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Representation of traumatized women in Sofi Oksanen's Estonian historical novels

Introduction

In my essay, I would like to review two Estonian historical novels, *Stalin's Cows* (2003) and *Purge* (2008) by the Finnish-Estonian novelist *Sofi Oksanen* (1977), exploring these novels in certain respects of trauma theory. The concept of trauma is used in many ways today. Trauma research is increasingly becoming a disciplinary field of science, which means that in its study, aspects of psychological, cultural, social, and philosophical issues can be raised at the same time (Békés, 2012, 35.). Perhaps the closest to the spirit of my essay is Juliet Mitchell's definition of trauma in a broader sense: "A trauma, whether physical or psychical, must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss." (Mitchell, 1998, 121.) In the following, along with the analysis of the novels, I would like to show how this concept of trauma can be used, according to which trauma is a deep fracture in which the individual's ability to defend herself/himself works differently.

In my research studying these two novels, I examine how the cultural aspects of trauma theory can be integrated into literary analysis, and how trauma can take effects on the topic. Examining the traces of trauma in literary texts is a new trend in literary theory, essentially in cases when these destructive effects on the psyche and the body are presented in explicit, linguistic ways. For understanding Sofi Oksanen's novels, it can also be useful to apply the cultural aspects of trauma theory, which was worked out in the 1990s. Trauma theory is an interdisciplinary research trend, enriched by the results of psychoanalysis, historical and literary studies, and additional disciplines. There is consensus in papers published on trauma theory that trauma can be desensitized if sufferers are able to narrate their injuries (Fleisz, 2013, 99.). In literature, trauma can be depicted in forceful figurative and linguistic shapes. Consequently, the original meanings of trauma in medicine as a 'wound' or 'injury' can also be used metaphorically in literary texts. In Anna Menyhért's words, "the recovery has essentially linguistic nature, because it is based on the way of narrating"

trauma (Menyhért, 2008, 6.). Reading literary texts can also indirectly help in desensitising trauma, because texts are showing the broken, fractured psyche and not leaving trauma unsaid, subsiding into silence. In other words, trauma can be transmitted by reading these kinds of texts (Menyhért, 2008, 7.), i.e. analysing trauma texts is very important for understanding and interpretation. In this way, when the reader interprets literary texts, he creates a *secondary trauma text* at the same time, which helps him or her get through and interpret trauma in these texts (Menyhért, 2008, 7.). This process is not equivalent to intervening in the characters' life or destiny in the novels; instead, trauma can be explained as narration, interpreting it as the subject-matter of novels.

Historiographical metafiction and testimony

There are several social and historical issues raised in Sofi Oksanen's novels and public appearances. The novelist has a special aim; she prefers to tell unsaid stories, suppressed historical events. Estonia lost its independence in 1940, taken by the Soviets, but a year after, the Nazis occupied the country, which lasted until 1944, when the Red Army restored the Soviet power, and the country was under Soviet rule up to 1991, the year when the country regained full independence (Raun, 2001, 169–267.). Sofi Oksanen does not only illustrate the collective trauma anchored in historical events and contexts, but in her novels, she also writes about the effects of the same trauma within different generations, through the protagonist's life. Oksanen shows that individual and historical (collective) traumas are closely related, enhancing one another, and this dual nature of trauma creates a destructive, dangerous effect. This nature of trauma involves that it is not only individual victims but entire communities which suffer from that, and a whole society can be oppressed by it (Erős, 2007, 16.), because the transmitted individual trauma affects social groups as well.

Cathy Caruth deals with the representation of trauma in literature and the paradoxical question of how staying alive can become a testimony for the impossibility of life (Caruth, 1996, 62.). The definition of survivor witnesses and the victims' testimony are of crucial importance in trauma theory. The trauma of the Holocaust became a 'model' to understand different traumas in further researches today, because through that, many problematic questions of morality, law, philosophy or humanity could be answered, providing an opportunity to explain them. Giorgio Agamben stresses the importance of the Holocaust trauma and points out that the word 'witness' is derived from *martis*, which is related to the verb 'to remember' in Greek. This is an important addition, as the Italian philosopher concluded, "the survivor [...] cannot *not* remember" (Agamben, 1999, 26.). Agamben pointed out that in Auschwitz, the testimony of survivor witnesses "contains a lacuna". In the case of the Holocaust, "the complete witnesses" are those who were destroyed in the gas chambers (Agamben, 1999, 33–34.).

Sofi Oksanen's novels are documentary fictions; the Swedish literary scholar Ebba Witt-Brattström gave a more exact definition for her books: *historiographic*

metafictions, which are based on facts, but representing the given historical events in a world of fiction (Witt-Brattström, 2014). Oksanen creates the fictions of her novels from past reality; she used original documents and KGB (*Committee for State Security*) reports. Her aim in literature is to represent the atmosphere and experiences of a given historical period, without including real, known facts. Therefore, Oksanen's novels cannot be placed into the category of non-fiction literature, because her characters can be seen as testifiers only in an indirect way. The abused women and their testimonies of suffering under sexual abuse and oppressive dictatorships, are presented in Oksanen's fiction. The Belorussian Svetlana Alexievich, when talking about contemporary non-fiction literature, noted in an interview: "the witness is the hero of today" (Alekszijevics, 2020). Sofi Oksanen's characters testify how the effects of dictatorship on the body and the psyche can be destructive, transmitted across generations.

