

# Toward Finnish Heterolnational Literatures: Challenges and Opportunities

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I mmigration has broadened the definition of Finnish literature that was traditionally defined as a piece of literature written by a Finn in Finnish in Finland for Finns. As a result of immigration to Finland, writers with immigrant background have produced and continue to produce literary works that deal with Finnish culture, society and history in Finnish or other languages. In addition to immigrant writers in Finland, Finnish immigrants to other countries and their second and third generations have written and continue to write literary works either in Finnish or other languages. The existence of these groups of authors and their works challenges the traditional definition of Finnish literature, and thus, Finnish literature can no longer be confined to only one particular language and nationality.

In 2018, in co-operation with the Finnish Literature Society (FLS), we decided to launch the project *Toward a More Inclusive and Comprehensive Finnish Literature*. It was our contention that multicultural and multilingual literary works, written by immigrant authors in Finland and by authors of Finnish origin in other countries, deserve some acceptable spaces in the Finnish canonical literature. Thus, this project aimed to rethink the traditional definition of Finnish literature and increase the visibility, readability and research on literature, produced by immigrant authors in Finland as well as by authors of Finnish origin, living in other countries.

As a part of the project, we conducted interviews with several members of the two target groups. To conduct interviews, we prepared a questionnaire and a consent form in the Archive of the FLS. During 2018, I travelled to different towns and cities in Finland and interviewed fifteen immigrant authors, and in September 2019, I visited the United States of America and had interviews with eight authors of Finnish origin in Chicago, Detroit, Novi and Hancock. All interviews, each of which is between 60 to 75 minutes, have been recorded and are kept in the Archive of the FLS, and researchers, scholars and students, who are interested in the fields of minority and immigration literature, can use them as qualitative data. The interviews make users acquainted with the works and worlds of the twenty-three interviewees in Finland and the United States. The interviews record and offer materials from diverse actors, affiliated with Finnish literature and culture.

The interviews, set out in semi-structured format with open-ended questions, provide researchers with social-scientific data, and they can be retained for reference in research works. In addition to introducing themselves, their orientations, worldviews and motivations, the authors discuss a couple of their works in a one-to-one encounter with the interviewer. The open-ended questions offered the interviewees a high degree of leeway to formulate their insights on different topics. In the interviews, they have elucidated their thoughts on their works, themes and styles of writing in an analytical environment. My grasp

of the authors' selected outputs helped me delve more deeply into their works and conduct in-depth and technical interviews rather than general ones. In the questionnaire, we had included a long list of questions, and as the interviewer, I decided before and during the interviews what to ask based on the authors' backgrounds and interests as well as the directions of the discussions. The flexibility of the interviews helped me personalize questions, and as some of the authors declared, the interviews provided them with an opportunity to reflect on issues that they had never considered so explicitly before. It is my contention that the interviews, which uncover the behind-the-scenes of authors' books and backstories of their characters, support researchers' studies and liven up their research works. Moreover, since there are not enough critiques of the authors, the interviews as a data-gathering instrument are good resources to expand readers' understanding of their contemporary literary outputs. The Archive of the FLS has preserved the interview records in its storage systems and made them accessible to the public. This is to maintain the collection as a permanent source of material for use in research works. Recording materials from our target authors, writing in other languages than Finnish, Swedish or Sami, in the FLS Archive also display the existing phenomenon of Finnish transnational multicultural literature, which has not been recognized, and their roles within Finland's literary canon have not been properly mapped or thoroughly explored.

Additionally, in the interviews, authors found the opportunity to share some of their concerns with listeners. One concern that all the authors had in common was their lack of visibility and readability in their adopted homes. As some of them state, they have represented Finnish culture, history, language and literature in their works and words to their fellow citizens in their home countries or to people in the United States. Despite their contribution to introduce Finnish culture, these cultural workers – as minority groups – have not received the visibility and readability they deserve. As a couple of Finnish American authors note in the interviews, their literary works have functioned to revive the Finnish cultural heritage and traditions through incorporating them in the context of the American society and transmitting them to their own next generations. As voiced by some of the interviewees, they usually take their subjects from the Finnish society, history, culture, language and literature, mix them with their transnational and transcultural experiences and eventually offer a body of literature, which proffers different insights and transforms Finnish literature in both form and content. In this light, their literary works have become the sites in which question of identities for Finnish immigrants are raised and pursued. However, a number of them, just like some of the interviewed authors residing in Finland, felt a sense of non-belongingness.

Another concern by a major number of interviewees in Finland and the USA addressed policies of a number of influential Finnish literary and cultural entities, which still attempt to introduce Finnish literature based on a fixed

and finite set of characteristics. These conservative entities, including some publishers and literary institutions, are still into connecting Finnish literature to monolingualism. According to such conservative orientations, the literary and lingual diversity, which is growing in Finland, would challenge the monolingual paradigm and literary homogeneity of Finnish literature, constituted and sustained as “norms” for decades. Since any attempt to blur the borderline between Finnish literature and literature produced by immigrants causes vibrations to the construction of the homogenous Finnish national literary identity, they are not receptive to such changes. The fact that these traditionalists still attempt to confine Finnish literary identity, which consists of innumerable defining characteristics, to only language is questionable.

