

BORDER CROSSINGS, PATHFINDERS AND NEW VISIONS: THE ROLE OF SÁMI LITERATURE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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The Sámi are the indigenous people of Northern Europe who, in the course of colonial history, have been divided by the nation-states of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.¹ Faced with similar colonial practices of assimilation, usurpation of territories and eradication of languages and cultures as other indigenous peoples worldwide, the Sámi have, since the late 1960s, engaged in a process of reclaiming their self-determination and rights to land, language and cultural heritage. This process has been further complicated by the different political and legislative systems of the four countries where the Sámi live today.²

While border crossing is a contemporary Sámi reality not only in terms of physical but also cultural, linguistic and epistemological boundaries, for many Sámi the national, colonial borders are insignificant as people have relations and speak the same language on both sides of the border. For instance in the Deatnu (Tana) River Valley where I come from, the national border of Finland and Norway is literally 'a line drawn on water.' Recalling how in her childhood she was told that on the other side of the river is another country called Finland, the renowned Sámi musician Mari Boine remarks that she had not understood how that was possible for she had family on both sides of the river. Only years later she learned that colonization had divided her homeland into different countries.

¹ Previously called the Lapps or Laplanders by outsiders, the Sámi have claimed their right for their own collective term deriving from their own languages (*sápmelaš* in Northern Sámi). The terms 'Lapp' or 'Laplender' is considered derogative and outdated. There is, however, a number of Finns living in Northern Finland (aka Lapland) who in the past ten years have started to refer to themselves as Lapps, claiming that they are the 'real' indigenous people of the region. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this complex historical-political issue in detail.

² Since 1986, representatives of the Sámi Parliaments and governments of Norway, Sweden and Finland have been working towards the Sámi Convention which would harmonize the legislation with regard to the Sámi people in the three Nordic countries.

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In this article, I will consider some of the current issues and concerns in contemporary Sámi literature. I view them as border crossings particularly because it seems that at least in certain ways, Sámi literature is on crossroads faced with some tough and serious issues. I suggest that we need to perceive Sámi writers as pathfinders who can, through their writing, guide us in considering what are the paths that the Sámi need to take today in order to have an active cultural connection in the future. Moreover, what is urgently needed in Sámi society is reclaiming Sámi values and vision for contemporary contexts in a meaningful way. In this process, Sámi writers have also a central role as they are the ones who constantly weave the past, present and future into a fabric that gives us the meanings we need to stay grounded in who we are.

What is Literature?

In the past few decades, indigenous writers have challenged the narrow and Eurocentric perspectives of the Western literary canon and convention. In many cases still today, indigenous literatures are not regarded as 'literature proper.' Analyzed through Western literary theory, they are dismissed as being 'primitive,' 'childlike,' 'overpopulated' or 'having no clear plot' (Blaeser 1993: 54-5, Kailo 1994: 22; Paltto 1998: 39; Petrone 1990: 4). Due to differences in structure, format, story line, mode of telling or expression and even purpose, indigenous literary conventions are often rendered as 'folklore,' 'myths' and 'legends' which usually carry the implicit message of being something less significant and noteworthy than 'literature.' Literary criticism alien to these conventions may also violate the integrity of indigenous literatures.

What is considered literature is, of course, closely related to the question of aesthetics. Traditionally, aesthetics has been regarded as an autonomous area of theory, separate from ideologies. Aesthetic experience has been considered neutral and independent from political meanings and power relations in a society. Contemporary criticism has, however, challenged this view, arguing that what is considered aesthetics in fact reflects bourgeois values and behaviour norms of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Fredrick Jameson (1981), for example, calls aesthetics a 'political unconscious' which suggests that an understanding of beauty may present the

unconscious political order of a society. Moreover, as postcolonial criticism has effectively demonstrated, the concept of aesthetics is thoroughly permeated by historically and culturally contingent perceptions of beauty as well as colonial and racist assumptions about 'high' and 'low' cultures (see also Helander and Kailo 1998: 12).

