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Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father* and Cambodian Civil War:
Memoir as Testimony and Beyond

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Abstract:

Unlike other research based on literary documentation of history, the present research aims at studying a literary writing about the Cambodian Civil War (hereafter CCW), Loung Ung's *First they killed My Father* (hereafter *First*) first published in 2000. CCW narratives, especially memoirs as testimony, hold a significant place in South/South-East Asian literature. Such memoirs contribute to the molding of stories and myths, constructing a collective memory of war for Cambodians. Authors from the CCW generation provide different frame of mind and reflections of the same, and an interesting mix of new voices from Asia emerges through these narratives. This paper aims to make a two-pronged analysis of the Asian woman writer Loung Ung's memoir *First*. First, it studies the text as a direct testimony to the CCW using the theoretical apparatus of testimonial literature. Second, it explores how the literary merit of the text takes it beyond the limits and limitations of the genre while blurring the distinction between autobiographical writing, here a memoir, and the features of a fiction and assumes autofictional qualities. In order to negotiate the proposed bipartite argument, the paper considers the sociological and political aspects of the narrative strategy used and discusses the historical accuracy of the text by providing an insight into the historical evidence of the CCW and other fictional and non-fictional accounts of the same. By proving that Ung's *First* is auto-fictional in nature, it offers a new lens to read the text and might be useful in the study of life writing. For the first time, this paper attempts to study Ung's memoir, *First* as an Autofiction.

Keywords: Asian women writers, testimony, memoir, Cambodian Civil War, autofiction.

龙翁的《他们第一次杀了我的父》亲和柬埔寨内战：回忆录作为证词及超越

摘要：

与其他基于历史文学文献的研究不同，本研究旨在研究有关柬埔寨内战的文学作品，龙翁的《他们第一次

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杀了我的父亲》（以下简称《第一次》）于2000年首次出版。柬埔寨内战叙事，特别是回忆录作为证词，在南亚/东南亚文学中占有重要地位。这些回忆录有助于塑造故事和神话，为柬埔寨人构建关于战争的集体记忆。柬埔寨内战一代的作家提供了不同的思维框架和对相同思维框架的反思，并且通过这些叙述出现了来自亚洲的新声音的有趣组合。本文旨在对亚洲女作家龙翁的回忆录《第一的》进行两方面的分析。首先，它使用证词文献的理论工具来研究该文本，作为对《特定常规武器公约》的直接证明。其次，它探讨了文本的文学价值如何超越体裁的界限和限制，同时模糊自传体写作（这里是回忆录）与小说特征之间的区别，并呈现自小说性质。为了协商拟议的双方论点，本文考虑了所使用的叙事策略的社会学和政治方面，并通过深入了解《特定常规武器公约》的历史证据以及其他虚构和非虚构的叙述，讨论了文本的历史准确性相同。通过证明翁格的《第一的》本质上是自传小说，它提供了阅读文本的新视角，并且可能对生活写作的研究有用。本文首次尝试将翁的回忆录《第一的》作为一部自传小说进行研究。

关键词：亚洲女作家、证词、回忆录、柬埔寨内战、自传小说。

1. Introduction

The Cambodian journalist Dith Pran, an important subject of the film *The Killing Fields* and the author of *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields*, makes the assertion that “It is important for me that the new generation of Cambodians and Cambodian Americans become active and tell the world what happened to them and their families... I want them never to forget the faces of their relatives and friends who were killed during the same time. The dead are crying out for justice” (Pran & DePaul, 2017) Pran's book was targeted to bring justice in any small way, and his text is a compilation of visual witness accounts of life in Cambodia during Pol Pot's regime. He chose stories of Cambodian survivors who lost their childhood to the rising sun of the Khmer Rouge regime in April 1975 (Kar, 2020). Haing Ngor is one such writer who is well known for his debut performance as the best supporting actor in the Oscar-Award winning 1984 Hollywood movie *The Killing Fields*. He is a survivor of that horrendous time and a witness to the atrocities of the Pol Pot reign. His *Survival in the Killing Fields* is a well-knit account of life during the Communist Khmer Rouge regime and is a gripping memoir giving us a vision of survival during times of unthinkable horror (Ngor, 1984). Similarly, Chanrithy Him is another child survivor narrator who wrote in honor of the memory of her family members and the victims of the Pol Pot regime in her memoir *When Broken Glass Floats* (Him, 2000). Him is an international speaker, social activist, Khmer classical dancer, and storyteller.

