Journal for Re Attach Therapy and Developmental Diversities
eISSN: 2589-7799
2023 December; 6 (10s(2)): 2272-2275

The Afterlife Of Memory: Postmemory, Genocide And Childhood Trauma In *First They Killed My Father*

Anandhi S[1*], C. Arul Renuga[2]

[1*]Research Scholar, Dept. of English, V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tamilnadu, India Reg.no. 22214014012039
Email: anandhitvl7@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Sri Paramakalyani College, Alwarkurichi, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tamilnadu, India, Email: arulrenuga@gmail.com

Abstract:
This paper studies Loung Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* through the lens of Marianne Hirsch's postmemory. Loung Ung reconstructs her childhood experiences during the Cambodian genocide in an emotionally intense narrative. Through a child's eye-view, this memoir offers a visceral window into the chaos and trauma of surviving a mass violence. Although Loung Ung is a direct survivor of the Cambodian genocide and not a descendant of one, her memoir exhibits certain structural and emotional characteristics associated with Hirsch's postmemory. This paper argues that Ung's narrative blurs the distinction between lived memory and postmemory, showing how her traumatic past is reconstructed and transmitted through affect, imagination and retrospective voice. It reveals how postmemory suits not only the descendants of survivors, but those whose trauma began even before language or comprehension could fully capture it.

Keywords: Postmemory, Cambodia, Genocide, Trauma

The Cambodian genocide (1975-1979) by the Khmer Rouge remains one of the most brutal atrocities of the twentieth century. Orchestrated under Pol Pot's regime, this genocide resulted in the deaths of approximately two million people, nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population. They attempted to create an agrarian socialist utopia. The Khmer Rouge targeted intellectuals, urban dwellers, ethnic minorities and suspected political enemies to the regime. The victims were systematically exterminated by subjecting them to hard agricultural labour, starvation and execution.

Loung Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* (2000), told from the perspective of a five-year-old child, reflects the incomprehensibility of genocidal violence and the subsequent losses that each family incurs. The memoir traces Ung's forced displacement from their home, her family's separation, the re-education camps, the brutality of forcing rifles into children's hands and turning them into war killing machines, the psychological toll of war and loss. Ung's memoir is shaped by the trauma of this era and it serves as an act of testimony and memory. Her narrative mode provides various grounds for analysis, particularly through the lens of postmemory as defined by Marianne Hirsch.

Marianne Hirsch's concept, developed in the context of Holocaust studies, explores how trauma is passed on to subsequent generations, shaping their identities and memories even when they did not directly experience the events themselves. It investigates how the children internalize the trauma of their parents, making them memories in their own right. Hirsch writes, "Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before- to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up" ("Generation" 5). These memories are not lived, but are so viscerally and affectively passed on, that they function like actual memories. Postmemory is a very relevant concept in genocide literature that helps explore how memory, testimony and silence around trauma operate across generations.

Although the memoir *First They Killed My Father* is written by a direct survivor of the Cambodian genocide, its affective reconstruction and narrative structure invite analysis through the theoretical lens of Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory. Since Loung Ung's genocide experiences began at the age of five, trauma was imprinted on her even before it could be fully understood or articulated. She lived through these experiences as a child and reassembled them as she grew up. Decades later, when she writes this memoir, she re-narrates her experiences which are filtered through the retrospective voice of an adult, layering meaning onto her experiences. Thus her memoir occupies this liminal space, blurring the distinction between lived memory and postmemory. Hirsch describes this as "not identical to memory but mediated by imagination, investment and creation" ("Generation" 107).

Narrative reconstruction, as theorized by Marianne Hirsch, involves the act of piecing together fragmented or unclear incidents using external cues and adult understanding. In Ung's memoir, this is evident in her confusion about political figures and moral choices. In the child soldier camps, the children are forced to attend propaganda classes every night. The mentors demonise the Vietnamese and train the child soldiers to kill a "Youn"(Vietnamese soldiers) as soon as they see one. However she recalls what she had once heard from her father: "In Phnom Penh, Pa once told me the Youns are

just like us with whiter skin and smaller noses. However, Met Bong describes the Youns as savages who are bent on taking over our country and our people. I do not know what to believe" (Ung 171). After the victims of the Cambodian genocide are liberated in 1979 by the Vietnamese forces, Ung sees Vietnamese soldiers for the first time and observes unironically that "these men look remarkably human…they do not look like the devils Met Bong said they were"(Ung 204). She is surprised that they are very cordial to the Cambodians and wonders why her mentors considered them a threat. The memoir shows how the child struggles to understand whether the Vietnamese (the "Youns") are their enemies or saviours, mirroring the confusion of all survivors during that time. She does not offer a definitive political analysis here, but tries to reconstruct meaning from her fragmented understanding and her father's previously voiced opinions.

