

DEHUMANIZED & OBJECTIFIED WOMEN IN SOMALY MAM AND RUTH MARSHALL'S *THE ROAD OF LOST INNOCENCE*

Hana Farida^{1*} & Fadhila Faiza Amalia²

¹Universitas Ahmad Dahlan

²Universitas Ahmad Dahlan

Corresponding Author: Farida, Hana E-mail: hana.farida@enlitera.uad.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This research attempted to understand how dehumanization along with objectification occurred in prostitution. Dehumanization occurred when people treated others less than humans by denied their human uniqueness and nature and added negative attributes to refer to them as animals or objects. This research discussed how the victims of prostitution suffered dehumanization and how this dehumanization affected the victims, positioning them as objects, as portrayed in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall's *The Road of Lost Innocence*. This research is qualitative-descriptive research. The main data is Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall's *The Road of Lost Innocence*, while supporting data is obtained from books, articles, and journals. In analyzing the data, the researcher applied the dehumanization theory of Haslam and the consequences of dehumanization as described by Bastian and Haslam. The results of this research showed the victims of prostitution suffered dehumanization based on Haslam's theory: first, animalistic dehumanization, where the brothel owner viewed victims as animals, trained the victims as animals, etc. Second, mechanistic dehumanization occurred when a victim was sold into the brothel by her family, and the owner of the brothel treated the victims like goods that could be traded, etc. This researcher also discovered that this dehumanization affected the victim's cognitive and emotional responses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The academic literature depicts a complex and troubling portrait of prostitution in Cambodia, with research indicating a high incidence of violence and mistreatment experienced by sex workers. Factors such as the lasting impacts of colonialism and the inherently traumatic nature of the sex trade have exacerbated these issues (Farley et al., 2004). Prostitution, a practice with deep historical roots and ongoing contemporary significance, entails the provision of sexual services in return for compensation. It presents a range of complex ethical, social, and psychological challenges that impact both individuals involved and the broader society (Grady, 2010). At the heart of the ethical concerns surrounding prostitution are the issues of dehumanization and objectification. These concepts point to the troubling reality that people involved in prostitution—particularly those who are coerced or lack real choice—are often seen not as full human beings, but as objects used solely for the sexual pleasure of others (Farley, 2003). In the context of



prostitution, these dynamics often appear through the commodification of the human body, the disregard for personal autonomy and boundaries, and the reinforcement of damaging social stereotypes, leading to a phenomenon of dehumanization and objectification.

In order to explain violent practices, dehumanization measures often combine the denial of human traits with the incorporation of negative traits. They operationalized dehumanization as the willingness to refer to victims as animals, apes, or worms; as people who were shallow, unemotional, and unsophisticated; or as people who aroused disdain and scorn. (Rai et al., 2017) (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014). Dehumanization, which involves stripping away someone's sense of humanity, can appear in different ways. One form is animalistic dehumanization, where a person is seen as lacking traits that set humans apart from animals. Another is mechanistic dehumanization, where individuals are treated as if they lack emotions or individuality, like machines (Lekka & Sakalaki, 2019) (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014).

According to Farley, "Sex buyers did not recognize the humanity of the women they used for sex, so the process of dehumanization, objectification, and commodification put those involved in prostitution at risk of psychological and physical harm (Farley, 2018, p. 101)". Most of prostituted women around the world experience prostitution as being pursued, dominated, harassed, abused, and battered. According to Farley in a study on prostitution in Vancouver, 75% of the women had experienced physical harm as a result of the violence (Farley, 2018).

Prostitution had also grown rapidly in Asia. For example, in Cambodia, sex and prostitution were widespread problems a long time ago. In Cambodia's metropolitan regions during the 1970s and 1980s, prostitution was legal, and brothels, bars, and nightclubs grew in popularity (Derk, 2004). The growth of sex industry was often supported by the political instability, influx of international actors, including peacekeepers and aid workers (Mwanyika, 2021), and the rapidly expanding tourism sector which attracted sex tourists (Yasami et al., 2023). Those phenomena were often depicted in literary works, one of them being is Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall's novel *The Road of Lost Innocence*. In the novel, Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall highlight the harsh realities of prostitution in Cambodia, where young girls are trafficked, exploited, and forced into sexual slavery.

