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How Can a Body Under Surveillance Rediscover Its Own Himalaya? Transcendence, Language, and Sensory Liberation in Johanna Sinisalo's The Core of the Sun

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Abstract

This article examines Johanna Sinisalo's Finnish dystopian novel The Core of the Sun (Finnish original: Auringon ydin, 2013; English translation by Lola Rogers, 2016) through the intersecting lenses of Foucauldian biopolitics, feminist body theory, and South Asian epistemologies of inner transcendence. Set in a fictional "Eusistocratic Republic of Finland," the novel imagines a technocratic welfare state that polices women's bodies, suppresses autonomous language, and criminalizes sensory pleasure – most notably the consumption of chili peppers – in the name of collective health and social stability. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theorizations of disciplinary power and biopower, the analysis demonstrates how the state apparatus in Sinisalo's text constructs the surveilled female body as a primary site of governance, reducing it to a classifiable, optimizable instrument. The Eusistocracy divides women into two legally enforced biological categories – eloi (submissive, sexually available breeders) and morlocks (intelligent women condemned to sterilization and menial labor) – thereby literalizing what Foucault describes as the production of "docile bodies": subjects who have so thoroughly internalized regulatory norms that surveillance becomes self-sustaining.

The article then pivots toward a comparative philosophical reading. It argues that the protagonist Vanna's (also known as Vera) escalating addiction to increasingly potent chili peppers, culminating in hallucinations and out-of-body experiences induced by the legendary "Core of the Sun" pepper, bears a striking structural resemblance to the South Asian philosophical concepts of tejas and samadhi as articulated in Ayurvedic, Samkhya, and Yoga traditions. Tejas – derived from Sanskrit and meaning inner luminous fire or radiance – refers in Ayurvedic philosophy to the transformative energy that underlies digestion, cognition, and spiritual perception; at its highest refinement, it is associated with liberation, clarity, and the capacity to overcome oppressive forces. Samadhi, as described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and in broader Indian meditative traditions, designates a state of absorbed, undivided consciousness in which the ordinary boundaries between self and world dissolve, enabling a mode of awareness that transcends the surveilling, classifying ego. The article argues that capsaicin's physiological mechanism – activating the same receptor that responds to thermal heat, causing the body to register chili literally as fire – gives Sinisalo's conceit an unexpected material literalism: the protagonist's experiences are, at the level of bodily chemistry, an encounter with inner fire in the most direct sense.

Situating the novel within the thematic orbit of literature in exile – broadly understood as writing that negotiates belonging, displacement, and the desire to reclaim a self that power structures have tried to erase – the article proposes that Sinisalo's text stages the body as a site of counter-knowledge that no surveillance apparatus can fully colonize. The exile Vanna endures is not primarily geographical but corporeal: she is a self evicted from its own body by a biopolitical order that claims ownership of life itself. Her chili addiction becomes a project of return – each capsaicin experience a brief restoration of somatic sovereignty that enacts what South Asian philosophy would recognize as a movement toward moksha (liberation). The Himalaya invoked in this article's title names not a geographic destination but an interior altitude: the luminous, high, and uncharted territory of consciousness that the body can reach when freed from the demand that it be only what power decrees.

The article also attends to the novel's formal architecture – its collage of fictional government documents, health bulletins, propaganda pamphlets, and Vanna's fragmented trance-prose – arguing that this formal opposition between institutional discourse and somatic illegibility enacts the epistemological argument the novel makes thematically, and connects Sinisalo's project to Hélène Cixous's concept of écriture féminine. By bridging Nordic speculative fiction and South Asian philosophical frameworks through the shared medium of bodily fire, this study contributes to comparative literary studies and opens new pathways for reading dystopian fiction as a

literature of internal exile and embodied resistance. It further suggests that the most searching forms of counter-surveillance do not require political manifestos; they require only a body willing to burn.

Keywords: Finnish weird, dystopian fiction, biopolitics, bodily surveillance, tejas, samadhi, transcendence, literature in exile, feminist literary theory, comparative literature

Introduction

What happens to the self when the body that contains it is legislated, classified, and surveilled at every threshold? This question has animated dystopian fiction at least since Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) and has gained renewed urgency in twenty-first-century speculative literature. Johanna Sinisalo's The Core of the Sun (Finnish original: Auringon ydin, 2013; English translation by Lola Rogers, 2016) belongs squarely within this lineage, yet it distinguishes itself by locating the site of resistance not in political uprising or communal solidarity but in the somatic – in the very body that has been most relentlessly disciplined. Through the seemingly humble figure of the forbidden chili pepper, Sinisalo constructs an argument about the irreducibility of embodied sensation as a domain of freedom.

