

Opening Boundaries: Toward Finnish Heterolnational Literatures



Edited by
Mehdi Ghasemi

**Opening Boundaries:
Toward Finnish Heterolinalional
Literatures**

Affectionately dedicated to

**UUU
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UUU**

who believe there is no skin between us

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Literatures**

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Mehdi Ghasemi**

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Front cover photo: Freepik.com

Back cover photo: Shakiba Ghasemi

Publisher: BoD™ – Books on Demand, Helsinki, Finland

Manufacturer: Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt, Germany

ISBN: 9789528020196

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Introduction	3
Ahmed Zaidan	9
David Gambarte.....	23
Diana Mistera	35
Dieter Hermann Schmitz	47
Dora Az	59
Dorothea Grünzweig.....	71
Eleonora Joffè.....	85
Farzaneh Hatami Landi.....	95
Hope Nwosu	107
Joop Wassenaar	123
Lee Rodgers	133
Ljudmila Kol.....	149
Luis Mireles-Flores	163
Martina Adela	175
Mehdi Ghasemi.....	185
Mohamed Ahmed Haji Omar	199
Natalja Meri.....	215
Polina Kopylova	227
Rosamaría Bolom	239
Seyed Mohammad Momeni.....	249
Shashank Mane.....	261
Tao Lin	273
Zinaida Lindén.....	283
Zoila Forss	295

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) and the PoDoCo Program for funding the project “Toward a More Inclusive and Comprehensive Finnish Literature,” which I have coordinated during 2018 and 2019. I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to Dr. Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, the SKS Secretary General, Dr. Ilona Pikkanen, the head of the SKS Research Department, and Dr. Katri Kivilaakso, the head of the SKS Archive Center, for all their unforgettable support. My special thanks are also extended to the Migration Institute of Finland, the University of Tampere and the University of Turku, which provided me with material resources and institutional support. In addition, I am particularly grateful to our anonymous peer reviewers whose keen critical insights and comments tremendously helped me improve this anthology in every way. Last but not least, I would like to sincerely thank all the authors who have accompanied me throughout this project, and especially those who have contributed some of their literary works to this collection. Without their invaluable support, the implementation of the project and the publication of this book would not be possible.

Introduction

Immigration and globalization have 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, some immigrants 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 no longer can be confined to only one particular language and nationality and defined as a single entity.

At the Finnish Literature Society (SKS), the work of which is based on an up-to-date knowledge and understanding of the roots of the culture and the contemporary profile of a multicultural and multilingual Finnish literature, 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, in contrast to some excluding discourses, which seek for ethnocentrism, monolingualism and assimilation in Finnish literature, our project aimed not only to rethink the traditional definition of Finnish literature but also to 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.

Opening Boundaries: Toward Finnish Heterolnational Literatures, which is a part of our project, includes some literary outputs by twenty-four immigrant authors, living in Finland. Since the authors hosted in this collection have published prodigiously, their selected works do not fully cover and represent the range and diversity of their creative works, writing styles and themes. It is worth noting that the twenty-four

contributors are from sixteen different nationalities, and their works in ten different languages make this collection multilingual. However, for the sake of readability, the translation of some of their works in Finnish and/or English has been offered.

This anthology is a cross-cultural collection of texts, demonstrating the emergence and growth of new heterogeneous, multicultural and multilingual literatures within the canon of Finnish literature. It is also an indication of our cultural and literary activities, which, if appreciated, can further grow and enrich the Finnish literary canon. In that case, the literary works produced by immigrant authors in Finland not only diversify the narratives, languages, themes and genres of Finnish literature, but also add to the literary credits of their host society. This would pave the way for the celebration of ethnorelativism and recognition of all authors, regardless of their races and languages, involved actively to promote Finnish literature. Since immigrant authors reside in Finland, 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 marked contrast to some constructive efforts by some Finnish organizations and publishers to integrate immigrant authors, some influential Finnish literary and cultural entities still attempt to introduce Finnish literature based on a fixed and finite set of characteristics. They endeavour to limit such a rich literature to a few patterns of identification rather than identities. 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. What do they call those Finns, living in Finland, writing their works in other languages? Are they not considered Finnish authors? How about those Finns residing in other countries and writing in other languages? Is an immigrant author, living in Finland and writing in Finnish, a Finnish author or still an immigrant writer writing in Finnish?

