
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 Benessaïeh 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 *Mãn*

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 *Mãn* (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 the two writers, the women come from Lebanon and Vietnam respectively. Both Farhoud's Dounia and Thúy's Mãn 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, Mãn 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 Mãn's cooking, allow her to engage with others and to express herself. In both novels, language is a key trope. Mãn 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 aesthetics of the text are underlined by other isolated words in Vietnamese, which make their presence felt in the text alongside the description of the food Mãn 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 post-Québécois literature. Jean Jonassaint had already advanced the term of *littérature migrante* in his 1986 *Le Pouvoir des mots, les maux du pouvoir. Des romanciers haïtiens 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, Berrouët-Oriol and Robert Fournier published a study on migrant and Métis writings in Québec, in which immigrant writing was described as follows: "les écritures migrantes forment un micro-corpus 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 réel 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 migrant writing has 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 intercultural 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 "transmigration" (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 forgeront" (196). The temporal distance between the two novels I discuss reasserts the fact that each wave of immigrant writers reshapes "la question de la migration" 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 characterized by the same themes and discourse strategies. Instead, 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

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 Micone's 1982 play *Gens du silence*. By making use of what Afef Benessaïeh called "transcultural resilience," namely the process of connecting with and adapting to others, Thúy achieves a more meaningful transformation for the main character of the novel.

The question of immigrant women's experiences is a complex one. Those who can write or otherwise engage with the host society, more often than not come to know emancipation in their new environment (see Pruteanu). As Lucie Lequin and Mair Verthuy point out in the introduction to their edited volume on women (im)migrant voices in Canada and in France, "les migrantes commencent alors à écrire, à créer, à transgresser, à se révolter et à se transformer" (5). However, it is crucial to remember those who like Farhoud's Dounia, are cut off from full participation in society by the patriarchal paradigm that structures their lives (see, e.g., Buijs). 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 Chevette, 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 multicultural 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'écriture"). For Grutman, *hétérolinguisme* is the practice by bilingual writers of making traces of the first language visible in a literary text: "Par *hétérolinguisme*, j'entendrai la présence *dans un texte* d'idiomes étrangers, sous quelque forme que ce soit, aussi bien que de variétés (sociales, régionales ou chronologiques) de la langue principale. Quant au terme plus ancien de bilinguisme, il désignera un rapport individuel aux langues, notamment le rapport que peuvent avoir ceux qui signent les oeuvres littéraires" (37). Dounia literally cannot speak until Myriam lends a listening ear. When she does start to reflect and share her experience with her daughter, her language is peppered with proverbs from Arabic, which she learned as a child or young woman in Lebanon. Significantly, these heterolingual fragments are provided in a separate section at the end of the book, in order to underline their importance in structuring Dounia's outlook. Hugh Hazelton states that "Not only do we speak, but we also think in a specific language, and intellectually slide along preestablished rails prescribed by our verbal destiny" (107). This is the case for Dounia, as is evidenced by her internalization of the mindset implied in the Arabic proverbs she often quotes. In Thúy's novel, isolated words from forbidden books in French and English are burned into the memory of Mãn as a schoolchild in Vietnam and words in Vietnamese lie in the margins of the pages along with their French translation. Subtly then, but also pointedly, the novels by Farhoud and Thúy foreground language as a site of memory. The need to do so should come as no surprise given these authors' (im)migrant and bilingual or plurilingual backgrounds. Writing about Thúy's first novel, *Ru*, Julien Defraye finds that the author creates linguistic memories that are inextricably linked to a definite language, the most emotionally charged of which can only be inadequately translated, if translation is possible at all (38).

Farhoud's novel, *Le Bonheur à la queue glissante* approaches several topics common in (im)migrant writing, such as remembrance and construction of identity, feeling alienated from oneself (i.e., Kristeva's concept of *étranger à soi-même*) and the possibility of creating a space for oneself in-between two cultures. Dounia, a woman in her seventies and mother of six children, was brought to Québec from Lebanon not once, but twice by her husband Salim. After more than 15 years in Montréal, Salim brought the family back to Lebanon for 10 years before being forced back to Canada by the civil war. As such, Dounia's life is marked by multiple uprootings: first from her native village to her husband's village, then to Montréal where the family lives in seven houses over fifteen years, then to Beirut in Lebanon, and then back to Montréal. Dounia's principal traits of character are her profound silence and resignation, both of which have a deeper cause than the fact that she is an immigrant to Montréal who does not speak either French or English. As we soon learn, she bears both the stigma of being illiterate and of not being able to stand up for herself or for her children during what is an emotionally complex and abusive marriage. She has compassion for her husband Salim and understands his initial alienation in Montréal and his feeling of displacement along with his frustrated need to speak with others as he used to do on the village square in Lebanon. Yet she comes to greatly resent his domination of her and his physical abuse of her and of some of her children.

The physical abuse suffered by Dounia only comes to the fore towards the end of the novel through a shocking incident that the process of remembering for Myriam brings to the surface and that has wide symbolic resonances. A memory bubbles up in which a younger Salim kicks Dounia in the mouth as she is about to give birth to their third child in Lebanon and her father looks on without comment. The episode underlines Dounia's lifelong domination by a society that treated women as chattel, as Patrice J. Proulx notes while discussing Dounia's examination of her relationship with her father (132). Her father, although kind in other contexts, viewed her as her husband's property and of little worth as a separate being (we see elsewhere that he has no interest in her education and is not even aware that she has had difficulties at school and cannot read). Feeling handicapped by her lack of education and by her inability to communicate in French, Dounia has never ventured out by herself, except on one occasion in Montréal that she recalls for Myriam. The memory of the day when she went to her elder daughters' school to receive with pride their excellent reports makes her finally confess that she has lived in a constant fear of being looked upon as a stranger who cannot speak the country's language when in fact, as she now believes, all that would have been required was a little time for people to get used to her: "Quand on s'habitue à la différence, ce n'est plus une différence" (131).

