

# រៀងសុជាត

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# Introduction

សុជាត, the 1942 novel by author វិមេន, is widely acknowledged as the first modern Khmer prose novel. Looking back at it now, we as "sophisticated" consumers of the Western novel form inevitably see this work as a bit naive, as predictable, and at times a bit silly--maybe even annoying.

It's important to remember, however, what a significant achievement this work was in its day. All imaginative (as opposed to historical narrative--such as royal chronicles) Khmer literature prior to this work--we're talking centuries and centuries--was in verse. This is the first time a Cambodian put pen to paper to tell a creative story in prose. It's also important to realize the social context in which this work appeared. The French colonial era was rapidly coming to an end in Cambodia. More and more Cambodians were learning to read (ironically, largely as a result of French-led systematization and expansion of the school system). And just what they *were* reading--French novels, in particular--was vastly different in form and content than anything they had ever read in Khmer. Cambodians were starting to think about their national identity as well, and in fact វិមេន wrote សុជាត partly as a reaction to the proliferation of foreign prose novels (in Khmer translation) in Cambodia, particularly those of the Vietnamese. To this end, there are no foreigners in this novel. Everybody, and the social and cultural context in which they live, is 100% Khmer...at least in the way that Khmer culture and mores were conceived of in the author's time.

សុជាត is not all beginner's fumbling and naivete, either. There are some truly beautiful, clever passages in this novel. And there are some faithful recreations of spoken Khmer language, both formal and colloquial. Which makes this novel perfect for--you guessed it--your introduction as a student to the Khmer novel form. Admittedly, this form has not progressed

very far--it's now 2008--from its humble beginnings in this work. So you don't have all that much catching up to do! This novel is also short, weighing in at a mere 11 chapters, many of them almost ridiculously short. At times, nevertheless, you'll find it long, tedious, boring and hard to understand (largely because of all the poetic vocabulary within). But stick with it, and trust me as your guide to the wealth of useful cultural, historical and grammatical material here.

You can also think of this novel as an invaluable guide to the Khmer romantic aesthetic and psyche. The attitudes and behaviors expressed in this novel--not all of them, but a great many of them--very accurately *reflect* traditional Khmer mores and beliefs in the nature of social relations which existed prior to the 20th Century. These were passed down orally and through traditional verse literature to your grandparents (if you're ethnically Khmer). Interestingly, this novel, since it was read by virtually all Khmers educated in the Cambodian school system from the 1950s up until the present (excepting of course the mid to late 1970s), also served as a means of *transmitting* cultural mores and ideals to your parents and possibly older siblings. So it's a key to understanding some of the ways that many Cambodians alive today look at life and social relations.

The minimum prerequisite for using this novel in your study of Khmer is the completion of five semesters of Khmer, or, put another way, at least one semester of Intermediate Khmer language study beyond Beginning or "survival Khmer". At SEASSI, this first semester of Intermediate Khmer is essential for preparing you for some of the vocabulary and grammatical structures you will encounter in this book. Topics covered during the first semester of Intermediate Khmer (this novel is normally read during the second semester in its entirety) include Khmer Buddhism and the language used to discuss it, traditional (village) culture, mores and proverbs, and the language of public information, including formal ways of speaking. If you're approaching this novel with only a basic knowledge of and experience with reading Khmer (e.g. folk tales and simple, non-abstract narratives), and only a survival level of spoken Khmer (being able to talk about family, being able to shop in the market, give and receive directions, talk about health and illness and discuss basic human needs and daily life), you're going to find yourself woefully underequipped and struggling every step of the way. Also, keep in mind that this is by far the easiest, and one of the shortest Khmer novels in

existence. It's a perfect choice for your first novel...but even given that, you need to be adequately prepared for it in order to get the most out of it.

I've done a little editing of the formatting of the novel, in terms of deciding where to break phrases, in order to make difficult or unclear passages easier to understand. I've also had the novel retyped in a large, fairly easy-to-read font. This way, you can ignore all the various physical difficulties you might have encountered reading an original, typeset version of the novel, and just concentrate on content. I have kept intact, however, several physical features of the original. I have adhered to the author's paragraph breaks, many of which occur where they do for dramatic effect. I have also preserved the typing of all personal names in the narrative in ស៊ូន or "rounded", formal Khmer script. And I've included the original illustrations included in earlier versions of the novel as well.