Besides the conventional memoirs, there have been graphic memoirs like *Year of the Rabbit* (2020) by Tian Veasna that tells the story of the desperate struggle of one family journeying from Phnom Penh in the hope of freedom after the takeover of Cambodia by Angkar and his communist party. Apart from memoirs, a good number of non-fiction and fictional writings, scribing the accounts of the Khmer Rouge regime and its act of brutality, have been produced by both Cambodian writers and Cambodian diasporic writers. One such fictional account of a nine-year child survivor is scripted in the book titled *Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide* by Icy

Smith (2010), which gives us a narrative account of a child at the age of nine named Nat, who was forced to leave Phnom Penh and was relocated to labor rooms. Nat says “I feel like I can't go any further. But when we approach what looks like a dead body, I find new strength to keep moving” (Smith, 2010). Loung Ung, a child survivor of the Cambodian genocide, put her experience of the unimaginable trauma of losing her parents and siblings into her memoir *First They Killed My Father* (2017) (hereafter *First*). It is a first-person witness account of the CCW. The book has made a wide impact because of several award-winning films with the same name in 2017. This paper reads Ung's memoir that provides a detailed historical account of the CCW and performs a justice act to remind the Cambodians about the event as Pran would urge. At the same time, this paper revisits the history of the CCW to find out how the book is a testimony to the CCW and how it meritoriously violates the norms of the genre of testimony literature and the historical and cultural accuracy has not been maintained by the narrator, thus blurring the distinction between autobiographical writing and the features of fiction and assigning it the value of autofiction.

2. Defining Testimony

Dr. Raúl Alberto Mora defines *testimonio*, a Spanish term understood as “witness account”, embodying a narrative research methodology rooted in Latin American history: “A *testimonio* is a first-person account by the person (narrator) who has faced instances of social and political inequality... in *testimonio* it is usually the narrator her/himself who is ...speak for justice, the creation of stronger pockets of resistance,...frameworks” (Mora, 2015). Authors emphasize on the ancient and age-old popular canvas of oral literary discourse, on which the witness paints his or her own experience of a particular event as a representative of collective memory and identity. Another such professor of Metaphysics at Radboud University in the Netherlands, Gert-Jan van der Heiden in his paper discusses about “four elements of testimony, namely, subject matter, witness, act of testifying, and addressee” (Heiden, 2021).

2.1. *Loung Ung's First as Testimony*

Based on Heiden's four elements of testimony, we can call Ung's memoir *First* a testimony to CCW as all four elements of Heiden are present in Ung's text. Ung in her memoir *First's* author's note mentions "This is a story of survival: my own and my family's." The subject of her memoir is Ung's survival and her family, and she is herself eyewitness to CCW makes the text a direct testimony. In the next line Ung writes "Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians." When she says the story is from her own experience and her story echoes that of millions of Cambodians, then certainly it is an act of testifying through her story. Ung continues, "If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too", about this line Kit Ying Lye, a faculty member at Singapore University of Social Sciences, in her paper on artistic testimony says it reflects "Ung assumes a legitimacy to speak for her fellow Cambodians when she claims in the prolog to her novel, *First*, that her story "mirrors that of Cambodians" and that her story would be her Cambodian readers story too (10)" (Lye, 2016). Therefore, Loung Ung's *First* remains important testimonial literature and Ung a testimonial figure.

