

Force of Nature, Forced by Nature? *Esthonus Silvanus* Inspired Femininities in Popular Music

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Abstract

A prevalent theme in the construction of Estonian pop music femininities is their strong connection with nature. In this article we examine the connections between portrayals of women and nature in Estonian pop music, focusing on visual and textual discourses in Estonian pop artists' music videos and in-depth interviews. More specifically, we look at how these depictions intersect and interact with the prevailing local eco-nationalist folk femininity discourse. Our analysis shows that the dominant characteristics of nature-inspired femininity are simultaneously reinforced, challenged, and negotiated. We present two nature-related forms of femininity that emerge in popular music portrayals: on the one hand, a mystical, goddess-like *woman as a force of nature*, or a woman "naturally" belonging to nature; on the other hand, a broader alignment of a woman as agent of biological reproduction, women as natural, which merges femininity with motherhood, and can, we suggest, be made sense of as *woman as forced by nature*.

Keywords: pop music femininities; music videos; eco-nationalist femininity; folk femininity; *Esthonus silvanus*

Introduction

Popular music is an influential instrument when it comes to making meanings in our everyday lives and constructing the world around us (Mckerrel 2016: 425). Celebrated pop stars, their billboard hits and music videos, media coverage and self-representation help to shape the ways we see ourselves and others, including our expectations for gender roles and identities. In this study we examine the ways femininity is constructed in Estonian popular music. We explore how Estonian pop music femininities are represented in 19 music videos (2016–2022) and by renowned Estonian pop stars (13), music producers (2), managers and experts (3) whom we interviewed in 2021. More specifically, we explore one prevalent theme in how femininity is represented in Estonian pop music, that is, through its strong connection to nature (Kirch Schneider, Tiidenberg 2024 (forthcoming)). "Nature", in this context, comprises references to the natural environment and natural phenomena (e.g. the forest); an invocation of the Mother Nature/Mother Earth narrative wherein nature and earth are personified as feminine, and women, in turn are positioned as having a special relationship with nature (Merchant 1990), albeit in ways that tend to essentialize them as caregivers by reaffirming sexist notions of their place in society (MacGregor 2006; Tomalin 2008); a related

invocation of "natural" beauty and "natural femininity" and its employment in discursive governance of femininities (McCann 2015); the discursive connection of Estonian culture and national identity (including perceptions of Estonian femininity) to a particular attitude towards natural phenomena in Estonian identity (Rommel, Jonuks 2021; in detail see below); and Estonian folkloric beliefs about women's connection to animism and totemism. We situate the co-constitutive representations of nature and femininity in its local context – exploring pop music femininities within Estonia's specific cultural and historical setting (Marling, Koobak 2017), focusing, in particular, on the ways they intersect and interact with the prevalent local eco-nationalist folk femininity discourse.

By studying the visual and textual representations of femininity in how Estonia's female popular musicians are portrayed, how femininities are constructed in their music videos and lyrics as well as how they reflect on this on the basis of their lived experiences, this study adds greater depth to critiques of portrayals of women in popular music, by making space for noticing alternative depictions of femininity and the negotiations involved in constructing them. Furthermore, this study enriches the field of pop music and gender studies by introducing a focus on Estonian folklore and women's connection

with nature. This adds a less-explored empirical exploration to studies of the representation of women in pop culture/music while suggesting a line of analysis applicable to other localized forms in other cultures. Overall, by presenting a case study on the construction of femininities in Estonian popular music, this work contributes empirical and conceptual nuance to pop music studies as well as (post-Soviet) feminist studies.

Popular Music and Gender

According to social constructivist thinking, femininity, or womanliness, is a performance (Butler 1990) that is political and can be used to reinforce or challenge gender (and other) hegemonies (Kaneva 2015: 1). So, the ways in which gender, as well as femininity and masculinity, are constructed in the media and popular culture (including popular music) does have an impact on gender relations and politics in real life. In this study, we define *pop music femininity* as a socially constructed set of different (sometimes contradictory) characteristics, roles, and behaviours that are represented/expressed in the popular artists' performances of womanliness (e.g., through their appearance, songs, lyrics, music videos, in-person interviews, etc.) as well as portrayals of women and womanliness in popular music in the mainstream media (Elu24 2019; Öhtuleht 2019; Pere ja Kodu 2015; Postimees Naine 2016).

In the global West, pop culture femininity is constructed according to the prevailing post-feminist discourse (Gill 2016; McRobbie 2004; Tasker, Negra 2007) that celebrates women who are resilient, strong, (economically) independent, self-possessed, active, heterosexual, assertive, able-bodied, and sexually empowered; but at the same time traditionally feminine, beautiful, sexy, and motherly (James 2017: 29). This has led to the prevalence of resilient, self-possessed, publicly displayed femininity among Western pop stars and other celebrities (Dubrofsky, Wood 2015). Yet, alternative expressions of femininity do exist among Western popular artists (James 2017: 28). Lady Gaga, for instance, is known for her gender-bending practices, constantly mixing what is considered masculine and feminine (Auslander 2016: 187).