These assumptions have also affected the artistic production in other cultures. As a consequence, Sámi writer Kerttu Vuolab contends that the central problem is that some Sámi writers seek to follow non-Sámi literary values and styles (Lehtola 1995: 51, see also Paltto 1998: 33). The Sámi have, however, their own aesthetic values which, as Sámi writer Kirsti Paltto notes, are often guided by practicality and tied to the land and its ability to sustain people and other living beings. A mountain might be considered beautiful if it is easy to cross or if it grows lichen which reindeer feed on (Paltto 1998: 27). Eilina Helander similarly notes that in Sámi understanding, "[o]ne does not separate a sense of aesthetic from other components of a human being's experience and action" (1998: 176).

The persistent assumption that indigenous literatures are somehow not 'literature' but rather 'folklore' or 'ethnography' derives from the close relationship between contemporary written indigenous literatures and oral traditions which, mostly if not always, form the basis of contemporary indigenous writing and expression. Vuolab suggests a definition that reflects Sámi and other indigenous perspectives of literature:

Literature is the storage of human being's knowledge, understanding and inventiveness. It is also the foundation stone of humanity, survival, language and learning skills. Outsiders used to think that the Sámi simply did not have literature before our first books were published. But we have had our own literature time immemorial and we still have enormous rich oral storytelling tradition. (1995: 27)³

In other words, the concept of Sámi literature necessarily consists of various forms of oral tradition. Throughout history, oral histories have been and still are the memory of a people encompassing all aspects of life regarded important within a culture. A common view of indigenous peoples is that stories tell who 'we' are.

³ Own translation

This includes stories of origin and of ancestors, worldview, values and knowledge for everyday survival. Storytelling and literature reflect the values and worldview of that culture. Furthermore, oral tradition is a central aspect of the Sámi traditional knowledge and communication systems (Helander and Kailo 1998: 12).

It is important to note, however, when discussing the orality-literacy dichotomy, that no culture has ever been purely oral or written and that perhaps more importantly, we should not consider it an evolutionary continuum from 'primitive' oral to 'sophisticated' written forms. The common division of societies into oral and literate cultures has been challenged by various scholars who question the narrow, Eurocentric views on writing (e.g., Brotherston 1992, Derrida 1976; Mignolo 1994).

For instance, analyzing Lévi-Strauss's consideration of the Nambikwara, an indigenous people in South America, Jacques Derrida contests the idea of a people without writing. He demonstrates how the Nambikwara have a form of writing even if it does not necessarily follow the model of phonetic writing, arguing that separating language from writing is merely an attempt to restore a romantic notion of authenticity (1976: 101-40, see also Brotherston 1992). Similarly, it could be argued, for example, that symbols and images on *govadas*, the Sámi drum used by *noaidi* (shaman) or petroglyphs represent earlier forms of Sámi writing. This does not, however, imply that there is no need to draw attention to certain distinctions between different forms of literature and in particular, to the ways in which certain forms of writing have gained a superior status over others.

Indigenous writers have also called attention to the fact that their writings do not necessarily fit into genres of Western literature simply because they have different values and views of reality (Petronie 1990, 5). Therefore, indigenous writers create new 'genres' within their own literature and also bring them into the dominant literary canon. The late Sámi writer and artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää suggests that Sámi literature differs from other literatures in two respects:

First of all, we do not have, as far as literature goes, established norms and conventions, not even a written literature as our literary background. Thanks to this our literature is considerably more flexible and more modern than is the case with other cultures. It has sprung straight from non-existence to modern

existence. One must also understand that our literature is based upon oral knowledge that has been handed down through generations and it thus is not very easy to convert it into a literary medium. (1998: 90-91)

In Valkeapää's view, this results in several problems, including the question of readership and the lack of models for reading. However, the absence of blueprints for understanding Sámi literature is also a strength as it allows the writer to create freely without being tied into pre-existing formats (ibid. 91). One could argue, however, that considering Vuolab's definition above, Sámi literature has definitely not sprung from non-existence to modern existence but rather has taken a meandering, interesting and often difficult path from mainly oral forms of expression to early written texts and to contemporary literature.

