Cooking, Language, and Memory in Farhoud's Le Bonheur à la queue glissante and Thúy's Mãn

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Abstract: In her article "Cooking, Language, and Memory in Farhoud's Le Bonheur à la queue glissante and Thúy's Mãn" Simona Emilia Pruteanu discusses two moments in the evolution of (im)migrant writing in Québec. Abla Farhoud’s 1998 novel shows the struggle of Dounia, a Lebanese immigrant living in Montréal, who in her seventies finds a voice with the help of her daughter’s writing and starts to reflect on her identity. Themes of language and cooking overlap and reinforce one another and offer a new perspective on memory and the act of remembering. Language, cooking, and memory also intertwine in Thúy’s 2013 novel about an immigrant woman’s experience, yet Mãn goes beyond the struggle of the “in-between” identity in which a minority culture and language are subordinated to a more powerful one. Making use of what Afef Benessaieh calls “transcultural resilience,” Thúy’s character achieves a meaningful transformation through reflections which can be described as transpersonal.
Simona Emilia Pruteanu

Cooking, Language, and Memory in Farhoud’s Le Bonheur à la queue glissante and Thúy’s Mân

In this study I analyze two novels by immigrant writers to Québec: Abla Farhoud’s 1998 Le Bonheur à la queue glissante and Kim Thúy’s 2013 Mân (English translation with the same title 2014). The main character in both novels is a woman from elsewhere, who has been brought to Canada by her husband. Like many other writers, the women from Lebanon and Vietnam respectively, both Farhoud’s Dounia and Thúy’s Mân are initially passive women who have been brought up in a male-dominated society not to question and not to dream. Both, however, find means of self-expression in the food they prepare for others, as they are excellent cooks. In Farhoud’s novel, the elderly Dounia is encouraged to reflect on her life by her writer daughter, Myriam. While she comes to self-realization too late in life, some positive aspects emerge from Dounia’s ruminations. First, she comes to realize the negative impact of having been passive and dependent through her life. Second, she passes on the record of her life experiences, which will be written down by Myriam. In Thúy’s novel, Mân is drawn out of herself while still a young woman by a Québécois friend and by her discovery of love with a French restaurateur. These encounters, along with Mân’s cooking, allow her to engage with others and to express herself. In both novels, language is a key trope. Mân was taught French by her adoptive mother as a child and has a good grasp of the language. While its finer points evade her, she is fascinated by isolated French words, especially those that were part of her formative years in Vietnam. The aesthetic of the novel is underlined by other isolated words in Vietnamese which make their presence felt in the text alongside the description of the food Mân creates to rekindle memory of the homeplace for herself and her Vietnamese customers. Dounia’s relationship with language is more sorrowful, as she is illiterate and lacks the confidence to speak whether in Arabic or French.

The concept of migrant writing in Québec has known many interpretations since the moment of first definition in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1988, Pierre Nepveu drew attention to the need for a part of Québécois literature that had already advanced the term of littéraire migrant. In 1986 Le Pouvoir des mots, les maux du pouvoir. Des romanciers haitiens de l’exil and Nepveu took this further: “Immigrante est un mot à teneur socioculturelle, alors que migrante a l’avantage de pointer déjà vers une pratique esthétique, dimension évidemment fondamentale pour la littérature actuelle” (233). It should be noted, however, that while the late 1980s were the starting point for concentrated critical reflection on immigrant writing in Québec, a polyphonic literature had existed there at least since the 1970s (Moisan and Hildebrand). In 1992, Berrouet-Oriol and Robert Fournier published a study on immigrant and Métis writings in Québec, in which immigrant writing was described as follows: “les écritures migrantes forment un micro-cœur d’œuvres littéraires produites par des sujets migrants: ces écritures sont celles du corps et de la mémoire; elles sont, pour l’essentiel, travaillées par un référent massif, le pays laissé ou perdu, le pays rêvé ou fantasmé constituant la matière première de la fiction” (12). A key element to note here is the focus on “le pays laissé ou perdu”: this element is less important in current research on immigrant writing, which tends to place more emphasis on the movement back and forth across geographical and aesthetic borders.

