and sunlight.” (p.8) This is behaviour that a virtuous woman would never indulge in because, theoretically, Khmer women are never naked.¹³ When asked whether she has already forgotten about the Vietcong, Thina rudely tells her mother not to bother her with this issue again. Thina’s comportment is totally opposite to the comportment of virtuous women who are always soft, sweet and obedient to their parents. On coming to Phnom Penh, she is attached to a womaniser who lives nearby and quickly turns into an “experienced woman who loves to show off her body and to go out dancing and never come back home until the morning of another day.” (p.10) That she becomes totally addicted to him is purely because of her “desire for sex and not love.” (p.11) Sany describes her daughter’s behaviour as follows:

Whatever Saroeun wants, Thina will totally follow him. Even if he asks her to make love on a thicket of grass or on the roof of the car, she will agree. Night is like day for Thina. Once she hears his call or he just makes a clicking sound with his tongue from outside the fence, she will run out to him like a dog when it hears the voice of its master. If she is doing anything, she will just cast it aside. Sometimes the two go out for love till it’s beyond the limit.

¹³ May Ebihara (1968: 307) explains that Khmer women are very timid with their own bodies. Girls are taught to keep their genitals covered at a very young age. Women bathe and sleep in a sarong and use it as a covering while changing clothes.

On Sunday they will go in the morning and come back at 10pm!
(p.11)

In this description, there are two interesting points concerning sexuality. Firstly, Thina’s sexual misconduct is portrayed on many levels starting from her having sex before marriage. Then she does it at highly improper times and places without feeling embarrassed. The worst level is that she is happy to commit adultery even though she knows well that her lover will never marry her. Secondly, her sexual misconduct has led her to be unvirtuous in other respects as well, such as in neglecting the woman’s duty of looking after the house.

However, if we look at Thina from a different angle, her being unconcerned about the rape and her refusal to mention it can be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the patriarchal system of values. Her silence, in this case, can be seen as subversive. Moreover, her love of showing off her body as well as her sexual “misconduct” show that Thina has not allowed herself to become a victim of oppression. Instead, she has taken advantage of the situation when “the country is at war” to take control of her life and to challenge the cultural ideology that subordinates women. Thina’s body thus becomes the site where power is resisted. Her “unmarried status” also posits a possible way of maintaining her subjectivity.

As the *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa* to the full degree, Thina shocks and upsets her mother who has not been raped and still maintains her faithfulness to her dead husband. Sany looks at her daughter through the eyes of the perfectly virtuous woman. In Sany’s opinion, the change in

Thina results from the loss of the head of family whom they depend on. One night when she feels disappointed with Thina's behaviour, she moans to her husband's spirit: "Oh my dear husband, why don't you come and give advice to your wife and your daughter. If only you were still alive, our lives would never have fallen to this condition." (p.12) Her words truly reflect her strong belief in the traditional idea that women should be under the control of men.

Sany's strong belief in the concept of the virtuous woman begins to be shaken after she chooses to take refuge in the house of her brother-in-law in Phnom Penh. When she has a conversation with him about Thina's behaviour, her brother-in-law initially shows his concern but later ends the topic by just telling Sany not to think so much because "it is normal to behave like this when the country is at war!" (p.13) The brother-in-law provides her with this reason again when she refuses to sleep with him and asks him to feel pity for his dead brother. He tells her that the soul of his brother "knows well that the country is at war and will never blame his wife. He will only have a mad spirit if he wants his widow to stay unprotected when there is no security in the country." (p.13) His explanation seems to be a realistic answer to her fear of being unprotected and this creates conflict when she is asked to be his minor wife. Using a stream of consciousness narrative, the author depicts Sany's dilemma between maintaining or abandoning her virtues at a time of war as follows:

