The Migrant Mother's Silence in Her Mother Tongue as a Mothering Strategy

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Historically silenced, literary mothers' voices are finally now being given their due, but it is noteworthy that migrant mothers' literary voices are yet to be fully heard. This essay focuses on literary representations of migrant mothers who refuse to speak their own mother tongue to their children. It looks at two texts by women writers originating directly or indirectly from two post-Soviet Baltic states, Estonia and Lithuania. The texts in question are the novel Stalinin lehmät *(*Stalin's Cows*) (2003) by Sofi Oksanen and the essay "Motinų tylėjimas" ("The Silence of the Mothers") (2004) by Dalia Staponkutė. Drawing on postcolonial theory, memory studies, and transnational feminist theory, I suggest that the migrant mother's silence in her own mother tongue connotes several unarticulated realities: the trauma of colonization, the negotiation of post-Soviet migrant femininity, and patriarchal gender regimes. I argue that the migrant mothers represented in both texts withhold their mother tongue as a mothering strategy designed to socialize their children to successfully negotiate the transnational, multilingual spaces they will navigate as adults.*

Migrant mothers' and grandmothers' linguistic relationships with their children are rarely explored in literature. This essay focuses on two literary texts that portray mothers who do not speak their own mother tongue to their children: the novel *Stalinin lehmät* (*Stalin's Cows*) (2003) by the Finnish writer of Estonian origin Sofi Oksanen, which features an Estonian mother living in Finland, and the essay "Motinų tylėjimas" ("The Silence of the Mothers") (2004) by a Lithuanian writer based in Cyprus, Dalia Staponkutė, which depicts a Lithuanian-born mother living in Cyprus. Representations of the experiences of mothers originating from the states of the former Soviet Union, such as Estonia and Lithuania, are largely absent

Contemporary Women's Writing

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from the landscape of world literature, in terms both of creative outputs and scholarship on comparative women's writing.[1] Thus, the two texts at hand offer a fascinating insight into maternal experience that is otherwise mostly unknown to Western readers and literary scholars alike.

Both migrant mothers in the texts under consideration here are portrayed as silent. Voices of subaltern female subjects are often silenced since they are always "even more in shadow" (Spivak 28) and some of their "lives never came to writing" (Olsen 10). The subaltern female subject, as theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is, of course, racialized, but her postcolonial framework is valid in the context of Soviet colonization of the Baltic states and her shared whiteness (Annus). One way to bring those voices into existence is through careful interpretation of the literary portrayals of their silences. In postcolonial literature, silence "can be a wilful way for the victim, the colonised, and the marginal, to defy language's claims to power and resist participation in the discourses of patriarchy and domination" (Guignery 5). Scholarship on transnational women's writing has also framed women's silence as "articulate" (Cheung; Sasaki; Ho), arguing that "silence, too can speak many tongues, varying from culture to culture" (Cheung 1). For Betty Sasaki, women's silence expresses cultural trauma, loss, and marginalization, in terms of both gender and immigrant status: "silence itself can be a language that tells its own story in such a way that readers must attend to it with care and concentration, scrutinising in the process themselves and their own assumptions about women's silence" (123). The deliberate depiction of two maternal figures in the texts under examination here as silent invites us to consider the silence of mothers who refuse to speak their native tongue to their children as meaningful and communicative.

In this essay, I interpret the silence of both maternal characters in view of specific historic, geographical, political, and cultural circumstances as well as their transnational settings, paying attention to maternal silence embedded in complicated transnational cultural contexts. Specifically, I read *Stalinin lehmät* and "Motinų tylėjimas" against the backdrop of the post-Soviet condition of the Baltic States, drawing on postcolonial theory, memory studies, and transnational feminist theory. I examine how cultural discourses of femininity and migration impact maternal linguistic practice and its literary articulations. I seek to answer the following questions: How does the portrayal of these figures invite us to read their verbal silence? What compels those mothers to silence? What conflicting stories do their silences tell? Does their silence point to a lack of agency or a form of resistance? How does the mothers' silence in their native language inform their relationship with their children? Finally, to what extent can a silent migrant mother's perspective be narratively figured?

Post-Soviet Femininity and the Mother Tongue

To understand what compels the migrant mothers to silence, we must first consider the cultural context of both texts. The three Baltic States—Estonia,

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[1] The novel *Soviet Milk* (2018) by Nora Ikstena, focusing on maternal experience in Soviet Latvia, and Anna Starobinets' autobiographical narrative *Look at Him* (2020) on her abortion in contemporary Russia are two notable exceptions.

Latvia, and Lithuania—share many historical, political, and cultural features: late Christianization (early thirteenth century in Estonia and Latvia and late fourteenth century in Lithuania); a centuries-long struggle against Russian colonial power; independent Estonian and Lithuanian Republics (1918–1939); a brief but devastating Nazi occupation (1941–1944), resulting in the extermination of the majority of the Jewish population in those countries; a Soviet occupation (1944–1991) marked by mass deportations of ethnic Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, among other ethnic groups; a prolonged armed resistance to Soviet rule (up to the mid-1950s); the peaceful independence movement known as the "Singing Revolution" and the declaration of independence in 1990; the formal establishment of independent states in 1991; and, finally, integration into NATO and the European Union in 2004, followed by mass emigration of already small populations mostly to Western Europe and North America.[2] The transition period has also triggered a renegotiation of gender norms and femininities in both private and public domains. Soviet femininity, associated with desexualized, maternal, working-class women, has often been rejected as abject in favor of a new "Western" femininity characterized by beauty, sexuality, and consumerism (Bisigirskaitė 137).

