UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA

International Journal of English Studies

IJES

http://revistas.um.es/ijes

An analysis of happiness and resilience in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to pronounce knife*

SARA CASCO-SOLÍS*

Universidad de Salamanca (Spain)

Received: 30/04/2025. Accepted: 12/11/2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the literary representation of the complexities of the refugee experience in five short stories from Souvankham Thammavongsa's collection *How to pronounce knife*. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed's (2010) notion of happiness, it investigates how the stories expose the harmful effects of neoliberal scripts on refugees' wellbeing and interpersonal relations. Moreover, it highlights the characters' refusal to comply with normative expectations that cast refugees primarily through discourses of trauma, pain, or suffering. Instead, Thammavongsa portrays a community of Lao refugees who, by resisting these prescriptive narratives, cultivate affective bonds of care and solidarity. I argue that such practices emerge as forms of relational resilience that challenge erasure and invisibility, offering alternative ways of imagining refugee life beyond dominant representational frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Souvankham Thammavongsa, *How to pronounce knife*, refugees, happiness, resilience, ethics of care, affective bonds

***Address for correspondence**: C/Placentinos, 18, Department of English Studies, University of Salamanca, 37008 Salamanca; e-mail: saracs@usal.es

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

doi:10.6018/ijes.660891

1. INTRODUCTION

> Deriving humour from pain, and allowing the two to coexist within a single moment, has been integral to my experience of being an immigrant.
>
> (Thammavongsa, 2020b)

Contemporary refugee fiction emerges as a space in which to contest prevailing representations of refugees as either potential criminals or passive victims in need of humanitarian intervention. At the same time, it challenges the host nation's pressure to conform to normative standards including the adoption of "the language, customs, and practices of the dominant culture while abandoning and suppressing their own cultural identity" in order to receive "conditioning acceptance" (Bağlama, 2025, p. 11). Scholars like Liisa Malkki (1995), Marita Eastmond (2007), and Sercan Hamza Bağlama (2025) underscore the potential of refugee narratives to reclaim refugee identities away from the tropes of criminality, trauma, and victimhood surrounding them and to "make room for a more dynamic view of the individual as subject, acting in the world and reflecting on that action" (Eastmond, 2007, p. 250). Lao Canadian writer Souvankham Thammavongsa, among other authors such as Dina Nayeri, Viet Thanh Nguyen, or Jenny Erpenbeck, contributes to this urgent call by practicing what Cecile Sandten calls "a symbolic resistance, a 'writing back,' to the dominant state power and the established political and media discourses that tend to dehumanize migrants" (2020, pp. 127–28). Their works invoke an ethics of responsibility and care that proves to be essential to counteract dominant discourses where representations of minority groups may be absent, marginalized, or distorted. In this way, their personal and social commitment is framed within Joan Tronto's conceptualization (1993) of the ethics of care "as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (p. 103). In doing so, these authors contribute to the need identified by feminist scholars of extrapolating the ethics of care to political and social life so as to build a society where "empathic responsiveness" becomes a central tenet (Held, 2006, p. 15).

Born in a refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, and raised in Toronto, Canada, where her parents immigrated when she was young, Thammavongsa draws on her own childhood experiences to depict the daily lives of several Lao families in her short story collection *How to pronounce knife* (2020)[i]. Her experience as an immigrant challenges the narrow vision of refugees as victims usually offered by the media. Pain, but also humour and joy –as stated in the opening quotation of this article– allow her to resist injustices and even flourish in the midst of adversity. In her interview with Jack Wang (2021), Thammavongsa states that "whenever [she] encounters something that makes [her] sad, [her] instinct is to make a turn and frame it in something that can make [her] laugh" (00:51:39–00:51:50). In a similar vein, the 2020 Giller Prize jury observes that laughter, joy, pain, suffering, and trauma shape the lives of her refugee

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

characters, who try to "find [their] footing in a new and strange land" (Souvankham Thammavongsa, 2020)[ii]. Breaking with traditional articulations of refugee identity as "perpetually tired, faceless, docile" (August, 2021, p. 2), Thammavongsa's stories avoid victimhood and turn instead to "people who live next door, who are just trying to get to the next hour, the next day, the next year. They just want a chance to live and to matter and to love too" (Corkum, 2020). Thammavongsa's personal interest stems from the observation that the refugees and immigrants that often appear "in the news and in literature" are marked by sadness, loss, and tragedy. As she further explains in an interview, this is "a very narrow range of what we feel and who we are. We don't often get to see ourselves as ferocious or furious or ungrateful or joyous or enamored. And I really wanted to give voice to some of those other, less familiar, aspects of the experience" (2020b). In this way, her fiction acknowledges the need to "envision new ways of belonging which extend beyond infrahumanity for refugees" (Banerjee, 2021, p. 13), while avoiding representations articulated in political discourses that reduce displaced people to "symbols of suffering, gratitude, or geopolitical consequence […] designed to validate the moral or political superiority of host nations, or the West" (Bağlama, 2025, p. 2).

