

TURNING CANADIAN – PROCESSING IMMIGRANT IDENTITIES^a

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Abstract

The paper deals with the processes of integration in Canadian society as represented by three different contemporary ethnic authors – Sharon Bala (*The Boat People*), Tea Mutonji (*Shut up You're Pretty*) and Souvankham Thammavongsa (*How to Pronounce Knife*), all somewhat translating their transgenerational experiences as immigrants into their works. The negotiation of identities, in their respective works, happens at the margins of the Canadian society – the integral position of the immigrant individual whose marginalized status prescribes the performatives pertaining to class, race and gender. The commodification of this status underscores the shifting nature of *Canadianness* – as perceived by the margins and the center. The problematics of immigrant identity, its otherness and conditions of integration are represented in a highly ironic and postmodern manner, highlighting the issue of hypocritical enforcement of liberal policies in western societies.

Key words: identity, immigration, migrants, refugees, securitization, liberal policy, contemporary Canadian literature, postmodern criticism.

ПОСТАТИ КАНАЂАНИН/КА – У ПОТРАЗИ ЗА ИМИГРАНТСКИМ ИДЕНТИТЕТИМА

Апстракт

Рад испитује репрезентације искустава интеграције у канадско друштво и то на начин на који то три савремене ауторке са имигрантским коренима представљају у својим збиркама, Теа Мутонџи у *Пути, лена си* и Суванкам Тамавонгса у *Како се изговара нож*, и Шерон Бале у роману *Људи са бродова*, и то са посебним освртом на начин на који се трансгенерацијска искуства имиграната представљају у њиховим делима. У овим радовима се преиспитивање идентитета дешава на маргинама канадског друштва, што сугерише да је маргинали-

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зација неизоставно део имигрантског идентитета, како се кроз њу преписују перформативи који се односе на класу, расу и пол. Ова комодификација имиграната открива и оне стране слике канадског идентитета које указују на постојање недостижног центра, у односу на маргине. Ова дела суштински разоткривају лицемерје либералне политике западног друштва, и то на типично постмодеран начин – кроз иронију.

Кључне речи: идентитет, имиграција, мигранти, избеглице, безбедност, либерална политика, савремена канадска књижевност, постмодерна критика.

INTRODUCTION

Approaching identity as a process of negotiation with the cultural, political, social and historical contexts at the individual and collective levels, modes of *Canadianness* are explored in the contemporary, and rather recent, literary works problematizing the experience of integration in the Canadian society. Moreover, these representations are explored against the official immigration-related practices and narratives in Canada. Sharon Bala's novel, *The Boat People* (2018), describes the complexities of the refugee and migrant narratives, entrapped in bureaucratic loops scrutinizing every dimension of their personal history and evaluating their value to the Canadian society. Tea Mutonji's *Shut up You're Pretty* – a short story collection published in 2019, presents a transgenerational experience of women – Congo emigrants, in their poignantly unsuccessful attempts to navigate the margins in the process of integration in Canada. Finally, Souvankham Thammavongsa's short story collection, *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020), highlights the paralysis of immigrants in the process of integration in the Canadian society, and complements the narratives of the Japanese immigrant family in *The Boat People* by underscoring the disturbing repetition of historical injustices against immigrants – the Other that changes face and race depending on the historical context. Although Thammavongsa's short stories focus on the individual experience of isolation, marginality, loneliness and rejection, much like Mutonji's, they are implicitly mutually coextensive with the narratives encapsulated by the three works as all these have roots in the ethnical and racial displacement of characters.

CANADIANNES – FROM THE OUTSIDE

Canada is one of the rare countries that have remained opened for immigration despite the major global migration crises, offering residence to economic migrants, “professionals and skilled labourers who can make a real contribution to the Canadian economy,” as well family reunification and refuge for humanitarian reasons (Majhanovich, 2022, p. 107). In

fact, according to Irene Bloemraad and the Statistics Canada 2017, “[over] one in five residents (22%) of Canada was born in another country in 2016, with almost half from Asia (including the Middle East)” (Bloemraad, 2022, p. 155). The implications, however, of the different classification of immigrants in terms of their value to the Canadian economic and social progress also remind us of different procedures involved in their *integration*. In exploring Canadian multicultural policies on the case of Syrian refugee crisis, Majhanovich notices a pattern in the process of integration in the Canadian multicultural mosaic whereby the first refugee and immigrant groups “[sacrifice] a great deal and never really [fit] in” (Majhanovich 2022: 116), but their children integrate more easily and assume “Canadian identity” (Majhanovich, 2022, p. 116). The unfortunate use of the phrase invites the question of what the Canadian identity implies, but also questions the nature of the multicultural mosaic. There appears to exist a split between narratives of Canadianness as built on diversity and inclusion, and the actual inaccessibility to the membership to the group which normalizes what Canadianness is.

