

„The Happiest Women, Like the Happiest Nations, Have No History“: A Woman’s Body as a Metaphor For The Nation

Finnish authors Aino Kallas and Sofi Oksanen have both written about Estonia, its people and history, often provocatively for their time. Both Kallas’ and Oksanen’s ties with Estonia¹ have allowed them to see behind the facade that Estonians put up; they write as both insiders and outsiders, treating issues that create contrasting reactions and feelings amongst their Estonian readers. Focusing on Kallas’ *The Wolf’s Bride* and Oksanen’s *Purge*, the former published during the „first independence“ (1928) and the latter during the re-independence (2008) of Estonia, I will ask what the role and purpose of the violence against women in Kallas and Oksanen is, and argue that they have used gender-based violence to depict other conflicts. Estonian literary scholar Sirje Olesk has drawn parallels between Oksanen’s and Kallas’ lives and works, seeing the style of both writers as realistic, but also sharing a mythological dimension, with characters that are often symbolic.² Kallas writes about a woman’s search for her sexuality and independence in a time when women’s roles were changing. The story takes place in the 17th century, but addresses the questions of the beginning of 20th century. According to Mia Spangenberg women’s sexuality was part of those questions and it is a part of Kallas’s work.³ Oksanen writes mainly through the eyes of female characters and the tragedy of love, betrayal and redemption of the wounds of contemporary Estonian history. Critical opinion in Estonia are that her novel is too dramatic, and that it gives an incorrect portrayal of life in Estonia during Soviet times⁴. Both Kallas and Oksanen have used history and fiction, and sympathised with humiliated people, women with

¹Aino Kallas was married to and Estonian, Oskar Kallas, and lived in Estonia; Sofi Oksanen’s Mother was Estonian

² Sirje Olesk, “Eesti teema Soome kirjanduses: Sofi Oksaneni romaan „Puhastus,“ *Keel ja Kirjandus*, no.7 (2010):481

³ Mia Spangenberg, “And Never the Twain Shall Meet: Masculinity in Crisis in Aino Kallas’s *Sudenmorsian* and Reigin Pappi,” *Journal of Finnish Studies*, volume 12, no. 1 (2008): 5

⁴ Olesk, 476

shame, and that allows various interpretations to their narratives. Relying on Sara Ahmed's theory of how emotions shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies and the image of the nation as a woman used in both the Russian and Finnish cultural spheres, I suggest that in both texts gender-based violence can be taken to a national level, seeing the individual woman's body as the collective body of a nation.

Estonia and Finland were both in the Russian culture sphere in the 1800s, where the patriarchal ruler Batiushka-Tsar was related to the nation Matushka-Rus.⁵ The 20th century brought changes in Russia and in the countries gaining independence from it. The position of women was changing, the Constitution of 1920 stated that all citizens were equal before the law.⁶ The symbol of woman as nation could still be read from both Kallas' and Oksanen's works. During the Finnish awakening period that started in the end of 19th century and influenced Kallas' thinking, the figure of the maiden of Finland, was pictured on many important works, such as Eetu Isto's painting *Hyökkäys* where the Finnish maiden is being attacked by the Russian eagle.⁷ Sofi Oksanen has said in her interview to Diana Damian, "Finland is a Motherland – the Maiden of Finland is a really strong figure, and I wanted to explore that matriarchal society which also manifested in Estonia – within such a male-dominated political landscape. There is a strong relationship to Mother Nature within history – Estonia has been invaded so many times – the Swedish, Russians, Germans."⁸

The Wolf's Bride is on one level a narrative of a community of Estonian peasants on an island Hiiumaa in the middle of the 17th century, during the Swedish Occupation, „for now men wrote *Anno* 1650, and the land and all the people rested in the blessed peace of Sweden,

⁵ Goscilo, 6

⁶ Raun, 133

⁷ Raija Forsström, "The Attack – a Symbol of Independence for 100 Years" *Helsingin Sanomat*, <http://www2.hs.fi/english/archive/thisweek/43111999.html> (accessed April 2, 2013)

⁸ Diana Damian, "Sofi Oksanen," *Exeunt Magazine*, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/sofi-oksanen/> (accessed March 20, 2013)

