

BOOK REVIEW



FOUR CENTURIES WITH THE MIRE: MARIA TURTSCHANINOFF'S GENERATIONAL NOVEL UNRAVELS THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE

Maria Turtchaninoff. *Suomaa*. Translated by Sirkka-Liisa Sjöblom. Helsinki: Tammi, 2022. 371 pp. In Finnish.

This review dives into Maria Turtchaninoff's (b. 1977) novel *Suomaa* (Mire Land, 2022). The novel focuses on Finnish nature, and especially on its many mires.

Especially, *Suomaa* deals with the cultural, spiritual, and utilitarian relationship between humans and nature. Turtchaninoff is an award-winning Finnish-Swedish writer, and was born in Finnish Ostrobothnia – the county in which the action of *Suomaa* takes place. The rights of the novel have been sold to over 15 countries, so the story has been a success. The original Swedish name of the novel is *Arvejord*, which means inherited land.

Finland is certainly a land of mires since 1.8 million ha (28%) of its land area is covered by them (Virtanen 2008: 29). Literally, *Suomaa* means the land of mires. In the Finnish language, Finland itself is called *Suomi*, and while the etymology is not entirely clear, one explanation could be through the word *suo*, which means mire (Kulonen 2000). This book review focuses on the elements of Finnish folklore that are linked to mires, but also touches upon surrounding contrasts that relate to the mire, the most important of which is the one between Christianity and folk beliefs (Sarmela 2009: 20–21). The novel comprises five episodes set in different eras all the way from the seventeenth century to the present day. Each episode delves into the relationships of the people living on the Nevabacka family farm, which is a fictional location in Finnish Ostrobothnia.

Mires are an important part of Finland's national epic, the *Kalevala* (Lönnrot 1849), so their cultural significance is rather indisputable. The runes of the *Kalevala* present Finnish mythology and folklore, such as shamanistic acts and human encounters with the supernatural. In the runes, the mire is, for example, the setting for a competition between the two wizards, Väinämöinen and Jouka-

hainen, in which the older one sings the younger one into the mire. Mires also play an important role in the first part of Väinö Linna's Finnish literary classic trilogy *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* (Under the North Star) (1959), in which the opening line introduces a solitary man clearing a mire with a hoe to gain land for agriculture. This work-filled description of the history of the Finns has been irrevocably imprinted into the collective memory of Finns, and as a contemporary work, Turtschaninoff's novel illuminates both Finland's mythology and history with the mires and interprets how the human-nature relationship has changed throughout the centuries.

The relationship between the Nevabacka mire and the central characters of the novel (both humans and supernatural beings) is quite complex. The author presents the mire as a scene for many supernatural encounters, both platonic and sexual. Right from the seventeenth-century opening of the novel, the inhabitants of Nevabacka have had a deep respect towards the mire, and the supernatural creatures or so-called "forest people" living in it. According to Finnish folk beliefs, supernatural beings control different parts of nature. So, if one wants something from nature (for example, from the forest, lake, or mire), they must ask permission from a natural spirit controlling the area, or otherwise their plans will fail (Sarmela 2009: 424–425). Accordingly, for some of the characters in the novel the mire is a commodity, while for others it is a place that simply attracts them with its magic.

Living with the Mire

The Nevabacka family consists of many different people with different ages and roles, like hosts and hostesses, soldiers, and priests. The viewpoint taken in the novel changes considerably, but all of the stories of the protagonists link closely together. The mire near the Nevabacka farm is simultaneously a center of attention, and also a hidden power that guides the lives of the Nevabackans. The relationship with nature is strongly connected to the mire, which offers people benefits, but also requires plenty of work. That is the main lesson that is learnt by the local people living near the mire. The mire offers, for example, possibilities for farming, and provides a safe place for some residents. Some of them have a special relationship with the mire, and they retreat to the mire when they feel like being alone or seeking shelter. But when people exploit the mire selfishly, without any respect for it, the mire takes its revenge. One example of this is when a first-generation Nevabackan soldier named Matts drains the mire in the hope of turning it into a field for farming. The mire protects itself

in the form of a supernatural forest lady who enchants Matts and bears him a baby boy. Thus, the Christian man and the wild forest lady form a forbidden alliance. Later, as Matts proceeds to drain the mire, he realizes the mire will not surrender very easily. This moment captures the reader, and when the forest lady takes the child all for herself, this is seen as an act of revenge by the mire. Matts realizes he has made a big mistake, and this can be seen as an attempt to represent a need to achieve a balanced coexistence between human activity and the mire. This balance consists of mutual respect, with both parties treating each other with care. But it also carries a warning that if one party breaks this balance, there will be consequences.

