

## The Complexity of the Nexus

In southwest Algeria, people called the Sahrawi live in exile. They are not driven away from their *homeland*, because they don't have one. Rather, they are forced from the *land* that is their *home*, the wide desert of Sahara. These "inhabitants of the desert," which is the literal translation for "Sahrawi," are no longer able to practice their traditional nomadic lifestyle. They've become inhabitants of a refugee camp.

Meanwhile the capital of Finland, the land of somewhat plenty, is sweltering. It is summer 2021. Not being used to the heat, the Helsinkians gather to the beaches to seek relief from the sea breeze. As much as they would love to swim, they are driven to the land by the toxic blue-green algae that blooms in the Baltic Sea.

Sahara, Helsinki. One would think that there is no connection between these two places, so different in their geography, nature, and culture. But of course, there is, and not just one created in the essayist's imagination, known for its ability to interweave faraway things and ideas with invisible threads.

The connection is real. The Sahrawi are forced to settle down as their nomadic routes are cut by phosphate mines violently protected by the Moroccan military forces. In Finland, the same phosphate is used as fertilizer in agriculture, and via surface runoff, groundwater flow, and river flow, it enters the Baltic Sea and disturbs the water ecosystem.

The problem is not just Finland, obviously, as there's no "just-ness," or indeed *justness* in the global world. Phosphate fertilizers are key element in modern food production. The desert feeds everyone. Alex Kasprak writes in the Atlantic that "a dispute over Western Sahara's phosphate reserves could disrupt food production around the globe."<sup>1</sup>

Everything is interconnected. "Half the globe vibrates the moment we start our morning," says Finnish theologian Mikko Kurenlahti.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, the capitalist system does its best to fade out and hide these interconnections. Its most genius hoax is shifting the responsibility to consumers: if people want ethical products, the market will offer them. On the basis of supply, it could be concluded that most consumers desire, specifically, junk made by Bangladeshi child slaves.

The truth is that an individual consumer, or a citizen, if we want to avoid a dirty word, is offered mostly irresponsible choices. But that is not the real problem. The problem is that we are dependent on a system in which unethical production of food, goods and energy is legal and very profitable.

So when the Finnish author and journalist Riikka Suominen claims that literature has failed to explain the climate crisis, and failed to open our minds "to new scenarios of change," I am a baffled.<sup>3</sup> I am also baffled

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<sup>1</sup> "The Desert Rock That Feeds the World." The Atlantic, 29.11.2016.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/11/the-desert-rock-that-feeds-the-world/508853/> Retrieved 19.4.2022.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed by Julia Thurén. "Avaä kotona kaappi, joka pursuaa tavaraa, niin ei tee mieli ostaa lisää – 12 oivallusta kuluttamisesta." Yle, 7.4.2022. <https://yle.fi/aihe/a/20-10002515> Retrieved 19.4.2022.

<sup>3</sup> "Kirjallisuus epäonnistui ilmastokriisin selittämisessä." Suomen Kirjastoseura, 15.2.2021.

<https://suomenkirjastoseura.fi/kirjastolehti/kirjallisuus-epaonnistui-ilmastokriisin-selittamisessa/> Retrieved 19.4.2022.

when the Indian author Amitav Ghosh writes that the climate crisis is also the crisis of the imagination. *His* imagination for sure, for him the problem seems to be that tornados in novels don't make convincing plot twist.<sup>4</sup>

On these panels we have heard many strong arguments defending artistic freedom, and equally good arguments reminding of the artists' responsibilities. I don't think you need yet another opinion saying what writers should or should not do.

What I am saying is, that by focusing on the artists' imagination in tackling the climate and environmental crisis, we are behaving as if we didn't have a solution. As if we didn't know that what needs to be done is to cut down the fossil emissions, sequester carbon, invest in renewable energy and green infrastructure, tax companies that pollute, enact laws that prohibit producing irresponsible products, et cetera.

I'm saying, it is the fossil fuel companies and politicians who have failed to open *their* minds to new scenarios of chance.

I don't believe it's the writers' job to make the world a better place. I think it is their job to make it either more interesting or more understandable. In both cases it's not about making things simpler, to give answers—but rather presenting the world, nature, and human nature, in its formidable complexity.

What literature or other arts could do – I'm not saying they should – is to make the imperceptible connections visible. The Sahrawi people and the citizens of the Baltic Sea region share the same problem, even though the consequences are very different. This nexus between two distant and dissimilar environments was made observable by two artists, Pekka Niskanen, a Finn, and Mohamed Sleiman Labat, a Sahrawi. The artwork I have referred to is aptly named PhosFATE.<sup>5</sup>

What a writer can do, especially, is to dive into the ambiguousness of language we use to represent nature. I give you an example: The Finnish expression for "a body of water" is *vesistö*. It is composed of the word *vesi*, water, and a suffix *-stö* that indicates a place or a collection of things. Suffixes *-sto* and *stö* connote something that is organized, as they are used in words like *kirjasto*, *arkisto*, *tiedosto*, *laivasto*, *varasto*—a library, an archive, a file, a navy, and a warehouse. Although I love my mother tongue, I prefer the English expression. The Baltic Sea could and should be put back to order, but it's not something that can be organized or filed, let alone stored. It is indeed *a body*. It's alive, a physical, sensuous whole, formed of interdependent, even symbiotic organ(ism)s.

My body is bound to the body of the sea. It is bound to earth, and to earth it shall return. My body is bound to the bodies of other people, and to every other living thing on this planet. The system we share is complex, enigmatic, and fragile.

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<sup>4</sup> "Where is the fiction about climate change?" The Guardian, 28.10.2016.

[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/amitav-ghosh-where-is-the-fiction-about-climate-change-](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/amitav-ghosh-where-is-the-fiction-about-climate-change) Retrieved 19.4.2022.

<sup>5</sup> "The PhosFATE project discusses phosphate and its effects on the Baltic Sea and Western Sahara." Kone Foundation, 3.10.2019. <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/stories/the-phosphate-project-discusses-phosphate-and-its-effects-on-the-baltic-sea-and-western-sahara/> Retrieved 19.4.2022.