

Immigrant Subjecthood in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*

The introductory part of the paper discusses the concept of subjecthood and relates it to the contemporary Canadian immigration policy and the deep-rooted ethnocentric and racial discriminatory practices against non-citizens – migrants, immigrants, refugees and illegal immigrants. The specific focus of the paper is the female immigrant subjecthood as represented in the collection of stories *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020) by Souvankham Thammavongsa – born in a Lao refugee camp in Thailand, but brought up in Canada. As the collection progresses, the seemingly disconnected and (extra)ordinary narratives of individual characters start to appear as a single narrative of generations of Lao refugees. Moreover, the fact that Thammavongsa herself came to Canada in the period when it received the greatest number of Southeast Asian refugees suggests that perhaps the material for these stories does not belong solely to fiction, but the accounts of her countrymen and women. Moreover, the manner in which the author manages to bring together these individual accounts into a narrative of the entire group by weaving threads of the shared experiences of discrimination – racial, ethnic and gendered, alienation, isolation, hope and hopelessness, cultural differences and the conflict between the new identity and the old, among other things, represents invaluable contribution to immigrant literature. Therefore, the second part of the paper discusses the intersectional nature of discrimination of female immigrants. The concluding remarks reflect on the impact of the implicit discriminatory practices against immigrants, and particularly women.

Keywords: immigrant literature, female subjecthood, contemporary Canadian literature, gender discrimination.

1. Introduction

Souvankham Thammavongsa's 2020 collection of short fiction, *How to Pronounce Knife*, at first glance, offers fragments of diverse challenges of immigrants in Canada. However, upon closer examination, these fragments from the ordinary or unusual lives of immigrants, expose the complex nature of their collective experience. Thammavongsa's perceptive study of the cultural dislocation of individuals and families refrains from judgment or criticism, but provides a poignant perspective from the margins. Whether by design, or by virtue of realist and insightful writing, Thammavongsa paints a detailed picture of Asian-Canadian subjecthood within the Canadian

landscape, filled with intricate characters representing this *model* community. Sometimes this picture is in contrast to the *Canadianness* they strive for, and sometimes, it is a phenomenological exploration of the qualities and downfalls of their expatriate circumstances.

Although Canada is typically observed as one of the few Western countries keeping its doors open to immigration, its economy-based policies tell the story of a bait-and-switch practice in which expertise, high degree of immigrants' education or skill, become devalued upon arrival. On the one hand, the devaluation occurs at the level of institutions only provisionally recognizing qualifications in the visa-issuing process, and then demanding additional fees and further education at the expense of the immigrant. Canada is advertised as the opposite of its neighbor, the United States – in its liberal policies and integration projects aimed at non-citizens, endorsing the vague narrative of multiculturalism considering that it remains one of few Western countries to grant permanent residence. However, the securitization of the visa issuing processes becoming more complex, especially since early 2000s (Scoppio & Winter 2021: 92) suggests the opposite. Canadian government tendentiously modifies the immigration narrative – from the liberal one, relying on aversive racism maintaining that Canada is a nation built by immigrants, to the right-wing narratives that use the minorities as scapegoats for topical issues. In 2023, Canada is facing a housing crisis due to the global crisis, the price rises due to poor public policies and private-public partnership deals gone awry after the COVID-19 pandemics. However, the public discourse ascribes it to the rise of immigrant and refugee population, suggesting the tendency to activate the anti-immigration narrative with the purpose of shifting blame onto the designated scapegoat – the (immigrant) subject. Moreover, as Scoppio and Winter (2021) note, the revival of anti-immigration narratives, as well as general xenophobia, all find roots in the historically racist Canadian immigration policies (91; Williams et al. 2022: 22). Williams et al. (2022) highlight that anti-Asian discrimination not only still exists, but is evidenced by the 98 anti-Asian hate crimes recorded in 2020, in the “Anti-Asian Hate Crime Capital of North America” – Vancouver (22).