Unable to interact with others in any meaningful way and even with her own family, Dounia only exerts control in the kitchen. There, her excellent cooking becomes a substitute for all the love, care,

and concern she cannot manage to express in words. She can only speak pidgin French with her grandchildren, who do not speak Arabic, and while her own children understand Arabic, she feels as if she were never able to talk to them properly, since as a Lebanese woman her place was not to speak. 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 emphasize the acceptance of destiny. As Silvie Bernier points out, 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 interlocutor appears to be herself, underlining both the restricted nature of her 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 book, 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 desire. Although she does not really 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 Mãn, 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 *Mãn* 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, arrived in Canada by boat with her entire family. Thúy has a strong media presence, having appeared on many literary radio and television shows in French Radio Canada, as well as the English-language broadcasting groups CBC and *Global News*, and the Paris-based *Tv5Monde*. She is also featured in English-Canadian newspapers, partly due to the translation of her books into English. She is often seen as a success story in terms of immigrating and adapting to Québécois-Canadian culture. In 2011 Thúy was part of an official delegation that accompanied Governor-General David Johnson to Malaysia as a living symbol of the "Canadian way" and while touring in Europe she was asked by a Canadian ambassador to lead an informal symposium on Canadian immigration policy. Her celebratory attitude to life as an immigrant appeals to readers in a different way to France's Linda Lê, who is also of Vietnamese origin and whose work is more tormented. In 2015 *Ru* won "Canada Reads: One Book To Break Barriers" championed by the Toronto International Film Festival artistic director Cameron Bailey. As such, Thúy is something of a poster child for ethnic integration.

In *Mãn*, Thúy presents the adoptive daughter of Maman, a Vietnamese school teacher who taught her the French language. Mãn arrives in Montréal on a legal visa after a marriage is arranged for her with a Vietnamese immigrant established in Canada and who owns a restaurant. Like Dounia, Mãn loves cooking. Although she is initially passive and reserved due to her upbringing as a woman in Vietnam, she turns her husband's business into a roaring success, her personal touches attracting large numbers of both Vietnamese and Québécois clients: "The more people waiting in the entrance, and then outside on the sidewalk, the more nights I spent in the kitchen" (36). In Farhoud's novel, the food Dounia prepares with such care for her family replace language, Mãn's recipes have a more wide-ranging impact and are created so that people outside of her family remember their home country and their past and be touched by the memory of their personal experiences. Each dish has its own story to tell. Sometimes Mãn's own childhood memories lie behind the creation of a particular dish, but she is mainly inspired by the personal stories of her customers and friends. Before her arrival, her husband's restaurant only offered a single special a day. Inspired by the personal stories of her clients, Mãn begins reinventing the menu, in order to give them back a share of their lost happiness: "Hông's final memory of her father is

a faded yellow plastic bowl filled with clear broth and a piece of tomato and a few bits of parsley stem ... And so we immortalised the recipe in memory of her father (72).

Being mired in the past often holds negative connotations in immigrant writing. Yet while Thúy's literary strategies revive the past, Mãn 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 desserts 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). Mãn'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, Mãn'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 Mãn 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 Dussailant-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 more than 100 anthologies of *microrrelatos*, *minihistorias*, *minicuentos*, *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 *Mãn* 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 Mãn's current life to the lives of her Vietnamese entourage.

Being able to communicate in French, Mãn has the chance of opening to new ways of expressing herself. Julie, a native Québécoise, is a key figure in her transformation. It is significant that it is Julie who pokes her head through the serving hatch to strike up a connection with Mãn. Julie is a dynamic whirlwind, expanding and remodeling the space of the restaurant, initiating cookery workshops and using her contacts to gain media appearances for Mãn and working with her to publish a best-selling cookery book. She exhorts Mãn to "Bite. Bite into the apple. Bite the way the file bites metal. Bite hard and make the most of life. Bite! Bite! Bite!" (59). Julie is in love with Vietnamese cooking and culture and is a striking example of openness towards the cultural other. Significantly, she has adopted a Vietnamese girl. Interestingly, Mãn seems to feel most comfortable with Julie and those Québécois(e) like her who have adopted Vietnamese children as they are the most acceptant of her mixed Western and Eastern appearance (there is a suggestion that Mãn's father may have been one of the colonial French and that this is scandalous to the Vietnamese).

Whereas Farhoud's Dounia learns little from the cultural others she meets in Québec (although she is fond of Myriam's Québécois ex-husband and admires the generosity and matter-of-factness of the Archimbault family and of Mme Chevette who help her in troubled times), Mãn's encounter with Julie is an example of cultural understanding and collaboration. Mãn also learns from Luc, the French restaurateur with whom she experiences passion and romantic love for the first time, out of the bounds of her dutiful marriage. Luc, Julie, and Philippe are all love children and Luc's example in particular allows Mãn to express her love towards her own offspring: "I handed them their lunch boxes on the doorstep as I did every day, but that morning I sensed Luc's hand stroking my upper back so that I would bend down to their level and kiss them, as he would have done, if he'd been there, as he did with his own children every morning" (138). While personal memory is perhaps the most important aspect of Farhoud's novel, 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 *Mãn* give 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 Nünning qtd. in Mertz-Baumgartner 124). Vietnam's history becomes woven into a small part of Québec's daily life through Mãn'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 *Mãn* 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 Québec 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 Benassaïeh and Urro designate as transcultural resilience. They go beyond the identity conflict of the belonging "neither here/nor 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 *Mãn* develop on an individual level, *Mãn* 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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