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SILENCING DIFFERENCES IN THAMMAVONGSA'S *HOW TO PRONOUNCE KNIFE*

Abstract: *This paper specifically deals with the process of integration in multicultural Canada and its focus on language as a marker of foreignness, as represented in Souvakham Thammavongsa's short story collection* How to Pronounce Knife. *The premise is that language, as a system encapsulating markers of culture, presents both a barrier and a bridge in the experience of immigrants in the process of their assimilation into the receiving community and culture. Therefore, the voice of integrating immigrants becomes simultaneously a means of asserting the target identity, and the underlier for marginalization. The introductory chapters discuss multiculturalism as the official policy of Canada, as well as the practical implications of multiculturalism as historically emphasizing difference, especially in terms of language. The section that follows provides the analyses of a selection of Thammavongsa's short stories, illustrating the mechanisms behind the effort to erase markers of difference, including the linguistic ones. The concluding remarks summarize the discussion on multiculturalism simultaneously working to efface and emphasize difference.*

Keywords: *assimilation, foreignness, immigrant literature, integration multiculturalism, Souvakham Thammavongsa.*

Introduction

Among a number of attempts to define and describe multicultural societies, Ashcroft and Bevir loosely describe them as '[containing] multiple cultural groups

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rather than just one,' highlighting the implicit binarity between imagined cultural homogeneity and multiculturalism as '[evoking] a series of discourses regarding the appropriate way to respond to cultural and other forms of difference' (2019:p.2). In that sense, observed as a political practice, multiculturalism can be termed as the 'accommodation and integration of immigrants' (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2019:p.229), affirming the marking of difference between nationals and immigrants, as well as '[underplaying] historical interactions between different groups and the way these have influenced the policy and legal frameworks applying to each' (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2019:p.243). Whereas on the surface level, multiculturalism strives to erase the differences between the varied groups contributing in the community – at least in the legal discourse, it concurrently emphasises these differences through social, political and legal practices. In other words, the quality of the position and prospects of the immigrants as foreigners, or newcomers to the receiving country, cannot be solely attributed to the public discourse of multiculturalism (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2019:p.243), which in the case of the Canadian ideal of national identity – Canadianness, emerges as systemic inequality between those established as the group of nationals, and the immigrants striving to assimilate. The major problematics of politics (or policies) against practice, revolves around the conception of culture, and how it shapes the ideal identity of the national:

> 'In public debates over national identity, the overarching goal is to articulate an inclusive form of it that can integrate a multicultural citizenry [...] Integration is not a unitary process but rather takes place in different ways, across many locales, and into multiple groups. This suggests we should not focus on the participation of immigrants in specific spheres of public life, such as the majority culture or national identity, or through narrow mechanisms such as policy and law. Cultural meanings and identities are fluid, dynamic, and overlapping, which means that generalised calls for "integration," "assimilation," or even "cohesion" may be misplaced.' (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2019: p.243)

Multiculturalism has also been defined as 'the tolerance by a society of many different cultures and languages' (Lazear, 1999:p.96), or 'the quintessential Canadian value' (Harles, 1997: p.715) that 'distinguishes [Canadians] from the melting pot of the United States' (Harles, 1997: p.715). In the review of the most prominent theories of integration and assimilation, Ziyanak discusses the factors in immigrant groups' integration into the dominant culture (American), and finds it is largely contingent on the socio-economic structure of the society of the receiving country (2015:p.144), with an emphasis on 'cultural and biological blending' (2015:p.148) within the American melting pot, but one limited due to the dominant Anglo-Sax-

