

**READING THE KHMER AMERICAN IDENTITY:
A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF GENDER IN
ANTHONY VEASNA SO'S SHORT FICTION**

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of Gender in Anthony Veasna So's Short Fiction**

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ABSTRACT

Title: Reading the Khmer American Identity: A Feminist Analysis of Gender in Anthony Veasna So's Short Fiction

Khmer American identity refers to the distinct cultural, ethnic, and traditional identity of individuals descending from Cambodia and residing in America. Khmer American identity is a performance-based identity therefore the present research explores the performance of gendered identity in Khmer American society as well as the punishment faced by individuals for not performing their gender as expected by the society. It further explores how this performance brings forth culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women to highlight the plight of women who are treated as inferior beings because of their gender. The study uses selected short stories from Anthony Veasna So's short fiction titled *Afterparties: Stories* as its primary text to explore these phenomena and bring forth an understanding of the construction and reconstruction of gendered identity in Khmer American society that carries the weight of its bleak history in the form of genocide. The theoretical position has been formulated in light of the feminist lens of Judith Butler and Susan Moller Okin (1988; 1999), primarily focusing on the performance of gendered identity, culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women, and the enforced punishment for deviating from the expected ways of performing. Through this feminist research, one gains deeper insights into the patriarchal and traditional values and belief systems of Khmer American society, leading to the subjugation and entrapment of women. It also sheds light on the stronghold of Khmer cultural values on the lives of second-generation Cambodian immigrants in America. The research is, thus, a significant piece of writing for its contribution to Cambodian American and Southeast Asian literature as well as its role in highlighting a fresh piece of work published posthumously.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all the defined and undefined genders, who have long been confined to set standards. I dedicate this research to all those who try to break the shackles of the society and try to create a new identity for themselves.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This feminist research focuses on understanding and exploring the complex Khmer American identity which is based on gender performance and socially constructed ways of being. It begins with defining the key terms of this research i.e. identity, gender, and Khmer American identity by shedding light on the historical and cultural significance of Cambodian or Khmer identity. The research further proceeds toward introducing the selected short fiction while focusing on the specific research questions that involve the exploration of performance-based gendered identities, culturally reinforced discrimination against women, and punishment as a tool for subverting or reinforcing Khmer American identity. This, then, paves the way for a highly insightful discussion regarding the (re)construction of Khmer American gendered identities within the society, leading to an analysis of the role of traditional values in the everyday lives of individuals.

Identity is defined in different ways by various theorists and researchers based on their observations and insights. According to Bauman “the self-assertive individual” is “concerned with establishing his own identity and getting it socially approved” (59). This shows that identity formation has a social dimension to it. Bauman elaborates that individual forms his/ her identity with the help of defining questions, such as ““Who am I’, ‘how should I live’, ‘who do I want to become”” (62). Furthermore, Bauman asserts that identity formation is an ongoing process as it is “continuously negotiated, adjusted, constructed without interruption and with no prospect of finality”(41). This, then, highlights the significance of identity in the lives of individuals as well as the role of society in approving or disapproving of that identity.

Likewise, Appiah believes that identity involves realizing and understanding the “interdependence of self-creation and sociability” (17). This means that one’s creation of identity does not exist in a vacuum. It involves a social aspect as well. This highlights the role of society as well as individual choices in the creation of one's identity which is often a “response” to one's “circumstances” (19). Circumstances, here, refer to the distinct situations and scenarios present for the creation and reconstruction of one's identity.

Moreover, Jonathan H. X. Lee asserts that individuals “transform and construct their identities in light of historical knowledge” (477). This also holds for Cambodian American or Khmer American Identity. To elaborate, Cambodian American or Khmer-American Identity is formed with the help of traditional beliefs or “historical knowledge” (477). Khmer American Identity can, thus, be defined as “life in America guided by Buddhist doctrines, morals, and ethics” (480). In other words, being a Khmer is closely tied to one's cultural beliefs and historical roots stemming from Buddhist doctrines. However, Khmer Buddhist beliefs such as “selflessness” clash with the American focus on “individualism” (H. X. Lee 480). Khmer American individuals can, thus, be said to exist between “multiple worlds” as their identity not only includes “history, material condition, and social relationships” but also “emerging Cambodian American communities” (H. X. Lee 477; 481). Thus, Khmer American identity influences every aspect of the lives of the female and male genders.

It is also important to define gender, as gender performance or gendered identity is significant in this research. In his book titled *Sex and Gender: On The Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, psychologist Robert Stoller distinguishes between sex and gender by defining the latter as the behavior (feminine or masculine) as displayed by an individual. This means that one's gender is not a direct consequence of his/ her sex. Likewise, Mikkola Mari in *Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender* defines the gender of an individual as dependent on various social elements. This sheds light on the social construction of gender which is made and remade due to historical beliefs or traditional customs.

Pilcher and Whelehan argue that the two genders of masculine and feminine are presented in such a way as to lend support to the belief that men are stronger and more powerful and women are biologically better suited to be homemakers and mothers (72-74). Thus, society has constructed this narrative, which is believed by most, that trying to interfere with the traditional role of women i.e. that of a mother or a homemaker will lead to an unhappy and unsuccessful family life (Pilcher & Whelehan 72-74). In this way, women are denied their rights as equal to that of men, leading to the propagation of patriarchal values and traditions.

In feminism, patriarchy can be defined as the male domination and control over women, leading to their treatment as subordinate beings (Pilcher & Whelehan 93). Patriarchy entails various forms of violence and control over women's lives, including control over their bodies (Pilcher & Whelehan 93). Patriarchal cultures and values make it almost impossible for women to make choices based on their individual preferences. Although the patriarchal nature of such beliefs is harmful to women, society is not willing to reevaluate the value of such customs and values as it is closely tied to their social or cultural identity. This then highlights the value and role of one's identity in his/ her life.

As stated a few paragraphs earlier, identity holds significant value for Khmer residing in America. Khmer-American identity, based on Khmer cultural identity and heritage, has its roots in Cambodia (Lewis 1). Khmer American society holds their traditional values and beliefs in high reverence (Lewis 25; 31). Although it involves the propagation of patriarchal beliefs and customs, leading to the ill-treatment of women, this respect for traditions or cultural values remains unchanged since historical times.

To elaborate, Cambodia's gruesome history involves mass murders, brutalities, and dehumanization. Cambodians were ill-treated during the French colonization of the country in the form of discrimination. During the French protectorate, between the 1910s-1930s, there emerged a popular narrative of the authenticity of a Khmer propagated by the colonizers and the colonized (Edwards, *Cambodge* 12). It was an attempt to connect Cambodians to the glory of the past. Soon, Cambodians began to highlight the significance of their Khmer community, culture, heritage, and history (Edwards, *Cambodge* 12). They used the ideas of an "Original Khmer" to discriminate against other ethnicities and countries (Edwards, *Cambodge* 12). This continued even after independence by the ruling parties (Edwards, *Cambodge* 12). Post-independence, Cambodians, thus developed concepts and ideas relevant to a national community, leading to a heightened awareness of a geographic nation-state and Khmer nationalism (Edwards, *Cambodge* 12). However, this Khmer nationalism led to the propagation of cultural beliefs and traditions that severely limited the rights and lives of women.

Although there was almost a 40-year gap between the French Protectorate and Pol Pot's horrific regime, one can compare the popularity of the concept of "Original Khmer"

with the horrors of Khmer Rouge's discriminatory violence and murders that can be categorized as autogenocide (Edwards, *Cambodge* 12). While the word genocide covers the killing and bodily harm of a group based on their religion or ethnicity, autogenocide refers to the mass murder of one's ethnic group (Vittal 200). Thus, the Khmer Rouge, was, a traumatizing event in Cambodia's history because of Pol Pot's zero consideration for human lives.

To elaborate, Pol Pot, at the head of the Khmer Rouge, in an attempt to create a pure Khmer identity, stripped away non-Cambodian customs and traditions from the country, including foods, languages, dress, and education (Lewis 5). His regime swiftly killed individuals who did not possess a pure Khmer identity (Lewis 5). It was a way of "imposed identity renegotiation" based on Pol Pot's version of a "glorified past" (Lewis 5). Thus, it became essential to pass as a Khmer to stay alive (Edwards, "Sojourns Across Sources" 127). Silence, subservience, and obedience were survival tactics to stay alive during the Khmer Rouge (Lewis 8). Therefore, many Cambodians were forced to flee their country and arrived in the United States as refugees (Lewis 8). These refugees felt alone, lost, and trapped in the new country (Lewis 8). Their cultural values and beliefs were not popularly disseminated in the foreign land which made them feel further isolated (Lewis 8). This then represents the value of being near one's cultural community or cultural values.

One's bond with his/ her cultural community or cultural values is inherently significant in that it involves dictating his/ her life choices. While it is easy to remain connected to one's roots in his/ her country, immigration complicates one's relationship with his/ her cultural identity (Lewis 8). Moving to another country with a different culture creates conflicts with one's cultural identity (Lewis 8). It becomes difficult to integrate into the new culture while holding onto the culture of one's ancestors (Lewis 8). Every belief, idea, and tradition that one holds dear is put into question in the new country. Therefore, desperate measures are taken to hold onto one's history and culture, often at the expense of limiting the life and role of women.

This involves coming together with other immigrants of the same cultural group, leading to the formation of a united cultural group in the new country (Lewis 3). The

creation of this new community based on common ties allows the individuals to celebrate their cultural identity, giving them a feeling of stability in the unfamiliar geographical and cultural setting (Lewis 3). Such cultural communities often become a hub for education and learning as well as propagating gender-biased viewpoints of the past which limit the role of women to that of a good daughter and wife. The formation of one such cultural community is observed in Anthony Veasna So's short stories collection *Afterparties: Stories*. In these short stories, the primary text of this research, Cambodian-American individuals belonging to the Khmer group remain connected to each other in several ways, primarily by keeping Buddhist values at the center. The Cambodian-American individuals' formation of a strong community of Khmers served them in multiple ways, primarily helping them develop their name in the seafood processing industry (Lewis 8). It also allowed them to remain connected to their roots.

While Cambodian Americans formed a powerful community in the country, their socially constructed gender roles, stemming from cultural and ancient heritage, had a lasting impact on the lives of women. The socially constructed gendered roles for Khmer women were and still are seen as essential for the survival as well as the preservation of Khmer traditions and customs, thus representing the patriarchal nature of Khmer culture.

Throughout history and literature, Khmer women's socially constructed gender role encourages them to fulfill the role of a good mother, wife, and daughter (Hutinta 63-64). This also involves not engaging in sexual acts before marriage (Hutinta 64). Deviating from the expected social behavior puts into question one's identity as a woman and a Khmer too (Hutinta 64). While Khmer society's insistence on strict socially constructed gendered roles for their women represents the significance of women in the upbringing of future generations, it also highlights the entrapment of Khmer women in the bounds of societal and traditional rules and values (Hutinta 63-65; Ledgerwood 3). This viewpoint is highlighted in this research.

Thus, the current study deals with the lives, traumas, and eccentricities of Khmer American Identity as elaborated in *Afterparties: Stories* by Anthony Veasna So. *Afterparties: Stories* is a collection of short stories that highlight the lived experiences of Cambodian-American individuals where social rules, regulations, and customs play a role

in their understanding of the world. The lives of this diasporic community have a dark history in the form of the Cambodian civil war (autogenocide) and the displacement and emigration that followed in its wake. However, these individuals admire and respect their cultural identity and refuse to say goodbye to their customs, often at the expense of the rights of women members of their social group. They try to reminisce, rekindle, and reawaken the spirit of their original Khmer identity by keeping alive traditions and customs that subjugate women. This impacts how they behave, act, and present themselves. Thus, So's short story collection considers the distinct Khmer American identity as a factor that influences their construction and reconstruction of gendered identities, leading to the glorification of patriarchal values. The characters in So's stories are acutely aware of their Khmer identity even when cooking food or partying with cousins. This heightened connection with their Khmer identity impacts their treatment of women based on cultural and historical traditions.

So's collection of short stories is analyzed by bringing to the forefront two popular and insightful theorists, Judith Butler and Susan Moller Okin.

In her phenomenal essay titled *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Judith Butler constructs a narrative that considers gender as a “performance” (522). To elaborate, gender is a fluid identity enacted privately and publicly through “a stylized repetition of acts” (522). These acts stem from “meanings already socially established” (Butler 526). This highlights the socially constructed nature of gender.

By gender as a social construction, Butler means that certain acts have been repeated and reiterated, over time, and have come to be seen as naturally associated with a specific gender (520). Thus, when a person is born and is biologically identified as a male or female, one is taught to behave according to his / her gendered identity (Butler 519). In this way, one learns to perform his/ her gendered identity within the prescribed historical and social limits and comes to consider this societal construction as a natural consequence of his/ her biological sex (522). However, the social construction of gendered identity often forces an individual into roles that subjugate his/ her being and individuality, especially in the case of women.

Butler's theory of performing one's gendered identity leads to new and urgent insights when studied alongside Susan Moller Okin's extensive work titled *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* According to Okin, "past and present" societies find ways to control women using historic and cultural claims (21). She highlights that several cultures are biased against women in that women's equality is severely diminished with her rights being continuously infringed upon due to "ancient texts or revered traditions" (Okin 21). These societies refer to the sacred texts of the past to curtail the "freedom of females" in the present day (Okin 21). Okin believes that the degree to which a culture is patriarchal should be the cause of justifying the group rights assigned to the specific minority culture within a different majority culture setting. However, this research is primarily concerned with Okin's viewpoint that discrimination against women can be traced back to "powerful cultural roots" (22). This means a culture's traditions, customs, and beliefs stand in the way of women's growth, development, and opportunities. In other words, these "culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination" severely affect women's rights and roles in society (Okin 23). She also highlights how preventing people from questioning their historically constructed social roles can lead them to live "oppressive lives" (Okin 21). In other words, preserving one's cultural traditions and heritage often leads to the implementation of gender roles and laws that attempt to give men more control over women's lives and freedom.

Butler and Okin's ideas can be studied simultaneously to perform a more nuanced reading of *Afterparties: Stories*. To elaborate, So's short stories collection provides insight into an individual's socially constructed gendered identity that impacts his/ her place in society, often leading to limited opportunities for women in all spheres of life. In other words, Khmer patriarchal values influence how individuals perform, construct, and (re)construct their gendered identities, bringing forth the inherent biases present in the said culture. This includes the expectations with the Khmer women to be enduring and patient, leading to an unsatisfied and unfulfilled life for these women. Thus, the present study brings to light the impact of deeply situated Khmer American identity on the everyday performance of one's gendered identities, primarily women.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Khmer American Identity is a culturally rich gendered identity made and remade for decades. It appears to be a socially constructed gendered identity as observed in the selected short stories from *Afterparties: Stories by Anthony Veasna So* through a stylized repetition of acts based on meanings already socially established. However, failure to perform one's gender according to societal rules leads to severe and mild forms of punishment. Thus, this leads to culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study aims

1. To explore Anthony Veasna So's representation of the performance of gendered identities as Khmer Americans in the selected short stories.
2. To analyze the characters' performance as a representation of culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women.
3. To highlight the use of punishment as a tool for reinforcing or subverting Khmer American identities.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How does Anthony Veasna So represent the performance of gendered identities as Khmer Americans in the selected short stories?
2. How do the characters' performance represent culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women?
3. How is punishment used as a tool in reinforcing or subverting Khmer American identities?

1.4 Research Methodology

The area of study is feminism. The research is qualitative, systematic, and textual in nature as it analyzes the element of performing one's gender and constructing and reconstructing one's gendered identity as influenced by Khmer culture, bringing forth the various forms of culturally reinforced discrimination against women as well as the use of

punishment to subvert or reinforce the established identities in the selected short stories from *Afterparties: Stories* by Anthony Veasna So.

