Putting an End to the Shame Associated with Minority Culture and its Concomitant Negative Self-Images - On Gender and Ethnicity in Sami and Tornedalian Literature

Excerpt:
In the 1970s, the indigenous Sami people of the Cap of the North (the northwesterly arctic tip of Europe consisting of counties in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia), and minorities, such as the Swedish Tornedalians, began to mobilise and form organisations. The first literary work written by a Sami woman in a Sami language was published in 1971 and since then, many female authors have followed with works that thematise contradictions between majority and minority cultures.

In these works, old Sami myths and oral hand-me-downs are brought to bear in the investigation of a particular female Sami identity.

Leading female authors include Rauni Magga Lukkari, Synnøve Persen, Maren Uthaug and Rosa Liksom.

Content:
The Nordic countries witnessed an upsurge in anti- and postcolonial movements during the 1970s. The Sami people, the only indigenous population in the Arctic areas of Fennoscandia, and various minorities, such as the Swedish Tornedalians, began to mobilise and form organisations. As a result, a contemporary Sami and Tornedalian literature began to emerge.

The versatile author, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001), whose Sami name is Áillohaš, was active in the international indigenous rights movement. He was awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1991 for the groundbreaking illustrated book of poetry, Beaivi áhčážan (1988; The Sun, My Father), originally published in the North Sami language. Beaivi áhčážan is part of the cultural mobilization efforts to strengthen Sami cultural identity and revitalize the North Sami language. The book includes photographs from several museums and scientific institutions, including collections of racial biology, which aimed to demonstrate the purported differences between the Sami and the Nordic ‘racial type’. Valkeapää referred to his book as a Sami family album. The book depicts nature’s changing seasons, birth, and death, everything of which humans form a part, “[…] and I grow from this earth/ to the earth/ I/ and those who are like me”.

The Organization of Sami Women

During the 1970s, influential authors emphasised the role of language in the formation of cultural identity. The works of both Valkeapää and the Tornedalian author, Bengt Pohjanen, have an anti-colonial edge. Their books seek, like the research and artistic forms directed at the Sami and Tornedalian groups, to decolonise the very thoughts and sentiments, which have led to negative self-images and a sense of shame about their own cultures. Sami and Tornedalian publishers constituted an important precondition for the emergence of a contemporary Sami and Tornedalian literature.

Of great importance to the emergence of a contemporary Sami literature is the fact of Sami women beginning to write about women’s lives and experiences. One may find traces of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s in this new Sami literature. Kirsti Paltto (b. 1947) from Ohejohka, Utsjoki in Finland is one of the authors who attended Sami language classes during the 1970s in order to write in Sami. Her collection of short stories, *Soaŋgu* (Courting) from 1971 was the first book by a Sami woman published in North Sami. The contentions between the Sami community and the Finnish majority population and the transition from a traditional to modern society are prominent themes in Paltto’s work. Like Valkeapää, Paltto has been heavily influenced by the indigenous peoples movement and anticolonial currents. A recurring theme in her work is the marginalisation of the Sami people due to the colonisation of *Sápmi* (The cultural region inhabited by Sami people. This area comprises parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, transl.). Paltto was the first female president of the Sami Writers’ Association, Sámi Girjecálliid Searvi (SGS), founded in 1979. The association, with members in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, promotes Sami literature and creates economic opportunities, which allow writers to express themselves in the Sami language. Until the mid-80s, a series of publications, entitled *Cállagat* (Writings), promoted new Sami voices on the literary scene.

The first children’s book in Sami, Marry A. Somby’s (b. 1953) *Åmmul ja alit oarbmaelle / Ammul og den blå kusinen* (Ammul and the Blue Cousin), was published in 1976. Marry A. Somby, from Deatnu, Tana, in Norway, is the author of children’s books, fiction, and plays. She lived for a number of years among Native Americans in the United States, something which is reflected in the poetry collection, *Krigeren, elskeren og klovnen / Mu apache rähkesvuoha* (1994; The Warrior, the Lover, and the Clown), and the novel, *Bajándávgi*, (2004; The Thunder Arc). In 1979, Somby was one of the co-founders of the Sami Writers’ Association.

