

# A WOMAN'S VOICE IN AN EPIC: TRACING GENDERED MOTIFS IN ANNE VABARNA'S PEKO

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## ABSTRACT

In the article\* the gendered motifs found in Anne Vabarna's Seto epic *Peko* are analysed. Besides the narrative telling of the life of the male hero, the motives regarding eating, refusing to eat or offering food, and the aspect of the female body or its control deserve to be noticed. These scenes do not communicate the main plot, they are often related to minor characters of the epic and slow down the narrative, but at the same time they clearly carry artistic purpose and meaning. I consider these motifs, present in the liminal parts of the epic, to be the dominant symbols of the epic where the author's feminine world is being exposed. Observing these motifs of *Peko* in the context of Seto religious worldview, the life of Anne Vabarna and the social position of Seto women, the symbols become eloquent and informative.

KEYWORDS: Seto epic • gendered motifs • female voice • religious worldview • symbols

Anne Vabarna (1877–1964) was a remarkable Seto woman of whose creation we have documentation, unlike many other illiterate Seto women who were equally talented in traditional poetry. We can listen to Vabarna's voice thanks to the lively interest of folklorists at the time and thanks to her own active participation in the recording process. In addition to her heritage stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives, several of Anne Vabarna's recordings and texts have been published, in addition to a remarkable quantity of studies based on her texts.<sup>1</sup> The Seto recognise Vabarna as one of the greatest female singers and her epic *Peko* is the Seto national epic. Vabarna's epic heritage (see also 16 short synopses of epics she performed, published in Honko *et al.* 2003: 71–77) is now available to the wider audiences: *Peko* (published in 1995, translated into Finnish in 2006, an English version exists already), the double epic *The Maiden's Death Song & The Great Wedding* (2003, with a parallel translation into English), verse epic *Ale* and the second part of *Peko* are available online (2002a, b).

Vabarna's songs and epic heritage (about 150,000 verse-lines in total) are a "thick corpus"<sup>2</sup> for a researcher, but at the same time a large part of her epic creation can be interpreted as a powerful ethnographic description, created by an representative of Seto culture, Anne Vabarna. For example, *The Maiden's Death Song & The Great Wedding* is a beautiful story and an exceptional "twin epic",<sup>3</sup> but it is also a wonderful insight into Seto wedding rituals. While contemporary cultural researchers do field work at home

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Photo 1. Anne Vabarna (in the middle with child) with her choir, Tonja village.  
Photo by A. Rulli 1950. ERA, Foto 2274.

and use contemporary fiction as ethnographic material (Ortner 1991: 179–185), we may interpret Vabarna's texts as a profound insight into one person's world or a generalization of the world of the Seto at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Seto epic *Peko* was a result of the cooperation between Anne Vabarna and the folklore collector Paulopriit Voolaine.<sup>4</sup> Voolaine let the experienced traditional singer Vabarna carry through her idea of a Seto epic by giving her a summary of what afterwards became the epic *Peko*. Voolaine's letter, containing the summary or keywords for Vabarna's epic, has not been preserved, but researchers have made speculations about its contents and Voolaine's role in the composition of Vabarna's epic. For Estonians, who have had a long-lasting desire for epics (see Mirov 2002b; Kuutma 2005: 181 cont.), this folkloristic experiment has become an important milestone, even though a whole half of a century passed before the epic was published. For the Setos, *Peko* has acquired a special symbolic value.

When we read *Peko* while turning our gaze from the macro-level<sup>5</sup> to the micro-level, a completely different and deeper epic will appear on the side of the simple heroic story. The main story line, which is the result of the collaboration of Paulopriit Voolaine and Anne Vabarna, where the heroic acts of *Peko* are described, contains many smaller story lines, scenes and motifs that are no less significant than the main one. If we use the metaphor of bone structure to describe Voolaine's story (supposedly the story of the hero *Peko*), other supporting stories and scenes could be described as ligaments, muscles and blood of the epic, and why not even the nervous system. The material that holds the bone structure together cannot be considered simply a "filling" or an "accidental

material", on the contrary, here we find the heart of Vabarna's epic that gives meaning and colour to the whole text. In these minor story lines the ideas, tendencies and meanings of Vabarna's text are revealed. Here we find characters that play supporting roles from the viewpoint of the main story line, but who have a central part in the epic from the ideological viewpoint – they are: Peko's mother, Peko's wife Nabra, daughter-in-law Anne, orphan, etc. We can also observe a certain slowing down of the main narrative in the scenes involving the supporting characters – instead we have minor events, scenes where getting dressed, eating and other ritualistic behaviours are described.

In my article, I want to concentrate on those microscopic story lines and motifs<sup>6</sup> that reflect upon the Seto women's everyday life and thus represent specific female subject matter and poetics. My observation takes into account the viewpoint of the epic's author. I will make an effort to see the whole epic in relation to its creator and her social surroundings. In my work I will attempt not to just *look at* Anne Vabarna and her text, but to be *with* them (see also Bynum 1992a: 33; Abu-Lughod 1991). In my role as a researcher, I try to reach the author of the text, add to an observation from a higher ground also observations from the lower ground; to find some other, more empathic and fair ways to interpret the text. I find that this kind of very close dialogue and awareness of the social and religious surroundings of *Peko* help to open the text more widely and from a viewpoint that stands closer to the author, Anne Vabarna.<sup>7</sup>

I treat Vabarana's epic as a text that has been created and finished under certain conditions, while this text is regarded to be perfect and self-saturated. It reflects its author and the general social context. One of the goals of this article is also to call for the rehabilitation of *Peko*<sup>8</sup> and to show that this epic is something more than just a curiosity that merits only a brief mention. Furthermore, I do not support the idea that *Peko* is a sign of the decline of the Seto traditional song (Arukask 2003: 156 cont.); in my opinion it is a text that requires rigorous attention of the folklorists.

