

Diasporic Ecologies of Survival: Ecofeminist Approaches in Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* and Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*

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Abstract—Ecofeminism emphasizes the commonality between the experiences of oppressed women and a polluted planet. It is also a method of analysing how much each of these writers brings out the hushed voices of diasporic groups and how much they are connected with nature. This study examines the application of ecofeminism in comparing Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* and Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*. This research explores how and why each of these texts relates to Gender, Nature, and Cultural Identity. Dumas and Thammavongsa, in each of their autobiographical narratives, breach Patriarchal traditions and are struggling with environments that shape their identities. Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* amusingly defies her struggles with adapting to becoming an Iranian in America and is a subtle satire on Cultural Displacement and Nature. Similarly, Thammavongsa's collection of short stories, *How to Pronounce Knife*, voices concern for Lao Immigrants and their struggle with survival and resilience, not only within their environment but also within their societal position. This research examines how these two authors incorporate the concepts of ecofeminism within the description of Gender, Cultural Survival, and Ecological Awareness. It uncovers the intertwining of personal and communal histories with the physical and social landscapes in which they live. Through this comparison, the research identifies the role of environmental and gendered experiences in constructing narratives.

Index Terms—Ecofeminism, Diaspora, cultural identity, Iranian immigrants, Laotian immigrants

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism seeks to examine the intersectional oppression of women and nature based on patriarchal systems that devalue both. This concept developed in the 1970s women's and environmental movements as a response to the intersecting dimensions of gender and ecological justice. Ecofeminism draws on feminist, environmental, postcolonial, and indigenous perspectives to highlight the intersection of Gender, Race, and Class with ecological concerns. Ecofeminism opposes the current social systems that oppress nature and women. These systems are commonly accompanied by patriarchal power dynamics, colonial mastery, and capitalist exploitation. Ecofeminism holds that the same logic that is used to justify nature's exploitation as resource to be controlled and utilized for human advantage also justifies the control of women, often in the same practices and language (Plumwood, 1993). The feminist tradition of ecofeminism stresses the importance of gender in examining how both social and environmental injustices are felt by different groups of individuals, particularly women of colour, Indigenous people, and the working class. Ecofeminism is also centred on intersectionality, a theory that identifies how Gender, Class, Race, and Environmental categories intersect to create specific experiences of oppression. For ecofeminists, it is not sufficient to critique patriarchy or ecological degradation on its own; instead, they are interested in understanding how such problems intersect with other systems of power, including Colonialism, Racism and Capitalism. In Diaspora Literature, Ecofeminism highlights how dislocated communities, especially women, face double forms of exclusion: Environmental and Gendered. Diaspora works trace the intersection between identity, terrain, and survival, which resonates with ecofeminist critiques of domination and exploitation. Through the Ecofeminist analysis of Diaspora works, this study examines the positioning of women in terms of taking back their environment as well as agency.

This approach also substantiates the greater Ecological crisis and the need for intersectional solutions to Gender and Ecological issues. The greatest Ecofeminist contribution is its ability to tackle global issues on a Post-Colonialist and

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Diasporic basis. Postcolonial Ecofeminist theory analyses how colonialism has impacted the Race-Gender-nature relationship. Diaspora Ecofeminism emphasizes interreflection between Displacement, Migration, and home loss alongside Ecological and Gender conflict. Diasporic women experience intricate relationships between Land, Identity, and Survival as they encounter the Ecological and Cultural burdens of their host countries alongside their continuing ties to their original countries. In this context, Ecofeminism provides a framework for explaining how Diasporic women encounter Environmental and Gendered oppression, who themselves could be confronted with the issues of Classism, Racism, and Xenophobia.

This study's literature review highlights the absence of previous knowledge on the topics covered in the current study, making it more novel and original. The current study focuses on Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* and Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have examined the short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife* and *Funny in Farsi*, a memoir.

In the article "Immigrant subjecthood in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*" (Ignjatović, 2023) investigates the concept of subjecthood within the context of Canadian immigration policy, focusing on the racial and ethnocentric discrimination faced by noncitizens, including migrants, immigrants, refugees, and illegal immigrants. The findings show that Canada's immigration policies that stem from the economy devalue the credentials and knowledge of new immigrants bring to the table. In fact, the new policy suggests that new immigrants need to continue their education. While Canada considers itself a bright and multicultural society, the immigration system it has set up ensures that inequality prevails. After all, new immigrants in Canada must take up marginal roles that affect women. The case studies carried out by John Harles highlight the plight of Laotians as they try to assimilate into xenophobia.

