

## POSTMEMORY, STEREOTYPE AND THE RETURN HOME\*

REWRITING PRE-EXISTING NARRATIVES  
IN SOFI OKSANEN'S *PURGE*

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**ABSTRACT.** The article offers a discussion of Sofi Oksanen's novel *Purge*, focusing on the book's strategy of evoking stereotypical narratives about Eastern Europe, such as the (postcommunist) fallen woman and (Russian) return home narratives, as well as related intertexts, primarily Lukas Moodysson's film *Lilya 4-ever*. I argue that Oksanen constructs the plot around clichés in order to challenge them in a subversive fashion, first and foremost, in the name of recuperating the notion of Home. Related to locality and the feeling of being at-home, where the wholeness of the (national) subject is possible, 'home' is staged as an alternative to stereotypes, associated with transnational travel and the apparatus of colonization. A significant counter-narrative embedded in the novel – and hitherto rarely discussed – is the exilic perspective with its idealization of the lost and imagined home(land). In *Purge*, this is mediated through the main character's postmemory. By means of a postexilic narrative, home is reconfigured as a 'third space' – neither fully ideal and (ethnically) pure nor adhering to the aforementioned stereotypical narratives. The positive valorisation of home, despised by some critics as simplistic and conservative, does not prevent movement and dislocation from being included in the new experience of home(land) emerging from the post-Soviet condition.



**PRESSto.**

### 1. REPETITION IN STEREOTYPE AND IN POSTMEMORY

Two leading story lines in the Finnish-Estonian writer Sofi Oksanen's much-publicized novel *Purge* (2008) are figured in photography – a medium combining the uniqueness of real experience with repeatability.

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A tension between repetition and unique experience plays a crucial role in the construction of the two plotlines, one concentrated around Aliide Truu and the other around Zara.

Zara, a young woman from Vladivostok, is in 1991, soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, forced onto a path to sex slavery and taken away to Germany in a (stereotypically familiar) black Volga car. The only thing she brings with her is an old, black-and-white photograph depicting her grandmother Ingel and Ingel's younger sister Aliide in their youth in Estonia. Having received the picture from the grandmother, Zara keeps it hidden in her bra. It is her most precious treasure and a talisman, accompanying her in her darkest moments. The black-and-white picture represents the essence of Zara's family story: it encodes an unspoken trauma of which Zara is not aware but which is gradually revealed to the reader. The photograph portrays the happy days before traumatic events, including the Second World War, Soviet rule and Stalinist terror in Estonia. The picture represents a time of innocence that was lost like paradise, replaced by a brutal rape on the two sisters and Zara's mother, then a child, who still barely speaks as an adult, Ingel's deportation to Siberia, separation from her husband, and betrayal by her sister Aliide.

The description of the photograph, focalized through Zara, reads:

There was something very innocent in the girls' faces, and that innocence shone out at her from their round cheeks in a way that embarrassed her. Maybe she hadn't noticed it before because she herself had worn the same expression, the same innocence, but now that she had lost it, she could recognize it in their faces. The expression of someone unacquainted with reality. The expression of a time when the future still existed and anything was possible. (Oksanen, 2010:102-3)

Cherished by Zara, the inherited picture represents not just what no longer is but also Zara's postmemory: the memory of the pre-war days passed on to Zara by her grandmother – not in the form of a well-rounded narrative, but through fragmentary accounts, material leftovers, old recipes, and the Estonian language she taught Zara. They all represent feelings related to home and lost happiness.

Postmemory (i.e. memory of memory) is a term coined by literary scholar Marianne Hirsch to describe non-direct, second-generation memory related to collective traumatic events that influenced the personal lives of one's family members. Postmemory "characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch, 2012:22). Hirsch regards photography as a medium that has the power to connect the past with the present by bridging "first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory". Photographs "affirm the past's existence and, in their flat

two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance” (Idem:23). This is exactly the function of the old photograph in the plot: on the one hand, like a bridge, it eventually leads Zara to her grandmother’s former house after she manages to escape from her pimps and harassers, and provides evidence that Zara is Ingel’s granddaughter. On the other hand, by embedding an *imaginary* photographic object in the narrative, i.e. a photograph rendered by words, Oksanen lays bare the level of mediation and construction that every kind of memory is subjected to, and especially postmemory, in which the subject’s relation to the past is indirect, non-indexical (Van Alphen, 2006:486).

Precisely because of the inherent distance, postmemory is distinguished by “exploratory and probing” approach to the unknown past (Hirsch, 2012:247). To express such second-hand memory, some already existing narratives and images might be adopted, or rather, repeated with a difference. This exposes the impossibility of separating personal memory from cultural memory, transmitted through narratives and images reproduced across different media and technologies, and (re)framing personal remembrances<sup>1</sup>. Performativity, re-enactment and mediation are inherent in postmemory (Idem:38, 247). Rather than *recreation*, the aesthetics of postmemory forges creation.

Another type of photograph granted significance in the plot is a number of pornographic snapshots. They condense Zara’s own traumatic story – that of being a victim of human trafficking, a phenomenon that is escalating in Europe after the disintegration of the communist regimes. The pictures, taken by Pasha, one of two pimps who keep Zara imprisoned in Berlin, show “the expression Pasha had taught Zara, mouth open, tongue stretched out, and all the pricks” (304). After Zara’s escape, Pasha chases her to her Estonian family house and shows the pictures to Aliide. Their description is focalized through Aliide’s eyes: “Zara’s bright red lips shone dim against the oilcloth. Her stiff eyelashes spread like petals against the pale blue pearlescence smeared on the skin around her eyes. She had pink, swollen pimples, although her skin looked otherwise dry and thin”. The photographs are in colour and, importantly, they “were printed on Western photo paper; they had a Western sheen” (305).