In her attempt to move away from stereotyped representations of refugees, Thammavongsa articulates a globalized view of the refugee experience that transcends national boundaries. Set in unnamed places, her stories convey the experience of refugees without adhering to particular geopolitical forces. Far from denying or romanticizing the precarious conditions that exacerbate the vulnerability of a community that is often the target of racial and social discrimination, Thammavongsa seeks to show how refugees take pride in their homeland, striving to preserve their language, roots, and cultural traits in spite of being forced to follow the scripts of assimilation and happiness in a new country. The short story genre, which holds a central position in Canadian literature (Löschnigg, 2022, p. 1987), proves to be effective for Thammavongsa's purpose, as it brings together diverse experiences and multiple voices that construct a complex portrayal of the refugee experience. It should be noted that the representation of these voices and identities is otherwise essential in shaping the Canadian multicultural paradigm[iii].

Building on Thammavongsa's insights on the importance of depicting refugee life beyond dominant frameworks, this article examines alternative representations of refugee subjectivity in five short stories from *How to pronounce knife*: "How to pronounce knife", "Paris", "Chick-a-chee!", "Edge of the world", and "You are so embarrassing". Despite their thematic differences, these stories collectively illuminate the complexities of Lao refugee life in the diaspora. While "Paris" centers on a Lao refugee woman, the others follow families striving to survive and build a livelihood in a new country where their homeland, Laos, is rendered invisible within dominant cultural narratives. The selection of these stories is guided by their focus on everyday experiences unfolding in ordinary spaces –the school, the workplace, the neighborhood– where Thammavongsa's characters quietly resist pressures to

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

erase cultural difference. By foregrounding such dynamics, the stories challenge normative scripts of assimilation and adaptation that prescribe happiness for refugees in their adoptive countries, instead revealing the tensions and possibilities embedded in these encounters. Moreover, the selected stories articulate practices of relational interdependence, solidarity, and caring, which prove to be essential for refugees to navigate displacement in host countries.

While there are not many research articles on this short story collection yet, numerous interviews and reviews testify to the increasing interest in this outstanding book. Moreover, scholars acknowledge the importance of a collection that sheds light on a dimension of the refugee experience that is not amply explored in literary studies (Lara, 2020; August, 2021; Morra & Betts, 2022; Ignjatović, 2023; Rahman, 2024). In his reading, Timothy August argues that Thammavongsa "portrays a wide variety of Lao migrant lives, presenting a range of characters, emotions, and class positions, in contrast to more conventional, singularly focused tales of refugee redemption" (2021, p. 48). Basmah Rahman, on her part, draws on Vinh Nguyen's concept of "refugeetude" to explore multiple refugee experiences and feelings, arguing that refugee consciousness leads Thammavongsa's characters to feelings of loneliness (2024). Accordingly, this paper adds to existing scholarship and probes Thammavongsa's dismantling of stereotyped representations that link refugees to invisibility, identity negotiations, and cultural assimilation. To do so, it draws on vulnerability scholarship (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; Butler, 2004, 2009) with the aim of examining the economic precarity endured by most of the characters in Thammavongsa's selected stories, concluding that their vulnerability is context-specific. I argue that the precarious conditions endured by Thammavongsa's characters certainly add to their desperation to hold on to promises of happiness and the good life in the host country. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of happiness (2010), this article explores the cruel effects that these promises might have on Thammavongsa's refugee characters. I contend that by aligning happiness with the neoliberal notion of success based on individual responsibility, adaptation, and hard work, Thammavongsa reveals how affects are instrumentalized to enforce assimilation. Finally, in the last part of this article, I bring to light the mechanisms used by some characters who resist the narratives of assimilation and adaptation prescribed for them to achieve prosperity in their adoptive country. In doing so, this article emphasizes the relevance of the affective bonds created by Lao refugee characters for developing forms of relational resilience that enable cultural survival.

2. PRECARIOUS LIVES: VULNERABILITY AND HAPPINESS

In her seminal book *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* (2009), Butler defines precarity as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (p. 25). Refugees, whose lives in adoptive countries are often "made up of uncertainties in living and working conditions and of social inequality" (Simkunas & Thomsen, 2018, p. 37), often suffer this precarity that undoubtedly aggravates their vulnerability, which Butler identifies as a shared human condition (2004, p. 31). As social beings, we are susceptible to harm and dependent on others; yet, as Butler explains, "this vulnerability becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions" (2004, p. 29). In line with this, scholars Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds explain that "as sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses" (2014, p. 1). Building on these insights, I posit that Thammavongsa's characters are somehow subject to this "vulnerability to precariousness" that Butler identifies (2009, p. 25), since they hold jobs that entail physical strain, poor working conditions, and low wages. Despite being highly educated and having great jobs in their home country, they find themselves plucking chickens' feathers, pulling weeds, doing manicures, or picking worms, "as if the life they led before didn't count" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 4). Enduring precarious conditions that often lead to health problems, Thammavongsa's refugee characters remain attached to the need of building a better and prosperous future, which often makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

