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“Thanks to her ‘dissident’ status, she was granted cultural asylum.” The Figure of Romani Woman Artist in Kiba Lumberg’s Literary Work

Abstract

The figure of the (woman) artist is a central element in the literary works of the Finnish Romani writer, artist, and activist Kiba Lumberg (*1956), including one of her comic books. Lumberg’s take on the subject is pronouncedly autobiographical, highlighting the important role of the artist’s gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other aspects of her identity, although constantly problematizing and ironizing that identity. This essay begins with looking at the *Memesa* trilogy, but then concentrates on Lumberg’s last novel, *Irtiottoxxx* (2018, Breakxxx), which has thus far been largely ignored by the Finnish literary establishment. In *Irtiottoxxx*, which takes place in Italy, the lesbian “half-Romani” artist Memesa (the protagonist of Lumberg’s earlier novels) is no longer the first-person narrator, but only a narrated figure in the background. However, with the help of the “Memesa narrative” embedded in the discussion on artists’ rights and their position in society in general, Lumberg continues to discuss the role of the artist in the context of the—allegedly liberal and generous—Finnish cultural institutions and the art market. Lumberg’s critical view of the position of the artist—namely the aging woman artist—within the cultural institutions and in society in general is analysed with the help of contextual, multi-layered intersectional analysis of her last novel. There, the motif of art as salvation culminates in a kind of a feminist utopia.

1. Kiba Lumberg and her Work

The figure of a creative woman is a central element of Finnish Romani writer of Kale descent, artist, and activist Kiba Lumberg’s (born 1956) literary work, including one of her comic books. Lumberg’s take on the subject is pronouncedly autobiographical, or, better to say, autofictional. The book highlights the important roles of the artist’s gender, sexuality,

ethnicity, nationality, and other aspects of her identity, although constantly problematizing and ironizing those roles and foregrounding the protagonist's position in between various groups and identities. One of the important themes of Lumberg's literary work has been the clash between a creative woman and the surrounding society, be it institutions and instances of power of the majority population, or the pressure and expectation of the minority, in this case, the Roma community. At the same time, her works touch very personal issues like the embodied self of an aging woman artist and her intimate relationships.

The *œuvre* of Kiba Lumberg comprises a screenplay for TV series, comics, visual art, video art, performance art, a children's book, and four novels. The three first novels form together the Memesa trilogy, consisting of the novels *Musta perhonen* (*Black Butterfly*) (2004), *Repaleiset siivet* (*Tattered Wings*) (2006) and *Samettiyö* (*Velvet Night*) (2008); the fourth novel is *Irtiottoxxx* (*Breakxxx*) (2018). Lumberg has been active as a curator of exhibitions; she has held workshops and courses; and she has founded an art group, an art gallery, and a publishing house, all with a strong political commitment and concern for women, minorities, and left-wing politics.¹ In her capacity as the artist-activist, Lumberg has been denouncing the drawbacks of the Nordic welfare state, which sets high expectations in terms of a positive approach to alterity, but, according to her, often fails to meet them. At the same time, she has been equally critical of minority, namely Romani, cultures, their customs, and their way of treating women and various forms of otherness, including non-heterosexual identities (see Koivisto 2008; Lappalainen 2012; Parente-Čapková 2018b; Kauranen, Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne 2021; Bergman 2023²). Being openly feminist and critical of the heterosexual normativity, Lumberg has had to face at least a “triple marginalization” (cf. Ryvolová 2023), balancing between “establishing literary self-expression in diasporic cultural productions” and considering “aesthetic appropriation of major society's literary traditions” (Hertrampf 2020, 43).

¹ For more on Lumberg's life, work and activism see e.g. Parente-Čapková (2018a and b); Kauranen, Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne (2021); Rossi (2005).

² Eric Bergman has analysed the Memesa trilogy using the concept of *nepantla* (meaning, roughly translated, “torn between ways” in the Aztec language Nahuatl, see Bergman 2023, 3).

Memesa trilogy can be also viewed within the concept of “inner criticism” (see Hertrampf 2020)³. Lumberg’s position within the Romani community in Finland has been difficult, and she has often spoken about the death threats that she had to face because of her defying the rules of the Roma culture. In 2007, she accused the Romani activist Miranda Vuolasranta, President of the European Roma & Travellers Forum, of defamation, after Vuolasranta wrote an open letter, in which she, according to Lumberg, grossly offended her and her family.⁴ “Olen pelännyt jo vuosia ja pelkään edelleen, mutta jonkun on uskallettava sanoa ääneen myös romanien ristiriidat. Eikö sananvapaus koske kaikkia suomalaisia?”⁵, said Lumberg to Finland’s most well-known newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (Stenbäck 2007). “Olen hylännyt heimoni arvot, mutta en voi vaieta taiteilijana. Aion jatkaa toisinajattelijana ja vien asiani vaikka Euroopan tuomioistuimeen.”⁶ (Stenbäck 2007)

As it has been pointed out (Parente-Čapková 2018b), Lumberg, like many other Romani writers, has been using various stereotypes in representing the Roma struggling with the historical “burden of representation” (Toninato 2014, 116⁷). Lumberg’s generic repertoire is close to

³ I would like to thank Beate Eder-Jordan and Marina Ortrud Hertrampf, who have brought this concept to my attention.

⁴ Vuolasranta, who had been awarded, for example, the Golden Wheel Cross Award by the International Romani Union, has been criticised by several of Finland’s Romani artists for acting as if she were representing the voice of the Roma and downplaying the problems within the Romani community. Vuolasranta has always been open about representing and promoting Christian values. After Lumberg sued her for defamation, Vuolasranta had to pay a substantial fine in 2008.

