



Illustration: Moa Thelander

# Sofi Oksanen's “Purge” in Estonia

essay by **Eneken Laanes**

In an article revisiting Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, and in particular the relationship between the modern novel and the nation, Jonathan Culler advances the idea that the novel functions in the contemporary world as a transnational form primarily directed at the international cosmopolitan reader.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore possible that the national community of readers closest to the novel's origin might not be its best audience.<sup>2</sup> He provides the example of the critical Peruvian reception accorded Mario Vargas Llosa's *Storyteller*, which reproached the author for quietism and evasiveness. Culler argues that Peruvian readers read the novel as a political statement against the backdrop of Vargas Llosa's political activity and writing. He suggests that a “geographic remove” from the novel's national

context is needed in order to read the novel as a novel.

An interesting test case for Culler's idea is presented by the reception of Sofi Oksanen's internationally successful Finnish novel *Purge* (*Puhdistus*, 2008) in Estonia, the national setting of the book. Although Culler's discussion of the cosmopolitan novel refers to postcolonial literature, another transnational phenomenon in contemporary literature that is similar to the postcolonial type discussed by Culler<sup>3</sup> is literature on memory. Both address international readership in discussing widespread phenomena such as the postcolonial experience or working through historical traumas, but represent them in the historically specific (national) context. Because it addresses the traumatic legacies of World War II and Soviet rule in Estonia, *Purge* can be tentatively, albeit somewhat prob-

lematically, read as literature on memory and trauma. In my analysis of the Estonian reception of *Purge*, I examine how a transnational perspective affects the reading of the novel in the national context and vice versa. As one who participated in the debates on *Purge* in Estonia, I am presenting this article as an attempt at self-reflection.

**The novel *Purge***, based on a play with the same title,<sup>4</sup> was translated into Estonian in April 2009. It was received as a quasi-Estonian novel partly because of Oksanen's Estonian background, and partly because it recounts, through its two protagonists Aliide and Zara, the intertwining stories of Stalinist terror in Estonia and of trafficking in women in

post-Soviet Eastern Europe. Zara, a young woman from Vladivostok on the run from sex slavery, arrives in Estonia at the farm of her great-aunt Aliide to learn more about the suffering and acts of crime and complicity in her family during World War II.

The growing success of the novel in Finland and elsewhere was repeatedly reported and celebrated in the Estonian press even before the novel was available in Estonian. After translation, it was powerfully embraced by official publicity, but not reviewed as a literary work.<sup>5</sup> The cultural critic Kaarel Tarand suggests that the reasons for the lack of literary reviews, and for *Purge's* prominence in the public space in promotional articles and interviews that represented Oksanen as a national hero, are to be found in the international recognition accorded the novel before its arrival in Estonia.<sup>6</sup>

In the autumn of 2010, more than a year after its publication in Estonia, *Purge* became the object of unprecedented public debate that centered on the question of presenting Estonian history in fictional form.<sup>7</sup> The debate was remarkable in its intensity, and exceeded the public space usually allotted to a literary debate. The discussion was opened by a column in the daily newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* by journalist Piret Tali, for whom *Purge* molded Estonian history “into a modern thriller in short sentences à la Dan Brown and covered with a disgusting trendy sauce of violence against women, anguish, and depression”.<sup>8</sup> Her critical approach instantly provoked pain and fury in subsequent defenders of *Purge*. The critical dissent seems to be, more than a reaction to the novel itself, a response to its acclaim as a document about Estonian history that would enlighten the international reader about the historic suffering of Estonians. The specific points of criticism, all of which revolve around questions of history, can be divided between two broader arguments: one concerns the representational choices made in the novel, and the other deals with problems with the novel's depiction of history, caused in part by those choices.