3. Inaccuracies in Loung Ung's *First*

Ung's text is a firsthand account of her childhood in the capital city of Cambodia during the reign of Pol Pot. Loung depicts the genocide of almost a quarter of the nation's population. Loung uses both a child narrator and a child's viewpoint. With her chosen narrative style and perspective, she tries to protect herself and make the writing an authentic one. Ung says "I knew I was protecting myself by writing ... I had to use this tense. But it did not feel authentic ... Writing in the past tense allowed me to distance myself from that pain, but it distanced the reader as well" (Ung, 2017). While Ung was writing the first three chapters of *First*, she was writing in past tense and by doing so she was protecting herself from the fear of childhood trauma and suffering but later she switched to present tense to complete the text as she realized that by writing in past tense it not only distanced herself from that pain but also her readers. Through her narrative, Ung introduces the reader to a five-year-old Khmer Loung and makes the reader see the world through a subaltern, marginalized and oppressed child. The narrator, Loung Ung, now an empowered woman who has been a public figure with twenty years' experience of living in the United States, turns out to be a medium for long silenced 'Khmer Loung' by channelizing Khmer Loung's suppressed feelings and emotions, a child of five who lost her voice long back just to survive. John T. Maddox in his paper studies how Ung's *First* "challenges the uniqueness of testimonio and opens up new possibilities for reflection and political activism" (Maddox, 2013) Maddox finds Ung's text challenging John Beverley's elements of testimonio discussed in his paper 'The Margin at the

Center: On Testimonio' (Beverley, 2004) as Ung's text does not abide by the fourth and fifth elements of Beverley's schemata. Beverley's fourth point is: "the narrator is not a professional writer" and fifth point: "it is an oral recounting of events to an interlocutor" (Beverley, 2004) As Ung's text was found to be challenging the fifth element of testimonio defined by Beverley, Maddox says "Ung's text also challenges Beverley's fifth point, which apparently applies to "mediated" or "indirect" testimonies" (Maddox, 2013). He also compares Ung's text with other testimonies and observes how Ung's text and testimonio itself are quite different from the huge corpus of "witness life writings". After making a detailed comparative analysis, he jumps into the conclusion that "time will tell if Ung's text should not be called a testimonio, but something different. While it may be part of the beginnings of a literary phenomenon that will demand its own category, a Cambodian or Cambodian diaspora literary renaissance" (Maddox, 2013). Jimmy Kindru, a queer writer from Minnesota, USA, in his review "What's in a title? Examining the title of 'First They Killed My Father'" discusses an innumerable range of ideas that came across the student's mind and Kindru's understanding of the five words in the title: *First They Killed My Father*. Within his discourse, he mentions "Ung's work of testimonial literature has come under criticism of inaccuracy of having backfilled the understandable gaps in a child's understanding of such events with poor research, but it has also been praised for its emotional power, helping readers to get some idea of what the horrors of genocide mean" (Kindru, 2021) Here, "come under criticism" phrase takes us to Sody Lay's essay in which Lay discusses three narratives about Cambodia originally published in 2000. All these three books are *When Broken Glass Floats* by Chanrithy Him, *Bree Lefreniere* by Daran Kravnah, and Ung's *First*. Of all these three narratives, Ung's text being narrated by the youngest narrator, Lay says: "Being so young, Ung's "memory" is suspect, and her book seems to be based more on imagination than any kind of real memory" (Lay, 2001). Ung has been criticized by literary scholars and critics including Sody Lay, Sopheap Keo, Soneath Hor, and Grantham Quinn. In their 2001 review essay, the critics spoke of the historical inaccuracy of Ung's memoir and the testimony it contains:

"Ung gives the reader no sense of the turmoil of 1975 Cambodia. In describing the streets of Phnom Penh for instance, she states: "The wide boulevards sing with the buzz of motorcycle engines, squeaky bicycles, and for those wealthy enough to afford them, small cars" (1). But where are the military vehicles that were ubiquitous at the time or the over one million refugees from the countryside who fled into the city? Are they so insignificant to her as to not be worth mentioning? Or could it be that this author is simply setting her fiction within the Phnom Penh of today that she observed on a recent visit?" (Lay, 2001)