The 1960s mark the beginning of Asian illegal immigration to Canada, but the number of immigrants, or refugees, from Southeast Asia started to rise only a few decades later. Price's digression to the late nineteenth century practices of the Canadian government limiting female immigration and family reunification by means of head-tax (2013: 632) reminds us of the historical proximity of the blatantly racist measures. According to Troper, the “remarkably constant” (1993: 255) economy-based immigration policy after the Second World War, and the endeavor to steadily model the social and power structures in Canada, is rendered all the more complex for its

consideration of factors of race, ethnicity (1993: 255), but also gender. Price reminds us that “over 1 million European refugees came to Canada after the Second World War while Asian refugees continued to be excluded” (2013: 637). Canada has historically managed to overpass its ideology of liberalism and multiculturalism by redefining it according to its own necessity, while simultaneously maintaining mechanisms of oppression against marginalized groups.

2. Immigrant Subjecthood

The term subjecthood appears in different contexts in postcolonial studies to describe the inequality of status between non-citizens and citizens – a relation comparable to that of imperial subjects from the colonial times. Devyani Prabhat notes that in colonial times subjecthood represented “a relationship of allegiance and protection” (2020: 181) – a precursor of sorts to citizenship. However, this status could be revoked, or “deactivated without much administrative or judicial engagement” (Prabhat 2020: 181). What Prabhat particularly emphasizes is the impact of global migration over the course of centuries on the political understanding and implementation of subjecthood. In other words, immigrant subjecthood has experienced a cosmetic redefinition in terms of the relaxing of restrictions pertaining to race and ethnicity in the previous century, granting equal political agency to all (now-citizens). However, in practice, immigrant subjecthood is primarily defined by economic factors, and further shaped by the national, global, historical and socio-political circumstances and discourses. These factors outline the space and scope of agency of the minority group to act to improve their living conditions, as well as to counter discriminatory policies or behaviors. Nevertheless, Prabhat notices that national citizenship in former British colonies – Australia and Canada, although on paper freed from ethnocentrism and racial bias, continues to reflect structural inequalities in reality (2020: 186).

2.1 Colorblind until It Becomes Exotic

John Harles’ qualitative sociological research, published in 1997, explores the adopted attitudes of Laotian immigrants, and discusses the concepts of integration and assimilation in terms of whether these men and women truly reach the point of assimilation. Assimilation, Harles says, “indicates conformity to the pre-existing cultural norms – political norms included of a dominant social group. It nears its endpoint when outsiders come to identify most closely with the imperatives of that group and are accepted as equal participants in group life. That said, assimilation appears an unlikely prospect for newcomers to Canada” (1997: 713). What Harles does

not clearly state is that it would be completely impossible for the newcomers to fully identify with the pre-existing cultural norms simply because these have historically been racist, and labeling them multicultural in contemporaneity does not erase history. Contrary to Harles, Williams et al. comment on the endorsement of “the false discourse of multiculturalism” as a contingency “to validate their insouciance towards reports of racism made by Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (BIPOC)” (2022: 17).

According to Harles, the reason immigrants do not fully assimilate lies in the “ambiguity of Canadianness” (1997: 713) – the vague nature of the concept, which to him suggests “that conceptually there is little for immigrants to assimilate into, and no certain focus for their political identity” (1997: 713). If Canada cannot reach a consensus in terms of the core values of their national identity, then it is impossible for an immigrant to absorb and internalize these values. However, the idea of multiculturalism only became the Canadian narrative once it could no longer deny the presence of diversity. Harles emphasizes that “multiculturalism is the quintessential Canadian value” (1997: 715) and one that distinguishes [Canadians] from the melting pot of the United States” (Harles 1997: 715). Harles’ saturated definition surprisingly dismisses a history of injustice that is often neglected in terms of immigration politics in the context of the North American neighbors. Canada often evades criticism for the deplorable treatment of Asian immigrants during most of the twentieth century due to the American neighbor’s atrocious war record with Japan. In Canada during the Second World War, Price underscores “not only were all Japanese Canadians uprooted from their homes but their property and worldly goods were seized and sold off” (2013: 635), which was not the case in the United States. This extends to Canada disallowing Japanese men to join the army, their failed attempts at deportation and unwelcoming post-war return in 1949 (Price 2013: 635), which stands in contrast to the United States’ treatment. In other words, history and contemporary circumstances disprove the veracity of the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism.