**The critical approaches** to *Purge* view it as a novel that is part of the culture industry, which aims at accessibility, sensationalism, and entertainment. In telling a horrific story of crimes and suffering inflicted on people, it employs elements of the thriller and melodrama that make it a gripping read, but turn Estonian history into a theme park. The novel exoticizes elements of local color and borrows from Hollywood film in its sensational representation of the violence against women in sex slavery.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the argument refers to ethnic stereotyping in characterization. On this point *Purge* is compared to the Stalinist novels of the 1940s–1950s, which “had a certain appeal; they fitted into some of our deep psychological needs, to our needs for fairy tales, for tales of heroes and villains”.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in Stalinist literature heroic Soviet citizens were contrasted to sadistic Nazis, the patriotic Estonians in *Purge* are noble in body and mind, while Soviets are filthy and evil. In other words, *Purge's* element of mass culture, its eagerness to entertain the reader, and its popular success seem to make it suspect as a novel about historic suffering because the representational mode distorts history.

If we examine the allegations of distortion more closely, we find that some critics maintain that this schematic mode demonizes and presents an overly negative picture of the Soviet period.<sup>11</sup> Attempts to rehabilitate the Soviet period have led to accusations of Soviet nostalgia and insensitivity towards the suffering of co-nationals, as well as an inability to differentiate between the periods of Stalinist terror and the socialism

of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Ethnologist Ene Kõresaar, who has analyzed the *Purge* debate with regard to how memory is discussed in the public arena, argues that the conflicting arguments reflect the typical scenario of post-Soviet memory culture, in which the discourse of totalitarianism and suffering referring to the Stalinist period clashes with milder memories of everyday life under late socialism.<sup>13</sup>

**Another, more serious** charge of distortion refers to the sensitive issue of sexual violence against women in the Stalinist period. Tali, who raises the point, argues that in the representational mode used in *Purge* the theme seems to be borrowed from international experience in Kosovo or Congo rather than Estonian history.<sup>14</sup> There is almost no historical research on violence against women in the 1940s in Estonia, and it is not a topos of Estonian memory culture.<sup>15</sup> That is not to say that such a phenomenon might not have occurred in the Stalinist period. Tali's argument indicates some resistance to accepting the possibility of such violence against women in the Estonian context.

Many works of fiction have drawn attention to past crimes that were not being addressed in the present. Nonetheless, it is problematic, I think, to claim something as sensitive as sexual violence against women in a specific historical context, especially if it is presented not as a personal experience of the protagonist, but as a widespread phenomenon. Rein Raud's summary of the argument about the culture industry – “by linking historical narrative with the clichés familiar enough [...] to the western reader, she [Oksanen] touches precisely those keys and chords that megasuccess presupposes” – is presumably applicable to the issue of sexual violence. Tali's observation draws attention to the fact that violence against women is a topos in the transnational memory culture to which the international reader can relate.

It is possible, however, that the critics' problem with the generalization of sexual violence against women is primarily the novel's perceived relationship to the post-Soviet politics of memory – the last set of questions debated with regard to *Purge*. Many critics have opined that the novel is celebrated in Estonia because its interpretation of Estonian history is in harmony with the post-Soviet politics of memory. Those whose uneasiness with the representation of history led them to search for errors of historical detail were vulnerable to the objection that they had read *Purge* as a realist text. It may be argued that, as *Purge* works with clear-cut dichotomies and stereotypes, it must be read differently. However, as Linda Kaljundi shows in her analysis of the interesting use of olfactory motifs and the theme of purity and filth in *Purge*, the image of Estonian history that results from such a reading is still susceptible to political and ethical criticism.<sup>16</sup>

**The post-Soviet Estonian** politics of memory have centered on the themes of national suffering and heroism, which function as a “dominant narrative and state-supported memory regime”.<sup>17</sup> The fixation on victimhood has served as a screen memory<sup>18</sup> for avoiding questions about the Holocaust in Estonian territory and the collaboration of Estonians in Soviet rule. At the same time, it has an ethnopolitical dimension in the multi-ethnic Estonian state in that it ignores and excludes the diverse memories of different ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup> For Linda Kaljundi, *Purge* constitutes a powerful reiteration of the regime of memory established in the early 1990s because it represents the interwar Estonian Republic as a pastoral paradise, the farm as a symbol of the nation, and the Soviet

occupation as a rupture. Kaljundi demonstrates that the attribution of past and present sexual violence and political terror to Russians equates the two, transfers the victimization of women to the whole nation,<sup>20</sup> and assigns the blame to an ethnic group that is a part of post-Soviet Estonia.

