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Review of O. Vitandham (2005) *On the Wings of a White Horse: A Cambodian Princess's Story of Surviving the Khmer Rouge Genocide*

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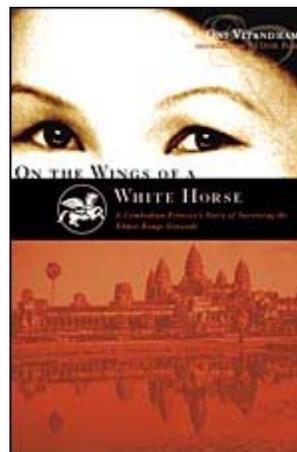
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For Oni Vitandham, however, the struggle did not end when she left Cambodia. Oni is a survivor of two different worlds: the killing fields of Cambodia and the city streets of urban America.
—Dith Pran, subject of “The Killing Fields”

“How did this child survive the onslaught of such tragedies?” I kept thinking to myself as I read Oni Vitandham’s riveting memoir, *On the Wings of a White Horse: A Cambodian Princess’s Story of Surviving the Khmer Rouge Genocide*. Oni recalls precarious life as a child hiding in a cave through her survival during the Khmer Rouge regime, the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, in the refugee camps, and finally through the rough terrain of resettlement in the United States. Relentlessly, Oni persisted against all odds in her unwavering faith in God, in humans, and in herself. *On the Wings of a White Horse* details a woman’s process of finding her voice, and with it, a symbolic narrative of a country’s history using the motifs of naming, the search for “home,” and spirituality.

Cambodia has a rich, long history as a civilized kingdom. Its cultural productions are evidence of the complex intellectual development of its people. Perhaps the most noted of the remaining cultural artifacts is the Angkor Wat temple complex, the consummate symbol of Khmer religion, architecture, and political expanse built in the 12th Century by King Suryavarman II. The court dances and the rich oral tradition of folklore and fables stood as part of the foundational bedrock that connected the royalty and the masses. Vitandham eloquently weaves these traditions of storytelling, fantasy, and Angkor Wat into the plot of her narrative.



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The deeply spiritual, textured lineage of Cambodian history has often been eclipsed by the tragedy of the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975-1979. At the end of the American intervention in Southeast Asia, the Khmer Rouge had gained large numbers of recruits and the support of powerful allies, such as the People's Republic of China and the ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk. On April 17, 1975, Khmer Rouge troops marched into the capital Phnom Penh to begin its eight-point program to "reclaim" the homeland. The next four years consisted of separation of families, political re-education through a return to the countryside, and massive deaths due to starvation and speculative accusations of treason against the state, Angkar. During this period, a slow stream of refugees began to make treacherous journeys across the Mekong, by sea, or through the jungles past international borders to seek sanctuary. By 1979, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia, succumbing its people to another ten years of violent occupation. The political unrest loosened the Khmer Rouge grip enough to allow a critical mass of people to flee, specifically into Thailand. There, tens of thousands of people lined tenuous border camps for years waiting for resettlement by third party countries. The effects of compounded trauma from war and protracted stays in the camps only manifested again in resettlement with the continuation of displacement, violence, poverty, and family separation. The collective process of rebuilding lives in resettlement often required the simultaneous reconstitution of oneself through closure and community.

On the Wings of a White Horse tells the story of a young girl who at once embodies the glorious history of the Khmer kingdom and the continual metamorphoses she must make of her identity in order to survive the historical moments of her life's crises. The first-person narrative begins with the young girl and her family in the United States on Independence Day. Just as they expressed a sense of relief with laughter at their inability to use the electric stove, the blasts of fireworks drove them back to the instinctual state of internal panic during war. This scene epitomized the rest of the book for the reader in that regardless of the sense of freedom they felt, the momentous weight of history haunted their psychological and physical memory. Each person would have to decide whether this memory would drive her/him to destruction or toward the wings of freedom.

In Chapter 2, the story is narrated as a linear chronology of events in Cambodian history as they affected the personal life of the young orphan. The child lived in a cave in Kompong Speu province with her godparents, Sarun and Cheata Voung Tan, the first years of her life because her father was Prince Chan, the well-known leader of an infantry brigade in the province that fought against the Khmer Rouge. Her biological mother died during childbirth, and with her father's disappearance in 1975, she began her trek through life as an orphan from the killing fields. Her journey ultimately brought her to Long Beach, California where she became community leader and activist. Each historical moment is literally marked by several key changes in the young girl's personal experiences. Each turning point in her life represented a moment when the hope for a rekindled Cambodian civilization would remain aflame or self-destruct.

Oni's identity constantly changes with each situation in which she finds herself. While living in the cave, the only "home" that she felt completely secure in, she went by her birth-name, Sisokhathini. During her time in the Khmer Rouge labor camps, she lost all sense of identity and was never called upon by name. In the horror of the mass killings, Oni's loss of herself symbolized a loss of the Khmer nation's connection to its roots as a great civilization. During the Vietnamese occupation, she briefly found shelter with Mr. and Mrs. Tun, a Cambodian man married to a Vietnamese woman. They "adopted" orphans as servants, forcing

them into domestic servitude and stealing for the family while beating and raping some of the children. During this time, Oni called herself “Nga,” meaning “baby” in Chinese and carried with it a connotation of “innocence and purity” (p. 71). It seemed to magically cloak the essence of her spirit from corruptive forces. Oni uses the name again when she enters a parasitic relationship with the abusive Touch family in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand. She was willing to accept the abuse because she intuitively felt destined to go to America. However, the American policy only accepted families for resettlement, of which she had none to claim. As Oni reached adulthood, her painful process of assuming her own identity, of finding her own voice through separation from an abusive partner, economic stability, and finding a creative, political outlet to express herself, she created her own identity. She founded her own international aid organization for Cambodian children, Progressive United Action Association (PUAA) in addition to writing her own memoir and musical compositions. The author’s name, Oni Vitandham, is a hybridization of the names of all the caring guardians in her youth. In each of these instances, Oni’s reconstitution of her name enveloped the historical situation of the country, and Oni transforms into the vessel carrying the essence of Khmer culture and values.

