

IMMIGRANTS IN FINLAND AS A PROBLEM DISCUSSED IN LEENA LEHTOLAINEN'S *MINNE TYTÖT KADONNEET*¹

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ABSTRACT: Leena Lehtolainen belongs to the most appreciated Finnish authors of crime fiction. One of the significant features of her works is that she discusses some most alarming social issues in them. The problem concerning immigration and its different aspects can definitely be considered as an example of such an issue. Since the problem of cultural antagonisms, racial hatred and xenophobia has been widely discussed by many other Scandinavian authors of crime fiction as well, it is worth analyzing how Lehtolainen herself approaches the problem. The aim of this article is to discuss some aspects concerning the problems of immigrant societies in Finland, basing on one of Leena Lehtolainen's novels, *Minne tytöt kadonneet*, which main subject could be described as a collision of two completely different cultures and attitudes to the reality. Its aim is not, however, to discuss any formal aspects of the text, since such a kind of detailed analysis cannot be the subject of one article only. That is why the article concentrates on the plot of the novel and its possible relations to some actual problems the Finnish society faces. Taking it all into consideration it may be seen as an introduction to a wider analysis of Leena Lehtolainen's works.



1. INTRODUCTION

Leena Lehtolainen, born in 1964 in Vesanto in Eastern Finland, is one of the most successful Finnish authors of criminal fiction. She has been one of the most popular crime fiction writers not only in her homeland as her novels have been translated into 29 languages so far (TA)².

¹ For translation of the title → see Paragraph 3.

² Due to particularly limited number of scientific sources it is inevitable at some points to cite references such as for instance the publisher's official webpage. Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that the novel is relatively new, which also influences the fact that there

Lehtolainen is considered the main Finnish author of crime fiction dealing with feministic and political matters (Ruohonen 2005:501). One of the characteristic features of her works is that they deal with the most appalling societal problems of today's Finland. Not only does the writer construct the plot in a way that makes it appealing to the reader, but also discusses the issues vital to the whole society, even for those not interested in crime fiction at all. An example of the issues widely discussed in Finland nowadays is the problem of the immigration process and the immigrants. Many of its aspects are present also in Leena Lehtolainen's crime story series with Maria Kallio as a main character.

2. IMMIGRATION AND ITS ASPECTS

In order to present the way Lehtolainen approaches the issue of newcomers to Finland it is crucial to signalize what kind of potential problems might be related to it in general. First of all, while analyzing the phenomenon of immigration it should be emphasized that not only the problems of immigrants shall constitute the subject of analysis. Not only might the immigrants have adaptation difficulties, it is also the host society that extremely often fails to adapt to the new cultural situation of the country. Unfortunately, the problems of intolerance, xenophobia, fear and ethnic hatred are still present even in such a modern, open-minded and multicultural society as the society of Finland and other Scandinavian countries. For that reason it would be a misunderstanding to accuse the newcomers of being the source of all the negative effects connected with the phenomenon of immigration.

As it comes to the immigrants themselves and their difficulties with adaptation to their new living conditions it is extremely important to take into consideration the reasons for their decisions concerning the change of place of residence. Most of the people leaving their home place and cultural surroundings they have been used to make such a dramatic decision due to actual political or economical situation of their countries, which means that they cannot always decide on their lives according to their own will. As a result, in most cases they are mentally not ready for such a dramatic change. They arrive to their new "homelands" completely unprepared for what they may experience there. Some of them leave in rush, forced to resign from most of the goods they gathered, sometimes even to leave some of the family members realizing that may never see them again. Some of them are even not informed about conditions they are supposed to adapt to in detail. All of these factors lead to the situation in which some of the immigrants not only do not

is not many scientific works, in which requested data could be found. Most of available sources represent the kind of popular science.

feel gratefulness for the opportunity to start a new life they have been given, but even regard the new situation as a kind of invasion into their lifestyle. Therefore, in some cases an assimilation process is a struggle both to the immigrants and to the society hosting them. Unfortunately, different expectations of both sides, completely incomparable points of view on societal matters may result in serious misunderstandings, in the most appalling cases even leading to crimes.