The research method used for this study is textual analysis of the selected short stories. According to Belsey, textual analysis is essential to all research that focuses primarily on the “texts” or the “inscription of culture in its artefacts” (160). This highlights the role of textual analysis in making possible a close analysis of the primary text.

The purpose of employing textual analysis is that it “poses the questions which research sets out to answer” (Belsey 166). To elaborate, textual analysis allows an exploration of ideas “made at a particular historical moment and from within a specific culture” (166). This means that a textual analysis analyzes one aspect of the whole at one given time. In this sense, textual analysis is subjective as it does not “embrace all the possible readings” (166). Nevertheless, textual analysis is “indispensable” as it brings in various “secondary material to investigate its classical sources” (160; 166). Thus, a text is not a standalone piece of literature but is made of “multiple writings”, which aid in its understanding and analysis (166). This highlights the value of supporting primary sources with relevant secondary readings as is done in the textual analysis for this research.

Furthermore, Belsey considers textual analysis as a research method that involves closely associating and analyzing “the work itself” (166). Belsey, thus, lays the groundwork for the employment of textual analysis to carefully uncover the “presuppositions” by examining “the details” of the “classical sources” or the primary text (166). Therefore, textual analysis is essential to the understanding and exploration of the selected short stories.

As it is a qualitative analysis, the sample is the selected text on which Butler and Okin's theories are applied and expanded upon. The researcher takes an excerpt from the selected short stories and applies the mentioned theoretical framework to identify the selected aspects as well as analyze how characters construct and reconstruct their genders as influenced by specific customs and traditions of the Khmer culture.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research has chosen to focus specifically on the Cambodian-American individuals' Khmer identity and literature to give voice to the voiceless and highlight the plight of women. To elaborate, the Cambodian Civil War resulted in mass killings, destruction, and emigration (Lewis 23). A significant number of Cambodians fled to the United States to seek refuge. These Cambodians spent decades reconstructing their Khmer identity to make a place in the new country and provide a safe and secure homeland to their American-born Cambodian children (Lewis 29). However, these children have had to go to schools where their history, culture, and heritage were not studied, acknowledged, or celebrated (Lewis 30). Thus, the only way that Cambodian-American individuals preserved their roots was through the creation of a community that celebrates and keeps alive their distinct Khmer identity (Lewis 2-3). This was extremely important to them.

The creation of such communities in a new country opens avenues for the members, allowing them to honor their past while making a place in the present. While their attempts to preserve their cultural roots are highly commendable, it should be noted that the women in the Khmer culture are expected to continue conforming to discriminatory rules and socially constructed roles of the past. This, then, highlights the patriarchal nature of Khmer culture which continues to train women to be subservient to men.

The study into the identity and literature of Cambodian-American individuals is relevant to the Pakistani context due to the similarities: During the '90s, many Pakistani families emigrated to America to provide their family members with a better and safer future. These families moved away from Pakistan to develop a financially and socially safe future in America. Many families were also tempted by the American dream that promises a glorious life for all Americans. While the emigration of Pakistani families was not motivated by an event as traumatic as autogenocide, it had in its roots a concern for the safety of future generations. As a member of a community that has worked tirelessly to create its place in the world, especially a new country, Pakistani readers and individuals can empathize with and understand the struggles of the Cambodian-American community.

Thus, this research highlights how women continue to be victims of patriarchal values and traditions propagated by the decision-makers of society, leading to discrimination in terms of socially constructed gender roles and identities. It also allows

upcoming South Asian writers and readers, specifically Pakistani researchers, to understand the impact of cultural roots in the continued subjugation of women through the performance of socially constructed gendered identities. This would open up future avenues of research into Pakistani identity and Pakistani experiences in a diasporic community.

1.6 Delimitation of the Study

The current research is delimited to the works of Judith Butler titled *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* and Susan Moller Okin titled *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* It primarily focuses on the aspects of performing one's gender and social construction and reconstruction of gendered identities with reference to culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women as well as the use of punishment to reinforce or subvert the established identities. The text for this research is selected short stories from *Afterparties: Stories* by Anthony Veasna So titled (i) *Three Women of Chuck's Donuts*; (ii) *Maly, Maly, Maly*; (iii) *Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly*, (iv) *The Shop*, and (v) *We Would've Been Princes!* The research adds to and develops Butler's feminist work by bringing forth Okin's ideas, representing how patriarchal cultures limit the opportunities available to women. This leads to an exploration of the specific cultural beliefs and traditions of Khmer American identity that are problematic in their treatment of women.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The collection of relevant literature for this research was limited due to the severe lack of existing articles and research papers on the chosen text and writer. This has hindered the possibility of understanding the chosen text from different research perspectives and placing this research within an already-existing body of literature. However, the researcher has attempted to critically analyze and evaluate the available book reviews on the chosen texts to place this research body within the existing literature. In a way, this research paper is a step toward reducing the gap in Queer Southeast Asian American Literature by paving the way for Khmer American identity in literature.

1.8 Organization of the Study

The research consists of five chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1.3 Research Questions

1.4 Research Methodology

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.6 Delimitation of the Study

1.7 Limitations of the Study

1.8 Organization of the Study

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

2.1 Khmer Society's Impact on Gendered Identities

2.2 The Representation of Complexities in Khmer American Society in Anthony Veasna So's Short Fiction

2.3 Addressing the Research Gap

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Theoretical Underpinnings of Judith Butler

3.2 Theoretical Underpinnings of Susan Moller Okin

3.3 Conclusion

Chapter 4: Textual Analysis

4.1 On Butler's Gendered Enactment & Okin's Customary Prejudices in the Selected Short Fiction

4.2 Retribution as a Mechanism for Challenging or Affirming the Established Identity

4.3 Conclusion

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Findings and Summing Up the Whole Discussion

5.2 Recommendations

5.3 Impact on Pakistani Society

Works Cited

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review has been divided into three parts. The first section explores the impact of Khmer culture and society on the construction and reconstruction of gendered identities (primarily females) by bringing forth historical stories, and folklore, and shedding light on the conducted interviews that highlight the plight of Cambodian women living in America. It also underscores the significance of Khmer values and traditions in the lives of Cambodians living in America.

The second section of this literature review explores the complexities of Khmer American society as observed in the primary text *Afterparties: Stories*. Due to a lack of research papers and articles on the primary text, this section presents nuanced viewpoints of various writers who have explored So's stories through different perspectives in their critical book reviews. These book reviews as well as a recently published thesis, serve, as a starting point for understanding life in Khmer American society and work as background reading for this research.

The final section sheds light on the existing gap in the literature that is addressed with the help of this research which provides an understanding of the performance of gendered identities and the use of punishment as a tool in Khmer American society.

2.1 Khmer Society's Impact on Gender Identities

A few researchers have explored the impact of Khmer culture on the gendered identity of individuals, providing an informative starting point for the current research. In her work titled *Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender: Women, Stories, And the Social Order*, Judy Ledgerwood investigates Khmer women's gendered identity by relying on stories and folklore. In this historical research, Ledgerwood reads Khmer folklore and stories to understand the lives of Khmer women as represented in literature. She also questions Cambodian women in America about their past lives in Cambodia as well as their current lives in America, leading to a record of stories that make it possible to explore hierarchical positions in the Khmer community as well as the women's gendered identity in the society that is closely linked to their identity as a Khmer (Ledgerwood 4-5). Her

research contributes to the current work by providing evidence for the socially constructed gendered identity of the individuals based on Khmer culture and ancient rules, leading to the poor treatment of women. Khmer society's strong focus on keeping their historical rules and ancient traditions alive stems from their attempt to keep Khmer nationalism alive which is inherently patriarchal. However, this work does not explore the treatment or place of Khmer women with reference to any specific text or the primary text in question. This gap is addressed by the current research.

Building upon Ledgerwood's work, Areeya Hutinta in *The Concept of the "Perfectly Virtuous Woman": Constructed Identity of Khmer Women for The Nation* explores the various expectations and socially constructed gender roles entrusted upon the Khmer women. According to Hutinta's research, a Khmer woman is expected to be a good wife, mother, and daughter, and control her sexual desires (63-83). Her work sheds light on the role of influential individuals in a society whose decisions for the behavior of Khmer women are politically motivated for the survival of Khmerness. To elaborate, Khmer women's behavior is used as a tool to protect Khmer culture in the changing political scenarios. Thus, Khmer women's socially constructed gendered roles have been impacted by political events such as the French protectorate or the Khmer Rouge (Hutinta 63-83). Her research also highlights the impact of Khmer customs, beliefs, and traditions in the (re)construction of gendered identities of women and is therefore, quite significant to the current research. Moreover, this historical writing provides an understanding of the patriarchal nature of Khmer customs and beliefs; however, it does not explore the distinct Khmer American identity nor address any specific literature or the primary text. It simply relies on political instances to explore the position and socially constructed gendered roles of women.

Although Hutinta's work has shed some light on the discriminatory role of women in the Khmer community, Jonathan H. X. Lee in *Cambodian American Ethics of Identity* talks about the difficulties of constructing one's identity as an American and Cambodian simultaneously, especially when one belongs to the 1.5 and second-generation of Cambodian-Americans (476-482). To elaborate, this generation of Cambodian-Americans either fled Cambodia at an early age to settle in America or were born in America (H. X. Lee 476-482). Therefore, they are completely unaware of Cambodia's history which is

closely linked to “their contemporary lives as Americans” (H. X. Lee 476). This then represents the value of Cambodian or Khmer cultural values and beliefs in the identity construction of Cambodian Americans even in today's times, representing the role of the past in the creation of group identity and individual identity in the present (H. X. Lee 476-482). This work is an essential background reading to understand the gaps existing in different generations of Cambodian Americans. It paves the way for understanding the primary text of this research, providing reasoning for the current structure of Khmer society in America.

2.2 The Representation of Complexities in Khmer American Society in Anthony Veasna So's Short Fiction

While few researchers have explored Khmer society's impact on gendered identities, not many readers and writers have chosen this text for their research work. Only one recently published thesis employed the primary text as its area of research. Moreover, a few writers have also reviewed the primary text of this research i.e., So's short story collection titled *Afterparties: Stories*. The written thesis and book reviews provide insights into the myriad of features, characteristics, thought processes, beliefs, and customs that work in the text and serve as valuable pieces of background reading due to the lack of research papers and articles on the primary text.

The already published thesis and book reviews represent how the primary text is a critical piece that highlights the traumas of the past, the difficulties of readjustment into a new present, and the need to give meaning to ancestral customs and beliefs in a new country often brought about by underscoring the impact of Khmer patriarchal values on everyday lives as well as the (re)construction of gendered identities of characters.

The thesis titled *Falling Short: On Alternative Fullness, Queerness, & Afterparties* by Reginald J. Kent talks about the intersectionality of diaspora and queerness with reference to So's short story collection. It discusses the concept of reincarnation as explored through So's protagonists who have similar names i.e. Tony, Ves, and Anthony, representing Sara Ahmed's definition of queerness as a path towards self-acceptance (Kent). Furthermore, it considers the role of So's short stories as a significant piece in queer re-imagining and identity exploration, allowing space for ambiguity and multiple meanings

due to the fragmentary nature of narratives (Kent). Although the thesis is a valuable piece of writing in understanding So's fiction as a queer narrative, it does not explore how the stories reflect gender performance, culturally-reinforced discrimination against women, and the use of punishment as a tool for subverting or reinforcing the established Khmer American identity.

In a review titled *The Red and the Pink*, Hua Hsu compares So's life with his short story collection. Like many immigrants, So's parents fled Cambodia to make a life in America. To provide him with a better life consisting of several opportunities, his Cambodian refugee parents chose to teach him English over their native language (Hsu 1-6). This, then, highlights how many Khmer were given limited working opportunities due to the language barrier. However, So does not take the traditional route to represent the plight and struggles of immigrant narratives (Hsu 1-6). Instead, he uses unorthodox or idiosyncratic language to portray the struggles of second-generation immigrants as they try to create a future for themselves (Hsu 1-6). Hsu also appreciates So's short stories for representing the experiences of two generations of Cambodian Americans (1-6). While the first-generation immigrants that fled Cambodia frequently mention the genocide, the American-born Cambodian generation tries to come to terms with their parents' traumatic past and locate themselves in the new world, creating their own identity (Hsu 1-6). However, their search for a new identity is often limited or prohibited due to the discriminatory traditions of the past, primarily in the case of women.

While Hsu's review covers the generational gap and queer characters, it does not explore how the stories represent socially constructed gendered identities stemming from Khmer American identity, leading to culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination and use of punishment as a tool for reinforcing or subverting the established Khmer identity.

Moreover, Larissa Pham's review focuses on the immigrant and diasporic experiences of the characters. Her review titled *Anthony Veasna So's Portraits of Diaspora* highlights the ever-present remnants of the gruesome past in the lives of Cambodian Americans. She compares the violence in the story named, *The Three Women in Chuck's Donuts* to the blood of the Cambodian genocide of 1970, implying that the blood never washes away (Pham 1-4). Pham analyzes So's ability to relate stories of traumatic past and

survival while highlighting the ability of refugee children to understand the sacrifices of their Khmer parents (1-4). She, further, draws attention to So's role in developing and adding to Southeast Asian American literature by authentically imbibing Cambodia's gruesome history in the lives of Cambodian-American refugee children who feel the collective pain of their parents and ancestors (Pham 1-4). This, then, represents the rewriting and reclaiming of history by this new generation of Southeast Asian American writers who try to bring forth real experiences of their people for better representation and understanding.

Pham's review also appreciates So for representing the Cambodian American diasporic community and underscores the significance of their Khmer identity in helping them form a bond in the new country (1-4). While this review covers several aspects of Khmer nationalism, culture, and ethnicity including the violent past, generational trauma, and immigration, the review does not draw links between the (re)construction of gendered identities as influenced by specific Khmer cultural beliefs in the short stories, thus, leaving out the element of patriarchal values' subjugating role on Khmer women's lives. This is where the present research is helpful.

Andrew Limbong further celebrates So's writing in *A Young Literary Star Makes His Posthumous Debut With 'Afterparties'* for exploring Khmer identity, generational gap, and the survival in a post-genocide worldview while highlighting the individual struggles of the characters using pressing themes. He further commends the short story collection as an essential piece of queer Khmer American fiction, shedding light on the characters' various gendered identities in the book (Limbong). Limbong's book review brings the readers' attention toward So's careful amalgamation of elements of survival literature (tension, anxiety, fear, confusion) with the search for self through one's cultural and gendered identities. However, it does not specifically explore the elements of performance of gendered identities, culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination, and the use of punishment as a tool.

Moreover, Zach Shultz, So's close friend, reminisces about the time spent together with his friend. He also marvels at So's short story collection for making space for Cambodian American identity (Shultz). In his piece titled, *After the Afterparty: On*

Grieving the Loss of Anthony Veasna So, an Explosive Literary Talent, Shultz highlights the artistic exploration and categorization of complex themes such as racism, trauma, poverty, and forced migration using bleak humor. According to Shultz, the characters in So's short stories experience varying loyalties to the communities with home acting as a haven (in some cases) and a cage (in other instances). This stems from the characters' feelings of commitment and duty to the family and desire to build their own life and happiness, leading to their search for belonging and connection in a reality intertwined in Cambodia and California (Shultz). Shultz's analysis, thus, represents the characters' strong link to their Khmer identity and society which may lead to entrapment of women due to culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination. Therefore, this work paves the way for the detailed exploration of gendered identities in Khmer American society within the current research.

