



Research Paper

Memories from the Sea: A Study of Vannak Prum's Graphic Memoir

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an attempt at rethinking the notions of slavery in the modern world and it challenges some of the preconceived notions of slavery to be associated with the past. The graphic memoir by Vannak Prum has come at a juncture in time that it speaks for itself without oversimplifying the narratives and without demeaning the experiences because the enslaved self draws them. This paper is an analysis of the different techniques through which Prum has captured the memories of his time at sea.

KEYWORDS: Memoir, graphic narratives, graphic memoir, modern day slavery

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean slave trade has been going on for ages, it encompasses Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The history of this kind of international slave trade that goes on within the Indian Ocean World (IOW) goes far back in time and has preceded the transatlantic slave trade that took place between Africa, America, and the Caribbean. It has people working both as slaves and slave owners or captives and captors. The “complex trans-IOW slave-trades that, unlike the transatlantic system, started well before the Common Era, remained vigorous into the twentieth century, and in some areas are still maintained” (Campbell viii).

Over centuries, large numbers of East African slaves were exported over to other regions of Africa and countries of the IOW. They were exported to Ethiopia and Egypt as well as to Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and India. The IOW slave trade was multidirectional and was always in a state of flux. In the mid-eighteenth century, the export of slaves from Africa increased and a lot of these slaves were transported as far as to Mauritius. Similarly, Indian slaves were sent to Indonesia, Mauritius, Cape Town, and the Middle East. The slave-trade network was very vast and intricate with slaves from Indonesia being sent to markets across South East Asia and the Cape Town, Indochinese and Koreans to China and Chinese slaves to Singapore and even San Francisco. The trades, markets, nature of jobs and routes varied considerably. This kind of slave trade was carried on either through overland routes or through maritime routes.

These multiple maritime slave trades were dominated, controlled and funded by coastal Chinese, Bugis and Malays and coastal Arabs and Indians (Campbell). As opposed to the transatlantic slave trade that was financed by European countries, these slave trades in the IOW were more intricate and complex. In the 19th century, however, the IOW slave trade came under increased international scrutiny and in order to overcome the consequences, these slavers adopted different measures to continue their trade by taking indirect routes, passing off slaves as non-slave porters, sailors and as kins.

What is striking and disturbing is that even with globalisation and increased international interventions, some of these forms of slavery still continue to flourish in the IOW. One of them is maritime slavery of fishermen in the Thailand-Malaysia region.

According to a report by Human Rights Watch,

Prompted in part by numerous media exposés that raised serious concerns about killings, beatings, and trafficking of migrant fishers, many from Burma and Cambodia, the European Commission in April 2015 issued a “yellow card” warning to Thailand, identifying it as a possible non-cooperating country in fighting illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. (2)

In another newspaper report, “Pulling together recent numbers from the Thai Department of Fisheries and estimates from local NGOs, it is likely that there are at least 17,000 fishers plying the waters of Southeast Asia who are considered slaves.” (*The Maritime Executive*)

While there is no clear data as to how many people are slaving in the fishing sector, what matters is that there is a

need to address the issue and bring forth the narratives of people who have managed to escape these dreadful conditions. In an attempt to let the world know, there are a number of stories and narratives of people in Cambodia who, because of poverty and lack of food, have to look for opportunities on the sea as fishermen. Little do they know that their jobs as fishermen are neither paid nor secured and that many of them would not return to their families or even on land. A number of maritime fishermen who are hired from Indonesia and Cambodia end up as slaves on Thai fishing fleets. Vannak Prum too was one of these many slaves but is someone who got lucky to have survived the trauma to tell his story to not only his kins back home in Cambodia but also to the world through his comic book, *The Dead Eye and the Deep Blue Sea: A Graphic Memoir of Modern Slavery*. For the ease of understanding, I shall be using 'Vannak' to denote the character in the graphic memoir and 'Vannak Prum' or 'Prum' to denote the artist/storyteller.

The abusive and often illegal treatment of workers aboard IUU vessels include financial exploitation; poor health-care, food and accommodation; poor vessel safety; verbal and physical abuse; incarceration; and abandonment. The worst cases meet International Labour Organisation definitions of forced labour, including physical confinement, compulsion, retention of identity documents, and non-payment of wages. (EJF, 4)

The International Labour Organisation and the Walk Free Foundation (WFF) defines modern slavery as "any situation of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power." This definition includes, "forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery and slavery-like practices and human trafficking" (ILO, 9).