on institutions, as well as the linguistic dominance of English. Historically, Canada has welcomed immigration labour since its very beginnings, yet it has maintained discriminatory practices towards specific immigrant and minority groups up until the second half of the twentieth century, and especially so against Asian communities (Troper 1993, Price 2013, Ignjatovic 2023). It continues to do so through its bait-and-switch immigration policy favouring specific ethnicities, and persons of desirable educational and other background (Kaushal & Lu 2015, Meyers 2000), continuously updating policies in a manner that disallows vertical mobility to those groups who do not belong to the favoured national ideal. From this very perspective, Uberoi notes that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) 'altered the policy of multiculturalism by empowering it to encourage all federal departments to reflect Canada's ethnic diversity' (2016:p.268), that it ensured the oversight of its enforcement, and that it 'explicitly empowers a policy of multiculturalism to promote understandings of what Canada is, or what we might call, 'Canada's identity'' (2016:p.268). However, this does not necessarily vindicate the immigration practices preceding immigration (profiling and securitization), nor those following it (integration programmes), nor does it testify to their successful implementation. Uberoi's position supports the view of the CMA as a nation-forming narrative, inclusive of minorities and focused on maintaining unity rather than emphasising the many existing differences – at the time of the passing of the Act, as well as in contemporaneity. Nevertheless, CMA has equally been observed as an attempt at blatant pacification not only of the immigrant communities Canada-wide, but also the First Nation Peoples in that it erases colonial and an entire history of inequality and systemic discrimination. Therefore, the idea of the Canadian cultural mosaic represents the same type of grand narrative as the one of the American melting pot, especially bearing in mind the diverse factors deciding on one's eligibility for integration and assimilation. In the Canadian context, burdened by the *silent war* between the English and French, language is one of the primary markers of difference.

Integration and (Impossible) Assimilation

According to Ashcroft and Bevir, '[cultures] are socially constructed in two key senses that make rigid and monolithic accounts of it unsustainable' (2019:p.236), and cultural meanings are 'necessarily abstract generalizations of concrete individual meanings' and, on the other, 'any attempt to identify a culture is itself a form of social construction' (2019:p.236). Therefore, any form of cultural definition

or identification is an act of reduction, which is particularly apparent in the case of immigrants who negotiate between two identities upon their relocation. The tension between the dominant and the marginalised expressions of cultures – the mainstream and all the divergence from it, are contained in the space of cultural negotiation which happens at the level of the individual, in terms of their linguistic expression, familiarity with the social, cultural, political and even economic practices of the receiving country, as well as the factors which are attributed rather than directly expressed, such as race and ethnicity. Whereas nationality and national identity are matters of legal status and personal feeling, a reductive, yet 'stipulative list of features' (Ashcroft & Bevir 2019:p.236) might exist as a checklist for newcomers' eligibility. In retrospect, Canadian multiculturalism has been an effective way to erase, first and foremost, internal differences between the Anglophone and French population, and avoid further division between these two major groups. The inclusive trend of the multicultural policy also encompassed the First Nation Peoples in the political, cultural and social discourse. However, the vision behind Canadian multiculturalism as a mechanism for the accommodation of different (marginalised) groups actually negatively affected all the diverse communities by forcefully imposing unity rather than recognising the inherent differences, and by 'undercutting the distinctive claims of indigenous people' (Ashcroft & Bevir 2019:p.232). Conversely, Brooks (2012) terms cultural diversity 'a subject that is hopelessly complicated, often corrupted by political posturing, and, if one digs very deeply, intellectually exhausting if not indeterminate' (2012:p.17), which appears to be an elaborate way to state that unity, even in theory, often comes at a weighty cost. What appears to be implicit, even counterintuitively, is that even cultural diversity models are based on perceived binarities, whereas the intersectional character of the marginalised groups' oppression exposes additional markers of difference or foreignness (sexuality, religion and other), which highlights the problematics of observing ethnic, national or any other groups as monolithic (Brooks 2012:p.18). Brooks defines culture as, 'the congeries of values, attitudes, behaviour, language, music, art, stories, and other conventions that govern or characterise a society or identifiable group within a society' (2012:p.18), and as a 'signifying system' (2012:p.18), that commands conduct, the psychology and behaviour of the group. The matter of cultural identification and belonging becomes even more complex when it comes to minority groups, or immigrant groups against the backdrop of the dominant culture.