Based on their discussions, the practice of excluding literatures, produced by authors affiliated with the Finnish society, from the canon of Finnish literature would expand inequality, disintegration and discrimination against such writers and deprive the Finnish society from their diverse worldviews. On the contrary, including literatures written by these groups of authors in the canon of Finnish literature would promote a better understanding between the Finnish and immigrant communities and help all to direct their positive energies for the establishment of a more inclusive literary society wherein all members feel to be a part of it and not apart from it. In this climate, it is sad that, despite their potentials, a major number of target authors feel that they have been deprived to apply for or to be included in some Finnish literary prize contests, mainly because they write in other languages than Finnish. Even sadder is that these authors have been prevented from joining the Union of Finnish Writers, and accordingly, they are deprived from some rights and benefits that their Finnish counterparts are entitled to. The saddest is that this exclusion is recurring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Finland that has been a forerunner in several great positive changes and advancements in the world.

In our one-day literary seminar at the FLS, entitled “Today’s Literature, Tomorrow’s Literary History: Do Immigrant Authors Transform Finnish Literature?” participants also discussed how would dividing the authors to insiders and outsiders help the multicultural and multilingual Finnish society to attain empowerment? Almost all attendees admitted that any attempts to essentialize and homogenize Finnish literature and exclude literatures produced by immigrants in Finland and Finns in other countries from the domain of Finnish literature would make Finnish literature incomprehensive. All these restrictions and classifications, hand in hand, have negatively affected the visibility, readability and research on literary works written by the two groups of authors and pushed their products to margin. As a result, many Finnish traditional publishers refuse to publish a major number of literary works by these minority authors, and thus, their words and works do not reach out to Finnish readers, critics and media. The concerns of immigrant authors in Finland about their challenges to publish

their works motivated me to edit and publish a multilingual literary anthology, entitled *Opening Boundaries: Toward Finnish Heterolnational Literatures*, which includes selected literary outputs by twenty-four immigrant authors, living in Finland, from sixteen different nationalities.

Here, I argue that the emergence of literary products by immigrant authors to and from Finland demonstrates the growth of new heterogeneous, multicultural and multilingual literatures within the canon of Finnish literature. It is also an indication of these authors' cultural and literary activities, which, if appreciated, can broaden and further enrich the Finnish literary canon. In that case, the literary works produced by immigrant authors in Finland and authors of Finnish origin in other countries diversify the narratives, languages, themes and genres of Finnish literature. This would pave the way for the celebration of ethnorelativism and recognition of all authors, regardless of their races and languages of writing, involved actively to promote Finnish literature. Literature generates power and plays a pivotal role in highlighting the sociopolitical and cultural issues and creating national understanding and unity. If literature turns into literatures, then it brings about more power. Based on this account, to benefit from the advantages of multilingual and multicultural literatures and their diverse positive literary influences, the subversion of national essentialism and problematization of the fixed traditional notion of Finnish literature should continue. To this end, we should leave behind ethnocentrism and embrace ethnorelativism, which seeks for acceptance and integration rather than denial and refusal of differences. In a multicultural and multilingual society, diversity is a strength, and differences are less important than similarities and commonalities. Through highlighting the joint-points, we would be able to open the boundaries of Finnish literature to include all literatures affiliated with it and celebrate cultural plurality and literary diversity.

To achieve this end, we also need to come to grips with the requirements of our time. One of those requirements is to understand that the old notion of Finnish literature is unable to cover all literatures affiliated with it, and thus, it should be reconceptualized. However, reconceptualization of the old definition of Finnish literature without the reconstitution of dominant conservative discourses does not produce the desired results. Based on this argument, I suggest "Finnish Heterolnational Literatures" as a single term to address all literary products, written in Finland by Finns and national minority groups, including Swedish Finns and Sami, by those who have immigrated to Finland and their descendants and by those who have immigrated from Finland and their descendants. This way there would be only one term to address all forms of Finnish literatures by nativist or immigrants to and from Finland, and we can shelve all such works in one classification. That would also solve the quest|ion of belonging. Accordingly, all writers who write such literatures would be called

“Finnish Heterolnational Writers.” “Hetero” here signifies “diverse or containing different types of.” The term “linalional” is a combination of “lingual” and “national.” The whole term “Heterolnational Literatures” includes all types of literatures produced in different languages by natives and immigrants to and from the country. The term can also apply to other multicultural and multi-lingual societies and their literatures.

For further information, please see:

Ghasemi, Mehdi (ed.). 2019. *Opening Boundaries: Toward Finnish Heterolnational Literatures*. Helsinki: BoD.

Ghasemi, Mehdi. 2022. Post-postmodernism and the Emergence of Heterolnational Literatures. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 20, 15–30.