

You have downloaded a document from



The Central and Eastern European Online Library

The joined archive of hundreds of Central-, East- and South-East-European publishers, research institutes, and various content providers

Source: Interlitteraria
Interlitteraria

Location: Estonia

Author(s): Anneli Mihkelev

Title: Biblical Myths and National Identity in Contemporary Estonian and Latvian Literature
Biblical Myths and National Identity in Contemporary Estonian and Latvian Literature

Issue: 13/2008

Citation style: Anneli Mihkelev. "Biblical Myths and National Identity in Contemporary Estonian and Latvian Literature ". Interlitteraria 13:242-248.
<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=266362>

Biblical Myths and National Identity in Contemporary Estonian and Latvian Literature

ANNELI MIHKELEV

1. Myths and National Identity

The Estonian researcher Jaan Puhvel has written that a myth is not just a story but through myth the whole society creates its own self-awareness and self-realization, as well as explaining the essence of itself and its surroundings. (Puhvel 1996: 10). There has been no culture which has not generated a set of its own unique myths. These narratives have a great role in the formation of national identity and, most importantly, these myths originate and appear in the oral stage of human culture. Juri Lotman has precisely stated the idea of myth: the mythological space is small and closed, but at the same time the story itself is about cosmic proportions, about the whole universe (Lotman 1999: 196). Myth creates its own world, its own universe, sacred and whole. The myths and national identity work in a similar way and sometimes they are intertwined: the purpose of national identity is also to create a specific world, the national space where we can find the unique spirit and character of the nation or *Volksgeist* according to Herder. The national specific world is closed too, sometimes also small, and the story about the nation extends far back in history. We could say that it would be the universe of the nation.

At the same time national identity contains several myths which we call national myths. These are the “stories about who and what we are and where we come from... Of greater importance than their truth value is the role they play in the formation of cultural identity. These myths are embodied by various cultural artefacts, literary texts included.”

(Lukas 2007: 75) Consequently, although the myths originate in the oral stage of culture, they appear in literature, in written culture. At the same time we can say that usually national literature may be closely linked to its cultural myths, but this is not necessarily true. Sometimes we can find the combinations of different national myths in the literary texts, also the myths from other nations which have a great role in the formation of national identity, for example the biblical myths.

However, it is still important that the sociological functions of oral myths and literature are different. Myths are sacred, but literature is secular in the original sense. The biblical myths are situated between the oral tradition and literature, or, in other words, biblical myths exist on the boundary between oral myths and written culture: on the one hand biblical myths are sacred, but on the other hand they represent written culture, although not secular written culture. So, we can see that the biblical myths connect two opposites: sacred and secular space. And it seems that in literature, if these two spaces exist in the literary text, they are mixed or, possibly, these two spaces exist as two separate spaces or worlds in the literary text.

2. Ene Mihkelson and Ahasuerus

The main themes of the Estonian writer Ene Mihkelson's novels are the severance of the identity of Estonians after the War and attempts to rediscover the deeper continuity of identity, which is often partly condemned to fail, the intervention of social and political rules into personal self-knowledge, and the forced (and unconsciously accepted) forgetfulness of past relationships and of natural sources of self-creation. The title of Mihkelson's novel *Ahasveeruse uni* (The Sleep of Ahasuerus, 2001) contains allusions to biblical myths, more precisely to two myths which are connected with the Bible and Christian tradition.

It is the proper name Ahasuerus which indicates the two myths. One of them is from the Old Testament, the Book of Esther, which contains the story of Ahasuerus, the Persian king who banished his first wife, the queen Vashti, because she did not submit to his commands. Then Ahasuerus married Esther, a Jewish girl who became the queen. Esther did not tell the king and his court that she was a Jew. But Esther had a stepfather, the Jew Mordecai, who was in conflict with Haman, one of the courtiers of Ahasuerus. The problem was that Ahasuerus supported

Haman, and he wanted all the people to obey him. But the Jew Mordecai did not do so. Haman was angry and persuaded Ahasuerus to allow the extermination of all Jews, including Mordecai. Mordecai told Esther what had happened, and asked her to ask the king for amnesty for the Jews. Esther's first answer was that she could not do that because the king had not invited her – everyone who went to the king's rooms without invitation would be put to death. Then Mordecai told Esther that it was not possible for her to remain silent at this difficult time for her nation; the royal house would destroy her as well as the other Jews. Mordecai, the stepfather of Esther, convinced her to speak to the king. Then Esther went to the king's rooms and Ahasuerus did not kill her. On the contrary, he asked what Esther's wish was. Esther asked for amnesty for all Jews. King Ahasuerus granted her will. He also promoted Mordecai, because Mordecai had exposed a plot against the king. So, the story of Esther and Ahasuerus is the story of the escape of the Jews, a story with a happy ending. And the most important person in that story is Mordecai, who was bold and spoke up.

