MULTICULTURALISM IN THOMAS KING'S "THE COLOUR OF WALLS"

Cristina NICOLAESCU
Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey

Abstract: In this essay, a brief survey of the history of Canadian and American multiculturalism will be done in order to understand the background of Thomas King's story and highlight the issues regarding pluralism and assimilation. Although many acts to prevent assimilation have been implemented throughout the last century, pluralism and multiculturalism in Canada have continuously experienced problems. "The Colour of Walls" is a story from the collection entitled A Short History of Indians in Canada in which he criticizes the continuous efforts for assimilation exhibited by White men towards people of different races and origins.

Keywords: multiculturalism, assimilation, difference, ethnicity, Thomas King

Thomas King is a Canadian-American author of Cherokee and German-American descent, who often articulates the problems experienced by North American First Nations in his writings. King is critical of Canadian and American policies towards aboriginal people's rights throughout the continent and has written many books questioning the attitude of governments and advocating the rights of indigenous people. One example of King's writings on these issues is the short story "The Colour of Walls" from his collection titled *A Short History of Indians in Canada* in which he criticizes assimilation tendencies on the part of white people. In the story, a white man Harper Stevenson wants to have his office walls painted in white. He gets angry when he realizes that the walls has not been painted in white, although he ordered it to be done so. He repeats his order again, only to find out that the walls were dark when he returns to the office. The story goes on to prove that multiple coats of paint did little to change the color to white.

Thomas King uses metaphor of wall in his story. Walls symbolizes indigenous people who resist to the efforts of assimilation. The author tries to convince his reader the impossibility of assimilation in his story. Although the white man tries to change the color of the walls into white, because of their "history" walls cannot be painted in bright white. Despite one's best efforts to whitewash them, especially the old walls, never embraces the intended new color. The author, as he does in other stories in the collection, examines the problems regarding tolerance and assimilation policies in Canada. The story reflects the writer's possession towards the possibilities of a pluralistic view. It may be claimed that he adopts pluralistic view rather than assimilationist one.

Multiculturalism is a phenomenon adapted by a variety of nations throughout the world, which can be described as "a worldview that rejects the global centrality of any single culture or historical perspective" (Madigan, 1993:169) It is "a principle, an approach, or a set of rules of conduct that guides the interactions and influences the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of people from diverse cultural backgrounds" (Fu, 1993). The

BDD-A22133 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:55 UTC)

principle is based on the notion that every culture or cultural groups should be recognized regardless of their differences. Since culture is a very broad term, multiculturalism can be examined in a variety of different categories including language, race, ethnicity, religion and several others. In particular, ethnic aspects of multiculturalism, an issue Thomas King demonstrates in the story, "The Colour of Walls", will be examined in this essay.

There are people belonging to different racial, ethnic, religious groups and demanding rights for their values and beliefs in every country, and thus multiculturalism "represents a liberal democratic attempt to promote tolerance towards a range of cultural practices within the contexts of the nation-state". (Barker, 2004:127) Multiculturalism, like culture, is a broad term on which many different approaches have been suggested such as communitarian and libertarian justifications. Among the most important scholars studying on multiculturalism are and Charles Taylor, adapting a communitarian justification to the term and Will Kymlicka, who based his theories upon a liberalist approach.

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher from Quebec, locates his theory on communitarian critique of liberalism. Liberalists are those holding that individuals should freely choose what they think that best fits for their view of the world. Individuals and their rights are the primary facet to consider, not community. Their views or policies advocates individual freedom. Those championing communitarian approach does not accept the notion that individual must be considered before community. Charles Taylor, embracing communitarian approach, believes that an individual necessitates a community and institutions in order to gain his identity. A man cannot be considered self-sufficient, disregarding the role of community. For Taylor, the recognition of diverse cultures as equal institutions can be accomplished by overthrowing the notion of identical liberties. "Our identity is shaped by recognition of others … and multicultural demands … seek the recognition members of these groups need to establish a strong identity" (Gutmann and Taylor, 1994:384).

Another Canadian political philosopher, Kymlicka, on the other hand, proposes a liberal theory of multiculturalism depending on the liberal values of autonomy and equality. The philosopher explains his ideas in his study *Multicultural Citizenship*:

For meaningful individual choice to be possible, individuals need not only access to information, the capacity to reflectively evaluate it, and freedom of expression and association. They also need access to a societal culture. Group-differentiated measures that secure and promote this access may, therefore, have a legitimate role to play in a liberal theory of justice (1995:84)

"Freedom", according to the Canadian "involves making choices among various options, and our societal culture not only provides these options, but also makes them meaningful to us" (Kymlicka, 1995). In that respect, Taylor and Kymlicka propose two different approaches for multiculturalism.