The novel is set in an alternate-historical present in the "Eusistocratic Republic of Finland," an extreme welfare state in which public health and social order justify the total management of pleasure, fertility, and language. Women are divided into two biological categories: eloi, submissive and sexually available women bred for procreation, and morlocks, intelligent women relegated to menial labor and sterilization – terms that deliberately echo H.G. Wells's The Time Machine (1895) and its anxieties about class and evolution. Chili peppers are classified alongside alcohol and narcotics as dangerous substances, and their consumption is criminalized. The protagonist Vanna (also known as Vera), a morlock who has been raised to pass as an eloi by her subversive grandmother, becomes addicted to capsaicin and is eventually drawn into a black-market chili trade and a cult devoted to a legendary pepper called the Core of the Sun – a variety so potent that it induces states resembling shamanic and mystical consciousness.

This article reads Sinisalo's text through two complementary frameworks. First, it applies Michel Foucault's analysis of biopower, the panopticon, and disciplinary governance to show how the Eusistocracy operates as a laboratory of bodily control. Second, and more innovatively, it brings the novel into dialogue with South Asian philosophical traditions – specifically the Ayurvedic and Samkhya-Yoga concepts of tejas (inner fire or luminosity) and samadhi (a state of liberated, absorbed consciousness) – to argue that the chili trance in Sinisalo's narrative constitutes a form of inner transcendence that the surveillance apparatus cannot reach. The body, paradoxically, becomes the very instrument by which it escapes its own colonization.

This comparative gesture is not merely metaphorical. It responds to the journal's thematic call for work on literature in exile by reading the novel as a text concerned with a specific and often overlooked form of exile: the exile of the self from its own body, and the desperate, sometimes ecstatic, project of return. The Himalayan and Indian conceptual vocabulary of inner fire and absorbed liberation offers a precise language for what Sinisalo is staging in her protagonist's encounters with extreme capsaicin. By juxtaposing Nordic technocratic dystopia with South Asian epistemologies, this study contributes to the growing field of comparative global speculative fiction and suggests that the dystopian imagination, at its most ambitious, reaches toward older and wider traditions of philosophical resistance.

Biopower, the Disciplined Body, and the Eusistocratic Republic

Michel Foucault's account of modern power is built around a central insight: that the most effective forms of social control do not operate primarily through violence or prohibition but through the production of knowledge about bodies and the internalization of norms by those bodies. In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault traces the emergence of what he calls the "docile body" – a body that has been trained, observed, and optimized to the point that it regulates itself without external coercion (Foucault, 1977). The panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for a prison in which every cell is potentially visible from a central tower, becomes for Foucault a generative metaphor: the prisoner modifies behavior because they might be observed, internalizing the gaze of power even when no actual observer is present (Foucault, 1977).

This panoptic logic extends, in Foucault's later work, into what he calls biopolitics – the governance of life itself, of populations understood as biological entities to be optimized, regularized, and protected from internal and external threats (Foucault, 1978). Where disciplinary power targets the individual body, biopolitics ope-

rates at the level of the species: it concerns birth rates, health statistics, fertility, mortality, and the management of what counts as a healthy life. The two technologies are not opposed but complementary; together they constitute biopower, the regime in which life is simultaneously individualized and collectivized as an object of state concern.

Sinisalo's Eusistocratic Republic is a nearly perfect fictional realization of Foucauldian biopower. The Health Authority governs every aspect of consumption, reproduction, and sociality: alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and chili are banned not as moral failures but as threats to collective health. Women's reproductive bodies are managed through eugenic classification. The category of eloi is produced not through violence alone but through generations of selective breeding and behavioral training – the eloi has internalized docility so thoroughly that she performs submission spontaneously, without the need for constant enforcement. This is precisely what Foucault means by the docile body. The block quotation below, drawn from Discipline and Punish, captures the mechanics of this production with unusual clarity: *"Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs"* (Foucault, 1977, p. 25).