It seems that the allusion in the title of Mihkelson's novel to the Book of Esther from the Old Testament is not connected directly to Ahasuerus, but to the story of Esther and Ahasuerus, as well as Mordecai. Ahasuerus is only a name and a king who has his own role in this story. As a proper name, Ahasuerus indicates mythological consciousness: on the one hand, it points to the old myth of Ahasuerus, while, on the other hand, it indicates mythical thinking in contemporary times, that mythical thinking is important also in contemporary culture, and it is important concerning national and personal identity. The protagonist of Mihkelson's novel also tries to discover her family's and her own history through the names. She searches for traces of her predecessors, asks who they were and what the secret of their identity is. At the same time, it also raises the question "who am I?", "what is my own identity?", and the answer depends greatly on the essence of her predecessors. All the work of discovery begins with a study of the names in the archives; it is the study of a family tree in which only the names have been written. A change in the family name creates a mystical situation: a name is a key aspect of personal identity; if it is changed, there must be a serious reason. And if the family has evolved from different nations and from individuals of different social classes, it is also possible to decide where you would like to begin your own identity. Each name of one's predecessors is surrounded by mystical

and mythical space. It is a space which includes events from the distant past. It is another world and we can only dimly imagine what happened so long ago. It is mysterious for us and also very magnetic because these people from the past were also our predecessors; they are not very close to us, but still close enough to feel the connection with them. And the same phenomenon also works if we read old myths, not only our own family myths, but myths which speak not only of personal identity but also of identity in a larger sense. So, the name Ahasuerus points to old myths which permit identification at a national and even larger level, not only a personal level.

The author uses both biblical myths and proper names to create the feeling of mythical or eternal time. This is characteristic not only of Mihkelson's prose, but also of her poetry. According to Janika Kronberg: "The main aim of Mihkelson's poetry is to give names to things. Memory and naming are her dominant motifs. Mihkelson names things and phenomena, as only those possessing names are able to persist. As regards the past, naming denotes saving something essential from oblivion and, as regards the present, it is an invitation for something essential to come into being" (Kronberg 2000: 22). Naming is also important in the novel *Ahasveeruse uni*. According to Lotman and Uspenski, naming is connected with mythological thinking, and a proper name is connected with a mythological consciousness.

It is important that the story of King Ahasuerus is the opposite of the story of another Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. This is a medieval legend, where Ahasuerus, a shoemaker from Jerusalem, is condemned to roam the earth until the Day of Judgement, because he taunted Christ on the way to the Crucifixion, urging him to go faster, and did not allow him to take a rest. The punishment for Ahasuerus is everlasting, sleepless wandering. That curse presses him till the Day of Judgement, and he must remember everything about it.

According to Marju Lauristin, Ene Mihkelson's novel reveals the deepest pain: if we lose our name and ourselves, our familial memory, we have lost our personality. If we forget our real history and are complicit with violence, it is the same as putting the self-awareness of the nation to sleep. Indifference is a timeless crime (Lauristin 2002: 83). Personal identity and memory are connected with collective or national memory and identity.

If we think about the first myth of Esther and Ahasuerus, it is the same thing as what Mordecai avoided: he convinced his stepdaughter to

act against violence, and remember and save her family, as well as herself.

Although this is a legend from Jewish history, a parallel exists for Estonian history: first, the direct parallel between the Holocaust and Soviet repression and, second, the parallel with national identity, which is created through history, myths and literature. Marju Lauristin has written that Mihkelson's novel *Ahasveeruse uni* touches the Estonian identity very deeply, more than any other contemporary novel or writer (ib. 81). The function of the old biblical myths is to create the eternal, mythical dimension in the novel and create contact with old nations – perhaps this demonstrates that Estonians have not been the only nation in history to have very difficult problems, and if we know history and the old myths, then we can also learn something from the history and the old myths. Or, as Kajar Pruul has written, it is a feeling that we still live in the same primordial time when the universe was created (Pruul 2002). A continuity between different generations and different nations is needed for identity.

We can see the same effect also in our poetry: Kalju Lepik used allusions to the Bible which gave an eternal dimension to his poetry, which tried to remember and save the national identity in exile. And we can see the motif of Ahasuerus as well as the other biblical motifs in Ene Mihkelsaar's poetry. Perhaps the myth of Ahasuerus is one of the most impressive myths for Estonians after World War II: in 1944 our nation was cast out into the world and we had the experiences of exile, Siberia etc. Like Ahasuerus the Wandering Jew, we have looked for our own place in the world, and experienced limitlessness.