#### A WOMAN'S VOICE IN THE EPIC

Estonian and Seto traditional songs are considered to be feminine. *Peko* belongs to the archaic period of Seto song at least formally, already because of its poetic system. As traditional songs have mostly been recorded from women, calling it feminine appears fairly adequate. At the same time, this supposedly feminine nature of the traditional songs has rarely been described nor defined.<sup>9</sup> What is this feminine nature and how do the so-called feminine features appear in the *regilaul*? If femininity is a quality that appears in the poetics, themes or performing traditions, then what is it exactly?

My intention is to analyse the motifs of *Peko* as a work of art, without forgetting that we are dealing not with a simple artefact, but a creation born under specific conditions. I will consider the context where *Peko* was created, the social status and gender of the creator as socially determining factors due to which the concept and imagery are what they are. I observe single motifs, but I will try to avoid the fragmentation of the work and of its structure. I will analyse the imagery of *Peko* as a part of the whole, as a part of the great continuity where creation is linked to its author's gender, social and geographic position.

I want to analyse some of the motifs and imagery in Anne Vabarna's Seto epic that

appear to reflect the *realia* and mentalities that surrounded the Seto women in the beginning of the 20th century. My goal is not a complete or exhaustive analysis of the motifs, I observe some similar groups of motifs, the “dominant symbols” that appear to represent certain ethics and imply feminine experience. While analysing these motifs in relation to gendered experience,<sup>10</sup> I propose to focus on their gender-specific nature. I believe, as Caroline Walker Bynum does, that “an awareness of the genderedness of symbol users will enrich our understanding of both symbol and humanity” (1986: 16). Two groups of motifs on which I will focus in the following are eating, abstinence from eating, the human body and motifs related to bodily control in general.

## LIMINALITY AND DOMINANT SYMBOLS

To mark the place of the feminine motifs in Anne Vabarna’s *Peko*, the notion of liminality can be used. The parts of the epic with the majority of motifs regarding food and bodily control can be called liminal.<sup>11</sup> Following the ideas of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, as well as literally, these parts of the text mark certain “thresholds”, these transitions are small and insignificant from the main narrative’s viewpoint. They can also be interpreted as the “lyric” parts of the epic, following the Estonian tradition of song interpretation. My intention is to show that these lyric transitions have an important message and express a specific feminine experience.<sup>12</sup>

After Turner, human experiences (including rituals and narratives) can be considered as social dramas, the structures of which resemble van Gennep’s *rites de passage* (rites that accompany all transformations concerning location, state, social position and age). According to Van Gennep, such transformations have three phases: separation, margin (liminal phase) and aggregation (Turner 2007 [1969]: 94). In the liminal phase, according to Turner, the so-called dominant symbols come to the foreground – the symbols in which the incompatible is concentrated and united for the liminal moment and normative and emotional meanings are joined. Therefore the dominant symbols (for example, *Euphorbia* for the Ndembus) can be understood only in their specific context (see Bynum 1992a: 30).

Turner (1982: 20–21) calls his approach also “comparative symbology” and emphasises that ritual symbols must not be analysed separately, but as a part of the continuity of events, the symbols are an inherent part of the social processes. According to Turner, symbols are multi-vocal, condensing and experienced; in order to understand them, the researcher has to be *with* the person using the symbols to know their characteristic “dramas” and their context (Bynum 1992a: 51).

## EATING AND ABSTINENCE FROM EATING

I have re-read Anne Vabarna’s *Peko* several times, and in doing so an interesting fact has caught my attention: many dramatic events of the epic are often linked to small motifs regarding eating, refusing to eat or preparing food. It seems that scenes of eating do not appear accidentally in the epic, neither are they without significance. On the contrary, they play the role of highlighting dramatic allegories or important story lines. The dra-

matic tension of such small motifs of everyday life can easily be overlooked if the text is read without taking into consideration its author or the social context of the motifs. Abstinence from eating, feeding someone or preparing a meal for someone were undoubtedly actions loaded with significance for the Seto women, more dramatic than for a contemporary reader. These are feminine realia, small dramas, detectable only under a “magnifying glass”. The location of these motifs in Anne Vabarna’s epic’s liminal moments shows that for Vabarna, as a Seto woman and a house mistress, those images and themes were dramatically charged and had important significations.

The eating motifs have very different semantics and the eating scenes in the liminal parts of the epic could be classified by signification conditionally as dramatic, sacred and erotic. These scenes are often multi-layered, they have different significations and functions at the same time. For example, the function of the dramatic eating scenes is to emphasise the intensity of the situation or adding an allegoric dimension to it. Dramatic eating scenes include the parts of the epic where someone refuses or waives eating and the scenes where there are no eaters and the food is getting cold. As an example, to emphasise the anxiety of a mother waiting for the wedding guests, Vabarna describes how the food meant for the guests is warm and on the table, but nobody has arrived yet.

The description of Peko’s mother’s illness and death does not make the linear heroic tale move forward, but it is told in great detail and with deep emotion, and it plays an important role in the epic’s micro-level. Many scenes relating to eating and refusing to eat that have a great symbolic significance are there to emphasise the tragic nature



*Photo 2. Setos are eating on the family graves in Taelova cemetery.  
Photo by A. O. Väisänen 1913. ERA, Foto 968.*

of the events. In the micro-scene where the mother, who has fallen ill after the father's death, is carried to the dinner table, but she cannot eat anything, Anne Vabarna uses the motif that is commonly used in *regilaul* tradition in scenes relating to a scare, illness or weakness: *pala puuhu pudõsi, kãkk lakja lagosi* (could not hold her bread, spilled the crumbs onto the floor). Dropping food or careless eating is a bad omen and from the cook's point of view it is an extraordinary and ill-boding event.

Peko yet cared for her gently, held the childbearer by her arm:  
held her when going to eat, supported her by the plate,  
they all ate together, had their breakfast all together.  
Daughter-in-law gave her soft bread, passed on a half a roll – 1745  
mother could not hold her bread, spilled the crumbs onto the floor.<sup>13</sup>

Before Peko's mother's death, Nabra cooks especially good dishes to give the ailing mother strength. But the mother is so ill that she refuses the food.

