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Negotiating Canadian multiculturalism During Quebecois Separatist Events of the Sixties: Between the "Italian Wop" and the "Flying Egyptian"

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Abstract

Over the years much has been written exploring the multiculturalism as a term. In the texts of Marco Micone and Saad Elkhadem under study the goal is to trace the nuances related to multiculturalism descriptively in practice during the period of growing unrest in Quebec in the 1960s which is dealt with in both texts. Through analysis of the writing of Canadian immigrant writers like Micone and Elkhadem, various questions impose themselves regarding the feasiblity for inclusiveness for people of diverse origins under the umbrella of multiculturalism. The need to traverse the primary and secondary affiliations and cultural tendencies of immigrants becomes pressing though in and of itself an elusive task. Elusive in the sense that designating the affiliations that are open to change and those that are not can be quite daunting. Competing histories in the lives of immigrants constantly foreground themselves. Immigrants upon coming to Canada bring along personal ethnic histories and language affiliations which complicate the workings of official multiculturalism. As a result, these histories and languages supposedly die as separate and unique structures and reappear in ghost form within multiculturalism, leaving immigrants in a liminal state which has been both considered productive and detrimental. Marco Micone's play *Voiceless People (1984)* and Saad Elkhadem's novella *Canadian Adventures of the Flying Egyptian (1990)* explore the convoluted nature of identity construction and multiculturalism within Canada during the separatist period.

الملخص العربى

تم كتابة الكثير على مر السنين لاستكشاف التعددية الثقافية كمصطلح، الهدف من دراسة نصوص ماركو ميكون وسعد الخادم في هذا البحث هو تتبع الفروق الدقيقة المتعلقة بالتعددية الثقافية بشكل وصفي في الممارسة أثناء فترة الاضطرابات المتزايدة في كيبيك كندا في الستينيات والتي تم تناولها في كلا النصين من خلال تحليل كتاباتهما، تطرح أسئلة مختلفة نفسها فيما يتعلق بإمكانية الشمولية للأفراد من أصول متنوعة تحت مظلة التعددية الثقافية، أصبحت الحاجة إلى اجتياز الانتماءات الأولية والثانوية والميول الثقافية للمهاجرين ملحة رغم أنها في حد ذاتها مهمة مراوغة بعيدة المنال بمعنى أن تحديد الانتماءات المفتوحة للتغيير وتلك غير القابلة للتغيير قد يكون أمرًا شاقًا للغاية، تشكل التواريخ المتنافسة في حياة المهاجرين نفسها باستمرار تاريخًا عرقيًا شخصيًا وانتماءات لغوية مما يعقد أعمال التعددية الثقافية الرسمية ونتيجة لذلك يُفترض أن هذه التواريخ واللغات تموت كبنى منفصلة وفريدة من نوعها وتعاود الظهور في شكل أشباح ضمن التعددية الثقافية ، مما يترك المهاجرين في حالة حدية اعتبرت منتجة وضارة في نفس الوقت، تستكشف رواية "المغامرات الكندية الطائرة" لسعد الخادم (١٩٨٤) ومسرحية "من لا صوت لهم" لماركو ميكون (١٩٩٠) الطبيعة المعقدة لبناء الهوية والتعددية الثقافية داخل كندا خلال الفترة الانفصالية بالستينيات .