In Central and Northern Europe, however, self-assertiveness is usually considered a masculine characteristic and “women are (still) raised with a strong focus on others instead of themselves” (Berkers, Hoegaerts 2019: 1–2). Berkers, Smeulders and Berghman (2019) found that 44% of Dutch female musicians feel unease in promoting their own music (compared to 25% of men), and 74% of them believe that the Dutch music industry – in which men also earn more and only less than ten percent of 2000 Top songs are performed by women – is male oriented. In the Flemish music industry, female managers have to mimic masculine behaviours to succeed (Mullens, Zanoni 2019). Similarly, the Estonian music scene is also described as male oriented, with men earning more and securing the most live gigs (Kirch Schneider, Tiidenberg 2024 (forthcoming)). Gender inequalities and stereotypes are also noted in Norwegian and Swedish musical performances and education (Blix, Vestad and Onsrud 2021). For instance, the studies by the Swedish Arts Council and Swedish Arts Grants Committee demonstrate that in the Swedish music scene, female musicians and composers are substantially under-represented (Statens Musikverk 2024). Moreover, in Norwegian musical education, traditional gender norms determine the choice of musical instruments for (future) artists (Blix, Ellefsen 2021).

However, the Central and Northern European musical landscape has also been viewed as a space in which gender nonconforming trans* persons can express their non-binary/queer identities, as seen in the Belgian music scene (Wasserbauer 2019). Finally, Icelandic pop star Björk, who is both celebrated and criticized because of her differences from much of Western pop musicians, has explicitly explored the ecomaternalist and ecofeminist (Merchant 1990; MacGregor 2006; Tomalin 2008) link between nature and womanhood, suggesting that women are naturally expected “to take care of others before or instead of themselves”, which she sees as problematic (Goldin-Perschbacher 2014: 58). Representation(s) of femininity in Björk's music and interviews “reveal multiple feminist stances, sometimes in tension, around essentialist, difference, and equality perspectives,

all articulating a maternalist position on world politics” (ibid.).

Eco-Nationalism and Femininities in Estonia

Although the principles of Western as well as Nordic gender roles and femininity also find traction in Estonia – the yearning for westernization has been one of the main characteristics of the original post-Soviet discourse (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, Koobak 2019: 83) – these depictions are also shaped by our local culture, ideologies, and history (Kase 2010). Therefore, the image of a beautiful, traditionally feminine, proper and polite woman who does not disturb anyone has dominated the Estonian pop music scene for decades (Kirch Schneider, Tiidenberg 2024 (forthcoming)). We follow the call by feminist scholars for more critical femininity studies (Dahl 2012: 57) by focusing on specific local contexts (Annuk 2019).

Although Estonia regained its independence over three decades ago, “one can argue that the post-Soviet space still exists” as “identities and political discourses in many former Soviet republics are still largely shaped by their relation to the Soviet legacy [...] (whether by embracing it or rejecting it)” (Hushcha 2021). Soviet occupation also continues to reverberate through popular music. For example, various Estonian hip-hop artists “have explored aspects of being ‘post-Soviet’ in contradistinction to the official hegemonic discourses, which outright reject the Soviet past and emphasize titular ethnicity as a cornerstone of national identity” (Cole 2024: 272; see also Pasdzierny 2018).

The specific local context most relevant for the argument at hand is that of the emergence of eco-nationalist discourse in the post-Soviet period (Rommel, Jonuks 2021). In the late Soviet period and newly independent post-Soviet Estonia, the notions of rebuilding the nation were linked to an eco-nationalist discourse (Malloy 2009: 375), which highlighted nationalist beliefs, but also focused on the revitalization of local folklore, including Estonians’ connection with nature (Rommel, Jonuks 2021: 34). The widespread vernacular of “*Esthonus silvanus*,

the forest Estonian” links Estonian-ness to the local natural environment, especially the forest, and its preservation (Rommel, Jonuks 2021: 34). In Estonian folklore, women in particular have been linked to animism and totemism, which has cultivated werewolf stories that feature a woman – usually a nursing mother – being turned into a wolf (Metsvahi 2013: 65). This has been framed as a punishment but also as an advantage and a source of enjoyment for a woman. Both the wolf and the woman have been associated with fertility.

As the nationalist discourse is conservative and masculine, womanliness was defined in conservative terms (Annuk 2019: 406) that reinforce the idea of a natural, childbearing woman whose responsibility was “to be both mother and caregiver, a person with Koidula-like¹ love for the homeland that demanded silent acceptance of male dominance in reawakening a culture suppressed during Soviet occupation” (Kaskla 2003: 306). Further, as a reaction to the Soviet faux equality where the widespread employment of women outside of the household was deemed evidence of gender equality (Ghodsee 2004), the (eco-)nationalist discourse positioned mothers and working women as contradictory subject positions (Kurvinen 2008). Overall, “the liberation of a nation did not necessarily liberate women from a society that remains patriarchal” (Kaskla 2003: 298).