Oh that good daughter-in-law, the very fleet-footed orderly –  
she baked a bread without her seeing, the sick childbearer watching  
(old mother liked the smoke no more, the birdie hated the haze of baking).  
The daughter-in-law softly entered, quietly went to the bed, 2135  
held out fresh bread on her palm, grainy gruel in her hand,  
good words she uttered, spoke so soft and gently:  
"Oh my dear husband's mother, darling mama of my spouse,  
I cooked you grain-filled gruel, daughter-in-law baked you honey-sweet bread,  
I picked a new spoon from its peg, picked a bowl with some flowers! 2145  
Take a bite of my grain-filled gruel, taste my honey-sweet bread!  
My gruel might make you feel better, my bread make you stay here longer?"  
Mother sighed from the bed straw, raised her head from the pillow:  
"No longer wish I grain-filled gruel, or to try to taste that honey-sweet bread."

A similar scene, where treatment in the form of food is refused, is evoked in the epic upon Peko's father's death. The father is not able to drink the broth made from herbs that Peko offers him.

Peko sat down by his father, on the bed of his darling sire,  
he took flower brew from a bowl, blossom vapor from a vessel. 1655  
Father no more took a sip, not a drop could touch his tongue.

In these scenes, one learns about the typical experiences of Seto women as sick-nurses,<sup>14</sup> traditional healers and cooks. Simple scenes, where food is being prepared, offered or refused, carry probably an intense and meaningful signification for Anne Vabarna as a Seto woman. The motif of a person refusing food repeatedly suggests artistic purposes. Scenes where an offering, prepared with care, is refused are dramatic for the cook or the person offering the food and symbolise the frustration and helplessness of the female character.

A similar scene where food is refused can mark other liminal situations. If Peko's mother and father refuse food before passing from one realm to another, Peko himself abstains from eating before going to war. Again, the person offering the food is Nabra and the frustration of the caring wife that we see in this scene reflects allegorically the

helplessness and despair of a wife sending her husband off to war.

Then Nabra uttered, thus spoke her mind:  
“Husband, take one final meal at home, eat some tasty food!  
Oh my dearest good husband, most darling spouse,  
rather would I feed you words, give some stories for you to drink, 2485  
I would give you sweetest soup, pies would I give you oh so soft.”  
Peko’s food all hit the spot, the drink sank right to his toes.  
Peko ate and had tears running, took his bread and lamented.  
Nabra put then cakes in sack, a bag of pies prepared for Peko.  
Peko thus then uttered, he then spoke his mind: 2495  
“I’ll have no time to eat there, dear, to take a bite of your bread!  
Better give this cake to the poor, donate your pies to the ones deprived,  
then they’ll mention my name, remember the name of the strong one!  
Jesus will come and offer air to eat there, Mary will feed me with vapor –  
Jesus will make me sharper with his air, Mary stronger with her vapor.” 2505

In this scene where a wife offers food to her husband, who is in a liminal situation (going to war), we can also see erotic allusions. “Feeding with words” and “relieving thirst with stories” before the meal and the “soft pies” that the wife offers his husband, seem to have a double meaning. Therefore in this scene it seems that the husband refuses not only food, but also intimacy with his wife. This microscopic feminine drama before important events – going to war – appears to be a skilful, tension-building construction by Anne Vabarna.

A similar scene where Nabra offers Peko food, takes place also on their first meeting. This time, Nabra offers Peko an apple that the latter accepts and eats. In this scene, the erotic allusions are even more evident.<sup>15</sup> The young girl picks an apple and asks for it to be eaten “gently”. Peko eats the apple and feels “his love grow”.

Look at that young maiden, that Nabra the lilting one –  
she picked apples from the tree, beautiful berries from the cherry: 645  
“Eat this, my handsome bridegroom, my famous courter!”  
Oh that bridegroom, that tall man, the groom of height,  
he took a bite, he swallowed twice, the dear one for the third time,  
then the young man had eaten, had eaten and had quaffed.  
The young man soon felt his love grow, his feelings deepen. 655

In addition to clear erotic allusions, beliefs, about the power of the person offering food over the eater, appear.<sup>16</sup> In these motifs, power relations become evident – who feeds whom, who accepts the food and from whom. In the continuation of the same scene, Peko’s wife also sends apples to his parents to win their approval. It is clear that this denotes more than just apples here. Nabra recalls through Anne Vabarna’s will the apple-maid from the song type “Apple-maid” (*Uibonō nāiokōnō*) where the girl is related to her apple tree through a relationship of contiguity, but probably they are also united through a relationship of part and a whole. Therefore the eating of the apples by the bridegroom and his parents can be interpreted as the acceptance of a sacrificial offering rather than a simple gift.

Father then ate his apple, and mama took a bite of the berry, 735  
 father ate and said, mother tasted and commented:  
 "Never have we eaten such an apple before, never tasted such a berry.  
 Where did you get them from, dear son, who gave them to you, darling child?"  
 Peko uttered thus, told them his mind:  
 "Your delightful daughter-in-law, your son's future wife has sent them." 745

The motif of eating apples in *Peko* appears to metaphorically allude to marriage or a bond between the spouses. After Peko's father's death he appears to the mother in her sleep and complains that he misses his wife, he would like to eat apples like others in the other world, but it is not possible because of the absence of the wife, and so the apple is not eaten and dries up.

My husband thus told me, my man taught me in my sleep:  
 all others have each other in paradise, march in groups through the berry-garden.  
 My husband spoke: "I'm so alone!", my spouse complained:  
 "All others eat their apples together, taste honey-berries cut in half,  
 my golden apples are going dry, the dear berries getting spoiled – 1945  
 I cannot sit and eat alone, I'm not a man to cut the halves:  
 they have set a share for wives, your part is there still waiting.  
 Therefore I came to get you quickly, stood early at your door!"

