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Novels of Vaddey Ratner and Viet Thanh Nguyen— unpacking trauma language, facing ghosts, and killing shadows

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This article focuses on why exiled writers turn to literature to untangle their complicated pasts and reconstruct their identities. Ratner and Nguyen’s memories and reconstruction of Cambodia and Vietnam are fragmented, secondary, and indeterminately accurate. Growing up with transnational identities and relearning about their motherlands in the US altered their perceptions of SEA. Both writers turned to literature to untangle their complicated pasts and reconstruct their identities. During these journeys, ghosts, enemies, and guilt surfaced and stalked them until confronted and resolved. Nevertheless, their reconciliation plunged them deeper into crisis as it became clear that their memories were in fact nostalgia. Ratner and Nguyen are among the ultraminor world writers who witnessed chaos, yet still successfully articulated their failures and displacement in literature. The results of this research affirm that their works can help us understand Southeast Asian political and cultural dynamics then and now.

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Background of the study

The language of communication through literary texts and in tourism, in life, has cultural features contained in it. Therefore, the cultural standards of communication are preserved and preserved through language. World literature has been dominated by literary works written in major languages, such as English, German, and French. The binary illusion that literature of major languages is superior casts Asian literature as a minor and inferior. If this concept persists, literature of small regions like Southeast Asia will be located at the bottom of the hierarchy and eventually forgotten. In order to resist binary in world literature, David Damrosch (2003) in *What is World Literature?*, re-imagines the boundary of world literature to “encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (Damrosch, 2003). David Damrosch looks at the ways works change as they move from national to global contexts. World literature in this sense is not a large collection of literature, “but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of materials, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike” (Damrosch, 2004). His definition of world literature opens doors for literature from diverse origins to be examined and recognized as significant.

Though this attempt seems to decentralize western literature, global economics and politics persist and still dominate our view of what major and minor are. For example, while literature from Southeast Asia such as *The Tale of Kieu* from Vietnam or *Tale of the Toad King* from Thailand can be classified as world literature by using Damrosch scope, these two stories have not been widely read and discussed on an international panels. Both masterpieces were written in Vietnamese and Northeastern Thai respectively; however, they debuted as world literature when the stories were translated into English. *The Tale of Kieu* circulates at a wider circle since the English translations are published in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* and others. On the contrary, without such privilege, the region and audience circle seem to deem *Tale of the Toad King* as minor literature. Hence, economic and political factors persist and place the masterpiece at the bottom of the hierarchy once again. To ensure that world literary works receive fair attention, critics and scholars further explore the concept of minor literature. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986), in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, initiated a wide debate on the meaning of minor literature. Bhavya Tiwari sums up the characteristics of minor literature as “written in a major language from a marginalized position; its nature is thoroughly political; and it has a collective value (Bhavya Tiwari, 2017). Then in 2017, *Journal of World Literature*, led by David Damrosch as a chief-editor, launched a new platform coining another term “ultraminor literature.” Since then, the concept of ultraminor literature has been circulated, in contrast to major and minor literature as, “[literature] written in a distinct but small language community, very much based in a specific territory. Far from deterritorialization a hegemonic class or culture, and ultraminor literature may be used to create or bolster the community’s territorial integrity (Damrosch, 2003). Minor Literature, inferior literature, ultraminor literature, etc., are just names, only relative concepts. Therefore, when using concepts to identify, maybe cause some opinions. Because a minority writer is not necessarily a minor writer: Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Jhumpa Lahiri, are certainly not minor writers in American literature. In the same vein, minority literature is not necessarily minor, or even ultraminor, literature—such as in the case of *The Woman Warrior*; *Bless Me, Ultima*; *No-No Boy*, *Jasmine*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and many others. So, we use it here only for the purpose of showing the difference between the literary divisions written in languages other than English, Southeast Asian literature, world literature, etc.

Viet Thanh Nguyen and Vaddey Ratner are two award-winning writers. Vaddey Ratner, Pen Hemmingway finalist for *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and Viet Thanh Nguyen, Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Sympathizer*, are two Southeast Asian-American writers who, due to war circumstances, had to leave their home countries. He was with my family, when he was young, to make a living. During the hard days in a foreign country, the bitterness, failure, and experiences of people who were both unrecognized in the US and lost their homeland, helped writers create works containing important issues. humanity. It is a matter of people’s right to life, the right to be affirmed and acknowledged, wherever they are, the issue of national identity, etc. From these issues, they deserve to be recognized as world writers, no matter how small. The effort to create in a language other than the mother tongue has demonstrated the desire to assert oneself. In France, there is the writer Linda Le, and the children of many other writers. These literary scales of literature from all corners of the world enhance the kaleidoscope of world literature.