Language as Marker of Foreignness

This paper specifically focuses on language as a marker of foreignness in the process of immigrant integration. Language is concurrently a barrier and a bridge in the immigrant experience as it is the instrument by which the newcomer communicates their existence in the receiving country, and a marker of cultural, social, political and economic difference. Additionally, linguistic features which stereotypically mark ethnicity and race potentially reinforce marginalization, unless they are culturally desirable, and both are determined by a number of factors influenced by history and politics.

Scarino singles out the cultural component, 'frequently comprised a generalised body of knowledge about the target country and its people, ranging from literature and the arts (high culture) to aspects of everyday life' (2010:p.324) as crucial in the students' ability to achieve linguistic fluency, suggesting that a speaker cannot reach the desirable level of fluency without the appropriate level of understanding of the culture, which is in line with Brooks' definition of culture as a signifying system in itself. Instead of learning language as separate from the culture, 'an intercultural orientation to teaching languages seeks the transformation of students' identities in the act of learning' (Scarino, 2010:p.324), which implies a deeper understanding of the social reality of the target culture (Fichtner, 2015), without necessarily relying on the relation of contrast between the native one. In observing cultural traits and specificities as opposites, or against the backdrop of the familiar, there appears a polarization (Kubota, 2003) instead of convergence and adaptation. Direct access to culture, though essential for 'fostering profound cultural understanding' (Kearney, 2010:p.332), appears to yield variable results precisely because of the problem of the approach to culture, and therefore the language as its coextensive descriptor.

Furthermore, in "Culture Pedagogy," Quist observes that '[in] the liberal humanist educational paradigm, culture was (and in certain institutions still is), mostly seen through the prism of the literary canon, the 'high' view of culture, which combines the aesthetic view with the hierarchical view of culture as civilization' (2013:p.23). On the one hand, this exposes the effort to strengthen the national image and maintain a higher cultural standard. However, the standard would imply equally to nationals and foreigners as it becomes one of the requirements on the aforementioned list of stipulations for the membership into the dominant group (assimilation). Such standards appear to be high, or even unachievable, for the immigrant population in the process of integration. Quist also mentions the emergence of intercultural models of teaching and learning that, in the light of globalisation,

take into consideration transnationality, diversity and the concept of the so-called Cosmopolitan Speaker (2013:p.26). However, as the author notes, the concept of cosmopolitanism 'does not preclude the perception of the particularities of ethnic, cultural or national identities' (Quinst, 2013:p.27), which is at the very core of the problematics of language as a marker of foreignness.

Linguistic fluency not only affects one's sense of belonging to the society, but also their socio-economic positioning and prospects. A noticeable or specific accent, suggesting membership to another ethnic or cultural group, as well as mispronunciation or errors, are all markers of difference – for foreigners and internal foreigners alike since language marks social and economic status even within the group of nationals. Moreover, the voice of the foreigner, as the instrument for asserting one's identity, and resist isolation and marginalization, inevitably enters the field of power dynamics present in the target society. It is available to the foreigner in a limited fashion, with restrictions in the bodily expression for the lack of a profound cultural timing, and it is selectively heard by the dominant culture that seeks to categorise it according to the narratives and counternarratives featuring in the public discourse about the minority or marginalised group in question (Meyers, 2000, Ignjatovic, 2024). The analysis of the selection of Souvankham Thammavongsa's short stories from the *How to Pronounce Knife* collection focuses on the manner in which the dominant culture selectively receives the expression of foreignness, how foreignness of immigrants is at once celebrated through multiculturalism as the (now) foundational philosophy of Canada, and commodified for their practical use in the neoliberal capitalist system that favours certain ethnicities for their disciplined subservience.