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to Jan Assmann’s term ‘cultural memory’. In his discussion of Maurice Halbwachs’ notion of collective memory, Assmann takes the position that the subject of memory is always individual – but individual memory is generated and distributed through broader communication processes within various social groups, such as family, religious community or nation. Thus, memory is socially conditioned (see Assmann, 2008). It should be added that there is yet another important, extra-textual facet to the perspective of postmemory embedded in *Purge*. The fact that Oksanen adopts pre-existing narratives (as well as other texts) to describe a traumatic chapter in Estonian history can be viewed as a strategy related to the author’s own postmemory. As a child, Oksanen used to visit her grandparents in Estonia. See [www.sofioksanen.com](http://www.sofioksanen.com) (Hamm, 2013:25-26).

The pornographic snapshots are more than evidence of Zara's misery; they also incarnate the Western stereotype (note the "Western photo paper") of post-Soviet (migrant) women as whores – 'Natashas' (Natasha is also Zara's working nickname given to her by the pimps). Moreover, the description mirrors Aliide's perception of the West as luxurious (the "Western sheen"). Yet, at the same time, the snapshots encode not just a Western but also an inherently Russian trope stigmatizing Russian or Soviet women travelling to the West as prostitutes, known as the *Russian return home narrative* (Kristensen, 2007). Because Zara was forced to pose in front of the camera, the photographs also materialize the violence hidden behind the constructed, undeniably stereotypical image.

As Mireille Rosello observes, "the stereotyping process turns the text into an image" (Rosello, 1998:23). Indeed, the snapshots turn Zara's story into an immobilized image of a (Russian) prostitute. Through the medium of photography, Oksanen emphasizes the fixity and repeatability of narratives and images circulating across spaces and times<sup>2</sup>. Both the porn snapshots and the old black-and-white picture of the sisters' happy, yet idealized youth represent fixed entities, hardened ideas in which history has been transformed into "one solid block" (Idem:24). At the same time, each of the two photographs epitomizes a significant dimension in Oksanen's novel – postmemory and stereotype. The pictures can be viewed as narrative 'knots' or ekphrastic "pregnant moments" (Steiner, 1982:41), condensing what is unfolded narratively. Whereas the old picture epitomizes what I call a *postexilic narrative*, the contemporary snapshots materialize the *fallen woman narrative* and the aforementioned *Russian return home narrative*. In all three narratives home is a crucial element.

A postexilic narrative, in which exilic perspective is filtered through postmemory (Mrozewicz, 2014:117), incorporates pre-existing narratives and images because it lacks its own relation to the past. But unlike stereotype, postmemory has the potential to challenge repetition through a performative approach. In *Purge*, the stereotypical narratives become rewritten by means of the postexilic perspective. Rosello suggests that rather than being treated as the opposite of truth, stereotypes should be approached as "a branch of the art of representation [...] as one of the narratives that a given power wants to impose as the truth at a given moment" (Rosello, 1998:17). Such an approach is present in Oksanen's novel. My aim is here to analyse the strategies deployed in *Purge* in the face of stereotypes. A simple denial would not be

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<sup>2</sup> As a material object, a single photograph can easily be destroyed. But as a reproducible image, it can be perpetually repeated. Rosello observes that stereotypes, "whose main purpose is to be repeated endlessly", are independent of the materiality of the medium that disseminates them; as a typographic technique, "[s]tereotypes were precisely created to protect ideas from the wear and tear of materiality" (Rosello, 1998:23).

such a strategy. As Rosello warns us, “saying ‘All Arabs are x’ and ‘It is not true that all Arabs are x’” can have an equally damaging effect, as it only repeats and thus “activates the stereotyped idea” (Idem:38). Rather, Rosello argues, stereotypes should be “declined”. With this term, she means *both* a conscious but delicate rejection of invitation to the consensual agreement about the ‘truth’ disseminated by stereotype *and* declension understood as a grammatical operation on nouns. In this way, a “double movement of inhabiting while displacing” can be achieved (Idem:10).

## 2. WHORES, DUMPLINGS AND THE IDEAL HOME

In order to see how stereotypes and pre-existing narratives work in *Purge*, I will briefly examine a chapter close to the end of the novel, entitled “Why Hasn’t Zara Killed Herself?” (277). It begins in Tallinn to which Zara has been brought from Germany by her Russian pimps. Here, Zara kills her ‘customer’, the pimps’ boss, after which she escapes with the aim of finding the house of Aliide, her grandmother’s sister.

To begin with, however, it seems important to make a few remarks about the reception of Oksanen’s novel. As Finnish scholar Markku Lehtimäki pointed out, “[o]nce we recognize the mixed – and yet aesthetically organized – materials out of which Oksanen’s fiction is made, it becomes more and more difficult to read the novel as a purely mimetic and referential ‘history’” (Lehtimäki, 2012:180). Nevertheless, a “referential” reading has dominated the reception of *Purge*: it has been widely read as historical fiction<sup>3</sup>. But while Finnish and Scandinavian literary critics have applauded the book (it was awarded several Finnish literary prizes and the prestigious Nordic Literature Prize in 2010), Estonian reviewers (after the book was published in Estonian in 2009) tended to be sceptical and even depreciative towards the acclaim

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas Sofi Oksanen identifies herself as a “post-colonial author” (see [http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/18/sofi-oksanen-interview-russia-finlandestonia-putin?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/18/sofi-oksanen-interview-russia-finlandestonia-putin?CMP=share_btn_fb), 20.04.2015), Christine Hamm classifies *Purge* as historiographic metafiction (with Linda Hutcheon’s term); the prefix meta- is added because the past is narrated through (fictional) texts and documents, and references to texts outside the novel, which reflects its constructedness. In this way, the novel formulates scepticism towards the possibility of an objective representation of truth, always anchored in cultural (verbal) expressions (Hamm, 2013:26). Leaving aside the questions of the politics of memory, raised by the Estonian critics (see Laanes, 2012), my approach to the novel as a postexilic narrative does not interfere with Hamm’s approach. However, I perceive the representation of history as driven first of all by the desire of a stable and independent home(land) and of establishing a past that would affirm such a home. Therefore, in my reading, the novel, rather than being driven by the desire to represent history (this possibility is questioned by the novel itself) is driven by a (subjective and idealizing) memory of the past, communicated by both Ingel’s memories (passed down to Zara) and Aliide’s memories of the interwar period in Estonia.