Based on the inaccuracies pointed out by critics and

scholars, Bunkong Tuon in his paper "Inaccuracy and Testimonial Literature: The Case of Loung Ung's *First they Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*" (Tuon, 2013) critically analyzes the historical irregularities present in Ung's text, as pointed out by various critics to verify their credibility. Bunkong discusses how Sody Lay criticizes Ung's *First* for historical and cultural inaccuracies, calling Ung's memoir "a sensationalization and over-dramatization of the Killing Fields experience" (Tuon, 2013). Tuon commented on how reviewers examined different sections of Ung's *First* and drew the conclusion that Ung is not the true daughter of Cambodia as her text provides: "blatantly incorrect information about these [Angkor Wat] temples, as they are an integral part of Khmer heritage and pride" (Tuon, 2013). The critical comments are valid if one looks at the testimony functions of a literary piece. Testimonial narrative in the form of resistance emanates as a side shoot of women's political movements in general. Women through their writings are reacting and responding to oppressive rule. Along with that, they are transforming the political oppression prevailing in the world. Testimonial writings of women create a new convention in the forums of political protest. Such writings stress on issues of survival, human rights, and equality by challenging the prevailing way of politics. Women writers, through their intimidating skill of writing, respond to the arranged authoritarian and oppressive governments in a way that the testimonial literature engages with their reader through the process of reflection, communication and negotiation, creating a genre that voices out their rage and discomfort (Lau, 2002). Such acts of repression are subversive. The key to testimonial literature is how selectively chosen words work as weapons against brutality.

4. The Role of Narrative Voice and Memory in *First*

The question of historical inaccuracies in her representation in *First*, for which Ung has been criticized, can be attributed to the significant link between narrative voice and memory. Episodic/Autobiographical memory of one's own actions and experiences often changes as the truths long held by the author about their lives begin to open themselves. The very form of memoir has a profound psychological effect on its author. According to Mary Karr "Memoir is a democratic form, in that anybody who has lived can write one" (Karr, 2015). One's understanding of one's world is made up of the stories one tells oneself about their lives, and those reflect ideas that are not firmly grounded in reality. Therefore, episodic memories are often influenced by how the writer wants to see and locate them and not necessarily the way things were. As a result, discrepancies arise between memories and facts when the author tries to maintain a coherent story. To wrap their regrets, authors

often justify their behavior and sometimes even suspend the reader's belief with alternate explanations. There is a disconnection between the way one remembers oneself and the way they really were, which might be caused by the peculiar features of episodic memory. But is there a possibility that these historical and cultural inaccuracies are deliberate? The answer to this question lies in Ung's response to Sody Lay's letter "which Lay published on the Khmer Institute Web site" (Tuon, 2013). Ung in her response explains her reason for choosing a child narrator since the voice is likely to be perceived as unreliable: "Writing my book from a child's point of view was... to correct, fix, add research, historical references, and other adult knowledge to the misinformation... I had to step out of the child's shoes...other "isms" in Cambodia in 197 ... at my home now" (Ung, 2017). Ung's testimonial discourse is deliberately chosen as an empowering and powerful mode to express Ung's resistance to mass killing and suffering. She consciously relies on her episodic memory of the time, which is subject to change as she unravels the truth in her writing. Her text paints a photographic reality of her childhood experience of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (hereafter CPK). By doing so, she remains true to the persona of her childhood self.

Ung is a descendant of both Cambodian and Chinese cultures. Therefore, the historical and cultural facts provided by Ung according to her childhood experience and perspective make the text appear inaccurate from historical and cultural aspects. These inaccuracies come naturally with the child's depiction of her story, and as a result, it might mismatch with Cambodian history and culture. Because of Ung's childhood voice and childhood memory a tension arises between her own episodic memory and the collective memory of Cambodian mass killing, the voice of all those who suffered at the hands of the CPK. Her text is representative that speaks of her and millions of other women writers' fight with military or governmental control. It is a testimony of her and her family and speaks about Cambodia's people against institutionalized marginalization. Here, the aim of the author is to raise a voice against the injustices and the crimes done to them during Pol Pot's regime. The truth of the victim's story drawn from her empirical knowledge may not be historically and scientifically correct. Nonetheless, the speaker is aware that the manner in which she reaches out to her readers may hold for them a harrowing experience of re-living the author's life during oppression. Voicing such oppressive experiences through her writing as an outlet to suppressed memories of torture, oppression or marginalization ultimately makes the author or speaker an enabled survivor.

