

Feminist Criticism of Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father*

Research Question: In what ways does Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* highlight how women suffer under the patriarchy?

First They Killed My Father is a memoir by Loung Ung, a survivor of the Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime. The novel details her memories during the conflict with particular depictions of what life was like for Cambodian women and girls during this period. As a result, a feminist lens, which specifically evaluates the treatment of and expectations placed on women, is an appropriate method to explore topics such as the patriarchy, gender performance, and objectification. According to sociologist Dr. Nicki Cole, there is no relation between gender and biological sex, but that through socialization, individuals are conditioned to perform a role that corresponds to their sex. In other words, a society expects females to behave in what is considered classically feminine, and males are expected to behave in a classically masculine way, even though biological sex does not determine one's personality traits. Because of these expectations and associations, where men are considered strong and women more passive, a society tends to be patriarchal, meaning that men have more power than women in society (Napikoski). Hence, through this line of inquiry, it becomes apparent in Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father* that women suffer within the patriarchy as a result of limited power, emphasized maternal performances, and the objectification of women.

Primarily, through limited female power in Loung's family, Loung's memoir depicts traditional gender performances and patriarchal ideologies where men should be strong and women weak. Particularly, when Loung and her family were waiting to be ordered by the soldiers, Pa told them to "remember, [that they] are a family of peasants [and to] give [the soldiers] whatever they want and don't argue" (51). Pa's clauses follow a parallel structure which include imperative verbs that have connotations with commands. Evidently, Pa speaks with an authoritative tone, indicating that he is in control of the family, highlighting his power. Conversely, Ma is indirectly characterized as having no role as Pa is the one who does the instructing, suggesting a patriarchal structure in the family. Consequently, the text

reproduces traditional gender performances as the male figure is the leader, and the female figure has less power in comparison. .

Additionally, when Ma and Pa were having an argument, “Ma [avoided] looking at him as he [approached] her” (188). When he spoke, he was “hover[ing] over her [...] speak[ing] loud, angry words to Ma [as] she [sat] in the corner of the room”(188). By saying that Ma avoided looking at Pa, readers have the impression that she was too scared to look at him. Added to this, the phrase “hover[ing] over her” evokes a threat due to a looming presence and portrays how Pa has more power than her in the family. Additionally, by saying that Ma was sitting in the corner of the room, readers are reminded of how weak she is when compared to Pa, as she is physically marginalized to a corner of the space. As a result of all this, Pa is using the power he has in the family to his advantage against Ma, revealing a patriarchal structure within the family. On the other hand, Ma does not defend herself, highlighting her weakness and place in the family. Therefore, the difference in power is emphasized since a male has the power to mistreat a female while she does not have the power needed to resist, proving how classical gender performances are reproduced in the memoir. Linda Napikoski’s, an American philosopher of gender studies, states that “in a system in which men have more power than women, men have some level of privilege to which women are not entitled” (Napikoski). Thus, the way men use their privilege of power to their favor while women are unable to become evident in the memoir can be problematic as it implicitly justifies such structures. Consequently, in her memoir, Loung shows how female power is limited within patriarchal structures..

Furthermore, through expected maternal roles for women, Loung’s memoir maintains traditional gender performances which limit their value. For instance, Loung was explaining that in general, “the father is busy with work and the mother is busy with babies and shopping” (27). By referring to mothers and fathers in general through the article “the” instead of the possessive ‘my’, Loung highlights how these roles are somewhat universal and normative. Additionally, the tone she uses is neutral and, thus, Loung reveals that these expectations are normalized. As a result, because Loung is portrayed as being aware of such expectations from a young age. This embodies patriarchal ideology where women are expected to take care of children and men to be breadwinners. In fact, according to Nasrullah Mambrol’s article about Judith Butler’s Concept of Performativity, “Butler defined gender as a social role performed/enacted by the individuals, and validated and accepted by society” (Mambrol). As is clear,

the memoir reflects this idea; mothers behave in a certain way which is accepted by society and is now expected by society upon all women.