In 1971, Canada was the first country to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy governing social and political interactions amongst its people. The era preceding 1971 was a period during which the goal of the Canadian government was to replicate the British type of society in Canada through assimilation rather than multiculturalism (Brosseau and Dewing). However, with the proclamation of the Multiculturalism Act as a policy, the initial goal was to ensure that all citizens can ascribe to their original identities, take pride in their ancestry and still have a sense of belonging to their new Canadian home. This moment of enunciation in and of itself raises questions because it ignored the position of the Aboriginal peoples the original inhabitants of the land focusing on Canada as a tolerant country which accepts and celebrates diversity without concern for the assimilation and ethnic cleansing historically practiced by its government against Aboriginal peoples. Historically, the term first became popular in the 1960s to counter the biculturalism touted by French Canadians in Quebec who called for protection of their language and culture and the opportunity to fully participate in political and economic decision-making as a result of Quebec's growing dissatisfaction with its place in Canada. Over the years much has been written exploring the multivalence of multiculturalism as a term. Brosseau and Dewing distinguish how it can be interpreted descriptively as a sociological fact, prescriptively as an ideology or politically as a policy. In the texts of Marco Micone and Saad Elkhadem under study the goal is to trace the nuances related to multiculturalism descriptively in practice during the period of growing unrest in Quebec in the 1960s which is dealt with in both texts. Through analysis of the writing of Canadian immigrant writers like Micone and Elkhadem, various questions impose themselves regarding the feasiblity for inclusiveness for people of diverse origins under the umbrella of multiculturalism. The need to traverse the primary and secondary affiliations and cultural tendencies of immigrants becomes pressing though in and of itself an elusive task. Elusive in the sense that designating the affiliations that are open to change and those that are not can be quite daunting. Competing histories in the lives of immigrants constantly foreground themselves. Immigrants upon coming to Canada bring along personal ethnic histories and language affiliations which complicate the workings of official multiculturalism. As a result, these histories and languages supposedly die as separate and unique structures and reappear in ghost form within multiculturalism, leaving immigrants in a liminal state which has been both considered productive and detrimental. Marco Micone's play *Voiceless People (1984)* and Saad Elkhadem's novella *Canadian Adventures of the Flying Egyptian (1990)* explore the convoluted nature

of identity construction and multiculturalism within Canada during the separatist period.

Analyses of Canadian multiculturalism from a racial perspective have been of essence since the introduction of the concept to Canadian culture and life in the seventies. The Utopian bend of the concept makes it a fertile space for the reassessment of visions of belonging. Moreover, the contradictory goals which it seeks to achieve through inclusion while maintaining differences, make its practical fulfillment a point of heated discussion in Canadian studies. Interestingly though, despite its inherent idealistic tendencies the Canadian government adopted it as a "political necessity" (Kenyeres 27). This necessity in Canadian society was shaped by the goal of "establishing a Canadian national identity to be shared by all" (Kenyeres 27). The term was coined in Canada and has been deeply explored by Canadian cultural theorists like Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Neil Bissoondath and Richard Gwyn. The Separatist attempts in Quebec discussed in Micone and Elkhadem's texts represent a particularly poignant historical moment for the discussion of the various debates around this concept in Canadian studies.

The multiculturalism Act is often critiqued for underlining the elusiveness of identity for immigrants rather than appeasing it leaving the immigrant in a constant state of liminality. Reginald Bibby argued that Canadian multiculturalism was an "unassembled mosaic" which was held together merely by a "tenuous willingness to coexist" (95). Bibby questioned the viability of multiculturalism because of its imposition of "viewpoint" to the degree of undermining truth and right so that any evaluation of multiculturalism as a concept becomes seemingly a threat to social stability (41-42). Neil Bissoondath who himself was an immigrant writer in *Selling Illusions* (1994) explores how Canada's multicultural policy increased tendencies towards self-segregation among immigrants. He designated that the Act was "activist in spirit, magnanimous in accommodation" (42). However, he goes on to list how problematic it is on various other levels since it suggested no limits to the accommodation offered to different cultural practices (139); assumed that cultures remain frozen in time (43) and failed to encourage a unified vision which leads to inevitable division (43). These critics argue that multiculturalism functions through a crisis of representation. Immigrants, according to the components of this policy, have to depart from and lose their "other" culture to embrace multiculturalism which always allows them to

remember their "other" culture and encrypts their bodies within the limits of its living compartments (Mcfarlane 22-24). Such criticism of the Act propounds that its spectral quality of making a formal identity visible while at the same time negating it results in a perception of immigrants governed by a ghostly duality. Moreover, the term immigrant itself signifies both belonging and alienation an, "anonymity and distinctiveness […] [a] paradoxical form of identification which paint[s] faceless faces and paint[s] also the facelessness of the interaction between the state and the people so named" (Itwaru 12). One must consider here the applicability of the claim that an ethnic community can retain its identity within the pervasiveness of a host community. Hence arises the elusiveness of a term which aims to eradicate alienation of the Other while simultaneously leaving in practice the tools of their alienation. Accordingly, that a stable society must be built upon shared values proposes various challenges.

