



Reifying Homeland in the Cambodian Diaspora: A Study of Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and *Music of the Ghosts*

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Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Cambodia remained formally independent while undergoing significant political and social changes. The expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodian territory further destabilised the country, intensifying existing political tensions. During the 1960s, opposition to the Cambodian government grew, including among parts of the middle class, while leftist movements gained momentum under leaders such as Son Sen, Ieng Sary, and Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot). These developments contributed to the rise of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), which subsequently led an insurgency against the Cambodian government ("Canada-Japan Joint Peace-Building Learning Project" 4).

In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge, under Pol Pot, seized Phnom Penh and established control over Cambodia. The regime forcibly evacuated the capital's urban population to the countryside, subjecting people to forced labour, starvation, disease, and violence. Its revolutionary project sought to transform Cambodian society radically by dismantling existing social structures and establishing an agrarian socialist state. The resulting devastation, particularly during the Khmer Rouge regime of 1975–1979, produced profound and lasting consequences for Cambodian society, including mass displacement, cultural trauma, and the disruption of familial and communal relationships.

The Cambodian diaspora is inseparable from this history of violence and displacement. For Cambodian refugees and their descendants, the loss of homeland extends beyond geographical separation to encompass disrupted cultural practices, fragmented identities, and the difficulty of reconciling personal memories with collective historical trauma. Consequently, homeland becomes more than a physical territory: it becomes a space sustained through memory, cultural inheritance, familial relationships, and the narratives through which individuals try to recover a sense of belonging.

Vaddey Ratner explores these concerns in *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2012) and *Music of the Ghosts* (2017). Drawing on the historical trauma of the Khmer Rouge period and her own experiences of displacement, Ratner examines the complex relationship between homeland, memory, and identity. In *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, the young protagonist Raami experiences the destruction of her familiar world and struggles to survive the violence that follows. In *Music of the Ghosts*, Suteera returns to Cambodia after years in the United States, confronting the distance between her memories, her inherited history, and the country to which she returns.

This paper argues that Ratner reifies homeland through the interconnected processes of memory, nostalgia, and storytelling. Here, reification refers to the process through which these practices give perceptible narrative and cultural form to a homeland that has become physically inaccessible or irretrievably altered. While Raami preserves fragments of a lost Cambodia through childhood memories and cultural narratives, Suteera confronts the discontinuity between inherited memories and her lived experience of return. Read together, the novels demonstrate that diasporic homeland is neither a stable geographical origin nor a recoverable past. Rather, it is continually reconstructed through the relationship between individual recollection and collective history.

Memory occupies a central position in Ratner's representation of displacement. It functions as a repository of past experiences and a means through which individuals negotiate the relationship between their former lives and their present circumstances. In the aftermath of genocide, remembering becomes especially significant because violence also threatens the cultural practices and historical narratives through which

communities understand themselves. In *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, Raami's recollections of her childhood in Phnom Penh preserve fragments of a world that the Khmer Rouge seeks to dismantle. Her memories of her family, her home, and the stories narrated by her father become crucial to her understanding of herself and her cultural inheritance. Through Raami, Ratner reconstructs aspects of pre-revolutionary Cambodia, presenting a homeland that exists simultaneously as a remembered geographical space and as a repository of familial and cultural experience.

The novel's engagement with memory is therefore both personal and historical. Raami's recollections preserve intimate experiences of childhood while also contributing to a broader representation of a society transformed by political violence. The relationship between individual memory and collective history allows Ratner to challenge representations of Cambodia that reduce the country to its experience of war and suffering. By recalling the cultural and familial world that preceded the genocide, the narrative acknowledges the complexity of the life that was disrupted.

Nevertheless, memory does not restore this world in its entirety. Raami's recollections emerge from the circumstances of displacement and trauma, and their significance changes as she experiences further loss. Her remembered homeland is consequently neither a complete historical record nor an unchanged reality. It is a reconstruction shaped by emotional attachment and subsequent suffering. This distinction is essential to understanding the reification of homeland. Through memory, an absent place becomes narratively present, but the resulting representation remains selective and mediated. Ratner's reconstruction of Cambodia thus involves both preservation and transformation: the homeland survives through recollection, even as the violence of history makes its complete recovery impossible.

In *Music of the Ghosts*, memory assumes a different significance through Suteera's return to Cambodia. Having migrated to the United States as a refugee, she struggles with a fragmented sense of identity and an uncertain relationship with her country of origin. Her return does not immediately restore her sense of belonging. Instead, it confronts her with the distance between Cambodia as a remembered or inherited homeland and Cambodia as a place shaped by historical change.