What is interesting for the argument at hand is how eco-nationalist ideas align with gender essentialism and its promotion of heteronormativity, including Mother Nature myth that emphasize women’s biological/motherly characteristics and their necessity in (re)building a nation (Goldin-Perschbacher 2014). In the case of post-Soviet Estonian eco-nationalism, we see its gender essentialism both in how the vernacular of *Esthonus silvanus* is internalized and circulated as well as the reproduction of folkloric narratives of nature-bound women in popular discourse and beliefs (Renser, Tiidenberg 2020). As one of our study participants, Heidi Purga – a music expert, DJ, and Estonia’s current minister of culture – illustrates in her interview: “An Estonian woman’s religion is nature.”

¹ Lydia Koidula (1843–1886) – Estonian poet, writer and journalist from the period of the first national awakening in the 19th century (ed.).

Although traditional gender standards have been changing quite rapidly over the past two decades, a recent study confirms that women in Estonia are still expected to conform to multiple standards – they must attentively attend to their children and partners, take care of their looks, and be successful in their careers and hobbies (Raud 2022). Further, gender scholars have found that the representation of women in the Estonian mainstream media usually reinforces traditional gender roles, portraying them in connection with home and family as housewives and mothers (Marling 2010), and emphasizing their physical appearance and heteronormative relationships (Piltre 2011).

Even though the Estonian music scene is seen as traditional and male oriented (Kirch Schneider, Tiidenberg (forthcoming)), performances of womanliness that steer away from the “template of normative femininity” (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg 2020: 5) do exist. Davidjants (2022: 307) explains that alternative representations of femininity in the form of girl punk bands existed already during the late Soviet era. While Western punk bands protested capitalist values, Estonian ones rebelled against Soviet standards, but also against prevailing designer fashion trends deriving from the West. In the 1990s there was an explosion of hypersexualized femininities, which was, around the millennium, supplanted by a portrayal of a “proper, good girl”, which continues to dominate the discourses of femininity in the Estonian music landscape (Davidjants, interview). This image was inspired by the above-mentioned (eco-)nationalist discourse of good women who possess “natural”, heteronormative beauty, and are motherly, or at least whom a “good man” would imagine making the mother of their children. It was not until the 2010s when a more explicit feminist approach that encourages the construction of alternative femininities started to raise its head in Estonian pop music (Davidjants 2021: 221).

Our article explores how the construction of Estonian pop music femininities intersects with the eco-nationalist discourse and its emphasis on nature. However, beyond analysing how this dominant discourse is reproduced, we consider Estonian pop artists’ attempts to challenge and/or negotiate the prevailing ideas and explore the alternative, hybrid and dialectical femininities that emerge in the process.

Methods

In this study we examine the links to nature in the constructions of Estonian pop music femininity by focusing both on in-depth interviews with renowned Estonian pop artists, their music producers, managers, and music experts, and on the interviewed pop stars’ most viewed music videos (2016–2022). A multiperspectival approach (Kellner 1995; Tiidenberg 2017) allows us to analyse constructions of Estonian pop music femininities not only from the media representation perspective, or as something that “is done to women”, but also to include their “active participation in it” (Kaneva 2015: 4) and view enactments of femininity (and gender) as performative and political (Butler 1990). We weave together a variety of discursive strands presented in music videos and interviews to highlight the negotiation of the more hegemonic discourses of femininity in Estonian pop music.

We pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the nature-inspired themes in Estonian pop music femininities?

RQ2: How are the portrayals of femininity in the music videos and interviews shaped by the discourse of eco-nationalist folk femininity?

RQ3: How do the participating pop-artists interpret and negotiate these discourses of femininity?

We collected two types of data: in-depth interviews with renowned Estonian pop artists (n=13: 11 women, 2 men), media producers (n=2: a music video director and a lyricist), music experts (n=3); and the interviewed female pop stars’ most viewed music videos on YouTube (n=19).

To select the interviewees we conducted desk research of Estonian music websites (such as Estonian Music Awards; MyHits TOP 30; Sky Plus TOP 20; R2 TOP 20) to identify award-winning pop artists and most played songs. To also include some up-and-comers and musicians who are known for their distinct representations of femininity, interviews with Estonian music experts – a radio host, a music journalist, and a music manager – were also conducted. Some artists from the desk-research based wish list were not able or willing to participate, so the final sample included one to two artists for each popular music category – pop, indie, folk, hip hop, soul/RnB, blues, art pop, and a few

up-and-comers. The semi-structured interviews were conducted from June to November 2021. The average duration of the interviews was one hour (varying from 43 minutes to one hour and 25 minutes). The interviewees were asked about the portrayal of women and femininity in Estonian culture and media, including pop music in general and in their own repertoire, their understandings of femininity, representations of femininity in their stage personas and music videos, their favourite female artists, etc. The interviewees were not anonymized in accordance with the interviewees' wishes in the informed consent agreements. The sample of music videos includes the interviewed female pop stars' most viewed YouTube music videos from 2016–2022.

