

If we want to redefine the concept of 'literature' from an indigenous point of view, the oral tradition has to be included. Agnes Grant has defined North American Native literature to mean "Native people telling their own stories in their own ways, unfettered by criteria from another time and place."³

Sami writer Kerittu Vuolab has defined that literature is the storage of a 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 Sami simply did not have literature before our first books were published. But we have had our own literature since time immemorial and we still have an enormously rich oral storytelling tradition.⁴ Sami storytelling emanates from every-day life and it takes place all the time, not only at a certain moment of the day - it is not a bed-time story. It is a way to pass on knowledge about our culture, people, history and survival skills. The Sami did not have books and libraries, but their libraries were their families, homes and the nature around them. Stories were matters of duty, fun, companion and consolidation (Vuolab 1995).

The results of my study on literary conventions led me to consider further the questions of aesthetic values in literature and in the arts in general; how they are constructed, by whom and for what reason. Recent theories (postmodern and postcolonial) have rejected assumptions of aesthetic values as being 'neutral' and as an autonomous field which are beyond ideologies. Thus, aesthetics have been seen as a 'political unconscious', which reflects bourgeois values and the norms of the 18th and 19th centuries⁵. This is one reason for the marginalization and creation of stereotypes regarding indigenous literatures.

Stereotypes and certain expectations about indigenous literatures are manifold. Indigenous writers are expected to write on certain issues, to use certain symbols, to speak certain ways and to know everything about their culture, history and their present situation "from land claims to spiritual practices to traditional dress."⁶ Furthermore, an indigenous writer is considered to be a 'traditional storyteller' who tells 'legends' and 'myths' of her/his culture.⁷ Of course the Sami writer is a storyteller in the deepest meaning of the word but restricting indigenous literatures into limiting notions by others, serve only the assimilationist policies of dominant societies; they create false misrepresentations and images of ourselves. Sami writers should write in a certain way in order to be 'authentic' for an outside reader, and thereby "respond to non-Sami ideas about Lapland magic and exoticism."⁸ When emphasizing the importance of storytelling in Sami everyday life we cannot however, go to the other

3 Gram 1991, 124
4 I-chiola 1995, 27
5 Rantonen 1994, 132
6 Damm 1993, 15
7 *ibid.*, 13
8 Kailo 1994, 24

FROM THE JUNGLE BACK TO THE DUOTTAR

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I spent the winter of 1994-95 studying Native Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. I found interesting courses with an enormous amount of readings, much of which was highly inspiring. The whole idea of including various kinds of articles into a course syllabus was new to me, as were their contents. My year in Montreal was like coming from the bare *duottar*¹ to a jungle full of new things; a whole new world with distinctive concerns and ambitions. I left home because I felt a great need for something new and fresh and indeed, I found it.

One of my central matters of interest during that year was North American Native literature simply because of my familiarity with Sami literature. My final essay was a comparative study of the similarities between the literary conventions of Sami and North American Native literatures. The results of this very basic study were that there are some common literary themes between these literatures and that their literary conventions clearly differ from mainstream Western literary conventions. The study also showed that analyzing the Sami or North American Native literatures through Western literary theory violates their integrity. Western literary theories tend to dismiss non-Western literatures as being 'primitive', 'child-like', 'overpopulated' or 'having no clear plot'.²

For me, (and many others) using the concept of 'literature' when only referring to written texts, implies judging everything else - the whole storytelling tradition for example - as being subordinate to written forms. Within the Western tradition, written literature is regarded as a crucial step towards 'a civilized society' entering the sphere of 'culture'; before written literature there is only the folklore of the 'people of nature'. Some may criticize the new definition of 'literature' by calling for the 'original' meaning of the word by going back to the Latin, where *'liber'* (diminutive form *'libellus'*) meant the bark of a tree; as bark was used for writing upon. Derived from that therefore, literature implies writing. However, the concept of 'literature' was neither a Sami nor other indigenous peoples' creation, so we can claim to have the right to redefine the concept on our own basis and priorities.

1 the Sami word for mountain, fell
2 Kailo 1994, 24

essentialist extreme and start saying that storytelling is the *only* way of Sami writing; that other writings not based so tightly on storytelling are less 'real' or assimilated by Western tradition. This extremism leads only to fulfilling and internalizing outside expectations of what our literature should be.