This is reflected in the story "You are so embarrassing", where the main character, a Lao refugee woman who works on a farm after spending all her savings on her daughter's education, admits that "[w]hen you work on a farm, you're just a body" trained to sustain the capitalist maxim of productivity (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 122). Such an extractivist system reduces human beings to mere objects while prompting individuality, indifference, and competitiveness. As such, the refugee character finds herself navigating a system that transforms her body into a neoliberal *machine* that ends up suffering from serious illnesses: "When it happened, she didn't know she was having a stroke. […] The right side of her face kept sagging, and then her ear started acting up, like she was underwater" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, pp. 122–123). After this episode, the protagonist feels responsible for her own situation and decides to distance herself from her daughter, from whom she hides information about her serious health condition so as not to be seen as a burden. In doing so, the protagonist develops an individual form of resilience that moves away from relationality, and that has been deemed a "moral code" in neoliberal societies (Bracke, 2016, p. 62). Her association of vulnerability and care with weakness certainly brings to light the dangerous effects of neoliberal rationality on refugees. Moreover, the example evidences the importance of paying attention to the social and political environments surrounding refugees, which aggravate their precarious living conditions and give rise to a vulnerability that has been categorized by Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds as "context-specific" (2014, pp. 7–8). Overcoming it requires extending an ethics of care that fosters interdependence and caring relations within the social and political structures of societies (Held, 2006, p. 130).

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

It is worth highlighting that the precarity of Thammavongsa's refugees' lives affects not only their physical condition but also their familial relationships. It is remarkable how most of the stories are narrated from the perspective of children. They usually admit that their parents spend little time at home because they must work to financially support their families. This is the case of the narrator in "Chick-a-chee!", who states that "[i]t was unusual to see Dad come home from work so early. I didn't understand why, and worried he'd lost his job. It was something he always told us, that he had to work long hours, or he wouldn't have a job at all" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 79). Not only adults but also children have embraced the neoliberal Western principles of individual sacrifices and hard work as a means to achieve a better future. In other words, they try to conform to the principles of the "'ideal citizens' of the neoliberal state […] expected to become 'autonomous,' 'independent,' a resourceful workforce for the national economy" (Pianezzi, Cinquini, Grossi & Sargiacomo, 2020, p. 153). I would argue that their precarity certainly adds to their desperation to hold on to any promise of the good life, paradoxically affecting their welfare and family life and bringing out a sense of alienation.

The neoliberal principles that guide the lives of the aforementioned characters are closely related to the normative notion of happiness studied by Ahmed. Lao refugees certainly believe that working hard is the secret to achieving better life conditions that can bring happiness for their families. In the case of refugees and immigrants, this perspective of success and happiness powerfully resonates with the "sense of indebtedness which refugees are made to feel for having been given a new start" (Mahrouse, 2021, p. 183). The hard work discourse, as Avril Keating and Jan Germen Janmaat argue (2020), is seen as a "criterion of deservingness" (p. 1226); that is, "immigrants (and others) that do not work hard enough do not deserve to belong as they pose an economic threat (draining the welfare state's resources) and a cultural threat (not behaving in a culturally-appropriate manner)" (p. 1225). In other words, refugees feel obliged to express their gratitude for being hosted in a new country where they become embedded in a system of productivity that turns them into victims of a neoliberal regime that promises happiness and the good life if they comply with the prescribed norms. These norms become, borrowing Kit Dobson's interpretation of Ahmed's studies of affect, a directive that "traps the migrant into an impossible demand for gratitude" (2025, p. 8). The next sections of this article aim to bring to light the cruel effects that these promises of happiness hold for Thammavongsa's refugee characters as well as the affective bonds of care and solidarity they cultivate as a way of resisting institutional pressures.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

3. THE PROMISE OF HAPPINESS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Normative discourses on success and happiness underlie almost all the stories in Thammavongsa's collection, and their consequences are particularly remarkable in "Paris". This story foregrounds the cruelty implicit in the dominant neoliberal scripts of happiness and success that refugees and immigrants cling to in host countries. In doing so, it attests to the importance of reconsidering these normative discourses guiding people's lives through an ethics of care that fosters "sensitivity, empathy, responsiveness, and taking responsibility" rather than individualism and competitiveness (Held, 2006, p. 119). As Michael Rustin points out, "in every stage of human life […] the care and understanding of others is essential to human development". Therefore, as he further explains, "the idea of the self-interested, satisfaction-maximizing individual at the centre of [the neoliberal] ideology" should be replaced by "an alternative 'relational' conception of human flourishing and well-being" (2014, p. 146). The relevance of these moral principles for the articulation of an alternative discourse of happiness and success is underscored in the story "Paris", where the empathic recognition of vulnerability becomes essential to counter such discourses.

Red, the protagonist of the story, is a Lao refugee woman who works at a chicken plant "pluck[ing] the feathers, mak[ing] sure the chickens were smooth when they left her" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 13). She recognizes that "[a]t the plant, you made enough money to pay for what you needed. But the big things in life, the things that could make you *happy*, well, you just never made enough to get all that" (p. 16, emphasis added). Red's words reckon with the difficulty in obtaining what Ahmed calls "happy objects" –those that "circulate […] even in the absence of happiness by filling a certain gap; we anticipate that the happy object will cause happiness, such that it becomes a prop that sustains a fantasy that happiness is what would follow if only we could have 'it'" (2010, p. 32). The impossibility of reaching through her job –and, by extension, her individual effort– that "happy object" that would fulfill her aspirations underpins the protagonist's nonconformity, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and emptiness.