Conversely, while Pa was talking to the sons about politics, “Ma [was sitting] on the mat, holding Geak, who [slept] quietly in her arms.” At the same time, “Chou [was] next to her, focusing on her red-and-white kroma, intently folding and refolding it” (65). Ma was taking care of Geak, the youngest daughter, instead of contributing to Pa’s discussion, and this reminds the readers of a maternal job since she is taking care of a baby. Moreover, the phrase “folding and refolding it” reminds readers of a household chore which is traditionally done by women. *Consequently, Ma and Chou are depicted as maternal, developing a maternal setting where women and men were divided based on what they were doing.* **Furthermore**, this reproduces traditional gender roles and performances in the text because female characters were doing traditional chores and tasks while being excluded from important situations held by men. Judith Butler explains that “in the act of performing the conventions of reality, by embodying those fictions in our actions, we make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary”, so “by enacting conventions, we do make them “real” to some extent” (“Modules on Butler”). **Evidently**, the maternal way in which women were expected to behave has become normative and is consequently presented in Loung’s own personal experiences. **Hence**, Loung’s memoir depicts classical female performances which limit women within the patriarchy.

Finally, Loung’s memoir highlights the harmful expectations and treatment of women through the ways they become objectified within the patriarchy. **For example**, after a girl called Davi was raped by soldiers, “the soldiers returned Davi to her parents the next morning. But the Davi they returned was not the same one they took away.” Upon her return, she “stood before her parents in front of their hut, hair disheveled, face swollen, shoulders slumped, arms hanging like dead weights” (107). The words “returned” and “took” remind readers of handling an object. **Added to this**, asyndeton is used while revealing Davi’s physical appearance; a conjunction was taken away just like how Davi was taken away from her parents and how her previous identity has similarly been taken through the act of rape. **Additionally**, a semantic field of damage emphasizes the horrific treatment to which Davi was subjected. Because the soldiers had the power to forcefully take Davi away, the soldiers’ abuse of power is revealed. **Thus**, Davi’s objectification implies that women in this setting have little agency and are objects for men to

use. *Furthermore*, this implies the power men have in the memoir's setting. *As a result*, this scene is significant as it provides insight into how such structures allow men to feel that they have ownership over women's bodies in extreme cases.

Moreover, the soldiers of the camp Loung stayed at believed that a "woman's duty is to do what they are made for, to bear children for the Angkar." They believe that "if they do not fulfill their duty they are worthless and dispensable" (108). *By believing that it is a women's "duty" to give birth to children, soldiers indicate that it is their only purpose in life, reducing feminine worth down to child bearing. Added to this, referring to women who do not bear children as "worthless" and "dispensable" implies they are objects of no value. Hence, this suggests that female characters only have value if they perform a traditionally feminine role within the memoir's setting. As a result, the text reveals how women are reduced to objects of child rearing or sexual fulfillment for men, and that when they subvert this expectation, they are met with misogyny. Sally Haslanger, an American philosopher, believes that there are certain conditions that establish whether or not a woman is being objectified. In the conditions, it stated that "men view and treat women as objects of male sexual desire", and that "men believe that women are in fact submissive and object-like by nature" (Papadaki). Thus, it is clear that, through the memoir, there are people who believe that, by nature, the only purpose of a woman was to give birth to children. Therefore, through the objectification of women, Loung showcases the harmful expectations and treatment of women*

In sum, from such an analysis, it has become evident that harmful gender expectations are depicted in *First They Killed My Father* through patriarchy, maternalism, and objectification of women. *Specifically*, male characters were depicted as being in control, and female characters were behaving maternally. *Added to this*, women in the memoir were objectified, especially due to the lack of control they had over their own choices and bodies. *In conclusion*, through applying a feminist lens to Ung's memoir, gender performance does appear to be socialized and classical performances and traits do perpetuate patriarchal ideologies which justify men as leaders. By deconstructing cultural texts such as Ung's memoir, such ideologies can be challenged to make steps for more equality between the sexes.

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