

THE NORDIC COUNCIL LITERATURE PRIZE AND THE QUESTION OF MINORITIES

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As the material of literature is language, the question of minorities in a literary context is to a large degree a question of linguistic minorities. It has sometimes been discussed if it makes sense to have a Nordic literature prize when the Nordic countries include so very different language areas. Only Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish are so related languages that translations between them are not necessary. Finnish, Greenlandic, Icelandic, Faroese, and Sami candidates have to be translated. This is not unproblematic, especially when it comes to poetry which depends more than prose on the sound, rhythm, grammar and idiomatic of its original language.

But could Finns, Icelanders, Greenlanders, Faroese and Sami all be said to be minorities in the North? It does of course not make sense to speak of Finns as a minority, since they have a sovereign state of their own. So does Iceland. As Iceland is a former colony, though, the Icelanders do have a history of oppression. But when it comes to literature, the situation of Iceland is different from the situation of most other former colonies, as the Icelandic sagas are considered the treasure and origin of Nordic literature. So here, we do not have the situation of a colonial power that has imposed a literary tradition on an illiterate colony, but rather a colony having a literary richness envied and desired by the colonial power.

The Faroe Islands, though still a part of the Danish kingdom, also have a strong and admired literary tradition of their own. When it comes to Greenland, we have a more classical postcolonial situation, in which the literary tradition of the former colony is oral rather than written, and its language very different from the language of the colonial power. This may partly explain why a candidate from Greenland has never won the Nordic literary prize, and I think we do have a problem here.

It should be said, though, that last year the prize was awarded to a novel showing great solidarity to Greenland and the Greenlanders, criticizing the Danish colonization. Kim Leine's novel *The Prophets of Eternal Fjord* is something as rare as a Danish postcolonial novel, telling us the story of a young Danish priest in Greenland at the end of the 18th century. The Danish colonization of Greenland is depicted as an utterly absurd project. The Danes are homesick and disillusioned, where as the European and Christian ideals of freedom and neighborly love that they bring to Greenland, are taken up by the original population as an inspiration to rebellion.

But besides being a critical, historical novel reminding us that Denmark has a problematic past as a colonial power the book is about body liquids as the primary element of the human being. Leine's novel is not a simplified story about evil Danish oppressors and noble wild Greenlanders. Rather it shows how we are all finally part of the same soup of sweat, slime, urine, sperm, rotteness, and how this makes any attempt at colonization utterly absurd.

The Sami are a true minority as they have a culture and language, but not a state of their own. Their literary tradition is also oral, and only once the prize was given to a Sami work, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: *The Sun, my Father*, 1991. The motivation text of the committee at this point testifies to

an awareness of strengthening the cultural identity and reputation of a minority: “The book gives expression to Sami cultural history and shows the richness of Sami language.”

Sami is not the only minority language to be strongly represented in the committee, so is Finland-Swedish, as it is represented both by the Finnish candidacy and by the independent candidate from the island of Åland. But in a literary context the Finland-Swedes are a minority not unlike the way that Iceland is a former colony, forming actually a kind of literary superpower. Swedish is a language with a long tradition of writing, and the Finland-Swedes have a strong literary tradition of their own. Two Finland-Swedish authors have been awarded the prize, Bo Carpelan in 1977, Tua Forsström in 1998.

The Sami language area as well as Greenland and Faroe Islands have only been independently represented in the prize committee since 1985. This was an important opening to other Nordic cultures and languages than the main ones. Only five years before, in 1980, the prize was for the first time awarded to the work of a woman writer, Sara Lidman. The year before a group of prominent literary women had protested against the total lack of women writers among the prize winners by awarding a Nordic prize of their own to Märta Tikkanen. Though women are not (by numbers) a minority, they have also had to struggle for recognition, and the statistics of the prize still does not look very good: 41 men and only 12 women have been awarded the prize.

So far, I have only been talking about what you might call internal Nordic minorities, that is minorities that all have a Nordic language and are ethnically and geographically rooted in the Nordic countries, even if they actually have different ethnicities and languages. But what about minorities that have their origin outside the North? What about immigrants and more nomadic people, what about the Jews, the Roma, the Arabs, the Turks?

Those are of course all minorities on different backgrounds, with different histories and conditions.

The Jews have been a part of Nordic culture for centuries, and as in all of Europe even very central to our culture, literature, art, and science. The Danish poet Pia Tafdrup, who was awarded the prize in 1998, has a Jewish background. In 2012 one of the Danish nominees was Janina Katz, originally from Poland, who was not only Jewish, but a direct descendant of Holocaust. As a child during the WWII she was hidden away at a Polish family's, while her mother survived five concentration camps. As a theme, Holocaust is quite present in the nominated books from the latest years. Merete Lindstrøm's *The History of Silence* (which was not only nominated but actually awarded the prize in 2012) tells *about* the silence that through decades has been dominating a Norwegian family in order to keep away the scaring truth about the father's childhood as a persecuted Jew in wartime Germany. Merete Lindstrøm's novel seems to me to be a very open, thoughtful, and responsible response to the ghosts of the past, even the most painful ghosts of European history: the ghosts of Auschwitz.