Securitization and the Narratives of Xenophobia

In “Immigrants to Canada: Welcomed Citizens or Security Threats?” (2021), Scoppio and Winter explore the immigration policies of contemporary Canada in the light of global changes in recent decades, defining securitization (p. 92) as screening for security threats, and a process that is “said to create distrust towards immigrants as it associates migrants with new threats of terrorism thus making stricter immigration standards a necessity” (p. 92). On the one hand, Canada’s history as a nation of immigrants is celebrated in the policy to *still* issue permanent resident visas, even if preceded by an arduous process of scrutiny. The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act 2001 ensures, in theory, measures against discrimination in the screening process for residence seekers. However, as Scoppio and Winter highlight, “in the past, some Canadian immigration policy was indeed racist, designed to favour the admission to Canada of immigrants of primarily European backgrounds, that is, whites” (2021, p. 91). Contrasted to the 2001 Protection Act, regarded as a convenient liberal narrative, the securitization of the screening process is largely understood as imperative in terms of terrorist crises management. Juxtaposed, the narratives of openness and liberality, and threats of terror on the other, have revived xenophobia and general distrust towards migrants (Scoppio & Winter, 2021, p. 92).

Interestingly, in *Identity Discourses and Canadian Foreign Policy in the War on Terror* (2023), McDonald discusses the general position of Canada’s foreign policy and the narrative of national identity, as remaining stable against the global influences (p. 233). The author observes Ca-

nadian foreign policy against the immediate neighbour – the USA, but also the international circumstances that invite swift actions and reactions, immigration included. McDonald notices a tendency of Canadian governments to “habitually rely on familiar and similar sounding identity narratives in making sense of Canada’s response to international crises and conflicts” (McDonald, 2023, p. 234), which brings to mind the disparity between the *unfavourable* tradition of discriminatory practices towards immigrants, the official policies and the narratives used to create basis for both. In other words, whereas actual practices change drastically towards securitization, the narrative of the open-door policy does not. On the one hand, the open and liberal policies serve to uphold the narrative of the multicultural society and national identity based on the idea of the Canadian cultural mosaic – inclusive and welcoming. On the other, the narratives produced by the global migration crises, and the perceived and real terrorist threats revitalize the suspicions towards migrants and immigrants, inviting historically backwards narratives back into the present, and serve to shape the public opinion on the restrictive measures employed in the screening process. Additionally, the latter are highly influenced by the neighbouring practices and policy – the USA, and they are not limited to the screening process, but extend to the very presence of immigrants and refugees – of specific ethnicity and race. It is these narratives that operate in the society as mechanisms of marginalization. After all, immigrant detention camps have been an unpopular, yet stable practice in the USA since the late 1800s, and Canada has had its own history of replication of this mode of screening and deportation. As McDonald formulates it, “foreign policies rely on stories about those involved, why certain actions are or are not necessary, and what is at stake in a sense-making process” (2023, p. 235). The official responses to international threats or crises either find their grounding in the persisting myths that make the idea of national identity, McDonald underscores (2023, p. 235) or rely on the “fluid myths that continue to shift over the years” (2023, p. 235). Therefore, the idea of national identity is a myth, as is the narrative of multiculturalism as both are discursive and fluid, but instrumentalized as necessary to forward specific interests. Hardly critical of the actual practices, in the Introduction to *International Affairs and Canadian Migration Policy* (2021), Samy et. al comment on the economy-motivated immigration policies, labour migration (Predojević Depić & Lukić 2021: 1246), and how they have been influenced by the security threats in recent decades. The Canadian history of immigration, these authors note, is “a history of nation-building, from colonial times to the present” (Samy et al., 2021, p. 1), “enshrined in the Canadian Constitution” (2021, p. 1), maintained by systematic efforts oriented towards immigrant integration into the society as a genuine reflection of the multicultural spirit. However, these authors also subtly note the “modest negative shift in attitudes

towards immigration and visible minorities in Canada” (Samy et al., 2021, p. 2) in recent polls and see factors such as the ageing population and low fertility as a possible motivation for the preservation of the open immigration policy. This is precisely in line with the discussion about the discursive nature of the open-door policy and immigration liberalism – it is highly motivated by pragmatic and economic reasons, yet veiled in an immigrant-nation narrative of inclusion and nation building. Whereas McDonald sees the changing opinions on immigration as a matter of international circumstances and governments’ choices of basis for reaction, Samy et al. note that in Canada immigration has been treated as a “domestic rather than foreign policy issue” (2021, p. 3). This would imply a high degree of independence of Canadian policy and practice, which only appears to be the case in the endorsement of the open-door policy to skilled white labourers whose *sui generis* markings do not invite prejudice. Assumed characteristics based on nationality and race in a skin different than white invite the countering narrative of securitization.