⁵ “For years, I have feared for my life, and I am still afraid, but someone has to speak aloud about the controversies among the Roma. Doesn’t freedom of speech apply to all Finns?” (Stenbäck 2007). All translations in the present text are mine.

⁶ “I have abandoned the values of my tribe, but as an artist, I cannot be silent. I intend to go on as a dissident and I am ready to pursue my cause even to the European Court of Justice.” (Stenbäck 2007).

⁷ Toninato is referring to Maria Lauret, “Introduction”, in *Beginning Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. by Helena Grice et al., 1–9. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. For the “burden of representation” of the Roma within the context of the literature of Finland, see Landon (2008) and Parente-Čapková (2011). For more on Finland’s Romani literature, see Rantonen (2018); Gröndahl & Rantonen (2013).

many other women writers from ethnic minorities, for example, in her way to use narrative strategies known from the genres of autofiction, ethnoautobiography, *woman-centred novel*, *Bildungsroman* or (feminist) *Künstlerroman*, the lesbian/queer picaresque, novel for girls, and literary pamphlet (Parente-Čapková 2018b, esp. 20–21; Lappalainen 2012; Gröndahl 2010).

A more complex approach is to view Lumberg's novels in the context of Romani writing. Research on Lumberg's work can contribute to the examination of works by Romani writers on a larger scale, showing the common features of the Romani writing as both minor and world literature (Hertrampf 2020), and the specificities of Romani writers from different countries from Western, Southern, Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe (see e.g. Toninato 2014; French 2016; Zahova 2016; Hertrampf 2020). Lumberg writes in Finnish, and although her novels manifest some of the features that have been attributed to Romani literature (e.g. the moment of multiple consciousness, cf. Toninato 2014; some strategies both in terms of content and style, see Parente-Čapková 2018b), she is considered to be part of contemporary Finnish literature, although existing on its very margins (see e.g. Gröndahl & Rantonen 2013).

In this article, I will discuss the figure of the creative woman beginning with the *Memesa* trilogy, and then concentrate on Lumberg's last novel, the self-published *Irtiottoxxx* (2018), so far largely ignored by the Finnish literary establishment. I will look at Lumberg's texts with the help of a contextual, multi-layered intersectional analysis.

2. A Many-Sided Woman Artist and Her Multiple Consciousness

As indicated above, the *Memesa* trilogy can be read as a feminist or queer artist's novel depicting the development of the Romani woman Memesa from her childhood until her forties. As a child, Memesa is inspired by strong female role models in the Romani community, be they the "resisting women" within the community, who put up with many hardships, but never surrender (as Memesa's mother), or the women who resist their "destiny" by leaving the community. A special case is Memesa's relative Zaida, who lives her own life in the capital Helsinki. She is a singer, but her talent is manifold; she is very skillful in "using" men for

her purposes and getting what she wants. Memesa's role is completely different. After escaping from her home as a teenager, she discovers the power of art, and succeeds in studying it at an art school. Art as creative self-expression in music, singing, dancing, and visual art becomes more and more important in her life. She manages to enter a school of applied arts to study traditional Romani handicrafts, but also design, history of art, ceramics, and music. She faces prejudice from the majority society, but also very much from within the Romani community. In this way, Lumberg's writing enters in dialogue with the texts of Romani women writers who "demonstrate that the unrelenting conflict with the non-Roma is not the only problematic issue affecting the life of the Romani people [...]; an even deeper conflict lies at the heart of Romani society, a conflict that, despite being silenced through the forceful imposition of male authority, remains unresolved" (Toninato 2014, 111). In Lumberg's case, the multiple consciousness is truly manifold, given her concern for social justice and for the freedom of expression of one's sexuality.

Memesa is gifted in various forms of art. When she performs "Gypsy songs"⁸ with a band in a cultural centre, she is enthusiastically applauded by the non-Romani members of the audience. The organizers from the cultural centre comes to congratulate her, but "an old and fat Gypsy man" from the audience begins to shout: "Sie etosa! Tollasissa vaatteissa näyttäyvyt ja rietastelet mustalaisten eessä! Kehtaatki tulla häpeisemmää meijät!" (M 481)⁹

⁸ The issue of using the word "Gypsy" is, of course, very difficult, sensitive and complex, especially when the author of the text comes from outside the Roma community. I am aware of the complexities and ethical issues connected with the issue of naming (see Parente-Čapková 2011; Kauranen/Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne 2021, 249). Jan Červenka (2015) has shown that the words that more or less correspond to the English "Gypsy" cannot be always translated like that. However, the most adequate translation of the Finnish word "mustalainen", which Lumberg uses in her texts and which is a Gadje word for the Roma (meaning "the black one"), does seem to be "Gypsy". Nowadays, it is unthinkable to use "mustalainen" as a neutral word. I am using, of course, Roma/Romani when speaking about the community Kiba Lumberg comes from, and "Gypsy" when quoting Lumberg's text or referring to it.

⁹ "You are disgusting! To show off in such clothes and behaving lecherously in front of Gypsies! You have the guts to dishonour us like this!" M = Memesa trilogy.