The republics of the Soviet Union had their titular nationalities on the basis of which the nation-states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia were created. Within each Soviet Republic, many ethnicities coexisted. Importantly, many ethnic Russians settled in the Baltic states as part of the colonial Russification project. Therefore, in the early years of independence, ethnic Lithuanians, Estonians, and Latvians abroad were keen to be identified as such as opposed to Russian. In contrast with many other former Soviet republics, the three Baltic states maintained their national languages in both private and public spheres throughout the Soviet rule. Consequently, the national languages have become strong symbols of the national identities of the three Baltic states, and of resistance to the Soviet occupation, to the point where the use of those languages is often conflated with national identity. Diasporic communities of the three Baltic states have been faced with some pressure to perpetuate those languages while living abroad to ensure the symbolic survival of the small nations (Annus; Sruoginis).

Both *Stalinin lehmät* and "Motinų tylėjimas" were published in 2003, when the Euro-Atlantic accession of the three Baltic states and the opening of their borders resulted in many international relationships and children born and brought up in international settings. It is significant that each text focuses on migrant mothers and their linguistic relationship with their children, suggesting that the mother tongue trope is symptomatic of a national discourse mobilized to consolidate the nations at a crucial historical moment of transition. As Nira Yuval-Davis points out, "a figure of a woman, often a mother, symbolizes in many cultures the spirit of the collectivity" (45). This mother figure is also held responsible for preserving collective values by transmitting them to the next generation (45). In the Lithuanian diaspora, mothers have been culturally constructed as responsible for the safeguarding and transmission of Lithuanian

[2] Admittedly, the scope of emigration from Estonia is much smaller than emigration from Lithuania ("Net Migration").

to their children. For example, Laima Vincė Sruoginis claims that in the postwar Lithuanian diaspora in the US, "the Lithuanian woman's responsibility and moral duty was to pass on the ancient Lithuanian language uncorrupted and instil Lithuanian cultural values in the next generation" (154). In an earlier work, I argued that the cultural injunction was still strong in the early 2000s. Though there is no evidence to date to suggest that mothers would be culturally framed as responsible for transmitting the Estonian language along with the national identity to their children in the diaspora, it would be reasonable to assume that in the context of mixed families where the mother is the only source of Estonian, she would be held responsible for the perpetuation of Estonian. In this context, the figures of migrant mothers from Estonia and Lithuania who choose not to speak their native languages to their children can be seen as transgressive and therefore as particularly worthy of attention.

The authors of both texts have first-hand experience of migrant mothers' linguistic predicament. Sofi Oksanen (b. 1977) is one of the most famous contemporary Finnish authors and enjoys a celebrity status in her native Finland. She was born and brought up in Jyväskylä by an Estonian mother and a Finnish father. As a child and teenager, she spent summers with her grandparents in her mother's native village in Estonia; Oksanen can therefore speak Estonian and publicly affirms her double cultural identity (Lehtonen 260). Oksanen shot to international fame with the publication of *Purge* (2008), the second novel of what has become known as her Estonian quartet. This novel has been translated into seventeen languages, including Estonian, Lithuanian, English, and French, and has won numerous national and international awards, including the prestigious *Prix Fémina Étranger* (France). The novel has also been adapted as a play and a film and has been the object of many academic articles. Due to her status as a public intellectual in Finland, and someone who enjoys a wide audience in Western Europe, Oksanen has become an authoritative voice in the post-Soviet space. It is debatable whether Oksanen can be treated as a transnational author in Finland since her Finnishness has never been in question (Grönstrand 42). However, her double origin, her bilingualism, and the experience of "living with two completely different social systems" as a child and teenager arguably qualify her as such (Gustafsson). More importantly, Oksanen's work is imbued with the sensibility of postmemory, that is, the imagined yet emotionally real historical trauma suffered by her grandparents, and, to a lesser degree, her mother. This essay analyses the first part of Oksanen's Estonian quartet, *Stalinin lehmät*, which has also been translated into numerous languages, including Lithuanian and French, but not into English. This semi-autobiographical novel explores transcultural mother–daughter relationships against the backdrop of a rare case of Soviet-time migration to Finland in the 1970s. The novel is written in Finnish with minimal translingual elements in Estonian. Arguably, it is the writer-daughter's way of rendering the migrant mother's voice through the literary means available to her. The reception of the Estonian translation of the book focuses on ways in which

Estonians are represented in Finland and the image of Estonia created in the book. The dominant view is that it is regretful that Estonians had to hide their Estonian origins in Finland to fit in, whilst the representation of Estonia, where there is a lot of silencing and ensuing depression due to the mistrust created by the Soviet regime, is accurate.

Dalia Staponkutė (b. 1964) is a Lithuanian-language author, translator, and academic, living and working in Cyprus. She was born and raised in Šiauliai (Lithuania), studied philosophy in St. Petersburg (Russia), and moved to Cyprus to marry a Greek Cypriot. She is the mother of two now adult daughters, who, like Oksanen, spent their summers in the Lithuanian countryside as children. Staponkutė is a well-established writer in Lithuania, where her work has been awarded numerous prestigious literary prizes. A frequent contributor to the transnational Lithuanian media, she is a prominent voice across the Lithuanian diaspora. Staponkutė's work has been translated into English, German, Ukrainian, Russian, and Greek and explores issues of identity, mobility, and migration from the perspective of the two liminal European spaces she inhabits (Cyprus and Lithuania). This essay focuses on her early essay "Motinų tylėjimas," which reflects on two different migrant mothers' experiences and their linguistic relationships with their children in the context of early post-Soviet migration. The choice of Lithuanian as the language of literary expression suggests that it is written primarily with a Lithuanian audience in mind.