In *Imagined Communities* (2006), Benedict Anderson sees the problematics of the concept of nationalism as having basis in the fact that it is generally understood as a unique category acquired on the basis of geographical and temporal circumstances, and a socio-cultural construct (Anderson, 2006, p. 5) that accumulates historical, social, cultural, political, ideological and other meanings. Anderson’s definition that nation is “an imagined community” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6) and one distinguished only “by the style in which [it is] imagined” (2006, p. 6), appears coextensive with McDonald and Samy et al. in focusing on the interplay between the internal dialogue of the Canadian public on the nature of the narratives surrounding the matter of nation, identity and, therefore, position towards immigration. Anderson’s nation is “imagined as limited” (2006, p. 7) because it can only define its own creation against the boundaries of other nations – those surrounding it. This brings the idea and concept of multiculturalism into question in terms of what the word itself should denote – a multitude of cultures coexisting somehow harmoniously, for example. However, as Anderson says, “[No] nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (2006, p. 7), but we can assume that it does find necessity to re-evaluate and examine the connections to its neighbours more rigorously, as well as global communities. However, speaking of nations and communities, a definition by Taylor and Winquist, in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, can be of use to explicate the ideal mechanism of multiculturalism, or its possible immanent failures. Taylor and Winquist’s definition of the concept of community as “[signifying] those elements that are held in common among people” (2001, p. 58) suggests a similar position as Andersons: in order for a group to become a communities, there has to be shared ground on the basis of, in contemporaneity, values and rights. However, more complexities arise in terms of whether

there are other elements that make us associate shared values with certain group members more readily than others. For example, in “Major Discourses of Cultural Identity,” Joseph Zajda reviews literature on identity, spanning from the earliest definitions of identity as encompassing cultural features, to the psychological definitions that focus on the individual experience of identity. Zajda’s working simplification of the multifaceted concept relies on the distinction between cultural and global identity – the former being defined by “a particular culture, language, religion, values, and location” (2022, p. 2), and the latter as “a defining dimension of the nation-building process” (2022, p. 3). Observed in this manner, cultural identity is shaped by local factors of initiation into culture, whereas national identity would represent a broader frame within which the individual internalizes the ethnic identity – the cosmological myths and collective history, the elements of culture considered relevant for belonging to the specific ethnicity. Granted, a postmodern interrogation into the nature of concepts such as nation, community, cultural and national identity would focus on *difference* as a marker for dissent, exclusion, non-conformity and rebellion. Taylor and Winquist’s observation that postmodernism explores “specifically how community does not mark commonality but difference, and in its most negative sense” (2001, p. 58) can be interpreted in the sense that community appears to be contingent on internal tension between the forces of majority and minority, normalizing and normative against the marginal and dissenting. This appears to be powerfully pronounced in terms of the community’s response to immigrants and refugees – individuals whose membership to the group is conditional even upon integration in terms of performatives demanded or assigned by society. As Zajda notices, “[one’s] language and culture affect resultant perception of national identity, and citizenship. A cultural perspective of identity refers to local identities, defined by a particular culture, language, religion, values and location” (2022, p. 5), and newcomers do not possess the qualities that allow the existing members to associate them with the consolidated image of *their* national identity as it is constructed historically, politically, culturally and transformed by narratives operating in society. If understood as a process, rather than a solidified product, both cultural, national and personal identity are products of negotiation, and a continuous one.

The unfavourable position of discussing Canadian issues from an external vantage point provides both advantages in terms of perceiving the contrasts that exist between the official narratives and subjective accounts, but also an unfortunate disadvantage of being blind to the nuances and actual realities of Canadian life. In “Reading and Teaching Canadian Literature in Slovenia” (2022), an article published in *The Construction of Canadian Identity from Abroad*, Jason Blake brilliantly words his own current external position: “The longer I am away from Canada, the more