Red's unhappiness is further emphasized by her perception of herself as unattractive to men, especially to her boss, Tommy, who seems to be interested in other women working at the plant. This negative perception of herself makes her feel not only undesirable but also invisible, as reflected in her thoughts when she sees her boss with another woman: "Red wondered what that felt like, to be seen, to feel the mouth of someone who wanted you" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 21). Red's aspiration to fit into the dominant white context becomes an "attachment that organize[s] the present" (Berlant, 2011, p. 14). As her aspiration to happiness through assimilation suffuses her everyday life, it develops into fantasies about the possibility of transforming her physical appearance to attract her boss' attention and, consequently, secure a promotion (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 14). This aspiration is focused on her nose: "How maybe if her nose was different, things would be different at the plant too.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Especially with Tommy" (p. 14). Red's quest for happiness functions therefore within the framework of Ahmed's theory, which holds that happiness "works as an idea or aspiration within everyday life, shaping the very terms through which individuals share their world with others, creating 'scripts' for how to live well" (2010, p. 59). In Red's case, her script to change her *unhappy* life focuses on getting a nose job, an aspiration that "highlights the destructive impact of racism and idolized American beauty" (Lara, 2020). In line with Sonya Lara's view, Red's idea of happiness implies not only the sexual objectification of her racialized body, but also the conscious rejection of her identity as an Asian woman. This is also visible when the protagonist refuses to forge a friendship with Somboun, a Lao worker who constantly calls Red by her Laotian name –something that she detests– and reminds her how beautiful she is with her natural nose. Red's behaviour echoes the need observed by Fiona Robinson (2011), who calls for the application of an ethics of care that recognizes "relationality and dependence while avoiding the dangers of paternalism and 'cultural imperialism'" (p. 106).

Similarly, the assimilation of dominant values and, therefore, the denial of interdependence, is also conveyed in the short story "You are so embarrassing", which emphasizes the generational gap involved in the wholesale adoption of the scripts and conventions of host countries. At the center of the plot is the tension between a Lao mother and her teenage daughter when the mother goes to pick her daughter up at school on a rainy day. The daughter rejects her mother's presence in the space of the school –an institution that has frequently functioned a state instrument for assimilation (Rahman, 2024, p. 3; Ignjatović, 2023, p. 20)– making it clear that the unassimilated Asian mother does not belong there: "'What are you doing *here*?' she said, urging her mother to walk faster" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 124, emphasis in original). The daughter's embarrassment at being called by her birth name, Chantakad, instead of her adopted new name, Celine, in front of her classmates, underlines her efforts to erase her difference and be successfully assimilated.

These two stories therefore demonstrate that the normative scripts that prescribe happiness for Thammavongsa's refugee characters are "used as a technology of citizenship, as a way of binding [them] to a national ideal" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 133). Affects have been instrumentalized in both stories to enforce assimilation, which undoubtedly results in a lack of empathy, care, and responsibility towards others. By rejecting their respective loved ones, who might function as a mirror to them, Red and Celine distance themselves from the cultural and racial identity that they see as limiting –and, by extension, as the cause of their unhappiness.

While the brevity of "You are so embarrassing" does not allow the reader to delve deeper into the effects that dominant scripts of assimilation have on refugees, "Paris" offers a critical understanding of these. As stated, Red embraces her adoptive country's scripts for happiness, but in a move that illustrates Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism (2011, p. 24). As the story progresses, the protagonist recognizes that the desire to attain her "happy object" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 32) by means of undergoing nose surgery is detrimental to her health. Many women at the plant had sought treatment at unsafe clinics, for they could not afford expensive

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

treatments and, as a result, their noses "were slightly bent, didn't heal properly, or scarred badly" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 17). Even more, despite the women workers' attempt to change and assimilate into the Western cultural models of beauty and glamour –"com[ing] to work with their hair curled and pressed and wearing heels and office clothes" (p. 17)– the protagonist admits that "all of this was for nothing. None of them got the job" (p. 17). Red realizes that the idealized version of herself that she wants to construct by altering her physical traits and changing her name will not result in economic success or successful integration.

Interestingly, the normative discourse of happiness that Red wants to follow is further deconstructed in the last part of the story in a climactic scene that subverts the protagonist's self-rejection. Nicole –Tommy's wife and the woman that all female workers at the plant are trying to imitate– ends up crying when she discovers that her husband is unfaithful. Red, who is observing the scene from a distance, realizes not only that her idealized version of happiness is a fantasy, but also that vulnerability is associated with more than those who belong to the lowest rung of the social scale. Thus, the last scene when Nicole runs to Red and holds her "like they were the closest of friends" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 23) highlights the condition of vulnerability as a shared characteristic of human beings (Butler, 2004, p. 31). What is more, the passage underlines Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's understanding of vulnerability as a potential characteristic that leads human beings to empathy and social cohesion (2013, p. 1), something that is staged in this story as the two women melting into each other's arms. As Nicole's pointy nose is buried in Red's neck, "the invisible boundary Red maintains around her body is broken" (Llarena-Ascanio, 2022, p. 198). This image stands in contrast to the prevailing sense of rejection and self-loathing that dominates the story. This leads to the story's conclusion that the recognition of the protagonist's own vulnerability –partly mirrored in another woman who suffers rejection at the hands of the same man– not only allows her to build empathy, but it also opens the possibility for bonds of mutual support and care to emerge.

