

Traumas Caused by Racism in Kashmeera Lokuge and Hyppe Salmi's Novel Ilmatilaa

FLÓRA VÁRKONYI*

Abstract. The article examines Kashmeera Lokuge and Hyppe Salmi's migration novel *Ilmatilaa* (Airspace 2021) as trauma fiction. I will examine the target text with the help of trauma studies in literature, racism studies and emotion studies. The subjects of my analysis are the racism-related traumas of the main character and first-person narrator of the novel Shehani, a young woman who moved to Finland from Sri Lanka as a teenager. I investigate her emotions caused by experiences of racism, and also pay attention to her other reactions to racism. I examine whether the novel has the typical thematic and linguistic features of trauma fiction. In the analysis of the depictions of racism, I use some concepts from sociological racism studies that describe different forms of the phenomenon. The emotions Shehani experiences, evoked by racism against her, will be scrutinised with the help of emotion studies. I approach the emotions as being formed in interaction with, and as linked to, social injustice, and as and functioning as adaptive tools. In Lokuge's and Salmi's novel, detailed depiction of the racism experienced by the narrator, as well as her emotions in response to it, awaken the reader's empathy and increase their understanding of the social phenomena of racism and being a migrant.

Keywords: trauma fiction; trauma studies; migration; migration novel; racism studies; emotion studies

In the 1990s, when literary scholars became interested in trauma studies, one of their main starting points was how literature cannot be detached from reality but can be used to process and study traumatic experiences. Although literary studies examines fiction, the events that fiction describes are related to the real world and real social phenomena. (Jytilä 2022: 15–18, 24–25.) Although trauma studies has developed in close connection with Holocaust studies and remembering wars, in addition to the subjects of traditional trauma fiction, the literature of the 21st century has dealt with other, fundamentally collective but also individual, traumas such as experiences related to terrorism, eco-disasters and racism (Cf. Jytilä 2022: 15–16; Jytilä 2020: 90; Arminen 2019: 39.)

* Flóra Várkonyi, Tampere University, Finland, onerva.flora.varkonyi@gmail.com

The concept of trauma comes from the Greek word for wound, today primarily referring to a psychological wound (Davis and Meretoja 2020: 1; Takács 2018: 132). A physical wound breaks the homogeneity of the skin, while a mental one breaks the tellability of the life story of the traumatised person (Takács 2018: 132). Trauma is an event in life that causes damage or injury. It tears the experiencer out of time, the continuity of their life, and language and linguistic existence because one of the most central features of trauma is its difficult tellability. Thus, the healing of trauma is fundamentally linguistic, as it takes place through telling, which is also stressed in psychology. (Cf. Menyhért 2008: 6) In medical terms, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) arises as a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation, which can be brief or long in duration and is likely to cause significant distress in almost anyone. Typical symptoms are, for example, repeated reliving of the trauma in pervading memories, so-called flashbacks, dreams or nightmares, numbness, detachment from other people, fear and avoidance of activities and situations reminiscent of the trauma, insomnia, anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. (WHO 2019)

Individual experiences presented in trauma fiction are often connected to broader events or social phenomena (Jytälä 2022: 11, 15–17). The representations of an individual's trauma and its remembrance can act as a metaphor for, for example, the trauma of an ethnic or racialised group (cf. Arminen 2019: 39). Traumas connected to living in a minority or being a migrant can relate to collective traumas. In the 21st century, literary studies started to understand trauma fiction in a broader sense: it has been defined as literature which deals with sudden life changes or distressing or violent events that derail the life of an individual or a community (Kirstinä and Turunen 2013: 44; Jytälä 2022: 10, 39). With the rise in popularity of trauma studies, the meanings given to trauma have also multiplied (Jytälä 2022: 10).