From Southeast Asian American writers to ultraminor world writers.

This paper investigates the literary works of two writers whose works seem to prosper and are widely recognized in the United States and beyond, but not in the writers’ native countries. It can be seen that authors like Espiritu (1997) has studied the spiritual and material lives of Asian Americans, their attitudes, and experiences from a gender perspective. The life of the immigrant community is explored in terms of the formal labor market and the “underground” world of prostitution; theft, marriage, refugee resettlement, racial prejudice, etc. She called for a fight against all forms of domination. This is one of the few valuable studies on Asians in the US. Avery Gordon wrote about the journey of fugitive migrants that took place among opposition movements. It is captivity, fear of fugitives, oppression, etc. Refugee writers are often proudly claimed by their host countries only when they became award winners. Vaddey Ratner, a Pen Hemmingway Finalist for *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (Ratner, 2012), and Viet Thanh Nguyen, the Pulitzer Prize Winner for *The Sympathizer*, have joined the canon of American instead of Southeast Asian writers. While the attempt to claim Ratner and Nguyen as Asian/Southeast Asian American writers stemmed from good intention and respect, such hegemony alienates the writers from their native contexts. It also marginalizes their positions in the United States as minor writers. Therefore, this paper attempts to magnify and empower their subaltern voices. As a result, Ratner and Nguyen are considered world writers; their inability to relate their complex identities to modern Southeast Asian context mirrors what most exiles have experienced. Leaving their native countries young and confused, Ratner and Nguyen’s memories and reconstruction of Cambodia and Vietnam are fragmented, secondary, and indeterminately accurate. Language itself is a code, that is, a system of conventional signals built on very tight relationships and structures, according to invisible rules, “committed to” bound according to the implicit but absolutely unified conventions of a certain language community. Growing up with transnational identities and relearning about their motherlands in the US altered their perceptions of SEA. It also marginalizes their positions in the United States as minor writers. In Postcolonial Theory, the term “Subaltern” is used to refer to people from the lower social classes who migrate and are marginalized from mainstream society, even though also living in the same country. Often, these groups of people have little or no access to the mainstream culture of the country where they emigrate, so they are described as subalterns. The *Subaltern* was coined by Antonio Gramsci, who was

an Italian Marxist intellectual. He used it when describing cultural hegemony, in order to identify groups that were excluded, displaced, and marginalized due to the socio-economic institutions put into place, so their political voices would be denied. Gayatri Spivak states that “the reasonable and rarefied definition of the word subaltern that interests me is: to be removed from all lines of social mobility” (Spivak, 2005).

Both Vaddey Ratner and Viet Thanh Nguyen were born in Southeast Asia, and later immigrated to the United States during the Vietnam and Cambodian Wars. They grew up in bilingual communities and were educated in the United States. Their works, written in English, can be interpreted at different scales; first at the minor literature level as Asian-American narratives that depict lives of immigrants who struggled to attain the American Dream; and second at the ultraminor literature level as Vietnamese and Cambodian exile stories that portray refugees who became disconnected from their origins, struggled to live in their new environments, and later unable to reconnect with their motherlands. The first level also recognizes Ratner and Nguyen as Multi-Cultural American writers, and the latter consider them world writers. This paper will take the latter level. Refugee writers are often proudly claimed by their host countries only when they became award winners. Vaddey Ratner, a Pen Hemmingway Finalist for *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, the Pulitzer Prize Winner for *The Sympathizer*, have joined the canon of American instead of Southeast Asian writers. Both of them render their stories from the childhood first-hand experiences; Ratner was a child when Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, while Nguyen, also a child, fled Vietnam in a refugee boat. Both writers weaved pieces of their memories and created stories of people who claimed both the United States and their native countries as home. Like wars in Cambodia and Vietnam, writers from all parts of the world are speaking of similar experiences. All have formed small colonies within host countries trying to make sense of their traumatic pasts, and struggling to fit into the new environments, and failing to reconnect with their motherlands.