Selective Hearing, Selective Voicing

Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020) examines the complexities of the linguistic experience of Lao immigrants in Canada, portraying language as both a barrier and a bridge to belonging. This analysis focuses on three stories, "Chick-a-Chee," "How to Pronounce Knife" and "Edge of the World," interrogating the complexities of immigrant integration and the dominant culture's selective engagement with immigrants' foreignness. Through an examination of the linguistic challenges and cultural expectations, the stories reveal the contradictions of contemporary multicultural inclusion, that is, the simultaneous celebration of difference and the reduction of Canadian immigrants to economic assets. Structured around the life stages of the protagonists – preschool, school age and adulthood, the unique phases in the negotiation of identity, and the different stages of acculturation are explored.

"Chick-a-Chee" introduces the immigrant experience in early childhood through the protagonists' attempts to navigate an unfamiliar tradition – Halloween. The young protagonists' linguistic and cultural displacement is illustrated through a phonetic misinterpretation of the phrase trick-or-treat. The ritualistic expression is misheard and mispronounced as Chick-a-chee, which carries broader implications about the difficulty of cultural integration and the potential for exclusion based on the language barrier in the peer group. The Lao immigrant family celebrates Halloween, a foreign holiday, by driving through an affluent neighborhood and observing the opulent decorations.

Humph. Seems like a waste of food to me. (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.51)

The father's remark mirrors his utilitarian and practical worldview shaped by his immigrant struggle, yet the dismissal of the pumpkin-tradition is not just a rejection of what he deems frivolous in the new culture, but a tool of resistance against the new customs. The scepticism contained in the comment reinforces his position as an outsider, a position marked by his language proficiency (pronunciation and accent) and worldview. His encouraging the children to partake in the holiday tradition, alongside their peers, and the explanation about the Chick-a-Chee phrase ensuring they receive sweets, is both an attempt to integrate the children, as well as to vicariously participate in the custom (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.52). The motive of the phrase, albeit its mispronunciation, underscores the significance of language in cultural integration. The children are in the position to test the usefulness of the recently acquired phrase as they stand before their neighbour's house, hoping to be rewarded. The protagonist, frightened and aware of his outsider status, abstains from crying, wanting to protect his younger sibling and accommodate his need for stability. The fact that the child chooses to remain quiet, also highlights silence as a survival strategy within the immigrant family. The emotional labour of the elder sibling, who is forced to preserve the cohesion within the family by reproducing the phrase their father supplied, and the manner in which he faintly whispers the mispronunciation, symbolize the uncertainty of navigating a still foreign and intimidating culture – to the parents as first-generation immigrants, and by extension, the second-generation as well. The hesitation is interrupted by the enthusiastic response of the neighbours, embodying the dominant cultural voice. Through laughter, they label the children's attempt at socialising as 'adoooorable' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.52) and, it is assumed, innocent. The mispronounced phrase marks the children as foreigners, and the affluent white neighbours generously reward the effort for the comic effect it produced (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.53), which leads to the assumption that the dominant voice reinforces the idea that immigrants exist as objects of amusement or

charity, and the children are temporarily included. Although the children's participation in the social ritual appears successful, it exposes a degree of exoticism implicit in the neighbours' enjoyment at observing the process of Asian children learning English. The children, encouraged by the fact that they received more Halloween candy than their white peers, assert their linguistic and cultural identity in school. When an adult at school insists on the 'proper' pronunciation of the phrase 'trick or treat,' the protagonists refuse to concede (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.54), because the validity of their experience – both in terms of learning from their father and outperforming their peers, ironically outweighs linguistic conformity. The children's retention of their father's variation of the phrase is a symbol of inherited knowledge, and at this stage, the authority of the father is proven by the experience of Halloween, and the attempts at school to challenge it fall on deaf ears.