The story narrated the life of Somaly, a nine-year-old girl who was abused and sold by her own grandfather, assaulted by her husband, and then resold after his death as a prostitute in a brothel to be violated daily. In the same brothel, then, she encountered other victims who had suffered similar fates; they were dehumanized and treated as commercial commodities, mere objects, or even animals by those who exploited them in the sex trade. The memoir, based on Mam's own life experiences, exposes how prostitution is a result of systemic exploitation, poverty, and patriarchal violence. Mam's personal journey from being sold into a brothel to becoming an advocate for victims of human trafficking serves as both a testimony of survival and a call for global awareness and action against sexual exploitation. Somaly Mam's memoir *The Road of Lost Innocence* is analytically valuable because it offers a first-person narrative of sexual exploitation and survival within the Cambodian sex trafficking industry. As a survivor and activist, Mam provides a deeply personal and emotionally charged account that exposes the structural violence, cultural norms, and dehumanizing systems that enable the trafficking and commodification of women. Mam's use of voice, silence, and testimony allows scholars to examine the intersections of narrative truth, memory, and advocacy.



Examining dehumanization and objectification in the context of prostitution is essential for several key reasons. It brings attention to the lived realities of those engaged in prostitution, especially individuals who are marginalized or involved under coercive circumstances. By exploring how these processes function, researchers can uncover the underlying power imbalances, identify patterns of vulnerability, and better understand the social and psychological harms that may arise within the sex trade (Gerassi, 2015). To truly understand prostitution, especially as it affects vulnerable groups, we need a critical perspective that looks closely at power, coercion, and exploitation (Bartels et al., 2021). While it's common to view sex-for-money exchanges as inherently exploitative, this assumption deserves closer examination—particularly in situations where there are clear power imbalances (Westendorf, 2023). This discussion contributed to advancement social justice by confronting the stigma and discrimination experienced by those in the sex trade (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Moreover, understanding how dehumanization works on a psychological level can help shape strategies that build empathy, challenge harmful beliefs, and support a more compassionate and equitable society.

The reason of researcher chose the novel because this novel depicted the experiences of prostitution victim that related to the dehumanization of prostitution. The author portrayed the process of dehumanization when Somaly narrated that nobody cared about victim's emotions and their bodies were nothing with any value because they were treated like commercial products, objects, and animals by the clients and pimps. The urgency of this research was to understand how victims were treated like animals or objects and how this act affected to them. This urgency was also the reason why the researcher chose this research. This study employs Haslam's dehumanization framework to examine how *The Road of Lost Innocence* illustrates the psychological trauma and bodily harm resulting from both animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization within Cambodia's sex trafficking industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous discussion has explored the impact of cultural violence against women, with some studies examining the ideological forces, such as patriarchy, that contribute to their oppression. Research on novels like *Astirin Mbalela* and *The Road of Lost Innocence* (Badrina, Darni, & Setijawan, 2020) has focused on the forms of violence women endure, highlighting the cultural backdrop in which this violence occurs. A scholar have also addressed the controversies surrounding Somaly Mam's memoir, *Le Silence de l'innocence*, particularly her involvement in the anti-trafficking movement and the allegations of fabricated stories within her narrative (Barnes, 2018). These studies analyze the appeal and limitations of her testimonial accounts within the global rescue industry, raising questions about the truthfulness of her portrayal. Existing literature lacks a comprehensive exploration of dehumanization and objectification within the context of Somaly Mam's depiction of her personal narratives in her texts.

In analyzing the psychological and physical consequences of dehumanization, this study draws on Haslam's dual models of animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization. According to Haslam, animalistic dehumanization involves reducing individuals to the status of animals by denying them emotional and moral capacities, while mechanistic dehumanization treats individuals as objects or tools, denying them agency and individuality. These models are particularly useful in understanding the exploitation of individuals in human trafficking and sex



work. In the context of *The Road of Lost Innocence*, Haslam's framework helps to reveal how victims of trafficking are systematically stripped of their humanity, both through the dehumanizing actions of their perpetrators and the societal structures that enable such exploitation. This theoretical lens allows for a deeper understanding of the trauma experienced by the victims and the ways in which they are reduced to mere commodities, with their emotional and physical well-being disregarded in favor of profit.

Dehumanization & Objectification

According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, dehumanize is to make someone lose human characteristics such as kindness, pity, etc. (Turnbull et al. 2010). Dehumanization was a phenomenon in which people were seen in fundamentally incorrect ways. Dehumanization was characterized by "disregard for reality, in which we see and treated people not as humans (Gervais et al. 2013, p. 1)". When people were dehumanized, they were perceived and treated in the same way as non-humans.