Suteera's experience illustrates the difficulties of recovering a homeland after prolonged displacement. Her uncertainty reflects what the novel describes as "homelessness" (*Music* 158) and a "continual search for a self that belongs" (158). These expressions suggest that displacement is not resolved simply by crossing geographical borders in the opposite direction. The physical act of returning may intensify questions of belonging when the individual discovers that neither the homeland nor the self remains unchanged. Through Suteera, Ratner demonstrates that memory can sustain a connection to the past while simultaneously revealing the impossibility of returning to it in its original form. The ancestral homeland remains an important reference point for identity, but its significance must be renegotiated in the present.

Nostalgia is another important element in Ratner's reification of homeland. It expresses the longing for a lost place, an earlier way of life, or relationships that can no longer be recovered. In the context of the Cambodian diaspora, this longing is inseparable from the violence of the Khmer Rouge period and the disruption of familial and cultural continuity. "In the article, 'Displacement and Identity Discontinuity: The Role of Nostalgia in Establishing New Identity Categories', Melinda J. Milligan asserts that 'displacement leads to identity discontinuity and that nostalgia provides one way of maintaining or regaining identity continuity' (381)." Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) provides a further framework for understanding the relationship between displacement and the reconstruction of homeland. Boym distinguishes restorative nostalgia, which seeks to rebuild a lost home and establish continuity with an idealised past, from reflective nostalgia, which dwells on longing, temporal distance, and the contradictions of memory. This distinction is particularly relevant to Ratner's novels, in which the desire to recover a lost Cambodia exists alongside the recognition that the homeland destroyed by the Khmer Rouge cannot be restored in its original form. While restorative nostalgia illuminates the impulse to preserve cultural and familial memories, reflective nostalgia draws attention to the fragmentation and irreversibility of the past. Together, these concepts help explain how Ratner reifies homeland through narratives that preserve cultural belonging while acknowledging the impossibility of complete recovery.

Restorative nostalgia is particularly useful for understanding Raami's recollections in *In the Shadow of the Banyan*. At the beginning of the novel, Raami associates her childhood home in Phnom Penh with familial affection, cultural familiarity, and her father's stories. The arrival of the revolutionary soldiers and the subsequent destruction of her familiar world transform these memories into fragments of a homeland that can no longer be recovered through physical return. Through Raami's recollections, Ratner preserves an image of Cambodia that precedes the violence of the Khmer Rouge regime. These memories express a restorative impulse because they sustain the desire to preserve the cultural and emotional dimensions of a lost home. Nevertheless, the novel complicates this impulse by demonstrating that the past cannot be restored in its entirety. Raami's experiences of bereavement, forced labour, and displacement reveal the irreversible consequences of historical violence. Her memories therefore preserve the significance of homeland without suggesting that recollection can recreate the world that has been destroyed.

Reflective nostalgia provides a complementary perspective on Suteera's experience in *Music of the Ghosts*. Her return to Cambodia does not provide an uncomplicated restoration of her lost homeland; instead, it confronts her with the distance between the past she seeks to understand and the present reality of the country. Her search for her father's history becomes an attempt to negotiate the rupture between her experiences in exile and her cultural inheritance. In this respect, Suteera's journey exemplifies reflective nostalgia, which acknowledges the incompleteness and contradictions of remembering rather than assuming that the past can be fully recovered. Her description of the journey as a ceaseless search that becomes her "only true country" (*Music* 91) suggests that belonging may emerge through the ongoing negotiation of memory and identity rather than through the recovery of a fixed geographical origin. Ratner thus complicates the relationship between homeland and return: Cambodia remains central to Suteera's identity, but her connection with it must be renegotiated through historical understanding, remembrance, and the recognition of loss.

Through the interplay of restorative and reflective nostalgia, Ratner reifies homeland as a literary and cultural presence that survives displacement without being reduced to an idealised or fully recoverable past. Her novels demonstrate that storytelling can preserve the memory of Cambodia while acknowledging the historical rupture that prevents its complete restoration. Homeland thus emerges not simply as a place to which one may return, but as an evolving relationship between memory, cultural inheritance, and the continuing negotiation of diasporic identity.

Raami's longing for her father is particularly significant. His absence is expressed through the statement that "absence is worse than death" (*In the Shadow* 20). The line conveys the anguish produced by an absence that cannot be fully explained or resolved. For Raami, her father's disappearance disrupts the source of cultural knowledge and emotional security. His stories and remembered words consequently become means through which she attempts to maintain a connection with him.

Loss and grief thus shape Raami's relationship with homeland. Her nostalgia is not simply a desire to return to a place associated with happiness; it is an attempt to preserve the relationships and experiences that gave that place meaning. The remembered home becomes inseparable from the people who inhabited it and the stories that circulated within it.

Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase observe in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* that nostalgia has acquired a metaphorical significance in which the "home we miss is no longer a geographically defined place but rather a state of mind" (1). This understanding is useful for interpreting Ratner's reification of homeland. For Ratner, home may not be confined to the physical structure in Phnom Penh. It must then also consist of familial intimacy, cultural traditions, and remembered narratives that remain significant after geographical displacement.

However, nostalgia should not be understood as an uncomplicated return to an idealised past. The memories that sustain Raami are inseparable from the knowledge of their destruction. Her longing preserves the emotional significance of her former life while exposing the historical violence that has made its recovery impossible.

In *Music of the Ghosts*, nostalgia is complicated by Suteera's more uncertain relationship with Cambodia. Her sense of belonging is fractured by the loss of her family and her life in exile. She longs for a connection with her origins, yet that connection is not supported by an entirely accessible or stable memory of the past. At times, the journey itself seems to become a substitute for the homeland she struggles to reclaim: "At times, she feels the journey, this ceaseless search, is her only true country" (*Music* 91).

The metaphor of the journey suggests that belonging may emerge through the ongoing negotiation of identity rather than through the recovery of a fixed origin. Suteera's return to Cambodia is therefore not merely geographical. It is also an attempt to understand the experiences that shaped her displacement and the family history that remains unresolved. Her search is prompted partly by the Old Musician's letter and the possibility of discovering information about her father. Rather than returning with an uncomplicated desire to revisit her birthplace, Suteera approaches Cambodia with apprehension about confronting the horrors associated with the Khmer Rouge regime. Her investigation of her father's past becomes inseparable from her attempt to understand her own history.

Melinda J. Milligan's discussion of displacement and identity discontinuity provides a useful framework for interpreting this experience. Milligan argues that displacement may disrupt the continuity of identity and that nostalgia can help individuals maintain or recover a sense of connection with their former selves (381). Suteera's experience illustrates both the potential and the limitations of this process. Her return creates an opportunity to confront her past, but it cannot erase the rupture produced by displacement.

The contrast between Raami and Suteera is therefore significant. Raami's childhood recollections preserve a world experienced directly, even as that world is destroyed. Suteera, by contrast, must negotiate the distance between her inherited history, her experiences in exile, and the Cambodia she encounters upon returning.

Together, the novels suggest that diasporic identity develops through different relationships with memory, depending on the individual's age, experiences, and access to cultural and familial knowledge.

Storytelling provides a means through which Ratner's characters negotiate the relationship between memory and identity. It allows personal experiences to acquire narrative form and enables cultural knowledge to be transmitted despite displacement and historical violence. In this sense, storytelling becomes central to the reification of homeland: it transforms recollections and inherited narratives into representations through which an absent place can be imagined and shared.

Michael D. Jackson, in *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, argues that stories help individuals make sense of their journeys through life and "rework reality in order to make it bearable" (16). He further describes storytelling as "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (14–15). These observations illuminate the significance of storytelling in Ratner's representation of survival after genocide.

In *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, the stories narrated by Raami's father connect her to Cambodia's cultural and mythical traditions. They offer her a means of understanding the world beyond the immediate circumstances of violence and displacement. As the Khmer Rouge seeks to dismantle existing social and cultural structures, these narratives preserve a form of knowledge that cannot be entirely reduced to the revolutionary regime's ideological framework. Her father's stories are therefore significant not simply because they provide comfort but because they establish a relationship between Raami's individual identity and a wider cultural inheritance. They connect her to a world that existed before the revolution and provide narrative resources through which she can interpret her experiences.

Storytelling also assumes a broader significance through Ratner's own literary practice. By transforming historical trauma and personal recollection into fiction, she creates a narrative space in which the experiences of displacement and genocide can be remembered and communicated. The novel thus moves between individual memory and collective history, presenting the particular experiences of its characters while acknowledging the wider devastation of Cambodian society. The act of narration does not eliminate the suffering associated with the past. Instead, it makes that suffering available for reflection and remembrance. Storytelling becomes a form of resistance against historical erasure because it preserves experiences that might otherwise remain silenced or fragmented.

Suteera's relationship with writing in *Music of the Ghosts* similarly demonstrates the importance of narrative preservation. As she returns to Cambodia and investigates her father's disappearance, she records her experiences through what the novel describes as "her private journey with words" (*Music* 14). Writing becomes part of her attempt to understand the relationship between her personal history and the collective trauma of her community. Her search also reveals that recovering the past is beyond retrieving forgotten information. It involves confronting the emotional and historical consequences of what has been lost. Through the process of investigation and remembrance, Suteera begins to negotiate the relationship between her fragmented identity and her cultural origins.