The opening story of the collection, "How to Pronounce Knife," stands in juxtaposition to the innocence and inexperience of the siblings in "Chick-a-Chee," as the protagonist, Joy, comes to understand that her father does not possess the knowledge to accurately navigate life in Canada. Young Joy internalises the incongruities between the inherited and institutional knowledge, and learns that her father's voice holds less power in their new home observing his relationship with language and literacy, as illustrated through his actions upon returning home from work, the manner in which he dresses, the overall attitude towards the new experiences at work, and the inferences she is privy to by the other Laotians of the community. The man kicks off his shoes, symbolically shedding the new work identity, and steps into a space free from expectations of communicative performance and social conformity. Simultaneously, this space allows him to revert back to his Laotian past – the status once held, interests which are no longer of value in Canada, and the like. His handling of the Canadian daily newspaper subverts the expectations, for it is no longer a tool for language acquisition and integration into Canadian society, but an improvised mat on the floor for the family meal, repurposed to mimic the Laotian tradition (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.9). Whereas this does not have to represent an outward, or even quiet, rejection of engagement with the mainstream culture, it does point to the fact that integration remains on the far horizon as the informative purpose of the newspaper is rejected. The child comes home with a note pinned to her chest, which her mother removes and discards carelessly (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.9), for unclear reasons. However, the act uncovers the helplessness of a mother unable to engage with a system that relies on language, which is the very system that shapes her child's experiences in their new home. The note is a symbol of exclusion and the unequally distributed

language capital, as the information about the child's education is inaccessible to her. Communication becomes a currency of power, and fluency and linguistic competence define the scope of one's participation in the society. The note, which the mother cannot read, instructs the parents to dress the child in pink for the school picture day and the girl shows up wearing green. Although the girl is aware of the requirement, she is also aware of the financial precarity in the family, which leads her to withhold the information – to protect the parents' finances, as well as their dignity, at the expense of social exclusion and shame. The colour discrepancy becomes another marker of difference that requires fixing or hiding. Therefore, the class photo serves as a visual metaphor for marginalization as the child is 'seated a little off to the side, with the grade and year sign placed in front of her [...] above that sign, she smiles' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.10). Her smile reads as a symbol for the gratitude expected from immigrants over the acts signalling integration, regardless of their implied or perceived *imperfections*. The immigrant child is included just enough to be in the multicultural image. Further, the smile stands for the child's quiet acceptance of the cultural bargain as she gets to participate in the event, conforming to the problematic erasure of her outward difference.

The most poignant example of linguistic exclusion occurs when Joy seeks help from her father to read the word *knife*, which he pronounces as 'Kah nnn-eye-ffff' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.11). Using his pronunciation in class reveals the profound social and emotional cost of linguistic difference, and Joy must endure the intervention of the annoyed classmate, a girl who objectively insists on the correct pronunciation of the word. The episode serves an as example of the impatience and dismissal of linguistic experience of immigrants, and the remark 'It's knife! The k is silent' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.11), followed by an eyeroll, teaches Joy that such mistakes are grounds for ridicule. Concurrently, the comment itself is an unconscious act of marking Joy as the class outsider. The classroom becomes a space in which Joy's cultural identity is exposed as inferior, albeit the insistence on cultural diversity, and even the teacher – a young Asian woman who subtly attempts to protect Joy from extreme exclusion and shame, reinforces Joy's understanding of the mechanism by ultimately rewarding her underperformance out of sympathy.

> '"It's in the front! The first one! It should have a sound!" and then she screamed as if they had taken some important thing away.' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.12)

Joy's insistence that the letter should be pronounced is an act of resistance against the perceived attack against her father's perspective, and the outburst reflects the fear at realising her family's engagement with Canada is inadequate (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.11), and the mispronunciation remains central to her identity. Finally,

the silent letter becomes a symbol of institutionalised silencing as Joy refuses to ignore something threatening that clearly looms around her family. Joy's decision to withhold the new linguistic insight from her father when she brings home the reward, signals the beginning of her integration, and potentially her realisation of the unpromising future for her parents. The withholding is an attempt at preserving her father's sense of dignity that might crumble at the realisation that, in their new home, he might no longer hold the authority of knowledge being unable to offer the basic linguistic resources. This act of compassion underscores silence as a survival strategy, similar to that of many other Thammavongsa's characters in the collection. However, it notably remains a protective strategy employed within this immigrant family as Joy moves from being a passive recipient of her parent's knowledge, to an active subject engaging in cultural and linguistic negotiation – a change both empowering and isolating. Beginning to recognise the inherent power dynamics, Joy understands she must rely on her own ability to navigate the system.