The insidious nature of dehumanization, particularly as it relates to the perception and treatment of women, has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, revealing disturbing patterns of bias and prejudice that permeate various societal structures (Ismail, 2023). Dehumanization, in its essence, involves the denial of fundamental human attributes to others, thereby diminishing their moral standing and facilitating discriminatory practices (Haslam, 2006). Dehumanization dated back much further. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, for example, European intellectuals were concerned with stories about savages, barbarians, and unusual tales of humanoid creatures and monsters. According to Jahoda (1999), she examined philosophers' and scientists' attempted to show that some races were superior to others from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century.

According to Haslam and Loughnan (2014) there were some researches conducted that discussed how 'even women' were possibly dehumanized by which the glasses of the perceivers. Gustave LeBon's appalling assertion that women represent the "most inferior forms of human evolution" and are akin to "children and savages" exemplifies the historical roots of such dehumanizing attitudes, highlighting a deeply ingrained misogyny that has persisted for centuries (Haslam, 2006). Such blatant expressions of sexism, while seemingly archaic, reflect a broader societal tendency to denigrate and marginalize women, reinforcing power imbalances and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Objectification theory posits that women are frequently treated as sexual objects within society, leading to a focus on their bodies rather than their capabilities (Gattino et al., 2023). The consequences of such dehumanization are far-reaching, impacting women's self-perception, mental health, and overall well-being, as they are forced to navigate a world that often reduces them to mere physical attributes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The phenomenon of sexual objectification, wherein women's bodies or body parts are separated from their personhood and treated as mere instruments, further compounds the issue of dehumanization (Winn & Cornelius, 2020).

Animalistic Dehumanization and Mechanistic Dehumanization

According to Haslam, dehumanization involved denied others' uniquely human characteristics, which disregarded others' human nature and depicted them as objects or robots, presenting them



as akin to animals. Haslam proposed two models of dehumanization: "animalistic" and "mechanistic" dehumanization (Haslam, 2006).

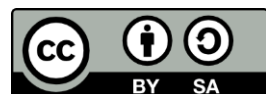
When women were objectified as impulse-driven, animal-like creatures with limited sexual autonomy, they were subjected to animalistic dehumanization. Example of animalistic dehumanization in pornography was when women shown as being ready and willing to persuade men to engage in sexual activity at all costs. (Zhou et al., 2021), and when dehumanized women emphasized their sexual insatiability while ignored other aspects of their humanity. As a result of this animalistic dehumanization, women were portrayed as uncivilized, immoral, and hypersexual creatures incapable of controlling their instinctual sexual desire (Zhou et al., 2021).

People should be viewed as devoid of depth, feelings, warmth, cognitive openness, and autonomy when they are denied their human nature. If someone lacks warmth and feeling, others will see them as dull and inactive. Depriving them cognitive openness (inquisitive, versatility, etc.) made them seem stiff; depriving them their own autonomy made them appear replaceable and inactive, with their actions driven by circumstance rather than volition. (Haslam, 2006). These attributes portray an image of others as object- or automaton/ robot-like. As a result, this type of dehumanization could be described as mechanistic.

When women were objectified as inanimate sexual tools, they were subjected to mechanistic dehumanization. For example, pornography may dehumanize women by ignored their sexual pleasure and depicting them solely as sex toys for men's sexual pleasure (Zhou et al., 2021). As a result of this mechanistic dehumanization, there was sexual objectification, which completely dehumanized women by reduced those to inanimate objects and sexual instruments (Zhou et al., 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

To comprehend people's views, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions, (Simanjuntak et al. 2022), this research used qualitative methods took from the novel *The Road of Lost Innocence* and other literature review. The primary data that used in this research were taken from the novel *The Road of Lost Innocence* by Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall that was published in 2008 by Spiegel & Grau New York, as the source to get the main data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, etc. The supporting data for this research were derived from a range of scholarly sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic papers relevant to the topics under investigation. These sources provided theoretical frameworks and contextual information related to prostitution, dehumanization, objectification, and their consequences. The integration of these sources served to support and strengthen the analysis of the primary text, ensuring a well-grounded and comprehensive interpretation of the issues presented in the novel. The data collection and analysis procedures employed in this research involved several systematic steps. First, the researcher conducted a close reading of *The Road of Lost Innocence* to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and its thematic concerns. Second, specific excerpts—such as quotations and descriptive passages—were identified and highlighted, particularly those that depict instances in which the victims were subjected to inhumane treatment. Third, these selected excerpts were analyzed through the lens of Haslam's theory of dehumanization, as well as the framework proposed by Bastian and Haslam regarding the psychological consequences of dehumanization. Finally, to strengthen the validity of the analysis,