He then presses me on the bed and pulls my sarong up. At that time I cannot say that he truly abuses me like the Viet Cong because my body is also

trembling from hunger. Perhaps this is because the war makes me confused. Or perhaps I'm so worried about Thina. Or perhaps it's because of my being widow. A woman without a husband is like a night without the moon. I hold him back and rub my body against him. It's true! Virginitiy exists only when one is still virgin. Oh my dear husband! I'm torn apart, both my body and my soul. Do you want it that I'm still faithful to you when the country is at war? Look at Thina. She understands the situation. She knows how to adjust herself to what fate has given her. She was just seventeen, pure and clean. She knew nothing about evil deeds. Suddenly fate decided that she lose her purity. Twenty Vietnamese 'ate' her till the virginitiy was completely crushed. Now she can live her life. And she wants men to 'eat' her more. Once the purity is gone, just let them have her even more! If it's so delicious, just eat it. Eat as much as anyone can. My body too. My brother-in-law wants it, he can take it. My dear husband! Please take your spirit away from me. Let me know happiness too! (p.15)

From her thoughts, we can see clearly that Sany's dilemma stems from the fact that the war has taken away both her peaceful, secure life and the one who protects her. Maintaining the value of the virtuous woman cannot provide her with the solution to this problem. Moreover, if being a widow during normal times is bad

enough according to the concept that women must always have men to rely on, it becomes even worse when the society is in turmoil. It seems to be highly practical for Sany to abandon the concept of the virtuous woman because, in doing so, she will get everything she needs – her own villa, money and her position as a legal wife if his wife dies.

There is another reason that makes Sany eventually become the *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa*; she cannot resist her physical needs and even considers sex as a source of joy. This results in her gradually agreeing with her daughter that they, as human beings, should have the freedom to do as they choose. This concept of freedom is obviously derived from the central tenet of Sartre's existentialism, the freedom of human consciousness (Solomon 1972). For Sartre (1973: 26-29), there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which man makes for himself. He will only attain existence when he is what he proposes to be. Man is free to act, to value and free to reject whatever values he chooses to reject, often with the understanding that his rejection will be met with disapproval or punishment from others. Sartre's idea is put into practice through the decision making of the main women characters. Refusing to suppress their subjectivities, Thina and Sany eventually free themselves from the traditional norms of women's sexuality and even make use of their bodies to fulfil their desires and personal interest.

Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek contends that the female body has become a contested site between discipline and freedom. However, it is difficult to assert that Soth's text is a real struggle to end the oppression of women since the author stresses throughout the story that women

can abandon their virtues only in time of war. This means that being an unvirtuous woman, for the author, is not always permissible in the normal situation. In my opinion, Soth wants neither to preserve nor subvert the norms of femininity. Rather, he wants to show the reader the other side of the coin. While traditional literature always focuses on the consequences of women's behaviour, both proper and improper, for the women themselves and for society as a whole, Soth Polin chooses to illustrate Cambodian society in disarray and its serious effect on Khmer women. Moreover, he tries to supply a reason why the Cambodian moral order has been completely disrupted and the country is in turmoil as symbolised by his female protagonists. Therefore, when politically interpreted, Soth's text shows that what needs urgent liberation is not Khmer woman but the feminised body of Cambodia which has been violated by foreign powers.

In the next part, I will examine the political situation of Cambodia in the early 1970s, which is the setting of the short story, in order to understand how sexuality is used as means of conveying the political messages the author intends to send to his readers.

Sexuality and politics during the Khmer republic period

In the first half of the 1970s when Soth Polin wrote *Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek*, Cambodia was ruled by General Lon Nol and his US backed government after they overthrew Prince Sihanouk in March 1970 and proclaimed a republic in October of the same year. During the four and a half years of the Khmer Republic, which lasted until April 1975, the creeping internal war gradually enveloped the

country. Shortly after he was dismissed, Prince Sihanouk formed a government-in-exile and joined with the Cambodian communists (known as the Khmer Rouge) to wage a civil war against Lon Nol. At the same time, the Vietnamese communists who were using the jungles of Cambodia for bases to infiltrate South Vietnam captured much of the eastern part of the country. With a policy of ousting the Vietnamese communists from Cambodia, the government launched its military operations against them but ended up with heavy losses. A joint US-South Vietnamese invasion of eastern Cambodia shortly thereafter drove the Vietnamese even further west instead of driving them away from Cambodian territory. From early 1972, the Khmer Republic steadily lost ground in their fight with the communist insurgents and was only in control of urban areas while the rest of the country was in the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Peasant refugees who fled the war and the American bombing in the countryside crowded into Phnom Penh and starvation occurred. The economy stagnated and corruption was rife throughout society as a result of American aid and the war.¹⁴