In this story of eating apples that Vabarna has expanded, a traditional didactic motif from Seto wedding songs appears. The bride and groom are told: "Eat the egg, cut in half, eat it together" to incite them to live in harmony and take care of each other.<sup>17</sup> Anne Vabarna has interpreted this motif word by word in the story of Peko's mother and father and she has developed it further; the original motif gives the newlyweds the advice to share the egg, but in Vabarna's version the egg has become an apple that can only be eaten by the couple together. In *Peko*, a traditional version of the motif of eating an egg also appears. Jesus and Mary give advice to Nabra, who is going to get married, to live a harmonious marriage. Alongside the motif of sharing an egg, another food-related traditional motif appears in a slightly modified form – the husband must feed the wife and the wife must cover the husband.

Split the egg you eat in half, eat the halves you two together!  
 Take your orders from his father, run to where his mama requests, 1065  
 do try more without these orders, do run more without requests,  
 then his father might think well of you, his mother might well like you!  
 Now I'll recite the good recital, tie your wedding knot more proper,  
 set you, children, in your wedlock, tie you, ducks, in knot of marriage –  
 may the husband feed his wife, may she find clothes for her spouse! 1075

#### OFFERING FOOD AND SACRAL MEALS

The scenes where a person who refuses food decides to give the food to someone else can also be included in the dramatic eating motifs. The ones who refuse food are weak and in a vulnerable state – Peko's mother is dying and Peko is going off to war, but the



*Photo 3. The beggars are given farmer's cheese and bread on Pentecost next to Värška church of St. George.  
Photo by V. Säägi 1929. ERA, Foto 666.*

food is offered to others who are even weaker in a way (children, beggars). Through this action, the character who abstains from food seems to redeem his behaviour that constitutes a deviation from the norm. The offering of food to the poor has been a tradition related to religious feasts and holy sites for Seto women. Offering food has had a religious and sacred meaning. In the beginning of the 20th century, numerous beggars and cripples gathered near the churches and graveyards during religious feasts and Seto women brought offerings to them, knowing that good deeds are rewarded in the other world and that the suffrages offered by the poor reaches God's ears before everyone else's. In some Seto regions, there was a tradition to make offerings of food to poor-houses (*puhadelnja*) before Easter. This was done to atone for the sins before the only communion in the year.

In Anne Vabarna's family there seems to have been a very strong belief that the practice of offering food and taking care of the poor had a direct impact on the status that the benefactor could acquire in the afterlife. A recording of a lamentation, by Anne Vabarna's daughter Matriona Suuvere, is preserved in the Estonian Folklore Archives that she performed on her mother's grave in 1976. In her lamentation Matriona tells about her dream that showed her mother in heaven where Jesus and Mary fed her, because she had lived a god-fearing and virtuous life on earth. Matriona recounts her raising nine children, feeding the beggars and the crippled and giving them shelter, to indicate her mother's benevolence and piety.<sup>18</sup>

Dearest mama, you did not let beggars go without food, without tasting even a grain.

Dearest mama, if the beggars stayed late, after the sun was gone,  
Dearest mama, the beggars stayed for the night to sleep in our house.

(Pino, Sarv 1981: 27)

In Anne Vabarna's *Peko*, the hero, who is heading off to war, asks for the food he is unable to eat to be given to the poor, so that they would pray for him when he is in the battleground (see previous example). In the epic, other similar motifs of offering food can be found. The everyday experiences and folkloric interpretation of Eastern Orthodox spirituality are reflected in Anne Vabarna's descriptions. When Peko's mother's care and good nature are described, we are also told how she does not stop working, even if she is the mistress of a rich farm, but instead she bakes bread for the poor. Such passages mark Peko's mother's virtuous and god-fearing nature.

Peko's sweet mother, beloved gentle mama –  
she led the life of the righteous, the darling one did good: 335  
she cared for the poor, looked after for those deprived,  
his mother baked bread for the poor, made scones for the mourners  
from the grain the strong one had sacked, from what Peko had stored away.

Other similar motifs can be found in the epic. After Peko's mother's funeral, Nabra invites the widows and spinsters of the village to taste the traditional Eastern Orthodox funeral dishes *kutja*<sup>19</sup> and *kiisla*.<sup>20</sup> Motifs of offering food appear also in the didactic parts of the epic, where Anne Vabarna describes life after Peko's death and gives guidance for a virtuous and ideal life. Among other teachings we also find the descriptions of Seto women's everyday religious practices, such as advice to continue to offer bread of freshly harvested crop to the monastery's icons and the poor-house of Petseri on the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God.

I myself have baked that bread, made good round breads,  
I baked six round breads, seven loaves of church bread,  
I put six loaves in a sack, boldly into my bag, 5395  
went to Petseri on Mary's Day, marched to meet Holy Mary  
to the site where Mary slept, the great mighty giant was at rest.  
I took them six round breads, seven loaves of church bread.  
One I gave to St. Michael, the other half took to a poorhouse,  
to the parish's widowed women, the stately mourning people. 5405  
They took the bread with blessings, held gently in their palms,  
they gave me a hundred thanks, said a prayer for the white bread,  
they prayed to the maker of fresh bread, the baker of new loaves.  
The gratitude of poor flew high, the prayer of mourners reached paradise.  
I put a round loaf to the image, close to the glorious glass, 5415  
the one called the old Holy Mary, a glorious image behind the glass –  
there I put it on the table, in front of the holy icon.

Therefore the scenes of offering food reflect upon the religious views of Seto women and their appearance in the epic mark sacred or ethically complex moments that the author wants to emphasise.

Preparing food, eating or abstinence from eating function as powerful cultural metaphors. For Orthodox Seto women, eating or refusing to eat has the connotation of an

ethical-moral choice. Fasting, a desirable, but also physically and mentally demanding effort has been a weekly practice for religious Seto women. Those who did not keep the fast three times a week, and during the four longer fasts of the year, changed their eating habits at least for the Great Lent.<sup>21</sup> Occasions where fasting has influenced religious Seto women to change their eating habits radically and permanently are also known.<sup>22</sup>

Fasting is a clearly feminine activity in Seto culture, in the beginning of the 20th century women were much more faithful to the religious practices than men. This also includes strict fasts.

