

Ewelina Bator*

Uniwersytet Warszawski

Warsaw, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9808-5564>

THE MEMORY OF A LITERARY TEXT – INTERTEXTUAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVEL *MEMORY OF WATER* BY EMMI ITÄRANTA

Abstract

The history of literature has already recorded cases of authors who did not write in their native language. Nowadays, when English is the main lingua franca of our globe, we can expect an increasing number of authors from other linguistic circles, writing in the language. An interesting case is Emmi Itäranta and her *Memory of Water*. The author created her novel simultaneously in both Finnish and English. What impact does such mixing of corpora of literature – in reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality – have on the shape of a literary work? In my paper, I decided to examine what intertextual elements, typical of Finnish literature, literary history and cultural nuances are contained in the English version of the novel.

Key words: literature in English, non-native, Finnish literature, Finnish culture, intertextuality

1. Introduction

The history of literature already includes cases of authors who did not write in their native language. In the context of English literature, one

* ebator@uw.edu.pl

notable example is Joseph Conrad. Today, with English serving as the world's primary *lingua franca*, we can expect a growing number of authors from diverse linguistic backgrounds to write in English. An intriguing case in point is Emmi Itäranta and her novel, *Memory of Water*, also known as *Teemestarin kirja* in Finnish.

In this paper, I will analyse several cultural intertextual elements present in the text, which may be interpreted differently depending on the reader's cultural background, particularly a Finnish one. First, I will provide a brief description of the novel and its author, followed by an introduction to the research tools employed in this analysis. In the subsequent analytical section, I will focus on cultural motifs that connect the novel to Finnish culture, including onomastic elements within the text.

2. The Author

Emmi Itäranta, a Finnish author born in 1976, is renowned for her contributions to speculative fiction and ecological issues, both in Finland and on the international stage. Her specialization lies in speculative literature and dystopian fiction. She also pursued creative writing studies at the University of Kent. Itäranta gained international recognition with her debut novel, *Teemestarin kirja*, published in 2012. Remarkably, this work was written concurrently in both Finnish and English, with the English version titled *Memory of Water*. (Gustafsson 2015) The novel is set in a future world where water is a scarce resource, exploring themes related to environmental sustainability and the power of memory. The narrator of the story embarks on a journey to become a new tea master in her village, protecting a closely guarded secret: a source of pure water hidden in a cave near the tea master's home, intricately connected to the village's water supply network.

It is essential to note that the author created her novel simultaneously in both English and Finnish. In this case, we are not discussing the translation of a book into English but rather an English-as-a-second-language speaker's endeavor to write a book in English, which was subsequently published in English, and a copy of it even found its place in The British Library (Gustafsson 2015). However, I am not attempting to introduce a brand-new definition of English literature (cf. Taine 1863), nor am I addressing whether Itäranta's book belongs to it. My paper's purpose is to identify

the qualities within the book that might be perceived differently by an individual familiar with the Finnish language and culture.

Emmi Itäranta, a native Finnish speaker born and raised in Finland, was surrounded by Finnish culture as she grew up. Nevertheless, she chose to write her book in English. What impact does such a blend of literary corpora have on the creation of a literary work, in reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality? What influence does Finnish cultural heritage and the vocabulary of the Fenno-Ugric language impart? This paper aims to explore the intertextual elements characteristic of Finnish literature, literary history, and cultural nuances within the English version of the novel *Memory of Water*.

3. On the Theory of Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a broad and multifaceted topic, and this article does not attempt to encompass all of its definitions (cf. Alfaro 1996: 268). For the sake of simplicity, I will rely on the concise definition of intertextuality offered by the Cambridge Dictionary:

intertextuality: the connections between different works of literature and art and the meanings that emerge from them.¹

Marko Juvan (2008), in his article titled "Towards a History of Intertextuality in Literary and Cultural Studies", approaches intertextuality as a cross-cultural influence. This perspective will be evident in the subsequent analysis in this paper. In a different publication, Rob Pope (2002) delineates three types of intertextuality: 1. Explicit intertextuality: This refers to the direct mention or quotation of another text. 2. Implied intertextuality: This occurs when an indirect reference to another text is made through similarities in genre or style. 3. Inferred intertextuality: This involves referencing texts that the reader or respondent to the text draws from, even if those texts did not exist when the original text was created. These distinctions help us better comprehend how texts interact with and influence one another in various ways. (cf. Van Zoonen 2017).