In a 2013 article entitled “Quels concepts pour l’avenir du roman migrant?” Gilles Dupuis summarized the different conceptualizations of migrant writing known since its inception, including the debates surrounding the terms “intercultural” and “transcultural” in Québec. Dupuis states that the “transcultural” goes beyond the “intercultural” by encouraging a more radical cross pollination or what he calls cross contamination among different cultures (he cites the example of Fernando Ortiz’s Cuba). However, the transcultural discourse has imposed itself politically in Québec, as the term insists on a dialogue between cultures while keeping each identity intact, especially the dominant culture’s identity. While authors grouped under the migrant label generally seem to find it a type of positive discrimination, some scholars as Simon Harel deplore what they see as stereotyped reflections on migration (Les Passages obligés). Yet Dupuis justly underlines the fact that within the past twenty years (im)migrant writing has experienced a rise in popularity, rather than the opposite, an effect that even its challengers may have helped with through their work. As examples of the plethora of recent theories about (im)migrant writing, Dupuis cites Harel’s “braconnages identitaires” (2006), Pierre Ouellet’s “poétique de la posthistoire” (2010), as well as his own concept of “transmigrence” (2006) the latter of which is designated to study the cultural and stylistic transfers between the majority Québécois corpus and the immigrant one. For Dupuis, the proliferation of concepts around immigrant writing is engaging and innovative, each new concept allowing the immigrant experience to be pursued in different manners. He concludes his article with the following: “L’avenir du roman migrant sera donc celui que les romanciers venus d’ailleurs lui feront à lui” (196). The temporal distance between the two novels I discuss reasserts the fact that each wave of immigrant writers reshapes “la question de la migraine” thus attesting to its existing validity and relevance.

Farhoud’s and Thúy’s novels stage different moments in the evolution of migrant writing. In “Identité et altérité” Janet Paterson argues that (im)migrant writing cannot constitute a field of homogenous narratives, all characters are in the same thematic vein. picturesque. Paterson identifies two distinct trends corresponding to different stages of migration and of expression of identity. The first one is represented by narratives of exile, which portray characters subjected to longing, disempowerment and dispossession of identity, while a more recent trend tends to reject nostalgia and to welcome spatial relocation. According to Paterson, this category of novels exhibits a transnational poetics (une poétique transnationale) that transcends the criteria of the nation and of the ethnic group in order to promote identities that are multiple, changing, and often multicultural (89). I show that Thúy’s recent portrayal of a woman immigrant’s experience goes beyond the struggle of an “in-between” identity in

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which a minority culture and language are subordinated to a more powerful one as exemplified in the life of Farhoud’s Dounia and in others such as in Marco Miconé’s 1982 play Gens du silence. By making use of what Afef Benessaieh (e.g. the phrase ‘hétérolinguisme’ namely the practice by bilinguals of using the first language (IM) as a literary text: ‘Par le hétérolinguisme, j’entendrais…’) makes of the literary device of ‘migrant’ and ‘immigrant’ an aesthetic (see also Pruteanu “L’Ecriture”). For Grutman, hétérolinguisme is the practice by bilingual writers to use traces of their first language in their writing. This restricts them from engaging with the host society and indeed from learning its language: Dounia has only a few words of French, although when she is able to engage with Madame Chevrier, her shop assistant for a short period, she appears to enjoy the experience and to learn quickly. The lives of such women are more often than not stymied. Given the right circumstances, these women’s children can, however, thrive and develop through their multilingual encounters, although they are sometimes adversely affected by culture clashes or by too much instability and uprooting in their lives, as may be the case for Dounia’s eldest son Abdallah.

Immigrant writing as a signifying practice (see Kristeva) makes use of the literary device of what in 1997 Rainer Grutman termed hétérolinguisme, adding to the meaning of “migrant” and “immigrant” an aesthetic (see also Pruteanu “L’Ecriture”). For Grutman, hétérolinguisme is the practice by bilingual writers to use traces of their first language in their writing. This restricts them from engaging with the host society and indeed from learning its language: Dounia has only a few words of French, although when she is able to engage with Madame Chevrier, her shop assistant for a short period, she appears to enjoy the experience and to learn quickly. The lives of such women are more often than not stymied. Given the right circumstances, these women’s children can, however, thrive and develop through their multilingual encounters, although they are sometimes adversely affected by culture clashes or by too much instability and uprooting in their lives, as may be the case for Dounia’s eldest son Abdallah.