Furthermore, as we cannot ignore the interconnections of knowledge and power, we have to ask questions such as "who is speaking, to whom, on whose behalf and in what context?" There are various forms of power politics in literature; those who have access to define literature have, first of all, silenced indigenous voices and "disempowered Indigenous peoples by dismissing, romanticizing, censoring, and labelling us."⁹ We must also remember questions of property: who has the right to speak or write? What are the appropriate forms of utterance? According to Fredric Jameson, Western literary genres are institutions or social contracts between a writer and a specific audience. All practices of discourse (genres, intellectual disciplines etc.) determine the way how language should be used.¹⁰ Indigenous literary tradition has been seen not to fit into the Western criteria of literary genres, because of different values and views of reality.¹¹

Literary conventions reflect the values and world view of that culture; the literature of a certain culture reflects the deepest meanings of that community. This means that the common themes of indigenous literatures differ from those literary conventions of cultures with different values and world views. One could find many conventions within Sami literature which clearly indicate its own tradition, separate from Western literary tradition. However, as Kerttu Vuolab has pointed out, the prevalent values and style of Western tradition have been internalized by many Sami writers as well – many of them are writing according to structural models adopted from the outside. However, we have to bear in mind that the schooling system contemporary Sami writers went through was non-Sami and furthermore, extremely assimilationist; consciously attempting to eradicate Sami culture from children, who did not, in many cases, speak the language of the dominant society.

One of the most emphasized and recurrent comments made by these Sami artists was that art cannot be distinguished from everyday life and furthermore, it cannot be differentiated into boxes. According to Kirsti Paltto, there are many 'multitaskers' who write, draw and work in Sápmi: "It is useless to make boundaries since a human being is a whole. As children we could learn everything, but we are made to specialize. When a person specializes she knows only a single element, though she had the possibility to know the whole range. Life is art, the way of life is art" (manuscript by E. Helander and K. Kailo: No Beginning, No End. The Sami Speak Up).

⁹ LaRoque 1990, XVI-XVII

¹⁰ Godard 1991, 185

¹¹ Petrone 1990, 5

Kerttu Vuolab also talks about the continuum of art when telling of her childhood experiences: many of her pictures create stories and many of her stories create pictures. She makes both stories and pictures herself, and she does not consider them to be different nor separate. For her, they are two sides of the same thing. She learned both an oral tradition and a visual perception in her childhood at the same time, by listening and watching her parents and other relatives on a daily basis. She tells how her mother and grandmother used to make *goikkemat* ¹² and how she used to sit in the midst of furs. She was given some pieces of fur to play with and she used to cut out animals such as bears, cats and dogs. At the same time, she was told stories that were an important part of her learning and upbringing.

According to Kirsti Paltto, Sami 'aesthetic values' are determined to a great extent by practicality. For instance, "a tourist may find the fells beautiful while a Sami considers them ugly as they are full of rocks and thus difficult to get through. A landscape covered with moss is not as beautiful as land covered with lichen, because reindeer need lichen to feed on. A plump girl was considered beautiful because she could better tolerate the cold" (ibid.). According to her, 'aesthetics' are tied to land and its ability to feed its inhabitants. This attitude is also reflected in her books: an attitude that often is regarded as 'childlike' or even 'ridiculous' to urban readers (ibid.).

In Sami literature, kinship is the central structuring principal of the story. The extended family is a basic concept in indigenous societies even today. The sense of community is reflected so vigorously in Sami literature that most readers, who are not familiar with the confusing webs of relatives and other family members, get lost and frustrated. There then follow reviews of Sami literature condemning its incoherence and weak structure – Western literary tradition emphasizes that its best literature has one protagonist, whose life we follow with a linear time perception. Sami culture is not based on individualism. Earlier, a person's survival was dependent on the other members of the *siida*. The importance of the family in Sami society has been so pivotal that it is marked in language as well. The Sami language is rich in specific words for relatives, even those who are non-blood. In Sami writing characters resist any notions of inferiority, or of being merely victims, 'poor Sami', as they have been presented in texts by outside writers (of which there is a countless amount). In stories written by Sami authors, the characters are subjects themselves, they are not compared to somebody else, and they present a great range of survival skills in everyday life. Rather than being a perishing people, they are resourceful, vivid and strenuous individuals.

There is a vast collection of important and valid information in Sami stories, still told on many occasions. Even today, when we are expected to be rescued by modern technology, there is knowledge which we need and which we increasingly want to hear as well. The younger

¹² reindeer fur boots

generation has recognized in many cases, that what we call 'modern technology' cannot solve the problems which it itself has caused. We have an increasing desire and need to know our families and our backgrounds with which to ground ourselves. We want to take our culture away from the museums and back to ourselves, everyday life and to let it revive and invent new meanings. We are not trying to regain 'the old good days' but we know that a living culture creates new meanings all the time without however, losing its core values. We want to have a living Sami culture which bears great significance to our identities and answers the question who we are; which is the basis of our thinking.