and our grievous enemy, the unbaptized Muscovite, whetted his claws in vain fury behind the Narva“⁹. The peasants are depicted as simple-minded people who believe in werewolves. Aalo, as the other, is feared, and that fear creates anxiety amongst the villagers and in Priidik, leaving them with the choice either to eliminate the source of their fear or to accept the other. The village society is not ready to do the latter yet. Sara Ahmed writes, that in addition to fear affecting the self and the body, the relations between the objects that are feared are „shaped by histories that ‘stick’“ that makes some objects seem more fearsome than others.¹⁰ In this narrative, both physical and symbolic (using Pierre Bourdieu’s definitions) violence against women have an important role. Physical violence against the suspected witches/werewolves is a cause of the symbolic violence that exists throughout the story. Bourdieu says that „the structures of domination are the product of an incessant labour of reproduction to which singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) and institutions – families, the church, the educational system, the state – contribute.“¹¹ Aalo hears the call of wolves and runs from the domination to the forest, to experience freedom, running and almost flying with the wolves over the sandy heaths and marshes. That sense of freedom makes the virtuous and innocent wife feel desires and lust that she has never felt before, and after becoming one with the Forest Daemon, she „vanishes into the green dampness of the marsh moss, for she is the property of him“¹² The forest promises freedom, but instead captures Aalo in another, stronger domination. She cannot stay home at nights, she has to go back. Finding freedom and being able to hide in the middle of marshes and moss in the deep forest is not appreciated by the local powers.

In the midst of the transformation of the relationship between men and women and the new national identity, Kallas writes about the unjustified violence against a woman who is

⁹ Aino Kallas, “The Wolf’s Bride” in *Three Novels*, translated Alex Matson. (Helsinki, Otava: 1975), 161

¹⁰ Ahmed, 97

¹¹ Bourdieu, 339

¹² Kallas, 184

different and who is reaching for her rights to feel desires and have a sense of her sexuality, but instead chooses a different dominator. Her history 'sticks' with her, and she becomes fearsome to the village people, and she is punished and silenced by the same community of women where she comes from. In 1928 when Kallas writes the story, the state of Estonia, who as a nation could be considered female, had broken off the domination personified by the Russian Empire having felt a deep desire to be free since the century before, but the new independence did not last very long. Sofi Oksanen, born a century later than Aino Kallas locates the women she writes about in *Purge* in the contemporary Estonian history. In addition to many praises in the media, her book has also been criticised for being too violent, or inaccurate in details of Estonian history. In an interview with Diana Damien Oksanen says, „I want to address issues that are particularly relevant to and overlooked by my generation”,¹³ While Kallas writes about the changing of the woman's position and suggests the subjugated country's strife for independence and the dangers in freedom, Oksanen writes of women who have fallen under domination and how the violence of those dominations has affected their identity as individuals and suggests a parallel to the country as the collective body.

The institutional violence of the totalitarian regime of Soviet Russia has a fundamental role in *Purge*. The years of World War II had devastated the country and when the Soviet Union invaded Estonia in 1944 the first mass deportation occurred and the fear for more deportations held people under strict rules, violence was mainly direct, physical and brutal. In order to invade the collective body of this nation and to completely break it, the Soviets invaded individual bodies in various ways. Rape is directly and psychologically invading someone's body, and is often hushed up by the victims themselves due to shame. If it does not change one's mindset, then it definitely silences the unwanted ideas of the dissidents. The fear of being raped proved to be just as effective a method of silencing women as the act

¹³ Diana Damian, "Sofi Oksanen," *Exeunt Magazine*, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/sofi-oksanen/> (accessed March 20, 2013)

itself. When Aliide is confronted by the officer in the forest, she knows what is going to happen and that she has to remain calm.¹⁴ This chapter in *Purge* is somewhat of a turning point for Aliide, and it is full of symbolism. The chrome-tanned boots and leather coat squeaking in the peaceful forest. The boots of powerful men who invaded Estonia and who are about to invade Aliide, the mushrooms of her Estonian forest, and Aliide feeling the autumn freshness in the soil through her shoes, but she does not run away, she wants to show her innocence, she has not committed a crime, she does not deserve to be punished. Yet, the „boots“ think differently. Later, as she is being raped in an interrogation room, she „became a fly on the light that flew away...The woman with the bag over her head in the middle of the room was a stranger and Aliide was gone,..she became one with the roots that grew in the soil under the room.“¹⁵ The soil has always been important for Estonians, the soil has given food for centuries under different occupations and the phrase „to be buried in my homeland’s soil“ is famous from many patriotic songs. „Aliide had become a termite next to its hole, inside a round hole in a tree, an alder tree, an alder tree grown in the soil of Estonia that still felt the forest, still felt the water and the roots and the moles.“¹⁶ And while the body of Aliide is beaten and raped and „Russian and Estonian mixing together and rotting and seething,“¹⁷ her mind flies away, to the Estonian soil, to the trees, to the nature. Beginning with her marriage, Aliide’s main purpose is to survive, and for her love for Hans to survive. She chooses this marriage out of calculated reasons, to get away from the past domination over her body. It is worse for her to be reminded of the invasion of her body than to be called the „red“ by non-sovietminded Estonians. She wants to be respected and defended in order to defend Hans and hide her shame. Ahmed writes, „The very physicality of shame – how it works on and through bodies – means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social

¹⁴ Oksanen, 150

¹⁵ Oksanen, 151

¹⁶ Oksanen, 152

¹⁷ Oksanen, 152

spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame."¹⁸ For Aliide, the women with similar fate as her, are witnesses of her shame, and she wants to avoid them. She recognizes them from their behaviour and their trembling hands.