Migration novels, which I define thematically as novels whose central theme is being a migrant presented from the migrant characters' point of view, often deal with the characters' traumas related to migration. Recurring themes in migration literature include, for instance, discrimination against racial, ethnic and cultural minorities at school and in work life, conflicts arising from cultural differences, thinking about cultural identities and languages, family history, migrants' connections with the inhabitants of their former homelands, the different values of the younger generation and children of migrants and their parents, and differences between generations in notions of gender (Rantonen 2010: 167–173). *Ilmatilaa* by Lokuge and Salmi,¹ deals with all of these

¹ The primary author of the work is Lokuge, Salmi helped her writing the novel in (mainly) Finnish. (See an interview with Lokuge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Olj4xogrLWU>.) Thus, from now on I will refer to the work either by its title or as Lokuge's novel.

themes. It can be read as a migration novel and trauma fiction at the same time.² Trauma stemming from being a migrant and specifically from racism and its consequences form central themes of the work.

The first-person narrator of *Ilmatilaa*, Shehani, is in her twenties and moved with her family from Sri Lanka to Finland as a teenager. The novel is written in Shehani's peculiar idiolect, which is dominated by the colloquial register of the Finnish language spoken particularly in the capital region, although the text also contains many untranslated English expressions and sentences as well as Sinhala expressions that are explained in Finnish.³ Sinhala is Shehani's mother tongue and English is her second language, which she speaks with her father. In Sri Lanka, good English skills have been considered part of being sophisticated and English is one of the country's official languages due to previous colonisation. In his home country, Shehani's father had a prestigious job as an engineer, which guaranteed a high socioeconomic status for his family.

Shehani primarily talks about her present, but in a typical way for narrators of migration novels, she also remembers her childhood, in Matara, and the years after moving to Jyväskylä. To some extent, she feels like an outsider both in Finnish society and among her Sri Lankan relatives. In Finland, she faces racism in school, working life, healthcare and other contexts. The title of the work, *Airspace* in English, is also related to the theme of racism, among other things. The narrator describes how people avoid her at the bus stop and do not sit next to her on the bus if there is a free seat elsewhere, which produces empty space around her. The second meaning of the novel's title is related to ending a toxic and abusive relationship that results in physical violence, after which Shehani has "space to breathe" (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 245). Despite facing racism, Shehani has a fundamentally positive attitude towards Finland and ethnic Finns, but she also pays attention to societal problems. The same applies to her attitude towards Sri Lankan society and culture.

² The possibility of reading migration novels as trauma fiction has come up in the research on other novels written in Finnish. Hanna-Leena Nissilä (now Määttä, 2017: 275, 285–286) suggests that Pajtim Statovci's *Kissani Jugoslavia* (*My Cat Yugoslavia*, 2014) could be read as trauma fiction. Heidi Grönstrand (2019: 133, 138) examines Ranya ElRamly's (now Paasonen's) *Auringon asema* (*The Position of the Sun*, 2002) and Sofi Oksanen's *Stalinin lehmät* (*Stalin's Cows*, 2003) as both trauma fiction and migration novels.

³ In the excerpts quoted in the article, I mark in italics the English expressions and sentences that are also included in the original text. There is no linguistic register corresponding to colloquial Finnish in English, so I translate the excerpts in more standard English than the Finnish original. In the excerpts quoted in this article, there are no expressions in Sinhala.

When it comes to relatives, Shehani cannot live up to her mother's expectations, because for a long time she does not have a permanent relationship that could develop into marriage. The novel also talks about the relationship which Shehani enters into during the narration and in which she is subjected to mental and physical violence, financial abuse and infidelity, which is why she divorces her life partner. Her mother wants Shehani to live according to conservative norms. In their relationship, a generational conflict arises, caused by different values and differing understandings of gender roles and norms regarding sexuality. Shehani also does not meet her father's requirements for success because she progresses more slowly than expected in her studies at the university of applied sciences and works as a salesperson in a café.