4. AFFECTIVE BONDS AND RESILIENCE

Docility, suffering, or silence are terms often associated with forcibly displaced people. Their behaviour in host countries should conform to these notions, since, as Laura Madokoro argues, they are expected to "celebrate the generosity of states" (2021, p. 72), complying with their social, political, and cultural demands. Yet, as has been explained above, these normative discourses, masked by promises of happiness and the good life, aim to erase the identity and cultural differences of refugees and migrants. This certainly contrasts with foundational theories on care ethics that highlight the importance of interconnectedness, mutuality, and reciprocity, as briefly explained above. Care theorist Fiona Robinson acknowledges the

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

importance of understanding that "relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence" (2011, p. 4). An ethics of care, as Held contends, entails "attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations" (2006, p. 15). These values certainly point to the importance of "noticing interdependencies, rather than thinking only or largely in terms of independent individuals and their individual circumstances" (p. 53).

In the context of forced migration, interconnectedness and communal care become essential for refugees to develop forms of relational resilience that allow them to build community and navigate displacement. This understanding of resilience contrasts with individualistic definitions of the term that perceive it as "the new ethics of responsibility" that calls upon individuals to prepare for, adapt to, cope with, and rebound from unexpected circumstances on their own (Evans & Reid, 2014, p. 6). Resilience, as Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont point out, is understood as "the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organization, class, racial group, community, or nation to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it" (2013, p. 2). This understanding of resilience as a way of sustaining, advancing, and thriving through caring connections is embedded in Thammavongsa's stories. Using ingratitude as a way to defy normative scripts and expectations, the author offers an alternative way of imagining refugee life beyond dominant representational frameworks. Indeed, her characters' acts of ingratitude are read as forms of relational resilience grounded in an ethics of responsibility and interconnectedness that becomes essential to resist institutional pressures. Significantly, these practices are formally conveyed by the author's representation of numerous characters in different stories who are bound together by similar concerns, struggles and, in some cases, common desires. As August states, "the characters themselves form a heterogeneous assortment of personalities and identities" (2021, p. 49). Yet, all of them form part of the community of Lao refugees represented by the author, and their roles in the stories become essential for the readers to give meaning to and eventually make sense of the message Thammavongsa intends to convey.

Moreover, the importance of an ethics of responsibility and care to resist dominant scripts that lead refugees to identity negotiations is represented in the stories through different motifs such as language, food, and memory. The stories "How to pronounce knife" and "Edge of the world" bring attention to language and food, which function as important and indelible cultural markers that either bring human beings together or drive them apart[iv]. The story "How to pronounce knife" presents a child, Joy, who expresses her pride in being different. In this story, the narrator recounts her experiences at school and describes the way her classmates treat her, especially when she takes her homemade dishes to school and her classmates "tease her about the smell" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 4). Contrary to the narrator in "You are so embarrassing", Joy does not feel ashamed of her cultural identity and, therefore, continues eating her homemade food, which recalls her parents' culture.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

In addition to this, Joy's desire to counter and resist the erasure of cultural differences is visible when her teacher, Miss Choi, asks her to read the word "knife". The night before, she had asked her father –the only one in her household who knows how to read English– about the pronunciation of this word, and then at school, "[s]he said it the way her father had told her" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 7). Miss Choi did not turn the page, indicating that the child mispronounced the word. When arriving home, Joy does not tell her father about the episode she experienced at school due to the mispronunciation of the word "knife:"

> She doesn't tell him about being in the principal's office, about being told of rules and how things are the way they are. It was just a letter, she was told, but that single letter, out there alone, and in the front, was why she was in the office in the first place. She doesn't tell how she had insisted the letter *k* was not silent. It couldn't be, and she had argued and argued, 'It's in the front! The first one! It should have a sound!' and then screamed as if they had taken some important thing away. (pp. 8–9)

This episode illustrates the child's desire to preserve and protect her cultural traits. Even though the protagonist is fully aware of the differences between her family culture and that of her host country, evidenced in her thoughts as she watched her father eat his dinner –"she thinks of what else he doesn't know" (p. 9)– she tries to strengthen her connection with her roots and her family. As Rahman argues, Joy's resistance stems from her conscious understanding "of how the education system erases the agency of those who cannot assimilate" (2024, p. 9). It is her way of caring for both her parents and her Laotian community, which is rendered invisible in the host country. By playing this protective role, Joy is cultivating a sense of belonging rooted in community connection, thereby defying the neoliberal principles of happiness based on individuality, identity negotiations, and cultural assimilation. In line with this, her name, Joy, becomes a symbolic expression of the effects of this caring practice, which can also be interpreted as a form of relational resilience aimed at enhancing interpersonal relationships within her immigrant community.