However, in all of the societies where immigration determines public life on a large scale there could be seen some astonishing examples of fully successful adaptation processes. Therefore, many individuals with immigrant background succeed in obtaining appropriate education, finding satisfying, well-paid job as a next step and manage to pursue their careers in a way which makes them respected and appreciated members of the society. Their work contributes to the balanced development of their new society, what has a great importance not only to their family members, but for a larger community as well. At the same time they manage to retain some elements of their traditional lifestyle and culture so that the environment they live in becomes a multicultural society. The readers may find a lot of examples of such “successful biographies” in a literary world as well. Many characters created also by the authors of criminal fiction represent that type of personality: fully adapted to new life conditions, but still not fully assimilated to their new society, in a positive way. They cultivate some national traditions, which contributes to the creation of multinational, multicultural society and raise tolerance towards different cultures among the native inhabitants of a given country.

3. PROBLEMS CONCERNING IMMIGRATION IN LEENA LEHTOLAINEN'S WORKS

The problems mentioned above are present in some of the Maria Kallio-novels by Leena Lehtolainen as she is, according to some critics, “quick to react to topical subjects” (Ingström 2006:36). It is her novel *Minne tytöt kadonneet* (‘Where have the girls gone’) from 2011 in which the readers confront most of them. As we may read on Lehtolainen’s profile on the publisher’s official webpage, the novel is a gripping and intense description of today’s multicultural Finland and cultural collision. It is a journey into everyday life dominated by old-fashioned beliefs and way of thinking deeply rooted in human mind (TA).

The main plot of the novel concentrates on the disappearance of three Muslim girls and the death of the fourth of them. Maria Kallio, back to work after taking part in a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, investigates the cases with her colleagues. In the meantime, during the police investigation

there happens a dramatic collision of different cultures, attitudes towards the reality and totally incoherent points of view. It is a situation, in which we have to deal with "two truths" and the question is, who is right (TA). Maria Kallio tries to solve the mysterious case of Noor Ezfahani, young Iranian girl, whose body was found under snow in Espoo. Her Finnish boyfriend, Tuomas, becomes first of the suspects and the police decide to arrest him. However, his reaction to the news about Noor's death clearly indicates, that he is as shocked and terrified as everyone whom the case concerned. Later on Tuomas suggests that it was Noor's cousin, Rahim who suffocated her. According to Tuomas the reason is evident. As Rahim realized that the girl, once promised to him as his future wife, dated a Finnish boy and with high probability was not a virgin anymore, decided to take revenge and kill her. This kind of honor killing would have probably been nothing unusual in a cultural environment in which Noor and Rahim grew up. When the police starts to take such a possibility into consideration, not only Rahim, but all the male members of the Ezfahani family are seen as possible perpetrators.

At the same time the police from Espoo have to deal with enigmatic disappearance of three other girls of immigrant and at the same time Muslim background. They are aware of the fact that the cases might be similar to one another. In all the cases the investigation takes place parallelly in two different environments: among the girls' Finnish friends and acquaintances and within their own families which appear to have much more information concerning the girls that they are willing to share with the police. What makes the effective communication with them complicated is that not all of them, actually only several members of each family, managed to acquire the Finnish language in a satisfactory level. Those who are supposed to know the most about their daughters, namely the mothers, occur to be the less helpful to the Kallio's team. They find it extremely hard to express themselves in a language so different from their own, in a situation when strong emotions, even the feeling of desperation, surface.

As sensational as it may seem, Rahim finally confesses that he is guilty of having murdered Noor for the reasons already mentioned, to put it simply, standard reasons in such cases. No matter how trivial the solution of the case may appear at first, it becomes much more complicated and shocking when the police reveal the truth about a nationalist organization working on the area of Espoo. An organization that Tuomas Soivio also is a member of. An organization that indirectly causes Noor's death. The ruthless aim of the informal nationalist organization in question is to "clean" the Finnish society from the newcomers that are perceived as a threat to the traditional values of this Northern Europe country. In order to achieve that, the members of the organization take action to arrange situations in which their "targets" – the individuals of immigrant background of their choice, are provoked to violate