In the next sections of my essay, I will examine Sofi Oksanen's Estonian historical novels, *Stalin's Cows* and *Purge*, and show how the oppression and sexual exploitation of abused women and its destructive effects over generations are illustrated in these novels.

Thematic similarity in *Stalin's Cows* and *Purge*

Sofi Oksanen's first four novels make up a tetralogy of Estonian historical novels: the first one, *Stalin's Cows* was published in 2003, the second one, *Purge* in 2008, followed by *When the Doves Disappear* in 2012 and *Norma* in 2015. These novels are not connected by their plots, but by the illustration of different historical traumas of women in Estonian history. The first two pieces of the tetralogy, *Stalin's Cows* and *Purge* are in close connection: the main theme of these novels is the tragedies of World War II whose trauma is transmitted through generations and resulted in the same kind of crisis. These two novels illustrate in the same way, how a past trauma affects the soul today, presenting the older generations' sorrows over women's body. While in *Stalin's Cows*, the body is decayed by a mental disorder, in *Purge*, sexual violence results in decay. It is also similar in these two novels that the plots take place in three different periods of the 20th century: the grandparents live under the era of Sovietisation in the 1940s and '50s, the parents' generation in the 1970s, while the grandchildren and their problems are presented in the atmosphere of 1980s and '90s. As trauma is only interpreted by a story, I will summarise the plots of these novels, *Stalin's Cows* and *Purge*, focusing on the traumatic moments.

In *Stalin's Cows*, Sofi belongs to the first generation represented in the novel. Some members of her family were deported to Siberia. Her husband, Arnold was convicted of being a partisan of the Forest Brethren, but later, he was set free. Their children are Katariina and Linda, whose connection became twisted, when Katariina married a Finnish man, because he was from the West. Katariina's daughter, Anna got into a deep crisis. First, she suffered from anorexia and later, bulimia destroyed her body, because of her dual, Finnish and Estonian parentage. Her soul was also

oppressed and perplexed by continuously doubting herself and her surroundings.

Purge has a more complicated plot. Hence, I will examine women's emotional connection with the generations mentioned above. The periods illustrated in this novel are similar to those in *Stalin's Cows*. Here, the members of the older generation are Aliide Truu and her older sister, Ingel Pekk, who was pure as an angel. Aliide also had a serious identity disorder and inferiority complex, because Hans Pekk, the two sister's common beloved, chose Ingel. Aliide connived at the deportation of her older sister and her daughter, Linda to Vladivostok, after they were tortured in the parish hall. Therefore, Aliide had to live under the same roof with her husband, Martin, a new Partorg (party organizer in the USSR), while she kept her beloved, nationalist Hans in concealment and set the rumour about his death. Aliide was tortured and raped several times in interrogations and her trauma was transmitted to Ingel's grandchild, Zara, who had to work as a prostitute after she was trapped. Linda, who impersonated the middle generation mentioned before, symbolically and truly subsided into silence: after Aliide was forced to abuse her own niece with a light bulb in an interrogation at the parish hall, Linda lost the power of speech. Loss of speech, suppression and the overwhelming intergenerational trauma could not be desensitised entirely by the fact that Zara killed her own client and had to escape. Later, Aliide helped her to kill the offenders, who were hunting Zara.

Anorexia and bulimia as a transgenerational heritage

In psychology, the question of transgenerational trauma has been studied for decades, recently called as a transgenerational effect (Varga, 2011, 508.). In Hungary, psychoanalyst Teréz Virág was the first to point out the fact that the "Holocaust syndrome", as trauma of the Holocaust does not only affect the survivors, but also oppresses their descendants (Virág, 2001, 208.). Teréz Virág emphasised in her analysis of a Holocaust survivor family that anxiety neurosis produces symptoms even in the third generation. In this analysed case, the most important detail is the mother's sufferings in the Holocaust, because both her mother and her older sister were killed in Auschwitz (Ibid, 208.). While the mother suffered from depression, her granddaughter suffered from anorexia nervosa.

In Sofi Oksanen's *Stalin's Cows*, this recently transmitted effect of that past trauma is correlated with the experience of the disruptive Soviet period. Sofia, the grandparent and Katariina's mother, was seen as a suspicious person by the Soviet regime, because her husband was a partisan of the Forest Brethren mentioned before. Sofia was under supervision, tortured and abused several times in interrogations. Once, needless to say, while Sofia was tortured in an interrogation, a party worker was molesting her daughters, Katariina and Linda in another room. Some relatives of Sofi were deported to Siberia, where they lived in need, with no hope and food. Their involuntary starvation was transmitted to their grandchild: Anna suffered from anorexia since she was a little girl, and later from bulimia. It is also an important detail in the novel that her mother, Katariina defected to Finland before Anna's birth, in the