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and concern she cannot manage to express in words. She can only speak pidgin French with her grand-children, who do not speak Arabic, and while her own children understand Arabic, she feels that they were never able to talk to their Lebanese woman her first language. Dounia equates her cooking to self-expression and uses culinary images to gain an understanding of the world: "Je ne suis pas très bonne en mots. Je ne sais pas parler. Je laisse la parole à Salim. Moi, je donne à manger. Mes mots sont les branches de persil que je lave" (14). Her kitchen metaphors constitute her own alphabet and vocabulary which encompass the essence of her wisdom. So too do some of the Arabic proverbs she uses, although several also reflect the passivity she has been taught to accept, especially those that equate the art of cooking with the functions of women. Bernier points out that this type of rigid phrase further accentuates Dounia’s silence and shows her habit of hiding behind an acceptable social discourse (159). Her children do not understand her cooking’s vital importance for her, although they do enjoy the dishes she prepares and sends over to them by taxi or with Salim when their hectic Montréal lifestyles do not permit them to eat at her table. Interestingly, Kaokab, her youngest daughter, wants to learn how to prepare Dounia’s Lebanese courgette dish, albeit with instant yoghurt. When Myriam divorces her Québécois husband, Dounia is sad for her grand-children who will wander between the parents’ houses, but all she can say to her daughter is ask her whether their father will be able to cook for them. Myriam cannot see beyond the literal meaning of her mother’s words and insults her by replying that all she cares about in life is food and that there are other things besides eating (14).

It is nonetheless Myriam who will offer her mother a chance at redemption through her writing: when Myriam decides that she wants to write a book about her mother in order to get to know her better, Dounia finally gets a chance to reflect on her life and acquire a voice. Dounia’s main intention appears to be herself, underlining both the restricted nature of Mân’s life and existence, where little real development, exchange and growth has taken place until now, as well as the questioning of her own identity and outlook that Myriam has brought into being by wishing to write a novel about her. During their lengthy sessions where Dounia sits on a rocking chair in Myriam’s office, there is finally a sense of understanding between mother and daughter. With coffee and wine, questions, and patience, Myriam helps her mother unspin the thread of her life. Dounia shares her most painful experiences so that her daughter can finish her novel, while Myriam gives her mother a chance at making her voice heard and her life experiences and wisdom matter.

Not only does this reciprocal learning experience fill in some of the gaps left by immigration in identity construction of each of the two women, but it also represents Dounia as a speaking subject, something she longed for in the beginning of the story. Julie Brunet comments on this newly found understanding between Dounia and her children who take turns in mothering each other and teaching each other about life and language. Although she does not succeed in finding her own place in-between two cultures, Dounia wins at least a small battle, in her late years: she can abandon the non-space and non-time where her fears and lack of education have kept her imprisoned. Despite her continuing self-criticism and frequent unhappiness, she creates her own legacy for her children and grandchildren by passing on her own life experiences through the narratives she allows Myriam to record.

Expressing herself in French is less of an obstacle for Mân, the narrator of Thúy’s novel, although she does state on several occasions that she is apt to make mistakes in French and appears not to feel quite as precisely in control of language as she does with cooking. Thúy holds a degree in law and another one in translation, so her character’s concern with precision around language should not be surprising. Thúy’s own prose in Mân is musical and lyrical and foregrounds linguistic memory in a manner that is at once far-reaching and connected with historical events and often with the experiences of other people, as we shall see. Thúy has almost become a spokesperson for Vietnamese immigrants in Québec, and especially for the "boat-people." She received high praise for her 2009 novel Ru whose heroine, born during the days of the civil war in Vietnam and especially for the people, as we shall see. Thúy has almost become a spokesperson for Vietnamese immigration and identity in contemporary France, Québec, and Ireland. Ed. Dervilla Cooke.
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...and so we immortalised the recipe in memory of her father (72). Being moved in the past often holds negative connotations in immigrant writing. Yet while Thúy's literary strategies revolve in the past, Mân is not trapped in that past, but opens her present life to her new environment. In doing so, she is able to interact with her Québécois(e) friends such as Julie, the vibrant woman who is the first to draw her out of herself, and the pastry chef Philippe who creates international fusion with a Vietnamese twist. She is also able to tap into the richness of the collective memory of her home country: "Tears ran down his cheeks when I sprinkled his bowl with a small spoonful of pickled garlic. Eating that soup, he whispered that he had tasted his land, the land where he'd grown up, where he was loved" (35). Mân's culinary talents not only allow her to take control of her life, but they also open a new window towards the exterior world. Marie-Hélène Urro notes that in this novel, the kitchen and the restaurant become the place for meeting the Other, the theater of an interaction with other people, leading to the transformation of the self (87). Unlike Dounia, who confesses that she always eats little, Mân's appetite for life is stimulated by her new environment. Urro notes that the acts of eating and cooking become a form of transcultural resilience that allow Mân to survive by assimilating her entourage and by stimulating her appetite for life (90).