II. DRAWING THE TRAUMATIC PAST

In Vannak Prum's graphic memoir, he has drawn and visualised his traumatic past with such detail and care that it evokes a haptic response in the reader. It is a narrative of his life as an eight-year old in a village in Cambodia who had the ability to draw from an early stage. He starts off his narrative as coming back from his years of slavery and his ability to draw becomes a tool to narrate and tell his experiences to his wife and daughter. As a child, Prum had to suffer because of poverty and abuse from his stepfather. At the age of fourteen, he left his family and became a soldier which he left too because, as he writes, "all this violence and death began to poison my mind" (21). In order to find some solace and peace, he became a monk and started living at a monastery only to rejoin the army and then later take a job as a sculptor. He constantly moved from one place to another in search of better job opportunities and it was because of his economic condition and his desperate need to earn enough to sustain his wife and unborn child that he went on to search for work and ended up as a slave.

His graphic memoir is a tale of his experiences as a fisherman on the ship and then later as indentured labour in a plantation. He was one of the few who managed to escape the clutches of slavery and was able to tell his story graphically. The main argument that I shall be dealing with within the next section of my paper is the representation of the memories of Prum's traumatic past along with the representation of the Indian Ocean as the geographical space and as a figurative space as the cause and escape from slavery. I shall also be dealing with the visual-verbal interactions as used in the graphic memoir. The paper will also focus on the visuals as Cambodian folk art and with the idea of art as an escape, literally and figuratively, as well as the role of art in archiving history.

III. MEMORIES AND THE TRAUMATIC PAST

It is widely argued that trauma and traumatic memories are usually fragmented, incoherent and beyond the grasp of comprehension for the basic reason that they leave a lasting effect on the minds of the people and this effect renders these memories unspeakable and "unrepresentable." In such scenarios, Kathryn Robson says, "Survivors often face a double challenge: to put into words that which seems to resist narrativization and to recount experiences that cut through society's convictions" (13). Leigh Gilmore also argues, "something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the "unrepresentable" to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way" (6).

Since trauma is an experience that cannot be represented easily in the verbal medium, visuals play a major role in giving them physical appearance. Jill Bennet also argues that trauma is an "extreme affective experience" that cannot be represented through narrative memories, rather she argues that trauma is evoked as "images imprinted with sensation" and thus refers to the "sense memory." She further goes on to argue, "words can be put into the service of sense memory, vision has a different relationship to affective experience, experience that - while it cannot be spoken as it is felt - may register visually. The eye can often function as mute witness through which events register as eidetic memory images imprinted with sensation" (28). With this argument as a basis for further discussion, I wish to draw focus on the medium of comic books and graphic memoirs that especially use hand drawn images as well as verbal elements to represent something (an experience) that does not have a direct correlative in speech or in visual evidence. As Hillary Chute says, "Comics is a word-and-image form in which words and images create unsynthesized narrative tracks; that is to say, it is not an illustrative form in which each is redundant of the other" (108).

Comic books are an alternate mode of cognitive understanding to provide material existence in the form of drawn images to an abstract experience. While some comic book creators employ abstractions in drawings related to that experiential moment, and others resort to realism. Vannak Prum, in his graphic memoir, has resorted to realism in the form of folk Cambodian art. His drawings are hand drawn and are very detailed and colourful. Susan Sontag says that handmade images claim, “things like this happened. In contrast, a single photograph or filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera’s lens. A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show” (38). Prum’s graphic memoir is a visual-verbal testimony to his experiences as a slave that he captures artistically evoking a visceral and haptic response in the reader/viewer.

With the use of colour and realism, the most striking aspect of his drawings is that they are drawn from an omniscient perspective; he draws himself in every panel. His corporeal presence in the panels make the visuals more authentic and affective, as if the reader/viewer is more than a mere spectator, is rather a witness to the multitude of images. His engagement with his body and the drawing it time and again is another important feature of graphic memoirs, Elisabeth El Refaie calls this as “pictorial embodiment.” In order to draw one’s own self multiple times, it requires the comic book creator to have a very nuanced understanding of their corporeal self in relation to the perception of the others. By taking the third person perspective in the visuals and first person in the narrative, Prum blurs the boundaries between the three selves of the autobiography writer as explained by Elisabeth El Refaie- the real life I (author), the narrating I (self who tells) and the experiencing I (the self told about) (53).