Woman's nature conforms also more strictly to fasting than man's. Fasting would long ago have disappeared among the Seto, if the women had kept it as slack and weakly as the men. The men who go inland to comb flax, or collect rags, eat all that is set before them even on "great fast" days, while at home their wives and children watch carefully that non "eating-day" food enters their mouths.

(H II 63, 452 (5) < Setomaa, Vastseliina parish – Jaan Sandra (1900).)

The fact that women fasted, and men did not, does not mean that women stopped preparing non-fast food during fasts. Women had their private dishes and cutlery so as not to "pollute" them with animal products.<sup>23</sup> They also kept preparing regular dishes and offered them to the men.<sup>24</sup> Seto fast-keepers were probably inspired by the legends of saints who lived for years, eating only grass or communion bread. Such stories have also been told about the local Seto saints. Legends about St. Onufrius of the Mõla Church and about blessed Matvei both include such motifs.

For Seto women, fasting could be a clear and explicit sign of gaining control over their earthly bodies. Just as in the case of medieval saints (Bynum 1992b: 140),<sup>25</sup> the disappearance of menstruation after fasting and hard physical labour was a clear sign of victory over the irrational body. Seto women believed that the menstrual cycle was a punishment for women (Kalkun 2007: 7), and a temporary pause in such a possibly embarrassing and bothersome occurrence was definitely an encouragement for the person keeping the fast.

A religious refusal of certain foods exists also in Anne Vabarna's *Peko*. Vabarna tells how Jesus and Mary have created the world and set in place the fasts for the Seto. Eating turnips, a traditional food for fasting, makes "the tongue steady and the mind wise". Vabarna thus emphasises the usefulness of fasting. The virtuous, pain-enduring orphan of Vabarna's epic also eats traditional fasting foods like turnips and garlic, becoming only better and more beautiful through this.

Besides the sacral refusal of food, sacral feeding scenes also appear in the epic. In these scenes, the hierarchy of the feeder and the character fed is clearly set in place. Jesus or Mary feed the ill or the ones in pain and thus restore their health. In such feeding episodes, Eucharistic connotation is evident and here the beliefs of the Orthodox Seto about the healing power of communion bread (*prosvenja*) are reflected. Jesus and Mary appear to Nabra who is weak after giving birth and feed her white bread.<sup>26</sup> It is highly possible that the bread given to Nabra is directly related to communion bread. The fact that *prosvenja* is simply called *bread*, points to the fact that for a simple Christian like Anne Vabarna, there was no difference between the Body of Christ distributed in church and regular bread.

Jesus gave her food from his bag, sweet bread from his pocket. 146  
Jesus gave and said, Mary bent down and ordered:  
“Eat, woman, get well, take a bite of the bread, away with the pain!”  
The sick one ate and got well, the woman took a bite and the pain was gone.

In the same way Jesus and Mary appear to feed the sick on several other occasions. In the part where the miracles performed by Jesus are described, there is a story where Jesus restores the health of a person by asking them to eat. Jesus and Mary also help, in the same way, Peko who has escaped war and prison.

#### WOMAN’S BODY AND CONTROL OVER IT

After reading Anne Vabarna’s long autobiographical song, several passages describing physical pain, despair, fainting, collapsing, sickness and traumas emerge beside the scenes of crying or just pointing to crying, largely common in Seto lyrics, especially in the autobiographical songs (Kalkun 2004). In *Peko*, such small everyday traumas seem to carry artistic purposes. Therefore, as eating scenes are not simply “fillings”, loosely tied to the story line, describing such small traumas seems to have its own symbolic value and add support to certain scenes where tension or tense atmosphere are created.

For example, the melodramatic scenes, where someone faints or collapses, tell of women’s small everyday dramas and carry most probably the function of influencing the reader. For Seto singers, influencing the listeners through song has been of great importance. The singer who was able to invoke certain emotions in the listeners – make them cry, laugh, or become angry – was a good singer. For example, in the compendium of Seto lamentations for the dead, the authors of some of the texts recall with pride several years after the real lamenting situation, how their lamentations made the listeners cry. For example, Aksenia Männapuu has told:

My husband would not let me lament. I lamented when he went out to take care of the horse. When I was in church, I started to lament with words, but then all the others started to cry when they saw that... a daughter was crying over her mother, everyone feels sad in that situation. (Pino, Sarv 1981: 29)

In Anne Vabarna’s family, stories of their mother’s powerful lamenting were narrated. Her daughter Matriona told a family legend how her mother moved her audience to tears in 1913 in Helsinki (*ibid.*). Probably Anne had recalled this event herself on several occasions and all family members knew the story.

The fainting scenes probably express the fear of a body that is no longer under the control of its owner. Losing consciousness breaks the normal and safe situation where people rule over their irrational bodies. Melodramatic fainting scenes appear in the highly tense parts of Vabarna’s narratives. In her autobiographical song, Anne Vabarna sings about her older sister who is going to lament near the body of their dead mother and she faints. Fainting adds a dramatic effect to lamenting, an emotionally straining experience for the lamenter as well as for the listeners.

Look at my tall sister, my delightful berry,  
she could not enter the house, come near the threshold,

she was carried on two hands, she was carried inside on five fingers.  
 She saw her mother on the long bench, near the empty bed,  
 she went to lament over her mother, wail near the carrier.  
 Sister fell down as a nettle, fell to the floor as a raspberry.

(S 123828/9 (55) 1925)

The themes of sickness and death point also to an irrational, uncontrollable body. In *Peko*, the sick mother faints unexpectedly after going to sauna. Her health had seemed getting better before. This dramatic event alludes to the imminent death of the mother and the final loss of control over her body.