1970s and got engaged to a man who was not able to see the point of having a dual, Estonian-Soviet identity and live with its sufferings. Katariina and Anna smuggled food and goods into Estonia for many years, because only these goods from the West could help them arrange family matters and achieve other business goal. This illegal crossing of the border was metaphorically represented in Anna's eating disorder, as she was not able to find the right way, the dividing line between binge, gobbling and self-starving (Györe, 2014, 183.). This lack of comprehension was presented, copied into Anna's relationships, which were similar to the relationship between her mother and her low-principled, so-called 'daddy'. Thus, boundary has more extensions in *Stalin's Cows*, with body and politics closely related. Anna, whose life story lasts until the age of 25, suffered a lot, as she was not able to take on an Estonian identity and had to live with the Finnish language and Western culture, which was the reason for her eating disorder and identity crisis. Anna was on the very verge of life and death, counting the minimum weight she could survive with. Her body, which represents the perfect female body in the novel, was changing just like the borders of Estonia were. Just as much as this country did not have real borders or autonomy under the rule of Moscow, Anna was not free to have disposal over her own body, so it kept changing all time. Once she thought about herself:

„The centimetres of the female body are just as important as the borders of a country. They are precisely defined and their changes must be always reported. [...] The images portraying anorexics are astounding. Namely, the fact that skeletons familiar from ghost movies, concentration camp images of history books and vanitas vanitatum themes wear some flashily variegated American dresses [...]. These two worlds do not fit together. They exclude each other. Just like me and the deep-rooted Finnish small town. I have always been pretty sure that I would never become such a concentration camp princess in whom the soul starves to death.”¹ (Oksanen, 2011, 168.)

Ruski harlotry as a transgenerational heritage

Stalin's Cows and *Purge* make up an Estonian *saga*. In these novels, we can see the sexual exploitation of Estonian women and, paraphrasing Berdyaev (Turi, 2011, 82.), the violence against Estonia's (female) 'body' brutally taken by the Soviet Army. The body connotes geography in both novels, because the boundaries of the body and the geographical borders reflect and complete each other all along the plots. In *Stalin's Cows* and *Purge*, we can read about a basic experience of the West, i.e. that all Estonian women are Soviet whores. This experience became a significant part of Estonian women's identity. Oksanen's characters, mostly in *Stalin's Cows*, had a dual identity, with Western and Eastern features mixed in them because of their Finnish-Estonian (-Soviet) origin. The two main characters in *Purge* are Aliide, who belonged to the grandparents' generation, and her niece Zara, who was born in Vladivostok. Their fate was common, as they were under the generation's curse of being whores for

¹ Own translation based on the Hungarian edition.

the Soviets. Aliide's tortures and raping were transmitted to Zara's life, so the young girl *suffered from Aliide's revived trauma*. The most significant moment in *Purge* is the illustration of Aliide's tortures and sexual abuse in interrogations. Quoting her words:

“Aliide's hands were tied behind her and a bag was put over her head. [...] She couldn't see anything through the fabric. [...] Aliide's shirt was ripped open, the buttons flew onto the floor, against the walls – glass German buttons – and then [...] she became a mouse, in a corner of the room, a fly on the light that flew away, a nail in the plywood wall, a rusty thumbtack, she was a rusty thumbtack in the wall. She was a fly and she was walking over a woman's naked breast, the woman was in the middle of a room with a bag over her head, and she was walking over a fresh bruise, the blood forced up under the skin of the woman's breast, a running welt that the fly traversed, across bruises that emanated from the swollen nipple like the continents on a globe. [...] The woman with the bag over her head in the middle of the room was a stranger and Aliide was gone, her heart ran on little caterpillar feet into grooves nooks crannies, became one with the roots that grew in the soil under the room. *Should we make soap out of this one?* The woman in the middle of the room didn't move [...].” (Oksanen, 2010, 164–165. Emphasis in the original)

Because of her tortures and trauma, Aliide emerged from her ego and became an object out of herself. Sándor Ferenczi pointed out in his study on trauma theory that a reaction to an unexpected shock could induce a short psychosis, when a given person's psyche is torn out of reality. In this condition, every mental activity, cognitive function (perception and thought) and faculty of movement become incapacitated by the reaction to this shocking effect (Dupont, 2001, 16.). It is similar to how Zara experienced her own body, when she found out the reality near Aliide's home after escaping from her offenders. Zara's traumatised and tortured body also seemed strange to her, as Aliide felt the same after her own tortures.

“She seemed to be examining her own limbs, perhaps counting them, arm and wrist and hand, all the fingers in place, then going through the same thing with the other hand, then her slipperless toes, her foot, ankle, lower leg, knee, thigh. [...] She pulled her foot toward her with the slipper on it and slowly felt her ankle, not like a person who suspects that her ankle is sprained or broken, but like someone who can't remember what shape her ankle normally is [...].” (Ibid. 17.)

The two women's common experience roused their sympathy and sense of belonging to each other, which meant more than a distant family relationship. This “purge” of the doubtful murder could resolve trauma, which had been transmitted over generations, demonstrating that it does not destroy a person for good; traumas can be desensitized.

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