In this article, I will focus on Shehani's traumas related to racism and the emotions they evoke in her. How is racism manifested in her life and how does it affect her emotions? I scrutinise how the racism described in the work can be approached with the help of racism studies, examining the features of trauma fiction, and emotion studies.⁴ When reading the novel as trauma fiction, I examine whether there are specific thematic and linguistic features of trauma fiction in it. Two extremes can typically be realised in the language of trauma fiction: trauma texts can at first glance seem indifferent, distant, insensitive and numb; or overly emotional, talkative and unnervingly open. (Menyhért 2011: 168, 172; Menyhért 2008: 7; see also Takács 2018: 20)

When analysing the depictions of racism, I use concepts from sociological racism studies. I define racism as a historically born phenomenon occurring in the structures of society that also significantly affects the lives, status, opportunities and relationships of individuals. Racism is a system that creates power relations based on racialisation. It is also an ideology that can manifest itself as attitudes or individual prejudices. (Keskinen, Mkvesha and Seikkula 2021: 55–56.) The racism depicted in Lokuge's novel can be approached with the concepts of biological, cultural, structural and everyday racism. Biological racism refers to those ways of thinking, ideas, doctrines and ideologies in which the differences between groups of people are explained as stemming from heredity and biology, thus people are divided into biological "races" (Rastas 2014/2005: 77). Cultural racism means that different, hierarchically valued cultural characteristics are attached to different groups of people, perceived as "races". A certain culture is associated with a racialised group so strongly that

⁴ In addition to racism, Shehani has other difficulties and events that cause trauma for her, which are related in some way to being a migrant and living between two cultures. Shehani also experiencing trauma that is not related to these factors, but I will not give details in this article.

it seems almost as essentialised as biological “race”. (Moore 2009/2008: 377–380.) In cultural racism, the othered party is presented as culturally incompatible with the majority (cf. Valluvan 2020: 250).

Structural racism is present at different levels in the structures of society (Rastas 2014/2005: 75–76). It emerges, for example, in legislation or public institutions, such as health care, school and judicial institutions (Puuronen 2011: 59). Racism is a system of structural inequality and historical processes created and recreated by routine practices (Essed 2002: 181). Everyday racism refers to people’s everyday experiences of racism in various kinds of interaction. It can be produced by either individuals or institutions. (Rastas 2014/2005: 75–76.) Everyday racism emphasises the perspective of the person experiencing racism and the regularity of the phenomenon (Keskinen, Mkwesha and Seikkula 2021: 57). Everyday racism and structural racism are intertwined in a mutually productive and reinforcing way.

Emotions play a central role in trauma fiction. Emotions that typically emerge in trauma narratives are, for instance, shame, guilt, suffering, pity, compassion, fear, bitterness, anger, hate, and desire for revenge (Jytilä 2022: 54–55; Menyhért 2011: 176). Thus, trauma studies is often intertwined with emotion studies (cf. Takács 2018: 18). In recent decades of literary studies, both have been emerging research trends (Jytilä 2022: 26–27; Jytilä 2020: 91; Helle and Hollsten 2016: 8; Ngai 2005: 24). I examine those of Shehani’s emotions that are evoked by experiences of racism and are related to trauma.

In psychology, theories of emotion are divided into three main lines: evolutionary theories, cognitive appraisal theories and social constructionist theories. Despite the differences between these theoretical lines, they share the idea that emotions have an adaptive function. While the evolutionary approach links emotions to biological adaptation in the distant past, appraisal theory links them to cognitive processes of evaluation of situations and assessment of coping capacities. Social constructivism examines the role of emotions in transmitting and maintaining cultural and social norms, values and structures, as well as in the adaptation of individuals in modern societies. (Niedenthal, Krauth-Guber and Ric 2006: 11, 17–19.) The functions of emotions are building social bonds and addressing and overcoming social problems such as exclusion (Fischer and Manstead 2016: 424).

