

Paper Two: *The Road to Lost Innocence*

**Summary**

Born around the early 1970s, Somaly Mam grew up in Bou Sra village in a forest in Cambodia with her maternal grandmother. Her parents abandoned her when she was very young and therefore, she does not know her birth date or her real name. Throughout her life, she had several names, but chose this one because it had a special meaning to her. Growing up, she did not have a stable family, or live in a stable household. Most of young childhood days were spent scavenging around for food and sleeping in rice paddies. Along with being dark and thin, which was thought to be very unattractive by society, Somaly also faced hardships from being a mixed race of Phnong and Khmer.

In Cambodia, women are most definitely not seen as equal to men. Therefore, their lives are normally controlled by a male that is considered to be her father, adoptive father, grandfather or any male that owns her. For Somaly, she was handed over to an elderly man to whom she referred to as Grandfather, as a sign of respect. When she first met him, she felt like she could trust him and might enjoy living with him. However, not shortly after, Grandfather hit her to the ground and she began to bleed. Somaly knew she would never be loved by this man and would never be able to go back to the forest again.

Wanting to trust people, but then being proved wrong happened quite a few times in Somaly's life. Even her husband had hit her and she was very shocked. It was hard for her to feel like she deserved anything in her life because she was constantly treated like nothing. When she lived with her Grandfather in a small hut made of palm leaves, she was forced to be a domestic slave. Cleaning, cooking, fetching water, and washing clothes were her daily tasks.

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Even if she completed them all, there was something that she would be beaten for at the end of the day. Somaly quickly learned to be fearful and to be obedient at a very young age.

One day the village school teacher signed Somaly up for school. He and his family were very supportive and loving toward her. These were the people she felt connected to; they were her family. However, Somaly continued to get pails of water for the rude villages to earn money for Grandfather's gambling. Once, he ordered her to go to a man's house where she then was raped and cut. Somaly was still a young girl and had no idea what was happening to her. She had thought he hurt her in with a knife. Yet, she knew what happened was supposed to be kept a secret and she felt extremely horrified and guilty about it.

She finally realized that her virginity was her Grandfather's way of paying a large debt to that man. Later, her Grandfather sold her to a woman in the city. Somaly's life as a prostitute began and she had to leave her family back at the village.

Somaly is a strong and stubborn woman. The first night she was brought to the city, the women made her pretty with makeup and clothes and brought her to her first customer. Somaly tried to resist him, but instead he beat her. The pattern began happening hundreds of times after that. The brothel would stick her in a dark room in the basement and put snakes and maggots all around her. They used fear, intimidation and physical abuse to keep the girls obedient. Somaly had tried to run away once. She got into a taxi and almost made it back to her family in the village. Even though she thought she could trust the taxi driver, he raped her and brought her back to the brothel.

The guards tied her to a chair and forced maggots in her mouth. They even poured them on her when she was sleeping. After that, Somaly never tried to escape again and never forgot how she felt at that time. She was forced to continue seeing clients and being beaten every night.

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There were even times where she had a gun pointed to her and was threatened to be killed if she did not submit to a man.

Though she wanted to believe in the good in people, she felt very aggressive toward the people that caused her so much pain. She repeatedly stated how she wished to kill her Grandfather or some of the men that really hurt her.

Somaly met a French foreigner named Pierre, who gave her money and could speak her language. Somaly could finally escape the brothel to live with Pierre. At first she did not want to move to France with him, but this was her only way out. She was given an opportunity to leave a dirty, unsafe, dangerous and traumatic life to create a new one where she could attempt to feel clean, civilized and respected. They got married and started to house young prostitutes. All Somaly ever wanted to do was to help them because she knew exactly the pain and suffering they were going through.

Eventually they started to open safe centers for the girls by rescuing them from the brothels. This was not always an easy task due to money and the number of girls was always larger than the space they had. However, the violent attacks Somaly received were far worse. The government was unstable and powerful brothel owners were upset that Somaly was taking the girls away. One center was blown up and about 100 girls were taken back to the brothels. Another time, Somaly's own daughter was captured by the brothel owners. With the help of younger policemen, since older policemen were involved with brothels, Somaly was able to get her daughter back.

Somaly was recognized all over the world for her tremendous efforts to escape the sex slave industry and to help young girls that were still trapped in it. Though she previously felt no love in her life, having children helped Somaly detach from her old life and begin a new one.

## Quotes and Application of Class Materials

In Thlok Chhrov we only ate meat once or twice a year, on special holidays. My mother would buy a half pound of pork for twenty people and chop it up very fine, as a kind of flavoring. We were grateful for every grain of rice we got (Mam, 2009, p. 98).

Cambodia is a very poor country where the political regime is unstable and most frequently at war. Most people would go hungry and rarely had food. If they did have food to eat, then it was very small portions and not good quality. Somaly explained that during her time in France she was appalled at how much people ate there. French people were having meat in more than one meal a day. Then, they would toss what was uneaten and Somaly thought of the multiple families that food could have fed in Cambodia. In the class reading, *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*, several articles are state what governments need to do in order to obey the convention and basic human morals. Article 24 states “Children have the right to good quality health care – the best health care possible – to safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help them stay healthy. Rich countries should help poorer countries achieve this” (p. 3). Unfortunately, rich countries do not do all they can to aid third world countries. It is a depressing fact that millions of people, mainly children, in poorer countries starve night after night. While on the other hand, millions of people, including children are obese and overweight in developed countries.

The girls in Kratie were mostly debt slaves, as I once was. They were paying back a loan taken out by their parents or relative. Some of them had agreed to do it. This is Cambodia: If you are a girl, you owe obedience to your parents. If your family requires you to sell your body on the side of the road so that your younger brother can go to school – or your mother can gamble – this is what you do” (Mam, 2009 p. 116).

Cambodia is like many other countries where sex slavery is a huge profit for organized criminals. Since the country is well underdeveloped, prostitution is the easiest way for a family to earn money. The girls have no control over their own bodies. Some feel a great debt to their

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family and think they have to go into sex slavery. In the class reading of the *Training Manual to Fight Trafficking in Children for Labor, Sexual and other Forms of Exploitation*, it is thoroughly explained why children deserve a childhood. “Trafficking is a serious violation of children’s rights, including specifically their rights to be protected from exploitation, to remain with their family, to go to school, to be protected from sexual violence and to have time to play” (p. 16). Hundreds of girls’ rights are being violated because they are not given the opportunity to get an education, live with their family and have rights to their own bodies. Though some cultures do not believe in the idea of childhood, children are humans and their born rights are being snatched away from them. There is nothing they can do to fix it and the people around them only fuel the problem rather than solve it.

### **Personal Reflection**

I chose this book because I watched the movie *Half the Sky* and was very interested in Somaly Mam. She was a survivor of Cambodian prostitution and created a safe place for young girls. In broader terms, she came from an incredible place of struggle and managed to rise above it to better not only her own life, but hundreds of lives. Not every child has the privilege of going to school, laughing with friends, eating food, living in a home, being loved by a parent or feeling like they have a right to their own life. Her story confirmed the tragic reality that children all around the world are suffering.

If anyone wishes to step outside her normal world and take a peek at the life of someone less fortunate than herself, she should read Somaly Mam’s story. Though it is inspiring toward the end of the book, it makes the reader realize how fortunate she is and how difficult life can be for many others. Men can also read the story and attempt to understand just how helpless and victimized women are when they are sexually attacked. A person can only truly understand what

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Somaly went through if she experienced the same thing, and therefore, empathy is what most of readers will experience when learning about her life.