

# Memory, Testimony and Intergenerational Trauma in Narratives of the Cambodian Genocide

**RICHA DUTTA<sup>1</sup> AND SEEMA OJHA<sup>\*2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. English Literature and <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor  
Govt. M.S. College, Bikaner (Rajasthan) India

\*Corresponding Author

## ABSTRACT

The Cambodian Genocide was one of the most violent and devastating regimes that shook the population of the country. The people faced the brutal atrocities, which made them leave their homes and live in refugee camps under the leadership of Pol Pot, who was the one responsible for the genocide from 1975 to 1979. The memories of the survivors are fragmented and disturbed because of war trauma and the cruelty that they had to face. These fragmented memories are available to us in the form of testimonies, which are an important source of evidence of the reality of that time. The survivors were subjected to intense brutality, starvation, and forced labour, which led to the development of PTSD, anxiety, intergenerational trauma, and fear of society. Some theories given by researchers introduce us to the concepts of war as unclaimed memories and postmemory that leave their impact on the person. The narrative styles show fragmentation, silence, internal monologues, and child voices that survive even when exposed to noise and violence.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational trauma, PTSD, Postmemory, Silence, Testimony

## INTRODUCTION

Trauma is defined as a sudden and forceful event that overwhelms a person's ability to respond to it (Horowitz, 1989). It is described as an event that 'overwhelms the ordinary human adaptations to life' and can result in long-lasting psychological issues that may leave scars to deal with throughout life (Herman, 1992; 1997).

It can be seen through a psychological perspective, which describes the effects trauma has on the psyche of an individual who has witnessed certain events that shape his narratives and personal experiences. Psychological Trauma is not limited to diagnostic criteria; some psychologists have considered trauma-related symptoms as indicators of a mental health disorder (Turnbull, 1998).

The Cambodian Genocide was a historical episode of distress, violence, and traumatic experiences that left a lasting impact on the psyche of the population of Cambodia. The effects can be observed mainly from a

political, social, and cultural perspective. The Khmer Rouge was a radical cultural regime that believed in the idea of considering the educated masses as a threat to the integrity of the country. During this time, the Khmer Rouge reorganized Cambodian society along strict communist lines that glorified peasant life (Hinton, 1998). They tried to convert them into refugees who had only one task: to grow rice in such drastically high volumes that it could contribute to excess production, so much so that Cambodia could shine globally as a major contributor of the grain. The Khmer Rouge employed various tactics to increase its power during this time, including the elimination of ritual practices such as dance dramas, family ceremonies, and religious activities (Delano, 2018). The regime lasted from 1975 to 1979, which made millions of people in Cambodia lose their homes, jobs, livelihoods, and lives to Pol Pot, who was the leader of the entire movement. The people of Cambodia were subjected to widespread forced migration and labour, disease, starvation, torture, murder, and, indeed, genocide

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over a period of four years during the control of the country by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s (Gruspier *et al.*, 2017).

Memory can be defined as the way the brain stores information and decodes patterns of recall. But when the brain only witnesses horrifying episodes of mass killings and displacement, it gets impaired and disturbed, which leads to fragmented memories and sometimes forgetfulness. This is why disturbed memories lead to problems of PTSD and intergenerational trauma that, in the case of the population of Cambodia, has had its impact on generations to follow. This form of trauma leaves a lasting impact on the people, be it the militants, the refugees, the veterans, the participants of war, and even on the women, children, and elderly who were left behind. They develop a fear of trusting people again, prefer staying away from gatherings, and sometimes lose their memory later on in life as a result of trauma and distress. Amnesia is a phenomenon in which there is a problem in memory formation, which can be due to trauma to the brain, certain diseases, or stressors (Mujawar *et al.*, 2021).

Testimonies act as evidence of war when told through a personal perspective. They are essential legal, historical, and cultural documents that can humanize the statistics of a population and give voice to the survivors of war and trauma. The first-hand accounts provide undeniable evidence of war crimes and show the brutality of the inflicted violence on the people. It can be seen as a way these unfiltered stories can show the cost of conflict and make people realise the need to preserve these experiences for future generations to read, understand, and never to be repeated in the future. The testimonies are present in the form of oral evidence as well as written stories, which can be analysed through an empathetic viewpoint to understand the psyche of those who were affected, and realise how their trauma left its mark on them. Even though these people survived, they had the issue of survivor's guilt, which shows a form of persistent guilt present in the person who survives in the war, as opposed to their family members who die fighting. The Narratives of War (NoW) corpus additionally contains demographic and geographic data on respondents, as well as their scores in tests of PTSD symptoms and moral injury (Zasiekin *et al.*, 2025). These people were unfortunate to witness the deaths of their loved ones, along with being displaced from their homes and leaving their lives behind, which is why the trauma is not only

physical, but also emotional and psychological.