My own contribution to the debate drew attention to the melodramatic elements of the text which, in aspiring towards an unequivocal moral interpretation of the world, construct a world of perpetrators and victims. This permits a nationalistic reading of the novel, because the roles are distributed along ethnic lines.<sup>21</sup> The melodramatic element is most evident in the redemptive finale of the novel, in which the only morally ambivalent character, the protagonist Aliide, reveals her moral value by saving her niece Zara in the nick of time.<sup>22</sup> Her act of (self)sacrificial violence is meant not only to save the girl, but also to purge the social order that is presented in the novel in ethnopolitical terms.<sup>23</sup>

**The reaction to *Purge*** in Estonia brings to mind the reception of Steven Spielberg's Holocaust film *Schindler's List* (1993) in the US, as analyzed by Miriam Bratu Hansen.<sup>24</sup> Like Spielberg's film, *Purge* addresses collectively relevant historical traumas – the mass deportation of Estonians in 1949 and the annihilation of the Forest Brethren guerilla resistance movement by the Soviet regime in the 1940s and 1950s. In both cases, the reception is characterized by suspicions about the popular success of the works and perceptions of a clash between the representational modes employed and the subject matter. Whereas the polemic against *Schindler's List* was based on a comparison with Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985) as an exemplary attempt to represent the genocide, *Purge* was negatively compared to the novels of the Estonian writer Ene Mihkelson, which portray Stalinist terror in a highly experimental form and, instead of reworking the historical trauma in the name of national identity, present the conflict between individual remembering and the post-Soviet politics of memory.<sup>25</sup>

In her illuminating analysis of the reception of *Schindler's List*, Miriam Bratu Hansen argues that the film is important for its “diagnostic significance” in relation to the public remembrance of the Holocaust in American culture, but also *vis à vis* the functioning of public memory in general.<sup>26</sup> She shows how the straightforward rejection of the film overshadows its diagnostic value as well as diverts the discussion from the textual workings of the film.

In the light of Hansen's analysis, *Purge* can be seen to have a diagnostic value on multiple levels. First, the debate on *Purge* brought to the fore the differences in the interpretation of World War II and its aftermath in post-Soviet Estonia not only between the ethnic communities in the country, but within the Estonian community itself, in particular with regard to whether or not the memories of ethnic minorities deserve a place in the Estonian collective memory.

The second diagnostic point concerns the nature of collective remembrance and the role of literature as its medium. Michael Rothberg has argued that collective memory is not a “zero-sum struggle for preeminence”, but multidirectional, creating new forms of solidarity through intercultural cross-referencing of different memories.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, *Purge's* critics' concerns that the novel may achieve a political impact by establishing a hegemonic image of the past may prove to be exaggerated for two reasons. First, as Rothberg maintains, one memory does not necessarily preclude others. Second, and this brings us back to Culler's point discussed at the beginning of this article, novels are not read merely as political

statements. The critics of *Purge* fell into the same trap as the novel's publicists in that they read and discussed the novel as a representation of history. What gets eclipsed is the fact that *Purge* may not be, or at least does not function transnationally, as a novel about historic national suffering, but rather a masterfully executed, uncanny story about women's fear.<sup>28</sup> Instead of rejecting the novel on ideological grounds that are relevant only in the national context, we ought to analyze its textual workings and its attempt to represent sexual violence and other politically relevant issues in literature more closely.<sup>29</sup> As Culler shows, a geographic remove or a transnational perspective may allow readers to find more in a work of art rather than less.