However, Phil Ryan in *Multicultiphobia* (2010) argues that multiculturalism does not necessarily ensue a mindless relativism which accepts everything. He proposes that multiculturalism is not the culprit but rather that there are provocations related to establishing a good society that are directly linked to multiculturalism (170-171). Establishing a society in which various needs and views are accepted, though often standing at odds with each other, is a challenge in and of itself. Ryan reaches the conclusion that what is needed is a continuous dialogue regarding the concept in order to overcome multicultiphobic writing; this is the only means to surpass the relativist/racist binary debate which imposes itself whenever the topic of multiculturalism arises. Immigrant literature is a space where such questioning often occurs. However, this questioning needs to be contextualized in relation to a designated historical moment. The modern separatist movement emerged in Quebec in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Popular support for the separation of Quebec increased as political parties rallied most of the nationalist groups of the province. However, in the late 1970s pro-unity parties came to control the parliament and delayed attempts at independence in Quebec (Stein). During this charged period immigrants in Quebec represented an interesting sector through which the complications of belonging and multiculturalism were questioned. Such opportunities of questioning multiculturalism provide an interesting historical account through which affiliations, language affinities and racial relations can be explored without resort to oppositional, binary scales of thought. Micone and Khadem in this sense embark upon perceptive journeys of reflection and experience of otherness under the multicultural umbrella.

Marco Micone's play *Voiceless People* (1984) and Saad Elkhadem's novella *Canadian Adventures of the Flying Egyptian* (1990) both deal with the paradoxical workings of official multiculturalism during the tumultuous period of Quebecois Seperatism in the 1960s. Hasan the protagonist of Elkhadem's novella is introduced early on to the disparities of polite racism in Canada which stand as an integral obstacle to his belonging to the multicultural mosaic. Elkhadem questions racism as a structure through the character of LeeRoy, Hasan's friend of African descent whom Hasan meets during his stay in Prince Edward Island. It is he who voices concern regarding the second class citizenship of immigrants of third world countries and how it challenges them into unchallenging dead-end careers when he says, "don't let Canaan be their slave" (Elkhadem 32). Both the Egyptian Hasan and LeeRoy are intelligent men of African origin stuck in servile jobs that numb their intellectual abilities. Hasan and LeeRoy are both bookkeepers in a transportation company. Hasan only accepts this job because it is for him "the first job, with guaranteed salary, increments, free medical treatment and pension" (Elkhadem 30). The lethargic existence which LeeRoy experiences on the island is indicative of how second class citizenship obstructs the workings of multiculturalism wasting potential in the process. Hasan refers to this in a dialogue with himself arguing, "then you resigned a few moments before suffocating to death" (Elkhadem 32). LeeRoy describes Prince Edward Island in hellish terms stating, "any foreigner who arrives at this enchanted island and eats of its red hellish potatoes would be immediately afflicted with a state of laziness and lethargy, so that he forgets his people and country," (Elkhadem 31). Here Elkhadem describes the limbo state and the inability of the immigrant to completely be enveloped into the multicultural process through the barriers of institutionalized racism. The facilitation of language and cultural barriers in bridging gaps is dwelt upon as Hasan describes the so-called differential treatment which European immigrants experience in comparison to immigrants of "other" origins. In tracing the failure of multiculturalism to assimilate all immigrants Elkhadem questions the workings of this official policy. Elkhadem comments cynically about the state of multiculturalism in Canada when he first introduces LeeRoy saying, "We will trace his origin to one of the noblest families and[…] can we use the term "noblest" in this context, or is nobility a quality reserved for the pure white race, which has no trace of hateful racial impurities?"(33). He further develops the idea of differential racial treatment and how it is connected to a mind set which is overtly

multicultural but covertly incapable of embracing and understanding the differences of others saying:

> Hasan, the young Egyptian who has little experience with the cold melting pot and no understanding of the complex art of the mosaic […] the English and the French, in spite of their mutual hostility and contempt, are secretly in agreement that they are the only ones worthy to be treated as masters, regardless of their competence or ability to work. (Elkhadem 33)

Multiculturalism's troublesome relation to racism is dwelt upon once more; when the author refers to it as the general state of humanity "each pious, devout, and reasonable person knows perfectly well that he and his family and his people and those who look like them, are alone the finest creatures on earth" (Elkhadem 33).