the novel received in Finland and generally in the West – especially as “a document about Estonian history” (Laanes, 2012:20). Finnish (and Western) critics are prone to perceive Oksanen’s *oeuvre* as a moral project whose main function is to create *prosthetic memory* (Landsberg, 2004), i.e. a memory about the Estonian neighbour’s history that has been absent in the Finns’ awareness (Hamm, 2013:30)<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, some Finnish commentators voiced the opinion that Oksanen’s novel can redeem “the Finnish crime”, as it forces Finnish readers “to confront their suppressed knowledge about the abuses that took place in their neighbour country” (Idem: 17)<sup>5</sup>. As Christine Hamm emphasizes, because of the very fact that for Finnish and Western readers the novel functions as a *prosthesis* of memory, they are susceptible to accept Oksanen’s depiction of the historical past (Idem: 31).

The Estonian critique, on the other hand, revolved around questions of how accurately history is represented in the book. Some accused Oksanen of reinforcing stereotypes and turning “Estonian history into a theme park”. The novel, according to them, constructs a schematic black-and-white depiction of the Soviet period in Estonia along ethnic lines, demonizing Russians and staging Estonians as unambiguous victims: “[T]he attribution of past and present sexual violence and political terror to Russians equates the two, transfers the victimization of women to the whole nation, and assigns the blame to an ethnic group that is a part of post-Soviet Estonia” (Laanes, 2012:20). Literary scholar Eneken Laanes, in her critical overview of the Estonian reception of the novel, quotes scholar Reni Reid, according to whom “by linking historical narrative with the clichés familiar enough [...] to the western reader, she [Oksanen] touches precisely those keys and chords that megasuccess presupposes” (Idem). The stereotypical representation, the critics say, distorts history.

As several commentators have stated, *Purge* adheres to “the dominant narrative and state-supported memory regime” in Estonia. This “memory regime” is claimed to foreground national suffering and heroism, and to avoid more complex questions, such as “the Holocaust in Estonian territory and the collaboration of Estonians in Soviet rule”, as well as to ignore and exclude

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<sup>4</sup> Hamm emphasizes that according to Landsberg prosthetic memory can be created through works with a wide popular appeal, such as bestsellers and blockbuster movies. According to Hamm, *Purge* can be classified as a mass culture phenomenon, not least because the novel’s structure resembles a crime novel: the reader is made to construct the stories of Zara and Aliide and look for the truth (Hamm, 2013:30).

<sup>5</sup> Oksanen is known for her critique of Finlandisation, i.e. “Finland’s traditional foreign policy that favoured the Soviet Union. Giving the opening address at last year’s Frankfurt book fair, she called this the ‘diminishment of independence and the strangling of freedom of speech’. The maps used in Finnish schools ‘did not include my other homeland, Estonia’, she pointed out” (see [http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/18/sofi-oksanen-interview-russia-finland-estonia-putin?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/18/sofi-oksanen-interview-russia-finland-estonia-putin?CMP=share_btn_fb), 20.04.2015).

“the diverse memories of different ethnic groups”. According to this dominant narrative, “the interwar Estonian Republic [functions] as a pastoral paradise, the farm as a symbol of the nation and the Soviet occupation as a rupture” (Idem).

Indeed, such a pattern can be traced in *Purge*. However, the idealizing view of the interwar period and of the Estonian nation as ethnically homogenous does not need to be perceived as simply adhering to the “dominant” national narrative in Estonia. As already suggested, the novel provides cues allowing it to be read as a formulation of a postexilic perspective, typically romanticizing the lost homeland.

In the following part, in which I focus on the home-idealizing tropes and analyse the textual workings of the mentioned stereotypical narratives, I will pursue Laanes’ suggestion that

[Estonian] 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. [...] Instead of rejecting the novel on ideological grounds that are relevant only in the national context, we ought to analyse its textual workings and its attempt to represent sexual violence and other politically relevant issues more closely. As [Jonathan] Culler shows, a geographic remove or a transnational perspective may allow readers to find more in a work of art rather than less. (Laanes, 2012:21)

In the chapter “Why Hasn’t Zara Killed Herself?”, the description of Zara’s escape from Tallinn can be viewed as a juxtaposition of the previously mentioned narratives: postexilic, fallen woman and return home narrative. Let us start with Zara’s running through the streets of the city, which are utterly unknown to her. Zara’s disoriented spurt and her impressions are focalized through her terrified eyes, yet, at the same time, they are narrated as an almost mockingly exaggerated compendium of conventional images of the post-Soviet Europe. Windows in the buildings Zara passes are “barred with beams of Stalin’s sunlight”, streets look “deserted, potholed”, trash bins are “overflowing”, and on the ground lie “dumpling packets” – a rather awkward detail, combining clichés of Eastern European traditional food with junk food and contaminated streets. Zara even runs “past a [...] sandbox that smelled like cats, past girls nestled like trash against the concrete with their heroin-battered skin and crusted mascara, past little boys and tubes of glue, the snuffle of snot and glue mixed together” (282).

It is a grotesque gallery of stereotypes, and quite astonishing how many details the panicked girl is able to notice while fleeing from her oppressors. However, instead of undermining the authenticity of this passage or despising its stereotypical fabric, I would prefer to approach it exactly

as stereotypical and constructed<sup>6</sup>. It is, I will claim, as if Zara had to run through a congestion of clichés about the post-Soviet Europe – including herself being a whore – in order to get to what lies underneath the surface of the stereotypical constructions, be it the ‘truth’ or another cliché. In fact, the whole plot related to Zara can be read as a story about her gradual liberation from the identity imposed on her: that of a prostitute, and more precisely, a Russian prostitute in Western clothes.