New innovations in this, my second annotated edition of the novel--the first was published in 2002--include the numbering of the paragraphs in blue, and footnotes in red (to help you distinguish clearly between the two). Note also the rather odd numbering of the paragraphs: there are four "sets" of numbering systems used. Chapters 1-4 are comprised of paragraphs 1-94; then we start over again and find paragraphs 1-99 in Chapters 5-7; the next set is Chapters 8-10 (paragraphs 1-92). The final set occurs entirely within Chapter 11, paragraphs 1-60. The reason for this system is that by 2009, I hope to have a DVD ready which includes audio tracks of the novel being read from start to finish. Each paragraph will make up one audio track. To avoid track numbers going into triple digits (which would make it difficult to do things such as burn the audio tracks to separate CDs of your own, or make your iPod library unwieldy), I came up with this four set system. I've also included some photos from modern-day Cambodia illustrating certain moments in the novel, and provided the text of a letter written by the main character in Chapter 7 in handwritten (male) Khmer script, to give you some practice reading handwriting.

As in the 2002 edition, I've added footnotes at the bottom of many pages of the text (these have been modified and expanded in the latest edition). The footnotes are at times explanations of cultural practices or difficult grammatical structures. Most often, however, they contain definitions of vocabulary items. A knowledge of these footnote vocabulary items is deemed essential to your moving along through the narrative without too much interruption.

Less immediately essential vocabulary terms are given in a list at the end of each chapter. It's strongly recommended that you do your best to work your way through an entire chapter using only the footnotes for help, before turning to the vocabulary list at the end of the chapter (or to your dictionary). Use all the "good reading" strategies at your disposal: consider unknown words in context to try to guess their meaning; predict what will happen next and use your own experience and background knowledge to guess at an unknown word's meaning, etc. It's also recommended that you read through each chapter at least twice (but preferably even more times than that!), once without consulting the vocabulary list or a dictionary, and once again after you've looked up unknown words you identified during your initial reading.

If you're reading this book as part of your Intermediate Khmer study at SEASSI, I've got some more important advice for you: read the chapters in groups! Preferably "mixed" groups of native speakers (Heritage students) and non-native speakers. You can really help each other out: assuming the non-native speakers have had a year of Khmer reading and writing already, they'll be able to sound out words much better than Heritage students who are possibly taking Intermediate Khmer as their first class. Heritage speakers, on the other hand, will be able to make predictions and will know more everyday vocabulary (and grammatical structures) than the non-native speakers. It's a perfect combination to make a difficult task a little less daunting.

The text of most chapters is followed by explanations of various cultural and grammatical points, often including assignments and exercises. If you're using this novel as part of a class, you'll be notified when the exercises for a given chapter are due. But you'll be doing yourself a favor to automatically do all of them on your own anyway: they've been designed not to make your life more burdensome, but to engage you with the novel more fully and to enrich all of your Khmer skills through reading it--not simply your literacy skills.

I am in debt to Alberto Perez for re-typing the text of the novel in Khmer Unicode, and to Klairung Amratisha for her thoughtful analysis of the novel (taken from her Ph.D. dissertation), included in Appendix One. Thanks also to Alberto for suggestions regarding changes to this new edition of the novel, including the handwritten letter in Chapter Seven and the audio recording of the text read by a male native speaker (the latter, not yet realized).

Thanks to Seang Sokha for writing out the letter in Chapter Seven.

Thanks also to six summers' worth of SEASSI Intermediate and Advanced Khmer students who worked their way/suffered(!) through សូជាត and gave me feedback which hopefully has helped to make this edition easier to study and more useful. In those same summers of using សូជាត in the classroom, the input and suggestions of fellow instructors Khun Sok-hary, Chan Sambath, Sok Phal, Phan Hannah and Leang Kheang were also invaluable. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Frank Huffman and Im Proum for their groundbreaking and painstaking work compiling vocabulary lists for this novel, of which I have made extensive use. And finally, thanks to Kheang Leang for proofreading the first edition of the novel, and to Hannah Phan for proofreading the current edition. All mistakes and inconsistencies which remain are my own.

Frank Smith  
Bangkok, Thailand  
April, 2008