Space is experienced through a racialized lense as we experience Lee Roy's lived experience of Toronto, "Toronto, the city of lights, the capital of the clean world, the center of organized freedoms […] Lee Roy had also told me it was a pit of class hatred and racial persecution" (Elkhadem 32). National spatial imaginaries are racially marked and the segregation that this experience ensues, "serves as a crucible for creating the emphasis on exclusion" which leads minorities, immigrants and other marginalized groups to attempt to isolate and forge " solidarities within, between, and across spaces"(Lipsitz, 10-11). This explains the sense of solidarity Hasan expresses towards the Pakistani whom he hears is thrown under the wheels of a metro train by some young men who were joking around and using racial slurs to curse his origin. He explains that the obvious reason for their hatred is that "they lay the blame on him and his ilk for the increasing unemployment, economic recession, and lack of opportunities" (Elkhadem 32). Hasan's reaction to this incident is one of fear of being put in the same situation and exclusion as a result of being placed in the position of stealing away the jobs of the "native sons" of the country. In this way the experience of race increases his alienation making him forget that he supposedly is a citizen too. His spatial lived experience in Canada becomes distinctly marked by race.

Antonio on the other hand is both a victim of racism and propagator of it. He is an Italian immigrant in Quebec in the sixties. With the onrush of immigrants from Italy during this period he like Hasan is also considered an economic threat. In scene two of the play all the racially negative stereotypes connected to immigrants are brought together portraying the racism newcomers to Canada can face. Two racist Quebecois are introduced who place all the blame regarding economic troubles on immigrants, "there's no work left for us", "No ones kisses an ass better

than them", "They're so weird […] we don't want them in our schools", "We're being robbed", "They're so dirty!" (1.2. 16-17). Despite multiculturalism such perceptions of immigrants remain. Under the umbrella of multiculturalism Antonio will always be a "wop" or a "spaghetti". However, Antonio, who is a first generation immigrant, does not view himself as an outsider because in his materialistically oriented vision of assimilation he is Canadian. After all, he bought the expensive house and car and sends his son to English school to secure their future. It is through the second generation of immigrants, his son and daughter, that his limited vision is uncovered. Antonio is incapable of perceiving his own exploitation as an immigrant. This is played out in his prejudices against his former fellow Italian immigrants like Zio and his attitude towards other groups of immigrants. He distances himself from them and does not attempt to understand how they are all being exploited. He addresses Zio condescendingly saying, "[y]ou make us ashamed with your bicycle and your sharpening wheel during the week, and your balloons on holidays. People like you turn us into a laughing stock" (1.10.58). He uses his economic success to distinguish himself socially and racially. He has obviously forgotten his own days of struggling poverty because he was able to overcome them through a capitalist exclusionary vision. Antonio accepts the limited economic status that Canadian society allows him without quibbling. He himself adopts a white supremacist attitude as he refers to Greek immigrants who appear on the labour scene, workings for less wages than Italians saying, "All we need now are blacks" (1.4.25). He does not perceive that both the Italians and Greeks are being economically exploited by society. Antonio as a character is paradoxical on various levels. Despite his various attempts to distance himself from the immigrant position and his adoption of supremacist and racist visions, he continues to see himself as "other" speaking still from an outsider position when he describes Canadians saying, "only because there are more of them, it doesn't mean that they should have the right to decide for us" (1.4.23).

Hasan and Antonio's interpretation of racism and their understanding of identity in relation to race is formulated not only through the paradoxical workings of multiculturalism, which "encrypts their bodies" exposing them to the lashes of racism, but also through the influence of their past personal histories. Multiculturalism supposedly incorporates the past as a whole entity without attempting to analyze its constituents. It is this supposition which weakens it as a viable means for peaceful co-existence of identities. The assumption that all immigrants from diverse origins can

co-exist under the umbrella of multiculturalism according to the same criteria is questionable. Conversely as a system of co-existence multiculturalism should help Canadians understand immigrant culture and history in relation to theirs. For this to occur successfully a process of the distinction of the essential and basic components of an immigrant's culture and experience becomes necessary. There also needs to be a realization that some components are open to change while others are not. In this lies the centrality of compilation and evaluation of past histories. Through a descriptive study of multiculturalism as a social system, this history supposedly dies as a unique structure and reappears in ghost form from within multiculturalism. As Itwaru proposes, cultural change must occur for the ethnic society to be fully included in national life because there is a contradiction between ethnic life and national life. This is a difficult process because ethnic identity is not merely composed of distinctive food, traditional dress and language.

