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Vuokko Hirvonen’s *Sámeatnama jienat—sápmelaš nissona bälgis girječállin* (1998) is the first doctoral thesis published entirely in Sami. It is also the first academic dissertation that analyses the emergence, genealogy and historical and ideological setting of a Sami women’s literary tradition. According to Hirvonen Sami women’s literature was born during the 1970s in connection with contemporary feminist and ethno-political movements. Her thesis was published both in Sami and Finnish in 1998. When it was published in English under the title *Voices from Sápmi. Sámi Women’s Path to Authorship* by the Sami publishing house DAT in 2008, this made it accessible to a wider readership. One point of departure of Hirvonen’s study is that Sami women have a marginal position not only in literature (58), but also in the dominant, majority culture, as well as in Sami culture. This involves the claim that Sami women have been subjected to triple discrimination related to the fact that they are Sami, women and Sami women. This is the incentive for the strong emphasis on ethnicity and gender throughout the study. In relation to this the emergence of a tradition of Sami women authors is seen as an emancipatory project that may be described as anti-colonial, or de-colonising, feminism.

*Voices from Sápmi. Sámi Women’s Path to Authorship* is divided into four parts. The study is restricted to 40 authors who reside in the Nordic countries (20), which means that Russian Sami writers are not included. When it comes to the definition of Sami literature, Hirvonen defines authors as Sami “as long as they consider themselves Sámi—no matter in what language they choose to write.” (20). The first part of *Voices from Sápmi*, entitled “The Ethno-Feminist Perspective,” provides a discussion of the theoretical foundation of the study, which is a combination of perspectives from feminist, anticolonial and postcolonial studies. The second part, “Sámi Women Become Authors,” consists of one chapter, which provides a general presentation of the Sami languages, literature, the ambiguous role of education, as well as the importance of writing skills and ethnic awareness for the emergence of a Sami women’s literature. In the following chapter Hirvonen presents a genealogy of Sami women writers in a typology with four levels: the “Foremothers,” the “Grandmothers,” the “Mothers” and the “Daughters.” The point of departure of the categorisation is the time of birth of the respective authors. The “foremothers” are writers born in the late 1800s. The “grandmothers” were born between 1900 and 1939, the “mothers” between 1940 and 1960, and the “daughters” from the 1960s on (23–24). The third part deals with the issue of Sami identity and experiences of colonisation. Hirvonen particularly highlights connections among ambivalent feelings related to Sami identity formation in contexts where Sami culture has been marginalised and suppressed. In particular she focuses upon the role of residential schools, where Sami children from migrant families were sent, with subsequent loss of Sami cultural identity and with the emergence of feelings of shame. The discussion of these themes is based on readings of literary texts by Sami women authors. The
second chapter of part three discusses the yoik tradition and how it continues to influence Sami poetry. The fourth part, “Constructing a New Kind of Woman,” consists of three chapters that discuss the Sami gender system and female identities, women’s consciousness and feminism in the work of Sami women authors. Finally, the chapter “Voices of Sámi Women Authors” sums up the results of the study.

Hirvonen situates *Voices from Sápmi* within the framework of the Sami ethnic awakening of the 1960s and 1970s:

> the turn of the 1960s and 1970s was the time when the Sámi, along with many other minority groups, began to demand political, cultural and economic rights for themselves. Sámi women took part in this activity, writing many political texts (24).

One important issue in this context is that of language. Hirvonen particularly highlights that one reason for the cultural marginalisation of the Sami in the Nordic nation-states is the lack of a long tradition of writing in Sami by Sami writers. Furthermore she emphasises the dominance of male writers in the corpus of what has been written: “Sámi research, the written history of the Sámi, and the history of Sámi writing are all male history—history that was often dominated by non-Sámi men” (23). This is one historical backdrop of the role of the use of Sami language in Sami cultural mobilisation. One prerequisite for the use of Sami is the changes in the view on the Sami languages which has resulted in legislation that has made it possible to learn Sami at school: “Only in the past few decades have ordinary people learned to read and write Sámi to a greater extent, thanks to changes in educational and language policies” (23). The history of assimilation, followed by a fairly recent revitalisation of the Sami language, adds an ideological dimension to the language issue, as one aspect of the use of Sami is that it may be associated with anti-colonial critique. This theme has been highlighted in proposals for decolonising methodologies within the field of indigenous research, for example in *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith 2006) and *Decolonizing the Mind* by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Thiong’o addresses the issue of the use of language as a possibility for engaging in anti-colonial struggle in an African context. According to Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, writing in the language of the coloniser implies paying them homage, while writing in an African language involves resistance and critique (Thiong’o 1986). This is a theme adopted by Hirvonen when presenting the rationale for writing her thesis in Sami in the first place: “The choice of the language in which one writes is also a form of resistance through which we can undermine Western intellectual and political hegemony” (44). She goes on to quote from JanMohamed’s and Lloyd’s foreword to *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*: “Every time we speak or write in English, French, German, or another dominant European language, we pay homage to Western intellectual and political hegemony” (44).

