

Modern Short Stories – people’s experiences and memories recorded by novelists

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មកដល់សតវត្សរ៍នេះ ពុំមានអ្នកស្រាវជ្រាវដែលបានចាប់អារម្មណ៍ធ្វើការសិក្សាទាក់ទងនឹង (គឺជារឿងប្រលោមលោកខ្លីៗ) ដែលអ្នកនិពន្ធខ្មែរដ៏ល្បីឈ្មោះខ្លះ បានកែងមុនសម័យបដិវត្តន៍ ខ្មែរក្រហម និង ក្រោយសម័យបដិវត្តន៍នេះ ។ ហេតុនេះហើយ បានជា បណ្ឌិត អុនាដា សុម្ពិក្ខុ បានសម្រេចធ្វើបរិយាយអំពីស្នាដៃ របស់អ្នកនិពន្ធខ្មែរ ដូចជា លោក សុន្ទ ម៉ូលីន

លោក ឃុន ស្រ្តីន លោក ម៉ៅ សំណាង និង លោក សុន សុន្ទារី ជាដើម ។

លោក អុនាដា បានបកប្រែស្នាដៃរបស់អ្នកនិពន្ធខ្មែរនោះ ជាភាសាជប៉ុន ហើយបានបោះពុម្ពផ្សាយទាក់ទងនឹងខ្មែរអស់នេះ នាឆ្នាំ ២០០១ ។ ដោយមានការជួយឧបត្ថម្ភរបស់មូលនិធិ ជីវិតដៃដូ (Daido Life Foundation) ។

At the end of the 1930’s under the French Protectorate, so-called modern literature was born in Cambodia. The new wave of literature was written in prose and described every day life that was familiar to the common reader. These works were different from the classics that were written in verse and depict super natural heroes who inhabit splendid courts and the heavenly places.

Whatever you order me, I will do it (1969) is his only collection of short stories. In “Communication”, the first of four stories in the collection, Polin expresses the mentality of a serious young man who cannot communicate with persons near him without fretting about it. The hero narrator feels alienated and creates an ideal world in his imagination, while his “other” cannot talk comfortably even with a person in his office. “Order me, Honey” and “Whatever you order me, I will do it” deal with husbands whose behavior disgusts their wives and forces them to take action. In “Everything has changed”, the hero deplors the metamorphosis of his family but realizes after a quarrel with them that he has also changed like them. The heroes in each story are ordinary middle class people living an urban life in Phnom Penh who cannot express their ideas or feelings in front of the women they love. Also, the women described in the stories assert their rights, enjoy being free and unrestrained and challenge the traditional expectation of the virtuous woman who is modest and obedient to her husband.

Since independence from France, the political systems in Cambodia have changed many times. People’s values, such as how a family ought to be and the relationship between an individual and society have varied with the changing times and are reflected in the works of writers. The memory of an individual writer recorded in a story becomes the memory of readers, and eventually it becomes the historical memory of the people.

Today, Polin continues to write articles for some Cambodian newspapers and long stories as well. He lives in the United States, and his keen point of view is still active.

As there is little mention of modern short stories in the history of Cambodian literature, four writers and their works are introduced here that reflect the memory of each time.

Soth Polin - a journalist and novelist who loved Sartre

Khun Srun - a mathematics teacher who chose a road to the Khmer Rouge

Soth Polin (1943-) was one of Cambodia’s most famous journalists who published and edited newspapers such as *Koh Santepheap*, *Nokor Thom* and *Khmer Ekkareach*. These newspapers had many readers because they contained political articles that criticized the government boldly despite the strict censorship of the 1960’s. His talents as a writer, however, were brought into full play in his novels. Soth Polin has degrees in French literature and philosophy and was taught by a philosophy teacher named Salot Sar, later called Pol Pot. Polin published many novels one after another. His debut novel, *A Meaningless Life* (1964), was very popular at the time of its publication. In successive works, he continued to express ideas regarding “the Self and the Other” and “Being and Nothingness” influenced by Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy. Whereas most modern literary works in Cambodia are intended to “educate” or “enlighten” the people, Polin’s works are unique in the sense of their cynical narration and sophisticated sexual content that are rarely seen in other writers’ works.