Also the Icelandic nominees Hallgrimur Helgason (from last year) and Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl (from this year) reflect upon the trauma of WWII. Helgason's novel, *The Woman at a 1000 degrees*, is told by an old Icelandic woman from a garage in Reykjavík where she is lying in her bed, waiting for death. During WWII her father was attracted to Hitler's ideas through his enthusiasm for the sagas and the old Norse symbols, and she herself, who has lived the life of a hundred women, was a refugee in Poland. In Norðdahl's novel *Evil*, the protagonist's girlfriend Agnes descends from Jewish victims of the war and as a history student is obsessed with holocaust, until she leaves him

for a neo nazi. As Norddahl writes: “Hitler did not win the war, but he won Holocaust.” The novel also contains a reflection on the fate of the Roma: “What do you think was done to the gypsies when the prisoners were released from Auschwitz – and from Ravensbrück, Dachau, and all the others? They were simply moved from one prison camp to the other, were they had to stay a few years more, while the allied authorities made sure that they were not just pickpockets pretending to be persecuted.” Through hyperbolic, black humor those Icelandic novelists show how the Nordic countries, though located in the periphery of Europe, are involved in its central traumas, not least the persecution of minorities.

Emigrants from Africa, Turkey, Asia, and the Arab countries are a newer part of Nordic history. In these years we are actually beginning to see a number of excellent Nordic writers with a background from these parts of the world. One of them was nominated for the prize last year, the Swedish-African author Johannes Anyuru who has told the story of his African father who was trained as a pilot in Greece for the army of Uganda, but violently blown around by the storm of history, spending years of his life as a prisoner and refugee in Africa, until ending his days in Sweden. Anyuru’s novel is called “A Storm came from Paradise”, referring to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin who has described how the angel of history is blown out of paradise by the storm of progress that leaves nothing behind but ruins and catastrophes. The pilot, the angel, the wings, the whiteness, the light, the seeds and downs from flowers being carried by the wind – all these are poetic reoccurring motives in the novel, quilting together the skies of Africa, Greece, and Sweden, stressing the image of history as a ruthless storm, but even forming images of a father’s God, and images of a freedom from history which Anyuru’s father only experienced in short moments. Thus Anyuru gives a personal voice and story to the African refugees that have become a part of the Nordic countries, but of whom the sedentary Nordics often do not know much.

Other Nordic second generation immigrants, such as Yahya Hassan in Denmark and Jonathan Hassan Khemiri in Sweden, have renewed Nordic literature linguistically by introducing elements of their second language or a special mixed immigrant language into their writing.

I think it is only a question of time, and I think it will be an important moment, when an author with a non-Nordic ethnical background is awarded the prize. Just like it was an important moment when the first woman writer was awarded the prize.

Still, the question is also whether a writer with a minority background really should be seen as first and foremost representing this minority. The Swedish writer Jonas Hassen Khemiri, for instance, who is half Tunesian, has claimed that he does not like to be called an immigrant writer. I fully understand his point, I do not want to be called a woman professor, or a woman literary critic. If we take Anyuru, one of Swedens nominee last year, he was not nominated because he represented the Swedish minority of African immigrants, but because he had written a fabulous book.

Last year the nominee from Åland did not even want to be from Åland – she was nominated by Åland and Finland alike, and preferred to be presented as a Finnish rather than an Åland author.

I do think that literature has a very important universalist dimension, investigating the conditions of human life that we all share, regardless of nationality, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity and so on. Including the universal condition of actually being subjected to a special national, sexual, ethnical, social identity When I read the nominees from the other Nordic countries, I do not first and foremost think: Oh, that is how it is to be a Swede/ an Icelander/ a Norwegian etc. I think: what

does this learn me about human existence? Including the part of human existence that is about being attached to a certain language, a certain landscape, a certain culture.

The Nordic countries do not in themselves form a homogenous, mono-linguistic, mono-cultural area. How composite and conflictual even internordic relations can be is beautifully captured in this family scene from Hallgrímur Helgason's novel *The Woman at a 1000 degrees*, in which the narrator is the daughter of an Icelandic Nazi soldier, and granddaughter of Iceland's first president: "My grandmother was married to a Danish upper class lady who was married to an Icelandic and despised the Germans. My father was a German soldier who was married to an Icelandic and despised the Danes. [...] Puti was a half Danish, but optimistic Icelandic who dreamed of a sovereign Icelandic state. Külle was Icelandic-Danish, but married to a Faroese who found the thought of a sovereign Iceland utterly absurd."

The Nordic literature prize does in itself cross linguistic and national borders, as it includes a diversity of languages, nations, and cultures. Thus it invites us to plunge into literatures, languages, cultures, and landscapes that we are not necessarily familiar with. Just like the prize winners from recent years do it: Sofia Oksanen when writing about the history of Estonia, Merete Lindström when writing about a Jew traumatized from Holocaust, Sara Stridsberg when writing about a militant Lesbian American writer as she lies dying in San Francisco, Kim Leine when writing about 18th century colonial Greenland.

I would say that there is in contemporary Nordic literature a focus on minorities and their problems, and I do think that the Nordic Literature prize by being in itself trans-national and including internal Nordic minority languages has an openness to other literatures and cultures than those of the immediate majority.