We conducted multimodal discourse analysis (Tiidenberg 2017; Rose 2022) to identify key themes, their connections and contradictions (Rose 2022: 228–244) in textual and visual data and their intertextual assemblage. We started with descriptive coding of interviews, music videos and music lyrics. This means that basic topics of a passage of data were summarized in a short word or a phrase (Saldaña 2013: 70). We followed up with pattern coding, where we identified emergent discursive themes by pulling together descriptive codes (Saldaña 2013: 152). Our coding of music videos relied on analytical frameworks by Vernallis (2004), Railton and Watson (2011), and Rambarran (2021), where we focused on how femininities were represented in the images, performers, lyrics, background, choreography, camera work, editing, aesthetics, and their interplay with each other, with the melody and the lyrics. One of the key themes pertaining to the discourses of femininity in our data was links to nature, with further sub-themes of natural women, women of nature, and mothering and nature.

Discussion of Results: Estonian Pop Music Femininities' Two Ways with Nature

We have found that the construction of Estonian pop music femininities is simultaneously accepting, rejecting, and negotiating elements from the dominant eco-nationalist folk femininity discourse. One of the prevalent themes in the representations of Estonian pop music femininities is women's close relationship to nature (Kirch

Schneider, Tiidenberg 2024 (forthcoming)), which we see as relying on and gendering the vernacular of the forest Estonian (Rommel, Jonuks 2021). As one of the study's participants, Heidy Purga, a DJ and a politician, notes in her interview: "This is our heritage, our culture. Being in nature and caring about it is no doubt one of the things that defines us."

Our analysis shows that the nature-boundness of Estonian women is presented from two different, but interlinked perspectives. On the one hand, there is a romanticized, mystical version of Estonian pop music femininity, in which women are made of, represent, or belong in nature (*Femininus silvanus* in Estonian pop music). On the other hand, this framing also refers to a broader theme of women as agents of biological reproduction (Yuval-Davis 1996), which relegates women to the role of mothers, linking them to nature and nation through the figure of "mother earth" (women as agents of biological reproduction). These nature-inspired constructions of Estonian pop music femininity appear in visual and textual representations of womanliness, as well as in the interviews of the study's participants. They are also evident in the mainstream media's framing of pop music femininities.

"If two women make music together, people already assume it's mysticism." Femininus silvanus in Estonian pop music

A "naturally beautiful" (McCann 2015) female singer – hair down, simple cut dress, minimalist makeup, and bare feet – performing in the natural background is a common theme in almost half of the music videos analysed – for example, Liis Lemsalu rides a horse in a hayfield ("Halb vői hea"), Manna appears from exotic shrubs ("Disposable society"), Synne Valtri is swinging and lying on the beach ("12 kuud"), Sandra Sillamaa (Sandra Vabarna at the time of the interview) sings in a rural garden full of trees ("Kallimale"), Anna Kaneelina walks in a birch forest ("What have I done for love"), Yasmin wanders in the desert ("Slow fall"), HUNT girls and singers appear in a meadow ("Spring"), etc. They are portrayed as beautiful, but in a soft, gentle way. Remarkably, naturally beautiful femininity situated in nature appears across genres, including music videos

for songs in the genres of pop, hip-hop, ethno, soul, indie, etc. Pre-eminent Estonian pop star Liis Lemsalu confirms the prevailing norm of “natural beauty” for Estonian women in her interview: “We are more like Scandinavian women, favouring minimalism. We like softer beauty [...] that has air and lightness to it.”

Some of these “naturally beautiful” femininities are portrayed as ordinary, as naturally belonging to or fitting in with nature; while others are shown as mysterious and unearthly. Depictions of women as goddesses, fairies, witches, or other nature-inspired magical beings evident in the music videos often highlight the supernatural powers of enigmatic femininity, borrowing from Estonian folklore (Metsvahi 2013) and mysticising the vernacular of “the forest Estonian” (Remmel, Jonuks 2021). For instance, in the video for the folk band Trad Attack’s song “Kuukene” (“Little moon”), the long opening shots carefully capture each detail of the forest, including moss, berries, tree trunks, treetops, sky, etc., to stress the importance of nature and its connection to the video’s characters – the uncanny forest Estonians. After 45 seconds of nature shots, the first person makes a shy appearance from behind the trees. It is a red-haired woman (a model, not a singer) in a short white dress. Her hands, arms, mouth, and jawline are painted red, which suggests folkloric interpretations (Metsvahi 2013): Is it blood covering her mouth and hands? Is she a werewolf? Does she come at the viewer with some wild, raw power? Instead, she meets a blue-mouthed, blue-armed man, and they reach out for each other. With that reach, magic is born – blue blueberries and red lingonberries start rising in the air, and the forest fills with red and blue steam. Then the man and the woman also start rising in the air with the berries, exercising their supernatural powers, still reaching for each other. As they finally embrace, the red and blue steam mix, and the couple remains floating, surrounded by moonlight. To maintain the magic and tranquillity, everything takes place in slow motion. Even though the portrayal of femininity in this video is fortified by nature, visualizing the forest Estonian trope (Remmel, Jonuks 2021) as mystical and supernaturally powerful, it is firmly heteronormative – it is the meeting of the man and the woman that ignites the magic, and the

conventional colour scheme of blue for male and red for female reinforces traditional gender roles. Here, depictions of folk femininity are employed in the service of the traditional gender roles of the eco-nationalist discourse. As these forest Estonian images rely on conventional gender norms (Kaskla 2003), the connection between nature and women does not necessarily imply female empowerment.