Intergenerational Trauma is the transfer of emotional, psychological, and behavioural effects of trauma from the present to future generations. It occurs when the experiences of violent suffering and exposure to war continue to affect the children and grandchildren of those people who directly experienced the trauma and witnessed the war. Even when the later generations did not witness the original events, they may be affected by it through parent-child relationships, bonding with family, fear, anxiety, silence, etc. Intergenerational Trauma can affect a person's identity, outlook towards people, and cultural memory. It can create patterns of emotional distress that affect mental health and relationships in the long run.

## METHODOLOGY

The materials used in this paper are Qualitative and Interpretive in nature, based on textual analysis. The primary materials available were oral testimonies, autobiographical accounts, and personal narratives that address the experiences of individuals and families affected by the Cambodian genocide. The secondary materials available are in the form of books, articles, and research papers. Data were collected through close reading and document analysis of the selected texts of primary and secondary materials. Relevant passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions related to trauma studies, war, and violence were identified and categorized for understanding. The analysis of this paper surrounds the Literary Theory of Post-Colonial Writing and Trauma Studies, which forms an integral part of understanding the importance of war trauma and surrounding violence. Recurring themes, symbols, and patterns of characterization were interpreted in relation to the socio-cultural and psychological context of the texts.

### Theories of Trauma and Memory

Trauma is interpreted through various theories and ideas proposed by scholars and writers based on research. These include the prominent works of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch, who have given new dimensions to the genre of trauma studies. They show how memories are different because of the exposure to trauma and express their ideas through terms such as unclaimed experience and postmemory.

Cathy Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience:*

*Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), emphasizes trauma and describes it as an ‘unclaimed experience’. She argues that trauma challenges conventional ideas of history and experience, and describes how trauma causes a break in consciousness that resists direct representation, but still needs to be narrated and expressed. Her theory demonstrates that the language of trauma embodies the tension between knowing and not knowing. Her work is a key text to understand how literature engages with the limits of memory and mediates the ethical and historical dimensions of trauma.

The most important idea is called Postmemory, that has been given by Marianne Hirsch in their book, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), in which she talks about how intergenerational trauma is transferred from the first to the second generation. She takes the example of people who had witnessed the Holocaust and shows how even when the second generation was not a part of the Holocaust, they still had to overcome the psychological burden of their parents and their traumatic experience of the Holocaust. Due to this, the later generations may experience fear, anxiety, fragmented identity, survivor’s guilt, and many other issues in their lives that can contribute to isolation and an untrustworthy outlook for people around them. One of her most important observations is that “trauma is often transmitted through silence rather than direct storytelling.”

### **Historical Background**

The Khmer Rouge originated as a small insurrection in the 1960s. It acquired great traction during the early 1970s, fuelled by the chaos of the Vietnam War. In a brutal attempt to regain control over the resources and the people of Cambodia, the regime established an agrarian social utopia, forcing the people into farming and growing rice. To turn this into a ground reality, they made the educated masses and the royalty lose their homes and forced them to stay in camps to practice mass production of grains. As they took control of the capital of Phnom Penh, millions of residents were forced to empty cities and move to the rural outskirts.

The urban population was called the “new people” and was forced into the ideas of the Khmer Rouge regime. Their behaviour and ways were regulated to match the rural peasants who were considered the foundation of the revolution. The Society was heavily reformed under the abstract entity called Angka. Families

were systematically separated to break their unity and the feeling of security among them. The food rations were deliberately kept at starvation levels, and health care and modern medicine were completely banned. Those who were too weak to work, or were caught being from the educated class, were routinely murdered in mass executions. This made the population suffer and die of hunger, exhaustion, and mass executions.

### **Oral Testimonies of the Survivors**

*Buth Chan Meradey*, a survivor of the Pol Pot Regime, recalls her horrifying experience of witnessing the episodes of violence. She talks about her father, *Buth Choun*, who was a representative in the National Assembly for two terms and was involved with the coup to depose King Sihanouk in 1970. “On the third day after the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and started shooting, we left the city in two small cars. There were so many people on the road that we weren’t able to drive, so we had to push them. Along the way, we saw many dead bodies; there was so much fighting that they didn’t take the corpses away.” She describes the pain of seeing so many dead bodies, even though she was a kid, and how they had to evacuate their house to save themselves. As the identity of her father was revealed, her father was taken away from the family, and the only thing remaining was a letter that her father had sent to them. “At around 2 in the morning, the Angkar brought a letter, saying it was from my father. He wrote that he would be arrested in a short while and that we should not wait for him. He also said if he were lucky, he would meet us in Chamkar Leu. I remember everything in the letter.”

*Loung Ung*, in her work, *‘First, they killed my father’* recalls a similarly devastating experience where they had to leave their home along with the entire family, and live in refugee camps. They were forced to grow rice, and as soon as her father was revealed to be educated, he was shot dead, which left a lasting impact on the writer and shaped her trauma and psyche for life. How she was forced into farming and growing rice as a child forms an important part of her book. “The war has stolen everything from us.”