Silence as Cultural Trauma

Let us first look at how the portrayal of the silent mother figures invites us to read their verbal silence. In her analysis of the dialectics of voice and silence in Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* (1981), Sasaki traces the silence of the female characters in the novel to the intersection of "cultural and political history, gender and ethnicity" (118). Similarly, the silence in the mother's native language represented in both *Stalinin lehmät* and "Motinų tylėjimas" is multilayered and contradictory yet aligned with the autofictional texts' cultural, political, and historical context outlined above, as well as the gender and ethnicity (Estonian and Lithuanian, respectively) of the migrant mother characters. In the first instance, maternal silence can be related to the historical circumstances represented in both texts. It is important to note that the sometimes inaccurate historical dimension of Oksanen's novel makes sense when read through the logic of postmemory. The novel documents Anna (the character loosely based on Oksanen herself) growing up between two countries and across the so-called Iron Curtain. She goes to school and has her social life in Finland and spends summers in the Estonian countryside with her mother Katariina and grandparents. One of the subplots in the novel is the story of Katariina's Estonian mother, Anna's grandmother, Sofia, a woman whose husband, Arnold, was involved in the underground armed resistance to the Soviet regime in the 1940s and 1950s. Her sister-in-law as well as one of her own sisters was deported to Siberia, while another sister fled to Canada. A separate subplot relates the story of the courtship of Anna's Estonian mother, Katariina, with her Finnish fiancé (Anna's father), detailing the bureaucratic and emotional intricacies of her emigration from the Soviet Union and her hapless marriage in Finland between 1971 and 1978. Katariina is the silent mother figure this essay focuses on. According to Anna, her mother's refusal to speak Estonian to her is linked to the atmosphere of fear in the Soviet Union:

> Että pieni urhea baltiäitini, vaikka tulikin suuresta ja mahtavasta kansojen ystävyyden kodista, Neuvostoliitosta, oli valkoverinen patriootti, sellainen joka et ottanut alaluokilla kaulaansa punaista pioneerihuivia, kuten olisi pitänyt, vaan ilmoitti sen hirttävän hänet ja sai opettajansa pelästymään suunnattomasti. Mitä jos joku olisi raportoinut, että opettajan luokalla puhuttiin tuollaisia? Että opettaja rohkaisti neuvostovastaisuuteen, kasvattaisi kommunismille vaarallista sukupolvea? Opettaja ei halunnut Siperiaan.
>
> Siksi äiti kasvatti minutkin hiljaiseksi. Koska väärät sanat voivat olla tappavia.
>
> My brave little mother from the Baltics, although originating from the great and powerful country of the friendship of peoples, the Soviet Union, was a cold-blooded patriot, the kind who did not wear the red pioneer scarf around her neck in primary school as she should have done. Instead, she announced that the scarf was going to choke her, which frightened her teacher immensely. What if anyone had reported the teacher for tolerating such talk in her classroom? That the teacher was encouraging anti-Sovietism, raising a dangerous generation that threatened communism? The teacher did not want to end up in Siberia.
>
> That is why my mother raised me to be silent. Because the wrong words can be deadly. (*Stalinin lehmät* 44)[3]

This passage points to the significance of language within hierarchical power relationships between occupier and occupied. Katariina commits an act of subversion by refusing to wear the pioneer scarf, a symbol of the communist ideology imposed by the Soviet regime. She verbally substantiates her act with a phrase that can be read, both literally and metaphorically, as choking, alluding also to the cultural annihilation of Estonians by the Soviet occupier through deportations and the systematic russification of the country. Despite its historical inaccuracy (in the 1960s, when Anna's mother would have attended primary school, deportations were no longer practiced), this passage, which points to Anna's postmemorial imagination, is important. It establishes Katariina's loyalty to independent Estonia, her subversive relationship with power, and her capacity to use language in creative ways. The scene gains even more significance once it transpires

[3] Here and throughout the essay, for translations from Finnish into English my thanks to Asta Laugalienė, Danutė Sirijos Giraitė, and Armi Mustosmäki.

that Katariina has been followed by an Estonian KGB agent in Finland. Similarly, when Katariina applies for permission to emigrate to Finland to get married, her father, Arnold, is threatened with hard labor by the KGB. One of its functions was combating nationalist, dissident, religious and anti-Soviet activities. Again, the reference to such intimidation is historically inaccurate but, from the perspective of Oksanen's postmemorial creative practice, it captures the emotionally overwhelming atmosphere of fear generated by the repressive Soviet system's ability to ruin people's lives. Despite this intimidation, Arnold advises Katariina to leave what he calls "tästa punaiseta helvetistä" / "this red-colored hell" (93). This she does, only to find herself subject to surveillance by the KGB in Finland and having her phone bugged and her letters to her mother opened and read before they reach the addressee. Whether or not the KGB agent has the power to harm Katariina and her daughter in Finland or their family back in Estonia is irrelevant. What matters is that Katariina perceives the presence of the agent as menacing and acts protectively toward her daughter as a result. Seen thus, Katariina's refusal to speak Estonian to her daughter can be interpreted not as a lack of desire to transmit her cultural identity to her daughter, but rather as a protective gesture of care. Withholding Estonian from her daughter engineers Anna's partial linguistic incompetence, thus marking her as "Western" in Estonia. This prevents Anna from uttering "inappropriate words" and from divulging any information that could be used against them. Paradoxically then, Katariina's silence in Estonian teaches her daughter the survival strategies she needs to successfully navigate the transcultural landscapes of post-Soviet Estonia and Finland of the 1990s.

The memory of Katariina's aunts' deportation as well as her father's experiences during the resistance follow Katariina to Finland and shape her mothering practices, including her refusal to speak Estonian to her daughter. Marianne Hirsch considers ways in which trauma is transmitted through cultural production and identifies similar patterns of transmission in different cultural contexts. This makes it possible to apply Hirsch's model to the post-Soviet context, provided it is done with appropriate historical sensitivity and carefully navigating the potential essentialization of the transmission of trauma. The literal meaning of the word trauma, Hirsch points out, is "a *wound* inflicted on the body" (*Generation* 80). Children and grandchildren of individuals who suffered collective trauma receive the mediated knowledge of the trauma that they explore through their art. This is especially pronounced in matrilineal traumatic transmissions due to the heightened intensity of mother–daughter identification caused by women's shared life experiences shaped by the gendered expectations placed on women. Daughters and granddaughters "identify so strongly" with their traumatized mothers and grandmothers "as to receive from the parent the wound on the skin, and, at the same time" (82), to identify with the traumatized mother or grandmother involves a disavowal of their trauma. Crucially for my argument, the memory of trauma is transmitted across generations through mechanisms of identification and disavowal. Thus, daughters and granddaughters who receive a traumatic mark have the agency to either reproduce it or mediate its effects to a healing effect.