Intertextuality, formally theorized in the late 1960s during the shift from modernism to postmodernism, builds on earlier ideas suggesting

¹ *Intertextuality*, (27 July 2024) <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intertextuality>>.

that texts are mosaics of citations. Influential concepts include Bakhtin's dialogism (1981) and historical notions like *imitatio/aemulatio* from rhetoric and poetics, as well as the 18th-century concept of influence, which described inspiration as energy flowing from higher powers into human creativity. This notion evolved into a concern that external influences threatened originality, a key anxiety of the period valuing individual invention (cf. Cutchins 2017). Historicism and the comparative method, crucial to the 19th-century literary studies, emphasized the historical specificity and evolution of creativity, distinguishing original works from borrowed elements. This approach also fueled nationalistic cultural debates, asserting the unique value and originality of national literatures in the context of broader cultural exchanges (Juvan 2008: 2):

Theories of intertextuality reshaped the understanding of influence; it showed that supposedly primary sources are themselves but intertextual transformations dependent on cultural encyclopedia; it offered a refined terminology of forms and functions of foreign literatures' creative reception, while respecting specific linguistic and cultural spaces, traditions, and literary systems; it deconstructed the postulates of influence; for example, the concepts of author, cause and effect logic, and boundaries between texts; and it revealed the sociopolitical power of influence of hierarchy, colonialism, and hegemony as well as its negative and positive role in identity formation. For these reasons intertextuality in literary scholarship provoked the appearance of polycentric and pluralistic models of influence as discursive force and other inter literary relations. It made central the interactive, dialogic or bi level contacts between a literary text and a literary or nonliterary context whose national framings are no more self-evident. (Juvan 2008: 8)

The concept of influence represents external energy entering the author's mind, prompting different writing without the clear procedures of *imitatio*. Until the 18th century, borrowing was standard in artistry, but pre-romantic and romantic historical consciousness, along with copyright laws, shifted the focus to originality. Comparative literature highlighted the author's transnational influences as evidence of aesthetic power, becoming a criterion for canonization in "world literature." The concept of influence, accepted in literary history from the late 19th century, helped explain

relations between literature and other arts, emphasizing causal and value-laden authoring models. Critics like Kristeva (1980) and Barthes (1981: 31–47) challenged this model, seeing it as conservative and privileging established canons. They promoted intertextuality, which views texts as mutable, interconnected social discourses rather than fixed entities, thus shaping the theoretical shift away from traditional notions of influence (Juvan 2008: 2–3).

To sum up, intertextuality extends beyond the realm of written texts to encompass a wide array of cultural influences and artistic expressions that shape a writer's work. Writers are not only influenced by the literature they read but also by the visual arts, music, cinema, and broader cultural movements. The cultural milieu in which the author lives, including prevailing social norms, political events, and philosophical trends, also plays a significant role in shaping their work. This broader perspective of intertextuality recognizes that literary creation is a complex interplay of diverse cultural forces, reflecting the interconnectedness of all forms of artistic and intellectual expression (cf. Orr 1986: 811–823).

4. The Stereotype of Finns

To identify cultural and linguistic intertextuality, I will employ imagology based on the concepts proposed by Joep Leerssen (2007: 17–32). Imagology assumes that the literature of each cultural area, be it a nation or an ethnic group, possesses stereotyping properties that allow the group to form an image of itself, distinguishing it from other ethnic, linguistic, or national groups.

In a study found in the publication *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey* by Beller and Leerssen, Pasi Saukkonen (2007: 151) describes the image of Finns based on literary history and literary works. For the purposes of this analysis, I have extracted several examples of the stereotypical characteristics attributed to the Finnish people, which are reflected in Itäranta's novel.

Foreign observers have traditionally depicted Finland using exotic and somewhat romanticized language. From the ancient accounts of Tacitus, who characterized the Fennians as living in a „wonderful savageness,“ to contemporary writers, these texts have often portrayed the Finnish

people as traditional, pagan, irrational, and mystical, lacking sophisticated manners (Saukkonen 2007: 152).