When analysing Shehani’s emotions evoked by racism, I take a broader functionalist approach which sees emotions as tools of adaptation and as types of response in situations in which the achievement of someone’s goals is disrupted or interrupted. (Cf. Niedenthal, Krauth-Guber and Ric 2006: 62, 65–66.) I also rely on the view that emotions are not located in an individual but are formed in circulation between subject and object. Emotions are not

only psychological and social, individual and collective, but also form the contact surfaces or boundaries between individuals and communities. (Ahmed 2018/2004: 19, 21–22) Negative emotions, such as anger, often not only relate to the individual's experience, but are also connected with social injustice (Kim 2013: 1–2, 6, 46, 68; Jytälä 2022: 17–18).

Trauma fiction plays a significant role in understanding social phenomena and injustice, as it describes them through individual experiences and evokes the (implied) reader's empathy (cf. Takács 2018: 16–17; Menyhért 2011: 168; see also Rossi 2023: 24–25). By empathy, I mean our ability to perceive, recognise, understand and respond to the emotions of others. Empathic orientation towards another can be thought of as a gradual slide, in which different levels – from perceiving the emotions of others to identifying with them – overlap. (Cf. Rossi 2023: 24) At the end of the article, I reflect on the role of Lokuge's novel and migration novels in general and how they can be read as trauma fiction in the depictions of racism and being a migrant.

Old and new traumas and the emotions they evoke

Shehani repeatedly faces racism and exclusion at her workplace from customers at least partially connected to racism, as well as from her colleagues as well. The novel begins with a scene in which a customer does not want to go to Shehani's checkout. At Shehani's invitation, however, he agrees to pay there and utters a comment expressing surprise that Shehani speaks good Finnish, but nevertheless corrects one grammatical case in her speech:

- You speak good Finnish!
- Well, it's a bit of a must if you would like to work on this field, I say, and I hope that I'm still able to smile. I beep the weary doughnuts, even though I'm tired of this mantra. Today he is already the third customer who has something to say about my skin colour, origin or language.
- In this field. In Finnish we say in this field, the customer continues.
- Ugh. I wanted to grimace, but I swallowed it down.
- Yes, please. And have a good day. (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 5.)⁵

Shehani encounters everyday racism, which appears in the form of a seemingly positive comment, but it shows the customer's prejudice and is hurtful to Shehani. The customer makes an assumption about her Finnish language skills based on her appearance, so he expresses a biologically racist thought.

⁵ All quotes in this article are the author's translations.

The concept of everyday racism also fits the described situation because it emphasises the perspective of the subject of racism and the regularity of the phenomenon, which suggests that a certain kind of racialised power structure repeats itself (cf. Keskinen, Mkwesha and Seikkula 2021: 57).

Shehani reveals that questions and comments from customers about her origin and skin colour are repeated every day or rather emerge many times even during the same working day. She describes the feeling⁶ of boredom that the customers' utterances evoke in her, which is a direct means of conveying a character's feelings (cf. Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010: 55). However, Shehani cannot show her boredom and irritability. She is in a subordinate position, on the one hand because she is non-white and a migrant, and on the other hand because of her role as a customer service worker, in which she is not allowed to offend the customer. By setting the scene at the beginning of the novel and referring to the everydayness of comments on the narrator's origin and "race", the reader can anticipate that racism will be a central theme of the novel.

Shehani compares her colleagues' exclusionary attitude towards her to the racist exclusion she experienced at school:

I feel like I'm a teenager again and I'm in the school canteen in Jyväskylä. I have fish sticks on my tray, mashed potato that tastes like a sack and some sad peas, and when I go to sit at any table, they say that seats are reserved and I realise that they have agreed on it in advance. They decided together that there is no space for me.

...

Although the same thing happened day after day, none of the teachers was interested in the situation. Finally, one day I lost my patience and grabbed the worst bully, *spitting image of that bitch* Regina George, by her long blond hair, pulled her head back and poured my spinach soup down the neck of her shirt. A half-boiled egg was floating between her small breasts and suddenly everyone became interested in me. Then the caretaker came and the psychologist and there were discussions with my parents about why I can't adapt myself to school. And I was excluded from all those conversations, and no one understood that the only problem was that I'd tried everything to fit in, to belong to the group, and I did what I did only when I didn't get any response.