However, according to Rambarran (2021), and Railton and Watson (2011), it is important to notice that the characters in the music video are not the singers of Trad Attack, which does not automatically tie this portrayal of femininity to Sandra Sillamaa, the only female member of Trad Attack, nor to the perceptions of femininity held by the male members of the band. In fact, in her interview, Sillamaa is very reflective about portrayals of femininity, pointing out that in the case of ethno-music, in particular, audiences really lean into the discourses of folk femininity, expecting an “authentic” version of Estonian culture, wherein nature and femininity are inextricably intertwined. The example she offers is people often suggesting that, as a folk musician, Sandra should really be living in the woods. Heidy Purga also illustrates the mainstream idea of folk femininity presented in ethno/folk music videos in her interview: “We have niche artists, such as Curly Strings, who carry forward the Southern Estonian heritage” through the images of women “sitting on a bale of straw, holding a daisy”.

In another music video for the song “What Have I Done for Love” by an indie artist Anna Kaneelina, three fairy-like Anna Pärnoja characters (the soloist of the Anna Kaneelina band) appear in the middle of a dreamy birch forest, wearing airy, red dresses, and waving red veils. In this case, the magic power embedded into femininity is the ability to multiply, which is achieved through editing techniques (Vernallis 2004). The video presents half see-through, kaleidoscopic images of Anna and her red veil, which sometimes dissolve into the trees, representing an enigmatic femininity that blends in with, or even into nature. Although her actions appear mysterious, Anna’s character is not wearing heavy makeup, her dark hair flies loose in the wind, and she is wearing a simple cut dress – all markers of traditional femininity and its “natural beauty” imperative (McCann 2015). As

the “What Have I Done for Love” lyrics talk about searching, reaching, and living for love (not love for someone, but love itself), Anna’s red dress can be seen as a signifier for love, as well as for (traditional) womanliness and feminine, romantic beauty. In the Estonian mainstream media, Anna Kaneelina is often referred to as enigmatic, primal, and mysterious – this reading aligns with what is portrayed in the video. However, in the interview, Anna reveals that when people describe her stage persona as “the primal feminine” it confuses her. “I don’t know what to do with it, it is so big. I wouldn’t know how to characterize myself using this phrase.”

A third example of the nature-inspired, romanticized pop music femininity that is reinforced in the music videos, yet questioned by the artists themselves (Rambarran 2021), comes from the video for the two-woman indie band HUNT’s song “Spring” (for this song, HUNT is accompanied by a third woman, VJ Kristin Pärn). This artsy black-and-white music video embodies strong nature vibes through its portrayals of a blooming apple tree and barefoot, white-dressed young girls – the new generation of forest Estonians – who are hugging the tree, sleeping on grass, and running barefoot in flower fields. Although the video does not explicitly demonstrate the girls having supernatural powers, it nevertheless imagines them as belonging in nature, having a close relationship with it. Since they do not share a frame with any adults, and appear to be sleeping in the forest, they can be argued to be literally *of* the forest. Similarly to Anna Kaneelina’s appearance, the girls in the “Spring” also represent natural feminine beauty through the black and white shots of their bare feet; simple white dresses and long (blonde) hair, which make them almost blend in with the tree in full bloom with white blossom. The girls are contrasted with three nostalgic-looking women (singers) in severe black gowns. They are singing in nature, wearing modest make-up, and angularly cut dark hair. The figures the singers cut clearly contrast those of the girls, yet it remains vague, in what capacity. Are they the future awaiting the young girls in white?: is this what happens as women grow up? Or are the adult women in sombre black the overseers or protectors of the girls’ playful, childish, budding femininity?

Further, as the video consists of only women – little future women in white dresses and adult women in black – the video has no heteronormative orientation towards men. The women do not seem to search for men, wait for them, or even acknowledge their existence. The non-heteronormative world created in this music video can be argued to resemble the mythical society imagined by Doris Lessing in her novel *The Cleft* (2007) which is (at least seemingly) free of men and (hetero)sexual intrigues. Overall, womanliness in this video is portrayed as natural, yet mysterious; as ascetic and simple, but also shaped by sharp contrasts.