relevant secondary sources and scholarly literature were consulted to support the interpretations and findings discussed in the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Dehumanization of Prostitution Victims in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall's *The Road of Lost Innocence*

4.1.1 Animalistic Dehumanization as Portrayed in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall's *The Road of Lost Innocence*

Animalistic dehumanization refers to the process of denying individuals their uniquely human traits by equating them with animals, particularly in contexts involving domination and control. Haslam (2006) posits that this form of dehumanization occurs when individuals are seen as lacking higher-order cognitive capacities such as civility, moral reasoning, self-restraint, and rationality. When a person is treated not as a human being but as a creature to be disciplined, exploited, or tamed, they are subjected to animalistic dehumanization (Zhao, 2021). This dehumanization is not only psychologically damaging but ethically indefensible, as it strips individuals of their dignity and agency.

In *The Road of Lost Innocence*, Somaly Mam recounts her traumatic experiences as a victim of sex trafficking in Cambodia, co-authored with Ruth Marshall. The memoir provides disturbing yet powerful testimonies of how young girls, including Mam herself, are objectified, abused, and systematically denied their humanity. One of the earliest instances of dehumanization Mam recalls is her treatment by the man she believed to be her grandfather. Before being sold into sexual slavery, she was treated as a domestic servant, a fate not uncommon for many trafficked children in Cambodia. Her grandfather was brutally violent, as illustrated by the following account:

“He would make me kneel and beat me with a long, hard bamboo stick that cut in my flesh and made me bleed with my every blow” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 10).

This treatment mimics the disciplining of animals through physical punishment. The act of forcing her to kneel and the repeated beatings with a bamboo stick reflect a belief that Mam needed to be “trained” into submission, as one would train an animal. Her pain and resistance were met not with empathy but with violence, indicating a denial of her intellectual and emotional capacity. In accordance with Haslam’s theory, such treatment exemplifies animalistic dehumanization, as Mam’s moral agency and cognitive uniqueness were disregarded.

Mam’s objectification continued once she entered the brothel system. New girls were advertised using terms normally reserved for animals, as demonstrated in a scene where a brothel owner introduced her to clients:

“She is a new chicken, fresh from the country” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 36).

The metaphor of “chicken” here is telling. In Cambodian brothel slang, “chicken” refers to a virgin or newly arrived sex worker. This comparison degrades young girls to mere commodities,



animals to be consumed, with no acknowledgment of their personhood. Using an animal metaphor erases the subject's humanity, reducing her to a product valued solely for novelty and availability. Haslam (2006) identifies this denial of uniquely human characteristics, such as the ability to reason and make autonomous decisions, as a key feature of animalistic dehumanization.

Mam's first sexual encounter in the brothel was particularly harrowing. She resisted a client's advances, but her resistance was met with rape, framed by the client as a method of "teaching" her obedience:

"I fought him, and he raped me. But it wasn't easy, because I resisted. So he did it again, to teach me another lesson" (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 36).

This experience mirrors the abusive practices used to train wild animals for human entertainment, such as in circuses, where dominance is asserted through physical coercion (Neumann, 2014). Here, the client positions himself as a trainer and Mam as the unruly creature that must be tamed. Her refusal to comply is not respected as an act of autonomy but is punished through violence—another clear example of animalistic dehumanization.

The normalization of such brutality is further illustrated by the attitudes of clients, especially former soldiers, who frequently acted with sadism and entitlement. One quote particularly reveals their perception of the girls:

"The clients were horrible. To them we were meat. They would say, 'I paid a fortune, and you're not even pretty,' and smack, hit you against the wall" (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 39).

Referring to women as "meat" is a form of linguistic dehumanization that emphasizes physicality over personhood. By likening sex workers to consumable products, clients negate their moral worth and emotional existence. In Haslam's terms, these women are stripped of their identity as human beings capable of suffering and moral reasoning, and are instead objectified and animalized.