Jafarbeglou (2026) in the article, "Hybridity in Translation: The case of *Funny in Farsi: A memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*" illustrates that hybridity in translated texts arises from the interplay between source and target cultures, resulting in what scholars term a "dual space" where both cultural systems coexist. Utilising the notion of hybrid texts as articulated by Schäffner and Adab (2001), the study underscores that these texts frequently encompass culturally specific elements that may seem unfamiliar or "out of place" within the target culture, thereby presenting challenges for translators. This study interprets hybridity within diasporic frameworks. Migrant narratives inherently reflect cultural combination. Identity and cultural negotiation are articulated through linguistics and translation. Language is integrally linked to its cultural context. Accordingly, translation forms a process of intercultural negotiation cannot be reduced to a simple linguistic transfer. Also, the study discusses important translation strategies such as domestication and foreignization, especially through Venuti's (1995) framework. This implies that translators seek a balance between preserving differences in culture and ensuring the text is accessible for the target audience. This research implies that hybridity in translation is deeply connected to cultural identity, diaspora, and the translator's deliberate choices. Overall, these elements impact the translation of meaning and cultural differences among languages.

Casco-Solis (2025) states that Souvankham Thammavongsa's short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife* contests the prevailing representational frameworks that constrain immigrants to narratives of trauma and victimization. This study analyzes how Thammavongsa's Lao immigrant characters counter neoliberal narratives that exploit happiness to enforce assimilation while preserving cultural identity and dignity. Thammavongsa does not portray immigrants as helpless victims or criminals. Instead, she shows them as complicated people who are trying to keep their language, roots, and cultural traits despite pressure to fit in. This study employs Sara Ahmed's concept of happiness and vulnerability scholarship to examine the influence of economic instability on immigrants' relationships with the promises of prosperity in host nations. The study reveals how the immigrant characters can be interdependent, show solidarity, and care for each other, which are all forms of collective resistance. These emotional connections help cultures stay alive and fight against erasure by giving people new ways to think about life as immigrant. Thammavongsa breaks down stereotypes by placing everyday experiences in everyday places at the centre of her work. This study represents how immigrants deal with being displaced and build community.

Dumas' ability to exist in this hybrid space allows her family to interact with Americans, with her experiences being enriched by the blending of cultures, unlike her parents, who remain rooted in traditional Iranian values. Raheja (2022) in the thesis "Diasporic Playgrounds: How coming-of-Age Stories Unsettle Official Multiculturalism in Carriane Leung's *That Time I Loved You* and Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*", focuses on how these stories oppose the hegemonic government narratives of multiculturalism in Canada. Both novels portray the complexities of intergenerational trauma, mental illness, and cultural assimilation, especially through the lives of "1.5 generation" children who must navigate linguistic and cultural boundaries to reconcile their family's trauma. This generation, working overtime or double shifts, resorts to coping through art, but their work offers a specific intersection of diasporic subjectivity and traditional knowledge passed down through generations. In addition, the thesis believes that such coming-of-age literature foregoes heteronormative epistemologies in normative knowledge for paradigmatic transformation in which children's imaginations take precedence in dialogue about social, economic, and environmental justice.

This study is part of expanding literature that gives voice to and places in the foreground silenced voices, offering new lines of understanding about the mundane lives of refugee and immigrant peoples. According to Adlesgruber (2023), the author discusses food consumption in Anglophone Canadian short fiction by Zalina Reid Benta in *Frying Plantain* and

Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*, highlighting the themes of migration, identity, and memory in Anglophone Canadian Literature. Food is discussed as a symbolic representation throughout these narratives for purposes such as love symbolization, intergenerational conflict, and transcending cultural assimilation.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative, text-based literary analysis to assess the intersection of Ecofeminism, Diaspora, and Cultural identity in Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* (2004) and Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020). This study applies a comparative qualitative research methodology to analyse thematic, linguistic, and ecological patterns in both primary texts. This study theoretically supported in Ecofeminist theory (Plumwood, 1993; Merchant, 1980), post-colonial diasporic theory (Bhabha, 1994), and intersectionally (Mohanty, 2003), collectively offering a multidimensional analytical framework for the exploration of gender, race, ecology, and displacement within diasporic narratives.