Another important aspect to note is that this graphic memoir is drawn by Vannak Prum and was told to Ben and Jocelyn Pederick and is translated by Lim Sophorn for the publication in English language. “Three different autographic agents which can be read from the clues in the image and its perspective: the narrator, who creates the image; the focaliser, on whose knowledge it is based; and the observer, whose embodied spatial position is represented and which the reader is invited to share.” (Kukkonen 59) When a reader/viewer sees this graphic memoir, all these roles are played by Vannak Prum only, he is the creator of the images, he is the focaliser as well as his embodied personality is what is presented in the text.

Drawing from the concepts of film, comic books have two-fold narratives, ““focalization” refers to the consciousness through which the narrative is filtered ... therefore, caption boxes would be a function of “focalization.” “Ocularization,” then focuses on the visual perspective through which we see the story unfold” (Kunka 63). In the case of Prum’s visuals, since he is present in almost all of the visuals, it can be referred to as “external ocularization.” This technique helps him distance himself from his drawn past and enables him to see the larger picture to be able to contextualise himself in the situation.

Autobiography “draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of the truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling” (Gilmore qtd. in Chaney, 3). For some time in the memoir, Prum narrates that he had acquired a camera from a fellow fisherman and kept it hidden from everyone. He had managed to click a number of pictures that could have been a basis of his drawings but when he escapes the ship by jumping in the water, the camera gets damaged. Even though a photograph would have suggested authenticity, yet his style of drawing everything and the self-reflexivity when he draws himself in the act of drawing renders the memoir its authenticity. “The spatiality of memory mapped onto its temporality, its visual combined with its verbal dimension, makes memory, as W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, in itself an “imagetext, a double-coded system of mental storage and retrieval” (Hirsch, 22).

IV. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

The Indian Ocean holds a central figure in the graphic memoir; its representations are shown as to be turbulent and violent at some point while at other instances it is calm and peaceful. When studied closely, these patterns of change in the representation of the ocean water becomes clear. The first instance when we encounter a drawing of the ocean is on page 9 when Vannak returns from Malaysia after almost five years of slavery. In a desperate attempt to tell his wife about what had happened at sea, he draws a boat and the sea. At this moment, his mind is bubbling with so many things to say: he is in a state of unease, he says, “Words and pictures spill from him like water from a cracked pot: a boat, the sea, a dangerous journey”(9). All these words when combined with the image that he draws reflect the inner turbulence and desperation.

After this brief visual of the ocean, the next time we encounter the ocean is only after forty pages. Here, the sea is calm as it is indicative of the unawareness of all the people that they are being sold as slaves (50). In the subsequent renderings, the sea is calm but moving, hinting to the journey that Vannak and his fellow fishermen were going to take (52, 53). It is only when the horror strikes that they have been sold as slaves does the ocean water change its course. The sea still remains calm when the “older man” and Vannak are crying but when the “older man” jumps into the water, the seawater changes its nature to being very turbulent suddenly (57).

This pattern is followed in the subsequent pages as well, when the older man is retrieved from the water and put on the deck, the water restores to calmness only to be violent again when he “popped up again” Vannak says, “ I watched him as waves washed over him” (60).

What is important to note in these representations is that Vannak's idea of the ocean changes, as he perceives the situation. If at some moment he is unsettled, the ocean will reflect his feelings and will become the epitome of his emotions. Through this technique, Vannak has tried to externalise his emotions on an inanimate object rendering it almost as a character with moods, feelings and emotions of itself. This kind of representation of emotions could have only been possible in a medium that involves both image and text.

To represent the daily work of the fishermen on the boat, Prum has placed the ocean as a background. It figures in most of the images even if minutely. Even though there are instances of violence and brutality throughout the graphic memoir, when these instances take place on the boat, the ocean merely acts as a geographical space without any part to play in the action, for most of the part, it remains a dormant ocean. It is only when the matters involve the ocean in some way that the ocean acts as a character.

Later, in the memoir, when the men gathered around to talk about sea creatures, it is his figment of imagination that is drawn as something that happened in reality. It is only through these stories that he comes to know of one such "giant octopus" that dragged a man under the waves. He says, "I never saw these creatures, but I know they exist" (93). Even in this moment when he is adding an almost fictional element to his graphic memoir, he portrays it with such precision that it becomes hard to challenge its authenticity, here too, the ocean suddenly becomes violent as the "giant octopus" leaps out of it to grab the man.