Furthermore, Hirsch contends that one of the fundamental aspects of traumatic memory is its resistance to verbal articulation. Thus, traumatic memory is often transmitted by nonverbal means, making mother-daughter transmission particularly sensitive to nonverbal "articulation of historic withholding" (81). Due to their reproductive roles as primary carers, mothers affected by intergenerational trauma have a particular relationship to silence, which is infused with an ethics of care towards their children. According to Hirsch, a mother's silence performs an ambivalent function of protection and transmission. It shields her children, particularly her daughters, from the traumatic historical and/or personal past and transmits the memory of the trauma, sometimes mediating it to various extents. Katariina's silence in her native Estonian constitutes a mediated transmission of what Hirsch calls "not a story to pass on" (*Mother/Daughter* 3). Therefore, Katariina's silence is also her effort to protect her daughter from the traumatic memory of her parents suffering at the hands of the Soviet occupier.

Katariina is homesick in Finland. Her Finnish husband drinks, cheats on her, and is frequently away on work and recreational trips to Russia. Her homesickness is juxtaposed with that of the homesickness of her female relatives of the previous generation in Siberian exile that her mother, although not deported herself, would have heard something about from the few people who made it back and through infrequent correspondences with the deportees:

> Katariina haluaisi kirjoittaa äidilleen ja kysyä, minkälaista Siperiassa oli. Jos äiti voisi kertoa, mitä on kuullut, mitä kerrottu. Kylmä siellä oli, mutta kuinka kylmä. Kylmempi kuin täällä? Eikä mikään kasvanut, kuten kotona Eestissä. Mutta Katariina ei uskalla, koska ei tiedä, menisivätkö hänen kirjeensä sellaisina läpi, tai vaikuttaisivatko ne siihen, miten hän tulee pääsemään Eestiin, tai jos joku joutuu hankaluuksiin.
>
> Katariina would like to write to her mother and ask her what it was like in Siberia. If her mother could tell her what she had heard, what people said it was like there. It was cold, but how cold was it really? Colder than here? And was it true that plants didn't grow there like they do here, at home in Estonia. But Katariina does not dare, as she is not sure that the letters will get through and whether they will impact on her ability to enter Estonia or whether somebody might get in trouble because of those letters. (*Stalinin lehmät* 239)

The juxtaposition here of Katariina's silent unhappiness in Finland with her mother's longing for her deported relatives reinforces Katariina's strong identification with her mother, who, as the wife of a resistance fighter, spent her life hiding that secret from everyone through silence. Thus, Katariina's silence is traumatic and traumatizing, resulting from internalized fear incited by the punitive Soviet regime. It is textually inscribed in the parallel between Katariina's longing to write to her mother and to hear back from her, and her mother's own silence about her husband's activities as well as one of Katariina's aunts' lack of communication with her family during their Siberian exile. Katariina's inability to communicate with her mother in the 1970s and 1980s is later echoed in her own silence in Estonian towards her own daughter, a historic withholding of her own.

According to Hirsch, "[t]he language of family, the language of the body: nonverbal and precognitive acts of transfer occur most clearly within a familial space, often taking the form of symptoms" (*Generation* 34). Based on this, Katariina might be seen to have received the traumatic memory of her mother's separation from her deported sister and sister-in-law in Siberia: Sofia's longing for them, imagining the cold, the hunger, the horror, the sense of injustice, and the suffocating homesickness they suffered, in addition to the knowledge of Arnold's participation in the armed resistance to the Soviet rule. It can also be argued that the traumatic memory Katariina received growing up was later transmitted to her own daughter, Anna, through her identification with her mother.

The transmitted trauma ultimately finds expression in the form of Anna's eating disorders. Lengthy and vivid descriptions of anorexia and bulimia are some of the most striking features of *Stalinin lehmät*. Anna's anorexia echoes the starvation of her great aunt in Siberia, and her bulimia is symbolic of all the unuttered words and accumulated silences from two generations that she cannot hold within her. In this way, Sofia's trauma and both Sofia's and Katariina's historic withholding, which in Katariina's case extends to linguistic withholding in her native Estonian, can be seen as contributing to Anna's reception of the matrilineal traumatic past.

Furthermore, Anna's therapist suggests that there is a link between Katariina's not speaking Estonian to her daughter as a baby and Anna's disordered eating later: "Terapeuttini mielestä oli aika merkillistä, ettei äiti puhu lapselleen omalla kielellään mitään, edes imeväiselle, mitään leperryksiä, vain vierasta kieltä, joka ei istu vielä suuhun ja tunteisiin ja on vieras ja outo ja niinpä puhe lapsellekin on vierasta ja outoa." / "My therapist thought it was remarkable that a mother would not say a word in her own language to her child, not even to a baby, no cooing, just a foreign language, which has not yet grown into her mouth and into her feelings and is foreign and strange, and so speaking to her child must also feel foreign and strange" (*Stalinin lehmät* 45–46).

Anna's therapist reads her disorder through psycholinguistic theories that conceptualize the mother tongue as primary and deeply rooted in the unconscious. For example, Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* theorizes language as a psychosomatic function that every human being develops through their prelinguistic communication with their mother or primary carer, consisting largely of rhythmic vocal utterances such as cooing during common interactions between a mother and baby, like nursing and cuddling. The semiotic *chora* is thus an aspect of language development that is closely related to the oral dimension of linguistic expression (Kristeva 94). For this reason, by not speaking Estonian, the language "grown into her mouth and into her feelings," to Anna in the early stages of Anna's life, Katariina symbolically denies her nourishment in the form of the vocal and kinetic rhythms coded in her body. According to the therapist, Anna's bulimia and her insatiable hunger originate from the lack of early linguistic attachment with her mother which subsequently leaves a traumatic mark. In a sense then, Anna's condition becomes a symptom of that silence. Anna craves the food, and the language of those who came before her, and does not find nourishment in what is offered her in lieu of the linguistic nourishment she subconsciously craves. Therefore, she stuffs herself with food only to throw it all up again. In this way, Katariina's silence protects her daughter from the traumatic past as well as transmitting it.