Yet, similarly to the previous examples, the band members’ ideas of themselves do not align fully with these depictions. As band member Brigitta Davidjants explains in her interview: “The video was about some girls running in slow motion [...] I did not identify with it at all. I feel like I’m a much rougher soul than that.” She also questions the mainstream media portrayals of HUNT members as “mystical and cosmical”, confirming they “are rather down to earth women. [...] But maybe, if two women make music together people already assume it’s mysticism.” This gestures to a common trope (also noted by our interviewees) in Estonian pop music videos, where women tend to appear either solo or with a man. So, two or more women (and no men) hint at something mysterious from a heteronormative perspective – an ominously manless, mythological world like the one in *The Cleft*. Although thought-provoking, the non-heteronormative world portrayed in the video does not present same sex relationships, which were noted in two other music videos analysed, which were not linked to nature: “Tra pls” (“Fucking please”) by art pop performer Valge Tydruk, which displays two women kissing in the bath; and “Ookean” (“Ocean”) by blues band Kaisa Ling Thing in which the lead singer Kaisa (who practices gender-bending during her live shows) leaves the bar scene with another woman (instead of a man who appeared to be her cheating ex-lover).

In the music video for the WATEVA ft. Manna song “Disposable Society”, award-winning music video director Marta Vaarik portrays rapper Manna as a solo heroine – a “Mother Earth” or a goddess who saves our planet. The music video

is known for its special effects which help to visualize Manna's deep connection with nature and our planet – she has flowers covering her face, roots spreading on her arms, she seems to grow out from the exotic shrubs, there are kaleidoscopic images of bloom-like elements that seem to reproduce and multiply, etc. Although these images infuse her femininity with power, they do so through the female biological ability to reproduce, which will be further discussed in the next section.

***“And, f**k, then you also must give birth!”
Estonian pop music femininity between
biological and artistic (re)production***

The second idea that combines nature and femininity borrows from a broader alignment of women as agents of biological reproduction to the nation (Yuval-Davis 1996), nature and “Mother Earth”. Converging the representations of Estonian pop music femininities with motherhood reinforces the (eco-)nationalist ideal of a natural, childbearing woman (Kaskla 2003) whose main job in this world is to reproduce and to be a mother – whether to rebuild a nation or more broadly, humankind.

The idea of femininity as motherhood is frequently reinforced in the Estonian mainstream media. In public interviews, female pop artists are asked how they negotiate their parenting and music careers, who is watching their children when they attend public events, about their pregnancies and post-partum bodies, etc. The (eco-)nationalist contradiction between a mother and a working woman that emerged in the newly independent Estonia (Kurvinen 2008) still causes female musicians to experience various tensions in terms of choosing which fragments of their lives and identities they are willing to include in their public personas.

Most of this study's female interviewees have care duties as parents and many of them admit that negotiating motherhood and femininity is something they find quite challenging in their everyday lives. Sandra Sillamaa, for instance, opens up about how she did not discuss her first child and pregnancy in public, so motherhood would not define her:

For a long time, I thought that I must be able to take care of both – my child and my work,

and that I can't reduce my workload. I did not talk about motherhood (publicly). I was afraid that once the child comes, I won't be able to have anything else. That was my biggest fear, and I went to extremes in terms of pushing it aside.

Furthermore, Anna Kaneelina also admits the hardships of juggling children and a music career:

I'm not self-confident [...] The time is ticking and I'm thinking, oh god, what is my next step [in terms of her music career; authors]. Of course, I want to be home with my children, so I don't have to regret missing any moments with them. This [parenting] takes so much time that I don't even notice that I'm not doing anything. And suddenly I discover again that I want to do it [music]. There is a crazy whirlpool going on in my head. It's like you are split. [...] you are not one or the other, and you are not good at anything.

In her interview, Anna also expressed the conflicting nature of motherhood in a song “Mother”:

I'm happy I got to express my hardships of growing into a mother in a song. You are constantly wavering between love and fear. [...] This is my truth, and it is a special feeling when I perform this song. It is painful, and in a way, it is not beautiful.

According to Anna, the song is not for mothers only: it is also for children, as everyone is someone's child. We would argue that it can also be read as pushing back against the eco-nationalist dominant discourse that values women for being mothers. In her interview she explicitly confronts the dominant perception of femininity equalling motherhood: “I don't think that women who are mothers are somehow more women.”

Contrary to several interviewees who said that they prefer not to answer questions about motherhood in public (although the mainstream media journalists keep asking), music video director and artist Marta Vaarik uses her public persona and creative platforms to address this topic. In her interview, Vaarik speaks up about the hardships of being a single mother: “I'm a single mother and I live in a wood-heated apartment. In the winter I carry bags of firewood up the stairs

and think how idiotic it all is." She is referring to the discord between women's expectations and reality:

We (women) are being raised to live in a magic land as princesses, as little, soft, beautiful, cute things, who will be saved by a prince someday. But sooner or later we understand that no one is coming to save us, and we must be a thousand times stronger than men.

Yet Vaarik does not frame this through a lens of victimhood. Rather, she believes it is important to publicly highlight that motherhood, including single motherhood, is a position of strength:

I'm the first generation of women who can proudly say that I'm a single mother and people don't scowl at me for this. I think it is necessary to publicly show this strong woman, strong character, and to not turn her into a victim ... but to make her a power-woman. The one who we need to be as women. So that we can predict the future a little bit.