In the book this is a symbolic scene, since during the seventeenth century, Christianity strictly banned the practices of folk religion, which it considered to be superstitious. However, people still took part in them, usually in secret. The alliance between Matts and the forest lady also discloses a sexual connection with nature. The mire has a power to reveal one's deepest desires, but in Matts' case, his intentions to drain the mire are stopped by the forest lady. Thus, in this context their alliance can be seen as a form of resistance against the church which tries to erase the elements of folk religion. But it also brings attention to the power relationships between humans and nature, and Matts' willingness to benefit from or dominate the mire changes into a feeling of desire towards it.

In the novel, the human is seen as rather greedy when it comes to the mire, or to nature in general. There are characters who cherish the mire, but some see it simply as a commodity. The greed is also connected to real life, as some of the Finnish mires have been harnessed for the benefit of Finnish economy in a variety of ways – especially those connected with agriculture and forestry (see Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland). Even today, many people have fears concerning mires, such as a fear of sinking. These fears may not be connected with supernatural matters as before, and in Turtschaninoff's novel's modern day the fear is more linked to uncertainty and not really to understanding the surrounding nature. However, there is still curiosity and an element of yearning towards nature, and one example in the novel is a character called Stina – a twenty-first-century Nevabackan who considers selling some of the forests surrounding the family farm. Stina is described as a clueless city-dweller, but she still feels a connection towards Nevabacka and the surrounding nature, because it reminds her of permanence in an ever-changing world. Even though the familiar nature is not always present, it is in her heart. So, as a reflective element, the modern complexity of one's relationship with nature is quite well personalized in Stina's character.

Humans' Eclectic Relationship with Nature

In the novel, even the most devout Christians are aware of the mire's mythic character. One example of this is a chaplain who ends up in Nevabacka during the Great Northern War. Although he is a man of God, he becomes enchanted by the mire, and in the narrative it seems as if the mire releases the chaplain from his prejudices concerning folk traditions and beliefs. After eating the food offered by the forest people, he becomes free from the strict shackles of Christianity and gets closer to nature. Christianity has separated the chaplain from nature and its supernatural wonders, but now he is free to find joy not only in faith but also in nature. Nature can be viewed as a place of sanctity, and one can experience it as something that is somehow holy. In her dissertation, folklorist Kirsi Laurén describes that this sort of experiential relationship is one way of understanding the mire: namely that the mire is not merely a material commodity – it can also be an experience that gifts one with spiritual liberation (Laurén 2006: 152). Thus, in the book the chaplain's new relationship with the mire emphasizes both the cultural and spiritual significance of our mires.

Turtschaninoff describes the mire as being its own entity, full of secrets, practices, and laws. The mire is a whole other reality that clashes with the Christian community around it. The author has captured this complex relationship by drawing on folk beliefs. These beliefs include, for example, gifting butter and other goods to the forest people in the hope of good luck and safety. In addition, death is shown in the book in the form of a black woodpecker, and this motif pops up throughout the novel. Also, the feature of a rowan tree pops up here and there, and it has been seen as a holy tree and an exorcist of evil spirits in Finno-Ugric folklore (see Rowan). All of these things are well known amongst the Nevabackans, but they really do not talk about them because of their fear of the church. Christianity and folk beliefs therefore exist simultaneously, and this has an impact on the Nevabackans' relationship with nature. Later in the novel, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Christianity does not have the same weighting, and nor does folk religion – with both losing their meaning in everyday life. Earlier Christianity prevented people (Christians) from communicating with nature in superstitious ways, but for some, folk beliefs enabled a joyful connection with nature. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, people were also seen to slowly diverge from nature in the sense that the nature which surrounded them became unfamiliar to them.

In the last episode of the novel, which takes place in the twenty-first century, there is a list of instructions made by an older Nevabackan for the modern-day residents. One of them is that one must not cut down the rowan in the yard,

as it would mean bad luck. So even if the reader is not familiar with Finnish folklore, they will possibly learn to follow the folkloric codes that are woven into Turtschaninoff's story. The last episode of the novel especially captures how our relationship with nature has changed over the centuries. For example, the modern Nevabackans do not recognize different types of plants or animals without using their smartphones. Although this could be seen as something entirely negative, it somehow feels that the smartphones and plant-identifying apps are a way for modern people to restore this lost connection and become familiar with the surrounding nature again. Of course, the connection changes if it is filtered through the screen of a mobile device. But, on the other hand, in the previous centuries there were other factors – such as religion – that distinguished us from nature, which leaves a feeling that maybe there will always be some sort of mystery, but some people will always hear the enchanting call of nature.

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