In more recent times, romantic critics sought people living in harmony with nature, possessing access to ancient sources of wisdom. At the beginning of the 20th century, characteristics attributed to the Finnish people were often linked to a phlegmatic personality type, characterized by traits like perseverance, obedience, and stubbornness. The amalgamation of these attributes contributed to the quality recognized and cherished in the Finnish self-concept known as *sisu* (Saukkonen 2007: 152).

Carelia has been another significant area shaping the national image of Finland, primarily due to its role as the primary source of folk poetry collections. Oral poetry was viewed as a way to document the nation's history (Sommer 2009: 20). Moreover, the more traditional Carelian culture was seen as a representation of the past within the present, contributing to the perception of Finland as a modern nation as it embraced and preserved this historical heritage (Saukkonen 2007: 152).

In many literary works, we often encounter well-worn stereotypes associated with the Finnish people. These include ideas like excessive alcohol consumption and a strong-willed nature, particularly among men, as well as notions of blonde beauty and witchcraft in the case of women. These stories also frequently depict ritualistic events like embracing the darkness, engaging in sexual encounters under the midsummer night sun, enjoying a sauna, taking icy swims in lakes, and embarking on endless cross-country skiing adventures (Saukkonen 2007: 152).

Additionally, the imagery of the Finnish culture in literature includes themes related to the environment and space. The vast, untouched forests, the calm and remote lakes, and the extreme seasonal changes play important roles in shaping the Finnish character in literary stories. The harsh winters and the long summer days contribute to the image of the Finnish people as strong, self-reliant, and connected to the natural cycles. This image aligns with the values of *sisu* and perseverance (Saukkonen 2007: 153).

Moreover, the portrayal of Finnish history and mythology in literature enhances the cultural intertextuality. The Finnish epic, *Kalevala*, for example, has provided a rich source of themes and characters used in modern stories, reinforcing the mystical and heroic image of Finns. This epic is not only a cultural symbol but also a way to explore deeper aspects of Finnish identity, such as the connection to the land, the importance of community, and the enduring spirit of the people (Saukkonen 2007: 153).

In analyzing Itäranta's novel through the lens of imagology, we can see how these traditional and modern images are used to create a detailed portrayal of the Finnish identity. The references to Finnish culture, history, and natural environment not only add depth to the story but also connect with the broader cultural stereotypes and self-perceptions identified in imagological studies. This approach shows how literature can both reflect and shape the collective identity of a nation, using familiar images and stereotypes as building blocks for more complex and authentic representations.

5. Elements of the Image

In my analysis of the novel *Memory of Water*, I will focus on three groups of stereotypical traits that are prominently portrayed in the novel and emphasized by Saukkonen in his characterization of the Finnish nation and its image in literary history:

1. Qualities contributing to the concept of *sisu*.
2. A profound connection with nature.
3. The significance of traditional culture and folklore.

The pages of the novel reveal a portrayal of a community (not explicitly identified as Finns but their distant descendants) that is subservient to the authorities controlling the supply of clean water. However, their obedience enables them to survive in challenging conditions, coping with water scarcity, extreme heat, and pervasive insects. The main character exhibits an attitude that could be described as Finnish *sisu*; she is unwavering in her dedication to the tea master's tradition, even in the face of threats from military representatives. When she refuses to disclose the location of the water source her family has safeguarded for generations, she is met with remarks such as:

'I know about the spring,' Taro said. 'But I'm sure you had guessed that already. It would have been wise to tell about it. I understand your father was *stubborn* in the matter, and transferred the same *stubbornness* to you. The worn-out traditions of tea masters are tedious from my point of view. But of course it was only a matter of time when my suspicions would be confirmed.' (Itäranta 2012: 264)

The Finnish sense of obedience is reflected in the hierarchical structure of the society depicted in the novel. The people are subservient to the military, refraining from rebellion or defiance, faithfully following orders and prohibitions. The narrator reflects on her education:

For all my winter daydreams and snow-longing, I had never questioned what I had been taught at school and what the books said. I had taken for granted that what was generally considered to be true really was the truth, and nothing beyond that mattered. (Itäranta 2012: 74)

The strong bond with nature is strikingly evident in the novel. While dystopian in nature, the story contains frequent descriptions of the environment. The protagonists are deeply connected to nature and are committed to preserving it, in contrast to earlier generations who left behind a legacy of plastic waste and rising sea levels.