Similarly, the silence in the mother's mother tongue is also represented as traumatic and traumatizing in Staponkutė's essay "The Silence of the Mothers." The text features two Lithuanian migrant mothers who engage in very different linguistic practices of mothering. The "silent mother" of the title is a collective portrait of many migrant women from Lithuania who have not taught their children Lithuanian and have not learned enough Greek and/or English to competently mother through those languages. In earlier work, I drew on trauma theory to demonstrate that the reasons why that character does not transmit her native language to her children are partially to do with "her wish to distance both herself and her children from her native language-place which is marked by repression, suffering and mourning" (88). In other words, like Katariina, this silent mother also seeks to protect her children from "traumatizing history" (90).

However, the silent mother character in the essay is negatively stereotyped as a poorly educated and unintelligent immigrant. The narrator mocks her by saying that she has "never really spoken any other language than [her] mother tongue," but is then paradoxically "unable to talk to [her] children in [her] native language" because her "children don't speak Lithuanian." In contrast, the second mother, the first-person narrator of the essay, who might be said to be speaking in Staponkutė's own voice, is fluent in both Lithuanian and Greek and speaks both those languages to her daughters through what the narrator calls the act of continuous "shuttle translation" that "is something that's not limited to linguistic technique; it absorbs the entire body, and even more than that—it requires a historical approach to the body." Consequently, the first mother transgresses the Lithuanian national injunction to transmit the mother tongue to her children, while the second fulfills it. By casting the silent mother as an object of derision, the essay symbolically condemns Lithuanian mothers in the diaspora who fall short of the expectation to transmit Lithuanian to their children. This point is demonstrated in Staponkutė's comparison of the silent mother with the Little Mermaid from the eponymous fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen: "[l]anguage likes to torment, but not to suffer and, during the course of time, it takes its own back—it outwaits and takes its revenge on the Little Mermaid for her beautiful legs, turning her inner world to permafrost" ("Silence"). In exchange for her voice and a chance to win over a human prince she is in love with, the beautiful mermaid is given a pair of feet that bleed when she walks. In the context of Staponkutė's essay, the image of the mermaid refers to an intercultural relationship of a Lithuanian woman with a Greek Cypriot man that is further explored in the following section. Like the Little Mermaid, the price this woman pays is her condemnation to silence through her failure to transmit her national language to her children. The silent Lithuanian beauty is "punished" with what can be interpreted as depression, textually coded as "permafrost" that freezes her inner world. The silent mother must thus suffer the consequences for failing to meet the cultural obligation to pass on her native tongue to her children. Of course, the "permafrost" is also an oblique allusion to Siberian deportations that any Lithuanian reader would be unlikely to miss. The "permafrost" of the Siberian landscape is one of the most powerful images in many memoirs of Lithuanian deportees to Siberia that were published *en masse* in Lithuania and other Baltic states at the very end of the 1980s and during the 1990s. This was around the same time that Staponkutė would have left Lithuania for Cyprus. The first and the most influential of those collections of memoirs is entitled *Amžinojo įšalo žemėje* (*In the Land of Permafrost*) (1989). The recovery and publication of those memoirs was a strong feature of Lithuanian public discourse during the run-up to independence (1987–1990) and through the first year after Lithuania's declaration of independence (1990–1991), before the country was recognized as an independent state by the international community in 1991. In this respect, permafrost can be understood as referring to the hitherto unarticulated collective national trauma, which is figured here in the nearly physical inability of the "silent mother" to speak Lithuanian to her children. The portrayal of the "silent mother," who seems to carry the silence in her body against her own will, speaks to the logic of reproducing the trauma, whereas the multilingual mother and her "shuttle translation" perform a mediated reparative function. In sum, the first layer of both mothers' silence is geared towards protecting the children from the complicated historical past at least to a degree. In Katariina's case, there is also an element of protecting the daughter from danger when she visits Soviet Estonia by inadvertently blurting out any unwanted information.

Silence as Identity Transformation

In addition, the second layer of silence in the texts at hand has to do with femininity. Both texts clearly frame the migrant mothers' wish to dissociate themselves from the label of a post-Soviet/Russian woman as one of the reasons for their refusal to speak Estonian or Lithuanian to their children which may well go against their authentic wish to mother through their native languages. In the late 1980s and early 1990s in the Baltics, Russia would have been seen as the occupier who had set out to erase Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian culture.