Memesa shouts back, and the man keeps insulting her, because “her tits shine through” her clothes which are “too thin”; she should be, “at least”, ashamed (M 482).¹⁰ The demand that a woman should be ashamed for the very fact of her physical existence first infuriates Memesa, but eventually she answers laughing: “Eihän näitä tissejä voi taskuunkaan laittaa . . .” (M 482).¹¹ The man is confused, since he is obviously not used to Romani women talking back and being sarcastic, and asks: “Mikset sie oo niiku muutkii mustalaistytöt?” Memesa answers: “Kun mina halua olla oma itteni. En kenenkään käskettävä.” (M 482)¹² After that, she claims to understand why she is “like a red rag” to the Roma—especially to Romani women:

He pukevat yllensä vängin puvun ja tyytyvät kohtaloonsa. Minä muistutan heitä vapaudesta. Uhmaan lauman lakeja enkä häpeä fyysisyyttäni. Se satuttaa ja raivostuttaa katkeria naisia, eivätkä he voi katsoa minua. Heidän on pakko marssia salista ulos. Mustalaismiesten silmissä taas olen lavalla laulava portto. (M 483)¹³

Memesa does not wish to be associated with the Roma culture; she wants to “find her own star” (M 483), and she is relieved when the “Gypsy course”—the specific course devoted to making or studying “Gypsy art”—in the art school is over, and she can go on with “regular” courses. She finds her closest friends in the Helsinki artistic community. She has problems with breaking through as a visual artist, but eventually, she finds a gallery owner (a member of Finland’s Swedish community¹⁴) who likes her art, and she begins to hold her own exhibitions. They are reviewed also by members of the Romani community:

¹⁰ “On niin ohkaset vaatteetkii et tissitkii paistaa läpi! Häpiäisit edes!”

¹¹ “I can’t put my tits in my pocket . . .”

¹² “Why aren’t you as other Gypsy girls?’—‘Because I want to be myself. Not to be commanded by anyone.’”

¹³ “They wear that prisoner’s dress and acquiesce to their destiny. I remind them of freedom. I defy the herd laws and I am not ashamed of my corporality. All that hurts the embittered women and makes them furious, and they are not able to watch me [on the stage]. They have to march away from the [concert] hall. In the eyes of the Gypsy men, I am a whore, singing on the stage.”

¹⁴ The Swedish-speaking community, called the Finland-Swedes, has been a minority in Finland since the turn of the 20th century. It belongs among Finland’s “historical minorities” just as the Romani community does. Although the custom to view the Finland-Swedes as rich descendants of the former ruling class

Samaa jaaritusta näiltä Helsingin niin fiksuilta, omilla aivoillaan ajattelevilta mustalaisilta, jotka ovat perustaneet kulttuuriyhdistyksiä uskonnon ja kommunistisen aatteen alle. Loukkaan heidän tapojaan ja mustalaiskulttuurin sääntöjä vähäpukeisilla ihmishahmoilani ja omalla pukeutumiseläni. Pukeudun kuin kuka tahansa valtaväestön edustaja. (M 496)¹⁵

In spite of her defiance, Memesa admits that it took a long time before she got—at least partly—rid of a constant fear of a possible confrontation with the Roma on the streets of the capital. The same theme of the protagonist defying the Romani community is explored in Kiba Lumberg’s comic works, namely in the section “Kokaro—Yksinäinen” [Kokaro—The Lonely One] of the *G!psy Com!x!* (Lumberg 2010). Here, we have a character named Tekla, “an androgynous person dressed in a black leather jacker, white T-shirt, baggy sweatpants and dark sunglasses” (Kauranen/Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne 2020, 254), evoking portrayals of bohemian artist figures. In the comics, she is shown on a tram and then outside it, being approached by a group of Roma. They comment critically on her clothing and accuse her of dishonouring and shaming the whole tribe. After the verbal exchange, they attack her physically, and the scene ends with Tekla half lying, half sitting on the ground, being photographed by a foreign tourist (Lumberg 2010, 22).

Similarly, Memesa also emphasises the irresolvable nature of her conflict with the Romani community:

Olen aina pitänyt itseäni ihmisenä, en minkään rodun edustajana, mutta kaaleille rotu ja merkit tummaan heimoon kuulumisesta ovat tärkeitä. Minua ne asiat eivät kiinnosta. Tärkeintä on ihmisyyys ja elämä, jota voi elää vapaasti. (M 486)¹⁶

has been many times denounced as stereotypical and misleading, the Finland-Swedish community has, for historical reasons (Finland belonging to the Swedish realm from the mid-12th century until the beginning of the 19th century), enjoyed a very different status than the Romani community.

¹⁵ “The same rambling from these Helsinki Gypsies, so smart, thinking with their own brains, Gypsies who have founded cultural associations in the name of religion or communism. I offend their habits and laws of the Gypsy culture with my half naked figures and by my own way of dressing. I dress like any other member of the majority society.”

¹⁶ “I have always considered myself a human being, not a representative of a race/ethnicity, but to the Kale, the race and the signs of belonging to the dark tribe are important. I am not interested in these things. The most important thing is humanity and life, which can be lived freely.”

Memesa also follows other Romani artists' stories—she reads in a newspaper that a Romani pop singer Antti Svarts has again “kicked the hornet's nest” and has received death threats from the other Kale. He needs to have body guards to accompany him in public places. Memesa thinks, “Outoa kun kukaan, virkavalta tai poliitikot, eivät ota kantaa asiaan. Mieshän on kohta henkisesti ihan loppu.” (M 520)¹⁷ She is interviewed about her experience with death threats and mentions in particular a Romani activist with an official position and the people around her:

Kyllähän niitä on tullut. Etenkin tietyt romanijärjestöt ovat sitä mieltä, että pilaan mustalaisten maineen ja lisään rasismia. Taustalla on muiden vanhoillisten kaaleiden lisäksi vaikuttanut eräs virkaapitävä romaniaktivisti. Yksittäisiä uhkauksia, puhelinsoittoja. [...] mustalainen sana ei edes saisi käyttää, vaan pitäisi puhua romaneista. Suurin osa heistä on uskavaisia tai muuten vain jäänyt 1500-luvulle. He haluavat edelleen pitää yllä vanhoja tapoja ja kulttuuria, ja kieltävät yhteisön sisäiset ongelmat. Yhteisön sisällä kaikkien pitäisi olla samaa mieltä ja pukeutua tiukkojen normien mukaisesti, ja jos et noudata sääntöjä, olet vainottu. (M 523).¹⁸