textual my relationship to my home country becomes” (2022, p. 244), and that is the only relationship an external critic could have to Canadianness. Christopher Kirkey, in “Peering Northward to Construct Canadian Identity: Why Canada?” (2022), notes that efforts to explain Canada and Canadianness, “especially those undertaken outside its borders by expatriate scholars, focus primarily on issues of process [...] and the identification of iconic personalities, symbols, and practices—i.e., who and what constitutes Canadian identity” (2022, p. 359), but less on the realities of it. For a stranger-to-culture, it is only possible to extract generalized conclusions about the possible realities that coexist for different categories of people sharing in the multicultural experience. After all, multiculturalism implies a history of immigration and diversity, even if it nowadays conveniently remembers and discards its colonial past. In that sense, it might not be redundant to highlight that the process of integration, much like the regulation of immigration historically, has not provided equitable opportunities for all. This paper explores the gap between the grand narrative of Canadian multiculturalism and the reality as translated into literary works by the selected ethnic authors. The two collections and the novel are chosen based on the authors’ personal connections to the featured stories and the postmodern meta-character of their writing – reflecting a collective experience, veiled in fictionality, but not entirely fictitious.

FAILING ON THE ACCOUNT OF LIBERALISM

In “Canadian Liberalism and Gender Equality: Between Oppression and Emancipation” (2020), Elena Choquette critically addresses the perceived liberalism of the Canadian official policies regulating legal equality of gendered and marginalized groups maintaining their inability to identify the injustices and recognize the manner in which oppression is hypocritically perpetuated in practice (p. 16). The gap between the performance at the level of official politics and practice, this author argues, resides in the failure of liberal humanism to identify its own oppressive mechanism against vulnerable groups, which allows for the complex mechanisms of oppression and social injustice to become intertwined and culturally accepted since, at the level of official discourse, the narrative of liberalism denies the everyday realities of the marginalized. Choquette’s critical position is intersectional and identifies gender, race and class as the main markers for oppression (2020, p. 25), and these are the crucial factors in the process of identity building. It would be quite false and unconvincing to suggest, against even mere immigration statistics, that contemporary Canadian migration policies and practices are discriminatory or otherwise aimed at limiting opportunities for those looking for home in the vast Canadian landscapes. However, these three literary works achieve the purpose of literature in problematizing the grand issues of

contemporaneity at the level of the clash between grand and individual narratives as they expose the failure of multiculturalism in practice, or perhaps its limitations. Inspired, moreover, by the authors' direct and indirect experiences as belonging somewhere on the *migrant* spectrum, either in terms of their ethnicity, literal circumstances or as witnesses of their ethnic communities, these literary works explore how oppression and privilege work to shape the supposed mosaic pieces – that is, the individual identities of new members. With the same postmodern enthusiasm, the three works aim to discover the discrepancies between policy and practice, politics and everyday life, against the background of Canadian multiculturalism.

Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018) explores Canadian multiculturalism integrating the stories of characters caught up in three different stages in the process of integration into the Canadian society. Highlighting the narrative of a detained refugee, Mahindan – separated from his young son upon their arrival in Canada on a suspicious cargo ship, the novel interpellates characters belonging to the second and third-generation Sri Lankan and Japanese Canadians – Priya and Grace. The suspected terrorist, Mahindan, is both literally and figuratively trapped at the immigration camp – torn between the homeland identity and history he managed to leave behind, and the emerging one he must create in order to be reunited with his son and continue his life in Canada.

I can trust Canada.

(Bala, 2018, p. 26)

Hanging by a thread and at the mercy of an adjudicator who observes him through the lens of his desperate acts back in Sri Lanka, Mahindan's experience of the screening process resembles death row as he observes inmates being deported or disappearing. He contemplates suicide witnessing his child growing and gradually becoming part of society that does not welcome people who manage to survive the conditions of civil war and existential ordeals that require desperate measures (Bala, 2018, p. 327). Unintentional and forced collaboration with terrorist factions back home that saves his and his son's life, becomes the red flag in his immigration dossier, alongside the very fact that guilt is attributed to him by association – his national and ethnic identity. Curiously, his reluctant lawyer is assigned to the case also by association. Although second-generation Sri Lankan, a moderately successful lawyer who showcases Canadianness, Priya is unwillingly becomes the designated defender of the newly arrived Sri Lankans since her ethnicity presupposed knowledge of language and circumstances. In the same manner Mahindan desires to master the new language and become as Canadian as his understanding of what that would entail allows, Priya's sense of shame and rejection is triggered by the stereotypical assumptions that her Sri Lankan origins