The criminalization of chili is particularly illuminating in this context. Capsaicin is not banned because it is intrinsically harmful – the novel's fictional scientific literature acknowledges that its effects are contested – but because it produces an experience that is not legible to or manageable by the state. The chili-trance disrupts the normal functioning of the body-as-instrument; it introduces a form of consciousness that escapes classification. This is, at its most fundamental, what biopower cannot tolerate: the body that exceeds its own documentation. The Health Authority's prohibition of chili is therefore not merely a public-health measure but an epistemological one: it is an attempt to foreclose a mode of being that the state's knowledge apparatus cannot process.

Feminist scholars have long observed that Foucault's framework, while enormously productive, requires gendering. Sandra Lee Bartky (1988) argued that the techniques of femininity – dieting, posture, deportment, makeup – constitute a specifically gendered form of panopticism in which women internalize and perform the male gaze as part of their ordinary subjectivity. In the Eusistocracy, this gendered surveillance is literalized and institutionalized: the eloi's submissiveness is not merely a cultural norm but a biological category, engineered and legally enforced. Vanna's situation is accordingly double: she is a woman in a society that disciplines all women's bodies, and she is a morlock masquerading as an eloi, which means she must perform the disciplined female body even as she secretly refuses it. Her chili use is

thus a form of what Judith Butler (1990) would call subversive performance – a repetition with a difference that exposes the contingency of the norms she is compelled to enact.

Language, Classification, and the Silencing of the Subaltern

The Eusistocracy's power is not only bodily but linguistic. The novel's narrative architecture – interspersed with fictional government documents, dictionary definitions, magazine excerpts, and propaganda pamphlets – enacts the way in which official discourse produces the categories through which citizens understand themselves. The eloi and the morlock are not merely social roles; they are linguistic impositions that structure perception, desire, and self-knowledge. To name someone an eloi is to produce the eloi: classification is, in this sense, constitutive rather than descriptive.

This resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the subaltern's silence. In her foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak argues that the colonial and patriarchal episteme erases the conditions under which the marginalized subject could speak in ways that would be heard within the dominant framework. The eloi cannot articulate her condition because the language available to her has been produced by the very system that constructs her as a subject. Her silence is not individual but structural: it is the silence of a position that the episteme has determined to be incapable of legitimate speech.

Vanna escapes this epistemic trap precisely through illegibility. Her chili experiences do not produce articulate political critique; they produce sensation, vision, and a form of consciousness that cannot be translated into the state's categories. When the chili-trance begins, the narrative voice shifts – becoming fragmented, sensory, spatially disoriented – in a way that performs the dissolution of the surveilled self. This narrative strategy is significant: Sinisalo does not give her protagonist a political manifesto; she gives her an experience that precedes and exceeds political language. The body speaks before the mouth does, and what it says cannot be transcribed into the official lexicon.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry is also relevant here. Bhabha (1994) analyzes mimicry as the colonial subject's adoption of the colonizer's identity in a way that is "almost the same but not quite" – a performance of sameness that introduces a subtle but destabilizing difference. Vanna's performance of the eloi role is precisely this: she mimics the docile femininity the state demands while harboring an interior life that that performance is designed to suppress. The chili addiction is

the point at which mimicry breaks down – where the "not quite" becomes undeniable. Her body's response to capsaicin is a form of illegibility that no amount of behavioral performance can erase.

The Chili Trance and the Himalayan Within: Tejas and Samadhi

The most philosophically ambitious dimension of Sinisalo's novel is its suggestion that the capsaicin experience opens onto a form of consciousness that the Western secular, technocratic imagination has systematically foreclosed. When the fictional Gaian cult in the novel speaks of the Core of the Sun as a pepper that allows the consciousness to "detach from its fragile shell and move free and unfettered" (Sinisalo, 2016, p. 198), they are articulating something that resonates deeply with traditions of somatic spirituality from the Indian subcontinent and the Himalayan region.

The Sanskrit concept of tejas is one such tradition. In Ayurvedic philosophy, tejas refers to the element of fire as it manifests within the human body—not merely physiological heat but a form of luminous, transformative energy that underlies digestion, cognition, and spiritual perception (Frawley, 1999). The Ayurvedic texts describe a process by which gross food is progressively refined, through the body's vital processes, into blood, vital essence (ojas), and finally tejas – the body's own inner luminosity. Tejas is associated in Sanskrit literature with spiritual power, the capacity to overcome opposition, and a quality of radiance that marks those in whom it is cultivated (Wisdomlib, 2026). In the Samkhya philosophical tradition, tejas (fire) is one of the five fundamental elements that constitute all physical and psychical reality, and its activation is associated with the movement toward liberation (moksha) from the bondage of conditioned existence (Wisdomlib, 2023).