the law, even to commit serious crimes and to “prove” that creating a harmonic multicultural society is only a utopian dream. According to their common, ridiculous idea which, in fact, leads to the Iranian girl’s death, each member of the group is obliged to start a relationship with someone, adequately with a boy or a girl, representing a culture in which such kind of relationship would be seen as a religious or cultural rule violation in order to cause their families and relatives’ rage. In case of Tuomas Soivio and his relationship with Noor Ezfahani, the result of the plan is cruelly spectacular. As the girl was supposed to marry her cousin Rahim, the fact that she started to date another boy, in addition a person of different cultural background and religious views, enrages Rahim and he takes cruel revenge killing his own relative. The girl who planned to study medicine, become a doctor and help people in need would never be given a chance to feel that she won all the difficulties and made her dreams come true. If there can be any kind of solace in such a situation, the reader realizes that what was supposed to be a demonstration of power and pure hatred at the same time, turns into a personal tragedy to Tuomas Soivio. Before he undertook the action against immigrants he could not have predicted that he would really fall in love in the girl he indirectly killed. Both Rahim and Tuomas get their punishment immediately as they lose the girl they loved, each of them in their own personal way, forever.

4. THE “TWO TRUTHS”

Taking all the facts mentioned into consideration it should be admitted that the reader indeed deals with two truths while discovering why the crime on which the main plot concentrates was committed. It goes without saying that Rahim is guilty; taking Noor’s life he in fact ruins the whole family’s future as their hope for a stable life in a new homeland fades away. However, the tragedy would never have happened provided that Rahim had not been provoked by Tuomas Soivio and his mates. It should be added that at the same time another member of the notorious group, Heini Korhonen, arranges a meeting with a developmentally disabled brother of one of the lost girls that the police is searching for and gets raped by him. She may be seen as a victim and it is undoubtedly true on the one hand. On the other hand, it is evident that due to his disability Samir would have never been able to commit such a crime consciously. It should be emphasized that Heini Korhonen in fact encouraged the boy to harm her. Therefore, it would be unjustified to accuse only Rahim and Samir for what happened in both cases. Both Rahim and Samir on one side and the group of nationalists on the other are guilty of having caused suffering to all the people involved and to themselves as well.

Analyzing the situation presented in the novel, it is noticeable that Leena Lehtolainen discusses the following issues concerning immigration: problems

occurring during the adaptation process in case of some immigrants on the one hand and problems with the attitude of the host society unable to accept the fact that it takes time for the newcomers to start living a life according to the new cultural standards on the other. The families of the Muslim girls whose cases the police investigate are examples of immigrant communities that could be considered problematic. Even if their decision concerning moving to a different country was caused by some external factors, what may result in the feeling of injustice, they know that they are given a chance to start a new life in a place where living conditions are indisputably better than in their homelands. Despite this, they seem unwilling or unable to accept the fact that changing a cultural environment requires changing lifestyle patterns to some extent. The male members of the families described in the novel do not accept the fact that their female relatives should be given some more independence as it comes to studying, choosing the future profession and a partner to spend the life with. However, this is not the only problem concerning the female immigrants. Some of them, similarly to the mothers of the families shown in the novel, seem intimidated as some new duties and responsibilities that this kind of independence generates appear. They often fail to learn the Finnish language to a satisfactory extent, which makes them feel insecure in their new communities. Because of that their behavior may seem unnatural. Moreover, they are often afraid of the influence their new cultural environment may have on the family's traditional lifestyle and future of their children. Noor Ezzahani's mother has never accepted the fact that Tuomas Soivio could really be Noor's boyfriend. According to her, he is only a kind of "bad boy" trying to make Noor interested in him, but Noor is unwilling to get involved in a relationship with him. The most shocking example of an individual having a serious adaptation problem is definitely the one of Rahim. The young boy solves his problem in a way that is absolutely unacceptable for his new society, though he might have been understood by people sharing his points of view in his homeland. He acts as if he had not realized that what he undertakes belongs to the most serious crimes according to law he should obey in order to become a legitimate member of the Finnish society. It goes without saying that the situation he finds himself in might have made him feel humiliated and desperate. As the author of the novel herself admitted in one of her interviews, even if we cannot accept the crime, we might understand the motives (Haavikko 2003:42). However, no matter how strong the feeling of dishonor was in his case, having lived in his new homeland for some time already Rahim should have predicted that no one representing the traditional values of the Finnish society would find his decision justified.