Thus Vaarik combines the notions of motherhood, which we have analysed primarily from the perspective of the reproductive links to nature, with the discourse of woman as a force of nature discussed above. In her music video for Wateva ft. Manna "Disposable Society" this comes together in an idea of mother as a force of nature. She comments on the narrative (Rambarran 2021; Vernallis 2004; Railton, Watson 2011) and images of the post-apocalyptic earth in the video: "This is 5000 years from now when everything is completely f...d up. The earth is used to the last drop." In the video, Vaarik turns rapper Manna into a heroine, a female goddess who saves the world by (re)birthing our planet. In her interview for the Estonian National Broadcaster, Vaarik discusses the video by saying: "I believe that the world needs smart and strong women, then things will get better. New humans come from inside of women. Kids and the world need to be hugged." (ERR Muusika 2021) Here, there is a reproduction of the eco-nationalist femininity that elevates motherhood, yet instead of it being disempowering or objectifying as originally attributed to the discourse (Kaskla 2003), Marta Vaarik complicates and challenges the heteronormative origins of the idea by

highlighting single-motherhood and by portraying motherhood as a supernatural force of nature. In the case of "Disposable Society" Vaarik shows it directly through the image of Venus (Manna) giving birth to the earth.

Although Vaarik's video celebrates the (biological) superpowers of women, it also elevates the "darker side" of woman- and motherhood, depicting it through Manna's transformation from a virgin girl covered with flowers and vibrant colours into a scarred and bleeding postpartum Venus – representing the price women pay for being/acting as forces of nature. As Vaarik comments in her interview with us: "Everything is on your shoulders. And f..k, then you also must give birth."

Overall, the eco-nationalist stereotype of women as reproductive agents for nature/nation (Yuval-Davis 1996; Kaskla 2003) is a topic of engaged negotiation, if not outright contestation in the constructions of Estonian pop music femininity. Although most of the interviewees critically reflect on it, motherhood nevertheless remains a crucial part of their daily lives. And whether the female members of the Estonian music industry want to express it as part of their public personas or not, the mainstream media make sure to discuss parenting in relation to women – by highlighting women's role as mothers (Elu24 2019; Öhtuleht 2019), by making lists of female celebrities who don't have children (Postimees Naine 2016), by contemplating whether women are too old to have children (Pere ja Kodu 2015), etc. As Hannaliisa Uusma from HUNT illustrates in her interview:

The expectations that we set for ourselves are still archetypical. Even if you have been living a different life for a long time, even if your mother has [...], you still don't feel perfect if you steer too far away from these archetypes. So, these stereotypes are constantly gender-policing you. It is still deep in our culture.

Conclusion

In this study we focused on the constructions of femininity in Estonian popular music. More specifically, we examined the nature-inspired themes in Estonian pop music femininities, how they are informed by the dominant local

eco-nationalist folk femininity discourse, and how renowned Estonian pop artists (and other members of the music industry), and their most watched music videos reinforce, negotiate and/or challenge these prevailing depictions of womanliness. Additionally, their understandings and enactments of femininity were placed in the broader cultural discourses prevalent in the Estonian mainstream media.

As women's strong connection with nature emerged as a significant theme within Estonian pop music femininities, we argue that the eco-nationalist discourse retains a strong foothold. However, our results show that nature and femininity are interlinked in pop music discourses of femininity via two different but connected perspectives. This highlights a recurring negotiation of the eco-nationalist narrative. The visuals and narratives in music videos routinely borrow from the vernacular of *Esthonus silvanus* and its connection to "real" Estonian-ness (Rommel, Jonuks 2021), portraying women as *forces of nature* – goddesses, fairies, witches, and other mystical beings (which can also be interpreted as enactments of post-feminist values of female strength, resilience, and independence – or as "naturally" blending in with nature. Although these depictions can be empowering because of the forest Estonian vernacular links of the *Esthonus silvanus* identity to an authentic, independent Estonianness, they are often presented in ways that reinforce dominant heteronormative values (present in both the eco-nationalist as well as the post-feminist discourses). Women in music videos often inhabit the position of a force of nature in relation to men or when sparked. When this is not the case, they are overtly framed via mystery and mysticism, which arguably situates women who are not oriented towards men as incomprehensible, and thus the magic woman as a force of nature still reinforces the heteronormativity by its "otherness". However, the interviews reveal that artists tend to question these mystical nature-inspired depictions, describing themselves as ordinary women of this world rather than the divine characters in the music videos.