Summer K. Lee brings an interesting perspective regarding the characters in the short stories. In her review titled "*Of Course, of Course*": *On Anthony Veasna So's 'Afterparties'*" S. K. Lee sheds light on how recurring characters appear in So's short stories, representing the layering, appearance, and reappearance of themes and ideas through a varying lens. S. K. Lee compares this to So's real life where he and his family prepared duplexes time and again for tenants to live in and then leave. She, further, highlights how most characters are longing for a better life elsewhere while performing their duties and responsibilities in California (S. K. Lee). So, thus, presents his characters as raw and flawed, struggling with every man's trouble – drugs, pain, financial strain, business loss, and depression (S. K. Lee). However, the characters still love their Khmer home which is comfortable – something they have known all their lives (S. K. Lee). This review, thus, represents the multifaceted nature of So's characters who struggle with their (gendered) identity and, at times, feel entrapped by their culturally reinforced beliefs. Nevertheless, they put an effort to hold their Khmer American identity close. S. K. Lee's review is insightful and intriguing, exemplifying the complexities of identity formation and preservation explored in more detail in the current research.

Thuy Đinh takes an interesting approach in her review titled *Philosophical, Queer, Angry, Romantic, Defiant: 'Afterparties' Contains Multitudes*. Đinh deconstructs the title of the short story collection to consider it as a celebration of life and the end of the Khmer

Rouge genocide of 1975. She also sheds light on the immigrant feeling of otherness as portrayed by the Cambodian-American characters that are, at times, trapped between the two worlds of America and Cambodia or the past and present Đinh. The reviewer also highlights how the word survivor is viewed in a distinct light in different short stories in the book Đinh. For example: In *Three Women in Chuck's Donuts*, the survivor refers to the women who live in a world surrounded by gang shooters and robberies, allowing the readers to remember the horrors of the Cambodian Civil War (Đinh). Đinh's review does not directly contribute to the present research because of its lack of exploration of the performance of gendered identities, culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination, and the use of punishment as a tool. However, it is an essential background reading for understanding So's writing style and thought process.

Furthermore, Mark Athitakis, in his writing titled *So's posthumous 'Afterparties' is a bittersweet coda*, references the difficulties of the second-generation Cambodian immigrants in finding themselves amidst their parents and ancestors' horrific experiences in Pol Pot's regime and the concentration camps. According to Athitakis, this generation has not witnessed the atrocities first-hand but they feel the pressure of their parents' experiences as to how they navigate their lives. This represents the central role of Khmer background in the characters' lives who, despite traversing between their multiple identities (religious, cultural, gendered), hold their Khmer identity in high regard. This highlights So's efforts at connecting the present with the past, shedding light on the cultural significance of Khmer identity even in the lives of second-generation Cambodian immigrants. Athitakis's work is also an essential background reading for understanding the complex elements and themes at play in different short stories as well as exploring So's skillful representation of the chaos, confusion, trauma, pain, and history through dark humor and effective narrative techniques.

Allan Zheng also offers a thought-provoking perspective on So's collection in his work titled *Review of Afterparties Stories by Anthony Veasna So*. For Zheng, this collection is an insightful collection for individuals interested in learning about the Cambodian diasporic experience and Asian American literature, primarily related to gender, sexuality, and queer studies. He, further, commends So for shifting the narrative by focusing on the lived experiences of second-generation Khmer Americans through sex, race, gender,

identity, and memory instead of narrating the traumatic experiences and survival stories of the 1.5 immigrant generation (Zheng 1-8). Zheng also appreciates how the stories exemplify the role of experience in the formation and reformation of Khmer American identity while shedding light on the ills present in the community due to the propagation and transmission of toxic beliefs and ideas (1-8). Zheng, thus, manages to elaborate on the multifaceted exploration of Khmer American identity through the characters' performance of their gendered identity, leading to entrapment and confinement (in some cases) (1-8). Zheng's review of the short story collection allows the readers to understand the meaning of having a Khmer American identity which involves experiences, instances, traditions, and beliefs specific to Cambodians. However, this review does not explore in detail the culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women nor does it explore the (re)construction of established gendered identities. This gap is addressed by the current research.

In his short life span, So did not write much. He completed this phenomenal book of short stories that has been critically acclaimed by all. However, he also started writing another book *Straight Thru Cambotown* which he couldn't complete before his death. According to a few excerpts shared by the writer himself, this book, too, discusses and highlights the plight and shared history of Cambodians affected by the terrible genocide (Bam Khmer-American Archives). He elaborates on how Cambodians share the same stories and lives (Bam Khmer-American Archives). This represents a collective history impacted and influenced by migration to America. For example, older generations express disappointment in their grandkids for having an Americanized accent, representing the impact on Cambodian cultural roots and beliefs (Bam Khmer-American Archives).

The current research, thus, adds to this work by analyzing and carefully elaborating how women's socially constructed identities, stemming from their Khmer cultural roots, limit their movement, progress, and growth.

2.3 Addressing the Research Gap

As stated earlier, there is a lack of critical research papers and articles on the chosen primary text. This could be because it is a recent piece, published posthumously in 2021. This may also be because of a lack of information and knowledge regarding the existence

of Khmer American literature that makes it a valuable part of Southeast Asian literature. Therefore, the current research paper is a significant piece of writing that addresses the research gap by being one of the first of many research papers and articles that may be written on the selected short story collection in the future. It explores the selected short stories to bring forth the eccentricities and intricacies of life as a Cambodian-American whose Khmer cultural beliefs and traditions discriminate against and limit the freedom of women through the use of punishment as a tool and performance of established gendered identities. It also adds to the existing body of literature by highlighting the plight of silenced and subjugated women in Khmer American society, providing an outlet for voicing their concerns and ill-treatment.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To explore the aspects of gendered identities, performance, and punishment in Khmer American society, the researcher uses the extensive works of Judith Butler titled *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* and Susan Moller Okin titled *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* as its theoretical framework respectively. This allows the researcher to delve deep into understanding the complexities and intricacies existing in the day-to-day lives of individuals in Khmer American society, providing insights into the (re)construction of this identity.

The works of these two theorists are quite detailed. However, this research relies on Butler's aspects of performance and social construction and reconstruction of one's gendered identity as well as the punishment faced by individuals for deviating from expected behaviors (519-531). It also utilizes Okin's viewpoints regarding discrimination against women that is brought about by the culture, leading to grave consequences in the form of unequal treatment of women (9-24). Both researchers converge on the role of cultural survival and preservation as the end goal for confining individuals (primarily women) to specific ways of being. Thus, the research relies on analyzing how individuals (primarily women) are forced to perform their gender based on socially constructed gendered identities, stemming from their Khmer cultural roots and heritage while simultaneously shedding light on the discriminatory nature of cultural rules, laws, and regulations involved, forcing women to be confined to a fixed way of being.

3.1 Theoretical Underpinnings of Judith Butler

According to Butler, gender is not a "stable identity" which means it is open to change and not fixed in time (519). She further states that gender is performed through "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 519). To elaborate, one's gendered identity is constructed through the acts of doing or performing certain acts or behaviors that have come to be associated with one's gender. These repetitive acts and behaviors have been reinforced throughout history and have come to be accepted as a natural consequence of one's sex, bringing forth the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 519). This means

that individuals, since childhood, are made to believe that gender is something “they are” instead of something they “do” (Butler 523). Therefore, when an individual “enacts” his/ her gendered identity “within the confines of already existing directives”, his/ her behavior is met with “reward” and “reassurance” (Butler 526; 528). This is because he/ she is conforming to the existing socially constructed gender performance instead of challenging or threatening its existence. Conforming to the accepted social norms and behaviors makes it possible for society to propagate its expected ways of being to the next generation(s). Likewise, those who do not perform gender correctly are “regularly punished” which explains why gender performance takes place “under duress” (Butler 522). Individuals undergo a lot of stress and trouble while performing their gender to conform to society's expected standards related to their gender to avoid punishment. This, then, points towards the inherent desire of the collective society to give a fixed meaning to a naturally fluid concept of gendered identity.

In Butler's words, “gender is a performance” used for “survival” (522). Although gender is performed by “individual bodies”, there exists a “collective dimension” to this performance (526). This means that an individual's performance of gendered identity threatens or reaffirms the existing societal expectations and ways of being. Therefore, when an individual attempts to nonconform to the existing cultural traditions and socially constructed gendered roles, he/ she is met with “punishment” or resistance and disapproval because nonconforming to the accepted norms interferes with the existing “binary frame” (528; 526). This explains why gender performance is associated with stress.

Butler further elaborates that gender performance has “cultural survival” as its aim (522). This means that an individual's gender performance represents his/ her culture to the extent that ways of being are extracted from historical sources. Therefore, each society is bent on forcing individuals to behave in a certain way to conform to the rules and regulations of their culture. This, then, highlights the need and desire of a culture or society to keep alive the traditions and rituals of the past, even if they are biased towards a gender.

The selected short stories represent how individuals are forced or confined to perform their gendered identities within the established conventions and customs of Khmer American society with the aim of cultural survival and preservation. A befitting example

is from the selected short story *The Shop* which shows how Khmer American men are expected to “marry a girl because that is what you should do” (So 78). This highlights the value of marriage in preserving Khmer American culture. Although the protagonist performs his gendered identity as a homosexual privately, he is advised by the elder to “have children, because that is what you should do...” (So 78). This shows how the performance of an individual’s gendered identity has a collective dimension to it in that he/she is expected to marry and have children to preserve cultural customs and beliefs.

As stated by Butler, not conforming to the expectations associated with performing one’s gendered identity is met with punishment. This becomes evident in the selected short story titled *Maly, Maly, Maly* where Ves and Maly are “banished” as explained by Ves: “...everything about us appears at once too masculine and too feminine: our posture—backs arching like the models in the magazines we steal; our clothes—the rips, studs, and jagged edges—none of it makes sense to them. The two of us are wrong in every direction” (So 54). This shows how individuals may face varying forms of punishment for not performing their gendered identity within the established bounds of a society or culture.

3.2 Theoretical Underpinnings of Susan Moller Okin

Butler’s views regarding the survival of culture by keeping traditions alive (even if they’re detrimental to members of the society) coincide with Susan Moller Okin’s viewpoint that “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” may allow “minority cultures” to “preserve themselves” (23). This means that minority cultures that exist within the bounds of a majority culture (such as Khmer culture existing within the major American culture) may conserve their cultural heritage and traditions by allowing the propagation of discriminatory practices towards individuals (primarily women). Thus, cultural preservation comes at the expense of the mental and physical well-being of females (Okin 23). Therefore, Okin asserts the need to equally preserve the rights of women in minority cultures within the setting of a multicultural or majority cultural setting.

Moreover, Okin talks about the role of “powerful cultural roots” in severely diminishing the role of women in “public and private” spheres (13). To elaborate, most cultures remain closely tied to the past by holding dear “ancient texts or revered traditions” to “live in the contemporary world” (Okin 21). These sacred texts may work to preserve

the dying culture of a society; however, this comes at the expense of women in the sense that their freedom and rights are threatened. This is because these sacred texts often support “the control of women by men” by using myths, stories, folklore, and traditions to represent women as “overly emotional, untrustworthy, evil, or sexually dangerous” beings that need men to maintain, confine, control, and overpower them (Okin 13). Women are, thus, at a disadvantage when it comes to preserving one’s culture as it involves practicing traditionally biased and harmful rituals and customs.

Okin, thus, asserts that “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” lead to “severe and mild” consequences for women in that their “physical or mental integrity” is violated by confining them to limited roles in public life and forcing them to conform to the traditional domestic roles of a woman (22-23). This highlights the ever-dominant role of a culture's ancient texts and traditions in prohibiting women from “achieving equality with men” (Okin 13). Thus, “severe and mild” forms of discrimination against women “threaten(s) their well-being and even their lives” (Okin 22). This highlights the urgent need to end such discriminatory practices as propagated by one's cultural traditions and values.

Okin, further, highlights that “culturally based customs” derived from “ancient texts or revered traditions” are used to make women “servile to men's desires and interests” (16; 21) A girl's “healthy development” is endangered as she’s confined to a limited sphere of being with little to no opportunities for growth (Okin 16). This then represents the patriarchal, discriminatory, and detrimental nature of ancient traditions and cultural texts

Throughout the selected short stories, So represents how females are treated as silenced and marginalized individuals in Khmer American society. Some of the female characters are not even addressed by their names rather than husbands’ profession or their profession, diminishing their identity: “Doctor Heng’s wife”, “FAMOUS SINGER”, and “TRADITIONAL CLOTHING LADY” (So 73; 124; 137). Furthermore, the prevalence of violence against women is another instance of “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women which is present in the backdrop of most selected short stories (Okin 23). In *Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts*, Kayley wonders if her father “ever hit her mother” (So 29). Likewise, in *Maly, Maly, Maly*, Ves’ mother would send him away

to Ma Eng's home when his dad got drunk due to fear of his son being physically harmed. Since Ves was sent away, he was unsure if his father was "violent" with his mother (So 56). However, he was found wondering about it, representing the violent or abusive nature of men against women in this society.

Furthermore, the protagonist's mother in *The Shop* is presented as an othered woman, silently fulfilling her role as a homemaker. It is later revealed that she tried to help her husband in the shop by balancing the books; however, she got tired of "tolerating" her husband's insensitive jokes due to which she "renounced her mission of boosting the shop's profit margin" (So 83). This reinforces Okin's viewpoint that culture propagates ill-treatment of women, considering women as beings that need to be controlled and confined to fixed ways of being, which severely limits their opportunities for growth and healthy development. This is evident throughout *The Shop* as constant abuse and mistreatment alienated the protagonist's mother from her husband due to which "her future plans never referenced Dad (her husband)" (So 84). So's short stories, thus, represent varying forms of culturally propagated discrimination against women that limit women's roles in private and public spheres and significantly reduce their quality of life.

3.3 Conclusion

The theoretical underpinnings have been derived from Judith Butler and Susan Moller Okin to bring forth a feminist argument and discussion regarding performance, punishment, and culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women in Khmer American society. Butler's views regarding the performance of gendered identity and the use of punishment to conform to the expected ways of being lead to an understanding of the role of an individual's conforming performance in the preservation of the culture. It is essential to note that this performance takes place in a stressful environment and often involves confined ways of being (primarily for women). This coincides with Okin's views regarding the significant role of culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women in preserving a minority culture in a multicultural setting which is highly relevant for this research as Khmer culture exists within the setting of the multicultural American society. Okin further asserts how culturally biased customs, derived from sacred texts, promote mistreatment of women, leading them to live physically and mentally stunted lives

with limited opportunities for growth and progress. These viewpoints are combined to analyze and explore the primary text(s) to highlight how socially constructed gender roles in the Khmer community force women to perform their gendered roles as is accepted by society and propagated by historical traditions. It, further, sheds light on the confinement and entrapment of women stemming from the need to preserve their patriarchal cultural values.

CHAPTER 4

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

This section is divided into three parts. The first part provides an answer to the first two research questions by bringing forth a critical analysis of the selected short stories based on the interconnected theoretical underpinnings of Susan Moller Okin and Judith Butler. The purpose of combining the two theorists under a single heading is because their viewpoints converge on the elements of cultural survival and preservation. To elaborate, cultural survival is presented as the aim for propagating “culturally reinforced discrimination” against women as well as encouraging the performance of gendered identities in a specific way in Khmer American society (Okin 23). This allows an understanding of the lives of Khmer American individuals as represented by Anthony Veasna So in his short stories, shedding light on the (re)construction of a distinct Khmer American Identity. This part of the analysis also explores how gender performance brings forth the distinct Khmer American identity of the individuals, shedding light on the influence of ancient traditions and customs on the day-to-day lives of individuals which often leads to discrimination and confinement (primarily against women).