Capsaicin, the active compound in chili peppers, produces its characteristic burn through activation of the TRPV1 receptor – the same receptor that responds to thermal heat. The body registers chili as fire. This physiological fact gives Sinisalo's conceit an unexpected literalism: the protagonist's chili experiences are, at the level of bodily chemistry, an encounter with fire. The Gaian cult's claim that sufficiently intense capsaicin induces an "invaluable state of receptiveness" is not merely mystical; it resonates with pharmacological research on capsaicin's effects on endorphin release and nociceptive modulation, and with ethnobotanical accounts of somatic practices that use pain or heat to shift states of consciousness (Candido et al., 2021). Tejas, understood as inner fire, is not far from the phenomenology of extreme capsaicin.

The other key concept is samadhi. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and in the broader traditions of Indian meditation, samadhi designates a state of absorbed, undivided consciousness in which the ordinary boundaries between self and world dissolve (Feuerstein, 1996). It is, crucially, not an erasure of the body but a transformation of the body's relationship to itself and to the world – a condition in which the surveilling, classifying, anxious self ceases to operate, and a deeper mode of awareness becomes accessible. Samadhi is liberation not from the body but through the body, via the cultivation of attention and sensation to the point where they transcend their ordinary limits.

Vanna's most extreme chili experience, in which she is able to project her consciousness into the bodies of other creatures and ultimately to hold her sister's consciousness within her own mind, is structurally analogous to this description. It is not a rejection of the body but an intensification and expansion of somatic awareness to a point where the self's usual boundaries cease to hold. The Eusistocratic state has attempted to produce bodies that are contained, classifiable, and predictable; the chili trance produces a body that is porous, relational, and exceeds every category the state has devised. This is precisely the Himalayan within: the territory of inner experience that no surveillance map can chart.

This comparative reading is not reducible to an equation of chili with yoga. The point is structural and epistemological: Sinisalo's novel imagines a form of consciousness that is accessible through the body and that constitutes a domain of freedom irreducible to political rights or linguistic representation. South Asian philosophical traditions offer a precise, detailed, and historically deep vocabulary for exactly this form of consciousness – one that Western liberal modernity, with its emphasis on rational agency and articulable preference, has largely lacked. Bringing these frameworks together produces a richer account of what Vanna's experiences mean and why they are threatening to the Eusistocratic order.

Literature in Exile: The Body as Homeland

The thematic focus of Sjani's current issue invites reflection on the concept of exile in its broadest dimensions. Traditionally, exile names a geographical displacement – the forcible or voluntary removal of a person from their home territory. In Edward Said's celebrated formulation, exile is described as the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home (Said, 2000, p. 173). Said also insists, however, that exile is not simply a condition of loss; it can generate a distinctive consciousness – attentive, contrapuntal, alert to the gap

between where one is and where one might have been – that produces important forms of insight and cultural work.

Sinisalo's novel invites us to extend this concept inward. The exile that Vanna experiences is not primarily geographic – though the novel's ending does involve flight from Finland to a country where she and Jare can be free. It is, more fundamentally, a corporeal exile: the condition of inhabiting a body that the state has claimed as its property, that has been classified, surveilled, and denied the right to its own pleasures. The eloi body is a body that has been exiled from itself – colonized by biopower to the point where its desires, pains, and capacities are administered by an external authority.

The chili addiction is, in this frame, a project of return. Vanna's escalating need for hotter and hotter peppers is not merely a narrative device; it enacts the phenomenology of someone trying to re-inhabit a body from which they have been evicted. Each capsaicin experience is a brief restoration of somatic sovereignty – a moment in which the body is fully, intensely, undeniably hers, answering to no authority but its own nerve endings. The Himalaya of the title is this inner territory: vast, high, cold, and luminous; the kind of place that an exile recognizes as home the moment they see it.