Joy, as the emotion embodied by the main character of "How to pronounce knife", stands in sharp contrast to the emotion of shame experienced by the protagonist's daughter in the story "You are so Embarrassing". Whereas the latter story is suffused with a negative affect –following Silvan Tomkins's (2008) classification of primary affects–, the protagonist in "How to pronounce knife" defies normative scripts of happiness, resulting in an atmosphere of joy, comfort, and empathy towards her Laotian community. In this regard, it is significant to highlight that Joy's resistance allows her to build empathy towards her own community. Thammavongsa herself points out in an interview that "when the little girl argues with her teacher about the pronunciation of the *k*, she isn't just being difficult, she is fighting for the validity of her experience and the integrity of her home" (2020b). The author's words bring to mind the notion of ingratitude, which is often associated with those refugees who do not

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

comply with the norms of the new country and therefore are seen as "difficult". To put it differently, resistance to prescribed norms is perceived as an act of ingratitude on the part of refugees. They are expected to "celebrate the generosity of states while at the same time shaping generalized understandings of refugee experience in which displacement, passive vulnerability, and eternal gratitude are key" (Madokoro, 2021, p. 72). Thammavongsa dismantles these stereotypical depictions of passive refugees and brings to light the unconventional resistance (rarely shown in the mainstream media in a positive and accurate way) of immigrants and refugees to those prescribed norms they are compelled to accept in host countries.

Resistance to accepted narratives that intend to silence and hide minorities is also a central trope in "Chick-a-chee!" In this story, two Lao children walk from one house to another trying to fill in their pillowcases with candies, saying "Chick-a-chee!" These children are corrected when they tell of their adventure at school: "Don't you mean you went trick-or-treating?" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 82). Instead of feeling ashamed or out of place, the children respond to the woman by repeating the 'unfamiliar' words: "'No, Missus Furman. We went Chick-A-Chee!" (p. 82). With this example, the author once again challenges what Janet Wilson calls the "uncritical adaptability" (2023, p. 44) expected of refugees and even questions the importance of dominant assimilationist discourses that promise refugees' integration. The children who went "Chick-A-Chee!" receive the same number of candies as, if not more than, the rest of their classmates. As Philip Swieton points out, "what others regard as mispronunciations, Thammavongsa's characters regard as opportunities for integrity and for reward" (2022, para. 6). With this resolution, the author demonstrates that integration does not necessarily entail the loss of history, language, and culture. This brings to mind Y-Dang Troeung's understanding of Thammavongsa's refusal of being renamed in Canada. As she states, "Thammavongsa's name signifies […] a Canadian's author's refusal to foreclose this possibility of community and encounter: with Lao history, with Southeast Asian people, with Asian diasporic communities, and with all people of colour whose names and beings have been traditionally read as 'difficult' or unintelligible" (2020, p. 140). It is precisely this diasporic identity that the author and her refugee characters attempt to build in the host country –a collective effort echoed by contemporary writers, as Troeung's words suggest.

In "Edge of the world", the pressure to abandon Lao in favor of English underscores the demand for refugee integration: "Oh no, no! You better start speaking English with her. How's she going to fit in once she gets to school?!" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 98). Mother and daughter respond with laughter to the citizen's suggestion, rejecting the anxiety of "fitting in" as a desirable goal. Their refusal illustrates what Ahmed identifies as the "normative scripts of happiness" imposed on migrants, where integration is framed as the condition for multicultural harmony (2010, pp. 137–38). By taking pride in their difference and preserving language, food, and memory, they resist assimilationist pressures and affirm community resilience. What institutions may perceive as "ingratitude" becomes instead a mode of

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

solidarity that strengthens cultural continuity. Moreover, the characters' insistence on speaking Lao –even though the daughter "had never been there" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, pp. 97–98), showing then a "sense of responsibility" for both her mother and her community (Held, 2006, p. 92)– enables cultural survival across generations. In line with this, the mother's sharing of Lao recipes, recounted in their native language, situates her within Ahmed's figure of the "melancholic migrant", one who remains attached to her origins rather than embracing the host national ideal (2010, p. 143). Far from signaling failure, this attachment fosters an alternative conception of happiness rooted in cultural memory and intergenerational care.

Community gatherings described in the story –where Lao refugees "dance and listen to music, play cards and eat, reminisce and talk about old times" (Thammavongsa, 2020a, p. 96)– further highlight the affective bonds that sustain refugees in their new country. In Rahman's words, these "gatherings act as an anchor for [the protagonist's Laotian] community, representing a consciousness that unsettles expectations of refugee indebtedness towards the nation-state" (2024, p. 4). Unlike the isolation depicted in "Paris", here belonging emerges through shared cultural practices that blend refugees' pride in their past with recognition of their present achievements. These collaborative and affective acts help them develop an ethics of care that is essential for these individuals to assert their existence in the host country. Ultimately, "Edge of the world" reframes happiness not as assimilation but as the creation of communal spaces where resilience, continuity, and joy flourish. As Martha Kent claims, resilience "does not occur in isolation. It is an interactive process that requires someone or something to interact with. It is dependent upon context or environment, including our most important relationships" (2012, p. 111). Preparing Lao recipes, speaking their own language, and telling stories about their birth country become mechanisms of resistance for these individuals that subvert the dominant narratives of assimilation and adaptation. It is through resistance that they build forms of relational resilience, which become essential to sustain them and, ultimately, to celebrate their existence in their new country.