Although thought provoking and consistent with a critical, anti-colonial perspective, Hirvonen’s emphasis on the ideological implications of the use of language may seem excessively romantic and unconcerned about the material conditions of publishing. One problem is that it does not take into account the prerequisites for the establishment and sustenance of a Sami print culture. In
The Sámi People. A Handbook, John Trygve Solbakk makes the following observation: “There has never been sufficient Sámi readership to cover production and distribution expenses through sales alone. Sámi language publications will therefore continue to depend on public subsidies” (Solbakk 2006: 136). This implies that while anti-colonial critique may be an incentive for writing in Sami, there are also drawbacks to writing in a small language, as the readership will be restricted to a small group of people. The fact that there are several Sami languages further complicates the issue. Hirvonen does mention this theme: “Sámi literature has been published in six Sámi languages: South, Lule, North, Inari, Skolt and Kildin Sámi, which all have an officially adopted orthography” (16). Another factor pointed out by Hirvonen is that all Sami people are not proficient in a Sami language.

When depicting the backdrop of Sami ethno-political mobilisation, Hirvonen points to the history of assimilation politics aiming at cultural homogenisation, to colonisation and the Sami people’s loss of land and to lappological research which contributed to a marginalisation of the Sami. One of her claims is that Said’s notion of Orientalism may be applied to the lappological research tradition, which contributed to constructing the Sami as the Others (30). When discussing the present-day Sami critique of colonial and lappological rationales for marginalising the Sami, Hirvonen furthermore proposes the deployment of strategies presented in another postcolonial classic, namely Ashcroft’s, Griffiths’ and Tiffin’s The Empire Writes Back (1989). One major strategy involves critical investigations of notions of a centre and its outside, or margin, which is an important element in all brands of anti-colonial critique and decolonising methodologies.

The critique of notions of centres that have resulted in a marginalisation of the Sami people, as well as other minorities and indigenous peoples, is one example of a decentring and recentring methodology whereby an attempt is made to make Sami authors visible. In the project of making Sami women visible Hirvonen attaches great importance to literature and art: “it was the birth of literature and other forms of art that made Sámi women visible: they have made the voice of Sámi women more audible than anything else has” (18). The emergence of Sami women writers is interpreted as the creation of a platform for the expression of thoughts and experiences related to gender and ethnicity, and to the relationship between the Sami and the majority society. Furthermore the decentring and recentring may be interpreted as a challenge to the epistemological barriers created by compliance among colonialism, modernisation and science that has constructed the Sami as the Others.

The “foremothers” of Hirvonen’s genealogy of a Sami women’s literary tradition are represented by two pioneers who struggled for Sami rights, Elsa Laula, later Renberg, (1877–1931), and Karin Stenberg (1884–1969). The first Sami women’s association, Brurskanken Samiske Kvindeforening, was founded in 1910 on the initiative of Elsa Laula-Renberg. Laula-Renberg is also the author of the pamphlet Inför Lif eller Död? Sanningsord i de Lappska förhållanden [‘Facing Life or Death? Words of Truth in the Lapp Situation’] (1904), which discusses the situation of the Sami and their prospects of survival under the assimilationist policy of the Swedish government. Laula-Renberg was of the opinion that cooperation among the Sami was crucial and that women should engage in this actively. As
a result of the women’s association the first National Congress of the Nordic Sami was brought about in 1917 (Kulonen et. al. (eds.) 2005: 434). Karin Stenberg, who carried on the work of Elsa Laula-Renberg, was also preoccupied with the promotion of Sami culture, particularly the Forest Sami culture, and with the enhancement of opportunities for Sami to get an education. Education was seen by these pioneers as a prerequisite for the improvement of the situation of the Sami, as it would facilitate contacts and negotiations with the majority society and adaptation to the modern world. Hirvonen emphasises the role of a booklet by Stenberg on the early history of Sami demands for rights, Dat läh mijen situd!, Det är vår vilja! ["This is our wish!"], published by Stenberg and the Árjjapluovvi Sami association in 1920. According to Hirvonen the criticism of the booklet “is directed against the social Darwinist, ethnocentric and colonialist views of the Swedes, dealing with the hegemony of the producer of knowledge” (79). As this quote shows, Hirvonen’s manner of arguing is clearly influenced by anti-colonial, postcolonial and indigenous studies. Considering that the demand for self-determination is an important theme in the struggle of indigenous peoples worldwide, it is interesting to see that this theme was on the agenda already in the early days of Sami mobilisation, and that two women played a major role in the history of Sami struggle for rights.