While the attempt to claim Ratner and Nguyen as Asian/Southeast Asian American writers stemmed from good intention and respect, such hegemony alienates the writers from their native contexts. It also marginalizes their positions in the United States as minor writers. Ratner and Nguyen works tell stories of people who failed to adapt to changing political climates of the native lands. The new governments in Cambodia and Vietnam accommodated people who changed their political and idealistic views; the rest became a threat to the countries, and soon were eliminated or extradited. As a consequence, Ratner and Nguyen could no longer be Cambodian or Vietnamese, but only refugees. Stripped of social and economic privileges, both writers started a new life in the United States—a journey that requires assimilation, and the construction of identities. Becoming a US citizen requires meeting certain requirements to be able to adapt and integrate into a new country; therefore, both writers avoid delicate matters concerning their homeland. Some of the spiritual and cultural values of the homeland are only shown when they have the opportunity to live and meet with the Vietnamese and Cambodian communities in the US. Therefore, if there is no consciousness, the problem of assimilation is very likely to occur. There is a complex interface between assimilating and keeping in touch with the native land, which is not easily transformed in a short period of time, nor is it easily discernible. We can see that some authors research the second generation, the children of immigrants will develop gradually integrate into mainstream American life, or maintain economic, political, and religious ties to their homeland? In chapter 15, by Yen Le: “Việt Nam, Nước Tôi” (Vietnam, My Country): Vietnamese Americans and Transnationalism 367 *Yen Le Espiritu and Thom Tran* (Levitt and Waters, 2006) examines how children of immigrants participate in

activities in their host countries. From there, it shows that there is a transnational transformation in the culture of modern immigrants in family values, in the way second-generation immigrants build their identity, how to deal with people, ancestral homeland, etc. It seems that both writers are stuck in the past while the people of Vietnam and Cambodia are moving forward. Starting over is not easy and like most minor American writers, Ratner and Nguyen were deemed inferior to the mainstream and canonized American writers. Their works had been circulated within the multi-culture category and rarely included in an anthology. The awards given to Ratner and Nguyen significantly helped launch both writers to a larger and more inclusive platform. In spite of the recognition they received in the US, such was not the case in their motherlands. In her epilogue, Ratner mentioned that she went back to Cambodia, and Nguyen’s characters revisited Vietnam. Both writers wrote about culture shock as well as a sense of homelessness when they realized that their native countries have moved on to new phases; wars had ceased, and culture, society, and politics seemed to mute Vietnam and Cambodian’s traumatic and violent pasts since most intellectuals and educated population lost their lives during the War.

With limited knowledge of Vietnamese or Cambodian literature, Ratner and Nguyen told their stories in English using western literary resources. As a result, their stories are peripheral to the native literary traditions. These stories have not yet been translated into Cambodian or Vietnamese languages, thus, have not gained recognition in these countries. This paper attempt to magnify and empower their subaltern voices. If Ratner and Nguyen are recognized as world writers, whose works speak of transnational journeys, their works will become more significant both within their host countries and their motherlands. In fact, although their disconnection from their motherlands, hardship in living in the new country, and failure to relate to modern Southeast Asian context mirror negative exiles’ experiences, Ratner and Nguyen’s stories can “bolster [their native lands’] territorial integrity (Damrosch, 2003).

In The Shadow of the Banyan is a novel, the story of Raami, a young girl who was a descendant of the Cambodian royal bloodline. Her family lived in a privileged royal compound. This privilege was stripped away when the civil war broke out in Cambodia. When Phnom Penh fell into Khmer Rouge’s hands, she and her family concealed their identity and fled the city. In the unfamiliar and harsh territories, they worked hard, and one by one killed or died of illnesses. During many years of her exile, she underwent a physical and mental transformation from a young and innocent girl to a broken and traumatized young woman. In addition to being uprooted from her home, separated from her family, and lost almost everything, she also was placed in a re-education camp where political propaganda was forced and brainwashed young people like her. At the end of the novel, she escaped to Thailand and was transferred to the US to reunite with her relatives. In her second novel, *Music of the Ghosts*, Ratner’s story becomes more experimental and sophisticated. However, the story shares similar themes and details of crisis, trauma, and exile. When compare Ratner’s works to those who lived and wrote in the same political climate such as Loung Ung in *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, we can detect a common thread that may identify Ratner and her peers as the lost generation of Cambodian writers (Ung, 2016). These writers share fragmented memories of the War and chose to process their experiences through writing. These literary works, though written in English and in autobiographic style, powerfully convey stories of complex humanity. The novel is the creative work, the artistic sublimation of the writer, in the work of Viet Thanh Nguyen and Ratner, there is a similarity between the writer and his character. We can compare *Quyên’s* novel by Nguyen Van Tho, a Vietnamese resident in Germany, which explores different aspects of Vietnamese life in Eastern Europe (Tho, 2002). From there, identify some

