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Tradition, Marriage, and Women's Autonomy in Phka Srapoun: A Critical Study of Khmer Society

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***Abstract*—This article analyzes tradition, marriage, and women's autonomy in Nou Hach's Khmer novel Phka Srapoun (The Wilted Flower). Using qualitative literary interpretation informed by feminist criticism and the concept of agency, it examines parental authority, economic status, and the limited decision-making power of the heroine, Vitheavy. The argument is that the novel's tragedy cannot be reduced to disappointed romance: it emerges from the interaction of family control, class expectations, and constrained consent. The article distinguishes criticism of coercive practices from an indiscriminate rejection of Khmer traditions and considers the complex role of the heroine's mother. It concludes that the novel provides a productive literary context for debating family responsibility, gender justice, and personal choice. As a draft, its close-reading claims require checking against the exact Khmer edition before submission.**

***Index Terms*—Phka Srapoun, Nou Hach, Khmer literature, marriage, women's autonomy, feminist criticism, family authority.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Nou Hach's Khmer novel Phka Srapoun (The Wilted Flower) is widely remembered as a tragic narrative of love, family expectations, and the consequences of an arranged marriage. Its central conflict arises when the prospective marriage of Vitheavy and Bunthoeun is disrupted after Bunthoeun's family suffers financial misfortune. Vitheavy's mother subsequently favors a wealthier suitor, Ny Sot. The ensuing suffering of Vitheavy invites analysis beyond the conventions of romantic tragedy: the novel raises questions about who possesses the authority to decide a woman's future and how family honor becomes intertwined with wealth, marriage, and obedience [1], [2].

This paper explores the tension between tradition and autonomy through three interrelated issues: the power of parents in marriage arrangements; the economic calculations that shape matrimonial

decisions; and the limited possibilities open to a young woman whose desires are at odds with familial demands. Rather than describing Khmer tradition as uniformly oppressive, the argument distinguishes the novel's representation of particular social practices from the diversity of Cambodian lives. The text dramatizes a conflict between an ideal of filial obedience and the ethical importance of a woman's consent.

The main argument is that the tragedy in Phka Srapoun is not merely due to disappointed love. It is also a product of an uneven distribution of decision-making power. Economic and parental control is exercised through marriage and Vitheavy's ability to refuse is limited. The narrative thus offers a literary space for questioning how social arrangements may sacrifice personal well-being in the name of family advancement.

II. OBJECTIVES, MATERIALS, AND METHOD

The study asks four questions. How does the novel portray parental authority in the making and breaking of marriage arrangements? What role do wealth and class expectations play in the selection of a spouse? How is Vitheavy's agency expressed or suppressed? Finally, what can this literary conflict reveal about the ethical tensions within representations of Khmer society?

The method is qualitative textual interpretation supported by feminist literary criticism and scholarship on gender, agency, and social power. The novel is treated as a work of fiction rather than as a statistical record of Cambodian marriage practices. Its storyline and characterization are evaluated for the manner that they construct moral judgment and disclose competing ideals. Feminist criticism gives a vocabulary for exploring whose preferences count when making decisions about marriage, and the concept of agency helps to distinguish formal choice from the ability to execute that choice in practice [3], [4].

This draft is based on verified reports of the novel's storyline and reception, including an academic study of its place in Cambodian literary criticism [2]. Before considering the article a finished close reading, the author must verify the analysis against the precise Khmer edition submitted and make page-specific references. No dialogue or page numbers are invented.

III. PHKA SRAPOUN IN ITS LITERARY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Phka Srapoun belongs to the development of modern Khmer prose fiction and is set in the period of French colonial Cambodia. Its narrative combines the emotional intensity of a love story with questions about status, family responsibility, and changing economic circumstances. Literary scholarship has also noted affinities between its plot and other Cambodian tragic love narratives [2]. Such ties indicate that the novel is part of a wider discourse about attachment versus obligation to society.

The title, sometimes translated as The Wilted Flower, hints at a metaphorical reading of the heroine's vulnerability. Beauty, compassion and transience are commonly associated with a flower. The death of a flower can be a metaphor for the destruction of possibilities before they are

completely fulfilled. But this symbolism needs careful attention. To treat Vitheavy merely as a delicate flower risk reproducing the same assumptions about feminine passivity that the novel makes available for scrutiny.

Reports of a 2022 stage adaptation indicate that the narrative continues to circulate in Cambodian cultural life [5]. Its continuing visibility does not prove a single agreed interpretation, but it supports the relevance of revisiting the text with contemporary questions about consent, familial authority, and gender justice. The purpose of such reinterpretation is not to impose present-day judgments mechanically on the past. It is to ask how literary form represents conflicts that remain intelligible across historical contexts.