Importantly, the stereotypes are accumulated in the urban space, and Zara runs away to the countryside. A clear antithesis is created between the hostile streets of Tallinn and the rescuing rural areas. The transition from the evil city to the positively coded nature evokes the myth of nature as liberating, even though the house and the Estonian village serve as a setting of both the happiest and the most gruesome events in the family life. Yet, Zara is not aware of these grim facts. Quite the opposite, she cultivates an idealized image of the pre-war past in her mind. It is worth noticing that if the image of the interwar period in Estonia is idealized as a “pastoral paradise” (as some Estonian critics would have it), it is always focalized through the memory of a character.

It is striking that Oksanen’s idealizing depiction of the Estonian home as remembered by Zara’s grandmother Ingel and her sister Aliide (the interwar period), and Zara’s journey, depicted as a kind of home-seeking journey, coincide to a high degree with the utopian depictions of homelands in exilic narratives, described by Hamid Naficy in his book *Accented Cinema. Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Naficy’s study concerns films, but the following observations can equally be applied to Oksanen’s novel:

In the postcolonial and post-cold war periods [...], in many parts of the world the ownership of land and of national territory was an object of frequent and ferocious dispute among warring groups, nations and superpowers. In fact, such disputes were key instigators of the displacement and emigration of massive numbers of peoples [...]. *Faced with the destruction of the homeland, the erosion of former structures and authorities of home (such as language and culture), and the impossibility to return, many exiles seem to turn to the structural authority and certainty that only nature seems capable of providing: timelessness, boundlessness, reliability, stability, and universality.* (Naficy, 2001:155-56, emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Markku Lehtimäki prefers to analyse, rather than criticise, the strategy of evoking clichés in Oksanen’s novel. For instance, he observes: “If these romantic characters of the story, Ingel and Hans, with their tragic love story, appear to the reader as somewhat clichéd, this is precisely the point: they are stock characters taken from fairy tales and Gothic romances, and their airy figures are in stark contrast to the more realist, modernist, and earthly characters of Aliide and Zara. Thus, the intertextual and discursive space of the novel is inhabited by distinctly *literary* devices, whether characters, plots, or motifs. It sometimes feels as if the characters themselves were living their lives within the confines of well-known cultural schemata and popular folk stories” (Lehtimäki, 2012:179, emphasis original).

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the perspective on the former Soviet area (excluding Russia) as postcolonial, see David Chioni Moore (Moore, 2006).



The idealizing depiction of the Estonian home as something stable and timeless, as well as closely related to nature and its rhythm, can be perceived as a part of an exilic perspective embedded in the novel, inherited by Zara from her grandmother in a secret language – the pre-war sounding Estonian – which they share when living in a claustrophobic communal apartment in Vladivostok. Zara's symbolic return to the Estonian house (and its transition from an imagined place of postmemory to a real place) can be read as a fulfilment of the exile's utopian dream of returning to a lost paradise. In exilic narratives, the desire to return is a desire "to become whole again" (Naficy, 2001:156). This longing takes shape in Zara's desire to become physically pure and to reconnect with her (national, Estonian) identity. Even if not aware, Zara inherited the desire from her grandmother, just as she inherited the Estonian language.

Additionally, the home-idealizing perspective in *Purge* adheres to a typical exilic narrative contrasting nature as "the sacred space-time of uncontaminated spirituality" with culture and civilization/city as "profane" (Idem:156). In *Purge*, the profane city represents the patriarchal and colonial orders: the totalitarian Soviet regime (Vladivostok), global capitalism (Berlin) and the oppressive stereotypes about the post-Soviet parts of Europe (Tallinn). Another feature typical of exilic narratives is that the idealized – and, importantly, imagined – home(land) is staged as an open space (nature) and contrasted with the all-too-real claustrophobic life in exile, envisioned in the tiny communal apartment in Vladivostok and the prison-like apartment in Berlin, where Zara is locked, as well as in the confining space of the car in which Zara is driven from Berlin to Tallinn.

Hence, the idealizing depiction of home in *Purge* can be detached from being viewed in terms of a one-to-one relation with historical facts – and as the officially supported "memory regime" in Estonia. Instead, we can read it as a narration driven by longing for the lost home. The reason why I describe the narrative as *postexilic* is because the exilic dimension is filtered through Zara's *postmemory*. Similarly, it seems important to distinguish between exilic and diasporic consciousness. Whereas "exiles' primary relationship, in short, is with their countries and cultures of origin and with the sight, sound, taste, and feel of an originary experience, of an elsewhere at other times", diasporic subjects' experience is to a lesser degree based on "a cathected relationship with a single homeland and on a claim that they represent it and its people", and more on a "horizontal and multisited" approach (Naficy, 2001:12). Undoubtedly, the narrative in Oksanen's novel illustrates a desire for a whole and stable national identity rather than an approach oriented toward plurality and performativity. Nevertheless, this ideal home becomes rearranged through the experience of dislocation concerning three generations (Ingel, Zara's mother and Zara) and comprising an integral part of Zara's Estonian home-to-be.

### 3. THE FALLEN WOMAN RISES AND RETURNS HOME

One of the pre-texts with which the Finnish novel has numerous analogies, and one which is evoked by the title of the chapter discussed here – “Why Hasn’t Zara Killed Herself?” – is the Swedish director Lukas Moodysson’s widely debated film *Lilya 4-ever* (2003) about a sixteen-year-old girl from an unspecified Baltic country, who is sold to Sweden, kept imprisoned in an apartment in Malmö, and forced by a Polish pimp to prostitution with Swedish men, a fate clearly similar to Zara’s. In the end, the desperate Lilya manages to escape, but commits suicide jumping from a footbridge in Malmö<sup>8</sup>.