Memesa says that she is aware of risking her life when talking like this. She invites her sister, who, together with her young daughter, have also been threatened by Romani men. Memesa wishes the majority society politicians would intervene, expressing her trust in their possibilities to change things for the better. When criticizing the conservative Roma, she brings up the way her work has been appreciated by the majority community: “Olen tehnyt töitä veitsi kurkulla vaikka valtaväestöltä olen saanut positiivista palautetta, koska olen tuonut taidekenttään toisenlais-

¹⁷ “Strange that nobody, official authorities or politicians, takes a stance on the issue. The man is going to have a burnout soon.”

¹⁸ “Yes, there have been [the death threats]. Especially certain Romani organizations think that I am spoiling the reputation of the Gypsies and provoke more racism. In the background, apart from other conservative Kale, there has been an influential Romani activist. Some threats, phone calls. [...] in fact, the word Gypsy should not be even used, one should speak about the Roma. Most of them [the conservatives from the Romani organizations] are religious or stuck in some other ways in the 16th century. They would like to keep up old customs and culture, and they deny the problems inside the community. All community members should share the same opinions and dress according to strict norms, and if you don't comply with the rules, they harass you.”

ta tekotapaa ja ajattelua.” (M 523)¹⁹ She criticizes all conservative cultures and the politicians who evade these issues: “Ihmisoikeudet koskevat kaikkia kansalaisia ja kansanryhmiä.” (M 523).²⁰

Indeed, Memesa gets more threats, reports offences to the police, and tries to get help from lawyers. However, she is skeptical about her options: “Mustalaisaktiivinaisella on valtion tukema organisaatio takanaan, kun taas minä keikun kuin pieni vene valtavankokoisen laivan peräaal-loissa, jossa potkurit pyrkivät murskaamaan kaiken kohdalle sattuvan.” (M 538)²¹ Memesa is attacked on the internet, she suffers from insomnia and nightmares, and lives in constant fear, seeing strange men following and watching her. Again, art functions as refuge and consolation.

One of the turning points of the *Samettiyö* is when Memesa gets an invitation to join a group of Hungarian artists in a project aimed at their participation in the Venice Biennale. What Memesa and the Hungarian artists have in common is that they do not live a “Gypsy life”, but that they “live doing art” (M 487).²² A large part of the last section of the book, “Palazzo Pisani”, is dedicated to the preparations of Memesa’s participation in the Venice Biennale and the event itself. Memesa takes part in the Biennale by exhibiting her work, a black Kale skirt pierced by knives.²³ “Minä edustan Suomea”,²⁴ Memesa says in the chapter depicting the opening. She meets more artists, curators and organizers, one of

¹⁹ “I have been working with a knife on my throat, even though I have received positive feedback from the majority community, since I have brought a different way of doing [art] and a different way of thinking.”

²⁰ “Human rights concern all citizens and all national and ethnic groups.”

²¹ “The Romani female activist has got behind her an organization supported by the [Finnish] state, while I am floating here like a small boat in the wake of an enormous ship, where the propellers try to crush anything that gets in their way.”

²² “[—] ettemme elä mustalaiselämää, vaan elämme taidetta tehden.”

²³ The art work described in the novel closely resembles Lumberg’s work *Musta perhonen* (Black Butterfly), which she exhibited in the Venice Biennale in 2007 (see e.g. <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/eng/2007/tour/roma/img-06.htm>). The installation, composed of prison bars, through which the spectator views it, has been interpreted as criticism of the Finnish Roma forcing young girls to wear the traditional Romani dress and, more generally, to comply with the customs, habits, and unwritten rules of the community.

²⁴ “I represent Finland.”

them being the Finnish Helena-Maria, a charming and successful woman from the majority population. However, Memesa's colleague Minna is very critical about Helena-Maria, indicating repeatedly that Helena-Maria might be an impostor (M 512, 555–556). Memesa seems to be suspicious as well, but she is too infatuated with the beautiful woman. “Niin, kyllähän taiteen ympärillä tietysti pyörii kaikenlaisia ihmisiä, epämääräisiäkin, sanon ja jatkan: ‘Muttei kaikki ole sellaisia.’”²⁵ (M 512), Memesa concludes.

Eventually, Minna is proven right in her skepticism towards Helena-Maria. Memesa falls madly in love with this “Scandinavian blonde” who, at times, seems to reciprocate her feelings, especially when association with Memesa and her art seems to pay off. Memesa suffers, feeling inadequate, ugly, poor, and—“... ja nainenkin vielä...” (M 555),²⁶ who cannot, unlike many male artists, offer money and security. Indeed, Helena-Maria seems to use any opportunity to advance her career by means of socializing (and, as Memesa suspects, not only socializing) with men. When, in a bar, Memesa talks about how “... kuinka heteromaailmankuva on pilannut ihmiskunnan kehityksen ja polkee ihmisoikeuksia ympäri maailmaa. Kuinka heteromiehet raiskaavat ja vahingoittavat pieniä lapsia.” (M 584),²⁷ Helena-Maria refuses to translate Memesa's words from its original Finnish into English, so that a man they meet there would understand. The conversation takes place in English, which Memesa does not speak and is thus dependent on Helena-Maria translating for her. However, Helena-Maria seems only interested in impressing and/or using the man, showing no interest in Memesa's scathing criticism of heterosexual matrix and male violence.