Perhaps unintentionally racist, Harles labels Laotian immigrants as “clearly exotic – the sort of immigrants who might be expected to have the most difficulty adapting to the new society, and so the most unlikely to become integrated” (1997: 717), because they arrived as refugees and as such had no choice. Additionally, “the urgency of flight not having allowed much premeditation” (1997: 717), Harles sees these people as “[exhibiting] a heightened gratitude for the sanctuary of the host society”, but “an ambivalent commitment to Canada” (1997: 717). Harles’ impression of “guarded enthusiasm for Canada” (1997: 717) suggests that Laotians are simply too “exotic” to understand the complex beauty of the country they resettled in, despite some of the respondents’ comments that they would give their life for

their new country, etc. It seems that Harles observes Laotians as opportunists, considering only “material well-being” (1997: 730) as factor in their satisfaction with Canada, which prevents their assimilation. Harles writes this in 1997. Williams et al. note that “Canada has been celebrated as an ideal inclusive nation, yet this fails to take into account the actual lived experiences of the 11.5 million persons of colour and indigenous persons who make up nearly 30% of all Canadians” (17).

Exploring the line of thought such as Harles’ exoticization of Asians, Gordon Pon (2000) problematizes the concept of the Asian “model minority” as a stereotypical representation of the “Asian Canadian Youth as an exotic, collectivist, and uniformly successful group” (277). Harles’ position precisely reflects that stereotypical attitude, although Harles hardly considers Laotians as members of the model minority. Harles’ attitudes and conclusions are the product of divisive Eurocentric generalizations, and show how prevalent they are in the academic and other discourses.

2.2 No Woman, No Cry

Lisa Kaida’s (2015) research on the immigrant women’s economic contributions to the family in terms of its capacity to overcome poverty (486) is based on the data that 43% of immigrants in Canada faced poverty in 2002 and 2003 (486), although the majority were highly educated. This data exposes the incongruities behind the merit-based narrative and the advertising of Canadian liberal narrative. Whereas Canada seeks exclusively highly educated or skilled professionals, it also consistently and purportedly fails to provide employment based on the immigrants’ qualifications, forcing them into low-paid positions. Moreover, gender becomes a factor in the passivization of immigrant individuals in terms of tacitly encouraging the patriarchal breadwinner family model according to which women’s dependence on the male spouse’s wage restricts them to the private sphere, and into minimal income, which is highly aided by the restrictively managed labor market (Kaida 2015: 488). Kaida’s research finds that less than 30% of non-employed low-income immigrant women overcome poverty after four years since arrival, but 63% of the employed do (2015: 498). However, whereas immigrant women from Europe assessed as poverty-stricken in the period of two years after coming to Canada usually overcome it by the mark of four years, non-European women are significantly less likely (Kaida 2015: 498). In other words, race, ethnicity and gender *are* the crucial vulnerability factors for immigrants, and especially women.

2.3 Don't Look Back in Anger

Lalaie Ameeriar's (2015) study marks the "easing of immigration regulations" (467) in Canada as one of the reasons of the market overflowing with professionally skilled workers, but also underscores the unwillingness of the government to provide suitable employment. The foreign-trained professionals become "subjects [...] visible as the taxicab drivers and cashiers in North American urban centers who were once doctors and lawyers" (Ameeriar 2015: 468). Interestingly, dealing specifically with nursing, "a feminized profession, understood as women's work" (Ameeriar 2015: 468), Ameeriar lists the occupation as one of few that do not require extensive additional (re)education in Canada (2015: 468). What is required are specific trainings that Ameeriar deems another form of "colonialization" (2015: 468) by means of which the government integrates the female worker in the workspace that reproduces not only blatantly gendered, but also "racialized notions of femininity deemed appropriate for immigrant women in Western settings" (2015: 468). Ameeriar notices distinct effects of these Canadian trainings prescribing an understanding of race and gender through pedagogical techniques, while endorsing the stereotypical model of the passive Asian woman (2015: 469).