She tended to recycle anything that could be recycled without attaching any sentimental value to it. I had watched her give all my toys away, convert my baby clothes into furniture covers or carpet rags and calmly dispose of a stone collection I had compiled on the windowsill of her study. (Itäranta 2012: 162)

The Finnish landscape is vividly portrayed through the changing seasons. Although the narrator yearns for snow for a considerable period, the story introduces the polar night with the arrival of winter. The northern regions are also graced with the breathtaking spectacle of the aurora borealis.

Fishfires are colliding particles caused by the closeness of the North Pole. An electromagnetic reaction, no more exciting than a light bulb or a glow-worm. There are no dragons living in the sea, no shoals of fish following them or the flashing of scales in the dark sky.' [...] Under the dim-green glow of the fishfires her face was different than in any other light. (Itäranta 2012: 123)

We walked across the dried swamp spreading behind our house to the foot of the fell and then up the slope. It wasn't a long walk, but sticky sweat glued the hair onto my scalp. When we reached the height where the boulder garden began, I took my insect hood off. The wind was so strong that there weren't as many

horseflies and midges here as around the house. (Itäranta 2012: 10)

The novel showcases the presence of common issues faced by Finns in the warmer seasons, particularly in the northern regions of the country, such as the ubiquity of insects. The modern Finnish landscape comprises lakes, marshes, and swamps, elements that are referenced in the text.

The portrayal of Finnish nature is intricately tied to Finnish traditions. Even the main character's diet reflects the continuation of Finnish culinary traditions, exemplified by a breakfast consisting of oatmeal and seasonal fruits (cf. Tomaszewska-Bolałek 2020: 5): "I was grateful for the garden; the berries, vegetables and fruits were ripening. [...] I had enough porridge flakes maybe for a week, if I used them sparingly" (Itäranta 2012: 251–252).

The presence of "weepers" at the main character's father's funeral is a direct reference to rituals rooted in oral culture in the area of modern Finland and The Republic of Carelia (Tolbert 1990: 80–105).

The lament-women began to sing. It started as a quiet song that grew gradually, beautiful and ugly at once, like weeping forged into a waxing and waning melody that shrouded everything within its reach. Their language was old and strange. Its words sounded like a spell or curse, but I knew it was one of the past-world languages, now nearly lost, only remaining in the songs they and few others knew. (Itäranta 2012: 131–132)

The narrator suggests that the songs are sung in an old and unfamiliar language, akin to modern Finns occasionally reading some sections of the national epic, the *Kalevala*, which shares its roots with the tradition of verse sung in trochaic tetrameter, resulting in numerous archaic elements.

6. Onomastic Elements

I have categorized the proper names in the novel into three distinct groups. Firstly, I will focus on geographical names that anchor the novel's setting to a specific location. The subsequent group comprises geographic names and character names suggesting close connections to Scandinavian languages. Lastly, the most extensive group encompasses character names that carry specific connotations in Finnish. For this segment, I have drawn

upon my own associations and consulted native Finnish speakers, as well as referencing official Finnish statistics regarding the popularity of given names.

The geographical name *Alvinvaara* refers to a location just outside the narrator's village. *Vaara* alludes to the rocky terrain distinctive to the northern regions of Finland, particularly Lapland. To some extent, it can be likened to the English term 'fell,' as it often appears in the novel as *Alvinvaara fell*. Finnish-speaking readers would naturally associate the novel's setting with northern Finland. The closest town frequently visited by the narrator is *Kuoloyarvi*. One can interpret this name as a combination of *kuolema* ('death') and *järvi* ('lake'). Given the novel's dystopian context, such a name adds a sense of drama to the narrative. As the story ventures farther from the village, familiar Finnish city names such as Rovaniemi and Kuusamo further emphasize the northern Finnish setting. The city of Xinjing, with its Chinese undertones, holds a significant place in the narrative, highlighting the shrinking world in the dystopian future. References to Chinese or Japanese traditions are also noticeable in the tea-brewing ritual and proper names.