Unlike Lilya, Zara does not commit suicide. She believes that she has a home to go back to. In the following, I make references to Moodysson’s film, focusing attention on the differences between these two highly similar narratives, which can help us better understand Oksanen’s choices in evoking the fallen woman narrative and the (Russian) return home narrative.

More precisely, both the film and the novel evoke what film scholar Serazer Pekerman called the “postcommunist fallen woman film” (Pekerman, 2012:171). The traditional fallen woman stories (popular in Hollywood cinema in the 1930s)

usually include the process of the fall of the innocent girl and the reasons behind it. Her involvement in sexual exchange is always involuntary and her situation is perceived as a misery by all the characters in the storyworld. [...] Typically, the male protagonist [...] heroically saves the girl along with the whole nation embodied in her character. [...] He is the only hope for a bright future in the miserable decline into the deeper layers of the allegedly hell-like world of the sex industry. (Pekerman, 2012:174)

Pekerman observes a re-emergence of this pattern in numerous films about post-Soviet / ‘Eastern European migrant women, typically portrayed as sex workers and victims of the unprecedented boom of human trafficking that

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<sup>8</sup> Analogies between the Zara-related plotline in *Purge* and *Lilya 4-ever* concern both the plot and narrative techniques. Dina Iordanova mentions several tropes typical of ‘trafficking films’: a young woman looking for a job in the West as the central character; the choice to go abroad is her own; her passport is taken by the trader/pimp; the viewer has access to the character’s inner life, often in the form of subjective flashbacks (Iordanova, 2011:24-25). Other similarities between *Purge* and *Lilya 4-ever* include: the figure of the aunt, in both cases morally ambiguous; the ‘talisman’ which the girls carry with them: Lilya has a picture of her guardian angel, Zara the old photograph; in both cases, a falling/rising metaphor is employed, as well as the metaphor of taking a bath (purity, innocence) as opposed to wearing heavy make-up (‘whore’); both girls have unknown Russian fathers; Zara’s disoriented run in the chapter “Why Hasn’t Zara Killed Herself?” closely resembles Lilya’s dash in the opening sequence of the film: Zara’s point-of-view recalls Lilya’s. Moreover, it is implicit that Lilya comes from Estonia (where the film was shot).

followed from the decline of the European socialist regimes, and has therefore been labelled the ‘Natashas Trade’ (Brown, 2010:2, 5-6). As a result, postcommunist ‘fallen women’ became identified with “‘Natashas’ or Russians” (Pekerman, 2012:171)<sup>9</sup>. *Lilya 4-ever* is a well-known filmic example. A similar trope can be observed in popular literature, especially crime novels. In a traditional fallen woman narrative, the “progression usually takes a form of a spatial displacement – a movement from the domestic space of the family to the public space of the street” (Lea Jacobs quoted in Pekerman, 2012:175). Space is gendered conventionally – the woman belongs to “the domestic private sphere”, whereas:

[h]er entering into the public space, which is gendered male, becomes a cause of all misfortunes that follow. [...] Peace is reinstated either by her death or by the man providing her a home, to save her from this misery. This salvation, of course, only becomes an option after she is punished for her sins. (Pekerman, 2012:175)

The fact that the female protagonist in Moodysson’s film commits suicide can be perceived as a resistance to a potential male saviour figure, “the man providing her a home”. But not providing Lilya a home unavoidably means – at least in terms of genre conventions – falling into another trap: Lilya remains a victim deprived of agency whose only escape is death through suicide. In this way, Moodysson’s film demonstrates there is no way out of the patriarchal neo-liberal universe and the related geopolitical hierarchy, in which the rich exploit (not only sexually) the poor<sup>10</sup>.

As Pekerman reminds us, postcommunist fallen woman narratives unfortunately have a lot in common with reality. But they also reinforce the stereotypical view of Eastern European women as prostitutes. Compared with the realist (shot in a para-documentary style) story of Lilya, Zara’s story turns the convention of the fallen woman upside down in a positive, radically anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial gesture.

First of all, the progression typical of the fallen woman narratives – from home to street – is reversed in *Purge*. Although Zara’s point of departure is her home – Vladivostok and the communal apartment in which she lives with her mother and grandmother, it is the final destination that turns out to be her *real*

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<sup>9</sup> Pekerman discusses Turkish films. She observes that whereas the emergence of American fallen woman films coincided with the Great Depression, in Turkish cinema its first emergence (the 1950s and 1960s) coincided with “an equally painful transition period, the partial destruction of rural livelihoods followed by a severe increase in rural-urban migration for economic reasons” (Pekerman, 2012:174). A re-emergence of fallen women in Turkish cinema occurred after 1989.

<sup>10</sup> At the same time, critics agree, the film successfully “refuses to privilege a patriarchal portrayal of Lilja as a feminine other” (Coxe, 2010:30), especially in terms of the use of cinematic means. See e.g. Larsson (2010:36).

home. Thus, her path follows from the 'home' imposed by the Russian colonizer, through the 'street' (transnational travel and enforced prostitution), to *the* home. Hence, Zara, in opposition to Lilya and typical fallen women, is in the end rewarded for the fact that she left the safe domestic space. Oksanen seems to be saying that leaving the safe domestic sphere, and entering the public space and transnational travel are necessary steps in order to find one's own roots and national identity, even if the process is painful. Such an understanding of home can be formulated with Sara Ahmed's words: "There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation" (Ahmed, 2000:88).

Additionally, because Aliide kills the pimps and Zara kills their boss, the novel, without denying the real tragedy of migrant sex workers from the former Eastern Bloc, challenges the very conventions of representing the post-Soviet universe as embodied in the figures of fallen women, who are, on the one hand, victimized, and, on the other, sexualized, by both the West and the East. Zara's "saviour" is not a man, but a woman – importantly, an Estonian woman. Moreover, Aliide – not a man – will provide Zara a home, or more precisely, she will return the family house to Ingel, Zara's grandmother.