Sámi Literature at the Crossroads

One of the greatest challenges for Sámi literature has always been associated with the fact that for the most part, it continues to be written in the Sámi language.⁴ This is also an aspect which differentiates Sámi literature from many other contemporary indigenous literatures which for example in North America is written mainly in English and thus is available for a much broader audience. While the question of language is a challenge, it by no means implies a deficit nor do I suggest that Sámi writers should opt for dominant languages. Quite the contrary: both the current Sámi leadership and the Nordic governments should demonstrate much stronger determination to ensure the survival of Sámi literature for the future generations.

One can easily detect the great discrepancy of the Nordic governments who have passed Sámi Language Acts but lack political will to allocate necessary funds and resources to implement these acts and policies. Sámi politicians who today have a limited access to both power and funding do not fare much better in this regard – they like to give speeches about the importance of maintaining the Sámi language but at the time of decision-making, they view these concerns through a

⁴ Or more correctly, in Sámi languages, as there are nine languages ranging from Kildin and Ter Sámi in the Kola Peninsula to Southern Sámi in Central Norway and Sweden. The great majority of Sámi literature is, however, written in Northern Sámi which is also most widely spoken of all Sámi languages.

very narrow lens which tends to focus on what is considered 'traditional Sámi livelihoods.'

The insistence of Sámi writers to continue writing in their own language is inseparable from the concern for the survival of the language. Kirsti Paltto, the first Sámi woman author who started writing in the late 1960s, notes: "When I began writing, I was conscious of writing with the Sámi people in mind; I very much hoped that Sámi culture and language could be preserved" (1998: 23). Kerttu Vuolab also maintains that she writes in Sámi because it is the language with which she has grown up and experienced the world first hand. From this perspective and understanding, the size of the audience insignificant:

I could write in Finnish since I speak Finnish fluently, but I do not wish to. I also command the English language to some extent, so why would I bother to write for four million Finns if I could write in English, if I wish to live this life on the basis of numbers. But that is not how I look at things. (Vuolab 1998: 55)

This – the refusal to be co-opted by numbers and market forces – is one of the most precious gifts of contemporary Sámi writers which largely goes unnoticed even by the majority of the Sámi themselves. The discussion of the concerns and problems faced by Sámi writers and literature in general on the pages of Sámi newspapers in the past few years, however, indicates that the situation has become unacceptable and intolerable for many. The concerns revolve particularly around the apparent shortage of Sámi writing. Whether it is a non-Sámi literary critic proscribing the death of Sámi literature and blaming Sámi authors, Sámi journalists who call for a public debate on Sámi literature and more attention to newly released books or suggest that writers also have to become their own salespersons and marketers, a Sámi university student in search of an 'exiting, enticing Sámi novel' or Sámi writers themselves who either admit that their texts do not appeal to Sámi readership or wonder why younger Sámi generation is not interested in writing, it is clear that something needs to be urgently done (see, e.g., Kenziör 2001, Buljo 2001a, 2001b and 2002, Johnskareng 2001a, 2001b and 2003, Veimæl 2001, Rasmussen 2002).

It is interesting how effectively the media and most individuals participating in the debate that keeps surfacing over again have been either blind to or able to conceal what seems to be the root problem of the condition where Sámi literature finds itself today: the lack of appropriate structures of support and funding. It is not that writers and also others have not repeatedly brought the idea forward and worked hard toward establishing such a system – they have, but for some reason these efforts and suggestions largely remain invisible. The media, including Sámi newspapers and radio, appears to be more willing to take a position of blaming the victim and focussing on comments (uttered even by some Sámi authors) that support that stance.

It is a peculiar situation where everybody seems to be saying that 'we need more writers, more literature' but only very few are looking at the larger picture and calling for the responsibility of Sámi leadership to take initiative to create circumstances where the flourishing of contemporary Sámi literature could eventually occur. Every now and then we hear relatively isolated but justified cries by writers who point out the extreme difficulty of writing and publishing in a situation where not only one has to wait for years to get a book published by a handful of Sámi publishers who are entirely dependent on outside grants, but also have another job in order to support oneself financially (and thus, not be able to devote themselves for writing).