Memory is an important characteristic of testimonial literature. Some critics and scholars argue that memory may cast less than absolute truth. The very nature of the victim's survival enables the narrator to accentuate her

experience through a tenderhearted art by allowing them redemption. Testimonial literature has a therapeutic effect on both the reader and narrator. It opens up their eyes to the empowering capacity of individual accounts and empowers them to become a part of the greater human consciousness. Although testimony usually a firsthand account of one person, it collectively speaks for those affected by the same oppressive social event. Testimonial accounts work like a miracle in the process of healing.

Bunkong Tuon discusses Ung's reception's text by critics who claim to have historical and cultural inaccuracies along with their expression of disappointment. Lay et al. object that "Ung's treatment of the New Year customs and rituals that appear to them more of Chinese than Cambodian, such as the red dress that Ung wears during the celebration and Ung's description of food. Their review claims that the red chiffon dress that Ung describes "is far from traditional Cambodian formal wear, which actually consists of hand-woven silk skirts and laced tops and are usually not red in color. Although the American reader may consider it a relatively benign 'mistake,' it would be akin to saying that Americans traditionally dress up in gaudy pink prom dresses to celebrate the Fourth of July" (Tuon, 2013). Tuon critically analyzes the claims made by Lay and his group by cross-checking the historical record of the same event. Lay accuses Ung of misleading the readers by constantly manipulating historical facts and misrepresentation of Cambodian culture as Ung fails to calculate Cambodia's Khmer Rouge period and to balance her personal healing process with her taken up responsibility to politically connect with Cambodians through a common thread of death, loss and suffering. In his paper, Tuon takes up the responsibility of discussing the Lay-Ung controversy in the context of the Cambodian diasporic community by keeping the politics of representation and his need for multiple and diverse representation in close attention. He also ponders Teri Shaffer Yamada's article 'Cambodian American Autobiography: Testimonial Discourse' and discusses Ung's *First* within the context of testimonial literature. Tuon examines "the difficulty of Ung as a survivor in balancing her psychological need for healing with the political duty to speak on behalf of the Cambodian people...text succeeds in bearing witness to the destruction that impedes the survivor's ability to create the kind of narrative that can be used as straightforward evidence against the Khmer Rouge" (Tuon, 2013). There are historical and cultural inaccuracies lying in the very fabric of the memoir *First* and this text being a first-hand witness account to the CCW questions the credibility of the text as a testimony to the same. Tuon draws the conclusion that though Loung Ung inaccurately presents the historical truth, she successfully presents her emotional truth and therefore it is legitimate evidence of the Cambodian genocide. By defending Ung, Bunkong Tuon has no intention to lessen the value of the historical or cultural accuracy in

testimonial literature; rather he successfully establishes his argument that though Ung's *First* fails to bear witness in some ways but triumphs in other ways" (Tuon, 2013).

5. Memoirs as Testimony and Beyond

Memoirs are testimonies in the sense that they are historical recordings of evidence, but the issue of truth still arises in terms of criticism whether it makes an objective representation of the evidence provided or it is just a subjective truth. They are individual expressions of feelings, events and actions that reflect individual values, desires, hopes, opinions and belief systems. Although memoir is a genre of life writing like an autobiography, it is more "focused than an autobiography, a memoir is an intimate look at a moment in time" (Dukes, 2023). Furthermore, Jessica Dukes defines memoir as a "narrative, written from the perspective of the author, about an important part of their life... An autobiography is also written from the author's perspective... it primarily focuses on facts... Memoirs stimulate factually true... dis-continuity in the time continuum..." (Dukes, 2023) Therefore, to rely on memoir often results in having biased viewpoints, particularly if there are varying perspectives of a certain event. As memoirs are just recordings of events that seem necessary to the author that means such autobiographical writings are mere expressions of opinions that can be applied to the context of neither a group nor are they stable enough to stand the test of time. Based on the author's perception and various factors influencing the point of view, memoirs are considered to be conflicting in nature as to the interpretation based on facts. This is how memoirs contradict the truth on the basis of history. A memoir is supposed to be as true as the author can make it, and writing one's exact memories is quite challenging as very few have photographic memories. Thus, Ung's text is not entirely a memoir as the text moves beyond the limits and limitations of the genre of Memoir. How exactly is the reception of this text going to be at the hands of readers? Does the text come across as a fictional account based on the CCW with the pronounced historical inaccuracies? Paul de Man (1979) dismantles the idea in a compelling manner that one might decide which texts should be read as autobiographical and which ones should be regarded as merely fictional. He is the man whose deconstruction of autobiography made way for writers' self-fictionalizing experiments. He observes: "The distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable... Autobiography, then is not a genre or a mode but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs to some degree in all texts... But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be" (de Man, 1979).