The fact that Zara returns home – though the home she finds is not the home she left – both evokes and challenges the previously-mentioned return home narrative, "a salient Russian, and in particular Soviet, convention in representing Russians abroad" (Kristensen, 2007:3). According to the return home narrative, the travelling female character, going abroad to the West in order to find a better life, ultimately decides to return home – i.e. to Russia. Lars Kristensen defines this narrative, outlawing women's travel outside their homeland, as "conservative and patriotic" (Kristensen, 2007:20). As literary scholar Karin Sarsenov notes, in the times of perestroika the trope of the prostitute "emerged as a metaphor of Russian intercourse with its former enemy in the Cold War". What is more, "in works featuring travelling women, this metaphor acquires additional strength, due to the difference culture attributes to men and women's relation to space" (Sarsenov, 2006). In Kristensen's reading, because *Lilya 4-ever* adheres to this narrative, it "refuels the negative narrative of transnational female migration" (Kristensen, 2007:15).

As in Lilya's case, the reason for Zara's journey is dissatisfaction with where she lives. Where she travels to is an imagined place, the paradise-like West. But unlike Moodysson, Oksanen's use of the return home narrative counters its basic scheme: Zara returns, not to Russia though, as the "conservative and patriotic" Russian narrative would have it, but to Estonia and the old family house where her grandmother grew up; hence, she returns to the partly forgotten and repressed nationality. Thus, the Finnish author draws not only on the fallen woman/human trafficking narrative to formulate

unequal power relations of the transnational condition in the new Europe and to suggest continuity between Soviet and capitalist oppression, but she also subverts the (Soviet) Russian patriotic narrative in the name of recuperating the Home or rather, homeland. The narrative is here used in an anti-Russian gesture, thereby subversively turning it against itself.

Hence, unlike Lilya, Zara is given a 'third space', which allows her to reject the binary of the dystopian East and dystopian West, in which the post-Soviet subject has nowhere to go. It also allows her to re-establish her (partly erased) identity – without help from either the West or Russia, or from a male saviour. Even though Oksanen's novel may be perceived as "conservative and patriotic" – after all, home is a synecdoche of "Free Estonia!" and expresses a nostalgic idea of a(n) (ethnically homogenous) nation – this narrative has no colonial claims, contrary to the Russian tradition. What is more, the return primarily takes place in Zara's own imagination – she *believes* she re-discovers the smells, sounds and objects which her grandmother told her about and which until now she only imagined: "The sun peeped in through a slit in the curtains, and the curtains were exactly as she had imagined they would be" (54). While Lilya is abandoned by her mother (we could say that Mother Russia deserts her children, the former Soviet republics), Zara is guarded by *Grandmother Estonia*. Again, Oksanen plays with some clichés to reinstate the national identity of Estonia and stage it as superior ('grander') than Russia's.

Moreover, the Estonian home finally reached by Zara does not entirely fit into the domestic *versus* private pattern. Even though it undoubtedly remains coded female, women in Oksanen's novel are not simply relegated to the domestic space – they choose it actively and have (unlimited) agency related to the home. As Joanne P. Sharp states, during Soviet rule in Estonia, the "private sphere of the family provided a space of resistance which was antithetical to the public space of the totalitarian state" (Sharp, 2000:102). Indeed, home is a space of female resistance, whereas both the totalitarian state and capitalist regime are embodied by men and located in urban/transnational space<sup>11</sup>. The women representing the Estonian nation are agents whose actions determine the plot. As Sharp puts it, "[T]hough women appear in national imagery – as symbols of nation [...] or symbolic bearers of it as mothers – the agency of the nation is embodied within its male citizens" (Sharp, 2000:101). Oksanen challenges this model.

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<sup>11</sup> Hans Pekk, Ingel's husband, is an exception. It is not my aim to examine gender relations in *Purge* in detail. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the novel starts with a 'mad' man's diary. The man, Hans Pekk, is hidden in a secret room in Aliide Truu's house. The diary starts in May 1949: "I have to try to write a few words to keep some sense in my head and not let my mind break down" (1). And continues: "A man should do the work of the household, but in my house a woman does it. It's shameful" (3). This can be viewed as an almost literal reversal of the 'madwoman in the attic' trope famously described by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1979 (Gilbert, 2000). More on this trope in *Purge*, see: Lehtimäki, 2012.

Zara's story ends with "salvation", but a salvation opposite both to the conventions of the fallen woman narrative (a man or suicide) and to Lilya's story. Zara's persecutors are killed by Aliide, due to which Estonian national identity, embodied as a woman, is transformed from victim to hero. The passive/active binary is in *Purge* reformulated through a fallen/risen binary. The salvation through suicide trope is confronted directly when Zara, in shock after having murdered the boss of her pimps, wonders why she has not yet committed suicide. Instead, having both literally and symbolically killed 'the' man, she refuses to remain a passive victim. In fact, she literally rises (unlike Lilya, who *falls* from the bridge) and transforms into an independently acting character, capable of resistance.

#### 4. INCORPORATING STEREOTYPES / WASHING STEREOTYPES AWAY / STEREOTYPE AT-HOME

Some of Zara's acts of resistance take place on the most fundamental, bodily level, occurring as micro-events rather than events, related especially to cleanliness and the removal of dirt. The title of the novel, *Purge*, is both a reference to historical facts (Stalinist purges) and a multifaceted metaphor. In Aliide's house, the girl indulges in almost obsessive hygiene: she takes a bath, bleaches her hair, and meticulously cuts and files her nails, "concentrating on each finger one by one" (28). She also burns her dress and stockings. Zara's obstinate removal of dirt and make-up – driven by her will to avoid being recognized – can be read as an attempt at removing any traces of a 'whore' and transforming her body from out-of-place to in-place, at-home. It is a meaningful detail that Zara uses Aliide's homemade soap (the same kind Ingel used to make before the war), contrasted with the Imperial Leather soap, brought from Finland by Aliide's daughter<sup>12</sup>. The at-home can be here understood as the feeling of safety and integrity of the self (Derrida, 2000:53), and in Zara's case, the feeling of being Zara and not 'Natasha'.