One of the most graphic accounts of violence occurs when Mam recounts the punishment she received for helping two girls escape. A man named Li burned her body using electrodes. The author notes that such punishments have only become more severe over time:

"Now I see girls in brothels with nails hammered into their skulls... Girls are chained, beaten with electric cables. They go mad" (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 48).

The comparison here extends beyond animals used for labor or entertainment; the girls are now akin to lab animals subjected to cruel experiments. The brutality not only degrades them physically but psychologically as well, often leading to mental illness. This reflects the extreme end of animalistic dehumanization, where victims are denied both cognitive function and emotional resilience.



Later in the narrative, Mam and her colleagues at AFESIP (Acting for Women in Distressing Situations) encounter more victims in horrific conditions. One such case involves a six-year-old girl named Moteta, who was confined to a cage after being sold to a brothel:

“We found Moteta, beaten black and blue, in a cage in a Toul Kok brothel” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 122).

Caging is typically used for wild or dangerous animals, not for children. This act encapsulates the complete stripping away of Moteta’s humanity. Not only is her freedom taken, but she is treated as though incapable of thought, emotion, or agency. According to Haslam, this denial of basic human traits—especially in a child—reflects a deeply ingrained belief in the disposability of these lives.

The final examples in the memoir reveal a trend toward increasingly cruel treatment. Mam describes how girls were discovered “chained to sewers” and “beaten half to death” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 136). These methods evoke the imagery of captured animals or livestock, used and restrained until death. The use of chains, an object not commonly associated with humans, further underlines the denial of the victims’ autonomy. The brothel owners perceive these girls as difficult to control and, therefore, less than human—beings that need physical restriction to maintain order.

The Road of Lost Innocence offers harrowing yet critical insight into how animalistic dehumanization operates within systems of sexual exploitation. Through consistent acts of violence, coercive control, and animal metaphors, Somaly Mam and the other victims are portrayed not as people but as entities to be subdued, consumed, or discarded. Haslam’s (2006) framework of dehumanization is powerfully illustrated in these narratives, which expose the systematic erasure of human qualities in contexts of extreme abuse. This text not only documents individual trauma but also critiques the broader societal conditions that allow such dehumanization to persist.

4.1.2 Mechanistic Dehumanization as Portrayed in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall’s *The Road of Lost Innocence*

When humans are treated as objects, they are demeaned, their dignity is violated, and this treatment runs counter to humanist values (Halim & Suprajitno, 2022). This is what Haslam (2006) refers to as mechanistic dehumanization, a condition in which people are seen or treated as machines or objects and perceived as lacking human nature attributes, such as emotional responsiveness (Zhao, 2021). One form of mechanistic dehumanization in *The Road of Lost Innocence* occurs when individuals—particularly women and children—are treated as commodities to be bought and sold. For example, Somaly recounts the moment when her grandfather sold her virginity to repay a debt:

“Now I understand the grandfather owed that Chinese merchant money and sold my virginity to pay his debt.” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 20)

This act reflects a clear case of mechanistic dehumanization: Somaly’s virginity is reduced to a tradeable good. While goods and services can be exchanged in economic transactions, virginity—an intimate, personal aspect of bodily integrity—cannot. Thus, by selling her virginity,



her grandfather reduced her to an object, disregarding her autonomy and agency. This treatment aligns with Haslam's concept of mechanistic dehumanization, wherein a person's human nature is denied. Another instance involves parents selling their children into brothels to settle debts. Some families used their children as collateral or sold them outright, treating them as property. This is illustrated in the following quote:

"Their children are money on legs, an asset, and a kind of domestic servant." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 26)

This quote demonstrates how children were viewed as economic assets rather than human beings. Their individual agency was stripped away; they were seen as commodities that could generate income, repay loans, or be exchanged. This reinforces the notion that treating people as objects—void of emotion and autonomy—constitutes mechanistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006). Mechanistic dehumanization also appears in how prostitutes were managed by their employers. Aunty Nop and Aunty Peuve profited by 'renting out' girls at night:

"They looked after us, they fed us, and they dressed us – though that was usually an expense we had to repay – and they lived with us. At night they rented us out." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 38)

This language mirrors how one would describe the leasing of objects, not the treatment of human beings. By renting out women as if they were goods, Aunty Nop and Aunty Peuve denied their humanity, perceiving them as passive instruments for financial gain. This reflects Haslam's model, where victims of mechanistic dehumanization are seen as cold, inert, and interchangeable (Haslam, 2006). Somaly also describes the brutal murder of three prostitutes in the brothel and how their bodies were discarded:

"We were garbage in life and garbage in death. They probably threw the sack on the public dump." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 47)

Disposing of the murdered bodies like garbage reveals the utter disregard for their humanity. In life and in death, these women were treated as disposable objects, further emphasizing the extent of their dehumanization. Again, this example aligns with Haslam's theory, which states that the denial of emotional and moral worth results in object-like treatment.