5. CONCLUSION

Aware of the narrow view of refugees as either potential criminals or passive victims often provided in refugee narratives, Souvankham Thammavongsa's short story collection *How to pronounce knife* offers an alternative perspective that problematizes normative discourses that erase the identity and cultural differences of refugees and migrants. This article has shown how the selected stories mobilize representations of relational interdependence, compassion, and caring as a shared praxis to illuminate how refugees navigate displacement, build communities, and challenge oppressive structures, highlighting themes of vulnerability, mutual support, and solidarity. In so doing, the stories dismantle stereotypical depictions of refugees, while showing

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

strategies that defy normative scripts of assimilation and adaptation. These strategies entail the preservation of their culture, language, and identity, which in the case of Thammavongsa's refugee characters become essential for the survival of a whole community. While striving for the "validity of [their] experience and the integrity of [their] home[s]" (Thammavongsa, 2020b), these characters resist the power dynamics of a system that condemns them to invisibility and identity negotiations. Thus, the different experiences depicted in *How to pronounce knife* show the pathway toward collective resistance against the imperative to forget, erase, or exclude those individuals who are stereotyped in contemporary society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this article was supported by the research project "Narrating Resilience: Achieving Happiness? Toward a Cultural Narratology" (PID2020-113190GB-C22), graciously funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

NOTES

[i] Although Thammavongsa was born in Thailand, she is not Thai, because children born in refugee camps are considered stateless, as the author clarifies in an interview conducted by Cornelia Channing (Thammavongsa, 2020b). Her parents, like many people from Laos, were forced to flee their country after the Vietnam War ended in 1975. The country underwent a period of profound political, social, and economic upheaval following the ascension to power of the communist Pathet Lao. As Ian G. Baird (2025) argues, these tensions resulted in the forced displacement of a number of Lao citizens to Thailand, following events such as "the forced resignation of the king of Laos, the imposition of a socialist economic system, and other major changes" (p. 2). Most of the Lao refugees migrated to different countries such as Canada, Australia, France, and New Zealand, since they were not allowed to "permanently stay in Thailand" (p. 3). Although it is not stated explicitly, it can be inferred that the reasons motivating Thammavongsa's refugee characters to leave Laos might be similar to those of the author's family.

[ii] *How to pronounce knife* is a collection of fourteen short stories that won the 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Canada.

[iii] In his reading of the collection, August (2021) explores an "aesthetics of heterogeneity" with the aim of "articulat[ing] how refugee collectivities exist beyond state designation" (p. 42). In so doing, August highlights Thammavongsa's role in "reviv[ing] earlier, less official, imaginings of Canadian multiculturalism" (p. 58).

[iv] The story "How to pronounce knife" not only opens the collection, but also gives the entire work its title, attesting to the importance the author attaches to language and pronunciation in the context of (forced) migration. As Thammavongsa explains in numerous interviews, she attempts to challenge

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

common expectations that refugees and immigrants feel "ashamed or embarrassed or humiliated" when they mispronounce English words (Roy, 2021, para. 14).

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.

August, T. (2021). The refugee, recently: Souvankham Thammavongsa, Philip Huynh, and the aesthetics of heterogeneity. *Canadian Literature, 246*, 40–60.

Bağlama, S. (2025). A critical introduction to contemporary refugee fiction. In S. Bağlama (Ed.), *Contemporary refugee literature: Syria and beyond* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.

Baird, I. (2025). The transnational politics of Laos after 1975. In E. Hannah (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (pp. 1–23). Oxford University Press.

Banerjee, B. (2021). Picturing precarity: Diasporic belonging and camp life in Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *57*(1), 13–30.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Bracke, S. (2016). Bouncing back: Vulnerability and resistance in times of Resilience. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti & L. Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (pp. 52–75). Duke University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.

Butler, J., & Athanasiou, A. (2013). *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. Polity Press.

CBC Books. Souvankham Thammavongsa wins $100K Scotiabank Giller Prize for short story collection *How to pronounce knife*. (2020, November 9). *CBC Books*. Retrieved January 4, 2025, from https://www.cbc.ca/books/souvankham-thammavongsa-wins-100k-scotiabank-giller-prize-for-short-story-collection-how-to-pronounce-knife-1.5796202.

Corkum, T. (2020). Uncanny, ferocious, funny. Interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa. *The Hamilton Review of Books*. Retrieved January 10, 2025, from https://hamiltonreviewofbooks.com/blog/2020/5/15/trevor-corkum-interviews-souvankham-thammavongsa.

Dobson, K. (2025, February 19–21). *The 'volume' of displacement: On David Chariandy's Brother*. [Conference presentation]. III International Research Workshop "Narratives of Happiness and Resilience." University of Salamanca, Spain.