Salman Rushdie's concept of "imaginary homelands" sheds light on this process. In his essay collection *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie explores how displacement transforms the relationship between memory, imagination, and the representation of one's place of origin. The homeland reconstructed from exile is necessarily mediated by memory and imagination rather than reproduced as an unchanged reality. Ratner's novels similarly demonstrate that literary representations of homeland emerge through the selection and arrangement of remembered experiences. The resulting homeland is neither wholly imaginary nor a complete reproduction of historical reality. It is a narrative construction grounded in personal experience, cultural memory, and historical knowledge.

Storytelling consequently enables Raami and Suteera to maintain connections with Cambodia while acknowledging the rupture created by genocide and displacement. Through their narratives, homeland becomes something that can be remembered, interpreted, and transmitted even when physical return cannot restore the past.

Ratner's representation of homeland extends beyond individual memory to encompass the relationship between place, history, and cultural identity. In both novels, the destruction of familiar environments disrupts the assumption that home is a stable space offering security and continuity. Yet the persistence of memory and storytelling demonstrates that the significance of home can survive the destruction of its physical surroundings.

In *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, Raami's childhood home in Phnom Penh is initially associated with familial bonds, cultural familiarity, and the privileges of her former life. The arrival of revolutionary soldiers and the forced evacuation of the city transform this environment into a space of loss. Her subsequent displacement exposes the vulnerability of a homeland defined exclusively through physical location. Nevertheless, Raami carries fragments of her former life through memory. Her father's stories and her recollections of family relationships provide a sense of continuity amid the instability of displacement. Home becomes an emotional and cultural presence that accompanies her beyond the boundaries of Phnom Penh.

The novel also complicates the relationship between memory and survival. As Raami endures starvation, forced labour, and the loss of family members, her relationship with the past changes. Her statement, "I became

a deaf. I became a mute. I thought only of the work in front of me" (*In the Shadow* 296), suggests a profound alteration in her way of responding to the world. Her silence can be read as a response to overwhelming circumstances, although it should not be reduced to a simple act of recovery or resistance. It also indicates the limits of narrative expression under conditions of extreme suffering. While the novel illustrates storytelling as a means of preserving cultural identity, Raami's silence reminds readers that trauma may disrupt the very processes through which experience is communicated. This tension deepens the argument about reification. The homeland reconstructed through memory is not an entirely coherent or complete entity. It is assembled from fragments of experience, including recollections that can be narrated and absences that resist articulation.

In *Music of the Ghosts*, the relationship between home and history is further complicated by Suteera's return. She initially struggles to reconnect with Cambodia because the country is associated with the destruction of her family and the trauma of the Pol Pot regime. Her displacement has disrupted her relationship with the ancestral homeland, leaving her uncertain about how to inhabit the history to which she remains connected. Her journey becomes an attempt to recover the circumstances surrounding her father's disappearance and to confront the historical experiences that have shaped her life. Yet the Cambodia she encounters cannot simply reproduce the homeland preserved in memory. The passage of time, the consequences of violence, and her experiences in the United States have all altered her relationship with the country.

Suteera's experience therefore challenges the assumption that physical return necessarily restores cultural belonging. Instead, return exposes the differences between remembered homeland and present reality. Her developing understanding of the past becomes part of a continuing process of negotiating identity. Both novels consequently resist the idea that homeland can be recovered in an unchanged form. For Raami, the homeland persists through memories of a childhood world destroyed by genocide. For Suteera, it becomes the object of a difficult return through which inherited history and personal identity must be reconsidered. In each case, the reconstruction of homeland depends upon the interaction of geographical place, historical experience, and narrative imagination.

Conclusion

Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and *Music of the Ghosts* explore the relationship between homeland, memory, and identity in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide. Through the experiences of Raami and Suteera, the novels demonstrate that displacement involves more than physical separation from a country. It also disrupts familial relationships, cultural continuity, and the narratives through which individuals understand their identities.

This paper has argued that Ratner reifies homeland through memory, nostalgia, and storytelling. Raami's recollections of her childhood in Phnom Penh preserve fragments of a world destroyed by revolutionary violence, while Suteera's return to Cambodia reveals the difficulties of reconciling inherited memories with the realities of the present. Their contrasting experiences demonstrate that homeland cannot be reduced to a stable geographical origin or recovered through physical return alone.

Memory preserves connections with the past, nostalgia expresses the emotional significance of what has been lost, and storytelling gives these experiences narrative form. Yet none of these processes restores the homeland in its entirety. Instead, they produce representations shaped by personal recollection and the imaginative possibilities of literature.

Ratner's fiction thus presents homeland as both an object of longing and an ongoing process of reconstruction. By bringing individual memories into conversation with Cambodia's collective history, her novels resist the erasure of cultural experience and preserve the complexity of a society frequently represented through the violence it endured. Ultimately, the reification of homeland in Ratner's work lies not in the recovery of an untouched past but in the creation of a narrative space through which loss can be remembered, cultural identity can be negotiated, and the experiences of displacement can be transmitted across generations.

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