An ideal practice of multiculturalism, either liberal or communitarian, can be seen as celebration and embrace of differences. There are several big countries officially promoting and encouraging multiculturalism such as Canada and the United States, which are two

BDD-A22133 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:55 UTC)

practitioners of different multiculturalist approaches. While Canada adopts the notion of cultural 'mosaic', in which different ethnic groups and their languages coexist within society, the United States is in favor of 'melting pot' in which different elements of various cultures create a homogenous, harmonic unity.

Having one of the largest economy and diverse population, Canada was the first country to adopt multiculturalism officially. According to self-reported figures of the 2006 census, among ethnic origins of people living in Canada are the Canadian, the English the French, the Scottish, the Irish, the German, the Italian, the Chinese, the First Nations, the Ukrainian , and the Dutch, with respect to percentages.(Statistics Canada, 2006) In 1971, liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced the multiculturalism as the official policy of Canada, following the implementation of official bilingualism (French and English) in 1969. It was followed by Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. However, these steps were not the first regarding multicultural issues. Prior to these acts, there had been Indian Acts, for example in 1876, or revisions of previous acts recognizing Indians officially like that of 1951. These steps taken by liberal governments of Canada aimed at accepting all Canadian citizens including First Nations equal disregarding their origins, their language and other kinds of affiliations such as religion. The policy also included the preservation of aboriginal people's rights. However, Thomas King strikes the deficiencies regarding the equal treatment of Indians and all aboriginals.

Both Taylor and Kymlicka deal with Canadian multiculturalism and its possibilities. Will Kymlicka, argues that the discussion of Canada's diversity and multiculturalism owes much to individuals, and should be on basis of liberal notion of "freedom and equality of individual citizens" (Kymlicka, 1995:34) The distinction between rights of national minorities and rights of immigrants, namely the two patterns of cultural diversity, is very central to Canadian model. Kymlicka describes 'national minorities' as those previously self-governed, and having their own territories incorporate into a broader state such as Quebecois and Aboriginals. Immigrants, on the other hand, create loose associations that Kymlicka defines as 'ethnic groups". These group's articulations of their ethnic characteristics within the society do not focus on the desire of living separately. Rather, they request more accommodation to the society through modified institutions and laws. (Kymlicka, 1995:10-11) Unlike, for example, aboriginals, they do not desire to establish a distinct society having their own rules.

While immigrant groups have increasingly asserted their right to express their ethnic particularity, they typically wish to do so within the public institutions of the English-speaking society (or French-speaking in Canada). In rejecting assimilation, they are not asking to set up a parallel society, as is typically demanded by national minorities (Kymlicka 1995, 15).

Taylor, on the other hand, in his essay "Interculturalism or Multiculturalism?" draws attention to one possible problems posed by multiculturalism in Canada:

The multicultural issue is often posed in terms of natives and immigrants, or people with a long local ancestry versus those who have more recently arrived. But it can also arise

BDD-A22133 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:55 UTC)

because of inequalities suffered by people who have always been there, as with women of historical national minorities, but whose subordination previously seemed normal, and now no longer does so in a fully democratic age. (2012:417)

Multicultural relationships in Canada are not always exhibiting a celebrated situation. There have been lengthy discussions regarding the possession of ethnic groups living in the country. Based on the issues stem from the application of multicultural approach, a vast scale literature exists written by both immigrants and First Nations. Thomas King is an important figure writing on the issues confronted by the people of his origin.

In the story, Thomas King is against the white man's policies which insist on assimilation or integration. Multiculturalism, once understood as acknowledging diversity, Harper, the main character of the story, seems to ignore and does not celebrate it. Instead, the author implies the fact that Harper tends to erase the difference of the natives, by insisting on having the walls painted in white. In King's story, walls symbolize natives, or those coming from different origins, while Harper's insistence on the color white reflects assimilationist attitudes of the White man. Multiculturalism in the generic sense involves policies aiming both at recognition of difference and integration, but in this context, more emphasis is put on the diversity. Aboriginals, or First Nation people of Canada carry citizenship of Canada, but the fact especially in the 60s and the 70s was explained by Taylor in his essay:

It had to be made clear that one was no closer to the heart of the Canadian identity if one was called Jones, than if one's name was Kowalski or Minelli. Culture, in the sense of what one received from one's origins, was sharply distinguished from citizenship. (414)

Regarding the fact that an ideal multiculturalism decenters any kind of ethnocentric identity and does not privilege any of ethnic groups, there have been attempts to claim one's superiority, which is a situation King wants us to consider. Upon Harper's second order for the walls' color:

If anything, the walls were darker. "What is going on?" Afua placed her hands on the walls. "These are old walls," she said. "They have a history. Walls have a memory." "White," said Harper. "I asked for white." "I know," said Afua, "but they don't want to cooperate."King shows us here that the things go worse if one behaves against the will of other people. That is, aboriginals resist the assimilationist intentions of the White Man. In Canada, the Indian Act may seem like a protection effort regarding Indian's culture, but it also contains policies controlling the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal peoples have been resisting the laws which were designed to control and erodes the social and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal people.