A second motif used in this memoir is the idea of homelessness. Throughout the story Oni does not have a real home or a family. She begins her life in a cave and moves continually from the care of one adult to another that she serendipitously meets along her journey to an unforeseen future. Under the care of various guardians, she is still not guaranteed a physical house or an emotional sense of home. She lived in labor camps, on the temple floor of Angkor Wat, in the jungle, in a garage and a group home in the United States, and in various other people’s temporary abodes. The reader witnesses a child amidst violence and war escaping abuse and death over and over again, and with each escape, a new search for the warm hearth of a home. The relentless movement of bodies, the minute and slow descriptions of walking for hundreds of miles to no clear destination in the heat of near death, leaves the reader exhausted and hungry for any sign of stability in the child’s life. Oni’s perpetual state of displacement encompasses the notion of “statelessness” inherent in the term, “refugee,” an identity almost synonymous in the United States with the Khmer Diaspora. As a child protagonist, her character compels empathy from the reader in her desire for protection, for a sense of place and with it, a name that secures an identity. Allegorically, the upheaval of an entire national culture and the uprootedness of the nation’s people suffered from similar malaise.

Oni’s narrative also emphasizes the ubiquity of spirituality in her life, as it is for the devoutly Buddhist, historically agrarian nation. The story approaches spirituality in several intriguing ways. First, Oni felt intricately connected to the spiritual world, which she believed communicated with her and guided her through difficult moments in her life. She was visited regularly by the spirits of former caretakers to guide her. Spirituality also defined distinct periods in her life that outlined the struggles of the Khmer people. The two periods in her life when she felt the safest were in the cave with a huge statue of Buddha and Lork Ta Sa, a monk who shared the cave with them, and during the Vietnamese occupation when she lived for months in Angkor Wat, mysteriously fed rice every morning by an unseen source. It was there that she was reunited with Lork Ta Sa. He told her to leave the country, and that her destiny was to travel abroad.

In contrast, the most devastating memories in her life were attributed to what she considered the violent desecration through ideology of the Buddhist-centered cultural values that define traditional Khmer society. She seemed to understand the Khmer Rouge ideology of Marxist-Leninist-Maoism as the profound antithesis of the inherent spirituality of the Khmer land and people. With each murder she witnessed or massacre she narrowly escaped, she found

herself fleeing into the jungle. The land from which the people had grown the sustenance of their existence had become desecrated with unnatural death:

Our path was littered with the remains of those who had not stepped so carefully. Legs and arms, grotesquely separated from their bodies, were a common sight. I did not understand this carnage that was spreading unabatedly, and it was horrifying to see the dead. I soon learned that to survive we must remain hidden while constantly moving (p. 50).

Ironically, the jungle simultaneously served as a refuge for her, and she always re-emerged as if reborn from a baptism of the sins she had witnessed. Narrowly escaping execution, Oni and her caretaker in the labor camp ran into the jungle at night,

[Chandra Sam] replaced my ragged Khmer Rouge uniform with garments made of banana leaves and created shoes for me from cornhusks. I was once again a girl of the jungle ... sometimes we felt safe enough to relax a little. During these times, we composed songs to amuse ourselves, and Chandra Sam created whistles out of palm leaves for accompaniment (pp. 63-64).

After resettlement in the United States, she was kidnapped, beaten, and held captive in a closet for a week by a sordid Buddhist cult. She escaped the house with her head shaved bald by her captives, reminiscent of a newly born infant, and sought shelter with her classmate Yelna's piously Christian grandmother. Together they went to church regularly, and she soon graduated with a scholarship to college. Thus, as a conduit of the spiritual world, its manifestation in the materiality of the jungle, the clay temples, and the monks provided the light for Oni on the one hand, while its artificial human manipulation exemplified in Angkar and the cult haunted her. The author seemed to suggest that the adherence to the basic essence of one's constitution as a person can shield one from the trepidations of life, and by extension, the Khmer nation could also find its process of reconciliation and rebuilding through returning to its historical roots.

On the Wings of a White Horse is a creatively articulated allegory of a young girl's life story for the national narrative of Cambodia. As Oni Vitandham is forcibly displaced throughout her childhood, she spends her life searching for her identity and a sense of home. In motherhood, she realizes her mission in life is to better the lives of the less fortunate in Cambodia. In doing so, she finds her voice to tell her story and create an identity true to her character for the first time. The protagonist wrapped herself in the cocoon of what she saw as the core values of the Khmer people. The cocoon shielded her from the unnatural violence in her life and guided her to envision a future for Cambodia without poverty or war. Vitandham suggests that Khmer traditions and culture have only been hidden beneath the tragedies of war, but it can be unearthed to rediscover its beauty.

About the Reviewer

Loan Dao is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include Asian American studies, Diaspora studies, social movements, and community studies. She was born in Viet Nam and migrated to the United States in 1975.



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