somehow render her eligible for the position. After all, she managed to emulate Canadianness perfectly, even refusing to speak her mother tongue to the point of not being fluent in it anymore, and yet the association remains. As Zajda states, “[language] is intrinsically connected to personal, national, and ethnic identity” (2022, p. 5), and for this female character, it is essentially Canadian-English that defines her sense of belonging to the community. By being perceived as anyone other than purely Canadian because of the shade of her skin colour and assumed ethnic background, her sense of self becomes unstable. Internalized negative attitudes towards her ethnic origins – the *sui generis* nationality and values it entails considering the counter-narratives for securitization, force this young woman into an introspective journey. Priya’s Canadian identity appears to be formulated not *with*, but *against* her ethnic origin, much like Canadianness is often defined *against* neighbouring images of Americanness. Shame and anger at the association with the immigrants – women and children, as well as the suspected terrorists, open door for the exploration of her family’s journey to Canada and unexpected revelations and confessions about what measures they resorted to in order to get out of war’s way (Bala, 2018, p. 270, p. 315). Grace – a government employee, entirely removed from her family’s position as Japanese immigrants, gradually recognizes the intricacies of the cases presented to her, including Mahindan’s. Spurred into self-examination by her demented grandmother’s recollections of detention camps, discrimination, organized attacks on Asians, dispossession and rejection, as well as her mother’s, Kumi’s, insight into the nature of their own position as second-generation immigrants once, Grace becomes less convinced in the affirmative character of the rigorous and painstaking screening process. Her superior, the conservative Fred Blair, advises her to maintain strictness as “they have ulterior motives” (Bala, 2018, p. 321), but Grace finally understands that she too is *they*. Third-generation Japanese Canadian, she only starts to get into contact with her family history and the collective Japanese and Asian immigrants when she is in the position of power – the executive hand of the government, but not necessarily an independent one.

This is totally different! These people are... we’re fighting a war on terror.
Yes, yes. War is always the excuse. Real war, fake war. Either will do.

(Bala, 2018, p. 325)

The fate of the Sri Lankan protagonist depends on the inward journeys of those interpellated in his process and their examination of the nature of values integrated as part of multiculturalism. However, Priya’s contact with Sri Lankans, far removed from her reality, sensitizes her to the experience of her own family and helps her face her internalized aversion towards the *difference* that her origins imply, whereas Grace’s final decision remains unrevealed. The novel ends before Mahindan’s screen-

ing process is over emphasizing a sense of loss coextensive with the distancing of second and third-generation immigrant characters from their respective roots, collective experiences, but also the acquired identity they refer to as Canadian.

Téa Mutonji's short story collection, *Shut up You're Pretty* (2019), emphasizes the vulnerability of immigrant women and the intersectional character of their marginalization. Through the introspective narrative of Loli, stories of these women's lives, as intertwined with her own, subtly reveal the mechanisms by which female identity is shaped to comply with oppression and exploitation. A Congo immigrant, Loli is instantly commodified and introduced to forms of prostitution and exploitation by her peer – a pattern she would willingly reproduce based on internalized inferiority as a black woman coming from a low-income immigrant family and no opportunity. The narrative of Loli, especially as childhood stories are related, tells about the disturbing nature of collectivism and spontaneous identification with groups whose characteristics relate to the circumstances of the immigrant girl. The factor of race is implicit in stories in as much as her lack of *beauty* is emphasized in the child's understanding that white women are the standard, and her becoming the victim of their abuse – emotional and physical, finds no alternative. Loli neither fully understands the abusive and oppressive nature of her relationships with the white women she becomes infatuated with or employed by in her career as a sex worker, nor does she notice alternatives to these relationships in her surroundings. On the contrary, in striving for integration, she becomes interpellated in sexual abuse when a new high school student is hazed and humiliated as initiation, by Loli's white clique (Mutonji, 2020, p. 55). Additionally, the factor of gender prominently illustrates the process of the commodification of the body as the ultimate result of Loli's inability to envision her place in the society as anything other than an object for sexual exploitation of men and women (Mutonji, 2020, p. 10, p. 127). These individuals, mostly white, are acutely aware of the factor of race, class and Loli's marginal position in society, although their racism is only occasionally overt:

“I just never pictured myself with a black girl, you know?”
I didn't know.

(Mutonji, 2020, p. 74)

In her 2004 study, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Joanne Gilbert notes that “[regardless] of their image, [...] marginalized people serve an essential societal function; without margins, the center cannot exist in daily discourse” (p. 4). Loli is not merely an object of exploitation, but her desperate subjection becomes the confirmation of power, in her private life – personal and romantic relationships, but more overtly in the professional sphere, as a sex worker.

Ultimately, Loli's depression and anxiety, undiagnosed yet debilitating, lead her to her mother's kitchen where she recognizes the similarities of their positions and afflictions – as immigrant women at a loss for something that would define their purpose and existence outside forms of servitude and exploitation.