Ansku twists crookedly. I decide to keep my chin up, and my third chakra, that is my middle finger. Sometimes I wonder if I could just solve the problems

⁶ In the current research examining the relationships between literature and emotions, different terms are sometimes used almost or completely synonymously, sometimes somewhat differently. These terms are, among others, emotion, affect and feeling. (Helle & Hollsten 2016: 12–16) In this article, I use the terms emotion and feeling as synonymous and understand them as umbrella terms that include many different feelings.

by hitting Ansku in the face. No. I wouldn't do that. I don't advocate violence, but that's how it goes. All that anger accumulates and you explode like a juicy, white pimple. (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 80–81.)

The excerpt is preceded by a description of a situation where Shehani's colleagues are planning a night out together under the leadership of Ansku, who is a lower-level supervisor of the café. They do not invite Shehani, but talk about their plans in whispers in her presence and exchange "quiet glances" (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 80). Elsewhere, Shehani talks about the exclusionary behaviour of Ansku and other, especially female colleagues towards her. Shehani thinks that the primary reason for their behaviour is racism. Isolation motivated by racism is one form of everyday racism, as are also, for example, derogatory looks and gestures (Puuronen 2011: 60–61).

Shehani talks about the exclusion she experienced at school in simple present tense, which suggests that she relives the trauma caused when, in the present moment of the narrative, she finds herself in a similar situation at her workplace. One key feature of trauma is that the memory of a past event repeatedly penetrates the mind of the traumatised person as if it were the present, and they relive it again and again (Menyhért 2011: 169, 176–177; Takács 2018: 40; WHO 2019). In Shehani's narration, her trauma from school appears as a flashback wedged into the present. Such narrative flashbacks are typical in trauma fiction (Whitehead 2004: 83–84; Jytilä 2022: 47). Lokuge's novel represents the kind of trauma fiction in which the narrator tells about their traumas openly, frankly and in detail. Telling about traumas is not difficult for the narrator as she feels the need to talk about them. (Cf. Menyhért 2011: 168, 172; Menyhért 2008: 7; Takács 2018: 20.) Shehani is healing her traumas by talking about them openly, in detail, analytically and self-reflexively from the perspective of her feelings and reactions.

Shehani presents her own reactions as well as the reaction of the teachers and the school management to the racist bullying towards her. The teachers do not react to her exclusion, but they do to the fact that she pours spinach soup down the shirt of one of the ethnic Finnish girls who bully her. The narrator recalls in critical tone the reluctance of the teachers to intervene, which can also be connected to her anti-racist values.⁷ The inaction of the teachers and their blaming behaviour towards her make Shehani disappointed.

⁷ Anti-racism confronts racism, seeking to reduce or eradicate it. An anti-racist person challenges the stereotyping of ethnic and racial groups and is able to and strives to recognise racism. (Bonnett 2000: 3.) In addition to the individual level, anti-racism can also emerge as an institutional practice (Keskinen, Mkwesha & Seikkula 2021: 59).

The behaviour of the teachers and other school staff and their explanation of the narrator's act also contain cultural racism. After Shehani's violent reaction to the exclusion, the school caretaker and the psychologist talk to her parents about why she cannot fit in at school. Therefore, they attach a lack of acclimatisation to her, which in the context of racist school bullying and the refusal to acknowledge it, can be interpreted through the culture linked to Shehani as a migrant. A person who is the target of cultural racism is presented as culturally incompatible with the majority (cf. Valluvan 2020: 250). Hence, Shehani is not only subjected to racism from her schoolmates, but also from the school staff, who are in a dominant position compared to the students because of their adulthood and status.