Similarly, Ung's understanding of Pol Pot and his regime is equally muddled. In the propaganda classes, she is taught that Pol Pot is their savior and that the people are under his protection. But Ung finds it contradictory to the fact that she lost her home, her belongings and ended up in labour camps due to Pol Pot's orders. Her parents and sisters were killed because of Pol Pot. She realizes that she is being lied to by the mentors. She rejects Pol Pot's deceptive image as a leader who claims to love his people while starving and killing them. She is also told that the Khmer Rouge soldiers are mightier than the Youns. But she eventually witnesses the defeat of the Khmer Rouge at the hands of Youns. She thinks, "Maybe the Khmer Rouge's power is just another one of Pol Pot's lies" (Ung 201). She is actively trying to make meaning out of the chaos through her fragmented childhood perception, which is a classic postmemorial act.

There are moments of narrative absence in the memoir, such as when Ung leaves completely unnarrated the days following her mother's death. She is so devastated by the news that she is unable to recollect what she did or where she went the next few days. Such gaps in the memoir are called "ruptures" in postmemory. They are moments when trauma resists direct recollection. The narration here feels fragmented and disconnected.

The memoir also shows the child's internalization of the elders' trauma. Five-year-old Ung imagines that Pol Pot personally hates her for some reason. She thinks that is why half of her family got killed during his regime. She says ,"I have never met Pol Pot in person or in pictures. I know little about him or why he killed Pa. I do not know why he hates me so much" (Ung 172). The five-year-old child internalizes the horror that was meted out to her parents.

Likewise, Ung expresses remorse over stealing food from a sick old woman at the infirmary. Out of starvation and hunger, she gives in to the temptation of stealing whatever food she could find around her. As an adult, she thinks she "put a marker on the old woman's grave" (Ung 187) by depriving that lady of her food. This reflects a child's internalization of her moral injury. Such recollections are not isolated memories but postmemorial constructs moulded by emotions and adult reflection. Within an inherited moral structure, Ung as an adult, tries to judge herself compassionately yet critically.

Retrospective narration is a key aspect in postmemory. Though the narration is made out of a child's experiences, it is layered with retrospective insights of an adult. For instance, after the liberation, Ung reconnects with her older brothers at the refugee camp. She observes how their appearances and behaviour have transformed over the years. She remarks that they have lost their boyish innocence and have become grown up men, hardened by suffering. Admiring her brother Kim's composure, she says, "He seems so much in control that I forget he is not quite fourteen" (Ung 198). An eight-year-old child mourning the loss of her brothers' innocence or admiring her brother's composure for his age is not typical. Here Ung exhibits a level of maturity that can only be achieved through adult retrospection.

This duality in voice is also seen when Ung expresses pain and guilt over her younger sister's suffering. Geak's malnourishment, emotional muteness and vulnerability touch her. She feels miserable that she is unable to protect her younger sister and contribute to the family. She displays self-aware empathy that transcends a child's cognitive frame. In these moments, the adult Ung speaks though the child.

I look at Geak; she is quiet in Ma's arms. It strikes me then that she does not have much command over the language to complain about her hunger. How does a five-year-old tell us about her stomach hurting, her heart aching for Pa, and her fading memories of Keav?... "I'm so very sorry", I say to her with my eyes, "I'm sorry I'm not good like the rest of the family." (Ung 179)

I did not bring Ma and Geak anything. I am tormented by the knowledge of how much my family is willing to sacrifice for each other. If Chou gets caught sneaking food she will be severely punished, but she risks it. Kim stole corn for us and was brutally beaten. Ma was assaulted trying to get Geak a bit of chicken meat. I have done nothing. (Ung 180)

Hirsch notes that postmemory is also mediated through 'affect', referring to the physical and emotional responses that are associated with past trauma.