**Finally, *Purge* confirms** that literature as a medium of collective remembrance is a phenomenon of reception<sup>30</sup> and that popular success is a prerequisite for attracting transnational attention to issues of historic injustice, especially in marginal historical contexts. The national perspective on *Purge* reinforces the realization that historical specificity may be compromised in the process. How we deal with specificity in remembering historical injustice and suffering in the public arena and in literature is a question still open for discussion. ✕



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## references

- 1 Research for this article was supported by ESF research grant no. 8530.
- 2 Jonathan Culler, "Anderson and the Novel", in *Diacritics* 29, (1999), p. 33.
- 3 Culler discusses the kind of postcolonial literature in which, in Timothy Brennan's words, "the contradictory topoi of exile and nation are fused in a lament for the necessary and regrettable insistence of nation-forming, in which the writer proclaims his identity with a country whose artificiality and exclusiveness have driven him into a kind of exile – a simultaneous recognition of nationhood and an alienation from it". See Culler, p. 33; Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form", in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London 1990, p. 63.
- 4 *Purge* premiered in the Finnish National Theatre in 2007.
- 5 Oksanen was named Person of the Year 2009 by the leading Estonian daily newspaper *Postimees*. The novel topped Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip's Christmas wish list. See "Ansip tahab jõuluvanalt Oksaneni raamatut" [Ansip wants Oksanen's book from Santa Claus], in *Postimees*, 2009-12-22, accessed 2011-11-15, <http://www.postimees.ee/204103/ansip-tahab-jouluvanalt-oksaneni-raamatut/>. In 2010 Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves awarded Oksanen the Order of the Cross of Terra Mariana for special services to the Estonian Republic. The first review of *Purge*, by Kaarel Tarand, was published six months after its publication in Estonia. Kaarel Tarand, "Tuumapommiks kujutletud meelelahutus" [Entertainment imagined into a nuclear bomb], in *Sirp*, 2009-12-18, p. 8.
- 6 *Ibid.* *Purge* received the Finlandia Award in 2008, the Runeberg Award in 2009, the Nordic Council Literary Award, and in France, the Prix Femina Étranger and the FNAC prize in 2010.
- 7 The debate was provoked partly by the opening of the play *Purge* in Estonian theatre Vanemuine in September 2010.
- 8 The first critiques were actually expressed by the renowned Estonian writer Jaan Kaplinski in his blog entry "Sofi Oksanen and the Stalinist Award", but the negative responses to his post attracted wider attention. See Piret Tali, "Kogu tõde Sofi O-st" [All about Sofi O.], in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 2010-10-04, p. 3; Jaan Kaplinski, "Sofi Oksanen and the Stalinist Award", in *Ummamuudu*, 2010-08-24, accessed 2011-11-15.
- 9 On entertainment and crime, see Tarand, p. 8; on melodrama see Eneken Laanes, "Trauma ja popkultuur: Sofi Oksaneni *Puhastus*" [Trauma and mass culture: Sofi Oksanen's *Purge*], in *Vikerkaar*, no. 12 (2010), pp. 52–65; on exoticism, see Linda Kaljundi, "'Puhastus' ja rahvusliku ajalookirjutuse comeback" [*Purge* and the revival of national history writing], in *Vikerkaar*, no. 12 (2010), pp. 36–51; on the representation of sexual violence, see Tali, p. 3, and Laanes, pp. 62–64.
- 10 Kaplinski. For related arguments, see Rein Raud, "Teised meist: stampide keeles ajalugu" [Others about us: history in the language of clichés], in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 2010-11-05, p. 3; Rein Veidemann, "Oksaneni kuvand eestlastest on vastuoluline" [Oksanen's image of Estonians is contradictory], in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 2010-11-01, p. 3.
- 11 Kaplinski; Tali, p. 3.
- 12 Mihhail Lotman, "Sofi Oksanen ja nõukonostalgiat" [Sofi Oksanen and nostalgia for the Soviet Union], in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 2010-10-18, p. 3.
- 13 Ene Kõresaar, "Ajakirjanduse "mälutöö" ja mis on Sofil sellega pistmist" [The role of the press in memory work and what Sofi has to do with it], in *Postimees*, 2010-11-06, p. 6–7.