The teenager Shehani's reaction and the adult narrator's thoughts about how she should handle the situation in which Ansku and the other colleagues ostracise her are parallel to each other. Shehani's thoughts about the current situation are linked to the trauma of school bullying, which is activated in the present moment of the narrative. However, in the second paragraph of the quote, the narrator already uses simple past tense, which evokes a more reminiscent and less animated impression than in the first paragraph. In addition to the third-person singular narrator, the use of a reminiscing first-person narrator is a common narrative device in trauma fiction (Takács 2018: 30-31).

The narrator's reaction to school bullying and her current thoughts that she would respond to Ansku's behaviour with violence can be approached as responses to the trauma caused by racism. Shehani's anger, which motivates the violence, is an adaptive response to racism as a significant form of social injustice. Racism also interferes with Shehani's goal of fitting in at school and making friends. Disturbing someone's plan can lead to them trying harder, or to them becoming aggressive. (Cf. Niedenthal, Krauth-Guber and Ric 2006: 11, 17-19, 62, 65-66; see also Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987)

The quote describes Shehani's feelings of irritation and anger, although she does not verbalise them directly. These emotions are not only located in her, but are also formed in interaction with the schoolmates who bully her (cf. Ahmed 2018/2004: 19, 21-22; Kim 2013: 1-2, 6, 46, 68). Anger is not only an individual but rather a collective and intersubjective emotion and should be understood as a process. It can also be ideological, and in that case its causes are systematic. In this case, anger is inseparable from such social categories as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender and sexuality. (Kim 2013: 1-2, 6, 46, 67-68) Racism has been considered, among other things, an ideology. The fact that the teachers do not intervene in racist bullying, which manifests as exclusion, and do not acknowledge its existence but instead blame Shehani for her problems, is also related to structural racism and the internal contradictions

and injustices of Finnish society as presented in the work (cf. Kim 2013: 1). In addition, the narrator encounters racism in a public institution, which can be a place of structural racism (cf. Puuronen 2011: 59). Therefore, Lokuge's novel presents racism in such a way that structural and everyday racism do not clearly differ, but reinforce and produce each other (cf. Essed 2002: 181).

The narrator's anger and her violent act (or the desire to carry it out) are reactions to her subordinate position both at school and in her workplace, and, more broadly, in Finnish society. In the quote, suffering, indignation, anger and the desire for revenge appear from the emotions that often emerge in trauma fiction (Jytilä 2022: 54–55; Menyhért 2011: 176). However, in the case of the adult narrator, the latter no longer leads to actions. Blame and the effort to arouse shame are manifest in the actions of the school staff.

In connection with the bullying she experiences at her workplace, Shehani wonders if the fault lies with herself. On the other hand, she notes that similar incidents have happened again and again at different workplaces, perpetrated by different colleagues: "During the end of the shift, however, I start to question my own behaviour and wonder if I'm really annoying or unlikable. Should I point the invisible third chakra at my forehead and at myself and not at Ansku, because even though time passes and *jobs* and colleagues change, the same phenomenon is repeated." (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 82) In the end, the exclusionary behaviour evokes a sense of guilt in Shehani, despite the fact that elsewhere she expresses her awareness of the structural nature of racism.

Shehani is very aware of racism. She notices it, when it is directed at herself and other migrants, especially non-white ones, in different situations and thinks about it a lot. Sometimes she also uses the term "racism" or the adjective "racist". She feels solidarity with other people who are targets of racism and acts in an anti-racist fashion, for example, when she defends the staff of an Indian restaurant from harassment by a drunken customer and recognises the racist motivation of harassment. When thinking about the reasons for the behaviour of her colleagues, in addition to racism, Shehani mentions the tensions between female colleagues and Ansku's superior status as other possible reasons, although she generally has the impression that she is not treated completely equally at her workplace because of her skin colour and being a migrant.