Somaly's own punishment after attempting to escape highlights another disturbing example of dehumanization:

"Li beat me with his cane and tied me naked to bed. Anyone who came was given the pleasure of looking me." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 44)

Here, Somaly was not only punished but displayed as an object for others' amusement. She was stripped of dignity and treated as a spectacle—an inanimate item for public viewing. Her human nature, including her capacity to feel pain and shame, was ignored, fulfilling Haslam's criteria for mechanistic dehumanization.



Trafficking, as described in the memoir, is another manifestation of this process. Traffickers treated women and girls as commodities, exchanging them across borders for profit:

“Every day fresh girls are trucked from Cambodia across the Thai border... It is an industry whose product is young human flesh.” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 128)

The metaphor of ‘young human flesh’ as a product reinforces the image of these girls as mere objects, to be processed and consumed. They were stripped of individuality and emotion, and traffickers denied their capacity for pain, freedom, and choice. This is echoed again in the following case:

“The ‘orange women’ are girls who sell oranges in the public gardens. For the price of an orange, the client also fondles the girl...” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 131)

By being sold alongside fruit, these girls were placed in the same category as perishable goods. They were seen as tools for profit, valued only for what they could offer to customers, not for who they were. One of the most disturbing examples of mechanistic dehumanization appears in the case of Kolap, a six-year-old girl sold by her mother:

“After her first week, they sewed her up again, without an anesthetic, and sold her to another brothel.” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 139)

Kolap was repeatedly sold and physically violated. Her body was treated like a product that could be repaired and resold. Her cries, resistance, and trauma were ignored. She was denied her voice and her rights, her identity reduced to her economic value.

Throughout *The Road of Lost Innocence*, Somaly Mam powerfully documents how women and children in Cambodia were subjected to mechanistic dehumanization. Haslam’s theory provides a fitting framework for understanding how their human qualities—such as emotion, agency, and moral worth—were disregarded. They were objectified, commodified, and treated as disposable tools in the sex trade.

4.2 Dehumanization Affected the Victims in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall’s *The Road of Lost Innocence*

4.2.1 Cognitive Response of Dehumanization Victims as Portrayed in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall’s *The Road of Lost Innocence*

Cognitive responses to dehumanization often manifest when individuals internalize feelings of humiliation, worthlessness, and emotional numbness due to the mistreatment they endure. Vohs, Baumeister, and Chin (2007) argue that individuals who suffer from social mistreatment frequently experience self-blame, especially when their social status is diminished. Similarly, Bastian and Haslam (2011) highlight that humiliation or a loss of standing often triggers painful self-conscious cognition, such as guilt, shame, or self-perceived inadequacy. When victims are dehumanized, particularly through prolonged abuse or objectification, their responses typically include unpleasant self-awareness, emotional detachment, cognitive impairment, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Bastian & Haslam, 2011).



In *The Road of Lost Innocence*, Somaly Mam's narrative offers numerous instances of such cognitive reactions following experiences of animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization. For instance, as a child, Somaly was subjected to abusive training by her grandfather, who used a bamboo stick to beat her into submission. His treatment of her mirrored the way one might train an animal, devoid of emotional consideration or human respect. Her experience is reflected in the quote:

"People seemed to think it was normal that I should be beaten, since I was this small black savage, the lowest person in the village." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 12)

This statement not only reveals how society viewed her, but also how she came to view herself. Internalizing the community's indifference, she began to believe that her suffering was justified because of her perceived low status. This self-perception is a clear indication of cognitive dehumanization, where an individual begins to accept their devalued status as a reflection of their identity. The abuse, reinforced by societal neglect, led her to develop an unpleasant self-awareness—a hallmark of animalistic dehumanization—as she likened herself to the 'lowest person in the village'.