The second part of this analysis answers the third research question by highlighting the use of punishment as a tool to reinforce or subvert the existing Khmer American identity. The use of punishment or force is highlighted primarily by Butler as she explains how deviating from existing or expected ways of being is met with varying forms of rebuke or reproach from members of society. Likewise, Okin mentions how the continued propagation of discriminatory or biased cultural customs leads to women living diminished lives with little freedom and rights. This can then be considered a form of punishment too which stems from the need for cultural survival and preserving the distinct Khmer American identity.

The third part of this analysis concludes the critical evaluation by summarizing the argument and highlighting how each short story has successfully contributed to a better understanding of Khmer American identity with specific reference to gender performance, punishment, and culturally biased practices against women.

4.1 On Butler's Gendered Enactment & Okin's Customary Prejudices in The Selected Short Fiction

This part of the textual analysis will proceed story by story to highlight and critically analyze specific instances of gender performance and culturally reinforced discrimination against women, highlighting how Khmer American identity influences every aspect of an individual's being.

The opening story of So's collection titled *Three Women of Chuck's Donuts* sheds light on three women: Sothy, and her two daughters Kayley and Tevy. The entrapment of women due to culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination is evident early on as Sothy and girls are forced to fry, glaze, and serve donuts, performing their gendered identities as Khmer American business owners or cooks in order to survive. Unlike other children, the young girls perform their gendered identity as their mother's helpers because their father had an affair and married another woman, preferring his second family over the first.

Her ex-husband's preference for the second family stems from his second wife giving birth to male children. Since ancient times, male children have been held in higher esteem and regard than daughters because of their ability to provide for their families. Daughters, being females, are thus considered an "overly emotional" burden (Okin 13). The negligence and ill-treatment of women in this story can be linked to Okin's ideas that "severe and mild" forms of discrimination against women prohibit them from "achieving equality with men" or living their lives with comfort, ease, and freedom (22; 13). To elaborate, Sothy is discriminated against by her husband for not giving birth to sons which makes life more difficult for her as he moves on to another family without much consequence. In a sense, Sothy and her daughters are punished for their gender as they're left to fend for themselves with not much to go on.

It is also interesting to note how Sothy names her store Chuck's Donuts instead of basing it on her name even though she "never met a Chuck in her life" (So 8). She believes the name Chuck "is American enough to draw customers" (So 8). This, then, represents the performance of her gendered identity as a Khmer American in the sense that she refuses to use her female Khmer name for her business because it isn't American enough to generate revenue. It may also be a way to attract male customers as men are more likely to

visit a shop when it is named after a man because of the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women which present them as “untrustworthy” (Okin 23; 13). One can also view it as an instance of (re)constructing one’s gendered identity as Sothy does not use her identifying marker, her name, but a new, unfamiliar name.

Sothy’s plight as a Khmer American woman further becomes evident when she “contemplates her hands”: “discolored and rough,” “wrinkled and sinewy” (So 9). She feels as if her hands are that of her mother who spent painstaking hours of her youth “twisting dough” to make “cha quai in the markets of Battambang” (So 9). Later, she “serve(d) the Communist ideals of a genocidal regime” through “picking rice” (So 9). Sothy’s reflections represent the hardships her mother had to endure. However, it also sheds light on Sothy’s pain who, despite, escaping the concentration camps and living in California as a businesswoman, with her “American-born Cambodian daughters” has hands “aged into her mother’s” (So 9). The effect of Sothy’s wonderings is two-fold: they represent the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women prevalent in the Khmer society which have been practiced since the genocide and even before that (Okin 23). It also highlights the inescapable patriarchal treatment of women that continues to exist in Khmer American society: even though Sothy created a “new life” for herself and her daughters, she continues to be oppressed by the same institutions, demeaning women’s role to limited confines (So 9). However, there exists a difference in the treatment of Khmer women in Cambodia vs America. To elaborate, Khmer women in Cambodia faced more overt and brutal kinds of violence; however, the discrimination or ill-treatment they’ve been subject to in America has been of a lesser intensity.

The performance of gendered identity as a Khmer American does not end here. Sothy’s elder daughter, Tevy, feels “amazed and frustrated” at how her parents can “intuit all aspects of being Khmer, or emphatically not being Khmer” (So 13). However, despite being a second-generation Cambodian American, Tevy clearly understands that her Khmer identity cannot be “reduced to the brown skin, black hair, and prominent cheekbones” (So 13). She realizes being a Khmer involves performing one’s gendered identity in a specific manner which can involve something as simple as the way your behind “goes numb when you sit in a chair too long” (So 14). Thus, being a Khmer in America is a (gendered) identity a person performs by “eat(ing) a piece of dried fish or scratch(ing) her scalp or walk(ing)

with a certain gait,” (So 13). This shows the role of deeply-rooted cultural values and beliefs that influence Khmer American individuals’ views about their appearance and behavior, leading to a specific performance of their gendered identity.

Regarding their distinct Khmer American identity, Tevy remembers her father crying out, “There were no ice cubes in the genocide!” when he’d see her drinking a glass of ice water. The act of drinking water with ice cubes would then lead to “mild” forms of punishment in the sense of the father’s disappointment and anger “How did my kids become so not Khmer?” (So 13). In other instances, performing the expected (gendered) identity as a Khmer American is rewarded by appreciation, “Now I know you are Khmer” (So 13). This point is reiterated by Butler in her theory as she elaborates that enacting gendered identity “within the confines of already existing directives” leads to “reward” (528). In this case, the correct or expected performance of Khmer gendered identity leads to approval, representing the deeply embedded Khmer cultural values, beliefs, and heritage that continues to make its way into the lives of second-generation Cambodian Americans.

Furthermore, as a Khmer American man, the father in the story, performs his gendered identity by “step(ping) into the middle of the room” and “sniff(ing) his papaya salad,” expressing how nothing makes him “feel more Khmer than the smell of fish sauce and fried dough!” (So 13). This, then, highlights the role of food in the performance and construction of gendered identity as a Khmer American, connecting immigrant Khmer(s) to their roots, heritage, and a familiar taste of comfort and home. However, unlike her father’s strong connection to his Khmer roots, Tevy feels “detached” from her “culture” primarily because of her father being a “lying cheater” (So 14). Therefore, she is “unable to imagine what her father felt as he stood in Chuck’s Donuts sniffing fish sauce” (So 14). This makes her feel guilty, too, which she tries to cover by focusing her attention on the strange man in the shop, wondering if he “can center himself” “around other Khmer people” (So 15). This, then, highlights the role of cultural customs and traditions in the lives and performance of the gendered identity of Khmer Americans.

Thus, Tevy formulates her paper by focusing on the man, “based on the idea that he is Khmer” (So 19). She involves her sister in forming assumptions about the man which would prove he is a Khmer American. The assumptions include growing up “with parents

who never liked each other” which then represents the role of marriage as a duty and obligation “where you make alliances to live longer” in Khmer American society (So 19). This is further reiterated by Tevy remembering their father’s description of marriage in the Khmer society where “people paired up based on their skills” (So 19). “If one person in the marriage cooked, then the other person should know how to sell food” (So 19). This further, highlights, how marriage brings forth the performance of gendered identity in the form of fulfilling specific roles. Marriage in Khmer American society is not based on love or companionship but on convenience or mutual benefit.

The confinement of marriage roles to mere performance of “skills” makes Tevy wonder if her mother ever experienced “love” (20). She questions the possibility of her mother “reaching beyond the realm of survival”, and “being granted any freedom from worry” (So 20). This, then, represents the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women where they’re stripped of their freedom, provided with limited opportunities, and consumed with doubts and fears of the past and future (Okin 23). Khmer American women are, thus, not free from the shackles of patriarchy or the burden of responsibility that prevents them from making their own choices. Khmer women in America and Cambodia have always had to worry in one form or another. However, one of the Cambodian refugees in America explains how his wife did not have to work in Cambodia yet she has to work in America all the time (Lewis 28). This, then, represents another perspective regarding Khmer American women facing more struggles within multicultural America.

Moving toward Tevy’s paper, the two sisters, thus, start their interview with the strange man after forming enough assumptions about his identity as a Khmer American. Despite his insistence on being a Chinese Cambodian and not a Khmer Cambodian, Tevy deduces that he is a Khmer Cambodian in America because his family “lived in Cambodia for generations”, “survived the Khmer Rouge regime”, “speak Khmer”, “celebrate Cambodian New Year”, “eat rotten fish”, “buy food from the Khmer grocery store” (So 24-25). The girls’ insistence on the man being a Khmer because he fulfills the criteria of listed characteristics and features represents how both men and women who perform these acts can be considered Khmer which may be a broad generalization.

However, the man explains he is “Chinese” because his “father told” him and therefore, he “should marry only Chinese women” (So 25). This, then, clearly highlights the role of family and society in “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women (Okin 23). In this case, Khmer and other women are discriminated against, since Chinese women are considered worthy of marrying Chinese men. It also represents how parents pass on their values and beliefs to children which plays a significant part in keeping patriarchal values and beliefs alive. This is further explored within the realms of Khmer American society, leading to the creation of a distinct, traditional Khmer American identity. Another interview with a Cambodian refugee in the US revealed how he wouldn’t raise his children any different from how his parents had raised him, inculcating in him the same values and beliefs (Lewis 31). This then reinforces how beliefs and traditions continue to remain alive even if they’re detrimental to women’s well-being as they’re passed on from generation to generation.

Furthermore, the story sheds light on the performance of Khmer American gendered identity through men’s use of language. They “truncate” their words, without “too proper” “pronunciation” or “too fluid” “sentences” (So 21). Unlike Khmer men who speak with a “thick and pure” “Khmer accent” (So 21), Khmer American men have reconstructed their gendered identity by changing their way of speaking to make space in the diverse American society. This, then, sheds light on how gendered identity is a fluid concept, involving recreation and (re)construction of existing ways of being.

The story concludes with another enactment of cultural bias against women that leaves the readers with several thoughts. The wife of the strange man (who was interviewed before) enters the shop and starts arguing with him for leaving her and then spying on her. She starts beating him. When the man gains momentum to overpower his wife, Sothy instantly comes to the woman’s rescue by hitting the man with a pan, leaving a trail of blood all around. Sothy, thus, performs her gendered identity by protecting an unfamiliar woman from becoming the victim of her husband’s violence. She attains her identity and voice and utilizes it to save another woman.

Tevy and Kayley are surprised to see this side of their mother. Kayley wants to know whether their father “ever hit her mother” which could explain how their mother

“naturally came to the woman’s defense” (So 29). Tevy also “thinks of their father” (So 29). She wonders how “every Khmer woman” “has to deal with someone like their father, and what the outcome is of this patient, or desperate, dealing” (So 29). However, Sothy feels “grateful” and “lucky” to have “rid her family of her ex-husband’s presence (So 30). This, then, suggests the father was a violent and threatening character like the strange man in the story. This then represents the culturally reinforced dominant or violent role of men in Khmer American society who create terror in the lives of their female family members, forcing the latter to perform their gendered identity by fighting back and taking a stand for themselves even when they fear being punished.

Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts as the first story in this collection, thus, sets the pace for the detailed exploration of the performance of gendered identity in Khmer American society, the representation of “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women (Okin 23). This story consumes the readers by making them question the patriarchal and subjugated position of Khmer women in society who do not even run the business in their name and choose a common American name to attract customers. Furthermore, the women in the story, frequently wonder about the ill-treatment of other Khmer women at the hands of men, represented by Sothy’s gratefulness at separating from her husband and the daughters’ aloofness and negative image of their father. This, then, represents the cultural bias against women in Khmer society who face violence and are at a disadvantage if they do not produce male heirs. Furthermore, So represents the Khmerness of characters through various ways of performing their gendered identity, such as standing in the middle of the shop and enjoying the smell of a papaya salad or eating rotten fish. The readers are, thus, able to familiarize themselves with Khmer American identity because of So’s ability to inculcate Khmerness through various ways of being. However, this story does not represent how characters perform their gendered identity in a non-traditional manner, leading to punishment in the form of rebuke or lamentation. This will be covered in the subsequent stories and the next section of this analysis.

The second selected short story is titled *The Shop* which revolves around the story of a Cambodian family that owns a car repair shop in California. It is narrated from the point of view of the owner’s youngest son who helps around at the shop instead of moving to another state for better opportunities. The story highlights the unified bond of Khmer

American Community as the dad in the story hires everyone from Cambodia to help them support their families. However, this ends up costing him business when an employee's irresponsible behavior leads to a car being stolen. This increasing financial burden on the family is explored through the internal thought processes and external behaviors of the characters. Furthermore, the story elaborates on the distant and silenced position of the female – the mother – in the story who has stopped expressing concern for the shop after her viewpoints and concerns have not been taken seriously.

The narrator explores the troubles at the shop while shedding light on the dissonances that exist within him. To elaborate, as a queer character, the protagonist/ the narrator performs his gendered identity in nontraditional ways. He does not conform to the existing or expected behaviors associated with being a man in Khmer American society. However, he finds himself musing over the prospect of marrying a rich Cambodian girl and living the life of a heterosexual man outwardly to ease the financial burden of the family. In this manner, So highlights the duty of a man to his urges vs. his role in Khmer American society. Finally, the story ends with the protagonist choosing his family values and cultural beliefs over his performance of nontraditional gendered and sexual identity, representing the role of Khmer American society in the construction, reconstruction, and performance of gendered identity.

The story begins with the narrator's childhood characterization of his father as "just another Cambodian mechanic" which represents the gendered role played by Khmer or Cambodian men in American society as that of a car mechanic (So 73). However, the narrator then expresses embarrassment for stereotyping his dad but defends his viewpoint by explaining "That was what Cambo men did. They fixed cars, sold donuts, or got on welfare" (So 73). The performance of Khmer American gendered identity as men is, thus, tied to working hard at odd jobs to provide for their families.

The story, further, sheds light on the characteristics of esteemed or respected Khmer American men in the society through a Khmer woman (Doctor Heng's wife) who "spoke about her husband's virtues a ton at the Shop" (So 73). Primarily, her husband's main virtue was that he "stayed in school long enough" to "become a doctor" (So 74). This represents the viewpoint or traditional belief system of Khmer American society that considers men

only respectable if they opt for the profession of a doctor. Therefore, to be considered a man of honor in Khmer American society, one has to perform his gendered identity through the act of studying hard to become a doctor.

It is also worth noticing how So does not introduce Doctor Heng's wife by her name. Her only achievement is marrying Doctor Heng which is why her name has been stripped off from the view. This, not only, represents the prestige associated with becoming a doctor in the Khmer American society but also sheds light on the silencing of women, preventing them from "achieving equality with men" (Okin 13). Thus, Doctor Heng's wife is simply confined to the role and name of being a wife, representing the culturally propagated discriminatory treatment of women.

The character of Doctor Heng's wife also disapproves of the protagonist and other men in the generation for being, "lazy" (So 74). According to her, there hasn't been "one Cambodian man" since her husband because he became "a doctor here in America" (So 74). She, further, questions the protagonist in a disapproving manner, "Why did you not become a doctor?" (So 74) This, then, highlights the role of "punishment", as stated in Butler's theory, to rebuke men of the Khmer American society for not conforming to traditional values or performing their gendered identity in an expected manner (Butler 528). This represents how men, too, are forced to conform to specific ways of being.