Khun Srun (1945-1978) was a very active intellectual living at the same time as Soth Polin, but he lived a short life. He was an excellent mathematics teacher at a high school, and he also worked as a member of the textbook editorial committee at the Ministry of Education at the end of the 1960’s. But his real talent can be seen in the poems, long and short stories, and essays that he wrote.

Five of his short stories are collected in a book entitled *The Last Habitation* (1972), which seems to be his autobiography. Srun might have written “A Flash of Lightning” after reading the short story “Erostrate” by Sartre which the narrator of Srun’s story read. When the narrator, a prisoner, takes a shower on the roof of the police station, he suddenly has the delusion that he wants to kill a woman who happens to be there, just as the hero in “Erostrate”

while standing on top of a high building decides to kill someone. Srun was imprisoned for half a year in 1971, because his integrity and honesty kept him from accepting a conciliatory gesture of the new government that needed him. This experience is also described in detail in the novel *The Accused* (1973).

The second story, “A Disgusted Nature,” deals with the confession of a lady teacher who is distrustful of men. One can draw some comparisons with characters from classical stories such as *Kakai*, *Tum Teav*, and *Reamker*. The lady teacher asserts that men have always exploited women, marriage does not bring women happiness and women have a right not to bear a child. The story raises gender issues that are the same today.

In “The Sok’s Home”, the hero, Sok, leaves his home village and goes to Phnom Penh where he wanders from home to home as a servant. He sees a family who lives in an elegant home had broken down and finally found a place for peaceful living at the simple home of a married couple, working as teachers. “My School” and “Mr. Phuan, a teacher” describe the sweet memories of Srun’s schooldays. This is something that every Cambodian has experienced, and it can be seen on every page of the story.

Before 1975, Srun came to the conclusion that life does not exist to give difficulty to others. He abandoned everything that he had held dear and entered a liberated district. During the Pol Pot regime, he worked as a railway repairman near Phnom Penh, but his dream did not come true. He was purged with his wife and children in 1978, just before the regime fell.

Writers in the Post-Genocide - a start from zero

After the new “Kingdom of Cambodia” was born, many newspapers and magazines were published. Writers had new opportunities to make their works known to the public with a new conception. The political propaganda and stereotyped phrases and characters seen so often in literary works during the 1980’s disappeared.

Mao Somnang (1959-) wrote many long stories around 1990 under a pen-name “Tonsai,” which means “rabbit” in Cambodian, and has also been a very famous scenario writer of TV dramas. She was awarded the first prize of the first King Sihanouk prize in 1995 for *The waves wash the shore*, and since 1998 she has been writing exclusively for the women’s

magazine *Kolthida*. In the magazine, she writes articles on interviews with well-known persons, as well as essays on culture and society.

Her specialty is writing long stories published serially in the magazine as well as some short stories. In 1999, she took up the subject of the struggle inside a rich family and wrote “A Black Sea.” In this story, a boy who is spoiled his rich parents causes a criminal case in order to gain their affection. Keywords such as “Big Brother”, “robbery of motorcycle”, “water-house” are found in the story. One of the most serious problems in the Cambodian society, juvenile delinquency, can be seen here.

Mey Son Sotheary (1977-) was only 18 year old when her works “My sister” and “Why” appeared in 1995 in *Rasmei Kampuchea*, one of the largest and best-equipped newspapers. It meant that a new generation that had not experienced the Pol Pot regime was born. She focused on the social problems that arise from the social confusion of radical changes of politics and economics and explained the background of the problems.

The story “My sister” describes a woman who does not pursue an academic career or any skill to get a job that could provide her with enough money to live. She has no way to support herself except to be one of the bar-girls or prostitutes who are looked down upon because of their poverty and ignorance. Another story “Why” also describes a poor boy who lives in Phnom Penh. He does not have enough money to take care of his family, so he decides to become a robber with his friends. One night, he was followed by the police and killed.

After working at some media organizations, and at the same time writing short stories for *Rasmei Kampuchea*, as well as a popular magazine *Procheaprai*, Mey Son Sotheary is now on the staff of Women’s Media Center, a NGO that works to improve the participation and portrayal of women in the mainstream by producing and promoting effective TV, video and radio programs.

The works introduced here are often overlooked or ignored because they are not significant ones for the canon, but they are of help to those who want to understand how Cambodian people look at their society.

(The works introduced here were translated by the author into Japanese and published as *Modern Cambodian Short Stories* by The Daido Life Foundation in 2001).