We can also see in the story that Harper's stereotyping symbolizing White man's general attitude towards others.

Get the black woman back," Harper told his secretary. "Actually," said the secretary, "she's Native." "Native?" said Harper. "She looks black.", … "But colours have their place.

BDD-A22133 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:55 UTC)

For instance, black is a fine colour for limousines and evening dresses, while white is the colour of choice for wedding dresses and the walls of offices where important business is conducted. (87-88)

Stereotyping can be seen as a conscious attempt to demonstrate the alleged superiority of a person over other races or ethnic groups. It has been a discursive tool for controlling peoples for the White man. "All blacks are the same" or "All natives are brown" are such statements that brings inequality into the surface of relationships.

"So," said Harper, after Afua had walked around the office, "what's this nonsense about the walls?" "Originally," said Afua, "I think they were darker." "So the colour is bleeding through?" Afua stood in the middle of Harper's office and closed her eyes. "The world is full of colour," she said.(88)

Afua tries to have Harper remember that white is not the only color in the world to consider. There are other traits to be celebrated throughout the world. If white man understands and tries to celebrate the differences, it will be better for everyone. In a multicultural state like Canada, it is much more beneficial to remember and recognize other colors than white.

In King's story, Afua represents the conscious voice of ideal multiculturalism in Canada. As a hybrid woman symbolizing the diversity of ethnicities, she wants Harper to face with his ill-treatments and misjudgments.

"White," said Harper. "I'd like a nice, clean white." "Old walls," said Afua, "they're great, but if you want bright white you're going to have to move to a newer office or tear out the walls and start over." (88)

Afua mentions the simple fact that in Canada there is no possibility to live without recognizing other ethnic groups, with all their differences in cultural, social and political aspects. In this country, there is a long history of indigenous people, and it would be impossible to assimilate them as if they were a blank sheet. The only way to deal with the differences is either to recognize or to return the beginnings of the New World, which is impossible. In order to live peacefully, Harper, and thus the White Man, should consider the differences as a source of richness. Assimilation would seem ugly when people of different colors do not want it. At the end of the story, something strange happens. The walls are bright white at the end, but Harper's hands, at this time, were ugly brown.

Harper sat in his office all day, enjoying his new walls, but that evening, when he reached out to turn off the lights, he discovered that his hands had turned black. Not black black, more a dark brown, though perhaps not a true dark brown, but certainly a mid-tone, darker than normal flesh.(89)

BDD-A22133 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:55 UTC)

Thomas King makes an analogy which skillfully criticizes those assimilating ethnic groups. At first, they resist to assimilation, but a continuous effort makes it impossible for walls to remain white. Yet, this time, the White Man's hand becomes very ugly. This symbolizes the intolerant, unsympathetic White man's fault and sin regarding his attitudes toward other types of people. The aggressive endeavor of assimilation is a crime which should not be conducted. If one still sustains this ill-treatment, it will be him who will have to bear its consequences. Recognition of differences and diversity is a sine qua non for a multicultural state like Canada. Otherwise, peace and tranquility will never happen. No matter how many acts have been passed, it is not until the people living there respect and tolerate each other that an ideal multiculturalism will not be achieved. Thomas King wants us to remember every time that "walls have a history" which cannot be erased.

WORKS CITED

Barker, Chris. (2004)"Multiculturalism" in SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies. SAGE Publications: London.

Fu, Victoria R. "Culture, Schooling, and Education in a Democracy Multiculturalism in Early Childhood Program" retrieved in 2 Jan 2015 <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eecearchive/books/multicul/fu.html>

Government of Canada. Statistics Canada. Retrieved in 1 Jan 2015 <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/index-eng.cfm >

Gutmann, Amy and Charles Taylor. (1994) ,Rev. Of. "Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition" reviewed by, Bruce Landesman. Ethics.

King, Thomas. (2013) A Short History of Indians in Canada. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

Kymlicka, Will. (1995) *Multicultural Citizenshi: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights.* Oxford University Press: New York

Madigan, Dan. (1993) "The Politics of Multicultural Literature for Children and Adolescents: Combining Perspectives and Conversations" in Language Arts, Vol. 70, No. 3, Multiculturalism and the Language Arts. National Council of Teachers of English, 168-176

Taylor, Charles. (2012) "Interculturalism or multiculturalism" in Philosophy Social Criticism. SAGE Publications May/June vol. 38. 413-423

BDD-A22133 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:55 UTC)