Through the character of Doctor Heng's wife, So continues to highlight the traditionally held beliefs and customs propagated in the Khmer American society which may also lead to "culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women" (Okin 23). To elaborate, Doctor Heng's wife asks the protagonist to "marry a girl" whose "mother is not having a bad menopause" as "it is genetic" which highlights the inferior treatment of such women in Khmer American society (So 77). Elders in the Khmer American society, thus, play the role of discriminating against women based on their traits or physical features.

In response, the protagonist explains he's not a heterosexual male and therefore, does not conform to the traditional gendered identity in the Khmer American society. However, Doctor Heng's wife responds casually, "Yes, I know" (So 78). It is interesting to note that a traditional woman like Doctor Heng's wife would not have responded in the

same calm manner if a girl had admitted to not being a heterosexual female. This again highlights the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women” in society (Okin 23). Doctor Heng’s wife, thus, represents the different treatment of males and females in a society for the same action. She further advises the protagonist to “marry a girl because that is what you should do”, shedding light on the significant role of marriage in Khmer American society as well as the expectation of Khmer American men to marry and reproduce (So 78). Doctor Heng’s wife does not end her advice here. She further explains the performance of gendered identity as a heterosexual male in public and homosexual male in private:

You will marry a girl from Cambodia, a nice girl, a girl from a good family, a rich family, a princess from a rich family, and her parents will pay you fifty thousand, fifty thousand at least, to marry their daughter and get her a green card, and you and this girl will have children, because that is what you should do, have children. And after five years, when the girl succeeds the citizenship test, you can divorce her and get joint custody of the children. Then you will invest your fifty thousand in the stock market. Your life will be established. You can be as gay as you want after your life is established. That is the plan. (So 78)

This, then, highlights the value of money and maintaining appearances in Khmer American society. As evident by the excerpt above, the elders do not mind if their sons or male relatives perform their gendered identity as a homosexual male (privately) as long as they perform the expected roles associated with their gendered identity as a heterosexual male (publicly). This is another form of “culturally reinforced kind(s) of discrimination” against women in that they may be forced to adjust to husbands who are not true to them as they may perform their gendered identity as a homosexual male in private (Okin 23). Furthermore, these men are paid heaps of money by the girl’s parents to marry their daughter which again represents how this society treats women like a commodity to be purchased, used, and later, divorced. This, then, highlights the demeaning treatment of women in the society.

The “prospect of marrying a Cambodian princess for money” also seemed like a “heartfelt idea” to the protagonist because he “could be as gay” as he “needed to be” while fulfilling the financial responsibilities of being the male child in his family (So 80). This, then, represents how the performance of gendered identity as a Khmer American may involve two different performances: public and private to avoid “severe and mild” forms of “punishment” for straying away from the expected behaviors and ways of being (Okin 22; Butler 528). However, So represents the protagonist’s awareness regarding some of the harms that stem from blindly following expected cultural beliefs and rules. He expresses his “feelings” about home as living with “misunderstanding for so long” because it felt “comfortable” “embedded in everything I (he) loved” (So 80). This, further, shows the impact of cultural biases on the performance as well as worldview of the younger generation in Khmer American society.

Even though the idea of keeping up appearances and marrying a rich Cambodian girl seemed appealing to the protagonist for a short time, he allows the readers to understand his innermost thoughts more clearly when his mother expresses her desire to have “two kids” from him (So 82). He expresses his desire not to have “any number of kids” because he feels “content” as a “gay man” (So 83). This, further, shows how characters in So’s stories are not completely afraid or oppressed in the sense that they feel confident enough to perform and reconstruct their gendered identity based on their personal preferences even if they face disappointment or disapproval from others in society.

Simultaneously, So also represents how the characters feel burdened by their ancestors’ gruesome past in the form of millions of deaths. They feel as if they have a duty to their Khmer American society which is why the protagonist expresses how he only “took the idea of kids seriously” when he thought about “everyone who had died” and felt a responsibility for “young Cambos” to “repopulate the world with more Cambos, especially those with fancy college degrees, whose kids could be legacy admits (So 83). The impact of Khmer American values and beliefs is, thus, evident in how the protagonist considers performing his gendered identity as a male who produces offspring to continue the name of family and culture. Likewise, it also represents the emphasis placed by Khmer American society on members performing their (gendered) identity as individuals with “fancy college

degrees” (So 83). This highlights the value placed on education, prestige, and honor for the society.

So also highlights how the performance of gendered identity in Khmer American society as a male who looks out for other Khmer American men in the society can lead to financial troubles. This is portrayed through the character of Dad who hired “way more” Cambo men “than the Shop could actually afford, and let them get away with anything” (So 75). He “even paid some of them under the table” to help them, especially those with kids (So 75). However, the increasing financial constraints at the shop also increased the frequency of the protagonist’s performance of gendered identity as a homosexual with his partner, Paul.

The protagonist, thus, considers the prospect of being “an openly gay couple in the community” to show everyone they don’t have to “quit their home, their family, their lives, just to be themselves (So 93). Throughout the story, So presents the discord that exists between the thoughts and performance of the protagonist and how he muses over his public and private performance of gendered identity. Even though he likes the idea of performing his gendered identity as a homosexual publicly, he feels “exposed” when Paul winks at him with “Brian, Dad, and Doctor Heng’s wife” “standing that close” (So 90). This, suggests, that the characters’, primarily in public, perform their gendered identity in the expected manner as a Khmer American.

Perhaps the tipping point for the protagonist’s thought processes swaying both ways like a pendulum is the arrival of monks in the shop which only happens in a Khmer society “when you fail” (So 95). The slow realization of his father’s pain, fears, and troubles makes him offer his all to the shop “I’m gonna help the shop” because the prospect of doing something for himself or moving away seems “incredibly selfish” (So 100). However, his father asks the protagonist to worry about himself as the shop is “providing” for him, explaining the reason for “have(ing) the shop” is to support him (So 100). The understanding of his role as the “jobless” college graduate who is “chaining” his “father down to a failing business” leads him to stop “caring about those texts from Paul” even though he “could take a chance on Paul” if he wanted (So 102). He is only concerned with his family, his dad, and the shop, ending the story with a single thought, “What will we do

after?” which represents his pain and understanding of his limited role in helping his family (So 102). So, thus, sheds light on the performance of gendered identity as a Khmer American to support and provide for the family even if it means giving up on one’s desires and preferences.

While maintaining the primary focus on the protagonist, So also sheds enough limelight on the character of the mother to highlight the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women in society (Okin 23). So explains how she spent her time balancing the books in the shop at night to support her husband. However, he did not take her input quite seriously – she was stuck “tolerating” “Dad’s” insensitive jokes (So 83). Eventually, she “renounced her mission of boosting the shop’s profit margin” (So 83) and focused on cooking. She daydreamed about “traveling”; however, “her future plans never referenced Dad” (So 84). This highlights how the ill-treatment of women can make them lose their identity, forcing them to plan their future without including their patriarchal husbands.

Through her character, So further, represents how “Cambos” retain their culture through “food” (So 97). Thus, “rolling the egg roll” is a gender performance in Khmer American society (So 97). In the same manner, Dad represents the value of Durian in Khmer American society, “Durian is real, true Khmer food” and one who does not like it is “not even Cambodian American” (So 89). When his children complain of not liking the smell of the fruit, he asserts his “kids are spoiled” and “anything you can eat, you should be eating” (So 89). He backs this claim by explaining, how “every meal” they had during “Khmer Rouge” was not “smelling right” (So 89). So, therefore, manages to highlight the role of food, as evident in the previous story as well, in the performance of gendered identity in Khmer American society while shedding light on the impact of Khmer cultural roots and history on their performance and construction of identity.

Thus, *The Shop* is one of the most impactful stories in So’s collection because of how it portrays the construction, reconstruction, and performance of homosexual and heterosexual gendered identity in Khmer American society. So’s effective use of language represents the internal struggles of the protagonist who tries to balance his individual needs with the duties and responsibilities of performing his Khmer American identity. So, further,

explains the prestige and status held by the performance of male-gendered identity as a doctor in the society, bringing honor to their Cambodian heritage. This work also represents the punishment faced by characters (in the form of disapproval and anger) for straying away from the expected performance of gendered identity (this will be elaborated on in the next section). Finally, the story also portrays the reinforcement of cultural discrimination against women which confines them to specific, fixed roles, taking away their identity and not paying heed to their contributions.

The third selected short story is titled *We Would've Been Princes!* Like all of So's short stories in the collection, this story also takes place after the main event or the party. In this case, the main event is the wedding which has ended. Therefore, the story revolves around the wedding afterparty where Marlon, Bond, Monica, and the FAMOUS SINGER notice how one of the financially stable family members, Visith, did not make any monetary contribution. The story, thus, involves different games and tricks to expose Visith's cheapness to the family so that Marlon and Bond can convince their parents not to spend generously on Visith's wedding scheduled for the next month. Furthermore, the title of this story stems from Visith's boastful claims regarding his family's wealth and royal blood, asserting that he was born a prince and would be the richest in the province if the Khmer genocide did not take place.

So, thus, represents the role of wealth and excess in the (re)construction of Khmer American identity through varying representations of characters' obsession with and efforts to obtain wealth. Through the brothers, Marlon and Bond, So highlights the difficulties associated with accepting a change in financial condition, represented through their poor finances in childhood and a stable financial household in their prime age. He, further, sheds light on the impact of drug abuse on the destruction of Khmer American society evidenced by the disruption of Marlon and Bond's family life.

The story begins with a sigh of relief as the wedding is "done" and the bride's "cousins" are free from the performance of their "duties" as the bridesmaids (So 123). So's reference to the bride's cousins' "liberate(ing) themselves" represents the "culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women" in the sense that they're expected (or forced) to perform their female-gendered identity (So 123; Okin 23). This is achieved by

wearing “itchy traditional outfits that were rentals”, “praying in one hundred-degree weather”, “getting palm flowers chucked at their faces by tipsy guests”, and being compelled to be a part of “never-ending photo ops” which is described as “tedious” (So 123). Perhaps, the one impacted the most is Monica, “who was given a whole bottle to alleviate her suffering as the maid of honor” (So 134). Her ability to continue performing her gendered identity as a maid of honor despite being exhausted is evident by her statement, “Someone take a picture of me in this ‘Bride Tribe’ tank so I can post it on Instagram, tag the BRIDE to make her happy, and change into my normal clothes” ... “Or, I don’t know, kill myself—whatever’s easier with this giantass hair!” (So 135). This, then, represents the female performance of gendered identity in the Khmer American society as a tiring and exhausting responsibility for the close friends and cousins of the bride, representing the futility of (some) existing customs and beliefs. It also highlights how women may lose their identity by performing the roles entrusted to them instead of freely existing as they wish.

It is interesting to note the efforts made by Khmer society in America to try to adjust to their new country by adopting a few practices or customs from American culture. This becomes evident by So’s elaboration on the bridal party taking photos in the “same poses all over again, but in the white, American dress” (So 124). This highlights the significance of performing one’s gendered Khmer American identity, especially on special occasions like a wedding. It also provides insights into the distinction between a solely Khmer identity and a Khmer American identity since the latter is influenced by the culture and customs of America to some extent.

So, further, highlights the noble upbringing of the “younger crowds” in the wedding party who “knew better than to get sloshed in front of their seventy-year-old devout Buddhist grandparents” (124). This, then, represents how young men and women in a Khmer American society refuse or hesitate to perform the act of drinking to avoid facing backlash or “punishment” from the older generations which are known for keeping alive the traditions and customs of the past (Butler 528). The younger generations’ insistence on not drinking in front of their elders could also stem from observing Marlon who was “drunk like a true recovering drug addict” and “danced with too much verve next to the FAMOUS SINGER” (So 124). This is because Marlon’s drug addiction may have made him a social

outcast in Khmer American society due to acting outside the expected boundaries of one's gendered identity. Furthermore, the younger generations may not have wished to make a fool of themselves like Marlon who performed his gendered identity by dancing crazily in front of everyone.

Another distinct feature to note is the significance of names in this story. So does not give a name to the "FAMOUS SINGER" and "TRADITIONAL CLOTHING LADY," confining their female gendered identities to nameless blobs (124; 137). This can be used to represent the loss of their distinct identities. It also sheds light on the "culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women" in the society (Okin 23). To elaborate, women are treated as inferior beings who are not even addressed by their names but by their professions. This coincides with So's characterization of Doctor Heng's wife in *The Shop* who was known by her husband's professional achievement instead of her name.

So, further, elaborates on the importance of names in Khmer American society when he uses the famous singer as his mouthpiece to express that "Visith is a good Khmer name" unlike Marlon and Bond who do "not have Khmer names at all" (127). In response, Marlon explains how they're named after "Marlon Brando and "James fucking Bond!" which has a "Cambodian" logic behind it of attempting to achieve the "American Dream" by naming kids "after the first movies" they saw after "immigrating" (So 127). So, thus, sheds light on the Khmer American desire to achieve the American Dream and the ideals associated with it for a great life which is why they name their kids after famous characters to fit in or increase their chances of success. This, then, represents the reconstruction of gendered identity through the usage of American names in Khmer American society to enhance financial gains and status in society.

Although Marlon and Bond were named after characters in famous American movies, their dad is presented as "a strict proponent of tradition who loved to outclass his peers" by performing the act of filling a significant amount (six thousand dollars) for the bride and groom's envelope at the wedding (So 128). However, Marlon, later, describes his parents as "hella petty" who are "dying for an excuse to give jack shit at Visith's own stupid wedding" (So 128). This highlights the role of keeping up appearances by performing gendered identity as expected in Khmer American society. To elaborate, as a

male member of the family, the father feels entitled to give a huge sum to the bride and groom to be praised by all for his generosity. However, in reality, he does not wish to spend such an amount of money on the upcoming wedding of Visith especially if the latter does not pay the bride and groom for their wedding. This, then, highlights how “cultural survival” involves a “collective dimension” in the sense that each individual is entrusted to perform the expected role for the carrying on of the traditions and customs of the society (Butler 526; 522). If one individual does not conform to the expected gendered identity, he/ she threatens the existing social and cultural fabric.

It should also be noted that Marlon and Bond’s mom continued to “plead, desperately, for the family to spend less money” when his husband was filling the envelope with six thousand dollars (So 128). However, the men in the family paid no heed to what she was saying. This can be taken as another instance of cultural bias that prevents women from “achieving equality with men” (Okin 13). To elaborate, she does not wish to be a part of Visith’s wedding the following month but her husband “is making her go” (So 129). This shows how the woman does not have a say in her life choices which can be considered an instance of women losing their identity in the process of fulfilling their duties and performing the expected roles associated with their gender.

Furthermore, the two sons also disrespect their mother which could stem from their witnessing such treatment within their culture. To elaborate, when she “tried scolding the tipsy out of Marlon’s bloodstream” at the wedding, Marlon joked, “It’s not like I’m on meth!” despite knowing that his mother is sensitive about his drug abuse. In response, the mother was left “in tears” and ditched “their dinner table” to sit “by herself” (So 127). This, then, also elaborates how their performance of male-gendered identity as superior beings brings forth the treatment of women as inferior beings.

Moreover, through Monica’s character, So, further provides insights into the lives of Khmer American society as well as the existing cultural bias. Monica explains how women are “Fedex-ed to “old white guys” who “fill out online forms” (136). Women are, thus, described as commodities that are forced to perform the gendered identity of a bride when a white guy expresses his desire to get married. This, then, highlights the inferior status of women in society who can be easily married off to an old white guy without

considering her opinion (in some cases). She also explains how their society has become corrupted due to the obsession with “being rich” (So 137). She elaborates how “the TRADITIONAL CLOTHING LADY,” said, “It’s good we hired her to do the wedding outfits because most Cambodians here used to be low country people, and no one but her carries the expensive styles from Phnom Penh” (So 137). This, then, suggests that performing one’s female-gendered identity through wearing expensive traditional outfits is a significant part of Khmer American identity, shedding light on the community’s desire to keep up the appearance of financial stability.