Existing research critically analysed and contextualizes this study. Ignjatović (2023) analyses immigrant subjectivity and racial discrimination in Thammavongsa's work, highlighting disparities in Canadian immigration policy. Jafarbeglou (2026) explores hybridity in translation in *Funny in Farsi*, emphasising how diasporic narratives reflect intercultural negotiation and linguistic dislocation. Casco-Solis (2025) addresses happiness and resilience in Thammavongsa's short story collection, highlighting how immigrant characters overcome neoliberal assimilation pressures via social solidarity. Raheja (2022) studies how coming-of-age diasporic narratives challenge multiculturalism, emphasizing intergenerational suffering and cultural dislocation experienced by the immigrant group. Adlesgruber (2023) analyses food as a symbolic focus of memory, migration, and identity in diasporic works, which is closely compatible with this ecofeminist concept of food and nature. These primarily address immigration, hybridity, and cultural identity. However, no study offers an ecofeminist approach for both texts. This work bridges a significant gap in the field by providing new findings on diaspora studies and ecofeminism through close reading and in-depth analysis of primary texts.

IV. DISCUSSION

Nature has given symbolic meaning in the diasporic narratives, generally representing home, identity, and the tension between traditional culture and modernity (Bhabha, 1994). For women in the Diaspora, the space they inhabit is one of contradictions, marked by both internal turmoil and physical displacement (Anzaldúa, 1987). In regard to this discussion, the female characters in the two selected texts relate to their surroundings in ways that reflect the struggles they face, including alienation, cultural assimilation, individual identity, and the power relations involved in the phenomenon of migration (George, 1996). The crossing of boundaries in gender, culture, and geography is indicative of its influence on the lives of women in the Diaspora in terms of their notions of belonging and identity (Mohanty, 2003). Lastly, nature can be used as the domain for resistance as well as the empowerment of women in the Diaspora, aiding in the recovery of their cultural identity in opposition to hegemonic discourse (DeLoughrey, 2007).

However, Thammavongsa adds another dimension to the notion of power-based alienation of the body and the nature of language, in which the female protagonist's identity is further constructed in relation to words, her voice, and how others perceive her. "The cultural tradition that treats nature as resource for exploitation are critiqued, advocating instead for a holistic and respectful understanding of nature, which indicates the moral treatment of women in society" (Merchant, 1980, p. 175).

The characters created by both Thammavongsa and Dumas are alienated from their homelands and roles within their respective cultures. In addition, nature plays a symbolic role in both works, highlighting how the protagonists' relationship with their cultures is shaped by their interactions with the social and natural environments they inhabit. Dumas' alienation is expressed not only in her personal dislocation but also in her separation from the landscapes of Iran, which she left behind, and the new landscapes of America that feel foreign. Thammavongsa captures the alienation of the body and mind.

Dumas' memoir presents the concept of 'Alienation of Women and Nature'. The novel contains many instances connected to this concept of the "other." Grosz states that "Diasporic women's alienation is often escalated by linguistic barriers, as their disconnection from both their cultural and natural environments is intensified by the struggle to communicate, reflecting the intersection of gendered, ecological, and linguistic oppression" (Grosz, 1996). In *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas' encounter alienation and social isolation experienced by herself and her mother, Nazireh, as they negotiate linguistic barriers and cultural displacement within an unfamiliar Socio-cultural environment. Dumas explained her battle and stated that,

My mother and I did not speak English, so the meeting was just a conversation between my father and Mrs. Sandberg. All the students were watching us, not only because I had come to school with my mother, but also because we could not communicate in their language, and they thought we were foolish. (Dumas, 2004, pp. 4, 6)

In *Funny in Farsi*, the protagonist and her mother, Nazireh, feel disconnected and socially isolated due to their inability to understand English while living in a foreign country. They face various environmental and social challenges in their new homes. This theme is also present in the short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife* by Thammavongsa.