Using the currency of De Man, Ung's text appears to play a larger role and spreads over a bigger literary canvas than a memoir. Ung's *First*, as a memoir,

incorporates truth into it as it discusses CCW and therefore comes under the umbrella term life writing but the text is neither a pure memoir, i.e., completely autobiographical, nor is it entirely a fictive work. It moves beyond the boundaries of the genre of a memoir and steps into the premises of fiction. Memoir's partial departure from autobiography and other genres of life writing assigns it the features of other genres such as fiction. Ung's *First* with its more expansive literary vision invites its readers to receive it as a piece of auto-fiction, a combination of autobiography and fiction, the term that Dubrovsky invented in 1977 with *Fils* and went on redefining and refining for several decades.

Dubrovsky's notion of auto-fiction (1977) was partly a response to the definition of autobiography by Philippe Lejeune. To define autobiography, Lejeune contrasted the genre of autobiography with the genre of fiction, particularly novel in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Lejeune, 1975). Lejeune's definition of autobiography states that we can solely speak of an autobiography as a pact between the reader and the writer: "when a threefold identity is established... identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character that is being talked about" (Lejeune, 1975). He differentiated autobiography from fiction, as for him autobiographical text posits the identity of author for both the narrator and the protagonist, whereas in fictional work there is discernment between the author's name and the narrator's name. For Lejeune, stating this identity in an autobiographical text is a kind of agreement between the author and the reader, an autobiographical pact. His autobiographical pact runs parallel to a type of 'reading contract' that is 'romanesque (or fictional) 'pact'. Autobiographical pact unavoidably coexists with a 'reading contract' i.e. 'referential pact', as autobiographical writings claim to provide information on reality beyond the text. Due to the play of extra textual reality through reference, 'truth claim' comes under consideration. 'Referential pact' offers the reader and scholar a scope to read the discourse in a particular way. Second form of reading contract i.e. 'romanesque' (or fictional) pact' in which either there is a clear indication between the different identities of the author and protagonist or by a clear declaration of fictionality (for example, by mentioning 'novel' on the cover or front page) (Missinne, 2019).

Lejeune considered autobiographical pact (the narrator-cum the author- cum the protagonist sharing same name) and Romanesque pact (indication of fictionality) run parallel to each other and the point of convergence of two pacts is inconceivable. Serge Dubrovsky took this argument as a point of initiation and moved forward to discuss and establish his argument in favor of the coexistence and convergence of the two pacts. Both of them intersect at a point regarding the dissociation or unification of the autobiographical and Romanesque pacts. With the unification of these pacts, "the autobiographical truth no