So also highlights other ways of performing one’s gendered identity as a Khmer in America through the character of the singer. He paves the way for gender performance through a made-up traditional game to expose Visith for not paying his dues to the bride and groom. The female singer explains that one “must obey tradition” if “you want to marry a woman from Cambodia” (So 147). The said tradition, game, or “ceremony” involves the bride being “blindfolded” to “touch all the men’s behinds and guess, just from touching, which behind belongs to her husband” (So 147). The singer acts as Visith’s bride for this ceremony to reveal the truth about his financial contribution. The game ends with Visith kissing her forcefully, representing the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women (Okin 23). To elaborate, the acceptance of this made-up game as a normal ceremony by others at the wedding represents how natural it may be for Khmer American society to engage in such practices, customs, and celebrations that force women to perform their gendered identity in a demeaning manner.

So also represents the pressure of performing one’s gendered identity as a male in Khmer American society through Marlon’s character. Marlon became a drug addict because of the expectations and dreams of his parents. He remembers “downing cough syrup with his friends, just so he could avoid dealing with his dad, his mom, even his younger brother” (So 143). This, then, sheds light on the harms of forcing an individual to conform to a fixed gendered identity.

However, Marlon’s younger brother, Bond had a different yet equally nerve-racking experience. He explains feeling like “his parents had conceived him to work on a conveyor belt of nonsensical family issues” since every time he had “free time” he was

forced to perform the duties of a responsible male (So 133). Therefore, he had to attend “debrief sessions with Marlon’s rehab counselor because their mom could barely deal and their dad ignored all problems involving these sons of his...” (So 133). This, then, highlights the impact of parents’ not performing their gendered identities in the expected manner, leading to a difficult life for their children.

Bond was forced to carry the weight of his family when his mother talked “about her dead siblings” (So 149). He also experienced the effect of his family (or his brother) not conforming to the expected duties of a man in Khmer American society by getting a good job and being successful. Instead, he became a drug addict which made Bond feel as if everyone was thinking, “Those poor parents, he imagined all of them thinking. Look at their disgraceful kids, tarnishing their parents’ reputations with drug addictions and frivolous artistic delusions. Why had those parents worked so hard for a future like this?” (So 138). So, thus, highlights how not conforming to the expected roles and gendered identities can lead to punishment in the form of mental torture (by self) or verbal abuse (by others).

Thus, So explores various aspects of being a Khmer American through this story. He represents varying performances of gendered identities to maintain appearances and fulfill the role of being part of the Khmer American society. This involves the exhausting gender performances of being a bridesmaid and maid of honor to fulfill the duties of a Khmer American wedding. Furthermore, So, highlights the entrapment and inferior treatment of women within society in the sense that their opinion and viewpoint are not given much attention even within their own families. They’re treated as commodities to be shipped off at the call of one old white guy. This, then, represents the need for reconstructing gendered identities to provide women with better space in society. It is also worth noting that Khmer identity differs from Khmer American identity in the sense that Khmer American society makes efforts to inculcate American traditions and customs (such as taking photos while wearing American wedding dress) in their lives. Khmer immigrant parents also give American names to their children to provide their children a fair chance at achieving the American dream. This, then, brings forth the amalgamation of the majority culture within the minority culture for better chances of survival.

The next story in the collection titled *Maly, Maly, Maly* revolves around the story of two cousins, Maly (female) and Ves (male), who are considered outcasts (to an extent) for being nonconformists i.e. not performing their gendered identity as expected of Khmer Americans. The story is narrated through the perspective of Ves who provides insights into his friendship with Maly and her coming to terms with the Khmer belief regarding their new cousin's birth being a reincarnation of her (Maly's) mother. Through Ves, So, sheds light on Maly's use of drugs and bodily pleasures to protest against Khmer beliefs regarding reincarnation while highlighting the ostracization and oppression of Ves (as a homosexual man) in the heteronormative society. So's story, thus, provides insights into the effects of performing one's gendered identity outside the expected norms which leads to alienation and lack of connection between one's family and community. Thus, Ves feels like a failure, representing the incapability of familial and blood relations to be a source of comfort.

It is worth noting that the short story title is a repetition of Maly's name, implying that Maly is the main character of the story. However, the narrator of the short story is Ves who explains Maly's behaviors, actions, and thought processes through his perspective and also sheds light on his loneliness and isolation. So's use of Ves as the narrator of the story, further, highlights the alienation of Ves as a homosexual character. To elaborate, even in his narration, his thoughts and feelings about himself take a backseat and are primarily related to making Maly feel better about her situation and life. One can, thus, draw comparisons between this short story and Ves' life in the sense that he is forced to tend to the needs and expectations of the heterosexual society by performing his gendered identity in a manner acceptable to the Khmer American community.

So immediately sets the pace for this story to take place outside the bounds of the main event, representing the impact of not performing one's gendered identity as expected while simultaneously setting the stage for the afterparty where Maly and Ves explore the complexities of their lives and the hypocrisies of Khmer American society. Thus, the story begins with Ves and Maly becoming "outcasts" for "not shut(ting)" "up" as the grandmas prepared "for the monks" (So 54). They are "banished outside to choke on traces of manure..." as a "punishment" for not letting the grandmas perform their female-gendered identity by cooking food for the arrival of monks and beginning the celebration of

reincarnation (So 54; Butler 528). This, then, highlights the impact of Khmer American society on the everyday lives and gender performance of individuals in the community.

The lives of the elders revolve around ensuring “cultural survival” which involves celebrating the “rebirth” of Maly’s “dead mother’s spirit in the body of our (their) second cousin’s baby” and preparing for it adequately (Butler 528; So 55). Therefore, one who threatens the fabric of reincarnation or other Khmer American customs and beliefs faces “severe and mild” forms of “punishment” or banishment as in this case (Okin 23; Butler 528). This highlights the value placed by individuals or societies on their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Maly and Ves are not simply banished because of their interference while the grandmas prepare for the celebration. It primarily stemmed from Maly and Ves not conforming to the expected female and male-gendered identities in the Khmer American society: “...everything about us appears at once too masculine and too feminine: our posture—backs arching like the models in the magazines we steal; our clothes—the rips, studs, and jagged edges—none of it makes sense to them. The two of us are wrong in every direction. Though Maly, the girl cousin, strikes them as less wrong than the boy cousin, me” (So 54). To elaborate, Maly and Ves behaved, dressed, and acted “wrong(ly)” as in it did not make “sense” to the elders of their society (So 54). This, then, represents the value placed on women and men behaving in a certain manner, confining individuals to fixed ways of being. This can also be another instance of cultural biases because of how such restrictions often limit the movement and freedom of women more than men.

However, in the above scenario, So uses Ves’ character to explain how he “strikes” the elders as more “wrong” than Maly – the female cousin (54). The reason for this is elaborated in later paragraphs when Ves explains he wasn’t “a normal boy” (So 56). “Normal”, in this case, refers to the performance of one’s gendered identity as a heterosexual male in Khmer American society (56). Ves was considered a “girly wimp who despised sports and watched weird movies” (56). He was viewed as a “precocious freak” who performed his male-gendered identity in a homosexual and untraditional manner (So 56). This highlights the impact of transgressing outside the bounds of the expected performance of gendered identity.

It can also be treated as an example of punishment that is associated with threatening the “powerful cultural roots” of society by acting in a nonconformist manner (Okin 13). To elaborate, Ves was treated differently by his Khmer American community and even his immediate family. When he “came out” to his parents, he felt “doomed” as his mother explained how it’s “hard enough for people like us” (So 56). Using the character of the mother, So explains her disappointment in finding out about her child’s performance of gendered identity as a homosexual man which leads her to lament how life is already difficult for immigrants without the added burden of having their children being nonconformists. Thus, guilt trips can be considered another way in which individuals are punished and mentally tortured for acting outside the bounds of their cultural roots.

Ves’ troubles did not end here. He further elaborates how his mother would send him to Ma Eng’s home when his dad “got stupid drunk” (So 56). The main reason for Ves being sent away when his father was drunk may stem from the fact that he did not conform to the expected gendered identity of a man in Khmer American society. Ves’ father desperately wanted a son who conformed to the expected male gender role within the household due to which he brought him a “PlayStation 2” “even though he couldn’t afford it” (So 63-64). This was the father’s attempt to sway Ves to the other side, “hoping” he’d “be like the normal boys” (So 64). However, his efforts failed early on as Ves continued to perform his gendered identity as a homosexual male. Thus, Ves accepted Maly “draping” him “in her mom’s old dresses” with “high heels”, “lips painted red”, and “eyelids smeared with shadows” (So 63). The mother, therefore, feared that the father may be violent with the son for his untraditional identity due to which he was removed from his home which made Ves feel like a “failure” despite his “own preferences” (So 68). This, then, sheds light on the influence of one’s family and society on the performance of gendered identity.

Despite his personal choices and inclinations, Ves felt like a failure or a disappointment to his family for not conforming to the traditional gender identity in Khmer American society. Likewise, the protagonist/ narrator in *The Shop* also felt a responsibility toward his family and community and ultimately, gave up his relationship and homosexual gender performance. However, the current story primarily explores the alienation and loneliness associated with nonconforming to the expected gender identity in Khmer American society.

It is also interesting to note that Ves does not believe his father was “never violent” with his mother since he expresses how he did not know “what happened” between his parents when he went away to Ma Eng’s home, especially since his dad “was jobless-after his restaurant failed...” (So 56). This, then, sheds light on the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women in the Khmer American society where husbands’ failure, joblessness, or financial instability takes the form of violence against their wives (Okin 23). This significantly disturbs the “physical or mental integrity” of women who live their lives in fear, pain, and confinement due to their cultural beliefs and traditions (Okin 23). This, then, represents the mental and physical health toll brought about by society’s forced conformation to traditions and beliefs that limit the lives of women.

The oppression and ill-treatment of women are represented through other absent characters in the story as well. Ves explains how his uncle had “peaced out to the homeland for the month – probably to play house with his second family” which represents the unfaithfulness and disloyal behavior of men in the said society (So 63). To elaborate, Ves’ uncle’s ability to keep another family in Cambodia while having one family in California represents the unjust treatment of women in society in the sense that the man is not questioned for having two families. Furthermore, the only way he has two families is because he cheated on one of his wives as he married the other while already having a family. The two families, primarily women, are thus forced to accept their lying and cheating husband because of Khmer American society’s cultural biases that prevent them from attaining equal rights and freedom. This highlights how women lose their identity within the society.

Likewise, Maly’s father is also described as “another f***-off Cambodian man” who was not there for his daughter when her mother “committed suicide” due to “her memories of genocide” (So 60). Maly’s father was also not there for his wife, Maly’s mother as she is described as a “single mom who looked to the next day, and the day after that, only to see more suffering” (So 60). This, then, highlights how the performance of male-gendered identity in Khmer American society includes characteristics such as unreliability, unfaithfulness, and violence. The male characters in most of So’s short stories are described as having little or no emotional or supportive connection with the female members of their family (wives or daughters). This is another instance of “culturally

reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women in society as it creates a barrier to communication and connection between male and female family members (Okin 23). Thus, men are taught to consider themselves as superior beings and females as “overly emotional, untrustworthy, evil, or sexually dangerous” due to which they are required to confine and control them (Okin 13). This then represents the gendered-biased treatment of women justified through cultural beliefs and traditions.

Due to Maly’s father’s lack of interest in taking care of his family; Maly, was raised by Ma Eng after her mother's (Somaly’s) suicide. Ma Eng’s gender performance of taking in and raising Maly as her daughter represents the values of motherhood, generosity, and caregiving that seem to lie at the center of female Khmer American identity. Ma Eng, therefore, feels “pissed” when Maly shows “little respect for the ceremony’s preparations” as she is putting in all her efforts to ensure “her dead sister’s dead daughter has another chance at life, that the forces of reincarnation are working their voodoo spells to rebirth lost souls” (60). Through Ma Eng’s character, So, thus highlights the influence of “revered traditions” on the performance of gendered identity in Khmer American society where elders (including Ma Eng) continue to work for their “cultural survival”, making efforts to transfer their customs to the younger generations (Okin 21; Butler 528). Ma Eng’s, character, can be used as an example of a strong woman in the story as she confidently owns, attains, and performs her gendered identity through the propagation of traditions and customs.

On the other hand, So also represents the struggle of the younger generation to come to terms with the elders’ beliefs and traditions as they do not feel much connected to them. The younger generation represented through Ves and Maly feels angered and dissociated at the elders’ blind traditional beliefs like reincarnation. Ves describes it as “bullshit – the celebration, the monks” (So 56). He feels as if “it makes zero sense” that Maly’s mom would “reappear over a decade later” (So 56). The angered reaction of Ves can also be taken as his expression of hurt and pain at not being accepted by his Khmer American society due to the performance of his homosexual gendered identity.

Maly also believes “every Ma has been a psycho since the genocide” which highlights the horrors faced by Khmer women in Cambodia (So 58). She further tries to

come to terms with her mother's death, her subsequent reincarnation, and her father's abandonment by performing her female-gendered identity through engaging in physical acts with Rithy. Ves describes their physical relationship as making "sense" because "both of them have dead moms and shitty dads" (So 57). Therefore, Maly uses Rithy "her boy toy" to indulge in acts of physical pleasure to silence the pain associated with her life (So 57). This highlights how Maly (re)constructs her distinct gendered identity by performing it in a non-traditional manner.

Maly, further, indulges in drugs to soothe her senses and run away from the anger she felt at her mother not being "reborn as" her "child" (So 70). Thus, while the elders are busy preparing for the reincarnation celebrations with "an uproar of Khmer thundering out of the house", Maly and Ves keep each other company as they try to find their place in society (So 61). This highlights the gap in the thought processes and behaviors of the older and the younger generation.

Maly also forces Ves to consume drugs and indulge in watching adult films with her to spend time and take their minds away from everything. This, then, highlights the performance of gendered identity by both the male and female characters in a non-conformist manner. The two of them sneak into their uncle's shop to watch a film that wouldn't have been approved by the elders of their society. So, thus, represents how "revered traditions" may negatively influence and threaten the lives of individuals in Khmer American society (Okin 21). Insistence on obeying traditional laws and regulations may force individuals to engage in behaviors and acts that are harmful in this case indulgence in drugs, adult films, and physical pleasures.

Like in most short stories in So's collection, this story also represents the victory of the older generation or the customs and traditions as the younger generation is seen as coming to terms with their heritage, culture, and beliefs. After engaging in various unhelpful and traditionally unacceptable acts and behaviors, Maly decides to be a part of her dead mother's reincarnation. She plans to sneak into the nursery to see the baby who is believed to carry her mother's spirit.

Although Ves joins Maly in her mission, he has apprehensions and hesitations and wishes Maly. Since he continues to be treated as an outsider due to his homosexual

gendered identity in their Khmer American community, he wishes to get Maly to be a part of his hatred-infused anger against the community:

I fight the urge to yell for Maly to abort her mission, to grab her by the shoulders and remind her that none of this matters, that we shouldn't partake in the stupid delusions of old people wishing their lives had gone another way, that we have each other, just as we always have, even if we're about to be separated by three hundred miles, a whole mountain range. F*** everyone else, I want to say, for burdening the two of us with all their baggage. Let's go back to minding our own business, anything but this. Who cares about our family? What have they ever done but keep us alive only to make us feel like shit? (So 68-69)

The above excerpt represents the disappointment, hurt, and anger of Ves at his "family" for making him "feel like shit" due to his nonconformist gender identity (So 69). His ill-treatment, again, highlights the punishment inflicted upon individuals for threatening the thin web of expected gender roles and identities. Therefore, Ves feels they shouldn't take part in "stupid delusions of old people wishing their lives had gone another way" (So 69). This sheds light on Ves' negative perspective on the traditions of their society which refuse to accept change in the sense of gendered identities of individuals.