What makes the current situation even more peculiar – and unacceptable – is the way in which nobody is willing to take responsibility for the apparent dire straits of Sámi literature. The Nordic governments are more than apt to hide behind their well established bureaucracy and national borders when asked for even smaller grants, never mind a permanent structure. Sámi leaders are not much more accountable either. They shrug their shoulders and point to their limited resources which, for some reason, are not so limited when it comes to attending international meetings and conferences where they can, once again, discuss the survival of Sámi language and culture. As far as I am concerned (and I would be happy to be mistaken), none of the Sámi Parliaments, the official elected bodies of the Sámi people (or for that matter, any Nordic institutions who are also implicated), are in the process of drafting an action plan

for Sámi literature which would include recommendations for appropriate institutions to address and deal with the current major concerns.

The reason for the pressing need to seriously consider the state of Sámi literature is simple enough but it unfortunately seems to escape the attention of most people. The preservation of the language through Sámi literature is more than obvious to everybody (though it does not spark adequate response in decision-makers). What is less obvious is the enormous role that contemporary Sámi writers and cultural workers play in the process of reclaiming and restoring our societies and lives.

Sámi writers, together with other artists and cultural workers, are our ofelaččat, pathfinders (Helander 1998: 165). They are also our visionaries who are rooted in oral and other forms of tradition and who use that knowledge not only to reflect our current realities but also create new realities and visions for the future in the way that grounds it in the past.

This is not to suggest a romantic return to the 'golden past' but as many other indigenous people have articulated, in order to remain and restore who we are, we need to build up our present lives and societies on a solid foundation of our cultural heritage. This would imply, for example, modeling contemporary Sámi political, cultural, social and educational institutions after the structures we have always had.⁵ At the same time, we need creative, grounded visions how to encounter the challenges of the future in a way that the Sámi would not lose their cultural and social integrity. In this process with which also Sámi society is faced today, the work of Sámi writers, that has always been crossing boundaries and forging new paths without losing the sight of those elements that make us who we are, is invaluable.

Currently, Sámi society appears somewhat lacking direction and long-term collective vision regarding contents and practical implementation of Sámi self-determination. It is a bit like Sámi literature – everybody likes to talk about it but nobody appears to know where we are heading to. One of the commonly heard teachings of indigenous peoples in North America is that 'you don't know where you

5 The existing Sámi political and representative bodies, such as the Sámi Parliament and the Sámi Council (NGO) are in many ways direct copies of their Nordic counterparts, thus reflecting similar ideologies and biases as mainstream societies (for an analysis, see Jull 1995).

are going to if you do not know where you've been.' Considering the current state of Sámi society which is at the crossroads in many ways, both for positive and negative, it seems many of us do not know where we have been.

For example, we are losing people through a migration to the South but also through the lack of participation, further assimilation and integration into mainstream societies.⁶ Also, much of Sámi worldview and spiritual knowledge has been lost or actively destroyed due to the colonization and Christianization of the Sámi over several generations. Today, only traces of this knowledge remain and many Sámi have acquired and adopted dominant views according to which Sámi worldview, linked with living in a respectful and reciprocal relationship with land, is insignificant. Again, to call for attention to the Sámi worldview does not imply a romanticization of our traditions or culture but rather grounding our contemporary realities and solutions on traditions, knowledge and values that are ours instead of somebody else's. Critical of 'the mystical, misty-eyed discourse' sometimes applied to describe indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and the universe, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that

I believe that our survival as peoples has come from our knowledge of our contexts, our environment, not from some active beneficence of our Earth Mother. We had to know how to survive. We had to work out ways of knowing, we had to predict, to learn and reflect, we had to preserve and protect, we had to defend and attack, we had to be mobile, we had to have social systems which enabled us to do these things. We still have to do these things. (Smith 1999: 12-3)

The need to know how to survive for indigenous peoples has certainly not diminished in a world which is, in an accelerating pace, commodifying and commercializing everything from cultures and knowledges to all life forms. There is no need to essentialize Sámi values or assume that every Sámi writer is inevitably linked to or has knowledge of Sámi worldview and oral histories. The Sámi worldview, however, is reflected in the writing of Sámi authors as the language

6 The Yle Sámi Radio reported about the "population drain" which threatens Sámi culture. While in 1992, 37 per cent of the Sámi in Finland lived outside the Sámi region, today it is 54 per cent (<http://www2.yle.fi/plis/show/page?id=245487>).

always carries and represents certain values and a way of perceiving and relating with the world and others in it. The knowledge and practices that connect us to our values and worldviews reflected in the Sámi language and the writers who use it as their medium of expression give the readers a sense of staying rooted in that culture even when they write about contemporary realities and lives.