In the chapter about literary “grandmothers” Hirvonen highlights the wish to preserve traditions as an incentive for women authors. According to Hirvonen the “need to sustain and pass down traditions” is a central theme in their writing (81). One important historical and social backdrop is the ongoing marginalisation of Sami culture as a result of assimilation politics. Hirvonen points out that the “grandmothers” in fact did not begin to publish their works until the early 1970s, just like the generation of “mothers” (81). The emergence of the first generation of women authors is described as the result of a transition from the oral tradition to writing. This of course describes the development of Sami literature as a whole. The emergence of writing involved not only a new kind of mediation, but also the establishment of a print-culture with publishing houses and channels for the distribution and sale of Sami literature. When discussing the contribution of the “grandmothers,” Hirvonen particularly highlights the deployment of traditional Sami genres in writing, for example a kind of reminiscence literature, mutitašangirjálasvuohta. One aspect of Sami reminiscence literature is, according to Hirvonen, that it presents counter-memories, which represent resistance and criticism of the authorities for having oppressed the Sami (87). One common characteristic of the “grandmothers” is that “they have kept a strong Sami identity,” despite the fact that they had to give up their first language, Sami, during their schooldays (88). In the chapter about the next generation of authors, “The Mothers. Growing up in residential schools,” a strong focus is put upon Sami women’s identity loss related to assimilation politics and discrimination. Hirvonen particularly emphasises the role of residential schools for Sami children’s loss of language, identity, sense of belonging and a positive self-image. These are also themes explored in the literary writing of the “mothers.” The most important genres for this generation are, according to Hirvonen, children’s literature and poetry (97).

In the chapter about the “daughters,” “The Daughters. The benefits of education,” Hirvonen explicitly highlights the role of education for the develop-
ment of Sami women’s literature. The works of this generation were published in the late 1980s and the early 1990s (104). Hirvonen points out that the generation of “daughters” is the first generation that was able to “enjoy the fruits of the social policy initiated by their foremothers: the ones who first demanded equal social, political and educational rights for the Sámi” (104). While this characterisation does indicate that a shift in the policy affecting the Sami has occurred, and that some kind of justice has been achieved, it is not clear if Hirvonen thinks that the colonisation has come to an end. This is in fact an interesting theme, as there are different views among the Sami themselves when it comes to the issue of land, and other, rights. This issue also has theoretical implications, as the issue of colonisation will affect whether anti-colonial or postcolonial perspectives are deployed in the analysis of Sami cultural mobilisation.

One aspect that differentiates Hirvonen’s study from other examinations of Sami culture is the deployment of perspectives from feminist and gender studies. In particular her analysis of traditional Sami culture, socialisation and the establishment of gender patterns in part four, “Construction of a new kind of woman,” is interesting, as it highlights aspects of traditional Sami culture which are problematic from a feminist perspective. In my opinion Hirvonen’s contribution is a refreshing complement to other studies, which have tended to romanticise and exoticise Sami traditions by presenting them as positive ecological and holistic alternatives to those of modern Western societies. One important aspect of Hirvonen’s study is that while she does not deny positive qualities of traditional Sami culture, she also highlights aspects that are problematic from a feminist vantage point. In this context she particularly focuses upon the role of handicraft for shaping ethnic and gender identities. With examples from literary texts by women authors from different generations, she elucidates the ambiguous and contextual role of handicraft for shaping a Sami female identity. The significance of sewing skills in the writing of Sami women is discussed by contrasting the positive connotations these skills have in the poetry of the young Swedish Sami Anna-Stina Svakko with the negative connotations expressed in the work of the older poet Rauni Magga Lukkari. Hirvonen concludes that the difference may be related to the circumstance that Lukkari herself has experienced the hard work of sewing clothes, which was expected of women in traditional communities, while Svakko views women’s handicraft from a present-day position involving a search for a Sami women’s culture which to a large extent has been lost for the generation of young Sámi (174).

Summing Up
Hirvonen’s doctoral thesis is a valuable contribution to literary, cultural, gender and indigenous studies. It is the first of its kind in more than one respect. While the Sami version is embedded in the context of Sami cultural mobilisation, which involves the revitalisation and development of the North Sami language, it has now become accessible to a larger readership through the translation into English. When Sámeeatnama jienat—sápmelaš nissona bâlggis girječällin was first published in 1998, it contributed to the development of Sami literary studies, as well as challenged masculinist tendencies of marginalising women in the ongoing construction of a Sami literary canon. By emphasising tendencies to marginalise women, both in Sami tradition and in the process of constructing a Sami cultural
identity and literary culture, Hirvonen’s study contributes to highlighting the role of gender in the present-day negotiation about identity and canon formation. One interesting conclusion Hirvonen makes is that markers of a traditional Sami culture, which may fulfil a positive function in the dominant Sami (male-dominated) cultural mobilisation, may be represented as oppressive by women authors dissatisfied with the role of women in traditional culture. With the English translation *Voices from Sápmi. Sámi Women’s Path to Authorship* a wider readership may now take part of Hirvonen’s discussion of intersections of gender, colonialism, anti-colonial struggle and Sami cultural mobilisation, analysed with perspectives from feminist, anti-colonial and postcolonial studies.

REFERENCES


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