3. Nora Ikstena and Lazarus

We can find this mythical experience also in Latvian contemporary literature. Nora Ikstena's novel *Dzīves svinēšana* (Celebration of Life) was published in 1998, and it was translated into Estonian in 2003 by Ita Saks, and into Lithuanian in 2005. Nora Ikstena was awarded the Baltic Assembly Prize in literature in 2006.

The main motif in her novel *Dzīves svinēšana* is the motif of death. The Latvian researcher Guntis Berelis has written about Ikstena's novel: "What is the novel about? The answer is – it is about a funeral. (---) It is also possible to view *Dzīves svinēšana* as a novel about death"

(Berelis 2004: 8). In Ikstena's novel, Helēna's mother Eleonora has died, and when she invites seven colourful people to her own funeral, she also connects two worlds: the world of death and the world of living people. The situation is very mystical and mysterious; these seven people who have been invited are also very odd. The organizer of the funeral is the priest Adalberts, and he follows Eleonora's wishes concerning the funeral. Eleonora's daughter Helēna is against the clerical funeral, and she believes that nobody can bring her mother back to life. The text of the novel describes the clerical ceremony, full of quotations from the Bible. The atmosphere is solemn and horrible at the same time. The author also uses dreams – the novel begins and ends with a dream and it is Helēna's dream about a holy woman who is going to heaven and who says these words: Live, who is dead, and dead, who is living. It seems to be a paraphrase from the Epistle of John in the New Testament, the story of Lazarus, where Jesus tells Lazarus' sister Martha: 'one who believes in me lives, although he dies! And everyone who lives and believes in me does not die forever.'

Although there is not a direct allusion to a biblical myth or name, the overall atmosphere is similar to a biblical situation, not to the Old Testament as in Ene Mihkelson's novel, but to the New Testament. There are several stories about Jesus' miracles, how he brings the dead back to life: the story of Jairus' daughter and Lazarus are the best known. People come together to bury the dead; they weep and mourn. And then Jesus comes and awakens the deceased person, and admonishes that person to believe in Him.

In the novel *Dzīves svinēšana*, the situation is similar: Eleonora is dead and her daughter does not believe that it is possible to give her life again. In this story, Jesus does not appear, but there is an old priest who organises the funeral according to Eleonora's wish that her friends must read the psalms and tell stories about Eleonora's life.

In the novel, the situation is similar to that in the Bible: the boundary between death and life is ambivalent and delicate. The world of death influences the world of the living through memories and thoughts. Although Eleonora herself has died, her friends remember what has happened in the past. And through these stories, there is a celebration of Eleonora's life, and at the same time a celebration of Helēna's life, because Helēna begins to believe, and she becomes very similar to Eleonora. Through the funeral ceremony, where Helēna listens to these stories about her mother, she finds a connection with her

mother, with her predecessor, and as a result she finds her identity, which is connected with her national identity, because Eleonora's life also included living through the events of World War II.

Nora Ikstena's novel balances on the borders of the traditional novel, and it consists of different connected short stories. At the same time, all of the travelling in this novel takes place in the story-teller's memories; the real place where the funeral takes place is quite static and small. It is a framed space or room where different trips to the past take place. And through the past, Eleonora's and her daughter's lives are celebrated.

Conclusion

The motifs of death and the past are very important in connection with the Baltic identity: our history has been complicated and tragic, and we are still obsessed with it. From the beginning of the 1990s, after the Baltic countries become independent, we faced the essential questions, as who are we? and what is this world we see before us? Or in other words, we try to find or create our identity. Although Mihkelson's and Ikstena's novels are different, there are also some similarities, and they deal with the same problem: who are we? This seems to be the most important question in contemporary Baltic literature.

References

- Berelis, G. 2004. Nora Ikstena. – *Latvian Literature* no 5, pp 7–9.
- Kronberg, J. 2000. Naming the Things of the World. – *ELM*, no 10, Spring, pp 21–22.
- Kronberg, J. 2001. Ahasveeruse needus ja lunastus. – *Postimees*, 21. 12.
- Lauristin, M. 2002. Ahasveeruse mõistatus. – *Vikerkaar*, no 4, lk 81–82.
- Lotman, J. 1999. *Semiosfäär*. Tallinn: Vagabund.
- Lukas, L. 2007. The Baltic-German Settlement Myths and Their Literary Developments. – Mihkelev, Anneli; Kalnačs, Benedikts (eds.), *We Have Something in Common: The Baltic Memory*. Tallinn: Eesti TA Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, pp 75–85.
- Pruul, K. 2002. Tundmatu suur loom unede udus. – *Eesti Ekspress*, 16. 01.
- Puhvel, J. 1996. *Võrdlev mütoloogia*. Tallinn: Ilmamaa.