When Nabra was putting on her shirt, she was slipping into her dress,  
 grandmother then weakened like nettle, fell back on her hands like raspberry  
 twigs. 1855

Peko gently pulled her to his lap, took the dear one on his arms,  
 put the shawl around her head, the big cloth on her face  
 so that wind won't hurt his mother, sun won't shine upon his mama.  
 An old head avoids the sun that is hot, an old back dislikes strong wind.

A similar scene, typical to Vabarna, is a small motif where the daughter-in-law, upset by the mother's illness, hits her head against the doorpost when she brings grave-clothes for the mother. Here we see another scene where the spirit, shaken by emotions, cannot control the body anymore, thus causing a trauma.

Daughter-in-law ran thus to the chest, stumbled down to the box,  
 she struck her head to the jamb, hit her shoulders also numb, 2215  
 brought things to mother crying, to the childbearer weeping.

Other small motifs representing intimately feminine experiences or making reference to specific physiological processes can be found in the epic if we read it carefully. For example, when writing about the sufferings of the Seto people's emigration to Siberia, Anne describes how the women "were scared" and "sweating" when the train that was supposed to take them far away from Petseri, arrived at the station. In the same way, Anne, who has herself sung the wedding lamentations and "bowed",<sup>27</sup> describes how the bride feels hot from singing, crying and bowing.

Anne bent down in front of Jesus, bowed to the ground to Mary.  
 The maiden was hot from bowing, felt heat rising from bending. 4015  
 Anne bowed and thus wept, bent her head and thus lamented:  
 "Only God knows, dear God, only Mary knows, the meek one,  
 what kind of life will wait for me ahead, what kind of days for me to see,  
 what this life will bring me, the term in a strange house present."

Anne Vabarna uses poetics that differ from the general *regilaul* tradition, at least in the parts that concern depicting bodies and minor emotions. In comparison to the predominant tradition, Anne Vabarna's style is more naturalistic or realistic. In the scene of Peko's mother's death, a wonderfully poetic scene, the convulsions of the dying are described along with the last breath.

They lifted mother on a bench, set her lying by the wall. 2225  
 Mother's chin began to twitch, gasp for air there on the straw.

Peko put a candle in her hand, clasped her fingers right around it,  
 she felt the candle oh no more, the long wax touched her hand no more.  
 The candle was burning so nicely, the wax burning so brightly.  
 Mother breathed in once, she gasped for air another time, 2235  
 on the third round she stopped, the sweet one fell asleep.  
 Her head rested in the lap of Jesus, she fell onto the hands of Mary.  
 The darling mama was thus dead, her spirit set to rest.

At the same time, in addition to such developments, Vabarna uses tools found in tradition to implement her aesthetic aspirations. The motif “the hands of the duck made no move, her/his fingers too weak to bend; the hands reached not to tie her/his feet, the fingers to lace her/his shoes” used in lyric songs, but also in lamentations to express bodily weakness or becoming stiff with fear, is used in the epic on three occasions. On one occasion, Vabarna uses the motif in a literal sense, describing Peko’s son who is unable to play *kannel*<sup>28</sup> when his father is going off to war, as his fingers have become stiff. On other two occasions, the image is used in a more traditional, metaphoric sense. It is used to describe the pain of the Seto leaving for Siberia and the despair of Nabra who waits for her husband to return from the war.

Oh that wife of Peko, the graceful grieving Nabra – 3015  
 she waited for Peko for three days, expected him home for two days,  
 she waited late at night, looked out early in the morning.  
 It was hard to fall asleep, or find a rest from all her thoughts,  
 there flew ten inches of water to the sheets, thirty inches of water on her bed –  
 no flow of brook water, nor was it water from a well, 3025  
 these were all her tears, water shed straight from her eyes.  
 No food she ate went hit the spot, nor the drink sink to her toes.  
 for three days she ate not a spoonful, nor a plateful of any food;  
 the hands of the duck made no move, her fingers too weak to bend,  
 the hands reached not to tie her feet, the fingers to lace her shoes. 3035

Numerous crying scenes in the epic refer to the same problematic of irrational body and bodily control. Crying was clearly outlined and dosed for Seto women by their culture. Crying was a recommended and normal behaviour in some ritually determined cases like funerals and weddings.<sup>29</sup> Other beliefs limited crying. At one point after the burial, the wife had to stop crying, because cautionary tales tell of women to whom the dead appear, drowned in excessive tears. It was considered inappropriate to cry in public after the wedding. When the strength of Nabra is emphasised in the epic and the author wishes to make the readers feel for Peko’s wife, we see scenes where Nabra is not allowed to cry in public. As Peko’s mother had forbidden her from crying, Nabra does not dare to cry near the mother-in-law’s dead body, she cries caring for the cattle and going to the well. A similar motif is usually found in songs about the bad husband. Anne Vabarna sets the motif in a new context.

As she had spoken, so it happened, as she had advised, so they did:  
 daughter-in-law wept by the well, went to lament in the barn,  
 all her cows were grieving, her cattle were in mourning.  
 She could not lament at her feet, weep too close by mother’s head,

wherever she went, she wept, wherever she looked, she lamented. 2255  
 Daughter-in-law called: "What shall we do?", asked old mama for her help:  
 "Oh I'm sitting by the side of a cold one, by the feet which get cool,  
 no more does she call me her daughter, title me her gentle daughter-in-law!"