The teaching of subservience has the purpose of passivization through repression of negative emotions, such as anger, which is essentially a reaction to "perceptions of unfairness of the situation, and familiarity of a threat" (Brader and Marcus qtd. in Utych 2018: 441). Yet, political engagement of immigrants is countered directly (strict legislative measures, imposition of standards immigrants have difficulty meeting for long-term or permanent residence, etc.), and indirectly through the subject performative. This is to say, through social reeducation. The granting of residence or family reunification, which is a particularly relevant factor considering most immigrants come from economically impoverished or war-stricken regions seeking economic stability, the immigrants' reeducation represents the beginning of the integration process. On the one hand, the anti-immigrant narrative serves the purpose of subtly preventing vertical mobility of newcomers by creating a negative attitude of potential employers, and on the other, immigrants are *reeducated* into passivity. The mechanism exploits the fact that the great majority of permanent residence seekers – immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants, face conditions of poverty, language incompetence, social isolation and difficulties in getting their degree or education recognized by the Canadian institution, or getting an education. Therefore, these individuals, aware of negative attitudes and anti-immigration sentiments, acquiesce to any form of orientation in order to survive the challenging period (Kaida 2015). The process of dehumanization and reduction to a subject is achieved through legislation, education, economy

and labor market demands, as well as the public discourse that generates “contempt” (Utych 2018: 442) in nationals against immigrant groups. On the example of nurses Ameeriar discusses, “pedagogies of affect” shape and modulate not only the “micro context of the training sessions but also [...] the macro context of neoliberal capitalism” (Ameeriar 2015: 469) in Canada. The performative of the immigrant is no different from that of the dispossessed. Butler and Athanasiou notice that there exist “processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability (2013: 2), and what better place to execute such processes than classrooms. These processes shape the *ideal* immigrant in the course of their mission to establish economic stability in the new country, through integration programs. As Ameeriar puts it, “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” (2015: 470) – a *successfully integrated* subject. The general discourse positions immigrants as contaminants of the otherwise *pure* environment and promotes attitudes based on gendered, racial, cultural, religious, sexual or other differences. This conditioning by means of ideology teaches the immigrant about the subject performative in which they ignore, tolerate and accept dehumanization, but reproduce the desired modes of passive behavior gladly.

The chapter that follows discusses the selection of stories from Thammavongsa’s collection *How to Pronounce Knife*, exploring the concept of immigrant subjecthood with the emphasis on the marginalized position of the female subject.

3. The Silent Figures

Using distancing language to reflect the innocence and simplicity of the protagonist’s perception, in “How to Pronounce Knife,” Thammavongsa relates the account of an elementary school pupil – Joy, a Lao native who just started life in Canada and finds herself *figuratively* stuck at the pronunciation of the word *knife*. The first story of the collection serves as the interpretative key, but also as the binding glue of the narratives that follow. These are stories of the Lao refugee and immigrants’ shared experiences in Canada that relate contrasting outcomes.

Joy, or “the child” (Thammavongsa 2020: 4), outwardly does not seem to face any insurmountable challenges in navigating her new school-life in Canada for she shows great fortitude against ridicule and intentional or unintentional, perhaps perceived exclusion. However, her perceptions and choices expose the connection between the displacement of her parents, their

incapacity to integrate successfully into the Canadian society, and her own position – wedged between choosing loyalty to her family or being like other (Canadian) children. Focalized from the position of Joy, the environment of the school is defamiliarized to uncover a highly competitive and restrictive environment in which the teacher, Miss Choi, perhaps sensitized to *difference* by virtue of her own ethnicity, must find ways to reward the girl without exposing her reasons. Joy attends regular classes with English speaking children, and potentially predominantly white. The novelty of her experience of Canada can be inferred from the description of “a big shiny black car with a V and a W holding each other inside a circle” (Thammavongsa 2020: 8) – one belonging to the mother of a “yellow-haired” girl who “was like everyone else in the class, reading loud and clear, winning prizes” (Thammavongsa 2020: 8). In an incident when the girl is asked to read a text aloud, she fails to pronounce the word *knife* properly, and the yellow-haired girl corrects her. Joy does not receive the prize like the other children who have little problems reading. The matter of fundamental inequity motivates Miss Choi to an unexpected gesture when she invites the girl to choose her own reward from the drawer after her classmates leave the room. However, whereas the girl clearly understands it as a gesture of pity, that night her father is “delighted” because the pronunciation he taught his daughter won *something* (Thammavongsa 2020: 9).