"Edge of the World" collects the protagonist's recollections of experiences with her mother, particularly the moments of linguistic development and cultural dissonance. The narrative trajectory, which follows the protagonist's life through childhood, school and adulthood, offers an insight into the process of acculturation through Canadian institutions. It builds upon the earlier narratives of children first embracing their inherited knowledge, then reaching the realisation they cannot fully rely on their parents to survive in the new society, and moves into an awareness of what has to be left behind in the process of assimilation. The protagonist shares how her mother learns English watching soap operas and uses the new phrases light-heartedly in communication with her husband (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.61). Though playful, her actions reveal an unspoken tension mirroring the painful adjustments that immigrant families must make. The mother manages to use the language at satisfactory degrees enabling her daily functioning, but is unable to form meaningful connections, which leaves a longing to be heard and accepted, which the (then) child understands. The protagonist's memories reveal failed attempts to win over the friendship of the cashiers at Goodwill by offering small acts of kindness, signalling the need for a space of belonging in a society that largely remains indifferent or unwelcoming (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.63). The mother's lack of verbal assertion, her hesitation and her silent questioning of whether the women like and accept her, are understood as a quiet yearning for affirmation and her inability to voice this need in a manner that is socially coherent and acceptable. In retrospect, the protagonist realises that the moments of shared family intimacy over simple books with very few words and the experience of the new language

(Thammavongsa, 2020:p.64), in fact represented her mother's attempts at finding comfort and connection. It is through storytelling that her mother attempted to divert the sense of alienation and dislocation. Yet, her efforts to adapt to the new environment result in the departure from the family, which can be seen as the culmination of emotional and cultural dissonance that permeates the protagonist's mother's life in Canada, as if the old identity and the new one could not coexist within the family unit. The child's father shares the sense of alienation and feels dehumanised being 'barked at' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.61) in English at work, which is a motif pervading the collection, present particularly in the story "A Far Distant Thing" as a shared experience of male Asian immigrants. In "Edge of the World," the father's marginalization is achieved by means of the gradual corrosion of his dignity, as he is unable to keep up with the speed and intensity of English spoken by those around him. He protests against this treatment through his mockery of the 'Yes, sir' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.62) phrase, which he intentionally uses without the traditional connotations of submission. Through this act of linguistic resistance, he reclaims a semblance of agency, silently rebelling against the system that seeks to reduce him to a subordinate figure. However, the act itself being symbolic and inconsequential, the child draws conclusions about her parents' relationship with language, and therefore their socio-cultural potential in the Canadian society. By extension, and by virtue of identification, the child extrapolates the scope of her own possibilities, which is a common motif in the collection. In "A Far Distant Thing," the female protagonist accedes to her father's conviction that immigrants only remain within the domain of menial workers, and in "You're So Embarrassing," the protagonist – the daughter of a factory worker, chooses to completely sever ties with her mother as the initial figure of identification, for fear of remaining an outsider. The latter reveals a level of symbolism in rejecting the Asian mother and her language, and changing her name in order to build an entirely novel identity and fully assimilate.

In "Edge of the World," concerns are raised over the child's use their mother tongue, as if the active memory of the motherland could potentially impede assimilation. The child is both expected, and peer-pressured, to adopt the language and norms of the majority, despite her mother's pride in her ability to speak and understand Lao (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.62). The failure to socialise with other children, as she does not initially understand the language or the rules of the games they play, creates a necessity to formulate a different sense of self and identity, that at this point, seems to erase the one transferred to her by her parents. The mother's reassurance that '[maybe] it's something they learned at school. You'll learn too,

when you go' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.63), suggests the acceptance of the inevitability of assimilation.