longer lies in a referential truth, but "resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (Missinne, 2019). In *First* Ung craftily achieves the understanding between the participants, the reader and the narrator, and truth becomes a non-referential truth. Ung intends to be a new generation of Asian autobiographical voices through a reconstruction of the genre and brought in formal deviations. She did not just copy her experience in her memoir but invented, created, and skillfully manipulated her narrative on her life story. Instead of exaggerating her autobiographical details, she moves beyond to re-create and re-comprehend her unimaginable experience. She narrates the self's journey, evolution as an individual responding to the world around her, and discovers, and re-discovers life transactions in relation to contemporary realities. Several questions are generated from the intersecting points of truth and fiction. Ung's *First* successfully caters to her literary responsibility by staying true to her "story of survival: my own and my family's. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too." (author's note) Definitely Ung's text tells a tale of her and her family but her tale is not completely mirroring the experience of millions of Cambodians as the book is not isolated following either Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' or 'romanesque pact'; rather Ung's personal narrative is a combination of 'autobiographical pact' and 'romanesque pact' about which Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have discussed in their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001). In the subtitle to her text *First: a daughter of Cambodia remembers* (2017), though Ung claims to be a daughter of Cambodia but we cannot say she was not the true daughter of Cambodia as certainly *First* is a rendering of Ung's experience of the CCW but there are certain pitfalls lying at the core of the text that help transform itself to expand the literary vision and sense. It can be read as a fiction because of the following features of the text that compels the critics, scholars and readers to read the text as an autofiction are: historical and cultural irregularities pointed by many reviewers that Bunkong Tuon discusses in his paper about the historical inaccuracy traced by critics: "One group of reviewers examines a section in *First*... in which the Ung family takes a trip in the early 1970s... miscalculates Cambodia's Angkorian period... A true 'daughter of Cambodia' would not be so careless as to provide such blatantly incorrect information... part of Khmer heritage and pride" (Tuon, 2013). Tuon also speaks about the cultural inauthenticity that critics have discussed before: "One of the many examples Phim provides of Ung's cultural inauthenticity is the author's description of a Khmer noodle dish, which she says contains red peppers... Ung as culturally inauthentic

and ascribes ulterior motives to that inauthenticity, suggesting that Ung... sells copies of her book” (Tuon, 2013). In this way, literary merit propels the readers to read the text as fiction. Apart from this, the most thought provoking questions that haunt readers while reading the text are: since Loung Ung was five years old when these events took place, how was she able to remember it all? How accurate and truthful is her account of events? Ung’s five year experience of worldly pain and suffering can be perceived as incongruous. For example, in chapter ‘Phnom Penh’ of *First*, Ung mentions “Noodle soup is a traditional breakfast for Cambodian and Chinese.” Her culinary preference compels readers to question the cultural authenticity of the text. Ung has also talked about five year Khmer Loung, who was an urban elite living in an apartment having a car and her being called by her mother as “troublesome child”, such narrative questions: how can the author portray the child far too well? There is a chasm that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in rendition. Tension and ambiguity between the presentation and interpretation makes the text take a diversion toward fiction. Ung’s *First* has the transformative power of fiction as the author’s narrative self moves to and fro, back and forth in time while creating both personal and historical narratives. Crafting a person’s perception during her childhood and the representation of those episodic memories makes the text move beyond memoir. The split embedded in the text, deliberate or unintentional, works like a powerful stimulant that registers awareness among the readers of a slippage between truth and fiction, and specifically of the text’s ability to study it as an autofiction.

6. Conclusion

Autofiction as a genre never commits to fulfilling the stated intention of honest representation, as is often expected from the forerunner of autofiction, i.e., the studies of auto/biography. Autofiction as a literary device and narrative is more appropriate and logical to define or present an author’s personal history and identity with that of a completely fictional persona. The foundational works of autofiction were the studies of auto/biography, which were conceived with the limits of autofiction in relation to its course of hybridity. Autofiction as a genre overcomes the limits concerned with the studies of auto/biography, the limits between the self and the other, memory and forgetting, past self and present self, and so on. The move from the studies of auto/biography to autofiction has therefore helped in expanding the object of study from a certain way of literary narrative to autofictional narrative by blurring the boundaries between auto/biography and fiction through its focus on trans-narrative. By proving that Ung’s *First* is auto-fictional in nature, it offers a new lens to read the text and shows that it fits more accurately to Dubrovsky’s and Lejeune’s notion of the shared identity of author-narrator and protagonist. Although this research article is useful in the study of

life writing as for the first time this paper attempts to study Ung’s memoir, *First* as an Autofiction, and by doing so it deconstructs previous studies based on Ung’s *First* as a memoir.

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