As far as the host society portrayed in the novel is concerned, the situation that occurred in it is particularly frightening. In today's Finland, as well as in all the Northern European countries, it is emphasized that their future balanced

development in many aspects depends on the working power of the immigrants. The societies of those highly developed countries are getting older. The number of pensioners is growing, whereas the working population is falling. This problem that is in fact common for many developed countries and can be considered one of the effects of globalization process has to be solved if the countries concerned wish to maintain their status of welfare states. In most cases it is not possible without the help of the newcomers' contribution, to put it simply, without the work they do. As the governments of these countries take different steps to make the citizens aware of the serious threat caused by societal changes, most of them realize that the immigrants' work for the balanced economical development is a blessing. Unfortunately, among the genuine citizens of each country there can be found some individuals that treat immigration as a threat, even more serious one than the societal changes mentioned. In their opinion the fact that the immigrant communities of the country are growing put its genuine culture at risk. According to them among different factors that are particularly alarming there are for example mixed marriages between autochthones and immigrants. It is probably why the members of the organization from the Lehtolainen's novel choose such a way of fighting with the immigrants; they aim at humiliating immigrants by what they find humiliating to themselves.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that more and more citizens of the Scandinavian countries are expressing their objection to the fact that the welfare services the newcomers are provided with sometimes are not available to the native born citizens in need. There is a situation described in the novel in which a young Finn expresses his enagement towards those immigrants who, in his opinion, are provided with financial help from the government only due to all the traumas they experienced in their homelands. At the same time, the Finnish boy's grandfather, a war veteran who sacrificed his health for the land's freedom, is not provided with help that he needs and deserves.

Moreover, it is unacceptable for many that the immigrants starting their new lives still would like to cultivate some of their ethnic traditions or find it difficult to accept some elements of the local culture. The people with nationalistic attitude would probably find some of the characters described in the novel, as for example unemployed Muslim mothers or Noor's parents disallowing their daughter to study, particularly irritating. However, it should be emphasized that the adaptation process is extremely complicated and what makes it even more problematic to the immigrants is an antagonistic attitude of the people surrounding.

Nonetheless, Lehtolainen's aim is not only emphasizing the dark sides of the society. As a contradictory example to the problematic case of the nationalist group with Heini Korhonen and Tuomas Soivio as its members, Lehtolainen describes also such situations, in which the citizens' positive

attitude towards the newcomers is clearly visible. One of them is the moment in the novel, when a young Finnish boy reacts strictly to an elderly man malicious comment on a Muslim mother taking too much space in a bus because of the baby carriage, and Maria Kallio trying to help her. Having been supported by a young representative of the Finnish society Maria Kallio shares her optimistic thoughts with the readers. She appreciates the fact that there are many tolerant, open-minded individuals among the youngsters. The situation presented suggests that nationalist organizations like the one responsible for Noor's death is only a kind of aberration, whereas the majority of the society does not consider the immigration a threatening process causing the destruction of the national culture. On the contrary, the majority seems to treat all the citizens equally in the name of balanced, harmonic coexistence and future of the next generations.

Furthermore, as it has already been mentioned, despite serious obstacles that in many cases make a successful adaptation process almost impossible to thousands of immigrants, the stories of some of them may serve as an encouraging example to their less successful counterparts. A great case history of an astonishing success achieved by an individual of immigrant background is present also in most of the Maria Kallio-novels, thanks to one of the protagonists, female police officer named Anu Wang-Koivu. The character created by Lehtolainen is a woman of Chinese-Vietnamese origin that moved to Finland with her family. Not only is she eager to acquire the language and some important elements of the Finnish culture, she also aims to become a member of the new society she represents in all respects. She even decides to change her forename³ in order to be perceived by other Finns as "one of them", not as one of thousands of the newcomers struggling to acquire at least several new Finnish words every day. What proves that she is extremely determined to succeed in a friendly, open-minded, but still completely new environment is a fact that she decides to join the Finnish police forces. As we take into consideration that even nowadays it seems unusual to many that a woman can become a "real" police officer, a female police officer of immigrant origin may be considered as a revolutionary case in that area. Anu Wang succeeds also in her private life as she marries one of her colleagues, Pekka Koivu, Maria Kallio's best friend and becomes a mother.

It is definitely not a coincidence, that the author created a protagonist like Anu as she declares herself a feminist by all means (Haavikko 2003:38). Moreover, it is considered that through her works Lehtolainen aims at raising the reader's consciousness concerning some vital feminist issues (Nesting 2007:60). Anu, as well as Maria Kallio, may be seen as a kind of argument in the discussion on the stereotypical thinking about the women's society roles.

³ Anu is a Finnish female name.