For a while, I have been excited by the latest theories born out of the crisis in Western reason, known as postmodern and post-colonial discourses with their myriad different interpretations and implementations. I was thrilled by an obviously radical and promising critique of the Western hegemony of knowledge and its universalist notions of theory, history and so on. Within contemporary theories there have emerged several paradigms which promote decolonization of marginalized peoples and groups and a decentering of the dominant center, such as 'the cultural politics of difference'. The purpose of such politics is, "to reject the abstract, general, and universal in the light of concrete, specific, and particular."¹³ By doing this, the politics of difference attempts to undermine the binarism between the marginal and the center and promote cultural diversity in order to empower and enable those in the margins to pursue their own endeavours; to give to their own voices new possibilities. The politics of 'representation', a concept launched by Stuart Hall emerged out of a need to deconstruct previous stereotypical representations of marginalized peoples, to demystify complex power structures within society and its institutions for new, challenging paradigms, views and approaches deriving from the margins, from sites of difference. The politics of difference aims towards the recognition of different, incommensurate views of reality and local forms of truth. These deconstructionist intentions have been adopted by different groups which have labelled as 'Others' of the West. The Sami, for instance, have been recently recognized as the 'Others' of Finland and Scandinavia. It has been also asked if these mainstream societies have forgotten their 'Others'; when the Sami culture have been discussed in Finland, for instance? And if it has been, how?¹⁴ Deconstruction desires to "recover traces of the Other that persist, as continually disruptive forces, on the margins of Western thought, and to challenge the whole binary system of Self and Other to allow for a more pluralistic approach to thought and action."¹⁵ According to Jacques Derrida, the idea of deconstruction is basically to find out the fields of meaning for a word, which means that a word doesn't have a certain, given-in-nature meaning by itself that

¹³ West 1993, 204

¹⁴ Vuorinen 1995, 230

¹⁵ Winant 1990, 82

everyone shares. Derrida has also noted that reality is merely a text: according to him, reality is conceived as an ever-changing web of interrelated processes, and hence as "text".¹⁶

In those same margins, which these new paradigms intend to deconstruct and demystify, there have also emerged criticism: Barbara Christian has stated that in the present situation Western intellectuals are more concerned in analyzing other academics' texts than literature itself, which, in turn, does not produce any concrete solutions to those questions they claim to be interested in. For her, it seems that their "deconstruction" is merely an illusion: they are still using Western tradition's forms, style and language and maintaining the same hegemonic emphasis they claim to uproot. She is especially concerned about the fact how dangerous a theory can become, for there is then always the slippery road to prescriptiveness and exclusiveness.¹⁷

Another critic from the margins, bell hooks, has raised her concern regarding issues of Otherness and difference, because they do not seem to have so much concrete impact as an analysis or standpoint. According to her, it is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of "authority" as "mastery over" must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter.¹⁸

Is this decolonizing process of the 'Other', merely an attempt by intellectuals to obtain an instant solution (in the present day instant world) and just another desire to divide the world into new polarities, center and periphery, self and other, in order to be have easily receivable constructions? Gayatri Spivak has also criticized that the romantic notion of the colonized Other as being "simply the revolutionary mirror-image of the Western Self."¹⁹ According to her, deconstruction, if its values are based on a criticism of Western practices, cannot promote anything else but "big talk in the academic arena."²⁰

So, for a while, I wandered in a thick jungle of postmodern and post-colonial approaches. Lots of vines to grab, but there were always better looking ones elsewhere. Sometimes so complicated as well – life in this jungle was a brand new adventure for me. Fascinating and exiting of course, but also quite many foreign things which did not have anything to do with me. However, shaken up by the very critics mentioned above (who

¹⁶ Martinez 1988, 227

¹⁷ Christian 1990, 340

¹⁸ hooks 1991, 24

¹⁹ Winant 1990, 83

²⁰ *ibid.* 84

clarified my thinking from all the scrap gathered along the way), I returned back to the clear *duoddarar* of Sápmi and I realized that, like Johan Turi, only up in the mountains can a Sami think clearly. Put her into a musty room and she does not understand much, because the wind is not blowing against her face. Her thoughts do not move when walls are around her. Neither is it good for her to be in a thick forest with warm air. But when a Sami is up in the high fells, she will have a clear mind.²¹

Because of the effects of colonialism, the oral storytelling tradition was not passed on to our generation so that we could tell those exuberant stories that our grandparents and parents do, but we did not however, lose the tradition. It continues living not only in storytellers' performances, but also very strongly in contemporary Sami literature. And it is not only stories, it is our theorizing. Barbara Christian mentions how in her childhood the women around her theorized through the use of pithy language. We also have writers whose language resemble the *gáovssázat*²² in their vividness. In Eino Guttorm's novels, for example, one can criticize the shallowness of plot (is the demand of a certain kind of plot another legacy of Western literary values?), but at the very same time, the reader can also sense a strong ironic manner of speculation while analyzing the surroundings. His language with all its nuances – words which many of us do not know any more – sweeps the reader along. Peoples, who have not possessed a written literature, have respected the power of the word in a different manner; though this has often been buried within richly articulated and elaborated utterances often combined with various shades of meanings.