> 'That one doesn't go there. Try another one.' When one fit, she'd say, 'Every piece belongs somewhere, doesn't it?' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.64)

The protagonist's hope to gain a sense of belonging is nurtured by her mother's apparent optimism and underlying belief that, despite the odds, each person has their rightful place in the multicultural puzzle of Canada – a symbol of the family's reconstruction of their identities, which need to be pieced together from various disjointed elements: memories from their homeland, fragments of the new language, and the new experiences in Canada. The collision of inherited knowledge and new learned experiences is observed by the protagonist in her mother's sources of knowledge, the experiences of war, violence and survival, as well as the fact that these would have to be somehow sacrificed, or compartmentalised when it becomes evident that assimilation involves a silencing of the identities that do not carry any weight in the new home. In the story, this is symbolically represented in the protagonist's not being able to recall her mother's voice.

> 'Often, I dream of seeing her face, still young like she was then, and although I can't remember the sound of my mother's voice, she is always trying to tell me something, her lips wrapped around shapes I can't hear.' (Thammavongsa, 2020:p.66)

The fully assimilated protagonist loses the memory of her mother's voice just as she loses the memory of the mother tongue, which is almost entirely replaced by the language of the culture she has assimilated. Decades later, the protagonist is still grieving the loss, or absence of her mother, and symbolically all which was connected to her – the mother tongue, ethnic and cultural memory, as well as the transgenerational memories that are now inaccessible, due to the mother's absence, as well as due to their being immaterial in Canada, ultimately, her only home.

Conclusion

The integration process, far from a neutral path to inclusion, becomes a mechanism of normalisation of foreignness. As Ameeriar (2015:p.470) insightfully observes, 'classes for foreign professionals do not involve antiracism training but rather training in how to make oneself into someone who will not be discriminated against'. Here, integration is not about mutual recognition or systemic reform, but about self-regulation. The immigrant must become legible within dominant frame-

works not by challenging discrimination, but by avoiding it through performative acquiescence. These programmes and discourses do not dismantle exclusionary practices, but repackage it. Immigrants are observed as contaminants and disruptors of an idealised, pure national space. This framing is gendered, racialised, and culturalized, producing immigrants not as contributors, but as threats to a homogenous national identity. Through ideology, the immigrant is taught to internalise and reproduce passive behaviour: to ignore, tolerate, and accept exclusion, often under the illusion that this is the cost of eventual inclusion. Success, then, is defined by how seamlessly one can suppress markers of difference.

This suppression is deeply tied to the broader political category of 'foreignness,' which, as Dhamoon and Abu-Laban (2009:p.166) argue, operates as a 'constant and long-standing marker of racialised Otherness.' Foreignness, like race, is not innate, but constructed and shaped by historical, political and other discourses. This symbolic category is central to the management of national identity and citizenship, and it functions through re-racialization, re-nationalization, and gendered exclusion, often under the guise of neutral integration processes. Integration thus becomes less about inclusion and more about qualifying for conditional belonging. Immigrants are repeatedly disqualified from full participation in the dominant culture not because they lack the skills or desire, but because they are perceived as fundamentally foreign. The symbolic other, embodied by the foreigner, serves to stabilise the identity of the in-group, positioning the immigrant in opposition to the normative citizen in the same manner as the in-group establishes the relation between insiders and outsiders. The distinctions of otherness are operationalised through policy, discourse, and pedagogy, and the dominant group seizes the power to define and evaluate the boundaries of belonging, while those assumed as outsiders must constantly prove, perform, and negotiate their right to be included.