“It’s kahneyff.” (Thammavongsa 2020: 7)

The child observes her mother as silent and invisible. She is the one discarding notes from school as scraps of paper, and one always present in the elaborate descriptions of meals combining the cheapest meat the butcher could cut. The father is presented as a former-artist-now-worm-picker father, emphasizing the incongruities Joy sees in their partial experiences of the Canadian reality, and their old selves. Observing her parents crushed between their talk of past lives in Laos, and existential dread since moving to Canada, she decides to remain loyal and protective by consistently failing to notify her father about the notes from school her mother keeps throwing away. The painter who does not paint anymore, is the only one of them who can read and understand English, though evidently poorly, and as he speaks Lao at home, in a T-shirt that says “LAOS” (Thammavongsa 2020: 5), he advises his daughter: “Don’t speak Lao and don’t tell anyone you are Lao. It’s no good to tell people where you’re from” (Thammavongsa 2020: 4). Bullied at school for bringing meals of a particular smell, Joy gradually becomes aware that the points of difference between her and her classmates are not merely in the hair or skin color, but an entirely different reality. In Joy’s Canadian reality, the Volkswagen logo is as new as the elegantly dressed mother of the yellow-haired classmate, and both represent something she does not *know* as

normal. Yet, she strongly resists changing allegiances. In her class photo, “[in] this scene of pink and sparkles and matching purses and black bow ties and pressed collars, she saw she was not like the others” (Thammavongsa 2020: 5), Joy sacrifices her own need for social acceptance, fails to tell her parents about the particular financial demands of the school for photo-day, and remains the only girl wearing something other than pink – her green jogging suit.

In contrast, in “You Are So Embarrassing,” a mother desperately stalks her estranged daughter in front of her workplace (Thammavongsa 2020: 119) and the sidewalk across from her house. Although there seems to be no burning conflict that prevents the two from communicating, the now elderly woman experiences major life challenges, including a stroke, without notifying the daughter. However, the plot of this story is not a Munroesque tale of boundaries between children and parents, but rather one of internalized racism and cultural values that takes the cutting of the umbilical cord to an extreme. The daughter of the factory worker and now seasonal planter disengages from the relationship due to the conflict between her Lao identity as Chantakad, and the Canadian – Celine (Thammavongsa 2020: 123). Chantakad’s mother, mysteriously uncrippled by the stroke that caused one side of the face to droop (Thammavongsa 2020: 120), her body weathered by the seasonal work and age, quietly acknowledges the disconnection from the daughter she raised, for she cannot meet Celine’s standards. In fact, she accepts her daughter’s disloyal withdrawal as she understands that the prerequisite for Celine’s existence and happiness in Canada is the severing of ties. The embarrassment of being affiliated with a factory worker in this narrative addresses another dimension of the intersectional character of discrimination – of immigrants and women. Chantakad’s awareness of race and ethnicity, as well as class, begins in high school when she forbids her mother to enter the premises lest she be seen with someone who does not fit in with the image she has constructed as Celine (Thammavongsa 2020: 123–124). Whereas Chantakad’s identity implicitly disagrees with perceived Canadianness, Celine – the product of internalized racism, masks *difference* by creating the desired persona. It is as if she hears the advice of Joy’s father (Thammavongsa 2020: 4). When her mother observes her house from the sidewalk across the street, she notices her in a domestic role – “framed by the kitchen window like a small photograph” (Thammavongsa 2020: 120), but embraced by her husband, therefore Canada, and apparently content.

“That’s who I am now. I’m Celine. And can you *not* talk to my friends, please? You are so embarrassing.” (Thammavongsa 2020: 4)

This *happiness*, comes at the cost of her mother’s absence – a decision neither forced onto Chantakad/Celine, nor opposed by the mother. It is the

implicit understanding of the social (and economic) workings that prevent the mother from expressing any sort of anger or disdain against the exclusion she suffers. In comparison to still inexperienced Joy, we can assume that Chantakad is aware of the impact of racial and ethnic *difference*, as well as conscious of the negative narrative and potential for discriminatory exclusion. However, whereas for Joy the ridicule does not outweigh loyalty to parents and their capacities, the thirteen-year-old Celine already chooses to accept her subjecthood in rejecting the un-assimilated mother. Curiously, Joy is ridiculed at school, during lunch, and Chantakad/Celine protects this space from her mother's intrusion for *it* is the space in which the ideologies of the normative are expressed, taught and internalized (see Williams et al. 2022: 17–18).