The same motifs—a “dark Romani artist's” infatuation with a beautiful blond woman—appear in Lumberg's second comic book, *Hullun taiteilijan päiväkirja* (2010) (*The Diary of a Mad Artist*, 2011). Here, the protagon-

²⁵ “There are all sorts of people orbiting around art, you bet, including scrappy ones. [...] But not all of them are the same.”

²⁶ “on the top of it, a woman.”

²⁷ “the heterosexual worldview has ruined the development of mankind and how it tramples human rights around the world”, “[h]ow heterosexual men rape and harm small children.”

onist's²⁸ preoccupation with her looks and her complaints about being “too fat” and “ugly” balance between a caricature of a woman (artist) “putting too much thought into her looks and appearance” (Kauranen/Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne 2021, 262) and injecting a considerable portion of self-irony into the text (Kauranen/Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne 2021, 262). These portrayals can be interpreted as combining a more general critical look at the society, which is able to view women, including women artists, only through their body image, and genuine feelings of distress and anxiety caused by the unrequited love.

3. Curators, Promoters, People “orbiting around art,” and “dissidents”

The artist-protagonist in Lumberg's works complains about various difficulties she has to struggle with, from bureaucracy to promotion, which impedes her from concentrating on the art itself: “There is no way in hell I'm going to mess with all this rigamarole! Back and forth about the works for the exhibit, data, printing, cost of insurance, command of English—which I don't have—marketing the art abroad, etc. What a poor artist needs is a secretary.” (Lumberg 2011a, 44). However, she never has any, and feels to be a prey to people who “orbit around art” (cf. M 512) and the lives of artists and their work. The character of Helena-Maria in *Samettiyö* represents a caricature of such a person in the figure of an art curator, who is not an artist herself. Memesa loves making her art and improving and perfecting her skills, insisting on not following the fashionable trends (M 525). She is very critical of the recent development in the sphere of arts:

Taiteestakin on tullut liukuhihnatavara. Kilpailu on kovaa [...]. Nuoremmat perustavat työryhmiä, joissa kuraattorit ja nuoret taiteilijat tekevät yhteisprojekteja [...]. Julkisuu-
dessa käydään aikamoista kujanjuoksua siitä, kenestä tulee tunnettu ja kuka jää jalkoihin.
[...]. Eriarvoisuus näkyy tälläkin alalla. Varakkaan taustan omaavat etenevät urallaan
helpommin. Nousevana kaupallisena taiteen ammattikuntana ovat kuraattorit, joille toi-
set antavat näyttelyiden sisällön ja teeman suunniteltaviksi. Minä olen syrjässä tuosta
kaikesta. Me, jotka kuljemme omaa polkuamme, suunnittelemme teemat ja sisällöt pää-

²⁸ In our article from 2021 (Kauranen, Parente-Čapková & Vuorinne 2021), we decided to differentiate between the protagonist of the *Hullun taiteilijan päiväkirja* and the real author by calling the former Kiba, and the latter Kiba Lumberg.

sääntöisesti itse, mutta ei aina. Hyvä kuraattori on taiteilijalle kuin muusa, joka antaa taiteilijan tuoda ja keskittyä työhönsä. (M 525–526)²⁹

The tone, which resembles that of a pamphlet, shows Memesa engaging in the contemporary debates on curators and various art promoters who, often together with some artists, dominate the art world. As has been often brought up, the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium have been the “golden age” of curators, agents, and promoters, mainly in visual arts, but also in other forms of art, including literature (see e.g. Perloff 2010; Kuusela 2015; Gelmi/Lappalainen 2015³⁰). The trend of questioning the artist's central role in the production of art (O'Neill 2012, 9) has led to some curators becoming international stars (O'Neill 2012, 4–5). The phenomenon has also been visible and debated in Finland, especially after the 2007 Lyon Biennale with the 50 curators involved. The trend continued, and in the 2013 Venice Biennale, there were two artists and three curators representing Finland (Kuusela 2015, 35).

In *Samettiyö*, curators and other art promoters are seen in a critical light, but they are not vilified if they understand that they have to act like “an artist's muse”, i.e., not weakening the role of the artist. Their treatment is much more polarized in Lumberg's last novel, *IrtiottoXXX*. The novel takes place in Italy, but the lesbian “partly Romani” artist Memesa is no longer the first-person narrator, but a narratee who does not have her own voice (cf. Kauranen/Parente-Čapková/Vuorinne 2021, 266). However, with the help of the “Memesa narrative” embedded in the discussion on artists' rights and their position in society in general, Lumberg continues to discuss the role of the artist in the context of what she sees as the allegedly liberal and generous Finnish cultural institutions.

²⁹ “Art has become a commodity, too. Competition is tough [...]. The younger ones are finding working groups in which curators and young artists do projects together [...]. In public, they are throwing down the gauntlet to determine who will become famous and who will be trampled underfoot. [...] Inequality exists in this field as well. Those from a rich background advance quicker. A new commercial art profession are curators; some people commission them to plan exhibition substance and themes. I am outside all these practices. Those of us who walk our own path plan themes and content mostly ourselves, but not always. A good curator is like an artist's muse, who lets the artist create and concentrate on her work.”

³⁰ In 2015, a whole issue of the Finnish art history journal *TaHiTi* was dedicated to the issue of curating and mediating art.

Lumberg also discusses the position of journalists and the situation in the media. The protagonist (and the narrator of most sections of the book) is Memesa's close friend, a former journalist Nina, a member of the majority Finnish-speaking population, although she emphasizes having "Karelian blood".³¹ Nina lost her job after having discussed "unpleasant issues" in her articles. She is divorced and recovering from breast cancer that had resulted in a double mastectomy. She takes a refuge in a remote mountain village Del Grappa³² in Italy.