For the night meal, they had cabbage and chitterlings. Whenever she brought these meals to school, her classmates mocked her about the odor. In response, she retorted, “You wouldn’t recognize a good thing even if it landed right on your face!” Miss Choi scanned the room and spotted her. “Joy, you haven’t read it yet. Why don’t you grab your book and read for us?” The girl started reading, and all seemed to be going well until she got to the specific word. She read it as her father had instructed, but the girl felt it was not the right one since Miss Choi did not turn the page. However, the girl was not sure what the right pronunciation should be. (Thammavongsa, 2020, pp. 4, 7)

The alienation of the child in her identity, her struggles to speak the language of the host land, and her diet are exemplary aspects where Ecofeminism meets the marginalization of society in terms of women. Chitterlings and cabbage, which are part of her culture, are undesirable to others, symbolizing the alienation of women, especially those from marginalized groups. Magnusson and Marecek’s concept of interest in diasporic cultures is often associated with ethnicity. This culture is often associated with foreignness, threats, and tradition. Such representation generally tries to hold Diasporic communities as unique and unadaptable, stemming from the idea of cultural inflexibility or otherness (Magnusson & Marecek, 2012). Her ineptness at pronouncing the word ‘knife’ properly expresses her difficulty with the language that estranges her from her origins, embodying the concern of Woman’s identity and cultural expression suppressed within an environment governed by patriarchal, dominant, and colonial regimes. Her estrangement is also meshed with issues related to food and language, both expressing the need to adjust to the expectations laid out by the “alien land” of assimilation and subservience. Ecofeminism unmask the degradation of both women and nature from particular backgrounds and those related to particular cultural traditions that experience estrangement and dismissal (Ghandeharion & Farshi, 2017). A woman’s discomfort in the school environment portrays how women from particular or non-western cultures are alienated from established social performances, mirroring the derision given to nature within patriarchal paradigms.

In several places in the book, Dumas points out the disconnect in food customs and the longing for home food in America. In these places, Dumas explains that,

In Iran food preparation consumed a large part of every day, beginning early in the morning when the narrator’s mother instructed the household servant, Zahra, which vegetables should be washed and chopped. The vegetables were either grown in the family garden or bought the day before. The menus were dictated by what vegetables were in season. In summer, there might be eggplant or okra stew, served with fresh tomatoes and small cucumbers that the narrator peeled and salted herself. Celery or rhubarb stew might appear in winter, with cilantro, parsley, fenugreek, and the narrator’s favourite fruit, the sweet lemon, an aromatic citrus fruit with a very thin skin, almost never found in the United States. Cooking requires patience, as hours are spent allowing flavours to combine. When lunch was finally prepared, the family gathered at the table to enjoy a meal as part of a traditional Persian feast. (Dumas, 2004, p. 25)

In these lines, Dumas conveys the nostalgic and intimate relationships between women, nature, and food under the Ecofeminist perspective. This reveals how intimacy pertains to a feeling of estrangement, as opposed to unity (Garrard, 2012). It also pertains to the need for seasonal and indigenous foods, along with patience and effort in food preparation. Similarly, in “Randy Travis”, from the short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife*, the narrator conveys a great love for food from her homeland. The narrator says,

My mother was delighted. She cooked meals my father liked. My mother has soaked sticky rice for three days prior to our trip. Once it had been cooked, she put the sticky rice into thipkhao and covered it with a blanket to keep it warm until it was served. Additionally, she made a papaya salad with a pounding of small dry shrimp and fried two quails, which she packaged in foil made of aluminium. It is a fact that prior to this experience, I had never recognized the beauty of a Lao meal. The colours of such meals starkly contrast with the colour of TV dinners. The colours seemed like a festive invitation. It seemed like she came from such a culture because of the special way she showed affection. It struck a chord about why my father liked only one type of food. (Thammavongsa, 2020, pp. 50-51).

The protagonist’s thought process about her mother’s cooking is a great example of how nostalgia and alienation can come from food and the culture experiences that go along with it. The mother’s cooking, consisting of thipkhao, a method of cooking little dry shrimps, and fried quails, is more than mere sustenance. Hashemipour (2011) suggests that this is her love for her homeland and her effort to relieve her family’s sense of belonging and identity in a foreign land. This is directly relevant to the principles of Ecofeminism, which stress the interrelatedness of all forms of degradation, whether environmental, feminine, or cultural. Merchant (1980) suggests that by cooking indigenous cuisine, the protagonist’s mother keeps herself connected to nature and her cultural heritage, thus resisting the experience of alienation in a foreign land. This points to how women, particularly diasporic ones, take up the challenge of confronting the issue of identity and belonging. Food, in its vibrant colours and flavours, becomes a means of retrieving and reclaiming authority over their alienated state, offering a sensory reminder of both home and the nurturing roles women play in preserving and transmitting culture. *Funny in Farsi* showcases the alienation and prejudice experienced by individuals from a marginalized group, specifically Iranian women. Dumas reports that,