As his years pass, the mundaneness of life ensues and so the ocean too remains calm. When the Indonesian navy men attack their boat, the action almost hurries as if to suggest the speed at which all of the events were taking place. The panels of the graphic memoir that would occupy the whole page or were divided into half (horizontally) suddenly divide into three images. All the three images bleed into each other without any clear markers that have been a constant technique in most of the panels, this highlights the fastness and the simultaneity of the events (106). The ocean water adds to the intensity of the moment that is depicted by the waves crashing towards the Indonesian ship. Yet again, as soon as the danger of being caught by the Indonesian navy subsides, the water returns to its calmness (107).

Similar pattern can be observed when Vannak gets on a new boat, his mental state is not calm, he is anxious because the new "Hou Na" has a "cruel face" (110). The ocean water is shown to be more violent and unsettling accompanied by rains.

The Ocean, which was supposed to be his source of income and a job, throughout the narrative, is nothing but a space of misery and disappointment. Even in moments of peace does Vannak feel a sense of entrapment, after a series of storms and continuous rains, when the weather finally calms down, he says, "The world had been washed. It was beautiful, and a peace settled upon the ocean that had nothing at all to do with our lives, adrift on a hellish ship and lost at sea" (127).

The ocean is not just the cause of his slavery but also acts as an escape from slavery. Right before the chapter titled, "Escape", he says in the previous chapter, "I knew that one day I would have to jump into the endless ocean to be free" (134). The ocean that has been so cruel to him so far becomes his only way to reach the land. Even when he and his friend, Chaya, do not know how to swim, the ocean guides them to the shore and they reach safely with the help of empty fish sauce containers.

All these representations of the ocean in different scenarios are conscious reflections of personal emotions on nature. The comic book medium provides the appropriate space to reflect the different moods of the ocean which would have been difficult in the case of a prose narrative. In a comic book, these form the basis of the background to most of the panels and it looms over as a presence that is inevitable without constantly mentioning it, while in a prose narrative, the writer would have to mention the workings of the ocean separately in every event

V. ART IN THE GRAPHIC MEMOIR

Visual arts and narratives have been an intrinsic feature of Cambodian culture. The folk art and Angkor Wat sculptures have been prevalent through the ages; however, the comic book art is a fairly new terrain. Comic books entered Cambodian culture in the 1960s even though Cambodian political cartoons have been in publication since 1936 that "began shortly after the birth of the first Khmer-language newspaper, Nagara Vatta" (Lent 105). Uth Roeun created the first comic book in 1963 and since then, comic books have become quite a popular medium. These early comic books were highly influenced by the French *bande dessinée*.

Since comic books have been a major genre in Cambodia, it is of no surprise that Vannak Prum also chose this genre to narrate his story. What is clear from the onset of the comic book is that he had always possessed a talent for drawing. His first memories of drawing are from when he was a young child and drew an image of Bruce Lee in the dirt in front of his house (11).

The form of drawing that Vannak Prum chooses is very intrinsic to Cambodian culture, it is in the form of the folk art with realistic depictions of people and places, simple yet powerful in terms of conveying emotions. The drawings are very vivid and naive, drawn specifically to tell his story as simply as possible. The colours used in the drawings are very bright and the use of crayons provides a very unique touch that is reflective of the bright

and colourful culture of Cambodia. "For Henri Bergson, memory is brought into sharper focus by the image, but its most concrete articulation unfolds through action, which is dynamic and ephemeral" (Ahmed and Crucifix 1).

The descriptions are stated as matter-of-fact while the drawings are very detailed and even abstract at times. The use of fine pen and pencil lines gives the graphic memoir can also be interpreted as giving a definite and concrete form to the incoherent and incomprehensible experiences of trauma. His attention to fine detail in every panel brings out the active engagement he has not just with his body or that of the people around him, but also of his surroundings. Through the visuals in the graphic memoir that are drawn from recollection from memories he is archiving his story in the larger narrative of modern day slavery. It is his way of dealing with trauma, he says, "My physical injuries hurt less, but my memory is a wound that will never heal. I struggle with anger I feel toward the people who sold me like an animal" (225).