Troubling Belonging Due to Separatism

In the sixties, immigrants in Quebec like Hasan and Antonio had to deal with separatism, an additional block that complicates a sense of belonging. Separatism further obscures the situation for immigrants since they are invited to join a supposedly dual-pronged Canadian identity, which has two converging faces, the English and the French. Antonio refers to the workings of separatism at quite an early stage in the play. When he is still alone in Canada and writes to his family forcefully insists to his wife that she must write Quebec on the envelope, which stresses Quebec's constant attempt at achieving a distinguished identity. Antonio prefers to be part of Anglo-American culture and does not understand the need for separatism "I wonder what the hell those separatists want" (22). Antonio also refers to how immigrants are always the first to be interrogated when something goes wrong like the bombing and crimes, which took place during that time; "it's always the same whenever something is wrong. We immigrants always get blamed" (220). However, despite his views against it Antonio believes he has a right to decide on the question of separatism too, "only because there are more of them, it doesn't mean that they should have the right to decide for us" (23). His Italian nationalism also flares up, as a result he claims that he has a stronger claim to Canada than the English or the French because it was an Italian explorer who first landed on the Cape of Breton, "It was an Italian guy who got here before anyone else Giovanni Caboto" (24).

Hasan arrives in Canada amidst the separatist movement in the sixties as well. Through his experience we get a glimpse of what minorities experienced in Quebec during this turbulent period. Hasan refers to the declaration of a state of emergency in 1970 due to incidents of

assassination, kidnapping and sabotage. The fear and indecision of immigrants during this experience is described. Hasan and immigrants like him felt that though Quebec's separation does not affect them directly it might affect their long term plans, "what would be their attitude toward Canada as a country to which they immigrated, if Quebec seceded from it? […] will the government of Quebec consider itself responsible for them or will it round them up and place, them in large camps in order to force the federal government to take them," (30). When Rene Levesque and the Parti Quebecois won the majority in 1976 everyone believed that separation was inevitable. Hasan and his friends and many of the English Canadians considered moving to Ontario. Everyone wondered what would happen to the provinces east of Quebec, "will they be isolated from the motherland like Pakistan […] or will they join America to become the fifty-first state?" (30). Hasan finds himself and his friends amidst all the action when the police begin to raid the houses in his district at night. Memories of despotic tyranny of mother countries start to flash in the minds of immigrants, "the Lebanese remembered what happened to their country because of racism and bigotry […] and so did the Sikhs, the Tamils, and the Irish" (36). In this is shown the role past histories and experiences play in shaping a multicultural identity. The construction of a multicultural identity is not a simple additive exercise where various facets of immigrants' lives meld and join easily. It is rather a complex process which involves wrought-ed self-fashioning.

Language and Belonging

Since both Hasan and Antonio are in Quebec during the separatist attempts of the late sixties, living in Montreal they have firsthand experience with a very important element of this separatism through language. The French language has always been an important issue in Quebec. Though Canada is officially a bilingual country, in Quebec the French language is distinguished in many ways. Alice Nakamura and Masao Nakamura assess language policy in Canada saying, "a tension exists between the central government, which acts as a protector of language minorities, and the provincial or state governments, which restrict minority – language rights" (192). In Quebec, French is enforced in many ways. For example in Quebec unilingual French exterior signs are mandatory except for ethnic-oriented stores. As for the language used at work employees must obtain a certificate from the Office de langue francaise in Quebec. In addition to that, language requirements during the stages of hiring, promoting and firing are regulated also. Due to all these policies French speakers have been enhanced through increased French

schooling of allophones and Anglophones. This strong stress on the French language in Quebec in the present is the result of its curtailing historically. Hasan refers to the language problems he faces in Montreal due to the insistence of the Quebecois on the French language, "[H]e'd be more angry and irritable that whoever opens a door, answers a question, or volunteers to help him would address him in French" (Elkhadem 29).