The *embarrassing* mother, Joy's father and the factory worker in "A Far Distant Thing" – the parents in the stories, all express awe-inspiring resilience in the face of existential adversity, one that persists well into their old age. Their shared theme revolves around the fortitude with which they accept Canadian subjecthood, although it is based on existential fear, absolute compliance with the circumstances surrounding their work environments, exclusion and sacrifice for the *next* generation. Drawing on insight of their own repressive culture and past instability, and despite the memory of different opportunities and achievements discontinued by war or other adverse circumstances, they find the security of second-class citizenship, sub-par standard in their new country as a source of gratitude, though in varying degrees. The realization of the injustice does not drive them into rejecting the prescribed performative since their limited options allow no space for political action, engagement and risks. As Joy relates it:

"She listened as her father worried about his pay and his friends and how they were all making their living here in this new country. He said his friends, who were educated and had great jobs in Laos, now found themselves picking worms or being managed by pimple-faced teenagers. They'd had to begin all over again, as if the life they led before didn't count." (Thammavongsa 2020: 4)

In "A Far Distant Thing" Thammavongsa gives a deeper insight into the intersectional nature of discrimination against the Asian community and the overall structural inequality. Here, the Lao girl is around the same age as Chantakad/Celine when she starts noticing the difference between herself and friend, Katie – white. Whereas their respective parents, the girl's father and Katie's mother, both work at a nail polish factory, their career trajectories diverge significantly and intensify the class differences between the two families, and the girls by extension. Thammavongsa's character briefly relates her father's utter incomprehension at the abuse he experiences at work – being called a thief for accepting to work more efficiently and for lower

wages during a difficult period at the company (Thammavongsa 2020: 154). The account of the disconnection between the two friends due to her mother's promotion and improvement of financial status follows. Living in the same building – the girl (nameless) and Katie experience the “tree-lined street with well-manicured lawns and long, winding driveways that led up to three-story houses” (Thammavongsa 2020: 152), and the block of buildings the where they live different realities. Whereas the girl's reality is one in which mold on the walls “[looks] like a field of black dandelions” (Thammavongsa 2020: 152), the apartment of Katie's one-parent family is somewhere above, with a balcony view. Whereas Katie's mother receives promotion at the factory (for reasons unspecified), the girl's father's eagerness to work and progress from cleaner to an efficient line-worker attracts wrath, verbal and physical outbursts of the collective. The narrative of immigrants stealing the nationals' work is present, even though the man does not understand a word of it, literally. Poignantly, the protagonist-narrator's account of this childhood episode with Katie, which ends as the latter gifts her a dictionary her Lao family could not possibly afford, positions the two girls as extensions of their respective parents. Years later, the girl-woman recognizes Katie at a crosswalk, “assured, shoulders back, and looking straight ahead [...] wearing a dark blazer with a pencil skirt and carrying a briefcase [...] stretched out and grown, powerful, in charge” (Thammavongsa 2020: 161). Yet, she refrains from approaching the former friend because of the shame of her “uniform and [her] work shoes” (Thammavongsa 2020: 161), the fact that her father was waiting for her at home – to have dinner, in the same basement apartment. In other words, whereas Katie has moved and moved up the ladder, the girl replicated her father's life-formula – working as a cleaner, probably in the same factory.

The inequity contained in this story is disturbing for the description of its long-term crippling effects even with second-generation immigrants. By extension, the narrative of the (nameless) sister from “Mani Pedi” stands as a poignant example of oppression through different female identities – as an Asian, woman and wife. In most of the stories in the collection touching upon the concept of womanhood and gender roles, the wives and mothers remain silent. They are either somehow removed from the foreground of the narrators' lives since their agency seems insignificant, or they leave the family. The presence of the sister of Raymond in “Mani Padi” not only stands out for her significance as the sole financial contributor in the family, but also for her particular frustrating adherence to subjecthood on different levels. As the owner of a cosmetic establishment, “Bird Spa and Salon [...] Nails! Cheap! Cheap!” (Thammavongsa 2020: 59), she supplies both the economic stability to her husband and children, and performs the gender roles assigned to women in the family dynamics. Raymond, the protagonist of the story,

finds himself between jobs after his boxing career reaches a *knockout* point. After several weeks, the dramatic pleas of his sister (Thammavongsa 2020: 60) to work for her instead of scooping ice cream at the local mall, results in Raymond's taking the receptionist-cleaner position at the salon. Driven by love and the promise to their refugee parents (now both dead), she teaches Raymond how to do manicure (Thammavongsa 2020: 63), which somewhat backfires on her.