From the political situation described above, it would not be far wrong to say that Soth Polin creates the two protagonists of *Sramol Pī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek* as a symbol of Cambodia. The country in a state of deterioration, physically and morally, is portrayed by the change of Sany and Thina from the *Srī Grap' Lakkhaṇa* to *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa*, especially in terms of their sexuality. Soth first sets his story in Svay Rieng and Prey Veng, the two provinces bordering

Vietnam, and uses flashbacks to tell of the brutality of the Vietcong towards the Khmer people such as their firing artillery shells into the villages, killing the inhabitants and setting their houses on fire. It is very likely that the author drew these incidents from what really happened in the border provinces both before and during the republican period.¹⁵ That the rape incident is juxtaposed with the flashback shows that the body that is raped is not only the personal body, but also the national body and the flashback portrays how the Vietnamese 'rape' Cambodia and Cambodian people. Soth's use of the first person narrator, letting the main character tell the story of herself together with what happens to the country, also confirms that the narrative dwells both on the personal and national bodies. According to the title "My Dear Husband...My Body Was Torn Apart", the bodies of Thina and Sany which are torn apart by the Vietcong and also the Khmer men are similar to Cambodia which is being torn apart by the Vietnamese communists and also the Khmer politicians. Sany's cry to her dead husband is truly the cry of the hopeless Khmers for the old, peaceful Cambodia which has already gone because of the war. Thus, if we look closely at the political situation of the period in

¹⁴ For details of the Khmer Republic period, see Corfield 1994.

¹⁵ It was reported that Svay Rieng was the populated area most affected by Vietcong activities and US-South Vietnam attacks on them. There were some 15,000 Vietcong allegedly based there and as the province was midway between Saigon and Phnom Penh, it was an important strategic base for all parties to the Vietnam War. A large number of villagers had fled Svay Rieng, as their government and the US army had made the entire region a free-fire zone. With a largely unmarked border, dozens of Cambodians had been killed, many more wounded and large tracts of land destroyed (Corfield 1994: 62-64).

comparison with every incident in the lives of the two characters, we can understand the author's use of the symbol much more clearly. Before the story begins, Sany and Thina live happily with their family in Svay Rieng. Their 'protected' life as virtuous women in the countryside can be equated with the stable and peaceful Cambodia before the Vietnam War. Later, the head of the family is killed by Vietcong soldiers. His death reflects the situation when Prince Sihanouk, the Head of State and 'Prince Papa' of the people, was not able to maintain Cambodia's policy of neutrality and had to allow the Vietnamese communists to camp inside Cambodia.¹⁶ Sihanouk's secret approval of the Vietnamese using Cambodia's territory for the war drew full-scale criticism and became an important reason for his being deposed. However, it must be mentioned here that the character of Sany's husband does not symbolise Prince Sihanouk as a person but rather as the king and head of state which represents the peaceful traditional society.¹⁷ In this case, the

¹⁶ Vietnamese communist soldiers had stationed troops inside Cambodia and used Cambodian territory to ship military equipment to their forces fighting in Southern Vietnam since 1965 when U.S. combat troops arrived and the war in Vietnam intensified. In the early 1970s, there were more than 50,000 North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops in Cambodia (Chang 1985: 27-28).

¹⁷ The main reason for this explanation is that Soth Polin was an anti-Sihanoukist who started his *Nagar Dham* newspaper as an opposition paper in the Sihanouk era. Soth himself writes that *Nagar Dham* could be characterised by its open hostility to the regime. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that he would moan for the 'death' of the prince as a person. For details of *Nagar Dham* newspaper, see Soth and Sin 1982.

author only wants to show that it was the Vietnamese who had "killed" the old Cambodia.

After the head of the family is killed, Sany and Thina's lives are in chaos similarly Cambodia is engulfed by the war. When the two women arrive in Prey Veng, they are faced with the same fate; their relatives are killed and they must escape again. The incident where Thina is gang-raped by Vietcong soldiers, which is the first and most brutal sexual incident to change their lives, is identical to the long series of attacks launched by the Vietnamese forces throughout the eastern part of Cambodia in the early 1970s (Chang 1985: 27). Her loss of virginity to the Vietcong also symbolises Cambodia's loss of her sovereignty to Vietnam. When Sany and Thina flee from the province, their escape is no different from the retreat of the government troops in the countryside. That they come to live in Phnom Penh also shows that the control of the Khmer Republic was limited to the urban area and the political nation of Cambodia was only based in Phnom Penh (Corfield 1994).