IV. TRADITION, FILIAL DUTY, AND PARENTAL AUTHORITY

Parental involvement in marriage may carry several meanings: concern for a child's welfare, maintenance of kinship ties, preservation of reputation, and economic security. The ethical problem in Phka Srapoun occurs when the young woman's own desires are superseded by her parents' wishes. Vitheavy is caught between respect for her mother and attachment to Bunthoeun. The conflict is intensified because a socially expected form of obedience becomes difficult to separate from submission to an unwanted marriage.

Vitheavy's mother, commonly identified as Mrs. Nuon, plays a decisive role in reversing the earlier engagement and favoring Ny Sot. Thus, the power of the family in the novel is not based on established custom; it may be changed if the perceived material benefits of marriage change [1], [2]. Thus, the inconstancy of fortune in economic affairs disturbs the outward stability of a compact union.

The criticism of the novel is more specific than a rejection of all parental direction. Parents have experience, protection, and support. Whether guiding allows for consent and discernment of a daughter. A morally valid relationship between the generations would imply listening to the person whose life will be most directly affected by the marriage. Here, the novel forces the reader to think about the difference between filial respect and the negation of individual agency.

The stillness of Vitheavy is complicated too. Silence may signal fear, allegiance, societal restriction or lack of genuine options for refusal. It is not to be conflated with consent automatically. A feminist reading asks what consequences might follow if Vitheavy openly opposed her mother's decision, and whether the social world of the novel offers her meaningful alternatives [3], [4].

V. MARRIAGE, WEALTH, AND SOCIAL STATUS

The change in Bunthoeun's family fortunes is central to the plot. When his household loses wealth, the suitability of the match is reconsidered. Marriage therefore appears to be not only an intimate tie, but also an arrangement influenced by economic hierarchy. The mother's desire for a richer suitor reflects the conflict between material well-being and moral concern for the people involved.

One explanation of the mother's decision is that economic stability important in marriage. This is not a problem to be dismissed as foolish, especially in the face of uncertainty for families. But the narrative also explores the peril of letting wealth as the ultimate gage of a person's value. Financial wealth of a suitor does not necessarily indicate kindness, responsibility or compatibility.

Ny Sot functions in the narrative as a counterpoint to Bunthoeun: the material advantages associated with the new match stand against the emotional attachment between the original couple. The contrast is literary rather than a universal claim that poverty produces virtue or wealth produces vice. Its significance lies in showing how economic calculation can distort a family's judgment when status is privileged over the woman's own understanding of her future.

Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of forms of capital offers a useful interpretive analogy: economic resources and social standing can be converted into influence over relationships and institutions [6]. The concept should not be mistaken for a documented historical explanation of this fictional household. It helps illuminate how marriage in the novel becomes a site where unequal resources translate into unequal decision-making power.

VI. VITHEAVY'S AUTONOMY AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

Vitheavy is the moral focus of the story, but she has little say in the decision that will decide her future. Her affection for Bunthoeun does not provide her any power over the plan for the marriage. It is important to distinguish between feeling and action; the heroine's inner life matters to the plot, but the institutions surrounding her seem incapable or unwilling to take her wishes as definitive.

Agency should not only be conceived as dramatic resistance. When frontal opposition is expensive, one can consider, bear, bargain, or show indirect opposition. At the same time, romanticizing silence and fortitude can obscure the injustice of the conditions that give rise to them. Therefore, the reader needs to separate Vitheavy's moral dignity from the limits imposed on her [4].

Descriptions of the plot of the work include her decline after the unwelcome engagement [1], [2]. As literary representation, bodily suffering makes visible what cannot be openly resolved through speech or negotiation. The narrative turns private distress into a public moral problem. Yet the illness should not be reduced to a simple medical claim that forced marriage causes a particular disease. It operates as a narrative device that connects emotional suffering with a coercive social environment.

The image of the 'wilted flower' can therefore be read in two directions. It may reproduce a conventional ideal of feminine fragility, but it can also indict the social arrangements that make a young woman's life so vulnerable. A critical reading holds these possibilities together instead of treating the heroine's suffering as either purely passive or automatically emancipatory.

VII. MOTHERHOOD, GENDER, AND COMPLICATED AUTHORITY

A notable feature of the plot is that the principal decision-maker who restricts Vitheavy is her mother. This complicates a simplistic division between oppressive men and powerless women.

People of different genders may police gendered standards even while they themselves are laboring under situations of economic insecurity and societal expectation. The mother's effect on the daughter does not imply the gender equality in the surrounding system.