In a comical, but ultimately ironic turn, the brother becomes an exotic attraction at the salon as the most sought-for manicurist and pedicurist. Women, and for the first time men, come to see him more frequently than all other workers, and his tips exceed his sister's earnings. However, it is in Raymond's disgust with certain aspects of the job – the pedicures that give them all warts, the smells of feet and so on, that his sister's sacrifices become more visible for she quietly accepts those aspects of the work. Her unkempt nails and overall impatience with people provide clues about the story behind the façade of the successful Asian woman who worked her way from a refugee to entrepreneur. The dose of her realist cynicism highlights this woman's awareness about her own, as well as Raymond's socio-political status. When the salon-star, Raymond, falls in love with his long-term client, his sister immediately attempts to stomp on any possible delusions:

“What, you think you got a chance with that Miss Emily there? She's rich and educated. None of the things we are or are ever gonna be. [...] Keep your dreams small. The size of a grain of rice. [...] If there's something I know in this life, it's rich women. And that woman ain't for you.” (Thammavongsa 2020: 68).

On the surface, “Mani Pedi” is about Raymond – a gentle-hearted former boxer who dares to delve into a typically female occupation, accept his exoticism meekly and dream of romance with an unattainable woman due to his status – one of service and subjecthood. However, the story of the unnamed sister screams at the reader from the backdrop precisely because of the frustration it exposes in comparison to Raymond's romantic optimism. Although the representative of the integrated, but never assimilated Asian women, she endures persistent restrictions and micro-expressions of discrimination. Her anger culminates with the realization that the exoticism of the Asian man doing manicure would easily run her out of business – if it were not her brother, working for her.

The last story of the collection, “Picking Worms,” builds the bridge between the stories in the collection. Told from the perspective of another nameless refugee girl, the story of a single Lao mother resonates with the anger and frustration of Raymond's sister at being disregarded and passed over. Working an odd job, the woman signs her daughter up for a worm-

picking job in the field of a hog farm – a decision made out of financial necessity considering the mother’s high hopes for her daughter getting the education she never could.

“Me and my mother were the only women. There were about fifteen men, and they were all Lao like us. [...] I had seen these men before at card parties my mother went to.” (Thammavongsa 2020: 166)

Understanding the importance of socialization, the mother accepts James – her daughter’s friend and school dance date. After James finds out about their hog farm jobs and expresses desire to join, this worm-picking expert from Lao – a peasant in her homeland, but survivor in Canada, naively shares her knowledge and skill with the white teenager. The fourteen-year-old unexpectedly becomes almost as good as his friend’s mother, yet whereas the mother’s count of the worm harvest remains unnoticed, after the boy has visited the farm a few times, he is promoted into the management position the woman worked for so tenaciously.

“Back in Laos, the men who worked in this field had been doctors, teachers, farmers with their own land, like my mom. None had set out for a life spent crouched down in the soft earth, groping for faceless things in the night, this shit of the earth. And they picked like it. [...] James picked like a man who was free.” (Thammavongsa 2020: 175).

The woman’s enthusiasm for the work dies down as James establishes himself as manager and introduces rules. The pimple-faced teenager, mentioned in the first story, exerts his power coldly as he neither needs the job, nor understand the implications of his innovations: the sawdust cuts their fingers, causes infections, and the rules about footwear and plastic gear lower the harvest counts. The frustration at being passed over regardless of effort, and managed by a boy, culminates in the mother’s refusal to be present when James comes to pick her daughter up. Just like Joy, the daughter chooses loyalty to her mother over social acceptance in an act of teenage revenge – socially humiliating the boy.