The fact that Anu Wang-Koivu appears also in *Minne tytöt kadonneet* indicates, that what Lehtolainen aims at is not only showing the downsides of the immigration process. Similarly to the episode with the young Finnish boy mentioned, it brings to the novel a breath of optimism.

However, while analyzing the problems presented in the novel, as in any other literary work, the reader should bear in mind that it is only a representation of the author's point of view, thoughts and opinions about certain issues. Therefore, the work at hand should not be treated as a detailed sociological analysis presenting real problems of the Finnish society. It does not, in fact, include any official sociological statistics concerning the immigration process in Finland. Its aim is to show parallels and possible connections between the society portrayed in the novel and the real problems that the society faces nowadays. Searching for such connections is justified taking into consideration that every author as a representative and observer of a given society tries to convey a kind of message concerning it through their works.

5. IMMIGRATION AND THE SCANDINAVIAN LITERARY LIFE

It is worth mentioning that the problems discussed by Lehtolainen have been present in novels by many other Scandinavian, including Finnish, authors as well. In Finnish literature the problem has been discussed for a long time already, which indicates, that the antagonisms towards the citizens of non-Finnish background derive from some prejudices deeply rooted in traditional way of thinking. One of the most appreciated Finnish authors of crime fiction, Matti Yrjänä Joensuu, devoted one of his novels from the Harjunpää-series, *Harjunpää ja heimolaiset* 1984 (“Harjunpää and the tribesmen”, no English translation so far)⁴ to the problem of antagonisms between the Finns and the Romani minority (OT). In the novel racism is present in the police work as well as in the society in general. The novel has launched public debate on racist attitude among the police (Ruohonen 2005:32). The investigation described in it acquires some racist features as the police realize there are some people of Romani origin among the main suspects (Sassi 2012:147). Among the other Finnish writers mentioning the problem of society members sharing nationalistic or even Nazi views there is also for example Juha Numminen (Ruohonen 1999:275).

Problems concerning immigration and the newcomers have been discussed in Swedish crime fiction as well (Huhtala 2003:10). Among the Swedish writers elaborating issues similar to those investigated by Lehtolainen

⁴ English translation of the title – M.K.

there are for instance Camilla Läckberg (*Tyskungen*, “The Hidden Child” 2011), Olle Lönnaeus (*En enda sanning* 2014, “The only truth”, *Mike Larssons rymliga hjärta* 2010, “The great heart of Mike Larsson”⁵ and Mons Kallentoft (*Midvinterblod*, “Midwinter Sacrifice” 2011, *Sommardöden*, “Summertime Death” 2012, *Höstoffer*, “Autumn Killing” 2012). Especially Kallentoft seems to characterize related problems and in a way comparable to Leena Lehtolainen. In his novels the reader might find some protagonists of immigrant background similar to Anu Wang-Koivu as well as descriptions of racial hatred acts towards less successful ones. As it comes to Olle Lönnaeus and Camilla Läckberg, in some of their novels they signalize the alarming problem of neo-Nazi and other racist organizations, much well organized and far more dangerous than the informal organization known from *Minne tytöt kadonneet*. Nevertheless, the stories presented by them do not lack some optimistic elements, correspondingly to the cases displayed in works by Kallentoft and Lehtolainen. Therefore, the readers should be mindful of the fact that the authors’ aim is not only to criticize the negative phenomena shattering the social live of their countries, it is rather to signalize all the most important factors influencing the present situation of each society.

6. SUMMARY

As a conclusion, Leena Lehtolainen’s novel titled *Minne tytöt kadonneet* is recommended to all the readers interested in current problems of the Finnish society. It reminds of the changes that the Finnish society, similarly to other societies of highly developed countries, is undergoing nowadays. The processes described in the presented novel, as well as in the novels by other authors mentioned, are to be analyzed and understood if one aims to apprehend how the modern Northern European societies function, what the main factors affecting them, the fears people face, the hopes for future are. Although criminal stories cannot be treated as documentary works, the readers interested in the cultural environment the authors come from may find their content particularly constructive. As Leena Lehtolainen confirms, the reality of today’s Finland is in many aspects extremely elaborate and for those wishing to be familiar with it, getting familiar with her works is a perfect first step to start.

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- TA = The writer's and her novels' profile on Tammi's official website: <http://www.tammi.fi/kirjailijat1/-/author/name/LeenaLehtolainen> (accessed Jan 18, 2014)
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