Sofi Oksanen

Purge

Puhdistus

Presented by: Eric Bergman

Sofi Oksanen's *Puhdistus*, published in Finnish in 2008 and appearing first as a play at the Finnish National Theater (2007), is a political horror-thriller that raises a number of transnational issues concerning the political novel. First, *Puhdistus* is a critique of Russian politics, both historically and more contemporarily, though Oksanen is not Russian. Among other things, the novel centers on Russia's systematic crimes against the women of its enemies. Second, Oksanen writes in Finnish but one of her parents is from Estonia, where the bulk of the novel's story takes place, hence undercutting the national frame by which politics is typically approached. Some critics in Estonia questioned Oksanen's right—as a foreigner, specifically—to critique Estonian history, politics, and nationalist project (see, e.g., Laanes). Third, on the surface the novel portrays Russians as 'baddies' and Estonians as victimized 'goodies,' which plays into the novel being categorized as a melodramatic crime novel and women's fiction (Lappalainen) rather than 'serious literature.' However, the novel can also be read as a transnational call for victims' solidarity as they reject the nationalist tendency to found exclusionary collective identities on simplistic histories of suffering. Political history, as portrayed in this novel, must acknowledge that all communities are, and have been, morally fallible and should be scrutinized (Clarke).

Since this is a thriller that unwinds details across the narrative arc, the following plot summary contains plot spoilers. Also note that the novel may be, due to its brutal depictions of sexual violence, unreadable for some.

The central theme of *Puhdistus* is human trafficking, sex slavery, rape, and violence in the post-Soviet upheavals. Zara has grown up in Vladivostok, Russia, on the Pacific Ocean near North Korea in Siberia, and is taken into sex slavery by two brutal Russian thugs, who sell her in a dank apartment in Berlin. Zara manages to escape and arrives at what turns out to be her great-aunt Aliide's doorstep in Estonia. Aliide's past secrets of compromises, betrayals, and collaborations in the context of Nazi and Soviet rule are exposed. These interwoven stories eventually merge as it is revealed that Zara's family had been forcibly resettled (the titular 'purge') to Siberia from Estonia by the Soviet authorities due to Aliide's actions, hence undercutting the victim/perpetrator positions built up on national (Russian/Estonian) lines. However, Aliide's Soviet past is also portrayed as oppressed and conflictual, which ambiguates any simple moral judgment. Aliide eventually helps her great-niece, shoots the two Russian thugs dead, and burns herself along with her house in a final moment of possible atonement.

Though the novel has been translated into nearly 40 languages, the transnational political premise in the novel takes into account the historical experiences and memory of Estonian and Finnish suffering at the hands of Russia over the long 20th century. This is not only intended for a Finnish readership (the novel won the Finlandia literary prize in 2008, the most prestigious in Finland) but is

also based on Oksanen's own family's memories from Estonia. As is made clear in her most recent book, the non-fiction *Same River, Twice: Putin's War on Women* (2025), Oksanen is not ambiguous about calling a spade a spade: for nearly a century, Russian soldiers and the Russian government carried out systematic crimes, especially violence against women, including using rape as an instrument of war, against its enemies. *Same Rive, Twice* is framed by the arrest and brutal interrogation of Oksanen's great-aunt in Estonia during the Soviet occupation (the aunt, traumatized, remained silent for the rest of her life), illustrating historical context in which the novel *Puhdistus* is set. Though published in 2008, the novel can be read as a critique of Russian politics in the current day.

Even defining Oksanen's national belonging—and what subject matter she is 'allowed' to portray—is already a political question. As noted, Oksanen is considered a Finnish author and writes in Finnish while at least some vocal critics in Estonia consider her a foreigner. A more liberal definition of nationality would authorize Oksanen in using her family's stories and history, such as that of her great-aunt, to depict Estonia's history, politics, and construction of national identity. In this debate, methodological nationalism (the idea that the nation is the logical unit by which to approach literature, etc.) can delimit shared experiences of victimhood and potential solidarity to within national boundaries when, Oksanen shows, these are human questions that transcend borders. This also illustrates that the novel will have different meanings based on the contexts in which it is read (Pollari et al. 2015).

Oksanen contends that the nationalist tendency to build up collective identity based on memories of past suffering (see, e.g., Hogan) is a politically tenuous frame by which to build belonging. The novel rather posits vulnerability and moral fallibility as important aspects of a shared human condition that can provide a way out of violence and isolation both at the individual and national levels (Clarke 2015).

Through the process of 'Finlandization,' which is a concept that describes how a smaller independent country (Finland) can voluntarily align its foreign policy with a dominant neighboring superpower (USSR) to avoid conflict or occupation, it can be said the Finland is partly complicit in the historical wrongs that took place in Estonia. Maintaining good relations with the Soviet Union made ignoring the plight of Estonians convenient. In this sense, the novel *Puhdistus* also tells Finland's political story—of the unsaid and what was looked away from—that should be contended with between these two close neighbors, Estonia and Finland.

From a Finnish political perspective, the novel *Puhdistus* also illustrates the momentous geopolitical reality of sharing a 1,340-kilometer-long border with Russia. Finland fought two wars with the Soviet Union during WWII and barely succeeded in maintaining independence. But, as most Finns will openly acknowledge, history isn't over. The Russian bear is awakening and the novel *Puhdistus* illustrates exactly why vigilance is necessary.

References

Clarke, David. "The representation of victimhood in Sofi Oksanen's novel Purge." *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2015, pp. 220–235.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Understanding Nationalism*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2009.

Laanes, Eneken. "Sofi Oksanen's 'Purge' in Estonia." *Baltic Worlds* 16/2012, pp. 19–21. Accessed

January 13, 2014. http://balticworlds.com/%E2%80%9Cpurge%E2%80%9D-in-estonia/.

Lappalainen, Päivi. “Finnish Literature Abroad: The Case of Purge by Sofi Oksanen.” In *Finnische Sprache, Literatur und Kultur Im Deutschsprachigen Raum*, edited by Marja Järventaus und Marko Pantermöller. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013, pp. 333–351.

Oksanen, Sofi. *Same River, Twice: Putin’s War on Wome*n. New York, NY: Harpervia. Translated by Owen Witesman, 2025.

Oksanen, Sofi. *Puhdistus*. Helsinki: WSOY, 2008.

Pollari, Mikko, et al. “National, Transnational and Entangled Literatures: Methodological Considerations Focusing on the Case of Finland.” In *Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia,* edited by Ann-Sofie Lönngren, Heidi Grönstrand, Dag Heede, and Anne Heith, 2015, pp. 2–29.

LANGUAGE: Finnish/Suomi

This title was not censored before publishing