Through the novel's aesthetics, Thúy spotlights various people's emotions, often providing snippets of their lives. Thúy employs the micro-story technique she used so successfully in her first novel in which she goes beyond the limits of personal memory (see Dussaillant-Fernandez 85). Of note is that the microstory is an important literary genre, especially in Latin America. Andreas Gelz, for example, lists for the Spanish-speaking domain of microstories: minihistorias, microrrelatos, minificciones, which he proclaims as the ultimate genre of the twenty-first century (91). Less dispersed across time and topics than the stories in Ru, the microstories in Mân benefit from the presence of a thread provided by the culinary topic. Pascal Riendeau sees the 113 stories in Ru as precious objects carved out by language (138) and the same could be said of Thúy's second novel. Every carefully chiseled microstory connects Mân's current life to the lives of her Vietnamese entourage.

Being able to communicate in French, Mân has the chance of opening to new ways of expressing herself, a native Québécoise, is a key to a new transformation. It is significant that it is Julie, who pokes her head through the serving hatch to strike the non-fussy immigrant who confesses his nostalgia. Yet despite the emphasis on the personal, History filters and emphasize persona. Thúy's text both magnifies and transcends the personal. Novels which take a stance against oblivion and emphasize personal and family legacy, do not dwell on actual historical events as much as on the characters reflecting on that past. Some of the characters to which the stories in Mân evoke a voice have been marginalized by History, such as Hong's father, who died in the concentration camp or the anonymous immigrant who confesses his nostalgia. Yet despite the emphasis on the personal, History filters through.

Thúy's microstories embody the main quality of the metahistorical novel (see Nüning qtd. in Mertz-Baumgartner 124). Vietnam's history becomes woven into a small part of Québec's daily life through Mân's recollections and those of others and through her recipes. In his work on the double temporality of recent Québécois novels, including Thúy's work, Defraye notes that it is through the convergence of individual stories that the idea of a collective History emerges: "C'est à travers la convergence d'histoires individuelles qu'émerge cette idée d'Histoire collective" (12). Through the interweaving of History into the text, Thúy's novel achieves what Dominique Viart terms a rehistoricization of the subjective conscience (22). This is also the case in Le Bonheur à la queue glissante, where History is referenced in relation to the Québec votes on independence and to the civil war in Lebanon and beyond. As befits a novel where domination has such an impact on the main character's life, Dounia comments on the Québécois feeling of oppression within Canada and on the domination of peoples across the globe, including Jews, Palestinians, Armenians, etc. However, Farhoud's novel is less metahistorical than Thúy's novel where microstories make this such a strong aspect.

In conclusion, in Farhoud's Le Bonheur à la queue glissante Dounia, although she does not really succeed in finding her own place in-between two cultures, she wins at least a small battle in her late years when she abandons the non-space and non-time where her fears and lack of education have kept her imprisoned. Despite her continuing self-criticism and frequent unhappiness, she creates her own legacy for her children and grandchildren by passing on her own life experiences through the narratives...
she allows Myriam to record. In contrast, Thúy’s Mân moves away from the focus on embattled identity which characterize many early immigrant novels. Whether this signals a change in the evolution of the literature by writers settled in Quebec is open to question. What is beyond doubt is that through her recent depictions of women immigrants who reinvent themselves in their new lives and do not seclude themselves, like Dounia’s generation, Thúy builds characters who display what Benassaieh and Urro designate as transcultural resilience. They go beyond the identity conflict of the belonging “neither here/no there” specific to earlier migrant writing. Their itinerary remains open and linked to the journey of the Other who is a friend or becomes family. And while both Dounia and Mân develop on an individual level, Mân goes furthest in this respect transcending the personal in relation to people from her own culture and across cultures and displays what we might call a transpersonal and transcultural sensibility.

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