A similar motif appears also when Nabra falls into the hands of the Russians, but she cannot cry openly. She has escaped death, because she has promised to sing beautifully to the Russians. Vabarna seems to glorify with these motifs the extraordinary will power of such a woman, as well as her control over physical body and spirit. Controlling one's body and emotions is a virtue, but such limiting of affects is still considered as an act of violence:

She could not go alone to the forest, walk outside in solitude –  
 they bound her in that place, took the duck to that rock  
 where stood Peko's splendid sword, hung his heavy iron weapon.  
 When Nabra saw that, the good wife noticed, 3315  
 she took it for her husband, set eyes as on her spouse,  
 soon her tears began to fall, dropping down upon the ground.  
 She must not cry while others watched, shed no tears while they observed.  
 Her heart was weeping, but mouth was singing, her clever tongue had tunes,  
 clever tongue had tunes, swift mind created words. 3325

## CONCLUSION

Anne Vabarna's *Peko* includes many fairly realistic descriptions of Seto women's everyday life, women's work, customs, family relations, etc. Here we see reflections of relationships within an extended family, as well as between husband and wife, but also small dramas of women's everyday life: worrying for the food and the eaters, giving birth and recovering from it, caring for the sick, taking care of the dying and the dead, keeping family traditions and religious customs. When *Peko* is read ever more carefully, one notices small, but significant everyday traumatic experiences from women's lives, the echo of suppressed feelings and melodramatic micro-motifs inserted in the text by Anne Vabarna. Although one part of the plot of *Peko* was suggested by Paulopriit Voolaine, the voice that echoes from the epic the loudest is that of Vabarna, we can see her aesthetic choices and images. A fictional text mirrors also in a way its author and the world surrounding her/him. Images and motifs that seem gender neutral appear as references to feminine experiences and *realia* when examined more closely.

It is clear that every researcher's approach is a representation, one possible way to see things and interpret texts. Õie Sarv, a relative of Anne Vabarna, has given a critical opinion on the problematic related to interpreting and the right to interpret.

It is easy to talk about a person who cannot stand up for herself in any other way than in dreams. We can interpret Anne Vabarna's songs today as we please. If Anne had ever even dreamed about how she and her songs will be taken apart, maybe she would have kept some of the songs to herself. (Sarv 2004: 51)

Gayatri Spivak also asks in despair: "can the subaltern speak?" (1994) – can a researcher,

who is in the position of power, understand or represent the object of research? I am convinced that old texts and singers of old times talk to us only when we “bow down”, try to reach them and try to learn to believe and to see things as they did. Empathy (in addition to knowing their heritage, their life-stories, etc.) as well as understanding religious and other contexts appears to be inevitable preconditions for the possibility of a dialogue.

Our task as researchers is to listen carefully to the “voices” from the past (Timonen 2004; Oras 2008), make them come forth and give a name to what has been undeservingly overlooked. In relation to gender-conscious folkloristics, my viewpoints coincide with those of Rayna Green. She says:

While scholarship certainly cannot claim to empower or dignity anyone, it can reveal the ways in which empowerment and authorization take place. Such scholarship can, like textual exegesis of any kind, give a name and status to process. Renaming as form of reclamation the process through which moral authority is reshaped and re-established insists on the presence, worth, and, indeed, the very centrality of female genres, female forms, and female-centred meaning. (Green 1993: 5)

Anne Vabarna’s epic *Peko* can be forced into the frame of a masculine heroic epic, but undoubtedly there are other, more suitable frames for the text. A less vehement and not so coercive viewpoint, which shows more respect to the creative author, takes into account her gender and aesthetic preference, displays the epic in a different light. “Boring” and “unimportant” parts take the central position and become vehicles of the ideology of the epic.

Anne Vabarna’s epics reveal her extraordinary creativity and talent for expression. We have no reason to think that these extensive texts have been compiled accidentally or unintentionally from traditional poetic material. I see Anne Vabarna’s poetics as a system where the Author’s strong hand, preferences resulting from her gender, social context and biography are revealed. One woman, made of flesh and bone, lets us hear her voice. Woman’s body, control over it and women’s everyday dramas are the dominant symbols of Anne Vabarna’s epic. These are almost invisible motifs, scattered in the epic, that are systematic and have artistic purposes, but become visible and significant when the epic’s author’s gender, biography and social context are taken into account.

Translated by Hedvig Ioanna Priimägi

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ERA – Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927–1944).

ERA, Foto – Photo collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (since 1927).

H – Folklore collection of Jakob Hurt (1960–1906).

S – Setu folklore collection of Samuel Sommer (1922–1936).

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## NOTES

1 See, e.g., Hagu 1995, 2000, 2002; Kalkun 2000, 2001a, b, 2004; Arukask 2003; Honko et al. 2003; Kuutma 2005, 2006. I use the terms “Seto” and “Setomaa”, corresponding to the vernacular reference and preferred in native writing today, in contrast to Estonianised “Setu” and “Setumaa” (cf. Kuutma 2004: 110).

2 Of the concept of “thick corpus” see Honko 2000.

3 See Honko et al. 2003.

4 For more thorough treatments of the process of creating the epic, see the foreword of *Peko* by Paul Hagu (1995) and Kristin Kuutma’s study (2005). See also Voolaine 1928: 7; Pino 1997: 5; Honko et al. 2003: 72.

5 The linear narrative telling the story of the hero can be considered as the macro-level: Peko’s wonderous birth, growing up, marrying, finding the miracle club, going to war, exterminating the beasts, being crowned king by Jesus. Also Peko’s prophecies, his death and building of the monastery.

6 The motifs found in *Peko* have briefly been described also by Ruth Mirov. In addition to motifs analysed in the present article, she points to very significant motifs related to hair and candles in the epic (2002a: 238 cont.). Ülo Valk (2000) and Aado Lintrop (2004, 2006) have also written

about motifs in Estonian traditional songs (*regilaul*) and their relation to religion, but they have not been based on one singer.

7 Although I am from the same geographic region as Anne Vabarna and I am close to her through parentage, I am also aware of the differences between me and her (I am born 100 years later, I am a man, etc.). I prefer to position myself what Lila Abu-Lughod defines as a “halfie” (1991: 140–141). I hope, as Margaret Mills does, that “[a] very close dialogue with our research subjects, enables us to emphasise quite explicitly the fact that they are subjects and knowers” (Mills 1993: 174).

8 Anne Vabarna’s *Peko* did probably not meet the expectations of her collaborator Paulopriit Voolaine. This is also probably the reason why the epic was not published after it was finished.

9 Compared to Estonian folklorists, the Finnish *runo*-song specialists have been more interested in the gender aspect of the traditional songs (see Nenola-Kallio 1982; Timonen 1998, 2004, etc.). Finnish folklorist Leea Virtanen was one of the first researchers to have interpreted Seto song tradition from gender-specific viewpoint (see Virtanen 1981, 1987, 1994).