The practice of excluding literatures, produced by immigrant authors, from the canon of Finnish literature would expand inequality, disintegration and discrimination against such writers and deprive the host society from their diverse standpoints. On the contrary, including literatures written by immigrant 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 and forces for the creation of a better society wherein all members feel to be a part of it and not apart from it. It is sad that, despite their potentials, a major number of immigrant authors in this land have been deprived to apply for or to be included in some Finnish national literary prize contests, mainly because they write in other languages than Finnish. Even sadder is that immigrant authors have been prevented from joining the Union of Finnish Writers, the motto of which – as stated in its English webpage – is: “Our values are community, equality, expertise and literature’s intrinsic value. Our vision is to ensure a thriving, diverse literature sector in Finland and promote writing as a profession equal to other professions.” However, despite such claims, immigrant authors only due to their different languages of writing cannot be members of 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 21st century in Finland that has been a forerunner in several great positive changes and advancements in the world, including women’s rights! Why no pressing need is felt to change this trend?! In what ways would dividing the authors to insiders and outsiders – while depriving the latter from some rights that the former enjoys – help the society to attain empowerment? What I can note is that negligence of other

languages and literatures in a multicultural and multilingual society narrows down perspectives and prospects. In addition, all these measures to subordinate the immigrants' literatures and split them from Finnish literature can be used as a metric for measuring the level of immigrants' integration in the Finnish society.

Locating about eighty immigrant authors, residing in Finland, despite all their differences under one category, so-called "immigrant writers and literature," and separating them from Finnish authors and literature would fragment the society. Any attempts to essentialize and homogenize Finnish literature and exclude literatures produced by immigrants in Finland and other minority groups from the domain of Finnish literature would make Finnish literature incomprehensive. Even those who wish to maintain nationalism through creating such categories should beware that unity among different parties within a society can bring about a stronger national identity. Thus, devising some identification labels and prefixes, such as "entangled," "cross-border," "transnational" and "New Finn," for immigrant authors based on their national, linguistic and cultural differences would only maintain and widen the rifts and fragmentations in the society and convey a sense of "non-belonging" to these authors.

All these restrictions and classifications, hand in hand, have negatively affected the visibility, readability and research on literary works written by immigrant authors and pushed their products to margin. As a result, many Finnish traditional publishers refuse to publish many of immigrant authors' literary works, and thus, these authors' words and works do not reach out to Finnish readers, critics, scholars and media that have the possibility to increase their visibility and readability. Accordingly, a number of works in this anthology represent the attributes associated with immigrants, including detachment, exclusion, alienation and discrimination, and voice experiences of being outsiders. Some other works speak of intersectionality, showing how race, class, language, lack of networking and cultural differences can affect the immigrants' status, employment and promotion in their adopted home. Additionally, some authors reflect their first experience of encountering with Finnish climate and culture.

Regardless of the different languages and nationalities of the anthologized authors, what tie many of these works are question of identities, quest for equality, diaspora, racial concerns and Finnishness. Some writings, however, might not explicitly deal with such issues, but they occasionally and implicitly dip into them.

Here I should note that, like its language and nationality diversity, this anthology encompasses a variety of other themes. A number of authors draw upon wars, sanctions and climate changes as some of the push factors, forcing some peoples to leave their homelands. They also depict some of the pains that some immigrants and asylum seekers bear during immigration process, while criticizing some world leaders for their inappropriate policies that have caused or increased conflicts among some nations. In their works, some writers lament over the loss of love and nature and the rise in solitude and distance among people. By the same token, some authors challenge human races engaged in races over racial issues, prescribing affection to alleviate the gaps that exist in our world today. Furthermore, some anthologized works bring to the fore yearning for freedom, human relationships through literature and art, emotion fragility, human rights, modern youth, gender equality, transcendental experience, supernatural power, existential questions, attractions of different cities, countries and cultures.