How to Pronounce Knife by Souvankham Thammavongsa is a collection featuring seemingly unrelated stories about Asian immigrants, until the thread connecting them all – the collective experience of life as Lao immigrants in Canada, starts to appear. The author herself was born in a Lao refugee camp in Thailand, but soon moved to Canada. The manner in which the stories about refugees and immigrants are crafted strongly resonates with the previous authors' discernable need to revisit the collective experience of their ethnic or national group in an examination of their own Canadianness. Marginality is subtly, yet poignantly explored in "How to Pronounce Knife" where the child is forced into a mature conclusion that the reality of her future Canadian identity inevitably excludes her parents' culture and participation in her education and integration (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 8). Moreover, set to protect them from the embarrassment of being unable to provide for her the same economic stability and subsequent appearance that erases *difference* at school, the girl also continuously fails to correct her father's English, and allows the parents the ignorance of bliss as she suffers a subtle split. The protagonist of "Paris," Red, finds association with her fellow Lao colleague a disturbing reminder of her position as social outcast in the chicken factory (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 18, p. 20). Entrapped by the lack of her small town opportunities in which being a woman implies working a menial position at the plant or aspiring to be noticed either by the wives of the managers, or the managers themselves – as an object of desire, Red daydreams about rhinoplasty as a solution for a complete change of identity. This brief and subtle intersectional analysis of a vulnerable group of immigrant women in "Paris," supposedly well integrated, is veiled in an exploration of the concept of femininity and its impact on personal identity. In "Edge of the World," Thammavongsa explores conceptions of womanhood and the stereotypical concepts of motherhood, as well as its impact on personal identity and freedom. The heart-breaking choices of her refugee parents leave an imprint on the adult woman, still suffering abandonment and loss. In "Mani Padi," the positions of brother and sister are juxtaposed for the impact their immigrant background has on their professional opportunities. In the wider context of society, the failed boxer, Raymond, is merely an unemployed immigrant, but in the particular context of the story, he is reduced to a range of possibilities and inscriptions that cannot be expanded to fit the regular members' scope (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 57, p. 58). His sister is a moderately successful beauty salon owner, supporting her entire family, including the socially and professionally disoriented brother

who she eventually employs (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 59). Whereas Raymond's mani-pedi skills may not be extraordinary (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 63), his appearance in the salon grants him an exotic role with the female clients. The male clients are more comfortable with his services, and his tips exceed the profit his sister makes on the whole. Ironically, Raymond's intrusion into the typical work of women allows him an earning that his sister is not granted since her providing such services is both expected and somehow implied. Much like the white boy from "Picking Worms" who takes the manager position effortlessly before the eyes of an experienced, yet disregarded, Lao woman, Raymond is still better positioned than his entrepreneur sister, even if his romantic interest – a white client, Miss Emily, reminds him of the class factor. Obviously, Thammavongsa toys with the stereotype of the Asian manicurist, yet she underscores the unequal treatment based on race, gender and class. In the clash between the patriarchal and liberal cultures, Asian and Canadian, women are restricted to the private sphere and emancipation is not fully possible even when the male counterpart is ineffective, which is the case with the female protagonist of "Mani Padi" whose entire existence is in the service of the males in her life. These women's identities are structured according to the social and cultural values of their homeland, before they even become part of the Canadian society. However, the said liberal society equally thrives on such inequalities and the systematic inequity as such dynamics provide the basis for exploitation.

CONCLUSION

The Boat People ultimately raises the question of the nature of multiculturalism in terms of distancing from the *original* identity as a process mandatory in integration, and of multicultural integration as involving a selective amnesia to historical and persisting injustices for the benefit of second and subsequent generations of immigrants, yet with certain limitations. The process of integration, as problematized by the selected works, uncovers a subtle process of erasing or removing the characteristics of identities – ethnic and national, acquired by association, as a prerequisite of social inclusion, or rather internalizing the side of the oppressor as a mechanism for creating more difference between *us* and *them*.

Priya's sense of shame and her unconscious efforts to erase any markings of difference appear as a response to the group, the community and the images that define its identity. In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), Butler and Athanasiou define dispossession as referring to "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 (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 2). Priya's initial sense of Canadianness is regulated by

the values society implicitly estimates as favourable, and it is only after she becomes aware and integrates the re-examined attitudes towards the markings of her ethnicity, and therefore the identity that can never be *white*, that she appropriates her ethnic roots. Priya's Canadian identity prior to becoming the immigrants' appointed lawyer was purportedly liberated from any markings of vulnerability in terms of wilful association to the ethnic group. The sense of shame is twofold – initially at belonging to non-white, marginalized, stereotyped ethnic group – incriminated by the existence of a rigorous process of screening and securitization, and ultimately at realizing the tremendous loss of personal and collective experience of her ethnic background out of fear of rejection. Grace's journey to awareness is conveniently undisclosed by the open end to underscore the intersectional nature of marginalization and identity building. This character only begins to understand the complexities of her position as third-generation Japanese Canadian – somewhat wedged between the culture and experience she cannot know, but also instrumentalized in the process of potentially repeating the same kind of (historical) injustice inflicted on her own family, and nation of origin.