- 14 Tali, p. 3.
- 15 The first writer to address the topic, albeit indirectly, was Imbi Paju in her documentary film *Memories Denied* (2005) and in her book with the same title (2009).
- 16 Kaljundi, p. 46.
- 17 Eva-Clarita Onken, "The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe", in *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, (2007), p. 31.
- 18 For a discussion of the concept of screen memory, see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Palo Alto 2009, pp. 12–16.
- 19 Onken, p. 37.
- 20 Kaljundi, p. 46. For a reading of the way in which "the story of a era, of a state, of a family and of a woman [...] are braided into a rope", see Mari Klein, "'Puhastus' on väga mitmetasandiline lugu" [*Purge* is a multilayered story], in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 2009-01-16, p. 12.
- 21 Laanes, pp. 59–62. My understanding of melodrama is indebted to Linda Williams and Peter Brooks. See Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised", in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring Film Genres: History and Theory*, Berkeley 1998, pp. 42–88; Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven 1995.
- 22 For a different reading of the ending of *Purge*, see Markku Lehtimäki, "Sofistikoitunut kertomus ja lukemisen etiikka" [Sophisticated writing and the ethics of reading], in *Avain*, 2010:2, pp. 40–49. For Lehtimäki as well, the finale redeems Aliide, but rather than being melodramatic, it turns *Purge* into a novel of moral ambivalence. He compares Aliide's dilemma in saving Zara by killing Russian pimps to Sethe's dilemma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in killing her child in order to save her from slavery. I do not find this an apt comparison, because Sethe kills her child in order to save her from slavery, whereas Aliide kills a third party in order to save Zara and redeem her own past deeds, as Lehtimäki suggests.
- 23 Zara comes to Aliide as a Russian girl, but Aliide decides to save her because she has her Estonian grandfather's Hans's chin. As she kills herself, Aliide thinks, "If the girl made it home, she would tell Ingel that the land she lost long ago was waiting for her. Ingel and Linda could get Estonian citizenship. [...] Since she was a descendent of Ingel and Linda, she could get an Estonian passport, too. She wouldn't ever have to go back to Russia" (Sofi Oksanen, *Purge*, New York, 2010, p. 335; 355–356). The initial social order is restored by expelling the scapegoats – the Russian pimps – and by bringing Zara, who was unjustly removed from her community, back within its periphery. I am indebted to René Girard for my understanding of sacrificial violence: see René Girard, "Violence and Representation in the Mythical Text", in *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*, Baltimore 1978, p. 185.
- 24 Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah. Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory", in Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, Bloomington 1997, pp. 77–103.
- 25 Ene Mihkelson's novels describing Stalinist terror are *Ahasveeruse uni* [The dream of Ahasuerus] (2001) and *Katkuhaud* [Plague grave] (2007). For a non-antagonistic comparison of Oksanen and Mihkelson, see Sirje Olesk, "Two Ways to Write About Estonian History", in *Estonian Literary Magazine* 2011:1, pp. 4–11.
- 26 Hansen, p. 94.
- 27 Michael Rothberg, pp. 3, 5. It is important to note that Rothberg's approach addresses the relationship of the different histories of victimization, whereas in the *Purge* debate a single ethnic group's different ways of remembering the past compete.
- 28 The last point was made by Tiina Kirss. See Tiina Kirss, "Sofi O. ja tema raamat" [Sofi O. and her book], in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 2010-10-20, p. 3.
- 29 Hansen analyzes the role of sound in the visual production of *Schindler's List*. See Hansen, p. 85–94.
- 30 Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, Basingstoke 2011, p. 160. In reference to *Schindler's List*, Hansen also argues that the predominant media of public memory are media of mass consumption. See Hansen, p. 98.