However, when Ves and Maly finally reach the nursery and Maly happily embraces "her reincarnated mom against her body like armor", Ves begins to feel as if "she's (Maly) been preparing to hold this baby her whole life" (So 70). So represents Maly's gender performance of holding the child with love as "natural" (So 70). This highlights So's attempts to present the younger generation's reconciliation with the older generation's traditional beliefs and customs. It also represents how Maly (re)constructs her gendered identity in a more conformist manner by embracing Khmer American values and beliefs.

Simultaneously, So also highlights the loneliness and alienation experienced by Ves. To elaborate, Ves feels like "the only person in the neighborhood separate from the celebration, from the grandparents and the parents", representing the difficulty of existing

as a homosexual in a Khmer American society. He feels “alone” amidst “all the generations old and new, dead and alive, or even reborn”, shedding light on how performing one’s gendered identity in a nonconformist manner can lead to isolation (So 70-71). It also highlights how the Khmer American community’s practices and customs not only include the propagation of culturally-biased discrimination against women but other genders as well.

Through this story, So, thus represents one of the most respected traditions of the Khmer American society i.e. the belief in reincarnation as well as the generational response to this tradition. The older generation females in the society perform their gendered identities by cooking, cleaning, and preparing the home for the arrival of monks and the celebration of the rebirth of Maly’s mom. However, the younger generation, presented through Maly and Ves, express their anger, frustration, and helplessness at the celebration of such customs and traditions, considering the elders as delusional. Furthermore, Maly, as a child of a mother who killed herself and an abandoned father, feels conflicted at the thought of her mother being reincarnated through someone else. As a girl struggling with her feelings, she performs her gendered identity by indulging in harmful drugs and engaging in physical activities with Rithy who also shares a story similar to hers. Therefore, So represents how Khmer American society’s insistence on keeping such traditions alive may harm the mental and physical well-being of the younger generation who find it difficult to relate to and understand these customs.

So also sheds light on the cultural biases against women through male characters in the story. While Maly’s father is presented as another Cambodian man who messes up and abandons his wife and daughter when they need him; Ves’ father is described as performing his gendered identity as a typical, toxic, heterogenous male. To elaborate, he drinks excessively due to his failure and loss in business. The story also suggests the father may be violent toward Ves’ mother. Thus, Khmer American society is presented as a place where women may be subjected to physical or verbal violence (in overt or subvert ways); however, they continue to endure for the sake of their family, losing their identity in the process. Furthermore, Ves’ mother fails to save herself but protects her homosexual son by sending him to Ma Eng’s house whenever his father comes home drunk. This, then, also

highlights how one's performance as a homosexual man in Khmer American society can lead to physical and verbal punishment.

The loneliness faced by Ves due to his nonconformist gendered identity is further presented through his treatment as an outcast by his community members as well as his family. This makes him feel like a disappointment and a failure, representing the ill-treatment one may be subjected to for challenging the heteronormative landscape of one's society. His pain manifests itself as hatred for his community's customs and traditions.

Although So leaves Ves feeling like an outsider in the community for his gendered identity, he presents the reconciliation of the older and younger generations through Maly's character growth and (re)construction of gendered identity. When Maly embraces the new child naturally and treats her affectionately, it feels as if the newer generation is ready to perform the expected gendered identity of Khmer American society, highlighting the progress of characters and the continued propagation of ancient traditions and customs.

The final chosen story titled *Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly* details the Khmer cultural belief in reincarnation and its influence on the lives of those involved. This story could be considered a sequel to the previous story as it involves similar characters and progresses as a consequence of the reincarnation in the previous story. The main character, Serey is a nurse tending to her grandmother Ma Eng in an elder care facility. However, Ma Eng believes Serey is a reincarnation of Somaly and consistently refers to her as such. Her insistence on Serey being Somaly creates a confusing amalgamation of the past and present, forcing Serey to remind herself of her identity as Serey. The story travels through past and present narratives, nightmares, and visions to present the horrors Khmer American women have had to endure due to "culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination" (Okin 23). Although the story does not give much space to male characters, it provides a distinct perspective regarding the treatment of women and their navigation in a world haunted by the traumatic memories of the past.

The story begins with Serey remembering how she was considered "Somaly's reincarnation" since she was born, leading to a Khmer traditional "celebration to honor Somaly's spirit" (So 185). This celebration was considered a "good omen" for Serey's future (So 185). However, it forced her to "live" as Somaly (So 185). This, then, highlights

the performance of gendered identity as a Khmer American in the form of letting a dead spirit live and speak through a living person.

Khmer cultural roots and beliefs make Serey feel the pain of being trapped in her own body. Whenever she tries to remind Ma Eng that she is “not her niece, Somaly,” Ma Eng “gets mad and slaps” her, telling her to “stop being childish” (So 185-186). This represents the “severe and mild” forms of “punishment” associated with performing one’s gendered identity differently than expected (Butler 528; Okin 22). Since Serey does not conform to the expected behaviors associated with the reincarnated spirit of Somaly, she faces physical and verbal violence at the hands of Ma Eng. This, again, represents the influence of “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women” on the lives of Khmer American women (Okin 23). Serey is, thus, forced to perform her gendered identity as expected by Ma Eng or the elders in Khmer American society for playing along with the “delusions” (So 186). This highlights the slow erasure of Serey’s individual identity since she’s forced to perform the identity of another.

Due to Ma Eng’s old age and deteriorating health conditions, Serey, as a nurse, had to wash her which brought back Ma Eng’s traumatic memories. She warns Serey (thinking of her as Somaly) not to “fight” “if a Communist touches you here” as it would equal “choosing death” (So 188). This, then, highlights how Khmer women have had to face horrific ordeals in Cambodia in the form of rape and murder, representing how women have always been at a disadvantage. Furthermore, Ma Eng’s repetition of these nerve-racking instances from the past, traumatizes Serey who is simply trying to live life as a Khmer American. She is, thus, forced to perform two simultaneous gendered identities – one of herself as a Khmer American and the other of Somaly as a Khmer who experienced the horrors during the Cambodian war.

Due to the burden of carrying two gendered identities, Serey faces nightmares and flashbacks from Somaly’s life which disrupt her life significantly. She witnesses “Somaly working in the rice fields, pregnant and starving, her unborn child already lacking the nourishment it’ll need; Somaly’s water breaking in the darkest hour of the night and Ma Eng covering her mouth so the screams of labor won’t carry over to the ears of the Khmer Rouge soldiers, then Somaly muffling her newborn’s mouth so that nobody will catch the

crying...” (So 189). Other times, she feels as if she’s Somaly which forces her to perform her gendered identity as Somaly: “protecting” “the hungry fetus”, feeling the “indispensable rage that Somaly harbored toward her then husband” who fled “the country without his (pregnant) wife” (So 189). The traumatic details of Serey’s gender performance as Somaly, in California, away from Cambodia where the horrors took place represent how memories and violence continue to haunt the future generations even those who are a few generations removed from witnessing the destruction. It also highlights how women were treated brutally in Cambodia.

However, women still struggle in America. To elaborate, Serey’s exhaustion at performing two gendered identities becomes evident when she isn’t sure which she’d “prefer” for Ma Eng to think of her as the “living or dead” version of “Somaly” (So 192). She is unsure about what’s more painful for her and Ma Eng to experience – “a woman enslaved by Communists or a ghost haunting her Ming” (So 192). This highlights how Serey’s memories of Somaly’s life strip her away of her gendered identity, leading to the creation of a woman existing in limbo. It further sheds light on the “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women” as Serey’s visions or dreams represent Somaly suffering from the pain of carrying and bearing her child in a war-torn country (Okin 23). Somaly’s troubles were exacerbated by experiencing the unimaginable war times without her husband who fled the country, paying no heed to his family. So, thus, manages to highlight the plight of Khmer women in Cambodia who witnessed and experienced the torturous regime firsthand while the men who were supposed to protect them were nowhere to be found. He, then, represents the double ill-treatment of Khmer American women in California who have not experienced the tragedies of war-torn Cambodia first-hand yet are forced to experience the pain of being left behind by a man. This then highlights the drawback of propagating cultural beliefs that continue to regard women as inferior or disposable beings.

Although the story does not focus much on Serey’s personal life, it provides a few insights into her mother’s thoughts who “expects” Serey to “raise” “ten grandchildren” which represents the Khmer American expectation of performing one’s gendered identity as a woman by bearing several children. However, Serey “never want(s) kids” which could stem from her fear of having a dead relative reincarnated in her child, leading her child to

experience a life of trauma and pain like her. Furthermore, by not getting married and bearing children, Serey is performing her gendered identity in an unexpected and nontraditional manner which may lead to pressure from the elders at one point in the future because of their desire to “preserve” their culture and lineage (Okin 23). Preservation of one’s culture or traditions is, thus, one of the major reasons for forcing individuals to behave in a certain manner.

The story also features Somaly’s daughter Maly who appears with her children to visit Ma Eng in her final days. Maly’s presence in the story sheds light on her anger toward and hatred for Serey as the latter is considered a reincarnation of the former’s mother. It, further, highlights one’s desire to connect to his/ her culture, roots, and beliefs.

To elaborate, So implies that Maly would have wanted to be a reincarnation of her mother instead of seeing Serey carrying her mother’s memories. Maly’s character in this story, thus, represents the desire to perform one’s gendered identity within the confines of Khmer American society. This was not always the case for Maly. As evident through the story *Maly, Maly, Maly* as well as Maly’s nostalgic remembrance of her childhood days with Ma Eng in this story. Maly was a rebel who did not conform to the expected ways of performing her gendered identity in society. She was known for “sneaking out at night” in her youth and had “high school boyfriends” which made Ma Eng “so mad” (So 198). This also sheds light on the expected performance of gendered identity as Khmer American women which involves not staying out late at night or having boyfriends in high school. It also implies that the same rules of confinement and restriction may not apply to men in society, representing the performance and propagation of “culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination” against women (Okin 23). This highlights how women are at a disadvantage as more rules are focusing on governing and controlling women’s behavior. Therefore, Maly (re)constructed her gendered identity by performing the roles associated with a Khmer American wife and mother.

Thus, *Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly* is a visually traumatic piece of writing that is commendable for representing the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime and its impact on the future Khmer generations residing in America. It also provides a comparison between

the treatment of Khmer women in Cambodia and Khmer women in America, highlighting how the former faced a more gruesome ordeal.

So uses the primary character of Serey to perform the gendered identity of Somaly – their dead relative who died by suicide. Throughout the story, Serey is seen overburdened by carrying the weight of horrendous memories of Somaly’s life as well as remembering (or losing) her gendered identity as Serey. While Serey herself does not conform to the expected gendered identity in Khmer American society by not wanting or bearing children, she finds herself re-enacting the role of Maly’s mother (Somaly) in her dreams. She, further, experiences Somaly’s pain through nightmares, leading her to live a life in fear and exhaustion. It also does not help when Ma Eng continues to address her as Somaly which further silences her gendered identity as Serey, bringing forth an enmeshed identity of a Khmer and Khmer American woman. Finally, the story ends with Ma Eng’s death and Serey passing on Somaly’s necklace to Maly’s daughter in hopes of getting rid of the duty of performing the gendered identity of Somaly. The story, then, highlights the confinement and entrapment of women through cultural biases against women in the sense of their ill-treatment at the hands of men in their lives as well as the Khmer American society which forces them to keep alive traditions and dead spirits even if they threaten the well-being of the ones who are alive.

4.2 Retribution as a Mechanism for Challenging or Affirming the Established Identity

This part of the textual analysis answers the third research question by shedding light on the use of punishment as a tool for reinforcing or subverting the established Khmer American Identity. As stated in section 3.1 of this research, Butler highlights how deviating from the expected ways of behaving and nonconforming to the expected performance of gendered identity leads to punishment in various forms (522). The role of punishment in most of these cases is to reinforce or reaffirm the existing identity or gendered behaviors. Therefore, the performance of gendered identity takes place in a stressful environment. However, the use of punishment may also force individuals to rebel against the established norms and traditional ways of being. Therefore, this section highlights how punishment plays a key role in challenging or affirming the existing Khmer American identity while

shedding light on its influence on the individuals in the short stories. Although individual instances of punishment or retribution may be limited in number, their implications and influence are quite significant.

In *Three Women of Chuck's Donuts*, Sothy is punished for giving birth to daughters in the sense that her husband leaves her because his second wife gave birth to sons. As a result, Sothy is left to fend for herself and her daughters which reinforces or reaffirms their inferior identity as women in Khmer American society.

This story, further, highlights the use of verbal reproach as a form of punishment to force individuals to behave in a certain manner. To elaborate, Tevy and Kayley's father scolded them when he saw them drinking a glass of ice water, "there were no ice cubes in the genocide!" This forced the daughters to be mindful of their performance of gendered identity as Khmer Americans, leading to a reinforcement of the established identity which was met by approval and appreciation from the father, "Now I know you are Khmer" (So 13). This reinforces Butler's viewpoint that performing one's gendered identity within the established confines leads to reward in the form of verbal approval and deviating from the established societal norms leads to unpleasant consequences and retribution.

In *The Shop*, Doctor Heng's wife is the character used by So to present Khmer American society's views about how one can perform life as an ideal Khmer American man. Doctor Heng's wife is seen using anger as a form of punishment to disapprove of men in her society for not becoming "a doctor here in America" (So 74). According to her, such men do not possess the real qualities of a "Cambodian man" (So 74). She also expresses her disappointment and anger at the protagonist, "Why did you not become a doctor?" (So 74) This then represents how punishment is used as a tool to reinforce individuals to perform their Khmer American identity as expected by society.

Doctor Heng's wife is also seen as using assertion as a form of punishment to impose her decisions or viewpoints on the protagonist. She asks him to "marry a girl" whose "mother is not having a bad menopause", representing how Khmer American society reinforces the inferior treatment of women in society (So 77). It also highlights how Khmer American women lose their distinct identity while performing the roles of a homemaker or a mother since their viewpoints, opinions, or preferences are not taken into

account. This is highlighted further when Doctor Heng's wife even tries to compel the homosexual protagonist to continue being "as gay" as he wanted in private, but keep up appearances by "marrying a Cambodian princess for money" (So 80). This then shows how anger, disapproval, and rebuke are used as forms of verbal punishment to reinforce the expected ways of being and conforming to the established Khmer American identity which involves acting as a heterogenous male by marrying a girl (even if for financial motives).

The influence of this verbal punishment or reproach on the protagonist is that he begins considering the benefits of marrying a rich Cambodian girl and continuing his family line. However, his desire to be "an openly gay couple in the community" comes his way (So 93). Even though he wishes to perform his homosexual identity publicly, he feels embarrassed or "exposed" when his partner winks at him with his family members and Doctor Heng's wife standing nearby (So 91). This could be because of the fear of punishment in the form of disapproval or alienation which forces the protagonist to hide his nonconforming homosexual identity from other Khmer American individuals. This, then, highlights how even fear of punishment works to reinforce the established traditions and ways of being.

In *We Would've Been Princes!* So represents how fear of punishment prevents individuals from performing their gendered identity in a way that threatens or challenges the established Khmer American identity. To elaborate, the "younger crowds" in the wedding party do not drink in front of the elders because they "knew better than to get sloshed in front of their seventy-year-old devout Buddhist grandparents" (So 124). This shows how Khmer beliefs are deeply embedded in second-generation Cambodian Americans.