In *Shut up You're Pretty*, the protagonist's entire narrative is one of exploration of roots and immigrant disorientation and dislocation. The protagonist never explores whether or how she expresses Canadianness for her identity is inevitably built in Canada. However, Loli only knows life on the margins of the Canadian society – the benefit of her race, gender and class. Much like the depression her mother suffers due to the existential necessity to bear the burden of imposed inferiority, Loli obediently turns her body over to those more powerful than her – white men and women. She becomes an object that needs no personal identity. On the contrary, a repository of introjects and a canvas for the society to inscribe value based on gender and race, in Loli's story, the implied narratives of liberality and multiculturalism reveal hypocrisy in rendering her coming to Canada a costly opportunity granted as confirmation of liberality. Education granted by Canada is an implied *gift* to the young immigrant although the process tells otherwise, and the fact that she is labelled as *pretty*, by her abusers, just confirms the mechanisms of commodification and objectification as instruments of marginalization, although one could cynically argue that similar performative is designated for white women belonging to lower-income class. It may not only be a matter of race. The more sinister counter-narratives, inferred from the stories, explain how liberal humanism allows the dynamics of the margins and the center on the basis of systemic and institutionalized inequity. Race and class might be the factor in the making of outcasts and underdogs, but gender, in the case of Mutonji's collection, makes for an incapacitating factor. As a female, Loli integrates social inscriptions of femininity and womanhood, which incidentally prevent her from finding points of identi-

fication with members of society of similar background in a positive sense. Joanne Gilbert argues that by “‘performing’ their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status” (2004, p. xi), which calls for the renunciation of vulnerabilities, on the one hand – such as appropriating the social, cultural, physical or other markings of the dominant groups – if one desires any degree of integration. On the other, it implies accepting the subordinate status as permanent marking of the individual whose particular identity, based on *difference*, only exists on the margins, and therefore allowing for oppression, commodification and abuse.

Thammavongsa’s characters explore positions of vulnerability and difference in similar terms. In “How to Pronounce Knife” the immigrant Lao child understands very early on that her identities at home and school must be separate precisely due to the multiple vulnerabilities in terms of class, culture and language, even though her environment is diverse and *multicultural*. The amalgam of cultures at the school does not reward *difference*, but requires emulation of the demonstrated. Red from “Paris” desires a change of identity that would render her visible to the non-Laos and daydreams about rhinoplasty as a mode of erasing her racial and ethnic marks and transformation into the ideal-average. The couple from “Randy Travis” are entirely lost in their new Canadian community – for a sense of self and freedom that they, for different reasons, strive to emulate the behaviour of a country music singer. Whereas the only thing the woman loves about the country is the music, the man only loves her, and by extension, tries to become the Canadian she desires (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 44, p. 54). Similarly to Loli from Mutonji’s collection, Raymond from “Mani Padi,” a retired boxer, becomes an exotic attraction to the women coming to his sister’s beauty parlour. However, his exoticism at being the only mani-padi man among innumerable women brings him some sort of local fame and tips, whereas the exotic beauty of Loli – her being a beautiful black woman with mental issues – only invites mental and physical abuse. The contrast between these speaks about the nature of inequity. Both immigrants and both continually facing limitations due to their visible difference, Raymond is the exotic underdog, whereas Loli remains an outcast. In “Picking Worms,” the farmer Lao woman earns a living for herself and her fourteen-year-old daughter by picking worms, and quite efficiently. However, a fourteen-year-old white Canadian boy who speaks English gets the manager position of the worm-picking team because of his language proficiency, despite his age and ineptness at the work at hand. The painful irony of the woman’s position testifies to the inequity and intersectional character of oppression and exploitation.