If home is understood as a metaphor of the nation, then washing away the imposed identity and killing the pimps and their boss means eliminating the self-appointed "master of the house" (Derrida, 2000:5). In this respect, it is worth quoting a dialogue between Zara and the boss shortly before he dies. Having put on a porn video with Zara, he says:

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<sup>12</sup> The Imperial Leather soap connotes both 'Western imperialism' (as a British brand) and Russianness (as both Wikipedia and the brand's website inform [08.05.2015]; the soap, launched in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was designed to have the 'Russian leather' aroma and was initially called 'Imperiale Russian Leather'). The fact that the soap is brought from Finland can be read as Oksanen's hint to Finland's complicity in Russian colonialism in Estonia (Finlandisation).

'I suppose you know you're a slut?'  
 'I know.'  
 'Say it.'  
 'I'm a slut and I'll never change. I've always been a slut and I always will be.'  
 'And where is this slut's home?'  
 'Vladivostok.'  
 'What?'  
 'Vladivostok.'  
 'You said it wrong. This is your home. Here with your master and your master's cock. A slut has no other home, and she never will. Say it.'  
 'Because I am a slut, my home is here, with my master's cock.'  
 'Good. You almost got it right. Now say the whole thing.'  
 'I'll never have any other home.' (278)

This dialogue not only incarnates the fixed and indoctrinating nature of stereotype, but also relates stereotype to the idea of home. Clearly, the "home" of which the man speaks is ruled by himself – the "master", the "cock" – i.e. the (patriarchal and colonial) system that does not want the stereotyped individual/people to have any other home than itself. Stereotypes, when in use, always involve power and domination: "It is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve" (Dyer quoted in Rosello, 1998:177, n. 17). (Sexual) exploitation itself is not enough to maintain power over a violated person/people. The controlling subject needs a stereotype produced in language and reinforced by the repetitive nature of language, as well as through reproducible images (video and pictures) in order to ensure his domination. Moreover, he needs the person being stereotyped to believe it herself. Just as he needs her to get rid of any idea of an independent home – of her own subjectivity. She has to accept the language imposed by the 'host', the "master" (Derrida, 2000:15).

Indeed, in critical moments Zara believes herself to be 'Natasha', a whore, no matter how much she cleans her body. She thus internalizes the external perspective of herself and literally in-corporates the identity imposed on her: "She should try to be sweet and polite and well behaved and helpful, but she had a whore's face and a whore's gestures, although cutting her hair had surely helped to some extent" (59). Zara's self-humiliating adoption of the oppressor's view of herself is a well-described mechanism invoked in the colonized subject (Salomonsson, 2014:54)<sup>13</sup>. It also illustrates individual subjectivity being absorbed by a stereotype. The colonizer is – as in *Lilya 4-ever* – double-fold, connoting both Russia as the former oppressor of Estonia and the new 'wild capitalism' forging the commodification of Eastern European bodies and their trade to the West.

<sup>13</sup> In her analysis of *Purge*, Salomonsson refers to Frantz Fanon's concept of the colonized mind, discussed in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) (Salomonsson, 2014:53-54).

Thus, the gradual removal of the identity imposed on Zara by her pimps can be read as a removal of the colonized layer from her Estonian body, as well as of the self-colonizing view on the West as superior<sup>14</sup>. Zara's body transforms from transnational to national, erasing both the contemporary transnationality, the dirt of the road, so to say, and the one imposed on her family by the previous Soviet regime, which in practice meant Russification. Such a reading is supported by parallels between Zara's and her aunt's experiences. Aliide's past choices – marrying a KGB agent and becoming an agent herself – are implicitly compared to prostitution. Hence, the final act of killing the Russian pimps (controversial according to some critics in Estonia) emerges as a form of revenge for – and reversal of – ethnic Stalinist purges and the violence the women have experienced. The “salvation” resulting from Aliide's act is double: it saves Zara and thus redeems Aliide's sins, although, in the end, Aliide commits suicide, as if to confirm her guilt. In this context, the killing of the Russian pimps can also be viewed as the killing of both the Russian return home narrative and the postcommunist fallen woman narrative. Aliide kills the producers of the stereotype – who themselves embody it – and thereby lays bare the oppressive force behind it: a conflation of the new capitalist order with the old totalitarian regime.

Oksanen's novel implies that a stereotype can be not only an instrument used by the oppressor to control the oppressed, but that it can also function *as* a colonizer and infiltrate the imagination and identity of the stereotyped people to such a degree that it becomes a part of them – and their bodies. Aliide's infiltration is radical: killing the producers of the stereotype is equal to killing a part of her own subjectivity.

It is worth taking a closer look at Aliide's final decision to destroy the house and kill herself. The ending of the Aliide-related plot remains ambiguous: on the one hand, she writes a letter to Ingel in which she leaves instructions as to how to regain possession of the house. She mentions that the cellar is “full of jam and preserves, made according to their old recipes”. On the other hand, she plans to “get the gasoline and douse the house with it” and “lie down beside Hans. In her own house, beside her own Hans” (356). The reader never learns what she does in the end, which makes us focus on Aliide's motivation rather than actions.