Art, for him, is not just a medium to depict and narrate his story of all these five-six years of slavery; it also becomes a medium to get the trust of his wife back. She says, "I thought you were lying. But now I see it's the truth." (Italics in original) (224). And he says, "And so I drew my way back into my family home" (224). These simple sentences carry such a huge weight of being accepted by one's own family because he could draw and tell and, in a way, justify his absence from their lives for so many years.

Art has redeemed him at numerous instances, it is because of his ability to draw that he has been able to get jobs, get favours that would have been otherwise impossible and even escape danger of being killed. It is because he possessed the art of drawing, he got a job as a sculptor in Siem Reap. Even though this job didn't pay him, he still got enough to eat to survive. The most important instance where he escaped death by the use of art was when he was on the ship and he straightened a fishing hook to make it into a needle, scraped black soot and mixed it with water and toothpaste to make it his ink (99). He used this to tattoo a centipede on his thigh. Soon, other men too started asking for tattoos and this helped him be safe on the ship. He says, "I did hundreds of tattoos on men from many countries. It helped me keep safe from some of the violence" (101).

When he draws himself engrossed in the act of tattooing the body of the other man, he is documenting the process of creating an archive on the body. By representing this act of tattooing the body, he is representing the self and the tattoo as a medium to archive his story. He also drew some similar tattoos when he was enslaved as indentured labour. He started charging people for the tattoos then because he wanted to save enough money to buy a phone and escape the plantation (173).

In many other instances, he drew women to please them and gain favours from them, like in the case of the nurse, when he drew her portrait; she brought him clean clothes and gave her food as well. When he was in the police station in Malaysia, he drew Cambodia and an airplane to be able to tell the police men that he and Chaya wish to go back to Cambodia that is where they come from (155).

This graphic memoir is not just a narrative of Prum's tumultuous past, it also narrates stories of other people who are enslaved and tortured in many ways. While he was on the boat, he was kin to many of these slaves and he drew them in his narrative speaking for them as well. When he leaves from the prison in Malaysia, he encounter a different kind of slavery, a girl who worked as a maid for a rich family and was beaten up by the woman of the house. There is a sense of guilt in Prum that gets reflected in this drawing when he is leaving the prison and hands over "everything" he had to her (210). He is guilty of losing her address on the way home but he draws her in an attempt to redeem himself of his guilt. He feels that through his art and his graphic memoir, he might be able to make the world aware of the numerous cases of slavery and the kind of experiences that these slaves go through.

VI. CONCLUSION

The reality of all those instances strikes very hard through his drawings. In the end, Prum has drawn and recreated the photograph of him receiving the State Department Human Rights Defender Award, presented to him directly by then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2012 (225). Re-drawing a photograph is another technique used by the graphic memoirists, in the act of "graphic rendering," as Elisabeth El Refaie calls drawing of photographs in a story, the artist is performing authenticity (158).

In the "Afterword" to the graphic memoir, Kevin Bales says, "The voices of the enslaved are muted in the so-called "free world," where the practice of slavery can seem distant and archaic, almost unreal." This paper is an attempt at rethinking the notions of slavery in the modern world and it challenges some of the preconceived notions of slavery to be associated with the past. This graphic memoir has come at a juncture in time that it speaks for itself without oversimplifying the narratives and without demeaning the experiences because the enslaved self draws them.

"Because comics, unlike printed books, are hand-drawn, they seem to work as an immediate representation of the experience of the author both for what is being said, that is the events we see on the page and the dialogue we read, and for how it is being said, that is the look and style of the material on the page." (Kukkonen 56) I believe that had it not been hand-drawn, most of the experiences would not have been as easily and intricately portrayed as they have been in the visuals.

“In our lifetimes, this has begun to change. Shifting history's lens from the upper rungs to the lower, we are learning more than ever about the masses of people who did the work that made society tick.” (Zinn ix) Prum's narrative is not simply a story of one person who was held as a slave at the sea and then on land, his story is a reflection of the ongoing slavery and the failed attempts at regulating them in the contemporary world. His graphic memoir is testimony to the horrors of slavery and a wakeup call for the people to realise where does the seafood on their plate come from. It is representative of the real struggles and engagements between the slaves and slave owners in Southeast Asia. This graphic memoir calls to the injustices done to the slaves in terms of human rights violation, human trafficking, corruption, exploitation, forced labour, unpaid labour, lack of international intervention and policing, lack of proper enforcement of laws and illegal fishing trade.

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