Nina calls herself a "toisinajattelija" (I 11³³) who walks her own paths, just as Memesa did in *Samettiyö*. As with her other fictional works, Lumberg brings up the same issues when interviewed about the novel, emphasizing that she is serious about "bold" journalists being silenced: "Mediasta on tullut liian yksiääninen. Jos olet iäkäs nainen, tinkimätön toimittaja ja totuuden asialla, joudut kevyesti sivuun."³⁴ (Lassfolk-Feodoroff 2018) In the same interview, Lumberg also mentioned the issue of having received death threats as well as experiencing censorship: "Tarvitsemme moniäänisyyttä ja taitavaa journalismia, mutta saamme tiukasti rajattua 'totuutta'" (Lassfolk-Feodoroff 2018).³⁵

One of the principal motifs in the novel is an escape from Finland. Memesa is also characterised as a dissident. While in *Samettiyö*, Memesa

³¹ Karelia is a region in Eastern Finland, situated around Finnish-Russian border. Part of Finnish Karelia was annexed to the Soviet Union as a result of World War II. Karelian identity, formed also by Karelian dialects, has been traditionally strong in Finland. Karelia had a relatively dense Roma population. After the War, people from the ceded territories were evacuated to Finland; the evacuees from these territories included almost two thirds of the Finnish Roma (see e.g. Lähteemäki-Smith 2011, 4; Pulma 2012, 154). Nina's Karelian identity is interesting also because Lumberg herself comes from Lappeenranta in South Karelia.

³² The village seems to be fictional. Nina mentions once Cortina, which could be an allusion to Cortina d'Ampezzo, a tourist centre in Veneto. In the same region, there is also a place called Bassano del Grappa, but the village in the novel is depicted as a much smaller place, situated in the mountains.

³³ "dissident" (I = *Irtiotto XXX*).

³⁴ "The media has become too monological nowadays. If you are an aging woman, an uncompromising journalist, and you pursue the truth, you are likely to be ignored".

³⁵ "We need multiple voices and skillful journalism, but what we get is a tightly limited 'truth'".

is happy to represent Finland abroad; in *IrtiottoXXX* the reader learns at the beginning of the novel that she had left the country for Sweden, together with her partner: “Hän sai ‘toisinajattelijan’ statuksella kulttuuripakolaisturvapaikan, kun oli Suomessa toisinajattelijana niin ajettu nurkkaan, että ei saanut enää teoksiaan mistään suunnasta esille.” (I 23).³⁶ Nina, who had experienced discrimination as a journalist, remembers Memesa saying that after she turned 59, she did not get any grants and subsidies any more:

Pyrittiin elävältä hautaamaan ihminen, joka on taiteessa rohkea ja luova. Joka nousi vääristyneitä rakenteita vastaan ja sanoi, että Suomen taide- ja kulttuuriympyrät ovat rajoittuneita ja syrjiviä. Naiset kohtaavat eri organisaatioissa ikärasismia, jopa naiset syrjivät toisia naisia. Ystäväni sai tuntea syrjinnän joka suunnassa. Memesa ei ole hetero, ei hyväksy tapakulttuurien säädöksiä eikä myöskään noudata niitä. Ystäväni on suorasanainen eikä kumarrata niitä tahoja eikä kulttuuripoliittisia henkilöitä, jotka ovat saaneet virkoja taiteilijoiden selkänahkaa repimällä. Ymmärrän hyvin, että ystäväni lähti pois Suomesta. En nyt sanoisi kuitenkaan, ettei Ruotsissakin olisi samoja ongelmia. (I 48)³⁷

Memesa's story, as narrated by Nina, relates to some events depicted in *Samettiyö* and, again, evokes some elements from Lumberg's life. Nina speaks about plots and conspiracies against Memesa, and about the conservative Roma, especially one of them, “[...] vanhoillisten helluntaioromanien keulakuva ja mekkoromani, ‘romanien ihmisoikeusaktivisti’, jota ‘suvaitsevat’ politiikan huipulla olevat [...]” (I 30)³⁸. According to

³⁶ “Thanks to her ‘dissident status’, she was granted cultural asylum, since she was, as a dissident, so ostracised that she could not exhibit her works anywhere.”

³⁷ “They tried to bury alive a person who is bold and creative in her art. Who defied the perverted structures and claimed that Finland’s art and cultural circles are limited and discriminative. Women face agism in different organizations, even from other women. My friend [= Memesa] was discriminated in all circumstances. Memesa is not heterosexual, she neither approves of the rules of customary beliefs nor does she comply with them. My friend is very direct, and she does not bow to those circumstances or to cultural and political persons who have achieved their posts by exploiting artists. I understand well why my friend left Finland. However, I would not say that the same problems do not exist in Sweden.”

³⁸ “a spearhead of the conservative Roma from the Finnish Pentecostal Movement, one wearing the Romani costume, ‘the Romani human rights activist,’ ‘tolerated’ by the powerful politicians”. The Finnish Pentecostal Movement is one of the principal revivalist religious movements in Finland. The Roma began to convert

Nina, if a Romani person, let alone artist, does not comply with the customs of their culture, they are put on a blacklist.