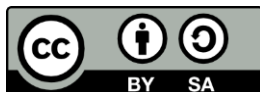
A further instance occurs during her time working at a clinic, where she was raped by a doctor who had previously made sexual advances. After the assault, he insulted her appearance, telling her she was fortunate that he even touched her. In the aftermath, Somaly recalls:

"I felt like garbage, like I was nothing." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 31)

This powerful statement encapsulates the depth of psychological trauma and cognitive degradation she endured. The assault not only violated her body but also dismantled her self-worth. According to Bastian and Haslam (2011), such experiences often lead victims to experience overwhelming shame and guilt—emotions that may culminate in self-blame or suicidal ideation. Somaly, too, attempted suicide by consuming Russian sleeping pills from the clinic, believing her perceived impurity had rendered her unworthy of life, especially in a cultural context where women who engage in sex outside of marriage are often expected to end their lives. Somaly also describes encounters with particularly violent clients while working in a brothel. These clients treated the women as if they were commodities or animal flesh to be consumed—an explicit act of animalistic dehumanization. One striking example is her reaction after being repeatedly raped:

"The worst thing was how dirty I felt all the time." (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 39)

This sense of persistent filth—physical and emotional—is a common cognitive outcome for victims of dehumanization. Somaly describes her surroundings, including the brothel, beds, and streets, as polluted and degrading. The psychological response to repeated sexual violence manifested in her belief that she was permanently stained, a response directly aligned with Bastian and Haslam's (2011) identification of unpleasant self-awareness as a result of cognitive dehumanization. The sensation of being perpetually unclean, unworthy, and violated reflects the long-term psychological imprint of being reduced to an object for others' use.



Even after gaining temporary financial independence through a client named Dietrich, who gave her enough money to leave the brothel, Somaly struggled with her identity and self-perception. During outings to nightclubs, where she occasionally engaged in consensual encounters, she remained burdened by internalized shame and stigma. She states:

“I wasn’t worth anything; I was srey kouc, broken and unmendable.” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 61)

The term *srey kouc*, a derogatory label for a prostitute in Cambodian culture, signifies more than just a social identity; it encapsulates moral and existential worthlessness in the eyes of society. Somaly's adoption of this term to describe herself shows how deeply the dehumanizing experiences had infiltrated her sense of self. Although she was no longer in a brothel, she continued to perceive herself as irreparably damaged—further evidence of the enduring cognitive consequences of dehumanization. Years after leaving sex work and dedicating her life to helping other victims through her work at AFESIP, Somaly still carries the psychological scars of her past. Despite therapy and support, the trauma remains embedded in her memory and identity. She confesses:

“I still feel that I’m dirty and that I carry bad luck.” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 152)

This statement, made more than fifteen years after her direct experiences in the brothels, illustrates how dehumanization can have long-lasting cognitive effects. The persistent belief that she is unclean and brings misfortune underscores how deeply internalized the trauma has become. Seeing the physical scars on her body—burns, bruises, and marks left by chains—only reinforces this identity. As Bastian and Haslam (2011) note, such chronic negative self-awareness is a common outcome for individuals who have been repeatedly dehumanized.

The Road of Lost Innocence offers a harrowing but essential insight into the cognitive responses of individuals subjected to dehumanization. Through Somaly Mam’s lived experiences, the narrative exposes how sustained abuse and societal neglect lead to deep psychological damage, including guilt, shame, numbness, and a persistent sense of worthlessness. These cognitive reactions, consistent with Bastian and Haslam’s framework, highlight the urgent need to address not only the physical and structural aspects of exploitation but also the profound psychological harm it inflicts.

4.2.2 Emotional Response of Dehumanization Victims as Portrayed in Somaly Mam and Ruth Marshall’s *The Road of Lost Innocence*

According to Haslam (2006), when individuals are subjected to inhumane treatment—such as being perceived with scorn or disgust—they often experience intense emotional reactions, including feelings of guilt and shame. These reactions are tied to a sense of diminished humanity and self-worth. Vohs, Baumeister, and Chin (2007) further argue that when individuals believe they are complicit in the way they are treated—especially in cases where their social status is reduced—they are likely to experience self-conscious emotions such as guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Bastian and Haslam (2011) identify ten dominant emotional responses that typically arise in victims of dehumanization: anger, contempt, disgust, sadness, depression, despair, shame, embarrassment, self-consciousness, and guilt.