Aliide's encounter with Zara, who has left her home in Siberia to get a better life in the West and become a prostitute, brings back to Aliide the long hidden shame. Zara has felt the desire to be free to enjoy the tempting comforts and wealth in West, but that freedom turns out to be a stronger domination for her. Estonian poet and philosopher Jaan Kaplinski has used the metaphor of prostitutes in his allegory of the reputation of artists and writers in 1992, parallelizing the communist regime with a harem where the KGB and Communist party guarded the artists from „dangerous Western influences.“ „In a harem you must make love to your lord and you can't do it with anybody else. A harem is a restricted area you can't leave.“¹⁹ And in the first couple years of independence, he draws a parallel of the women leaving the harem, because there is no money to keep them, and many of them become prostitutes, who now are allowed to sleep with the rich Western man. „It's not a long way from the harem to the brothel, or at least the way from the harem to freedom is much longer and harder.“²⁰

Many Estonians who moved to West during the end of Soviet Union and in the first years of independence were often ashamed of being Estonians, who were looked down upon in Scandinavia and other Western countries as the poor citizens of the former Soviet Union who were ready to do almost anything to win the place in Western society. When Aliide looks at Zara and sees her shame and fear, she thinks, "The bruises were covered up again, and there was silence. That's the way it always went."²¹ That all-encompassing silence has been a way for Estonians to cover up their shame or simply to survive. Linda does not speak

¹⁸ Ahmed, 103

¹⁹ Jaan Kaplinski, "From Harem to Brothel: Artists in the Post-Communist World" *Eurozine*, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-30-kaplinski-en.html> (accessed March 10, 2013)

²⁰ Kaplinski, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-30-kaplinski-en.html> (accessed March 10, 2013)

²¹ Oksanen, 14

almost at all anymore, Aliide does not talk about her past, Ingel tells Zara about Estonia, but not much more, and Zara is not able to tell Aliide the truth of all the violence she had suffered. „The silence had been peculiar that year – expectant, yet at the same time like the aftermath of a storm. There was something similar in the posture of Aliide’s grass, overgrown, sticking to the windowpane. It was wet, mute, placid.“²²

Oksanen, as an observer from another country, writes about the Estonian nation as it can be seen from outside. It had felt inferior to other countries, especially those in the West, for a long time, because of the shame of being invaded and abused; then after breaking off that domination, wanting to please those Western countries. Sara Ahmed continues discussing shame in the national context, “It exposes the nation, and what it has covered over and covered up in its pride in itself, but at the same time it *involves a narrative of recovery as the re-covering of the nation.*“²³ This idea applies in her examples of primarily nations who have done wrong to someone else, but it can also apply to the shame of being done wrong to, of being invaded by a totalitarian conqueror, and being made to feel that their culture is of no benefit to anyone; because of these things, the land itself almost seems devastated under the domination. Oksanen shows the danger of silence, but also offers a recovery from shame, purge as a confrontation to one’s past in order to expose the failures instead of hiding them. Ahmed writes that when a nation witnesses past injustice, which involves feeling shame, this exposure of failure becomes the basis for the national recovery.²⁴

Kallas and Oksanen have used historical totalitarian dominations, and gender-based violence to uncover and demonstrate some of the conflicts and moral questions of their time. Their use of individuals suffering from violence and different dominations and their emotions are the depictions of the complicated emotions of the collective body of a nation. It seems as if they have worked together, Kallas starting with the awakening nation, its pursuit

²² Oksanen, 7

²³ Ahmed, 112

²⁴ Ahmed, 109

towards independence and Oksanen continuing with the same nation, going under domination again, experiencing shame for their past and potentially finding recovery and national pride. Observing Estonians' strife for independence and their choices in the transition from occupation to a free country, they have pointed on the shame of history that 'sticks' with the nation and if it remains hidden in the silence that is represented in the form of nature, that is at the same time the source of freedom in both Kallas' and Oksanen's works (the mute overgrown grass sticking to Aliide's windowpane of her house in the countryside where she has hidden for years or in Aalo's wilds and marshes that seemed to have swallowed her up and carefully hidden her). Kallas and Oksanen have chosen to write about the example of the Estonian nation, but the history and shame of past actions that 'sticks' could be written about any other nation. In his novel, George Eliot has said, "The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history"²⁵. In order for us to know about nations, there has to be some kind of a recording of it, and the history, however ashamed or proud it makes the nation feel, uncovers themes that the nation might have wanted to hide, but through that uncovering brings recovery.

²⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003)

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