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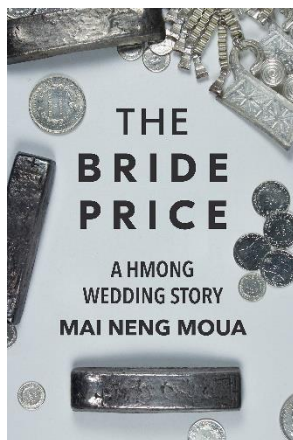
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Book Review: Mai N. Moua (2017). *The Bride Price: A Hmong Wedding Story*. Minnesota Historical Society Press. 240 pp. ISBN: 978-1681340364

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Mai Neng Moua's memoir *The Bride Price: A Hmong Wedding Story* tells the tale of her decision to refuse a "bride price" for her wedding and the devastating consequences that follow. Moua also narrates her struggles with health and sickness, her attempts to reconnect with her father's side of the family back in Thailand, her complex relationship with her husband Blong Yang, and her reconciliation with her mother at the end of the memoir. Moua is perhaps most well-known for being the editor of the first Hmong American literary journal *Paj Ntaub Voice* and the landmark Hmong American literary anthology *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writings by Hmong Americans*. Moua's memoir promised to deliver—and continue—the conversations that began in these early venues. *The Bride Price* is a work that exposed Moua's complicated subject-position as a Hmong American woman in the United States today.

Moua opens up the memoir with an interesting author's note and prologue. In the author's note, Moua cautions the reader to seriously consider her side of the story in (re)telling the narrative. It furthermore seeks to inform the reader that the book is not an "academic" or "scholarly" text, and reveals that references to various customs, rituals, and traditions of the Hmong are based on her own level of knowledge, which she described as, "little kid's talk." This disclaimer is significant to note. Indeed, Moua does make several interpretations of different customs, rituals, and traditions throughout the book that may provoke the discomfort of many readers. Another significant element to take prudently is whether Moua is *interpreting* the various Hmong customs, rituals, and traditions throughout the memoir, or whether she is *explaining them*. Rather than relegating her ways of knowing to the infantile level of "little kids talk," it would have been more empowering for Moua and her readers to be stronger in her own ways of knowing.

The prologue also begs the question of whether Moua is writing for an audience in which an interpretation (or explanation?) of such acts is necessary, or to an audience who may already possess their own archive of cultural meanings of Hmong customs, rituals, and traditions. At times, it seems to be both, neither, and one or the other. As the reader finishes the memoir, they encounter Moua's claim that Hmong Americans are complex people "who don't need to be translated so others



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may understand us.” In many ways she stays true to this claim, but in many ways she also “translates” Hmong words and phrases both literally and metaphorically for the reader(s). Therein lies the paradox of the subject who embodies an insider status but is nonetheless not entirely “authentic” in the narrating of this cultural insiderness. In short, this is both the memoir’s downfall and its accomplishment.

The Bride Price begins with Part I titled *Poob Plig* (Soul Loss). Moua starts out immediately with asking whether her mother, *Niam*, would collect a bride price if Moua were to ever marry. *Niam* said yes. Moua recounts flashbacks to her feelings of injustice seeing her own mother being subjected to the bind of the bride price within her mother’s own marriage. Moua poses several unanswered questions regarding the bride price, for example, why is there a no “groom price?” The memoir reveals the serious gaps in Moua’s knowledge about the culture in which she is writing for the reader and thus rendering her ruminations at times highly unpredictable. We learn that formalized exclusion of women from gaining particular kinds of knowledges was a large part of Moua’s life. She did not have a father who could educate her about particular cultural traditions. Compounding this exclusion is the confusion that Moua has with indirect statements and phrases within Hmong American speech regarding respect, family, and traditions. Moua uses May Lee-Yang’s term “HmongSpeak” to describe these indirect and opaque formalities of communication. Because Hmong have historically imparted knowledge orally from generation to generation, the memoir renews the politics of memories that are caught up in this history of Hmong knowledge production and preservation. Yet, “HmongSpeak” seems to be a serious hindrance to Moua’s understanding of her social world and thus forces the readers to consider the memoir as a part of this unique context of knowledge production and communication.

Moua’s relationships with her mother and brothers deteriorate further when she is diagnosed with a kidney disorder called IgA nephropathy. She is disappointed that none of her family members offered to donate their kidneys to her. Eventually, Moua received a kidney from her cousin’s boyfriend, Eric. The memoir spirals into further devastation regarding the issue of the bride price itself at the time of the wedding. Moua refuses to hold a *rooj tshoob* in fearing that Blong would have to pay a bride price. *Niam*, Kai, and the rest of Moua’s family also never attended Moua’s and Blong’s church wedding ceremony. To be fair, Moua details the numerous symbolic meanings of the bride price. However, Moua sticks to her original notion of the bride price as symbolizing the “worth” of the bride and thus continues to reject it throughout the memoir. Ultimately, Part I ends with the broken relationship between Moua and *Niam*.