in Berkeley, people were either thrilled or horrified to meet Iranians. Sometimes, mentioning that I was from Iran completely ended the conversation. I never knew why, but I assume that some people fear that I might really

be yet another female terrorist masquerading as a history of art major UC Berkeley. My favourite category of question, however assumed that all Iranians were really just one big family: “Do you know Ali Akbari in Cincinnati?” people would ask. “He’s so nice.” (Dumas, 2004, p. 40)

This shows how gendered stereotypes intersect with environmental and geopolitical narratives about the “other.” According to Glazebrook (2002), the Dumas case shows that women from marginalized cultures are often unfairly seen as violent and oppressive tropes. From an ecofeminist perspective, this also indicates how the female body becomes a site of control and misunderstanding, where a woman’s identity is both politicized and racialized, just as nature is often objectified, exploited and misunderstood in global narratives. The short story “Edge of the world” from *How to Pronounce Knife* highlights the narrator’s experience of racial discrimination based on cultural background:

My mother encouraged me to play with other kids at the party. They were rowdy, running around, and speaking English with one another. I wanted to play with, but they kept pushing me on the arm and telling me I was “it.” I did not know what “it” was, but every time I tried to get near one of them, any time I came close, they’d run from me like they didn’t want to play with me at all. (Thammavongsa, 2020, p. 98)

The protagonist’s experience of racial discrimination, driven by her cultural background, leads to profound social isolation. This example shows the struggles that members of the Diasporic community go through due to marginalization from cultural differences. As Singh (2019) argues, the issue brought out in the story is that of how this marginalization leads to the protagonist’s isolation from her friends and, more importantly, her identity, as a consequence of a world that makes her an “other.” In this light, the critique of interlocking oppressions as seen in this study discusses how women from a marginalized racial cultural background and others experience a kind of disempowerment based on a link between social isolation and the environmental and social context of their lives.

V. RESULTS

The findings of this study show that nature serves as an effective tool in the articulation of alienation, cultural dislocation, and identity struggle for the protagonists of both *Funny in Farsi* and *How to Pronounce Knife*. Dumas’ and Thammavongsa’s protagonists experience dislocation not only from their homelands but also from the social norms and landscapes of their host lands. The intersection of Gender, Culture, and Language Barriers creates a complex site of alienation wherein food and language assume unmistakable dimensions of belonging and identity. This study interprets women’s relationship with culturally rooted food within an ecofeminist critique, which stresses women’s attempts to retrieve power and voice their identities in the context of exclusion. These narratives also tend to show that the environmental and social dislocation witnessed by these women is exacerbated by the racial and gender stereotypes they are confronted with, further sealing their position of alterity. Finally, the study demonstrates how the ecocritical approach makes it possible to perceive the interlinking between gendered, cultural, and ecological forms of oppression and suggests ways in which alienated women take up their alienation on both the individual and collective levels.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study, Ecofeminism, Gender, and Cultural Identity were explored and examined through works such as *Funny in Farsi* by Firoozeh Dumas and *How to Pronounce Knife* by Souvankham Thammavongsa. Through Ecofeminist theory, this study shows how the characters in these works are affected by alienation and dislocation based on their connections with nature and society. The themes of food, language, and nature are important in highlighting the struggle of these characters in declaring their identities under the assimilation pressures of culture, chauvinism of gender, and racism. The findings of this research, apart from filling the gap in previous research by employing the concept of Ecofeminism in the study of Dumas’ and Thammavongsa’s works, also contribute to the wider argument of how literature can and should describe the struggles of marginalized women under a globalized environment of society. According to the ideology of ecological feminism, this research further provides an opportunity to understand how marginalized women resist the oppression they face in their environments and how these stories of survival also play a part in dealing with the wider argument of Social Justice, Environmental Sustainability, and Gender Equality. However, further research opportunities exist in these chosen works. Future researchers may investigate feminist and postcolonial issues in these short story collections and memoirs.

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