As far as I am concerned, there is a pressing need to take Sámi literature seriously and not only by those identify themselves as 'literary types' – scholars and students of literature, individuals who just love to read – but everybody in Sámi society as well as in mainstream societies. We need to rid ourselves from narrow understanding of Sámi literature and even more so, its role in Sámi society. We need to start listening more carefully to our contemporary visionaries and pathfinders who can guide us to reconnect with and reclaim the knowledge, strength and survival strategies of our cultural traditions that are, in many cases, disappearing. We must take heed to the words of Leslie Marmon Silko, an indigenous writer from the Pueblo Laguna:

I will tell you something about stories [...] They aren't just entertain-ment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. [...] You don't have anything if you don't have the stories. (1977: 2)

If we do not have our stories we will become what we have been (mis)represented by others. If we do not have stories telling and expressing who we are, why would we need institutions and structures supporting an empty shell? Maori writer Patricia Grace contends that 'books are dangerous' because, among other reasons, "they do not reinforce our values, actions, customs, culture and identity" (cited in Smith 1999: 35). This is, of course, why indigenous peoples need books written by their own people.

What is also very dangerous is when the role of indigenous, in this case Sámi, literature is ignored and left at the margins of concerns of Sámi society and discussions about the future. In other words, if people do not recognize the significance of literature as a means 'to reinforce our values, actions, customs, culture and identity.' Naturally, this is a process that requires the support of dominant societies and governments which have their own responsibilities for implementing

policies and establishing structures that make the existence of Sámi literature possible also in the future.

I started this article by discussing the notion of crossing borders. I would like to conclude by suggesting a mindset that allows us – not only the Sámi people but all of us – to cross borders also in terms of ideas and visions of the future. In Sámi society, such a mindset would be a part of the process of looking answers and solutions within as many of those from without have not always worked very well. We need to be creative and cross boundaries of categories (often imposed upon us from outside but which may have become part of our own thinking and operating) that limit our possibilities in addressing some of the challenges we are facing.

The reason why others should be interested in the issues dealing with Sámi literature – even if in many cases do not have an access to it – is relatively straightforward. While considering the significance of Sámi literature to the 'outside' world is problematic as it suggests that there is a need for Sámi literature to justify its existence by appealing to the idea that it is validated only when it has something to offer to the rest of the world, there certainly are a couple of points that can be made here. Besides having the necessary structures and funding for Sámi literature, what is also needed is making it available in translation so that others may have the opportunity of learning from and listening to the contemporary Sámi pathfinders.⁷ People even in the Nordic countries and Russia – the countries where the Sámi live – continue to have limited knowledge about the Sámi people and Sámi literature. Even the handful of titles that are translated rarely features in school or university curricula. The lack of knowledge results in a situation where contemporary Sámi issues and concerns are not understood because people in mainstream society do not have an adequate context for them. Instead of relying on outside representations of the Sámi which often are limited if not reproducing biased stereotypes, Sámi literature not only reflects lived Sámi realities but also gives glimpses of Sámi ways of knowing and constructing reality.

Sámi literature, like any other literature, offers a unique perspective to the world. It resists the current tendency toward what

⁷ Again, this is a question of lack of funding. There are existing translations and willing translators abound but neither political will nor money to get them published.

Vandana Shiva calls 'monocultures' – disappearance of diversity which, among other things, signifies a disappearance of alternatives. As Shiva notes, alternatives exist but are often concealed and excluded as people are made to believe the opposite (1993: 5). Sámi views of the world represent an alternative which the Sámi themselves and also others need to listen to more carefully in the world where the dominant globalizing system is becoming increasingly disruptive and destructive in all spheres of life.

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