"Chick-a-Chee" illustrates immigrant's conditional participation as based on the performance of sameness, and the ability to decode and reproduce the dominant norms. The story encapsulates systemic exclusion behind performative acceptance and the notion that belonging must be earned through self-erasure. "How to Pronounce Knife" reflects on the pedagogy enforcing the dominant culture in a seemingly multicultural society, and exposes the mechanism by which diverging linguistic identities are met with impatience and ridicule, and how awareness of language, and therefore linguistic purity, is imposed as a marker of belonging, among other. In broader terms, this particular story reflects on how classrooms that purport to prepare immigrants for participation often become sites of assimilation rather than critical engagement. What is framed as language acquisition is in fact a

form of behavioural conditioning, one that reinforces passivity and silences dissent. In "Edge of the World," the protagonist's journey from expressing and valuing her cultural identity to embracing silence as the fundamental existential condition, culminates in the actual and symbolic loss of her mother. The transformation, shaped by institutionalised discourses, illustrates the emotional cost of assimilation: the loss of language, memory and maternal connection in exchange for cultural belonging. By being presented with conformity as inclusion and silence as success, immigrants are conditioned to accept their marginal status as a prerequisite for legitimacy, which is a carefully managed system of containment, disguised as opportunity.

Thammavongsa's collection, *How to Pronounce Knife*, exposes the paradoxical nature of multiculturalism as an instrument for simultaneous emphasis and erasure of difference. Multicultural frameworks provide a platform for diverse identities and cultural expressions to be acknowledged and incorporated into the mainstream society, but only under the terms of the dominant group. The exploration of Canadian multiculturalism, as represented in contemporary fiction, reveals blatant attempts to flatten complex identities into acceptable, stereotypical representations, rendering them harmless to the dominant or ideal perception of Canadianness. They remain visible and recognisable in the multicultural mosaic, yet non-threatening and deprived of their supposed disruptive potential.

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UTIŠAVANJE RAZLIKA U ZBIRCI *KAKO SE IZGOVARA REČ NOŽ*, AUTORKE SUVANKAM TAMAVONGSE

Rezime

Ovaj rad bavi se procesom integracije u multikulturalnoj Kanadi putem analize jezika kao obeležja različitosti u zbirci kratkih priča *Kako se izgovara reč nož*, kanadske autorke Suvankam Tamavongse. Analiza polazi od premise da jezik, kao sistem koji sadrži obeležja kulture, za migrante istovremeno predstavlja barijeru i sredstvo integracije u novu zajednicu. Stoga, glasovi migranata u procesu integracije postaju i način dostizanja željenog identiteta i osnova za marginalizaciju. Uvodna poglavlja otvaraju diskusiju o multikulturalizmu kao zvaničnoj politici Kanade, i o praktičnim implikacijama multikulturalizma kao sistema koji implicitno naglašava različitosti, posebno one lingvističke. U nastavku je predstavljena analiza izabranih kratkih priča koje ilustruju mehanizme koji nastoje da obrišu individualne razlike, uključujući i jezičke. Tamavongsa u svojim pričama opisuje život i iskustva migranata iz Laosa, definišući multikulturalizam kao sistem koji nameće uslove i granice njihovog učešća u kanadskom identitetu. Pažljivo čitanje ovih kratkih priča otkriva da uspešnost procesa integracije migranata zavisi od ličnog potiskivanja obeležja različitosti i performativnog prilagođavanja kulturološkim i lingvističkim okvirima dominantne kulture. Tako autorka predstavlja proces integracije svojih likova kao oblik asimilacije pod pritiskom društva koje nastoji da migrante svede na prihvatljive i stereotipne reprezentacije, i to po cenu narušavanja njihovih ličnih odnosa i kulturoloških identiteta. Zaključna razmatranja sažimaju diskusiju o multikulturalizmu kao sistemu koji selektivno naglašava i briše razlike.

▸ ***Ključne reči***: asimilacija, različitost, migrantska književnost, integracija, multikulturalizam, Suvankam Tamavongsa.