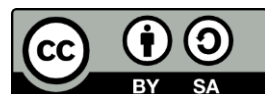


Somaly Mam, the author and subject of *The Road of Lost Innocence*, experienced these emotional effects of dehumanization first-hand. She was sold by her grandfather into sexual slavery, forced to work in a brothel in order to repay his debts. This betrayal exemplifies mechanistic dehumanization, wherein a person is treated not as a human being but as an object to be used or exchanged. In her first encounter as a sex worker, Somaly resisted the demands of a client and was subsequently raped. She described her emotional state following the assault with the words, “I felt black, dark anger at Grandfather and at what he had done to me” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 36). This illustrates the emotional aftermath of dehumanization, where Somaly’s anger stems not only from the violent incident itself but also from her awareness of being treated as an expendable commodity by someone she trusted. This reaction aligns with Bastian and Haslam’s (2011) assertion that anger is a frequent emotional consequence of being dehumanized. The long-term emotional toll of dehumanization is also evident in the lives of other survivors who sought refuge at AFESIP, the organization Somaly later co-founded. Before receiving international aid, the shelter housed over thirty young women and girls, many under the age of twenty-two, in a single room. Most had endured extensive trauma from years in brothels. Mam recounts that many of the girls were “suicidal, depressed, mute, or uncontrollably angry” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 116). These emotional states—ranging from depressive silence to unrestrained rage—reflect the depth of psychological suffering endured by the victims. The symptoms they exhibited, such as nightmares and withdrawal from drug addiction, underscore the need for professional mental health support. In response, AFESIP began employing psychologists to assist the women in processing their trauma, reinforcing Bastian and Haslam’s claim that depression and anger are common emotional responses to dehumanization.

Another example of mechanistic dehumanization occurs when Somaly’s grandfather sold her virginity to Chinese traders. In this instance, she was not only commodified but also silenced. She chose not to disclose the event, not even to her adoptive father. Her reasoning is encapsulated in the statement: “It would only shame me and the people who heard me” (Mam & Marshall, 2008, p. 21). This reflects the internalized shame that often follows dehumanizing acts, particularly in cultural contexts where sexual violence is stigmatized. Somaly’s decision to suppress her emotions further illustrates the emotional toll of dehumanization—where silence becomes a coping mechanism in the face of unbearable shame. As Bastian and Haslam (2011) observe, shame is a key emotional consequence of being dehumanized, and in Somaly’s case, it was severe enough to force emotional detachment as a means of psychological survival.

5. CONCLUSION

The Road of Lost Innocence, written by Somaly Mam in collaboration with Ruth Marshall, recounts Somaly’s harrowing experiences as a victim of sexual exploitation in Cambodia. The narrative not only exposes the inhumane treatment she endured at the hands of her grandfather, husband, brothel owners, and clients but also highlights the broader systemic abuse suffered by other victims of prostitution. This study identifies and explores two primary research problems. First, Haslam’s theory of dehumanization is employed to analyze how victims in the narrative experience dehumanizing treatment. Second, the consequences of dehumanization, as theorized by Bastian and Haslam, are examined to understand its psychological and emotional impact on the victims.



The analysis reveals two forms of dehumanization depicted in the text. Animalistic dehumanization is evident in how the victims are likened to animals or meat, subjected to animal-like training, confined in cages, and even chained. Such portrayals signify the stripping away of their human dignity, reducing them to subhuman status. In contrast, mechanistic dehumanization is reflected in the treatment of the victims as mere commodities or financial assets—auctioned, displayed, and exchanged like goods. This form of objectification denies their emotional and moral capacities, treating them as lifeless tools rather than individuals.

Furthermore, the novel illustrates both cognitive and emotional consequences of dehumanization. Cognitively, victims suffer from negative self-perceptions, often describing themselves as worthless, dirty, or cursed, and struggling with self-blame and suicidal ideation. Emotionally, victims experience deep feelings of shame, intense anger, depression, and overwhelming frustration directed at their circumstances and families. These responses underscore the profound psychological damage caused by sustained dehumanization. Overall, *The Road of Lost Innocence* powerfully portrays the multidimensional impact of dehumanization on the lives and identities of sexually exploited women and girls.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Hana Farida is a lecturer of English Literature Department in Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta. She focuses her researches especially on the discourses of gender & feminism.

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