Thus, Lithuanians or Estonians were not keen to be identified or labeled as Russian. That said, although in the Baltic countries, the use of the local national languages was a form of resistance to the Soviet regime during the occupation, this did not work once people from the Baltics were elsewhere. On the contrary, the use of Lithuanian or Estonian would have just identified them as "Russian" to the locals.[4] In the early 2000s, when the two texts were published, the three Baltic States were only just beginning to reemerge in the international arena as countries with their own languages and cultures. Thus, people who saw themselves as Estonian, Lithuanian, or Latvian were anxious to be recognized as such. To be mistaken for a Northern or Western European would have been (and arguably still is) taken as a sign of successful identity transformation from "Soviet" to "Western." Furthermore, since "the postsocialist period represents a reinvention of Eastern Europe through colonizing tropes that rest on the notion of the sexual availability of the exotic other" (Owczarzak 11), post-Soviet/Russian women would have often been read as sexually available through the Western male gaze. In *Stalinin lehmät*, Anna gives the following explanation of her mother's silence: "Että hän ei merkitse lastaan ryssäksi, joka Suomessa on aina ryssä" / "She will not allow her daughter to be labeled a Russian; a Russian in Finland will always be a Russian" (42). This points to Katariina's claim of a "Western" identity for her daughter. Katariina's aim is twofold: to protect Anna from the damaging stereotypical label she herself suffered from and to performatively produce an identity for her daughter that would not be identifiable as Russian. The novel suggests that the label of "a Russian in Finland" has several stigmas attached to it, among which that of a sexually available woman is the most harmful. Young Anna sees such women on the ferry from Finland to Estonia (the ferry that is notorious for "recreational" use by Finnish men) as a child, and Katariina makes sure her daughter knows who "those women" are. Importantly, Katariina's husband, Anna's father, who is portrayed as an unfaithful husband, is one of the men who take advantage of "those women" on his "recreational" trips to Russia. Furthermore, Russian women are also represented in the novel as KGB agents who follow Katariina even in Finland. In this light, Katariina's bid to construct a different femininity for her daughter must be understood to be the result of her maternal thinking.[5] Fred Dervin identifies Katariina's practice of styling Anna's look and behavior on Estonian and Finnish stereotypes of femininity as "[i]ntercultural Pygmalionism, an attempt to construct a certain image of the 'national self and other' and to copy certain national characteristics to become like the Other" (357). Anna is told to look, behave, and speak like a Finnish woman, including by adopting a more masculine dress style to mark her difference from the conventionally feminine Estonian (and Russian) dress code characterized by dresses and make-up. Against this, as an adult, Anna quite deliberately wears dresses and high heels, rather than jeans and trainers, in her personal bid to claim a transnational and hybrid Finno-Estonian femininity.

[4] Arguably, this has become more pronounced since the war in Ukraine.

[5] Here I refer to Sara Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking."

Staponkutė's essay also evokes the stereotype of a sexualized post-Soviet woman by portraying the "silent mother" as a "long-legged beauty queen," one of "dozens, no, hundreds of Lithuanian girls who have become the wives of foreign men and the mothers of their children" ("Silence"). The woman is said to have been married to a Greek husband with whom she does not really share any language. When asked how she communicated with her husband, the woman replies, "listen, on the home front you know . . . silence is golden, and in bed, well, we make enough sounds" ("Silence"; ellipsis in source). This sentence is the only narrative agency that the silent mother is accorded in the essay, and it is noteworthy that it is used to sexualize her. The above reference to Andersen's fairy tale also suggests the "silent mother's" quest for a foreign husband as a way to achieve a cultural identity transformation, an attempt to shed the Russian/Soviet/Lithuanian identification in favor of a new cultural subjectivity. The Little Mermaid exchanges her beautiful voice for her feet and swaps one identity for another in pursuit of love and, more importantly, of an eternal human soul. In the same way, by marrying a foreign man and giving up the Lithuanian language and Lithuanianness (since in the Lithuanian imaginary, the Lithuanian language is synonymous with Lithuanian identity), the Lithuanian "long-legged beauty queen" hopes to transform into a "Westerner," perceived as a qualitatively superior brand of woman.

Thus, in both texts under discussion here, migrant mothers' silence in their native language is used as a premeditated mothering strategy designed to dissociate themselves and their children, especially their daughters, from an unwanted cultural association with the Russian woman. As such, their silence can be seen as an instrument of shielding their children from an abject "Soviet" identity as well as transforming them into "Westerners."

Silence as Agency and Resistance

Despite Katariina's deliberate reticence in Estonian in relation to Anna, there is something loud and demonstrative about her silence which makes it more of an act of communication than a lack thereof. This is particularly evident throughout the descriptions of numerous long and arduous trips between their home in Finland and Katariina's parents' home in the Estonian countryside. This raises the question of whether her silence points to a lack of agency or to a form of resistance. The liminal in-between the two spaces of partial cultural marginalization and nonbelonging, underscored by cumbersome and grueling travel between Finland and Estonia, is where the mother-daughter bond is formed and where it thrives. During those trips, Katariina fashions Anna into a transnational individual who is able to successfully navigate both Finnish and Estonian cultural contexts and gender regimes as a liminal female subject. As such, Anna needs to be trained in the art of silence on several counts. Firstly, she needs to be aware of the Estonian context of surveillance so as not to compromise anyone's safety. Secondly, she needs to be aware of her status in Finland, where Russian women are treated as sexual prey, and perform her gender according to the Finnish ideal of femininity. Katariina's silence in Estonian is therefore part of an intricate practice of mothering intended to ensure her daughter's survival and provide her with a sense of belonging in both cultures.

During their annual trips to Estonia, Anna observes her mother speak Finnish to Estonian taxi drivers to ensure they receive better treatment than Westerners but then switch to Russian once in the car to make sure they arrive at the right address. She watches her mother wisely pack suitcases with goods that can be sold on the other side of the border and silently learns the art of smuggling—economic and sentimental valuables alike. On one return trip after the summer holidays, the Estonian customs officers are particularly ardent. They meticulously compare the filled-out customs forms with Katariina's and Anna's belongings to make sure nothing is left out of the declaration form. Anna knows that her mother's purse hides her grandmother's ring, carefully wrapped in a piece of cotton wool. Earlier in the day Anna's nose had started to bleed and she had been told to take a piece of that cotton wool from her mother's wallet, which she did, subsequently returning the bloody wad to the wallet, since dropping it on the floor would have been inappropriate. When the customs officers open Katariina's purse, both women understand the consequences if the ring is discovered, so Katariina grabs the precious piece of soiled cotton wool, saying:

> *Prahti*—roskaa. Äiti sanoo sen venäjäksi virkailijalle, isoäidille myöhemmin viroksi kertoessaan tapauksesta. Mitään ei löydy. Anna ja äiti pääsevät laivaan. Laivasa nenä alkaa vuotaa uudelleen. Äiti kiiruhtaa heti viemään matkatavarat laivan ainokaiseen huoneeseen, joka on varattu pelkkiä junanpenkkimäisiä istuimia varten. . . . Sitten äiti menee hakemaan paperia Annalle. Äidin kädet tärisevät yhä vähän, kun hän tulee takaisin. Laukut olivat olleet niin painavat.
>
> Ja äidin vihkisormus lompakossa pumpuliin käärittynä oli painanut yhtä paljon kuin laukut yhteensä.