Voiceless People was originally written in French and is part of a trilogy of plays written by Micone. The play was published and translated in Canada with Canada Council of the Arts money. In this sense the dissemination of the play is a political act in line with multicultural policies. In this play, Antonio's attitude to language embodies one of the attitudes towards English language in the Italian community in the late sixties. He sends his son to an English school to insure his success in life since according to his own experience English is the key to success, "Yes, the English don't only have the right cards, they also know how to play them. That's why they win" (1.5.29). The English language is a symbol of success for him. Linteau refers to the prevalence of this Italian attitude towards the English language in some Italian circles in the late sixties saying, "They were convinced that English was essential for socio-economic advancement and necessary to ensure that their children could move out of Quebec if they wished" (200). His daughter Nancy draws his attention to the inaccuracy of his views reminding him that they are living in a province with distinct language policies which govern the acquisition of jobs saying, " The real English send their kids to French school so that they can stay bosses. It's the phoney English like you who don't understand a word of English who send their kids to English school" (1.7.45). Antonio also increases his son's sense of alienation by sending him to English school. Mario wishes to truly belong in Quebec culture and is irked by his father's insistence that studying English is for his future and angrily addresses his father saying "I wanna live now, now, okay?" (1.9.51). Mario is forced to speak three languages to communicate with all those around him. He speaks Calabrese, which is a dialect of Italian with his parents, French with his sister and girlfriend, and English with his friends. Despite all of his father's pressures he wishes to integrate in French Canada. He breaks Italian custom and leaves home to live his life the way he pleases. Nancy, Antonio's daughter does the same. Elkhadem does not dwell a great deal on the issue of language in his novella. In several instances he mentions that Hasan faces some language difficulties upon coming to Canada because he was told that Montreal is French speaking. The novella however was published originally in both English and Arabic simultaneously in one book. In this it seems that Elkhadem though concerned with the separatist events seems to be more

interested in directing his novella towards an Arab reading community and French for him is not considered as a shaping factor in his linguistic identity as a Canadian. Such an attitude is quite prevalent in many parts of English-speaking Canada, where the only possible place for you to see French is on the labels of the food you buy at the supermarket. It also points to the hierarchy which exists within the practice of multiculturalism which in reality winds down to a limited limiting bilingualism which incurs that French or English are somewhere at the top of the linguistic plateau while all other languages are superficially included under the umbrella of a multilingualism which fails to be fully actuated. Elkhadem in directing his work towards an Arabic reading audience in the publication format of his novella is indirectly underlining weaknesses in the application of linguistic multiculturalism in Canada during the separatist period in Canadian history so that the French language is not even taken into consideration in relation to Hasan's construction of identity and French to him becomes merely an annoyance though it is one of the official languages of his new home.

Both Antonio and Hasan's attempts at belonging become complicated to the previously discussed culmination of factors. Multiculturalism though it prescriptively claims to be a harbor which brings together different races falls short of developing to incorporate the richness of immigrant culture(s) in all their complexities. The various components that play a role in forging immigrant experiences are multilayered and intersectional. Multiculturalism as a concept has great potential to create a society in which all members belong. As both Elkhadem and Micone conjecture in their writing multiculturalism should be questioned for it to be more realistically applicable so that the "Flying Egyptian" and the "Italian Wop" can become Canadian. The hope for change exists however those who bring about this change need to be people "who move between monolithic systems of power […] who have had to negotiate multiple relations of gender, race, language, class, nationality, and culture" (Coleman 69). Accordingly, it is within the adjacency of cultures that contradictions occur which eventually lead social change to occur. However, today within the context of globalization things are further complicated. Various questions impose themselves upon us: can multiculturalism exist practically within the current historical and political moment? Moreover, if it can how truly conducive in developing Canadian identity/ can it truly be? If the sixties introduced this policy how viable is it now within the context of racial relations and

discriminatory practices which continue despite the image multiculturalism upholds. The development of the individual cultures of Canada can grow in parallel to a shared Canadian culture. It is not necessary to continue to appose the Canadian multiculturalism and other modes of belonging like the "melting pot" in the US. It does not necessarily have to be either preservation versus complete deletion of differences. A dialogue between these two positions needs to continue in order for a living multicultural society to continue to thrive, because in keeping concepts like multiculturalism alive and open to questioning we overcome the barriers of set definitions that cramp societal development and growth. Immigrant literature being a liminal scope provides a peek into means of further developing affiliations and notions of belonging

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