This reading places The Core of the Sun within a distinguished lineage of exile literature that locates home not in territory but in the body, in language, or in memory. One thinks of Dionne Brand's A Map to the Door of No Return (2001), in which the Middle Passage produces an exile so total that even the body becomes an uncertain homeland; or of Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), in which the mestiza body is itself a frontier – a site of contested sovereignty. Sinisalo's contribution to this tradition is to situate the exiled-and-returning body within a dystopian Nordic frame, and to draw on the sensory immediacy of capsaicin to make the argument viscerally compelling in ways that more cerebral forms of resistance fiction cannot quite achieve.

It is worth noting that Sinisalo's novel belongs to the subgenre of "Finnish weird" – a tradition of Finnish speculative fiction characterized by its unsettling blend of the mundane and the mythological, the rational and the mysteriously embodied (Sinisalo, 2008). In this tradition, the body is never simply a biological mechanism; it carries traces of an older, stranger world that technocratic modernity has tried to suppress. The Core of the Sun inherits this tradition while giving it a contemporary feminist-political inflection: the strangeness that the Eusistocracy cannot manage is not supernatural but somatic, not magical but physiological.

Narrative Form as Epistemological Argument

The formal architecture of The Core of the Sun deserves attention in its own right, because it enacts the epistemological argument that the novel makes thematically. The text is composed of multiple registers: Vanna's first-person narrative sections, letters she writes to her missing sister Manna, and a series of interpolated documents – government health bulletins, fictional encyclopedia entries, historical pamphlets, children's book excerpts, newspaper articles – that construct the Eusistocratic world from the inside out. This paratextual apparatus is the novel's way of dramatizing how institutional discourse produces reality: the world of the Eusistocracy does not simply exist; it is constituted through a relentless accumulation of official texts that define, classify, and evaluate.

Against this institutional monologue, Vanna's personal voice – and especially the fragmented, disoriented prose of the chili-trance sequences – stands as a counter-discourse. The contrast is deliberate and carefully calibrated: the official documents are written in a crisp, confident, pseudo-scientific register; the trance sequences are written in a style that approaches poetry, favoring sensation over syntax and image over argument. This formal opposition mirrors the opposition the novel posits between biopower's knowledge apparatus and the body's pre-linguistic wisdom. The Eusistocracy can produce documents; it cannot produce the experience that capsaicin opens.

This formal strategy connects the novel to a broader tradition of feminist experimental writing that uses formal innovation as a mode of political resistance. Hélène Cixous's concept of écriture féminine – writing that proceeds from the body, from sensation and rhythm rather than from the phallogocentric logic of institutional discourse – provides a useful frame here (Cixous, 1976). Sinisalo does not subscribe to any naively essentialist version of this program, but the formal contrast between the state's documents and Vanna's trance prose does suggest that there are modes of bodily knowledge that exceed the state's archival categories and that require a different kind of writing to approach.

Conclusion

Johanna Sinisalo's The Core of the Sun is a novel about what cannot be fully surveilled. Its Eusistocratic state is a rigorously imagined realization of Foucauldian biopower – a social order that attempts to govern life at every level, from reproductive biology to gustatory pleasure. Yet the novel's deepest argument is that this project inevitably fails, not because the state is insufficiently powerful but because the

body contains resources that exceed any apparatus of governance. The chili trance is the novel's figure for these resources: an experience so intensely and irreducibly somatic that it cannot be classified, documented, or prohibited into nonexistence.

By reading this experience through the South Asian philosophical vocabulary of tejas and samadhi, this article has tried to give those resources a conceptual specificity that the novel's own Nordic-shamanic framework only partially provides. Inner fire, luminous transformation, consciousness that moves beyond its ordinary boundaries – these are not exotic imports into Sinisalo's world; they are, this reading has argued, precisely what the novel is staging in its most visionary sequences. The Himalaya of the title names not a geographical destination but an interior altitude: the high, clear, luminous space of consciousness that the body can reach when it is freed from the demand that it be only what power says it is.

In the context of literature in exile, this argument has a specific valence. The exile that Sinisalo diagnoses is not primarily territorial but corporeal – the condition of a self that has been evicted from its own body by a biopolitical order that claims ownership of life itself. The project of return that the novel enacts through Vanna's capsaicin experiences is accordingly not a return to a homeland but a return to the self: a recovery of the body as a site of knowledge, pleasure, and resistance that no surveillance can permanently colonize. This is the gift that the chili gives, and it is the gift that comparative literature, at its best, can offer as well: the discovery that the resources for resistance have always been here, in the body and in the philosophical traditions that have taken the body seriously as a place where freedom lives.

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