To read with sensitivity is to pose the question what does Mrs. Nuon do and what pressures bear on her choices. Even while she neglects the emotional and moral issues of Vitheavy, she may see wealth as safety or prestige. Such an interpretation does not excuse coercion; it shows how unequal norms can be reproduced through intimate relationships rather than imposed only from outside the family.

Feminist criticism is especially useful here because it examines how social power becomes ordinary and appears natural in everyday decisions [3]. The novel's home setting is not separate from wider issues of justice. Who is heard, who is expected to sacrifice, and whose future can be negotiated by others are political questions embedded within family life.

This approach also avoids turning the mother into a one-dimensional symbol of 'Khmer tradition.' The text presents a particular fictional character and a specific conflict. Any general generalizations regarding Cambodian moms, families or marital customs, would require independent historical and sociological evidence outside of the fiction.

VIII. ETHICAL INTERPRETATION AND KHMER SOCIETY

The novel invites reflection on the relationship between collective responsibility and individual freedom. Family commitments can encourage care and mutual support, but they become ethically worrisome when they obliterate a person's right to participate in decisions impacting her life. The central tension is therefore not tradition versus modernity in the abstract. It is the distinction between traditions that protect relationships and practices that deny meaningful consent.

In this light, the tragic ending of the story may be seen as a warning about the moral cost of seeing marriage mainly as a familial transaction. The relevant values include respect, reciprocity, truthfulness, care, and responsibility. None requires abandoning family bonds. Rather, they demand that family members recognize one another as persons with wishes and judgments that deserve consideration.

The novel can also be taught as a site of critical dialogue. Students might compare the intentions of Vitheavy's mother with the effects of her decision, examine the language through which the heroine's suffering is represented, and consider alternative endings that preserve both intergenerational respect and consent. Such classroom activities would be interpretive proposals, not claims about an established educational intervention.

Contemporary relevance should not collapse historical difference. Phka Srapoun depicts a fictional world associated with an earlier period, and present-day Cambodian society is diverse and changing. The responsible claim is that the novel offers enduring questions about authority and autonomy, not that its plot accurately describes all contemporary marriage practices.

The broader scholarly context includes Chigas's analysis of another Khmer tragic love narrative, Tum Teav, which provides a comparative point of reference for familial power and justice [2], [7].

Feminist scholarship on gender construction, patriarchal bargaining, and the representation of marginalized voices provides conceptual tools for interpreting consent and constrained agency without assuming that one framework fully explains Khmer society [8]–[12]. Research on contemporary Cambodian marriage supplies a distinct sociological perspective, but its evidence must not be projected backward onto the novel's fictional historical setting [13]. A recent linguistic study of metaphor in Phka Srapoun offers a useful starting point for examining the flower image and other figurative language in the original Khmer text [14].

IX. DISCUSSION: THE NOVEL'S CRITICAL CONTRIBUTION

The preceding analysis identifies three linked mechanisms of constraint. First, parental authority determines the terms of marriage. Second, economic status changes the value assigned to the prospective husband. Third, the heroine's emotional commitment is acknowledged by the narrative but insufficiently recognized by the family decision-making process. These mechanisms converge to produce tragedy.

The paper's contribution is to treat the marriage conflict as an ethical problem of agency rather than only a sentimental story of lost love. This interpretation also clarifies why the mother's role is so important: coercion can be sustained through ordinary family relationships even when its immediate agent is a woman. Such a reading opens discussion of the relationship between gender, class, and social legitimacy.

An alternative reading might emphasize the mother's desire for security and the historically limited options available to families. That perspective deserves consideration because it prevents a simplistic condemnation of economic concern. Nonetheless, security and consent need not be mutually exclusive values. The narrative's moral force arises precisely because the pursuit of one is allowed to extinguish the other.

Further research should examine the original Khmer language closely, including the narrator's evaluative vocabulary, dialogue, metaphors, and representations of silence. Comparison with other Khmer novels and later reinterpretations could establish whether the figure of Vitheavy is primarily idealized, criticized, or transformed across literary periods.

X. CONCLUSION

Phka Srapoun provides a compelling literary framework for examining tradition, marriage, and women's autonomy. Nou Hach's story thus compares the familial authority and social prestige with personal attachment and consent as can be shown via Vitheavy's limited position, the loss of Bunthoeun's economic status and Mrs. Nuon's wish for a richer match.

What keeps the novel relevant is not that it offers an easy judgment against tradition but that it shows how ethical family obligation is incomplete when it silences the voice of the person most impacted. A critical feminist analysis draws attention to unequal agency in marital decision-making, alongside the economic pressures that might impact parental choices. The 'wilted flower'

is therefore more than a symbol of private sorrow: it can be read as an indictment of a social order in which a young woman's future is negotiated without meaningful regard for her wishes.

DECLARATIONS

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