The other thread that surfaced in our analysis of the depictions of nature-linked pop music femininity is one that is strongly reinforced by the mainstream media portrayals of women

in Estonian pop music – an imagery of them as agents of biological reproduction (and thus related to nature). This thread, too, bolsters the (eco-)nationalist discourse of a childbearing, natural woman whose most important role in this life is to (re)build the nation and/or humankind (Yuval-Davis 1996; Kaskla 2003: 306). This idea is being rendered more complex by female music video creators like Marta Vaarik who do portray women's essence as linked to motherhood, but whose depictions of mothers are non (hetero)normative in some way – she speaks of single mothers, mothers who do not bear the burden of motherhood easily, but rather bear visible marks of being a force of nature. Furthermore, our female study participants, most of whom were mothers, both challenge and negotiate this stereotype by confirming in the interviews that femininity should not equal motherhood, even if it often feels as if it does.

These themes surfaced multimodally, through both visual and textual representations and as expressed by the participants in the study. There is an obvious orientation to nature in Estonian pop music femininity, though it may pull in a variety of directions. On the one hand, it presents womanliness as magical and mystical, portraying women as powerful, God-like forces of nature or naturally belonging to nature. On the other hand, there are elements in this femininity that are "forced by nature", as some depictions of women follow the traditional path of eco-nationalist folk femininity that celebrates heteronormative women who are "naturally" programmed and responsible for continuing/rebirthing our nation and humankind. This in turn can be more or less subtly pushed back against. There is agency there, but one constrained by a variety of dominant discourses, and one that requires persistent effort to maintain.

By providing a case study on the representation of Estonian pop music femininities, this article expands the dominant Western conceptual framework for analysing constructions of gender in popular music/culture. The Estonian experience in constructing pop music femininities is crucial when viewed in a larger context as postmodern knowledge creation encourages the richness of small, local stories rather than one great narrative (Lyotard, as cited in Annuk 2019: 407).

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Looduse jõul või looduse sunnil? „Eestlased on metsarahvas”, popmuusika naiselikkuses

Kerli Kirch Schneider, Katrin Tiidenberg

Käesolev artikkel uurib loodusest inspireeritud naiselikkuse kujutamist Eesti popmuusikas ning viise, kuidas need kuvandid suhestuvad kohaliku valitseva ökorahvusliku naiselikkuse diskursusega. Täpsemalt vaadeldakse, kuidas tunnustatud Eesti artistid (ja teised muusikatööstuse esindajad) ning nende vaadatuimad muusikavideod neid domineerivaid naiselikkuse kuvandeid juurutavad, problematiseerivad ja/või vaidlustavad. Lisaks uuritakse nende arusaamasid ja naiselikkuse väljendamist ka Eesti peavoolumeedias levinud laiemate kultuuridiskursuste raames.

Tulemused näitavad, et looduse ja naiselikkuse suhe on Eesti popmuusikas väljendatud kahe erineva, kuid omavahel seotud vaatenurga kaudu. Muusikavideote visuaalid ja narratiivid laenavad rutiinselt *Esthonus silvanus*'e ehk metsaeestlase pärimusest (Remmel, Jonuks 2021) ning selle seostest „päris” eestlusega, kujutades naisi loodusjõududena – jumalannade, haldjate, nõidade ja muude müstiliste olenditena – või „loomuliku” loodusesse sulandumise kaudu. Kuigi sellised naiselikkuse kuvandid võivad näida jõustavana – kuna metsaeestluse pärimus ühendab *Esthonus silvanus*'e identiteedi autentse, iseseisva eestlusega –, esitatakse neid sageli viisil, mis tugevdab ökorahvuslikes diskursustes domineerivaid heteronormatiivseid väärtusi. Teisalt aga näitavad intervjuud, et naismuusikud ise kipuvad nendes müstilistes loodusest inspireeritud naiselikkusekuvandites kahtlema, kirjeldades end pigem ilmalike naistena kui muusikavideotes nähtud jumalike tegelastena.

Teine uuringus esile kerkinud loodusest inspireeritud popmuusika naiselikkuse kujutamise viis on näidata naisi kui bioloogilise (looduse) taastootmise teostajaid. Seda kuvandit juurutatakse eelkõige Eesti peavoolumeedias ning see toetab (öko)rahvuslikus diskursuses esile tõstetud ideed loomulikust, lapseootel naisest, kelle tähtsaim roll siin elus on rahvuse ja/või inimkonna (üles)ehitamine. Seda ideed komplitseerivad naissoost muusikavideoloogid, kes küll kujutavad naiste olemust seotuna emadusega, kuid kelle emakujutus ei ole mingil moel (hetero)normatiivne. Selle stereotüübi seavad kahtluse alla ka naissoost intervjuueeritavad, kellest enamik on emad, kinnitades intervjuudes, et naiselikkus ei tohiks võrduda emadusega, isegi kui see sageli nii tundub.

Esitades juhtumiuuringu Eesti popmuusika naiselikkuse kuvanditest, laiendab käesolev artikkel Lääne domineerivat kontseptuaalset raamistikku popmuusika/-kultuuri sookonstruktsioonide analüüsimisel. Eesti kogemus popmuusika naiselikkuse konstrueerimisel on laiemas kontekstis ülioluline, kuna postmodernne teadmusloome toetab pigem väikeste, kohalike lugude rikkust kui üht suurt narratiivi.