Nina knows that “Taiteilijat eivät saa oikeastaan mitään, jos ei ole apurahaa tai teosten myynnistä saatuja tuloja.” (I 31).³⁹ The financial issues *vis à vis* art and its creation are more in focus in *IrtiottoXXX* than in *Samettiyö*, and they are often discussed together with the activities of curators and other promoters. Nina, obviously influenced by Memesa’s views, sees them mostly in a critical light: “Erilaisia toimitsijoita, mielesäni ajattelen. Heille taiteilijat ovat kuin karjaa, jota lajitellaan täällä eri karsinoihin, ja jokaisesta päästä saavat rahaa.” (I 31)⁴⁰ The curators and promoters orbiting around art are greedy, they live by the artists’ work, and they demand to be “[...] heitä pitää arvostaa ja heidän pitää aina olla näkyvillä enemmän kuin taiteilijoiden.”⁴¹ (I 33). Throughout the book, Nina is confronted by a Finnish woman Sanna, who also knew Memesa. Sanna runs an artists’ residence in the Del Grappa village and, eventually, turns out to be another “greedy art curator and promoter”, crafty and calculating. She resents Memesa, who had visited the village earlier and painted a large mural admired by the locals. Sanna racializes Memesa as a “[...] hurjasta mustalaistaiteilijasta [...]” (I 131),⁴² but, at the same time, she claims that she does not want other Finnish people to move and live permanently in Del Grappa. Gradually, the reader gets to know that Sanna had been jealous of Memesa, had tried to exploit her, and had ousted her out of Del Grappa; as the story evolves, Sanna becomes more and more hostile and aggressive. The main contradiction does not appear to be Memesa’s Romani identity, of which Memesa herself is critical, but her being a (Finnish) artist, who could “spoil” Sanna’s exclusive position in the Italian village.

to Pentecostalism in the 1960s and have formed a group within the movement. See e.g. Roman 2015.

³⁹ “[a]rtists don’t really get any money, if they don’t have grants or income from the sales.”

⁴⁰ “All kinds of agents, I think. They see artists as cattle, which is to be sorted in various pens, and they get money for each head.”

⁴¹ “more respected and more visible than the artists.”

⁴² “fierce Gypsy artist.”

4. From the Critique of Organized Exploitation to Feminist Utopia in a Mystical Paradise

Nina appears to be Memesa's most loyal and devoted friend, talking about her in a pronouncedly positive way and always taking her side. She tends to identify with Memesa. Since Memesa did not allegedly have the "time and possibility" to come back to Del Grappa, Nina acts as "her eyes and ears", pondering what Memesa experienced and felt when she visited the village herself (I 60). Most of all, as narrator, Nina acts as a kind of "spokeswoman" for Memesa. Only in one chapter, in the middle of the book, the focalization and even narration shift to Sanna, who is contemplating the "strangeness" of all artists and writers, whom she does not understand; the focalization and narration shift there and back.

Nina is happy to be far from Finland, though at times, she sticks to her Finnishness: "Olen suomalainen juuri niin kuin pitääkin." (I 119).⁴³ She likes the Italian cordial way of accepting foreigners, but she is very critical of the Italian male chauvinism as well as of the European Union, although exclusively in relation to Finland. She claims that "[...] Euroopan unioni on Suomelle kuin hirttoköysi." (I 106),⁴⁴ since the Euro stole jobs from Finland. Further on in the novel, there are critical voices of acquaintances telling Nina that Finland is not what it used to be: "national property" has been sold to foreign companies, and the majority population can't get work because the jobs go to immigrants (I 162).

As a journalist, Nina realized that "[...] ei haluta tutkivaa journalismia [...]." Journalists are not supposed to write "[...] mitä tapahtuu tai ketkä päättävät mutta eivät kuitenkaan ota vastuuta." (I 106)⁴⁵ This is juxtaposed with Nina's memories of Memesa's complaints that the artists have been enslaved and exploited to be "[...] politiikan, valtion ja eri kunnallisten ja yksittäisten organisaatioiden riistojuhdiksi."⁴⁶ (I 129).

Thanks to her mural and her pleasant behavior, Memesa is remembered fondly by the inhabitants of Del Grappa. Nina gets acquainted

⁴³ "I am Finnish just the way I should be."

⁴⁴ "the EU is Finland's noose."

⁴⁵ "nobody wants investigative journalism [...]." "about what is really happening or those who are in charge, but unwilling to accept their responsibility."

⁴⁶ "beasts of burden for the politics, the state, and various civic and private organizations."

with the villager Ilario and his friends, who speak about Memesa with affection and would like to have her permanently living in Del Grappa. Nina also meets the municipal manager, who is very friendly and open to new ideas. She begins planning to buy an abandoned house, which she eventually does, with the intention to reconstruct it and convert it into a home for artists. She also gets involved in planning to convert the upper part of the village, described as frightening in the first half of the novel, into similar places for all “[...] jotka haluavat elää täällä [...]”, “[...] jotka haluavat muutosta elämäänsä ja haluavat lähteä pois maasta, jota eivät enää koe omakseen, voisivat löytää täältä uuden alun.”⁴⁷ (I 203) The villagers support her efforts to revive and revitalize the village and the whole region.

Eventually, the house is bought and reconstructed. Memesa, who is disappointed by her life in Sweden, where the situation is similar to Finland, has decided to build her new network in Estonia and Italy. She returns to Del Grappa with her assistant and partner, a blond beauty called Katri, and another “refugee” from Finland, the artist Eva. Together with Nina, they celebrate the renovated house and the beginning of their new life.