“Vietnamese character” immigrants in foreign lands, which the author calls “Viet Tinh”. From this novel, compared with the work of Viet Thanh Nguyen, it can be seen that creating art is not copying reality. However, the book by Viet Thanh Nguyen and by Nguyen Van Tho reflected all of the writer’s concerns both as a human and as a writer, in his obsession with personal gain and the loss of human land. It can be said that every page is soaked with sweat and tears. Years of personal experience in a foreign country of the writer. They create based on personal experience in the position of a writer, in an aspiration for beauty and peace of life. So, bring a shadow of a writer who aspires to love and lives to overcome all challenges for self-improvement. At best, they revealed people’s strength and willpower to survive amidst deprivation and atrocities; yet at worst, we learned of the devastating impacts of extreme ideologies and political agendas. A Radcliff Scholar and a Pulitzer Prize winner, Viet Thanh Nguyen was a refugee relocated from his native country to the United States in the 1970s. Nguyen, unlike Ratner, was not propelled into a brutal relocation process, yet he and his family had to endure a traumatic experience at sea. He transformed that experience into multiple short stories in his book, *Refugees* (Nguyen, 2017). This collection of short stories was published a decade later than another well-known book by Nam Le, *The Boat* (Le, 2009). Both books feature stories of Vietnamese boat people. Characters in their books encountered merciless pirates who raided, raped, and killed their family members; endured scourging sun, diseases, hunger, and dehydration; and at the end of their journeys, were placed in new countries.

Stories in *Refugees* and *The Boat* took place in confined spaces of overcrowded boats where each character drifted in and out of feverish nightmares and heat stroke. The sense of time and places were less evident, yet despair was more dominant than in Ratner’s stories. These factors make Vietnamese narratives shorter in length since the journey took less than a year, while Ratner’s stories cover at least 2 years period. Even though people in *Refugees* were neither brainwashed nor relocated like Cambodian refugees, their memories became similarly broken. The first story in *Refugees*, “Black-Eyed Women,” best illustrates this claim by portraying a struggle of a young female narrator to reconcile with the ghost of her brother, and overcome her own rape trauma.

Writing to heal: unpacking trauma, facing ghosts, and killing shadows. Each culture has its own way of dealing with bad experiences; in a Buddhist country, one may visit a temple and talk to a monk in order to sort out his/her experience as well as to find solutions; in the US, however, most people visit a specialist who would listen and help their patients cope. In the article, “A Theoretical Understanding of Refugee Trauma,” suggested that “the effect of trauma on refugees are immeasurable, long-lasting, and shattering to both inner and outer selves” (George, 2010). When examined by the “Exile and Resettlement: Refugee Theory”, according to Kunz (1981), both Ratner and Nguyen are considered “acute refugees” whose exile journeys were immediate and forced by political unrest (as cited in George, 2010). In addition, through further investigation using Mollica’s Trauma Theory, Ratner and Nguyen seem to have the inner ability to heal themselves through storytelling. For trauma refugees, the healing process may come in a form of storytelling as well as interpreting their trauma stories together with coaches such as doctors, social workers, or therapists (as cited in George, 2010). However, the writers are still at physical and psychological risk since “embedded within them is often unspeakable violence associated with the refugee experience” (George, 2010). In Ratner and Nguyen’s cases, the writers took radical, yet creative steps in sorting out their mental entanglement by writing to repair fragmented experiences. They were successful in turning the negative inputs into positive outputs. The mental trauma here is described by Viet Thanh