Silence, both imposed and voluntary, is another critical element in postmemory theory. During the genocide, Ung and her siblings were forced to hide their true identities, live in separately under false names and pretend to be orphans to escape being killed by the Khmer Rouge. By doing so, they are forced to erase their family history and repress their grief. Ung says, "Three years of living under the Khmer Rouge regime has taught us that some things are better left unsaid" (Ung 186).

When Ung learns of her mother's and Geak's deaths, she is unable to cry in front of others, because she had joined the child soldiers camp under the pretext that she is an orphan. To avoid being caught, her grief is to be kept a secret. She

says, “We all have learned to be silent with our emotions” (Ung 150). This silencing creates a ‘postmemorial void’ that Hirsch defines as an absence that is shaped by the trauma of forgetting as much as the trauma that was endured.

Ung says, “As an implicit rule, we do not talk about our family. I fear that if I ask, I will make Kim and Chou sadder than they already are. Being only eight years old, this is the only way I know to protect them” (Ung 203). The children learn to maintain silence around the deaths in their family, fearing that they might break down or inflict pain upon one another by bringing it up. They pretend to go on with their lives as if those deaths never happened. This communal silencing among the siblings becomes a way of surviving. Hirsch argues that such “inherited silences are not neutral; they are politically and emotionally charged, often revealing more than words can” (“Generation” 33).

Ung’s memoir frequently turns to imaginative memory, a hallmark of postmemory in which the author speculates what must have happened during an incident they did not directly witness using their emotional intuition and cultural knowledge. Ung never witnesses the deaths of her father, mother and her sisters, but she imagines their manner of deaths based on her general knowledge of the events of the Cambodian genocide. She reconstructs a memory and projects her own voice into the scene to offer them comfort. She pictures her father waiting to be executed along with others, blindfolded, bracing for a blow from the hammer by a Khmer Rouge soldier. She imagines her spirit telling him that she would always love him.

The soldier pushes on Pa’s shoulders, making him kneel like the others. Tears stream out of my eyes as I whisper thanks to the gods that the soldier has blindfolded Pa. He is spared from having to see the executions of many others. ‘Don’t cry, Pa. I know you are afraid,’ I want to tell him…One by one, each man is silenced by the hammer. Pa prays silently for the gods to take care of us. He focuses his mind on us, bringing up our faces one by one. He wants our faces to be the last thing he sees as he leaves the earth. (Ung 132)

The days following Pa’s speculated death, Ung watches her mother grow more aloof and tired. Nobody speaks about the father out loud, but Ung understands her mother’s despair. She imagines Ma talking to Pa on her way to work: “‘Seng Im’, she whispered to Pa, ‘I’m so tired. I’m thirty-nine and growing old, so fast and so alone. Remember? We were to grow old together. Seng Im, I’m too old to live like this.’ She knows it’s of no use, but she still talks to him” (Ung 177). This is not based on direct memory, but on emotional intuition. In Hirsch’s framework of postmemory, these imaginative acts are not distortions but vital tools in grappling with unspeakable loss (“Generation” 5).

In another scene, she visualises her mother and Geak in the killing fields holding each other tightly in fear, eyes closed, anticipating a gunshot from the rifle. She imagines telling them not to be afraid, that she is with them. She imagines that the soldier would have shot her mother first, leaving the child Geak in utter chaos. Geak, too young to understand the concept of death, would try to wake her mother up, smear her mother’s blood all over her and cry helplessly, as the same soldier silences her next. This imaginative memory is an essential element of postmemory’s aesthetic framework (Hirsch 109). By emotionally constructing such scenes, Ung achieves closure on her losses.

Since its publication, the memoir *First They Killed My Father* has received both praise and critical inquiry, regarding its emotional authenticity and historical inaccuracies. The inclusion of Angkor Wat and some other chronological discrepancies are pointed out by the critics. Scholar Bunkong Tuon responds to such criticisms, noting that such narrative slips do not reduce the testimonial value of the memoir. Rather, they highlight the cognitive dislocations which are fairly common among trauma survivors. Tuon argues that “Ung’s memoir is less a factual documentary than an emotional excavation of suffering” (Tuon 256).

Similarly, H.M.A. Leow asserts that trauma narratives should not be held to the same standards as historical archives. “The very nature of trauma disrupts linearity, coherence and recall. These memoirs are maps of emotional survival, not forensic reconstructions” (Leow). Both Tuon and Leow reaffirm Hirsch’s statement that postmemory depends upon imaginative memory and emotional reconstruction than strict historical precision.