4. Conclusion

Thammavongsa’s reflection of the Lao collectivist culture reveals that women’s initial subjecthood is pledged to the family. The role of the sister in “Mani Padi” explores the complexity of the interaction of the subject-relations within the family, as well as to Canada where similarly a hierarchy is implied. Women are initially subjects in their own families – engaged in fixed roles which only evolve and expand in Canada due to fear-mongering and real economic threats. They do not only take the background position

within the familial setting, but also in the social and economic context of Canada –as human service providers, line-workers, cleaners and filling the positions that more *Canadian* nationals are not desperate enough to accept. The unnamed woman from “A Far Distant Thing” knows better than to try to rekindle a relationship whose innocence has expired with the change in socio-economic status, and “Mani Pedi” owner understands her place in the hierarchy as fixed to serve on rich women, not be one. The worm-picking woman understands that her ethnicity is exoticized and fetishized and therefore abstains from any social contact with men, and keeps her dignity by enduring the menial work that ensures existence. Although she accepts the existence-ensuring performative, she rejects the subservient position ascribed to Asian women in social context exerting her agency. Nameless, they represent the countless women who are the backbone of immigrant families – the lost members of the collective.

Finally, in this selection of stories, women are either entirely invisible or rendered invisible in the process of integration. In “You Are So Embarrassing,” the character of the daughter fully accepts subjecthood as a relation with Canada that excludes her familial and ethnic ties, yet either choice has a price. It is her mother’s sacrifice, and the sacrifice *of the mother*, that allow her to have the illusion of assimilation, although markings of race cannot be erased regardless of the colorblind hypocrisy of the multicultural discourse (see Williams et al. 2022). For the children who (passively) accept their parents’ subjecthood and replicate it in their own path, Canadianness encompasses life in the moldy basements of buildings on beautiful streets, but with limited views. The conspicuous green jogging suit among the pink-clad girls, as an act of rebellion, rejection of interpellation and loyalty to one’s family – empathetic decency, is an authentic act. In a collectivist culture, it is also the performative, which is why the discourse of multiculturalism appears indestructible paired with aversive racism.

Conversely, the performative of the collectivist-culture family to make tremendous sacrifices for the children, which in the case of refugees and immigrants in these stories sometimes does not reach a favorable outcome, marks the soft spot for exploitation. Despite the resilience and hard work, these characters’ narratives explicate how one’s misfortune and hardship can be harvested and used to ensure the economy in which there is an abundance of industry workers who could be underpaid, exploited and discarded willingly. The liberal propaganda is founded on social pressure and education, anti-immigration narratives and colorblind aversive racism with the aim to uphold the economy-based denigration of non-white citizens, and the endorsement of the model community narrative that first-world governments, Canada included, base the relation with their subjects on. On the one hand, this complex network of discourses and legislation pushes the

marginalized minorities into conforming to the fear-mongering standards required for their mere existence. On the other, the promised vertical mobility in exchange for subjecthood remains an elusive dream.

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Имигрантско подаништво у збирци прича *Како се изговара нож* Суванкам Тамавонгсе

Уводни део рада бави се концептом подаништва и повезује имиграциону политику Канаде са дубоко укоревеним етноцентричним и расним дискриминаторним праксама усмереним против људи без држављанства – миграната, имиграната, избеглица и илегалних имиграната. Рад се посебно осврће на природу статуса имигранткиња из Лаоса представљеног у збирци прича *Како се изговара нож* (2020), ауторке Суванкам Тамавонгсе и саме рођене у кампу за избеглице из Лаоса на Тајланду, а одрасле у Канади. Иако збирку чине појединачни наративи различитих ликова, њих спаја порекло и искуство избеглиштва, односно имиграције. Поред чињенице да је ауторка дошла у Канаду управо у периоду када је примљен највећи број избеглица из југоисточне Азије и да је материјал за ове (не)обичне приче управо била реалност њених земљака и земљакиња, способност ауторке да све приче повеже у целину која говори о родној, расној и етничкој дискриминацији, отуђењу, изолацији, нади и безнађу, културним разликама, слободи и конфликту новог и старог идентитета, између осталог, представља непроцењив допринос имигрантској књижевности. Ова збирка заокружује део неиспричаних прича о женама из Лаоса које се нису препознале у Канади, или са својим канадским идентитетом. Анализа одабраних прича бави се интерсекционалном природом дискриминације над имигранткињама. Последњи део рада коментарише имплицитне дискриминаторне праксе усмерене против имиграната, и посебно имигранткиња.

Кључне речи: имигрантска књижевност, женско подаништво, савремена канадска књижевност, родна дискриминација.

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