Nguyen as haunting the human condition, small, anonymous people before the ups and downs of life, carrying mental pain and despair. Not belonging to the traumatic literature, but by looking deeply into the tragedies of the death of the type of person struggling to establish and search for identity, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Rayner bring a new perspective on imported identities. Immigrants, people are gradually losing their mother tongue to become citizens free from national and ethnic ties. They are tragic people, not in “where they live” but because of their exile in the mind. “It is the type of people who respect the love of their homeland, their families, believing in life, yearning to affirm their dignity, talents, longing for life, love to the end of life, ready to burn in their lives. Living and experiencing art are labors that assert that essence” (Hue and Nguyen, 2020). In *The Shadow of the Banyan* and *Refugees* contain both chronological and creative plot structures. In the beginning, lives in Cambodia and Vietnam were peaceful and comfortable. The protagonists were forced out of their comfort zones into turmoil when the countries shifted political climates. They were much younger than 10 years old. At this age, children are supposed to receive proper education, be nurtured and fostered with care, and be equipped with security and confidence. All deferred when the Wars broke out; they had to leave their homes with limited means, and uncertainty, for a destination yet unknown. In *The Shadow of the Banyan*, Raami and her family were forced to travel from one village to the next as the Khmer Rouge intended to dissolve capitalism and democracy and eliminate intellectuals. Almost everyone whom Raami encountered could hardly make sense of who they were nor were they certain of their fates. Unlike others, Raami was able to anchor her thoughts, and her strength in what her father sang and taught, and both songs and words were recounted every time Raami lost her ways. In *Refugee’s* “The Black-Eyed Woman,” the narrator retraced her step piecing together her own memory and her mother’s multiple stories. She recalled vaguely the time when her family gathered their possessions and embarked on a crowded boat heading towards Malaysia when the US troops pulled out of Vietnam. Before the whole family reached the port, they wandered undetected by the soldiers to different places; on this journey, she lost touch with where she had been but remembered vividly days spent on the boat. “Boat people” and heartbreaking stories are not a thing of the past, the migrations continue into the 20s of the 21st century. Language is an effective means of communication to expose trauma and emotional pain through communication. Here is text communication. Language has preserved regional cultural evidence, thereby, helping readers better understand the intercultural and cross-cultural influences between countries through language. This is the most effective communication channel, preserving the most enduring culture of mankind.

Traumatic incidents registered quite differently in Raami and the narrator in “The Black-Eyed Woman.” For Raami, she had to disconnect with her memory of each place she visited in order to protect herself from being heartbroken and to keep moving forward; remembering made everything hard to leave. Whenever she began to call a place home, tragic incidents occurred; first, her father was executed after the Khmer Rouge found out he was a member of a royal family; then other relatives were slaughtered or died of illness; and last, her baby sister died. Raami’s narrative began with happiness and family members present, yet ended with sorrow and loneliness. For the narrator of “The Black-Eyed Woman,” whose name Nguyen does not specify, the story shuffles back and forth between the present and the past—the US, Vietnam, and the boat. Though the narrator arrived in the US safely with most of her family members, her brother was killed at sea. She remembered vividly how he was murdered while trying to protect her from being raped by pirates; however, her story did not line up chronologically, it is the reader who must put the narrative together.

In Troeung, Y-Dang (2015), *Iterations of War and Its Literary Counterforces: Vaddey Ratner’s “In the Shadow of the Banyan” and*