Shehani does her work very carefully and behaves politely to everyone. Based on her previous experiences, she thinks that her actions are monitored more closely than the actions of her ethnic Finnish colleagues. In her view, her superior, colleagues and customers would like to find mistakes in her work, and in a problematic situation she immediately becomes a scapegoat. At her first job, in at a petrol station, which she gets at the age of 17 with the help of the school headmaster, Shehani is indirectly accused of stealing a small amount of

money. Her supervisor talks to the work community about “Finnish values” regarding the missing sum (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 22). In addition to the aspect of racism, Shehani’s meticulous behaviour is also a coping mechanism to prevent retraumatisation, shaped by her previous experiences and the fear of reliving past trauma.

During the same workday that the narrator depicts at the beginning of the novel, a female customer under the influence of drugs shouts loudly in the café. Shehani and the other employees ask her to leave because of her inappropriate behaviour, and Shehani escorts her out. The customer shouts at the narrator in an openly racist way. Shehani’s colleagues and the customers do not react to the situation in any way, which arouses strong negative emotions in her:

When I have managed to get the woman out, my hands tremble.

I walk behind the counter and Ansku asks if she went away and when I nod, she doesn’t say anything anymore. Kaisa has fled to the back room, Jarkko is wiping the tables. As if nothing had happened, as if I hadn’t just received racist shouting in my face. As if everything were fine and this were normal.

Outwardly, I show that I don’t care and continue working. But I’m *confused as fuck*. I get *flashbacks* and the same feelings of embarrassment that I experienced as a 14-year-old in Jyväskylä, when that girl called me a Negro day after day in front of everyone [on the bus]. Even then, no one intervened, no one told me that she was behaving badly or that I shouldn’t care. Racist yelling was normalised with silence.

How can it be true that even in the 2020s, none of the customers or the dozens of people in front of whom I escorted the woman out, and none of my colleagues say anything to help or apologise? The feeling of powerlessness comes over me and I have to run away. I go to the toilet, turn the water on and put my hands on my face. Is it always the victim’s task to stand their ground?

...

I’m still quiet the rest of the day. I avoid talking, I just say the obligatory hello and thank you and hand out rolls and slices of pie on autopilot, fill up empty milk jugs, wipe up coffee stains. I feel like I’m shrinking inward, my self-confidence is gone. I can’t say goodbye to customers happily, I’m locked up and frozen. I am emotionally alive and dead; nothing moves inside me. (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 155–157.)

The narrator describes her trauma, caused by the customer’s racist yelling and the non-responsiveness of colleagues and customers. The latter saddens and worries Shehani because it suggests the acceptance of racist shouting and contradicts her anti-racist values (cf. Bonnett 2000: 3). It makes Shehani powerless; she is confused at how intervening in incidents of racism has not become more common even today. The situation is similar to the one in which a girl

called her racist names every day on the bus, but no one intervened. Shehani also talks about this traumatic memory of hers elsewhere in the work. She uses the English word “flashback” for the memory that flashed in her mind, which in trauma studies is identified as the activation of traumatic memories. The narrator’s escape to the toilet is also a reaction to the trauma, as is the apparent indifference. Trauma can cause numbness, emotional emptiness, detachment from other people, unresponsiveness to surroundings, and avoidance of activities and situations reminiscent of the trauma (WHO 2019).

Shehani’s traumatising is also reflected in physiological reactions: trembling of the hands and quietness caused by powerlessness and lack of self-confidence. The description of a character’s traumatising often builds on the cognitive assumption that there must be some mental state behind all physical activity (cf. Lehtimäki 2022: 148). The narrator’s silence can also be explained by the difficult narratability of trauma (cf. Menyhért 2011: 168; Menyhért 2008: 5). When remembering the yelling on the bus, she discusses the difficulty of talking about experiences of racism: “I have never told anyone about the yelling. I thought that if I don’t speak, it doesn’t exist. ... Learning to stop being silent is a slow process, and I’m still learning. It’s difficult.” (Lokuge and Salmi 2021: 61–62). However, by acting as a narrator, Shehani is able to tell the reader about the events and the feelings they arouse. This can be interpreted as the narrator’s attempt to heal her traumas.