It is clear that the tasks of Sami writers are various. Sami writers (and other artists as well) have sometimes been referred to as *Ofeleá*, the 'pathfinders' of Sami culture and they also have similar functions to the *noaidi*.^{23, 24} In general, the functions of indigenous literatures have been to give an alternative perspective to their own history, to dismantle stereotypes, to give voice to those who for long have been spoken on behalf of and to empower indigenous societies and cultures spiritually and politically by building bridges between the past and the present while mediating traditional knowledge. There are, however, other more political tasks. For an indigenous writer, the act of writing has been a political act. Social conditions have, inevitably, made indigenous writing political; in a situation without any power, writing has been the only way to express the people's hopes, goals and demands. In their writing, indigenous writers have maintained traditions and at the same time resisted the prevalent systems of dominant states.

21 Turi 1910, 11

22 the Northern Lights

23 the Sami shaman

24 Kaibo 1994, 30

In her article about Native literature (1993) Kimberly M. Blaeser, a mixed-blood of Ojibway and German ancestry, refers to Louis Owen's character, Uncle Luther, in his novel *The Sharpest Sight*. According to Uncle Luther, a person must know the stories of her/his people, and then she/he has to make their own story too. But this, however, is not enough if she/he is an indigenous person: in that case "we got to be aware of the stories they're making about us, and the way they change the stories we already know."²⁵ In other words, we have to also know misinterpretations of our own stories, because, as Uncle Luther reminds us, there is political power in stories: "They're always making up stories, and that's how they make the world the way they want it" (*ibid.*).

So if we start theorizing Sami literature too normatively, there is always a danger in canonizing, changing and remaking: whether we are trying to make Sami literature fit into the literary genres of the Western tradition or inventing our own new categorizations. We, who are analyzing Sami literature from within, as Sami ourselves, should not apply ready established literary theories to Sami writings, because, first of all, if accepting these theories, we also accept authority which still comes from outside and thus cannot be regarded as being fully appropriate. As Barbara Christian points out, non-Western peoples have always theorized, "but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic."²⁶ According to her, this theorizing has often taken place in narrative forms: stories, riddles, proverbs and play with language. This kind of theorizing also is far more dynamic and based on every-day life rather than the separation of reason and experience. She tells how the women with whom she grew up, used to speculate life through dynamic, active language use, which revealed the power relations of their world (*ibid.*).

If we were to theorize, or sketch heuristic models for analyzing Sami literature, I would suggest basing it on the storytelling tradition itself: try to find its pivotal elements, ideas and structures, which could function as a mediation, position and metaphors which resist the unheeded intrusion of foreign elements into Sami research. This also ensures that Sami stories will maintain their integrity, when the critique is derived from the stories themselves. However, one has to be aware of the dangerous traps of decontextualization.

Stories are not only words written on paper, but are a whole performance with interaction, communication, the learning process and finally the entire cultural context. As Jana Sequoya has pointed out: if stories are removed "from their actual cultural context to place them within a literary context destroys their social role."²⁷ It has also been claimed that the 'elevation' of a story to the level to which it is called 'literature' can destroy the story's moral function (*ibid.*).

25 quoted in Blaeser 1993, 52

26 Christian 1990, 336

27 quoted in Blaeser 1993, 59

After galloping on and around, I found myself merely repeating words of others rather than trying to find my own paths; it was too easy to slip into an ambiguous language of endless meanings; into the jungle of 'texts'. But in noticing that I was sinking into "big words", metaphorical and alienating language which my grandmother would never understand, I realized that it was time to reconsider my direction. I turned to indigenous criticism: using Sami traditional knowledge in doing Sami research is empowering and opposes outside influence. We do not have to write books about Sami traditional knowledge anymore but we can carry it all out in practise and not only in the arena of "big talk". Since, as indigenous writers have demanded, it is vital to recycle our academic writing and not let it mould behind the often high walls of academia; but to bring it to a broader audience, we as educated Sami, have to remember our responsibilities towards our own societies. Look at us, Sami scholars, writing increasingly in English. Will this interesting information be available for the people it is dealing with – the Sami themselves – or why, and for whom do we publish these kind of books?

As indigenous scholars and students, we should promote academic storytelling which includes resistance, alter-Native practices and models of doing science. Academic storytelling also presupposes participation. We cannot afford to stay apart from developing our societies. Wouldn't it be a remarkable skill to be able to write academic articles in a way that your grandmother understood – at least it would be a worthy challenge! One can of course claim that it is not a matter of concern at all; that academic writings are not intended for the 'ordinary reader' anyway, but to create discussion in the academic arena, among other intellectuals. But I return to the question: who defines that? Why do we need to keep these two arenas strictly separate? Does it not reflect the outmoded notion of superiority of reason from 'normal life'?

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