Kosal Khiev's "Why I Write", he said about the issue of why wartime is ongoing to be at the center of critical discussion in the field of study under legacies of the war in Southeast Asia (Troeng, 2015). So that, when comparing Ratner's story to Nguyen's, the latter story seems to be more open to a literary experiment—magical realism. Nguyen deploys a ghost as a link between the past and the present; whenever the ghost of the narrator's brother appeared, she reverted to the day that he was killed. The readers soon learned that the brother died trying to protect his sister from being raped yet failed. At first, she refused to acknowledge the ghost or talked to him, but when she finally did, the ghost revealed that it was her who summoned him not the other way around. A ghost is not an uncommon literary troop that Asian American or Asian writers employ to reveal certain truths; Maxine Hong Kingston often used ghosts to link multiple stories, and in most Asian literature, ghosts carry secrets as well as function as confidants. Through ghosts, readers often become enlightened or disillusioned. The narrator in "Black-Eyed Woman" was able to reconcile with her trauma and moved on as soon as she listened to her ghost brother confirmed that he existed only in her memory and imagination. In *In The Shadow of the Banyan*, the ghosts came in two forms—the holy-ghost or "Tevoda", and the ancestor ghosts (Raami's father and uncle). In both cases, the ghosts function as guides and guardian angels. When Raami was at home in Phnom Penh, her wet nurse claimed that Raami seemed to be surrounded by Tevoda. During her exile, Tevoda was remote and existed in dreams, but she was occasionally visited by ghosts of her father and relatives. They came to warn her of danger and foretell the future. As afraid of these ghosts as a young child might be, Raami bravely confronted and communicated with them and used them to her advantage. She also acknowledged that they were both dead. With their guidance, she was able to escape the Khmer Rouge to the safety of Thailand. Raami and many characters in Nguyen's short stories not only had to face ghosts but also were forced to fight looming shadows that hindered them from moving forward. Ghost is a popular character figure in literature since ancient times. In literature from antiquity to modern times, from East to West, the existence of demonic characters exists in any country, depending on the concept and culture of each period, each nation, and the characters. That object not only has all the characteristics and qualities of man but also goes beyond, higher than what man can't do and can't explain. The image of the ghost character is the result of the imagination in Bo Tung Linh's *Lieu Trai Chi Di* (China), *Truyen Ky Man Luc* by Nguyen Du (Vietnam), etc. to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by G.G. Marquez, G. Boccaccio's *Ghost*, Marcel Aymé Edgar Poe's *The Man Who Walks Through Walls...*, in the artworks of humanity, ghosts are actually human stories. The ghosts in the works of Rattner and Nguyen are both real ghosts as a character leading the story, as well as metaphorical meaning, as a haunting of painful war. The specter of war pursues people, the fear is difficult to let go of in the spiritual life of people. In the work *Nothing Ever Dies*, Viet Thanh Nguyen recreated the mental trauma and war memories that people have experienced (Nguyen, 2016). From the terrible, immeasurable devastation to the human life of war and its haunting ghosts, the writer sends a message against the senseless wars, calling for the fight for humanity. world peace. For Raami, her past identity as the daughter of wealthy and well-educated aristocrats was dangerous and alienating; if Khmer Rouge soldiers or village leaders found her true identity, she would be executed along with her father. Thus, she must surrender to her new humble identity as a war orphan with neither past nor connection to her noble origin. At the end of the story, Ratner offers a glimpse of what Raami may have to do once she reached her new home in the US— she began her new life as same as other immigrants who left their titles and privileges behind. Abandoning her past and the overbearing

shadows of her ancestors, Raami was free of her father's guilt similar to the fear of being hunted by her enemies. This is the story of the human destiny, of a whole class of Asian-Americans in foreign lands. Creative as a relief from the hardships of years of wandering in a foreign land, Nguyen and Ratner give readers a glimpse of an almost complete expatriate's life, in which each character is an insert.

Not only is it a matter of Asians going abroad to find a new life, but Ratner's work also speaks for the fate of women, especially women living far from their homeland. The writer let that voice of pain speak most urgently, the voice of women in general for the suffering, regret, and even the humiliation that women have to endure. Nguyen's story, "War Time," illustrates how people, who were handicapped by trauma, coped with their problems. In this short story, he drew pictures of two women who took different approaches to post-war life in the US; on one side, the narrator's mother (again, the name is unspecified), started her grocery store business in California, while on another side, Mrs. Hua, a woman who circled around the Vietnamese new community asking for a donation. Mrs. Hua seemed unable to adapt to her new life. When asked for donations and branded by Mrs. Hua as a current Vietnamese society sympathizer, the narrator's mother unwillingly donated money, but never fully discussed with the narrator why she did so. The narrator, who grew up amidst American popular culture and material comfort, launched his own expedition to investigate the circumstance and soon found out that Mrs. Hua has many wrong actions with her homeland. Nguyen offers two types of refugees: one who left everything behind and began with no connection with the past, and another who was too afraid and guilty to let go. Ms. Hua did not overcome her own prejudices, adding to her lack of understanding about the current Vietnamese society, so she took the wrong actions. While the narrator and his family blindly embark on a new journey as newly minted Americans.