In the context of Aliide's encounter with Zara that is to transform her life irreversibly, Aliide's (self-)destructive plan can be understood as more complex than ‘just’ atoning for her sins or an attempt to hide them. It can also

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<sup>14</sup> Self-colonizing is a concept that “can be used for cultures having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the west without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact” (<http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html> 01.05.2015).



be viewed as a consequence of her opening up to the stranger whom Zara represents, and who turns out to be familiar. Aliide's hospitality transforms – using Jacques Derrida's terms – from conditional to unconditional (Derrida, 2000:25). Although initially hostile rather than *host* to Zara, in the end she protects her from the invaders, former KGB agents. Allowing Zara to be truly at-home requires keeping the pimps – and their stereotypical narratives – out of the house. But unconditional hospitality may be self-destructive, and Aliide's gesture is radical in that she gives her home to the newcomer, to a (no longer) stranger. As a result, Aliide's house ceases to be her own, or rather, Aliide recognizes the fact that it is not exclusively hers. With her decision to rescue Zara, Aliide reinstates a sense of community: she acts in the name of both of them. Zara's 'return' makes Aliide's 'I' transform to 'we' (Ahmed, 2000:78). However, her plan to commit suicide signals that she would not be able to live in the transformed house affected by the outside world, a house in which Vladivostok and the Estonian village will unavoidably have to meet, as they already do through Zara: "Zara woke up to the homey smell of boiling pigs' ears snaking its way out of the kitchen. She thought at first that she was in Vladivostok – she recognized the sound of the lid rattling on the pot of boiling water, the familiar smell of gristle – her mouth was already watering [...]. She was at Aliide Truu's house" (53).

In this context, it is interesting to see what happens with the stereotype, and, more precisely, with the perception of Zara as a 'Russian whore'. The very first description of Zara in the novel is focalized from the point of view of Aliide, who watches Zara – a stranger lying in front of her house – through the window, an opening of the home towards the outside world *par excellence*<sup>15</sup>. Even if Aliide does not think of Zara as a prostitute, what she sees fits into the pattern. At the end of the novel, when the two pimps show to Aliide the pictures of 'Zara-as-Natasha', while Zara is hidden in Aliide's secret room, she says, fully convinced: "I've never seen her" (305). In Aliide's perception, Zara is detached from the stereotypical, reproducible image. She is not 'Natasha', even though throughout the novel Aliide indulges in rather unfriendly speculations as to who Zara is. But stereotypes are created about strangers, not about someone familiar. Gradually, Aliide realizes how the 'stranger' came into being, and what the history not only of her origins, but also of her displacement is (Ahmed, 2000:79). For the reader, the effect is similar: we become familiar with Zara, although much earlier than Aliide. Zara is not a stranger (an anonymous, stereotypical figure) due to the fact that we have learned her story, the story behind the porn

<sup>15</sup> "[...] in order to constitute the space of a habitable house and a home, you also need an opening, a door and windows, you have to give up a passage to the outside world [*l'étranger*]" (Derrida, 2000:61, emphasis original).

snapshots and videos. For Aliide, Zara is both strange and familiar – she is both Russian and Estonian, but most importantly, she reminds her of Hans Pekk – Aliide’s brother-in-law and Zara’s grandfather, and Aliide’s unfulfilled love: “Russian or not, the girl had Hans’s chin” (331).

Thus, a way of depriving a stereotype of its harmful potential can be domesticating it and at the same time opening the house to the stranger. A stereotype cannot be at-home. When away, out of home, a stereotype is disguised as familiar – known to everyone and knowing the ‘truth’. But when at home, it becomes an unwanted (although undeniably recognizable) invader.

A crucial difference between *Purge* and *Lilya 4-ever*, staging Lilya as homeless, is that the novel creates a ‘third’ kind of space, disrupting the binary order from which the post-Soviet subject is excluded (neither-West-nor-East). Whereas in Moodysson’s film the exploited and humiliated female body is the point of arrival, in *Purge* it is solely the point of departure. Whereas Lilya is denied any agency, Zara has agency from the beginning of the main plot (she arrives at Aliide’s house, her arrival changes Aliide’s life and sparks events). Whereas Zara’s story starts with her arrival to Estonia, Lilya’s is a story of leaving her country. Thus, even though the post-Soviet bodies of Lilya and Zara closely resemble each other, the way their stories are represented diverge in significant aspects.

Why hasn’t Zara “killed herself”, as both the fallen woman narrative and the Russian return home narrative would require? Because she had a home to return to, a home existing, in fact, only in her postmemory. This foregrounds the idea of home(land) as first of all an *imagined* community, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s term (Anderson, 2006). Home, coded positively in *Purge*, signifies not only the imagined past but also (Zara’s) imagined future. At the same time, home is definitely not constructed as a “purified space of belonging in which the subject is too comfortable to question the limits or borders of her or his experience” (Ahmed, 2000:87). Rather, the opposite is true: dislocation and transnational movement, including the Russianness which Aliide repeatedly notes about Zara (with disgust), constitute a part of the old/new home’s identity. Thus, the home in *Purge* seems a much more complex construction than some Estonian critics would have it. The “relation between being, home and world is partially reconfigured from the perspective of those who have left home” (Ahmed, 2000:79). The perspective of those “who have left home” (Ingel and Zara’s mother) is a part of Zara’s experience – and her postmemory.

Both *Purge* and *Lilya 4-ever* undermine the idealized view of contemporary transnationality, allying with the perspective of those who do not simply chose transnational movement but who have been forced on its path by some stronger (first of all economic and political) forces. Oksanen’s narrative is, indeed, conservative in that it seeks to re-establish the lost

relationship between identity, belonging and home (Ahmed, 2000:78), and offers an understanding of community based on shared experience and kinship rather than on difference. Nevertheless, it creates a space which is Zara's own and which she can not only re-inhabit but also reconfigure – a space denied to Lilya.

To conclude – in *Purge*, stereotypical narratives become rewritten by a post-exilic idea of home and through the perspective of postmemory, which itself is reimagined through Zara's experiences. Oksanen includes clichés purposefully – and not merely to gain popular appeal, as some critics have implied. Rather, as I tried to show, clichés and familiar narratives become rewritten with significant shifts, a strategy that does not deny them but, using Rosello's doubly-coded term, declines. Not allowed exact repetition, the pre-existing narratives become subverted from within, and, at the same time, both inhabited and displaced.

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