However, their hesitation to avoid drinking may also stem from their witnessing Marlon making a fool out of himself. He was "drunk like a true recovering drug addict" which may have made him a social outcast or an embarrassment in the Khmer American society (So 124). This is further reiterated by Bond's thoughts that provide a mirror into the viewpoints of their Khmer American community: "Those poor parents, he imagined all of them thinking. Look at their disgraceful kids, tarnishing their parents' reputations with drug addictions and frivolous artistic delusions. Why had those parents worked so hard for

a future like this?” (So 138). Through Bond’s inner monologue, So, thus shows how performing one’s identity outside the expected bonds can lead to various forms of punishment in the form of verbal disapproval or alienation. Thus, in this story, too, punishment plays the role of reinforcing the established Khmer American identity.

In contrast to the previous short stories where punishment primarily reinforced the established identity, *Maly, Maly, Maly* shows how the use of retribution as a mechanism can challenge or subvert the Khmer American identity. To elaborate, the story represents how Ves and Maly become “outcasts” for “not shut(ting)” “up” as the grandmas prepared “for the monks” (So 54). They are “banished outside to choke on traces of manure...” for not letting the grandmas prepare for the celebration of Khmer traditional belief of reincarnation (So 54). This highlights society’s insistence on shunning (punishing) the individuals who non-conform to the cultural beliefs and traditions.

However, their banishment also stems from Maly (female) and Ves (male) not performing their gendered identities according to the roles prescribed in Khmer American society. This is elaborated by Ves’ explanation: “...everything about us appears at once too masculine and too feminine: our posture—backs arching like the models in the magazines we steal; our clothes—the rips, studs, and jagged edges—none of it makes sense to them. The two of us are wrong in every direction. Though Maly, the girl cousin, strikes them as less wrong than the boy cousin, me” (So 54). Thus, the two of them are believed to be challenging the established Khmer American identity by behaving, dressing, and acting “wrong” (So 54). This represents the focus of Khmer American society on forcing individuals to behave in a certain manner deemed acceptable.

It is interesting to note how So characterizes Ves as more “wrong” than Maly because he isn’t a “normal boy” (So 54; 56). Normal here means performing one’s gendered identity as a heterosexual male in Khmer American society. Since Ves’ did not conform to the expected gendered identity, he faces punishment in the form of verbal abuse. He is described or considered a “precocious freak” and a “girly wimp who despised sports and watched weird movies” (So 56). This takes a mental toll on Ves who elaborates how he wasn’t even accepted by his parents when he came out. His mother expressed her disappointment, while his father brought him a “PlayStation 2” to try to force him to “be

like the normal boys” (So 64). This can be taken as another form of punishment where gifts and treats are used to compel individuals to act in a conforming manner, reinforcing the established identity.

The efforts of the mother and father proved futile as Ves continued to perform his gendered identity in a homosexual manner. Therefore, his mother protected him from punishment in the form of his physical abuse by his father by sending him to Ma Eng’s place whenever he came home drunk. This made Ves feel like a “failure”, shedding light on how society’s use of various forms of punishment can make one feel like a disappointment (So 68).

In response to being punished for their gendered identities and treated like outsiders, Ves and Maly react to their elders’ beliefs and traditions. Ves considers the belief in reincarnation “bullshit” (So 56). He feels as if “it makes zero sense” (So 56). Likewise, Maly also believes “every Ma has been a psycho since the genocide” (So 58). Ves and Maly’s angry outburst at society’s traditions sheds light on their helplessness as they do not hold the power to change the traditions or customs.

Thus, Maly (re)constructs or performs her distinct gendered identity by challenging the established ways of being in Khmer American society. She does this by indulging in a physical relationship with Rithy, “her boy toy” and consuming drugs to rebel against society’s confining rules and regulations (So 57). She also forces Ves to consume drugs and watch adult films with her by sneaking into their uncle’s movie shop. This, then, highlights how punishment or banishment can play the role of subverting the established Khmer American identity.

However, by the end of the story, Maly reconciles with the elders and traditions of Khmer American society by embracing the child (her reincarnated mother). But Ves does not find peace and comfort as he has been constantly made to “feel like shit” by his family and community members for his performance of homosexual gendered identity (So 69). This, then, shows how alienation and isolation (forms of punishment) can make one despise the beliefs and traditions of their elders, making him feel “alone” (So 71). This, then, makes one challenge the existing identity by not conforming to the expected performance.

The final selected story titled *Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly* details the impact of societal expectations on the lives of Khmer American individuals (or females). The story elaborates how Serey is considered Somaly's reincarnation due to which she is forced to "live" as Somaly (So 185). If she does not perform her gendered identity as Somaly in front of Ma Eng (who is her sick grandmother) and reminds her that she is "not her niece, Somaly", she faces punishment in the form of verbal and physical abuse (So 185). Ma Eng "gets mad and slaps" her, telling her to "stop being childish" (So 185-186). This shows how punishment is used as a tool to force individuals to conform to the traditional Khmer customs and behaviors. Thus, Serey is forced to carry the burden of Somaly's memories in the form of nightmares and haunted memories. She is forced to perform double-gendered identities (one of herself and the other of Somaly) which leads her to live a complicated life. This leads her to lose her identity and primarily perform the gendered identity of Somaly. This could also be the reason why Serey expresses her desire to not get married or have kids as is usually expected of Khmer American women. To elaborate, Serey may wish to rebel against the established expectations of women to get married and produce children because of how her life has been stripped away by the Khmer tradition of reincarnation. Her preference to (re)construct her gendered identity in this manner may also stem from witnessing horrors inflicted on women by experiencing Somaly's memories that have been imposed on her. This story, thus, works to show how physical and verbal punishment can act to reinforce as well as subvert the established identity. It can make an individual conform to some traditional customs and beliefs while challenging others.

4.3 Conclusion

The textual analysis has attempted to answer the three research questions mentioned in Chapter 1. The first section of this analysis deals with the first two research questions by shedding light on the performance of Khmer American gendered identities and the cultural biases against women, bringing forth the efforts taken to ensure cultural survival and preservation in a multicultural setting. The second section of this analysis has shed light on the role of ramifications or various forms of punishment in reinforcing or challenging the already-established Khmer American identity.

The selected short stories from So's collection titled (i) *Three Women of Chuck's Donuts*; (ii) *The Shop*; (iii) *Maly, Maly, Maly*; (iv) *Somaly, Serey, Serey Somaly*, and (v) *We Would've Been Princes!* bring forth different aspects of being a Khmer in America which involve (among other examples) performing one's gendered identity as a heterosexual man to fulfill the expectations placed on a Khmer man and performing the duties of a loveless marriage where women are treated in an inferior manner. It also sheds light on the customary prejudices or discrimination against the female gender through their treatment as the other in the sense that her opinions and viewpoints are rarely considered valuable. In most stories, the female is presented as performing and constructing her gendered identity in an inferior manner which represents man's ill-treatment of women in society, such as how the protagonist's mother's dreams about her future never involved her husband in *The Shop*, or how Sothy feels grateful at getting separated from her husband and her kids wonder if their father had performed the physical act of violence on their mother in *Three Women of Chuck's Donuts*.

Furthermore, the performance and (re)construction of gendered identities in these stories is a multifaceted process, involving the weight of Cambodia's horrific past that impacts their decisions and viewpoints. The older generation is presented as being disappointed in their immigrant-born children, referring to them as not Khmer, for drinking water with ice cubes, or not liking Durian because of their experiences in the Cambodian war where food and water were a privilege. Likewise, the younger generation is seen rebelling against the cultural beliefs of the elders yet in some instances, they (re)construct their gendered identities by coming to terms with the values and traditions of their forefathers often due to punishment.

So also provides enough space for the readers to compare the varied worldviews and lifestyles of the first and second-generation Cambodian-Americans, representing the clash of ideas and ideals with the second generation struggling to keep up with Khmer American beliefs such as their belief in reincarnation which is materialized in *Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly*. He further highlights how punishment, in some cases, reinforces the established Khmer American identity by forcing individuals to perform as expected by society such as in *The Shop*. In other instances, punishment makes individuals rebel from the expected ways of being, thus, challenging the established Khmer American identity,

such as in *Maly, Maly, Maly*. One can, therefore, establish that performance, punishment, and cultural biases against women present themselves in various forms within So's stories, allowing readers to understand the value of traditions and customs in the (re)construction of Khmer American identity.

Although the primary focus of this research and textual analysis is the performance of Khmer American gendered identities, culturally reinforced kinds of discrimination against women, and the use of punishment as a tool for reinforcing and subverting the established Khmer American identity, one can also shed some light on the intersectionality of race and gender in the selected short stories.

To elaborate, Khmer American society is a minority culture within the dominant or majority American culture. This puts the former at a disadvantage in terms of equal representation, opportunities, and rights. Therefore, Khmer American women face double marginalization and discrimination: first, they're treated as inferior beings within their cultural society due to the established customs, beliefs, and traditions (as elaborated above in detail). Second, they're also discriminated against within the majority American culture. This is witnessed in *Three Women of Chuck's Donuts* by how Sothy gives her shop an American male name (Chuck's Donuts) to attract American customers by presenting the shop as an American-male-owned business.

Furthermore, So highlights the extent of ill-treatment and marginalization of women in *We Would've Been Princes!* by how women are treated as liabilities, ready to be shipped off to American men or "old white guys" who "fill out online forms" (So 136). This then represents how other dominant cultures may benefit from the inferior treatment of women in another culture, allowing the former to exploit women further who are already at a disadvantage in terms of gaining equal rights and opportunities within their culture. This also highlights the significance of promoting women's rights and freedom by prohibiting the propagation of discriminatory customs and beliefs that negatively influence the lives of Khmer American women.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This feminist research paper has provided insights into the complexities and intricacies associated with Khmer American identity. As elaborated in Chapter 1, Khmer identity has its roots in Cambodia, making its way into America through the war immigrants who worked hard to keep alive their traditions while embracing few influences through American culture. The first-generation immigrants made sufficient efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and customs in multicultural America, propagating their Buddhist traditions and values to second-generation Cambodian Americans.

Since preserving their distinct Khmer American identity is essential to the lives of Cambodian Americans as elaborated in Chapters 1 and 2, this research paper has explored the performance and (re)construction of gendered identities as Khmer Americans. It has further analyzed how not conforming to the expected or traditional gendered identity performance leads to punishment in the form of verbal abuse, mental torture, and physical violence (in extreme cases). It has also highlighted how gender performance brings forth cultural biases against women in Khmer American society, providing them with limited opportunities, silencing their voice, and addressing them in connection to the men in their lives or their professions. Using Judith Butler and Susan Moller Okin's theoretical underpinnings, as explained in Chapter 3, the research has analyzed specific short stories from Anthony Veasna So's short fiction titled *Afterparties: Stories* to gain insights into the Gendered Identity Performance, punishment, and cultural discrimination in Khmer American society, bringing forth a detailed understanding of Cambodian life in America.

5.1 Findings and Summing Up the Whole Discussion

The first two research questions as stated in Chapter 1 deal with the performance of gendered identities as Khmer Americans and the representation of cultural bias against women through this performance. These two questions have been explored in Chapter 4.1 by analyzing each story to provide a deeper understanding of Khmer American identity. According to the analysis, So represents the performance of gendered identities as Khmer

Americans in various ways. He shows how something as simple as eating a Durian or sniffing a salad while standing in the middle of a room can be treated as performing one's identity as a Khmer American. He also looks at complex ways in which specific gendered identities are enforced on individuals, for example, women in the short stories are constantly subjected to cultural biases in terms of how they are expected to behave and perform their gendered identities. Women are silenced characters who perform their identities by making food or serving the men around them.

In some cases, they are not even given names or have names associated with the men in their lives. Furthermore, women are constantly portrayed as commodities that can be easily shipped off at the call of a white man for marriage or can be used for financial gains and a marriage of convenience. Although direct violence against women is not shown, there are enough implications that women in Khmer American society have faced violence at the hands of men in their lives.

Furthermore, So also represents how men are expected to perform their gendered identity in Khmer American society by getting married and producing kids even if one is a homosexual male. He further highlights how men who become doctors are considered more prestigious. This, then, shows how Khmer American identity is made and remade through events in daily life as well as how this identity is rooted in traditions and customs of the past as elaborated in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

The third research question deals with the use of punishment as a tool to reinforce or subvert the established Khmer American identities. This is explored in Chapter 4.2 by highlighting elements of punishment used by the members of society to force individuals (primarily the younger generation) to conform to the expected ways of being. The few forms of punishment that are used in these stories involve verbal abuse, mental torture, isolation or alienation, and physical abuse (to a minor extent). It is then shown how punishment or fear of punishment either brings individuals closer to their traditions and customs or makes them rebel against the established standards. For example, Ves in *Maly, Maly, Maly* is treated as a social outcast. He is alienated from his community members and blood relations because of his homosexual gendered identity. Therefore, he rebels and

challenges the Khmer American identity by considering it senseless and acting out in a non-conforming manner.

In contrast, Serey continues to perform the gendered identity of reincarnated Somaly in front of Ma Eng because when she tries to tell Ma Eng the truth about her identity, she faces verbal abuse and physical violence. Punishment or retribution, thus, plays a two-fold role in Khmer American identity, challenging and affirming it simultaneously. This, then, shows the value of keeping traditions and customs alive in Khmer American society. To elaborate, the elders do not hesitate to use verbal or physical violence to ensure the younger generation carries on their rules and regulations by performing their gendered identities within the expected confines.

5.2 Recommendations

Afterparties: Stories by Anthony Veasna So is an insightful and intriguing addition to the existing Southeast Asian and Cambodian-American literature. Since it is a recent publication, there has not been a significant amount of research work on this short fiction. Therefore, it offers a lot of scope for new researchers to explore a myriad of themes. The researchers may explore the themes of war, transgenerational trauma, displacement, queer identity, memory, violence, race, and class to gain insights into the lives of Khmer American society. Furthermore, the researchers have a golden opportunity to delve deep into the intricacies of living as a Khmer in America which is currently a lesser explored area. Alternatively, researchers have an opportunity to explore other incomplete books of Anthony Veasna So such as *Straight Outta Cambotown* and *Songs on Endless Repeat* to understand and compare his multifaceted representation of Khmer American identity within different generations. Exploring these areas helps enrich readers' knowledge and information about Cambodia's history while shedding light on the plight of the silenced. Moreover, engaging with such research areas will pave the way for the exploration of fears, trials, and dreams of immigrant Cambodians trying to make their place in America. Thus, the researchers are invited to engage with So's highly enriching pieces of literature to experience a varied worldview existing in the backdrop of genocide, poverty, and discrimination. This will provide much-needed representation to Khmer American society, bringing forth insights into their culture, beliefs, and ways of being.

5.3 Impact on Pakistani Society

The current research has made a significant effort to give voice to a minority culture or identity (Khmer American identity) existing within multicultural America. It has paved the way for readers and researchers to understand the complexities, intricacies, and diversities within Khmer American identity. This research is relevant to multicultural Pakistani society because it allows Pakistani researchers and readers to understand how minority cultures form their distinct identities by keeping alive their traditions and customs. It further makes it possible for Pakistani readers to understand the significant efforts made by each culture to propagate its identity by conforming to the existing ways of being, living, and behaving. This makes it possible for Pakistani readers and researchers to empathize with and work to understand the significance of the distinct cultural identity of minorities in Pakistan which will help them become more respectful and tolerant toward the traditions and customs of other cultures. It may also influence or inspire Pakistani researchers to research the various minority identities within the country which will open up a new avenue of literature, leading to increased readers and researchers in the field.

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