Leaving their native countries young and confused, Ratner and Nguyen's memories and reconstruction of Cambodia and Vietnam are fragmented, secondary, and indeterminately accurate. Nguyen's short stories rely on mother's and elderly's stories to complete the pictures rather than on the narrators' own memories. There are multiple places where stories adopted inaccurate details, and at times, seems like they are narrated by naïve American tourists who have seen the countries for the first time. In fact, it took both Ratner and Nguyen decades before they returned to their native countries. Details of foods, aromas, and settings in their stories are more imaginative than realistic. By the time they revisited the countries, places had changed and developed into modern post-war countries. Many of the warzones and battle grounds had also been converted into commercial markets and rice fields. No matter how hard they tried, it is evidently impossible to reconstruct an accurate and undamaged memory. Furthermore, when these writers attempted to reconcile with their past, they plunged deeper into crises as it became clear that their memories were in fact nostalgia. The characters in the novels of Ratner and Viet Thanh Nguyen have fiercely recreated the life and fate of those living abroad, causing readers to think and ponder about the human condition, especially facing the very difficult problem of finding and locating personal identity, national identity in the midst of a situation where the homeland has been dispersed, where one does not belong. Therefore, the message conveyed in the two works is a touching story of expatriates, obsessed with the desire to live with full human rights, deeper than dreams, the voice of talented artists who aspire to be confirmed and recognized, both in foreign lands and in their beloved homeland. Because "Culture and literature dominate, influencing each other during interactions" (Hue, 2017) So that, from the story of people, the work also sets out lessons about preserving the national cultural identity, wherever it is, especially in the context of current globalization.

Conclusion

This research aimed to inform the Merging Path--Current Southeast Asia and Function For Ultraminor Writers: Growing up with transnational identities while relearning about their countries in the US also influenced their perceptions of the native lands. Both Ratner and Nguyen have neither fully presented the negative sides of capitalism and bureaucracy, nor how the broken social and political systems drove the peasants and farmers to cause uproar. The true causes of most people's bitterness for the wealthy classes in Cambodia and Vietnam are left unmodern as another country on the world.

Like most Americans who never fully comprehended the Wars, the writers are concerned more with human rights, democracy, and freedom. Ratner and Nguyen, when settled in the United States, learned about their native countries from textbooks written by Western historians and scholars who, most often, scorned communism. Moreover, they also had been surrounded by discourses that celebrate individualism rather than socialism. Therefore, understanding their identity, but not their roots, is their priority. In short, Ratner and Nguyen can hardly connect with the current Southeast Asian cultural and social atmosphere. Once uprooted from their native lands, Ratner and Nguyen are the lost Cambodian and Vietnamese generations. Ratner and Nguyen are among the ultraminor world writers who witnessed chaos, yet still successfully articulated their failures and displacement in literature. Their problems and shortcomings are not flaws but evidence that reflects how fragmented the history of Southeast Asia is as well as how complex it has become. Wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, devastating as they were, built bridges that forced politics, cultures, societies, and histories to intersect. As a result, literatures, languages, and people have converged and relied heavily on one another to prosper. Children who grew up during the Wars and currently live in Vietnam and Cambodia are multi-lingual; they understand English, French and their native languages. However, children who fled the Wars and grew up in the US still resonate their traumatic experiences from the past.

Writers like Ratner and Nguyen wrote to find appropriate space for themselves in their native lands; even though they failed, we can still learn why they did so and perhaps find remedies. To fully understand the course of Southeast Asian identities, especially those of Cambodia and Vietnam, we must embrace stories such as Ratner and Nguyen's as an additional piece of the bigger picture. The sources of these identities should not be limited to the motherlands, but include wherever the people establish themselves and their families. Moreover, refugees and immigrants from Cambodia and Vietnam should be recognized as a part of the multi-cultural population. Literary works from this group of people can help us understand Southeast Asian global, political and cultural dynamics then and now.

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Author contributions

All authors jointly supervised this work, as follows: HHT was involved in the research, analysis and modification, finalization of the research paper, revising the title article, research tools, reference collection, editing and proofreading of the Vietnamese novel, submitted and completed the main version. TK-N was involved in scientific ideation, the title suggestion, writing the literature review and methodology, data/reference collection, analysis, and modification of the research paper. TDP was involved in the research, revising the main version, the research reference collection, and comparing.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

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