10 “Femininity” does not refer to anything essential or general (women’s culture, feminine writing, maternity), on the criticism of sexual difference, see Lauretis 1987: 1–3. I describe the “feminine experiences” in a particular culture, as Judith Butler’s everyday gender performance, the *difference* related to the feminine religion and everyday practices.

11 Paul Hagu who has done extensive research on Vabarna and who edited the published version of *Peko*, has also noted that the motifs that characterise Vabarna the most are all located in the “life’s changing points” in the epic: “She could not fully identify with the main character, Peko, either as a ruler or as a Setu farmer, but she was well versed in traditional Setu customs, life and everyday situations, and especially the life of a Setu woman. Therefore she could describe at length the birth, wooing and wedding of Peko, the behaviour and feelings of Nabra or Jesus’ maiden Anne at the turning points in her life, and her everyday routine, the death of Peko’s father and mother and the warm human relations between members of a family.” (Hagu 1995: 37; translation to English Honko et al. 2003: 72.)

12 For a long time, lyric songs have been considered to be less valuable than epic songs in Estonian and Finnish traditions (they are too recent, too ordinary, too feminine), so the lyric songs have been collected and analysed less than the epic ones. About the rehabilitation of lyric poetry, see Timonen 1998.

13 Here and after I use very gratefully Kristin Kuutma’s translation of *Peko* (Kuutma 2002: 306–391).

14 Terhi Utriainen has written about caring for the sick and watching over the dying as a traditional job for the women in the context of Finnish Karelia (1999).

15 Ruth Mirov (2002a: 237) also interprets the motif of eating the apple as relating to love magic.

16 In the love magic of the Setos, a belief also exists that eating or drinking ritually changed food or drink influences the eater and makes them desire the person who has prepared the food. The Seto believe that if a woman adds menstrual blood or sweat from the armpit to vodka, the man who drinks the vodka falls in love with the woman (see Väisänen 1924: 197; Salu 1990: 115, 116; Kalkun 2007: 7). The same kind of aggressive love magic has existed also in Finland and in Karelia (see Stark 2006: 195, 196).

17 In the summer of 2008, during fieldwork in the villages of Seto emigrants in Siberia I found evidence that the motives of egg-eating in Vabarna’s epic have an explicit and traditional religious basis. Setos have had several beliefs related to egg-eating. According to Maria Gavrilovna and Oksenia Kirilovna from Kiyay village eating an egg alone has been considered a sin. Archival recordings from the beginning of the 20th century confirm that eating an (Easter) egg alone can result in horse-related accidents (ERA II 190, 242 (13); ERA II 178, 225 (76)). Maria Eremeeva from Krestyanskoye village told that a person lost in the forest could find their way when they thought

of the person they shared their Easter egg with.

18 Seto legends also stress the importance of treating beggars and travelers with kindness, e.g. AT 751A\* *A Man Invites God to his House*, AT 804 *Peter's Mother Falls from Heaven*, AT 840B *The Judgments in this World*, etc. (Salve 1993: 2609).

19 *Kutja* is made of peas (or rice, raisins etc.) soaked in water that are blessed in church and offered to all funeral guests at the cemetery after the grave has been closed, but also as the first dish of the wake. *Kutja* is also eaten on other days when the dead are commemorated.

20 *Kiisla* is a sour porridge made of flour or flakes that the Seto ate as the last dish at wakes.

21 Weekly fast days were Monday, Wednesday and Friday to commemorate accordingly the birth, betrayal and death of Jesus. In addition to that, no food was allowed before the liturgy on Sundays. The four long fasts of the year were the Lenten Fast (seven weeks), Nativity Fast (six weeks), Dormition Fast (two weeks) and Apostles' Fast (two weeks). Further, one-day fasts were kept on certain religious feasts or vigils: e.g., the vigil of Epiphany, the vigil of St. John, Feast of Transfiguration, Elevation of the Cross, Beheading of St. John the Baptist. In different villages, more local fast days were kept: e.g., the St. Michael's Fast (two weeks) in protection against the rabies in Meremäe region (ERA II 286, 126/8), but also in Usinitsa (ERA II 155, 394/5).

22 I know a religious Seto woman (born in 1933), who has kept fast days since childhood, following the family practices. As a young girl, she had a horrifying dream of a slaughtered calf, after which she gave up eating meat altogether. Children's eating habits have been influenced also by the traditional menaces during the Great Lent (for example, the priest will cut out your tongue if you eat meat or drink milk; you will go blind if you eat eggs or butter etc.). According to Anne Vabarna: "The children who wanted to drink milk during fasts were told that the priest would cut out their tongues and a star would appear on it" (ERA II 39, 269/70 (4)).

23 See, for example, ERA II 286, 159 (131) – Ode Palo, born in 1869 (1940).

24 Caroline Walker Bynum, who has analysed the motifs of the lives of medieval women saints, shows that fasting (or giving up earthly food) is often related to a sharpened attention towards the feeding of others (Bynum 1987, 1992b: 141).

25 Cf. the condition of contemporary patients of *anorexia nervosa* (Puuronen 2001).

26 The scenes where Jesus feeds the saint communion bread, is specifically related to female saints in medieval legends (Bynum 1992b: 136).

27 In a traditional Seto wedding the bride lamented for the guests; lamenting was mentally and physically exhausting. In addition to improvising the words, the bride bowed during every verse and made prostrations.

28 *Kammel* is a traditional plucked string instrument.

29 Seto women could express their feelings in a clearly defined ritual context, even to voice protest in their songs. For example, wedding laments can contain harsh criticism about the parents marrying off their daughter as well as the new kin (see Kalkun 2001a; also Nenola-Kallio 1982: 46, 47). It was considered a good omen if the bride cried in her wedding, if she did not cry, the wedding singers taught her: "Put garlic on the eyebrow, onion on the eye!"