I thought of the only two cities I had seen: Kuoloyarvi in the east, and Kuusamo in the south. [...] I had wandered with my mother through the Danish quarters of Kuusamo, buying small bags of coloured sweets to take home with me, and the day I had taken my Matriculation Test I had been treated by my father to a meal in an expensive restaurant with a selection of imported natural waters from around the world. (Itäranta 2012: 54)

The novel incorporates Norwegian and Swedish geographical names of existing places such as *Southern Trøndelag*, *Saltfjellet-Svartisen*, *Trondheim*, *Dovre fjell*, *Malmberget*, as well as character names like *Jansson* and *Nils*, which have roots in Scandinavian languages. This emphasizes that the area inhabited by the main characters belongs to the Scandinavian Union. Additionally, as the narrator listens to the recordings from the scientists on *Jansson's expedition*, she notes the familiarity of the language spoken by the group. In the universe crafted by Itäranta, Finnish exists mainly in proper names and elements of the ancient traditions discussed earlier.

The proper names in the novel can be further categorized into several subgroups. To begin, the name of the main character and narrator, *Noria Kaitio*, is quite unique. Finnish statistics indicate that only about 30 people,

both male and female, have been given this name since 1900.² *Noria* may evoke the Finnish word *norja*, which, apart from signifying Norway or Norwegian language, depending on the spelling, also denotes ‘flexibility’. This choice of name could be intended to convey the protagonist’s physical and mental dexterity.

Finnish researcher Maarit Kaimio (2002) has observed the adoption of foreign-sounding three- or four-syllable names that end with “a” by Finnish companies, examples of which include *Merita*, *Sonera*, *Aktia*, and *Leonia*. A noteworthy phenomenon is seen with *Nokia*, an inherently Finnish place name, replete with obvious connotations for Finnish speakers. However, international audiences have often associated *Nokia* with Japanese companies. In this context, Itäranta’s choice of a similar form (No|ri|a) may underscore the influence of Japanese culture on the *Memory of Water* universe.

The name of the narrator’s friend, *Sanja*, has been bestowed upon 376 individuals in Finland since 1900, including 164 between 1980 and 1999.³ Conversely, her younger sister’s name, *Minja*, is more prevalent, with 2110 instances since 1900, including 777 between 2010 and 2019.⁴ It appears that the author often opts for existing yet less common names, implying that several generations have passed in the story, leading to the increased use of different names. Names such as *Minja* (especially in the diminutive form *Minjuska*), *Sanja*, and those occasionally appearing, such as *Mikoa* and *Tamara*, may suggest an intention to portray Russian influence as well.

7. Conclusion

The author’s unique approach to language and cultural influence has allowed us to delve into the interplay of different literary traditions and elements that bridge the gap between Finnish and English literature.

Throughout the analysis, I’ve identified key cultural elements and motifs from Finnish literature and history that find expression in *Memory of*

² Digi- ja väestötietovirasto, Nimipalvelu, (5 October 2023) <<https://nimipalvelu.dvv.fi/etunimihaku?nimi=noria>>

³ Digi- ja väestötietovirasto, Nimipalvelu, (5 October 2023) <<https://nimipalvelu.dvv.fi/etunimihaku?nimi=sanja>>

⁴ Digi- ja väestötietovirasto, Nimipalvelu, (5 October 2023) <<https://nimipalvelu.dvv.fi/etunimihaku?nimi=minja>>

Water. These include the concept of *sisu*, a strong connection with nature, and the significance of traditional culture and folklore. These aspects not only enrich the narrative but also serve to situate the story within a distinct cultural context.

The examination of onomastic elements in the novel has provided further insights into the cultural intertextuality. Names of characters and places contribute to the creation of a unique fictional world. The names themselves carry connotations, sometimes subtle, that reflect the evolution of culture in the novel's dystopian future.

In essence, *Memory of Water* serves as a compelling case study of how an author's bilingualism and cultural heritage can enrich the literary landscape. Itäranta's work exemplifies the interconnectedness of languages, cultures, and literary traditions, ultimately demonstrating the power of storytelling to transcend linguistic boundaries and offer a deeper appreciation of diverse cultural influences in literature.

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