Depictions of traumas related to racism evoke empathy

Ilmatilaa describes the effects of racism on the life of the narrator in a straightforward, detailed, often contemplative or analytical way. The work also presents the emotions evoked by the narrator’s experiences of racism, often verbalised directly by her, and the effects of racism on her life. In addition to the level of emotions and her interpersonal relationships, it has a negative effect, for example, on her socio-economic status. Shehani also mentions her financial problems several times.

Through Shehani’s individual experiences, Lokuge’s novel depicts racism and its consequences from the individual’s point of view, and also in such a way that it aims to give a broader description of the social phenomenon of racism and its mechanisms. The novel presents everyday racism intertwined with structural racism, as well as other forms of the phenomenon, such as biological and cultural racism. Shehani is a sympathetic and easily relatable character and a reliable first-person narrator, through whom the reader can get a comprehensive picture of the possible negative consequences of racism on the individual’s life. The novel also presents Shehani’s reactions to racism by describing her

emotions evoked by racism. Therefore, the reader gets to know the motivations for her actions, which increases the reader's empathy with her. Presenting the motivations of the characters significantly affects the reader's emotional reactions in evaluating the characters and their actions (cf. Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010: 24). Shehani's emotions and reactions are formed through interaction with individuals and communities, with the book showing how they evoke responses to trauma caused by racism.

The novel aims to awaken understanding and empathy. It encourages the reader to think about the presence of racism in contemporary Finnish society and its negative effects on the lives of individuals who are the targets. Shehani is a target of racism because of her race and because she is a migrant in Finland. From this point of view, Lokuge's novel can be considered a migration novel. However, the themes of the work are versatile and are not only built around being a migrant, although that is very much at the centre of the novel.

Shehani is an individualised and multidimensional character, but at the same time her traumas can be thought of as representing the traumas of many migrants living in Finland, especially non-white ones. Thus, the work can be read as a social novel that deals with issues of contemporary society and strives to influence the reader's thoughts and feelings (cf. Isomaa 2013: 357, 370). The novel attempts to increase Finns' understanding of the experiences of migrants and empathy towards them, for example by depicting how racism evokes negative feelings in Shehani. Depicting and evoking negative emotions can serve as effective means of social criticism: the shock effect awakens the reader's awareness of societal problems. (Cf. Rossi 2023: 29, 34) Reading fiction offers an opportunity to empathise with the narrators and other characters and to react to the situations in the story. Narrative empathy means recognising the emotions of a character and putting oneself in the shoes of another through a text, especially a novel (Rossi 2023: 23; see also Keen 2007). Reading novels can increase the reader's empathy, help them understand diversity and build bridges between cultures (Rossi 2023: 23; see also Nussbaum 1997, 2001). This statement also applies to Lokuge's novel.

Ilmatilaa is also trauma fiction, which describes damaging, distressing and violent events in the narrator's life. These events are connected to the injustice of racism and the wider social phenomenon of migration.⁸ However, the ending

⁸ Lokuge's work is an example of a novel that can be read both as a migration novel and as trauma fiction. A similar approach could be taken to several other prose works written in Finnish and published in the 2010s and 2020s, such as all of Pajtim Statovci's novels *Kissani Jugoslavia*, 2014 (*My Cat Yugoslavia*, 2017), *Tiranani sydän*, 2016 (*Crossing*, 2019), *Bolla*, 2019 (*Bolla*, 2021) and *Lehmä synnyttää yöllä*, 2024 (*The Cow Gives Birth at Night*), Riikka Pulkkinen's novel *Vieras*, 2012 (*The Book of Strangers*), Satu

of Lokuge's novel is optimistic and Shehani does not become a passive victim, even though she has depression, anxiety, panic attacks and insomnia, which can be thought of as trauma caused by racism. She is a developing character, and this feature of hers also elicits empathy in the reader. Shehani's story ends with her moving to a new apartment after a few weeks in a social institution because of her previous partner's violence; she starts a new life and deals with her trauma with the help of a therapist.

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