In the capital, the lives of the main characters are truly under the domination of the two Khmer men who symbolise the two leaders of the Khmer Republic. The character of Saroeun, the womaniser to whom Thina is attached, is probably created from Prime Minister and later President Lon Nol. That Saroeun takes full control of Thina's life by using sex is no different from Lon Nol monopolising political power through the use of the money and weapons he received from the US (Corfield 1994: 145). Furthermore, Lon Nol was widely known as the puppet of the Americans or the symbol of Americanism. This aspect is shown in the character of Saroeun and his 'free'

lifestyle. As a womaniser, he is happy to be Thina's lover while refusing any commitment and responsibility. His sexual behaviour is related to the idea of "free sex", a term usually connected to the Americans in the 1970s. The idea of "free" life which he implants in Thina's mind is also related to the idea of freedom the US tried to bring to other countries. As for the brother-in-law, this character probably symbolises Prince Sisowath Sirikmatak, Lon Nol's deputy who played a major role in the running of the country after Lon Nol suffered a stroke in 1971. The brother-in-law is the brother of Sany's dead husband, while Sirikmatak was a cousin of Prince Sihanouk. That he loves and wants Sany though his brother is still alive represents Sirikmatak's wish to take control of Cambodia with him being the major plotter in the conspiracy to overthrow Prince Sihanouk. Sirikmatak was implicated in many cases of corruption, and the brother-in-law also 'bribes' Sany to be his minor wife with a large, new villa.¹⁸ Through the depiction of Saroeun's and the brother-in-law's lifestyles, the reader can see Phnom Penh, the base of the republican government, as a modern city where people go to bars and nightclubs for dancing, a place where people live with freedom and with no concern for the drift towards chaos. Their lifestyle is just the same as the newly cosmopolitan lifestyle of the elite Phnom Penh people and the emerging bourgeoisie in the early 1970s whose interests were "sports cars, houses by the sea, the rhythms of Western dances, the twist and the moonkiss, the charm of Chinese

¹⁸ Sirikmatak was known to have more than one wife and much real estate and many villas in Phnom Penh, the characteristics that the brother-in-law also has. For details of Sirikmatak, see Corfield 1994.

cinema" (Corfield 1994: X). In just the same way as the lives of the two women come to the full state of *Srī Khāt Lakkhaṇa* when they come to live in Phnom Penh, Cambodia was truly in a state of decay, both physically and morally, during the rule of these two leaders who were under American domination.

This is the message Soth Polin wants to communicate to his readers in the first half of the 1970s. More importantly, he points out that the root of both the physical and moral decay is the foreign invasion of Cambodia, particularly by the Vietnamese communists. There are many reasons for blaming the Vietnamese for this state of affairs. Firstly, since ancient times, the Cambodian people had hated the Vietnamese.¹⁹ As mentioned before, the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk was successful because the plotters used the invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese

¹⁹ In the late fifteenth century, Vietnam began to challenge the Khmer Empire's power and expanded its territorial control into Cambodia. From the seventeenth century on, Vietnam was entangled in two centuries of diplomatic and military tussles with Thailand, who sought to eclipse Cambodia from the west. Between 1835 and 1842, a Vietnamese viceroy ruled central Cambodia through a puppet Khmer queen. A large-scale Vietnamisation campaign launched to transform Cambodia in all cultural, economic, and administrative aspects sparked off several rebellions against Vietnamese rule. The painful memory of this period lay deeply rooted in Cambodian minds. Hostility towards the Vietnamese increased during the French rule. French colonial policy in Indochina clearly favoured the Vietnamese vis-à-vis the Khmer; it allowed considerable Vietnamese participation in administration and redrew the boundaries in such a way as to be advantageous to Vietnam (Chandler 1993:125-127 and Osborne 1969: 31-32 and 119-131).