> *Prahti*—rubbish. Mother says that word in Russian to the officer and later in Estonian to her grandmother, when she is telling her what happened. Nothing is found. Anna and her mother get on board. On board, Anna's nose starts dripping again. Mother hurriedly hauls the luggage to the only room on the ferry filled with the same kind of seats you find on trains. . . . Then mother leaves to go get Anna some tissue. Her hands are still trembling slightly when she gets back. The luggage was so heavy.
>
> Grandmother's wedding ring in the wallet, wrapped in cotton wool, weighed as much as all the suitcases together. (207)

The word “rubbish,” spoken first in Russian and later in Estonian, testifies to both Katariina’s and Anna’s multilingualism and intercultural knowledge that prompts them to use the right language in the right place at the right time with the right people. It also refers to the dialectics of relative values Katariina is teaching her daughter to navigate. Whatever is of true value to the mother and daughter passes as “rubbish” in either one culture or the other. In the same way, their own value as culturally marginalized individuals may be subject to similarly distorted optics, making it vital for them to keep track of the value system they are judged against. The shared knowledge that if they are caught smuggling the ring, Katariina might be arrested in Estonia (since she had not yet been granted Finnish citizenship) and face prison or recruitment by the KGB brings the two women together in shared silence. Anna’s nose is bleeding and Katariina’s hands are trembling from the stress they have both experienced. They both know that the handover of the ring was carried out in the highest secrecy but evidently overseen and reported to the customs office. In this context, Katariina’s silence can be read as instructive not only on a practical level in terms of surviving in the transitional liminality of two cultures, each filled with its own prejudices but also on an emotional level in knowing to silently swallow up the pain of betrayal, especially when it comes from a family member.

If in Oksanen’s novel, the silence of the silent mother entails nonverbal transmission and maternal nurturing, in Staponkutė’s “The Silence of the Mothers” it is figured as a patriarchal silencing of maternal heritage. The silent mother is represented as an object of derision: “[t]he snotty child of a Lithuanian mother and a Greek father” is said to “mock” his silent mother who is “doomed to a stony silence” and who “during a lively Greek conversation, keeps strangely mum.” Furthermore, the mention of a Greek father who is spectacularly uninterested in his wife’s background is loudly disturbing and draws on another, particularly the Lithuanian context of patriarchal silencing. The image of the silent mother “doomed to a stony silence” evokes the silence of the female protagonist of the archetypal Lithuanian myth *Eglė, the Queen of Snakes*. This is the story of a young woman, Eglė, who is forced to marry a young man, Žilvinas. He first appears to her in the form of a grass snake, which can be interpreted as a reference to sexual violence, and takes her away to the bottom of the sea with him. Their mixed marriage produces four children. When the children are approaching their teens, Eglė decides to introduce them to her family and takes them back to the shore. The trip ends tragically, with Eglė’s brothers murdering Žilvinas to prevent her from returning to his underwater home. In defiance of both her late husband’s and her birth family’s patriarchal law, Eglė turns her four children into trees and transforms into a spruce herself. The image of the silent mother in Staponkutė’s essay, “a mother sitting silently amid her children who are twittering away in a foreign language” (“Silence”) is reminiscent of the image of Eglė standing on the seashore forever silent and watching her four children turned into trees. The only difference between the two outcomes is that in *Eglė, the Queen of Snakes*, the children join the mother in her silence and stay within the maternal, albeit liminal space on the seashore. Whereas in Staponkutė's text they "jump across the chasm separating their mothers from their locale," thus abandoning their mother and joining their father and their native land instead ("Silence"). In the same way, caught between two heavily patriarchal cultures, the migrant Lithuanian mother in Cyprus opts for silence in defiance of the male domination both in her native post-Soviet Lithuania and the newly adopted Cyprus. That said, the parallel between the silent and the multilingual mother in the essay suggests that the silence of one, just like the effort of linguistic transmission of the other, is an expression of maternal agency.

Narrative Figurations of Migrant Mother's Perspective

This brings me to the last question this essay set out to answer, namely, to what extent can a migrant mother's perspective be narratively figured in the context of post-Soviet migration from the Baltics? In 2015 Viola Parente-Čapková suggested that the mother–daughter relationship in Oksanen's *Stalinin lehmät* is represented as "an unproblematic symbiosis" dominated by "fantasies of the idealized pre-Oedipal union" and the nonverbal communication between the mother and the daughter. Indeed, Anna does manage to learn Estonian despite Katariina's deliberate efforts to prevent it. She does so by listening to her mother speak to other people and by spending time in Estonia with her Estonian family. Anna asserts that "vaikka viro on toinen äidinkieleni ja mina opin sen äitini vastustuksesta huolimatta, itsestään, minä otin kuolevan kielen itselleni, enkä suostunut luopumaan siitä" / "even though Estonian is my second mother tongue and I learnt it despite my mother's objections, I independently adopted the dying language and refused to disavow it" (Oksanen, *Stalinin lehmät* 41). The reference to a dying language here gestures towards the Russification of the three Baltic states during the Soviet occupation and remains topical because those languages are now seen as endangered because of the heavy influence of English. Estonian is passed to Anna as if "naturally," against her own conscious will, in the same gesture as the intergenerational trauma. Thus, maternal linguistic, historic, and cultural transmission is symbolically naturalized and essentialized, obliterating the mother's individuality, her distinct voice, her perspective, her own potential ambivalence, and her difference. Furthermore, Anna is the only first-person narrator of the novel; otherwise, it is narrated by the third-person narrator who tells Sofia's, Katariina's, and Anna's stories, sometimes focalized through Sofia, sometimes through Katariina, and sometimes through Anna. Thus, Anna is the only character granted the full narrative voice in the novel. As a result, Katariina's maternal perspective, including her choice of the language of mothering, is mediated by either her daughter Anna's narrative voice or the neutral third-person narrator, thus denying her a direct narrative voice of her own. Consequently, the novel confirms Hirsch's observation that in much of literary history, "maternal discourse can exist in the text, only on the condition that it remain fragmentary, incomplete and mediated through the perspective of the daughter-writer" (*Mother/Daughter* 185). Hirsch's claim is arguably no longer valid for many literary mothers' voices but seems to still hold true for migrant mothers, although I agree with Núria Codina Solà's point she makes in her essay included in this special issue that the mother's voice has simply gone unheard (p, xx).