Part II, titled *Hu-Plig* (Soul-Calling), begins with Moua traveling to Thailand to meet her grandfather, only for him to pass away before they arrived. Moua was only three years old when her father died in a tree cutting accident. His absence had delegitimized her family in the eyes of relatives and she has missed out on all the life lessons he could have provided. Her brothers were also left with no male role models in their lives. Blong’s side of the family did indeed operate a *rooj tshoob* and exchange a bride price with Moua’s side of the family, but Moua and Blong did not attend the wedding ceremony. Moua details the contestation over the *hu plig* ritual that Blong’s family never performed for her to formally welcome her into Blong’s side of the family. All of these acts of disengagement ultimately alienated Moua and Blong from both sides of their families by the end of Part II.

By the time Part III (Made Whole) begins, the reader can sense that Moua herself has begun to question her decisions and the idea of marriage altogether. Moua and *Niam* had not talked for over one year. Moua begins to mend her relationship with *Niam* by showing her pictures from her Thailand trip, helping out at the farmer’s market, bringing *Niam* hamburgers, and helping out at

the family farm. However, all of these acts did not gain *Niam*'s affection or acknowledgement of Moua's marriage. Finally, Moua finally asked *Niam* to babysit her daughter to which *Niam* passively answered yes. This gesture signaled that *Niam* is finally becoming affectionate. *Niam* informs Moua that the event *mov rooj tshoob* was the missing puzzle as to why *Niam* never acknowledged Blong as Moua's husband. This knowledge about the *mov rooj tshoob* is yet another long list of traditions that were systematically excluded from the knowledge of second generation Hmong Americans through HmongSpeak. We also learn that neither Moua's or Blong's clan members helped on Blong's campaign for a seat on the Minneapolis city council. This is another effect of Moua's wedding decisions which alienated many of her relatives. Despite this, Blong was elected as the first Hmong American to hold elected office in Minneapolis. The memoir ends with Moua speaking to a Yang clan leader who validated her convictions that Hmong Americans can transform cultural traditions especially as it regards wedding ceremonies and the bride price.

Throughout the memoir, the reader can feel Moua's confusion of not knowing all the workings of Hmong cultural traditions and wedding rituals. Moua pulls the reader into her own web of puzzlement as the memoir progresses. Even the significance of the "answer" *mov rooj tshoob* was not fully fleshed out in the end for the reader. Nonetheless, this dizzying array of emotions captures the complexity of Moua's memoir so perfectly. The central challenge of the memoir is that it does not provide a clear-cut story of triumph, nor is it a necessarily a story of anguish. Such an approach may frustrate some impatient readers (such as my students in the courses that I teach). "Hmong culture" is portrayed in the memoir as a highly unstable and troubling concept for all of its central characters. It is most important for Moua who is contending with multiple levels of intersecting and interconnecting social positions such as gender, religion, health, and family. Moua is struggling to define what weddings and marriages mean for her within a Christian-religious context. Moua's fatherless upbringing augments the social ostracization within her clan. And making matters worse was her kidney disorder fortifying the anger, isolation, and devastation she feels towards all members of her family. All these issues represent her estrangement from those around her.

Additionally, Moua's memoir complicates Hmong American gender by forcing the reader to question what it means to define one's own destiny as a Hmong woman living in the United States amidst larger structures of intensified gender inequalities both within and outside of Hmong American communities. Moua refuses to be defined by the bride price as a marker of her economic value seemingly at all costs. Yet, *Niam* problematizes the dominant narrative of the oppressed Hmong woman by raising her children as a strong single mother in the United States who is also a highly principled and tenacious woman in her own right. The reader must inevitably ask whether Moua or *Niam* is the feminist in the memoir, where feminism can be found in the memoir, or if the memoir is feminist at all. At times, the reader may perceive Moua as a morally self-righteous and sanctimonious character unworthy of admiration. This is particularly true when she yelled at some of the elder characters such as *Niam* and *Txiv* (her father-in-law). However, we also see her as a highly venerable person who sticks to her convictions against the edifices of formalized gendered exclusion within her families and communities while learning about life and love on her way to self-discovery. Moua does not pretend to present a picture of an immaculate "Hmong culture" for her readers nor does she necessarily reject "Hmong culture" as an essentialist and oppressive structure. In this sense, Moua's memoir provides a glaring contribution to the ever-expanding discourse of Hmong American identities and processes of belonging in the United States in ways that are undeniably nuanced and brutally honest.

About the Author



Kong Pheng Pha is Assistant Professor of Critical Hmong Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota. His scholarship concerns Hmong refugee migration and its intersections with racial, gender, sexual, and queer formations. In particular, his current research project explores the ways Hmong Americans are situated within and diverge from broader structures of United States racial, gender, sexual, and queer politics and activism. He subsequently examines the ramifications of these implications on Hmong American and queer Hmong American youth belonging.



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