communists as the main pretext to stage a coup d'état. The Khmer Republic then began its era by fanning anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the people and received wide support; the common attention of the people was centred on the so-called "enemy invaders."²⁰ Even when the press stopped supporting the government in early 1972 and attacked it instead for its incapacity and anarchic traits, newspapers remained patriotic, fighting the national enemies – the Vietnamese communists (Soth and Sin 1982:222). For all these reasons, Soth Polin, who considered himself a "militant nationalist who was anti-communist" (May 2004: 9) wrote *Sramol Pī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek* to stir up the nationalistic feeling of the readers by showing the morally decaying Cambodia as a victim of the 'savage' Vietnamese. He does this perfectly by creating the scene of rape as an incident where the virtuous women become corrupt. In the description of rape, the word *Yuan* is used to refer to the Vietcong soldiers. This word, which is believed to date from the Angkor period, derives from the Sanskrit word 'Yavana' which means foreigner or barbarian. In Modern Khmer, it means Vietnamese and in most respects is considered offensive (Headley 1977: 787). By using this word, the author stresses Vietnamese barbarity through the act of rape. Soth chooses rape instead of other violence because rape is viewed by the Khmers as the worst crime, a crime of both violence and sexuality outside the order (Ledgerwood 1990: 186). More than

that, the author places the rape scene in a Buddhist temple in order to show the immorality of the Vietnamese to the highest degree; they dare to commit such a sinful act in front of Buddha. For the readers, these 'savage' foreigners are seen not only as invaders but also as the destroyers of Buddhism and morality.²¹

Through the symbol of rape, the traditional way of living collapses and a chain of immoral effects follows. The Khmer people are portrayed as being forced to live a city life perceived as immoral and the result of modernity and Westernisation. The author finally lets his readers see that the Vietnamese together with American domination have led Cambodia to total ruin. Similar to the bodies of Thina and Sany which have been repeatedly assaulted, Cambodia has been "doubly repressed" by both the foreigner and the foreign-influenced Khmer leaders. The feminised body of Cambodia during the Vietnam War is, therefore, the contested site between two foreign powers – the Vietnamese communists and the US bloc. Moreover, this feminised body can also be considered a site where nationalistic discourse is exerted as a means of resistance to foreign controls. In contrast to the two women characters, Cambodia does not seem to have the freedom of choice and Soth's nationalistic discourse can be nothing more than a hopeless cry for help (as clearly shown in the title of the story) from the Khmer people. If we look at the situation in Cambodia after the Khmer Republic

²⁰ David Chandler (1993:206) writes that when Lon Nol gave the Vietnamese communists forty eight hours to leave Cambodia, many Cambodians were enraged to learn that the Vietnamese ignored him, and ten of thousands poured into the armed forces to drive the "invaders" from the country.

²¹ The perception of the Khmers towards the Vietnamese as the destroyer of Buddhism was deeply rooted from the seventeenth century. Through the process of Vietnamisation, Buddhist temples were defiled and monks were persecuted (Chandler 1993: 125-127).

period, we can see that this cry is prophetic because it was less than two years after this short story was published that Cambodia fell to the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge, the era when the "woman" was really dead.

From the analysis of *Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek* in terms of sexuality, it can be found that there has been a continuation of the theme about Khmer women from traditional to modern literature. Soth still uses the concept of virtuous and unvirtuous women as symbols of morality and immorality of the society. This short story also confirms that the idea of women being subservient to men is deeply rooted in Cambodian society, even in the modern period when the Western idea of 'freedom' was flourishing. However, Soth's text shows us that the female body is not only the symbolic site of patriarchal control but also the site of negotiation between the female subject and patriarchal power. This is a new aspect never seen before in traditional Cambodian literature. Moreover, sexuality gains a new function in literature - a means of enacting political discourse. Through Soth's description of women's sexuality, the feminised body of Cambodia is a site of both political oppression and political resistance.

Sramol Ptī Oey..Khluon Ūn Rahaek is a perfect explanation of the popularity of Soth Polin's works. It shows that Soth's key to success as a writer lies in his ability to mix the 'old' and 'new' aspects of literature. While the storyline is created according to the traditional Khmer concept, the author employs a contemporary environment where Western philosophy provides an answer to social problems. Moreover, the story is artistically told through modern and

multilayered literary techniques giving the reader the freedom to enjoy it politically, philosophically or pornographically.

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