Shows the deep sense of loss, displacement, and destruction caused by violence due to the regime. The sorrow and pain through the eyes of the writer is a recurring theme of the book that shows the intense emotional turmoil that she went through to deal with the death of her father. Her grief is expressed in her silence

as she had to accept the situation and show maturity to her family. "I learned to hide my feelings and pretend to be strong." This line demonstrates how trauma forces children to mature quickly and conceal emotions at an early age. With terrible recollections of poverty, terror, and death, Loung departs Cambodia for the United States at the end of the narrative. Her psychological anguish persists despite her escape from physical peril, demonstrating that emotional wounds cannot be healed by surviving.

*Saeng M Seng* expresses the deep horrors of the Cambodian regime in his book, '*Starving Season: One Person's Story*'. He writes how in 1975, 24 of Seng's family members were taken away with him. He expresses how it was a combination of extreme food deprivation and repetitive forced labour that claimed the lives of many of his relatives. "You will have heard in the news that the Khmer Rouge tortured and killed people by hitting their head with a hoe, or hurling the children on to tree trunks to not waste their bullets. But to me, the majority of the people in those days died of starvation," is what he says about the difficult situation of starvation among the people. The irony is that, even though the Khmer Rouge had planned to convert Cambodia into an agrarian economy, they could not feed their own generation. He writes how twice a day, a small tin of rice would be split between 10 people in the refugee camps, and a lot of people ate leaves, rats, insects, or snakes to stay alive. The starvation they were subjected to was compounded by an array of other deprivations. "The condition that we lived in had no clean water, no toilet, people squatting everywhere," he says. This story shows the stark reality of what the people experienced under the Pol Pot regime, and the horrifying situation that they were exposed to.

*Chanrithy Him*, in her book, '*When Broken Glass Floats-Growing Up under the Khmer Rouge*', shows her resilience and persistent struggle. Trauma, survival, malnutrition, violence, family separation, and the lingering psychological impacts of war are all covered in her book. Through her own story, she demonstrates how political violence ruins innocence in childhood and produces lasting mental damage that affects us into adulthood. The title conveys the idea that damaged lives can nevertheless endure and get through difficult times by symbolizing fragility and suffering. Because it depicts both individual and societal pain, the memoir is frequently examined in the field of trauma studies.

## Representation of Trauma through Different Narrative Styles

Due to the difficulty of clearly expressing traumatic experiences, trauma is frequently shown in Trauma Studies through fragmented narrative structures, flashbacks, symbolism, and child narration styles.

The scattered memories and psychological confusion that the survivors faced are often reflected in writers' use of fragmented structure. A person's sense of identity can be disturbed by trauma, as evidenced by events that appear disjointed, interrupted, and non-chronological in nature. The painful memories frequently resurface abruptly and uncontrollably, which is why flashbacks are another crucial narrative device that are often represented along with internal monologues. These show the psyche and emotions of the individual. Symbolism is a means of expressing feelings and pain that words cannot adequately convey, which is why, in this narrative style, fear, loss, death, and emotional suffering are represented by objects, pictures, or recurrent themes, such as hunger, silence, darkness, broken glass, blood, or dreams. Child narration is important in depicting trauma in memoirs like *When Broken Glass Floats* and *First They Killed My Father* because a child's innocent viewpoint expresses the tragedy of violence and war more effectively. Child narrators often use emotional and expressive language to describe horrific experiences, which makes suffering seem more genuine and urgent. Their incomplete comprehension of political struggle further emphasizes how trauma robs children of their innocence and forces them to mature rapidly.

Trauma literature uses these narrative techniques to show survivors' emotional disintegration, silence, terror, and long-lasting psychological scars in addition to their physical pain.

## Conclusion

Through this paper, we have seen the effect of the Khmer Rouge regime on the population of Cambodia and how they were exploited physically, mentally, emotionally, and culturally. This left them feeling isolated and troubled due to the effects of war and trauma on their psyche. The importance of Trauma, Memory, and Intergenerational Trauma shows how the prolonged exposure to trauma affects future generations as well, along with the generation that was a part of the war. The different theories and testimonies have tried to show the effect through various personal accounts of people who

were survivors of war. The oral testimonies show the effect of war on people and analyse everything that they experienced in detail, which is why we can conclude how war and trauma harm an individual's memory and cause them to suffer from problems like PTSD, fragmented memories, confusion, and intergenerational trauma that is passed down to future generations. The various narrative techniques show us how writers and survivors express their emotions through different ways, be it child narration, flashbacks, or symbolism.

### Scope of Research

The study primarily looks at how survivors use memoirs, testimonies, and autobiographical writings to describe experiences of violence, displacement, famine, family loss, and psychological trouble. It examines the function of memory and witness in maintaining historical accuracy and providing a voice to the survivors of the Cambodian regime. Specifically, the study looks into how traumatic experiences are passed down through the generations and how intergenerational trauma results from survivors' children inheriting dread, silence, emotional suffering, and cultural loss. The study's scope encompasses textual analysis of chosen works, such as *When Broken Glass Floats* and *First They Killed My Father*, and oral testimonial analysis, with a focus on narrative devices like symbolism, flashbacks, fragmented structure, and child narration. It looks at how individual accounts add to collective memory and historical comprehension of the genocide in Cambodia.

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