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For: *The University of Edinburgh Journal*, Summer issue 2019.

Review of Sally Magnusson, *The Sealwoman's Gift* (London: Two Roads, 2018).

Edinburgh University alumna and Scottish-Icelandic broadcaster and journalist Sally Magnusson has written a rich, relevant and highly immersive first novel, *The Sealwoman's Gift*. The novel is based on a notorious event in the history of Iceland, the Turkish Raid or *Tyrkjaránið*, when, in the summer of 1627, pirates from Algiers and from Salé in Morocco raided a number of coastal Icelandic regions and abducted at least 400 people, who were subsequently sold into slavery in North Africa.

A macro novel and a narrative feat, *The Sealwoman's Gift* maps the centrifugal and, later, centripetal forces that act on the abducted Icelanders, foregrounding the female focus and experiences of Ásta Thorsteinsdóttir from the Westman Islands off the south coast of Iceland. It charts the enforced cramped journey onboard the slave ship, arrival at the 'white city' of Algiers, the harrowing experience of being 'selected' and sold at the slave market, the years of subjugation but also the 'pull' factors and transformative effect of new environments and emotions, the eventual, laboriously negotiated ransoming of a segment of the slaves, the meandering return journey across the Mediterranean, via France, England, Holland and Denmark, and finally the difficult homecoming.

One of the major achievements of Magnusson's novel is the range of levels on which it can be read and the variety of fascinations it fosters. It combines depictions of the workings of a widespread international political economy sustained by abduction, enslavement and ransoming, of the imprints of colonial rule on an impoverished country, of displacement, diaspora and hybridisation with the imagination of the subjective responses and ambivalences that may prove elusive in the historical records, particularly the voices and mindsets of women.

As well as being a narrative that negotiates national and personal trauma, *The Sealwoman's Gift* is a travel adventure and a tale of a woman's development, making Magnusson's novel a *Bildungsroman* of sorts. In her informative 'Author's Note', Magnusson observes that one of the lines of enquiry that informs her novel is the question of how 'the mind of a woman from a small, homogenous society' is influenced when experiencing 'one of the most heterogeneous societies on earth' (p. 358). The answers provided in the novel are both nuanced and powerful. While the protagonist suffers under the burden of a range of ruptures and separations – from her husband, from her children, from her landscape and community of home – she develops at the same time strong new attachments to the civilisation that surrounds her, culminating, in a Stockholm syndrome of sorts, in an intense, story-telling-based and eroticised bond to the man, of mixed Dutch-Moorish origins and heavily involved in the politics and economy of slavery, to whose household she belongs. This means that her eventual liberation from bondage is bound up with loss in equal

measure, having turned her 'face to a different sun and put [her] roots into a different soil' (p. 299), and that her initial re-encounter with Iceland reads first and foremost as a foreignisation of home. Alongside these ambivalences, the multifarious experiences and wider vision acquired by Ásta Thorsteinsdóttir and other women result, significantly, in a striking manifestation of female empowerment, as observed towards the end of the narrative: it was 'extraordinary that someone who was dragged from her home a captive should return with such a sense of owning herself' (p. 293).

Stylistically, the novel is told in an elegantly crafted and poignant prose throughout, serving not so much to mirror the duress characters are under as to offer a lucid linguistic space for the novel's dialogic aims. These include interchanges between character viewpoints and mentalities, between distant landscapes, between belief systems. They include, moreover, a rich web of intertextual dialogue: with historical records, with tales from North and South, and with the Icelandic saga heritage, prominently *Laxdæla Saga*, whose interest in and reluctance to provide a definite or singular answer to the question of the nature of love and attachment serve as a leitmotif in Magnusson's novel. Ultimately, her novel is a tribute to storytelling itself.

Bjarne Thorup Thomsen
Reader in Scandinavian Studies
University of Edinburgh