Eastmond, M. (2007). Stories as lived experience: Narratives in forced migration research. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 20*(2), 248–264.

Evans, B., & Reid, J. (2014). *Resilient life: The art of living dangerously*. Polity Press.

Hall, P. A., & Lamont, M. (2013). Introduction: Social resilience in the neoliberal era. In P. Hall & M. Lamont (Eds.), *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* (pp. 1–32). Cambridge University Press.

Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global*. Oxford University Press.

Ignjatović, S. (2023). Immigrant subjecthood in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to pronounce knife*. *Књиженство: часопис за студије књижевности, рода и културе, 13*(13), 11–27.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Keating, A., & Janmaat, J. G. (2020). Immigrants, inclusion, and the role of hard work: Exploring anti-immigrant attitudes among young people in Britain. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(6), 1212–1228.

Kent. M. (2012). From neuron to social context: Restoring resilience as a capacity for good survival. In M. Ungar (Ed.), *The social ecology of resilience: A handbook of theory and practice* (pp. 111–125). Springer.

Lara, S. (2020). [Review of *How to pronounce knife,* by Souvankham Thammavongsa (2020).] *The Los Angeles Review.* Retrieved March 12, 2025, from https://losangelesreview.org/review-pronounce-knife-souvankham-thammavongsa/.

Llarena-Ascanio, M. J. (2022). New sustainable bodies in transit: Transnational affects in some (South-East Asian) Canadian women writers. In F. Gallardo-del-Puerto, M. C. Camus-Camus & J. A. González-López (Eds.), *Moving Beyond the Pandemic: English and American Studies in Spain. 44th Conference of AEDEAN (Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos), AEDEAN 2021, Conference proceedings* (pp. 195–200). Editorial de la Universidad de Cantabria.

Löschnigg, M. (2022). *The Routledge introduction to the Canadian short story*. Routledge.

Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (2014). Introduction: What is vulnerability and what does it matter for moral theory? In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New essays in ethics and feminist philosophy* (pp. 1–32). Oxford University Press.

Madokoro, L. (2021). Erasing exclusion: Adrienne Clarkson and the promise of the refugee experience. In V. Nguyen and T. Phu (Eds.), *Refugee states: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada* (pp. 71–98). University of Toronto Press.

Mahrouse, G. (2021). Producing the figure of the 'super-refugee' through discourses of success, exceptionalism, ableism, and inspiration. In V. Nguyen and T. Phu (Eds.), *Refugee states: critical Refugee Studies in Canada* (pp. 173–193). University of Toronto Press.

Malkki, L. H. (1995). Refugees and exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 24,* 495–523.

Morra, L., & Betts, G. (2022). The sound of a silent letter: Souvankham Thammavongsa and the kinetic archive. *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature Canadienne, 47*(1), 117–130.

Pianezzi, D., Cinquini, L., Grossi, G., & Sargiacomo, M. (2020). Migration and the neoliberal state: Accounting ethics in the Italian response to the refugee crisis. *Accounting Forum, 46*(2), 134–159.

Rahman, B. (2024). "Work hard" to find "home": Loneliness in refugee consciousness in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to pronounce knife*. *Canadian Literature*, *258*, 1–13.

Robinson, F. (2011). *The ethics of care: A feminist approach to human security.* Temple University Press.

Roy, B. (2021, May 22). "I don't write from the margins:" Author Souvankham Thammavongsa. *New Canadian Media.* Retrieved November 3, 2025, from https://newcanadianmedia.ca/i-dont-write-from-the-margins-author-souvankham-thammavongsa-how-to-pronounce-knife/.

Rustin, M. (2014). Belonging to oneself alone: The spirit of neoliberalism. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, *19*, 145–160.

Sandten, C. (2020). Refugee tales: Asylum stories and walks as new forms of literary and political intervention. *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, *31*(3), 121–136.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Simkunas, D. P., & Thomsen, T. L. (2018). Precarious work? Migrants' narratives of coping with working conditions in the Danish labour market. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review (CEEMR)*, *7*(2), 35–51.

Swieton, P. (2022). Language and immigration in Thammavongsa's *How to pronounce knife.* [Review of *How to pronounce knife*, by Souvankham Thammavongsa (2020).] *Queen's University*. Retrieved September 5, 2025, from https://www.queensu.ca/strathy/Thammavongsa.

Thammavongsa, S. (2020a). *How to pronounce knife*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Thammavongsa, S. (2020b, April 23). Laughter as a shield: An interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa. *The Paris Review.* Retrieved January 15, 2025, from https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/04/23/laughter-as-a-shield-an-interview-with-souvankham-thammavongsa/.

Tomkins, S. (2008). *Affect imagery consciousness: The complete edition*. 2 vols. Springer Publishing Company.

Troeung, Y. (2020). On names and resonances. *Canadian Literature, 242*, 140–142.

Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries, a Political argument for an ethic of care.* Routledge.

Wang, J. (2021, April 19). Interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa. *YouTube*. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsX47n-TwJY.

Wilson, J. M. (2023). Corporeal suffering: Performing resistance and resilience in *Slow Man*. *Journal of Modern Literature*, *46*(2), 39–54.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131