Panigrahi and Priyadharshini further attest to this opinion by stating that such memoirs are a form of ‘autofiction’, where affective truth and testimonial urgency override documentary logic. They argue that Ung’s narration “operates beyond the binary of truth and fiction, recreating genocide memory as it is lived and re-lived through the affective lens of the survivor” (Panighiari and Priyadharshini 3).

Additionally, the memoir has acquired significant attention among Cambodian-American and diasporic memory studies. Cathy J.Schlund-Vials considers Ung’s memoir as a part of transnational archive of trauma. She asserts that *First They Killed My Father* “bridges multiple gaps- between child and adult, memory and history, Cambodia and diaspora” (Schlund-Vials 38). In this context, this memoir becomes not just a personal testimony, but a huge contribution to collective postmemory, offering a platform for second generation Cambodian-Americans to navigate inherited silence.

Postmemory, when analysed through a gendered lens, shows how women’s bodies become sites of memory and mechanisms of silence. Hirsch acknowledges that women’s experiences are passed on to subsequent generations with “greater affective density”, particularly when asssociated with familial roles (“Generation” 112). Here, Ma’s trauma of motherhood is central to the postmemorial inheritance of female grief. As a mother of eight kids, she fears that she would be unable to singlehandedly protect her children. At some point, she suspects that her family is being targeted by the Khmer Rouge. In order to keep them alive, she forces all her children except Geak out of the house, instructs them to go live in different camps as orphans under new identities. She acts tough in front of them, but breaks down after they

leave. Her suspicion comes true a few months later, when she is executed along with Geak, leaving no trail for the soldiers to find the whereabouts of the rest of the children.

The memoir also records incidents of sexual abuse faced by young girls during the genocide. As an eight-year old child, Ung is subjected to sexual assault by a soldier in the middle of the woods. Ung tells the story of Davi, a teenage girl in their neighbourhood, who is dragged out of her house by the soldiers to be raped and abused. As she returns home a few days later heavily bruised, Ung remarks that Davi walked as if there was no more life in her (Ung 92). Young girls were frequently the targets of sexual abuse by the soldiers: "The soldiers are often heard saying women have their duty to perform for the Angkar. Their duty is to do what they were made for, to bear children for the Angkar. There is nothing the parents can do to stop the abduction of these young girls, because the soldiers are all-powerful" (Ung 93). Ung notes that many such girls who were taken away never came back. Some were rumoured to have committed suicide to escape the endless torture. Thus, the postmemorial dynamic in the memoir is not just emotional and imaginative, but also gendered.

Though Loung Ung is technically not a second generation survivor of the Cambodian genocide, her memoir *First They Killed My Father* is shaped by the emotional and narrative structures of postmemory. She reconstructs an early childhood trauma that cannot be fully understood and processed at the time. Through Hirsch's lens, Loung Ung emerges as both a witness and a postmemorial subject speaking the unspeakable. She illustrates how childhood trauma is both remembered and continuously re-narrated. She fulfills the ethical demand that postmemory imposes on those who speak for the silenced past.

Works Cited:

1. Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.
2. Leow, H. M. A. "Should Readers Trust 'Inaccuracy' in Memoirs About Genocide?" *JSTOR Daily*, Oct. 2023. *JSTOR*, daily.jstor.org/should-readers-trust-inaccuracy-in-memoirs-about-genocide.
3. Priyadarshini, Jyoti, and Tanutrushna Panigrahi. "Loung Ung's 'First They Killed My Father' and Cambodian Civil War: Memoir as Testimony and Beyond." *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, no. 61, Jan. 2023, https://doi.org/10.55463/hkjss.issn.1021-3619.61.18.
4. Schlund-Vials, Cathy J. *War, Genocide, and Justice Cambodian American Memory Work*. Minneapolis, Minn. Univ. Of Minnesota Press, 2012.
5. Tuon, Bunkong. "Inaccuracy and Testimonial Literature: The Case of Loung Ung's 'First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers.'" *MELUS*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2013, pp. 107–25. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42001241. Accessed 21 July 2025.
6. Ung, Loung. "First They Killed My Father : A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers." *HarperPerennial eBooks*, 2000, 4edd9444c072ad07aff7-11d966b2703d5a5467932b6516b2610f.r67.cf2.rackcdn.com/teaching-guides/TG-9780732265915.pdf.