Dreams, visions, and inexplicable, almost mystical phenomena play an important role in the story. Certain elements of magical realism were present already in Lumberg’s earlier novels (Lappalainen 2012; Parente-Čapková 2018b), but here in Lumberg’s last novel they occupy much more space. At the very end of *IrtiottoXXX*, a mysterious dark woman from Nina’s dreams comes to the housewarming party and gives Nina a bouquet of flowers and a box with a ring full of small rubies. This dark woman leaves immediately afterwards, but the feast goes on. Everybody is “[...] paikassa, jossa ihmiset ovat kuin samaa perhettä.” Nina concludes: “Elän nyt ja kuolen sitten kun on kuoltava. Tämä on minun paikkani, jossa saan olla poissa maailman kuohuista ja silti tietää, mitä tapahtuu.” (I 231)⁴⁸ These words echo a line uttered by the “Kiba” character from the *Diary of the Mad Artist*: “The only way is to do creative work

⁴⁷ “people who want to live here”; “who want change, who want to leave a country they don’t feel is their own, they could find a new beginning here.”

⁴⁸ “grateful to live in a place where people are like the same family.” “I live now, and I will die when my time comes. This is my place, where I can be far from the world’s fury and still know what is going on.”

and concentrate on that, and do my best at what I can, what I am able to do." (Lumberg 2011a, 87).

5. Conclusion

Lumberg's last novel develops themes and motifs present in her earlier works. *Samettiyö*, the last part of *Memesa trilogy*, concludes, however, with an enigmatic scene in which Memesa is hit and paralyzed with something that appears as a black eclipse, but she still longs for the light that she had found in art. In contrast, the ending of *IrtiottoXXX* is pronouncedly idyllic and utopian, a happy end as in a fairy tale. The art promotor and curator Sanna leaves the place; although she clearly plays the role of the "serpent in paradise", she is also portrayed as a victim of agism and male chauvinism. The protagonist Nina feels mostly sorry for her (I 170). The issue of art curators and promoters as "parasites" is highlighted and sharpened in comparison to Lumberg's earlier works, but, at the same time, partly softened by the feeling of compassion with the curator character and by means of the happy ending.

The relationship to the Romani identity portrayed in Lumberg's last novel seems consistent with the earlier works, although also partly subdued. There are mentions of racism from the majority population towards Memesa, but the main problem appears to be the pressure from the conservative part of the Romani community and from the cultural and art institutions in Finland. Memesa's "courage" and her "dissident" identity are highlighted in relation to all instances that feel limiting and restricting. The fact that there is a non-Romani narrator in the book who, nevertheless, partly functions as Memesa's voice, suggests that the criticism takes place on various levels.

The relationship to Finland and Finnishness in Lumberg's last novel appears ambivalent in a most intriguing way. In Nina's and, indirectly, Memesa's thoughts and lines, there is the basic trust in the Finnish authorities and establishment; both Nina and Memesa identify with Finland and Finnishness. This is in tune with Lumberg's way of empha-

sizing her belonging to Finland and Northern Europe,⁴⁹ although Finnish society is a target of severe criticism. While in the trilogy, Memesa accuses the representatives of the Finnish welfare state of racism, indifference, cruelty, and cynism (Parente-Čapková 2018b), in *IrtiottoXXX*, there is harsh criticism of the way things in Finland “have developed” lately. Culturally, it appears desirable that Finland is viewed and views itself as a part of Europe. Interestingly, Lumberg herself comments on this issue in the above-quoted interview: “Oikeastaan tarina on myös oodi Euroopalle ja rakkaudentunnustus Suomelle. Isoja asioita pienessä kirjassa.”⁵⁰ (Lassfolk-Feodoroff 2018) However, the European Union as an institution, and especially its immigration politics are viewed negatively. The voices in the book criticizing the integration of immigrants into the Finnish society are not questioned at all, but rather presented as “dissident”. The point of view of the immigrants to Finland is not present in the text, not even reproduced; at the same time, Nina, Memesa, and others are warmly welcomed into the Italian village.

All the women in the book seem to identify fully with the ideas and practices of gender equality, typical of the Nordic society. From the point of view of gender, the main point of criticism is the position of aging women, be they artists, curators, journalists, or women in general. The way the “men’s world” and institutions discriminate against aging women is repeatedly brought up and emphasized also by the author herself in interviews given after the publication of the book. The identity of an aging woman is analysed from various viewpoints—from her position in the labour market and cultural institutions to her very corporal existence and health issues—a continuation of the theme Lumberg had explored mostly in her *Diary of the Mad Artist* (cf. Kauranen/Parente-

⁴⁹ Lumberg has repeatedly brought up this issue also when being interviewed: “I have Gypsy blood, but I consider myself Scandinavian, European and a world citizen” (“Minussa on mustalaisverta, mutta pidän itseäni kyllä skandinaavina, eurooppalaisena ja maailmankansalaisena”) (Immonen 2016).

“Even if I have a multinational background, I am happy I was born in Finland and was given the Scandinavian values.” (“Vaikka taustaltani olen monikansallinen, olen iloinen, että olen syntynyt Suomessa ja saanut skandinaavisen arvo-maailman.”) (Yliherne 2019).

⁵⁰ “As a matter of fact, the story is an ode to Europe and a declaration of love for Finland. Big issues in a small book.”

Čapková/Vuorinne 2020).⁵¹ According to the author's own comments, men are not to blame for women "pumping plastic tits into their bodies"; it is the patriarchal structures that are to blame (Lassfolk-Feodoroff 2018). Art, solidarity, and shared, common humanity offer the ultimate hope, refuge, and consolation, resulting in a kind of a utopian dream, appearing to offer a solution also to the "longing to belong": "Yhteinen ilo kaikuu ylös vuorille korkeuksiin kuin kiittäen." (I 231)⁵²

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⁵¹ In the *Diary of the Mad Artist*, Kiba claims that there is "some old boys' club that decides [who gets apartments and studio spaces in an artists' space], based on who knows who" (Lumberg 2011a, 73).

⁵² "The shared joy echoes up to the mountains, till the heights, as a kind of thanks."

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