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. On this account, now it is time to problematize the fixed traditional notion of Finnish literature, subvert the earlier national essentialism and benefit from the advantages of multilingual and multicultural literatures and their diverse positive literary influences. 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, include all literatures

affiliated with it and celebrate cultural plurality and literary diversity. To 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 or out of Finland by Finns and even 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 question of belonging. Accordingly, all writers who write such literatures would be called “Finnish Heterolnational Writers.” “Hereto” here signifies “diverse or containing different types of.” The term “lnational” 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 that nation, and it can be applied to all other multicultural and multilingual societies and their literatures.

Mehdi Ghasemi

Tampere, October 2019

Ahmed Zaidan

Ahmed Zaidan was born on May 29, 1988 in Mosul, Iraq. He studied translation studies in the Department of Translation at the University of Mosul. After graduation, he started working as a journalist. In parallel, he started writing poems, and his first poetry collection, entitled *Play on the Strings of a Female*, was published in 2009. He also participated in the “Creative Art Competition,” organized by the University of Mosul, and received two literary prizes. In 2013, Zaidan moved to Finland as an asylum seeker and was granted the political status as a refugee in 2014. In Europe, he has found his way as a poet and journalist through taking part in poetry festivals. Consequently, in 2017, a number of his works were published in an anthology, entitled *Building Bridges*, in the UK. He also managed to publish his second poetry collection, entitled *Aurora from Mosul*, in Germany in 2018. Currently, he has been involved as a research assistant in the project “Family Separation, Immigration Status and Everyday Safety: Strategies and Experiences of Vulnerable Immigrants,” which is conducted at the Migration Institute of Finland. In addition, he has been administering a radio show broadcast for Radio Robin Hood. In his works, Zaidan attempts to depict and share with his readers some of the horrible war images he has witnessed in his home country. He also tends to save his second part, still trapped in the war zones around the world, the part that is materialized in his friends and family, who do not have the possibility to leave their homes and would face the imminent death. In addition to memories of war, he draws upon racial inequalities and immigration in his poems.

I come from Mesopotamia

I come from Mesopotamia
Where civilization commenced and terminated
and then, I was born.
Where bombs are implanted in the soil
instead of seeds of corn
Where children's flesh turns into oil
And palaces are made of their bones
Where the state of war is always on the boil
For a mirage called a throne.

I am the shrapnel of a bombing

I am the shrapnel of a bombing,
that happened in my town,
turned its days into whirling dust
I travel like multiple universes
after the Big Bang.

Into the flesh of the world
Into the cities getting old
Into the words of a poet like me
Who tries by odes, to be free and bold
I am the cries of a loner in the midst of the forest
where no one hears
Only nothingness gives its ears
I am a portion of the scattered cloud of vulnerable peace after a forgotten battle.
I am the abandoned castle from an unknown era
the departure of the ages, the drifter between pages, looking for a littering light
The vagrant moon in the crowd of planets, looking for its night



Opening Boundaries: Toward Finnish Heterolnational Literatures is a part of our project, entitled "Toward a More Inclusive and Comprehensive Finnish Literature," which has been conducted at the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) and the University of Tampere during 2018 - 2019. This cross-cultural collection of texts demonstrates the emergence and growth of heterogeneous, multicultural and multilingual literatures within the canon of Finnish literature. This anthology includes some of the literary outputs by twenty-four immigrant authors, living in Finland, from sixteen different nationalities, and their works in ten different languages make this book multilingual. However, for the sake of readability, the translation of some of their works in Finnish and/or English has been offered.

Mehdi Ghasemi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Finnish Literature Society (SKS), the University of Tampere and the University of Turku, Finland. He is also a fiction writer, writing his works in the hybrid genre of "noveramatry," a combination of novel, drama and poetry all in one line. He has already published three fiction books, five scholarly books and fifteen papers in peer-reviewed journals.