Staponkutė's essay is focalized through the migrant mother character and narrated in the mother's voice, even though the mother–daughter relationship is also envisioned through the lens of "fantasies of the idealized pre-Oedipal union" (*Mother/Daughter* 185). The mother's homeland, the mother, her language, her children, and the children's language are all imagined as vitally connected to one powerful "natural" system, as demonstrated in the following passage: "one probably cannot imagine a child without its mother's native language. This element seems to be so crucial that without it, a pall of doubt is cast over the integrity of the 'system'—its ties, its relatedness, its essence, and, finally, its traditions and values" (Staponkutė, "Silence"). The mother here is seen as the one person who holds that system of the ethnic collective together and ensures the integrity of its values through her maternal body. The failure to pass on her native language, to instill that core national value in her children, has dire consequences for the mother. The rupture of the seemingly natural system of mother-language-place is figured as a threat to the mother and her emotional relationship with her daughters. In Oksanen's *Stalinin lehmät* the narrative is focalized through the daughter-writer who upholds and performs the postmemorial healing function in the novel. The multilingual mother who is given the narrative voice in Staponkutė's essay serves a similar reparative purpose by transmitting her native Lithuanian to her daughters through "shuttle translation."

Both texts posit the maternal body as synonymous with the mother tongue and as an extension of the collective national identity. I suggest that this is because in the 2000s when both texts were published, the respective national Estonian and Lithuanian identities needed to be articulated and discursively established. At the beginning of Oksanen's novel, Anna is suffering from severe anorexia, the symptoms of which reduce only when she eventually comes out as Estonian to her Finnish boyfriend, thus symbolically claiming her own subjectivity together with the traumatic past of her grandmother and mother. Anna's strong identification as Estonian is proof of her intense connection with her mother and the reason why she experiences the invisibility of her Estonian ethnicity in Finland as painful and disfiguring as demonstrated by the following passage: "Jos Suomessa satuttiin kuulemaan virolaisperimästäni, kysyttiin aina ensimmäiseksi, että osaanko venäjää, leikinkö lapsena venäläisten lasten kanssa, mitä leikkejä heidän kanssaan leikin. Mitä ihmettä sillä on tekemistä virolaisuuteni kanssa? Miksei kukaan kysynyt, leikinkö virolaisten kanssa?" / "If someone in Finland happened to find out about my Estonian origins, I would first be asked if I could speak Russian, whether I played with Russian children as a child, what games we would play together. What the hell does that have to do with my Estonian origins? Why did nobody want to know whether I played with Estonians?" (Oksanen, *Stalinin lehmät* 43). This passage reveals the historical, political, and cultural erasure of ethnicity experienced by many subjects of colonized or occupied nations, including the subjects originating from the former Soviet nations that remained invisible to the Western eye for several decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, it was common for Western Europeans to equate all post-Soviet nations with Russians and to assume that all of the citizens of the former USSR only spoke Russian. For example, as an international student in the UK and in France in the early 2000s, upon having introduced myself as Lithuanian, my interlocutors would then identify me as Russian and ask to confirm if I spoke Russian at home.

The indignation in Anna's voice points to both the hurt feelings of a child at the obliteration of her ethnic subjectivity and the historical injustice suffered by the entire Estonian people. The same disturbing identity erasure is echoed by Oksanen:

> Everything pertaining to Estonia had felt like non-literary subject matter. For the simple reason that Estonia was literally missing from the map until it gained independence anew. It was part of the Soviet Union, about which I never wrote a single word before its dissolution, except for school essays for which I meticulously used information found in Finnish textbooks. Anything else would have been completely impossible in Finland. ("How History Is Falsified")

This passage sheds light on Oksanen's emotional investment in Estonia, explaining that her matrilineal Estonian identity was "impossible," discursively unavailable, and inarticulable throughout her childhood and adolescence. This impossibility of identity is where Oksanen's postmemorial literary practice lies and where the mother's silence that Oksanen's writing fills originates. It is only when Estonian becomes a realistic identity position that Oksanen becomes a writer, an Estonian writer of Finnish expression or a Finnish author of Estonian origin, and is able to discursively figure the cultural and personal trauma constitutive of her own identity and of the entire Estonian ethnic community. In Staponkutė's case, it is her choice of Lithuanian as the language of artistic expression that testifies to her commitment to articulating her own Lithuanian identity as part of a collective whose survival depends on its members, that is to say, Lithuanians all over the world bringing it to existence through their use of Lithuanian.

In both texts discussed above, mothers' silence in their own mother tongue in the context of migration connotes several unarticulated realities: the trauma of colonization, negotiating post-Soviet migrant femininity, and patriarchal gender regimes in both the country of origin and the host country. Both silent mothers withhold their mother tongue in defiance of discourses of colonial domination, patriarchy, and nationalism, while also using it as a mothering strategy designed to socialize their children to successfully negotiate the transnational and multilingual spaces they inhabit. As the analysis of Oksanen's and Staponkutė's texts shows, migrant maternal perspectives still struggle to find narrative expression in post-Soviet Baltic literature, as they are subsumed by the collective national visions that promote certain maternal roles within the national collectives framing migrant mothers' choice not to speak their native tongue to their children as punishment for the failure to fulfill their cultural roles.

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Funding

This publication has received funding from the Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellowship GOIPD/2016/252 and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 952366.

Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable contribution to the development of this essay, as well as Valerie Heffernan and Ieva Bisigirskaitė for reading and commenting on the manuscript.

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