On the 40th anniversary of the Refugee Convention signing in Canada, Canadian Council for Refugees published reports on the treatment of

war refugees since early 1930s until 2009¹. It is commendable and disturbing to revisit the government responses since the years leading up to Second World War, and the narratives present in the public, similar to securitization narratives present in contemporaneity, resonate with the same spirit of xenophobia and racism stemming from the identification of *difference* in individuals, Jews and others. Sharon Bala's inspiration for the character of Fred Blair in *The Boat People* reminds us about the historical injustices. More disturbingly, it reminds us of the presence of discriminatory disposition in the supposed multicultural Canada. In 1938, F. C. Blair, the director of the Immigration Branch said:

Ever since the war, efforts have been made by groups and individuals to get refugees into Canada but we have fought all along to protect ourselves against the admission of such stateless persons without passports, for the reason that coming out of the maelstrom of war, some of them are liable to go on the rocks and when they become public charges, we have to keep them for the balance of their lives.

(Canadian Council for Refugees Website)²

Similar narratives persist in contemporaneity pertaining to individuals of Middle-Eastern or other politically inadequate origins. On the other hand, by the 1970s, the liberal narrative of inclusion became prevalent with the government issuing the *Guideline for Determination of Eligibility for Refugee Status* (1970) and ensuring the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees Protocol (1967). By this time, Canada ensured programs for the integration of Hungarian and Tibetan refugees enabling the narrative of Canada being “a haven for the oppressed”³. Moreover, Harold Troper's contemplation on the open-door narrative, with the phrasing that “the public imagination turned a select series of economically beneficial refugee resettlement programs into a massive and longstanding Canadian humanitarian resolve on behalf of refugees”⁴, supports McDonald's thesis that both the liberal narrative and the securitization one coexist and are revisited and used by governments for the

¹ 40th Anniversary of Canada's Signing of the Refugee Convention. Canadian Council for Refugees. 2009, <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/canadarefugeeshistory5.htm>. Accessed 25 April 2023.

² 40th Anniversary of Canada's Signing of the Refugee Convention. Canadian Council for Refugees. 2009, <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/canadarefugeeshistory5.htm>. Accessed 25 April 2023.

³ Harold, Troper. 40th Anniversary of Canada's Signing of the Refugee Convention. Canadian Council for Refugees. 2009, <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/canadarefugeeshistory4.htm>. Accessed 25 April 2023.

⁴ Harold, Troper. 40th Anniversary of Canada's Signing of the Refugee Convention. Canadian Council for Refugees. 2009, <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/canadarefugeeshistory4.htm>. Accessed 25 April 2023.

promotion of Canadian foreign and domestic interests. It should be noted that these were in several thousand, but not in numbers that could realistically uphold the narrative. In late 1990s, Canada welcomed over five thousand Kosovar refugees, which is about the same number of Jewish refugees during Second World War⁵. In 2002, the already mentioned Refugee Protection Act came into force although the articles of the law providing these individuals the right to appeal the decision upon the screening process was still not implemented in 2009. Canada maintains the narrative of liberalism to the degree of it having impact in public based on official politics, whereas in reality the practice discredits this liberalism since its functioning is limited and hypocritical, guided by economic factors, as well as those Scoppio and Winter recognize as undoubtedly racist and discriminatory in the past (2021, p. 91), and persisting in the present.

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⁵ 40th Anniversary of Canada's Signing of the Refugee Convention. Canadian Council for Refugees. 2009, <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/canadarefugeeshistory6.htm>. Accessed 25 April 2023.

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ПОСТАТИ КАНАЂАНИН/КА – У ПОТРАЗИ ЗА ИМИГРАНТСКИМ ИДЕНТИТЕТИМА

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Резиме

Роман Људи са бродова преиспитује природу мултикултурализма у Канади, а посебно у процесу интеграције избеглица, односно имиграната, у коме се одрицање од националних, етничких и других димензија идентитета из прошлости подразумева. Ова жртва постаје преудслов за привид асимилације која је ипак недостижна. Роман, као и збирке Пути, лепа си и Како се изговара нож, проблематизују идеју асимилације која намеће брисање идентитета порекла, а самим тим и дела личног идентитета, као услова за друштвено прихватање. Самим тим, ова дела савремене канадске књижевности суштински проблематизују стуб на коме се национални канадски идентитет базира – наратив о мултикултурализму и либералној политици. С једне стране, историја дискриминаторних пракси у погледу расе, етничитета и рода оживљава се периодично са порастом броја избеглица, имиграната или нелегалних миграната, а са друге, идеја мултикултуралности се пропагира као лепак који нацију уједињује. Ова дела показују места која канадски културни мозаик покушава да сакрије аверзивном либералном реториком и открива начине на које се канадска дискриминаторна историја понавља. Шта више, сва три дела суптилно указују на управо ту историју кроз представљање колективних (трансгенерацијских) искустава – имиграната афричког и азијског порекла до данас.