### Searching for Sami Roots

The search for identity and the acrimony between the Sami and the majority populations are recurring themes in Sami literature. The Swedish-speaking writer, Ann Helen Laestadius (b. 1971) had a breakthrough with her books about Agnes, a girl who lives in Stockholm with her parents, a Swedish father and a mother who, in the beginning, hides her Sami origins. Agnes becomes increasingly interested in her background and begins to actively explore her Sami identity. In the first book, *Sms från Soppero* (2007; A Text Message from Soppero), Agnes falls in love with Henrik, a Sami boy who texts her in Sami. In order to keep the budding romance alive, Agnes must learn Sami. She travels to Soppero in northern Sweden in order to meet her boyfriend and her own Sami family, but the relationship is challenged on many fronts, not least because of Henrik’s mother, who is convinced that real Sami people should keep reindeer and live in Sápmi.

Maren Uthaug’s *Og sådan blev det* (2014; That’s How it All Turned Out) also explores the theme of having a mixed ethnic background. The protagonist, Risten, has a Sami mother and a Norwegian father. Her father falls in love with a Danish woman, Grethe, and moves with his daughter from Northern Norway to Southern Jutland, where he and Grethe have decided to set up home. Risten becomes Kirsten and in time, she begins to forget the Sami language. She only returns to Northern Norway as an adult. Dark family secrets are revealed and the encounter with her Sami mother does not turn out as expected. Maren Uthaug has also written a series of satirical comic books with her cousin Mona Solbakk (b. 1971), which humorously compare Sami and Norwegian culture and prejudices and conflicts within the Sami community. *Det er gøy å være same* (2010; It is Great to Be Sami) and the sequels *Same shit* (2011) and *Mens vi venter på solen* (2012; While We Are Waiting For the Sun) have been published in both Norwegian and Sami.

Being shameful of Sami origins is a recurring theme in Sami literature, e.g. the Swedish author, Annica Wennström’s (b. 1966), popular novel Lappskatteland. En familjesaga (2007; Lappskatteland. A Family Saga). The novel covers the period from the 19th century colonisation of Sápmi up to the present. In the past, a woman is sexually assaulted by a settler. She consequently leaves Sápmi with her child born from the rape. These events of the past serve as the prelude to the story of a young woman who begins to investigate her Sami family background.

Female Poets

The emergence of a contemporary written Sami culture is linked to the emergence of new genres, modern media, and the exploration of new themes that have not previously been addressed in the traditional oral culture. This does not mean, however, that traces of the older, oral tradition have completely vanished in contemporary Sami literature. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, for example, actively used the joik singing technique in his writing, and among female writers, there is a discernible trend of relating to traditional culture. Women’s traditional crafts constitute a theme in the work of the poet, Inga Ravna Eira. In one of her poems, she writes about Sami women and how the skills involved in the manufacture of the traditional beak footwear are associated with female Sami identity. There are, however, differing views on traditional women’s crafts. While some female authors consider these a positive activity, reinforcing Sami identity and connection to Sami culture, other writers regard them as part of a pattern of oppression.

Rauni Magga Lukkari (b. 1943) is considered the most prominent Sami writer of our time. A woman’s perspective is clearly discernible from her first poetry collection, jieŋat vulget (1980; The Ice is Breaking Up). Her poetry collection, Losses beaivegirji / Mørk dagbok (1986; Dark Diary), was shortlisted for the Nordic Council Literature Prize. Lukkari’s poems have been set to music and recorded by the popular Sami singer Mari Boine on a CD entitled Idjagiedas / In the Hand of the Night. While Lukkari is primarily a poet, she has also published works in other genres. The monologue, En lykkens mann / Lihkkošálmmaí (A Lucky Man), is the first play by a Sami author to appear in Sami and Norwegian and be performed in Norway. The play was performed at The National Theatre and The Norwegian Theatre in 2007. The theme of the monologue is oppressive maternal love, focusing on the relationship between a man and a mother in the Tana Valley. Lukkari has always explored subjects related to women’s experiences such as female identity, motherhood, love, and sexuality. The complexity of motherhood is the subject of her poetry collection, Árbeeadni
(1997; Mother Earth). The collection was rendered in Norwegian by Laila Stien. It includes a line which reads: “The hardest/ that befell my children/ was I/ and the softest”. In 1999, the publishing house, Davvi Girji OS, released the trilingual volume, Árbeeadni / Morslodd / The Time of the Lustful Mother, with poems in the original Sami alongside Norwegian and English interpretations. Like Magga Lukkari, the poet Inga Ravna Eira (b. 1948) is interested in female subjectivity. In the poem, “Samiske kvinne” (Sami Women), she discusses what constitutes a Sami woman. The poem brings up the issue of who is entitled to categorise others: “Anne says she is a nomadic Sami girl/ but she goes to school/ and she can't even make pointed boots.”

This crossover of genres and art forms, which is typical of several women authors, is also present in the work of Synnøve Persen (b. 1950) from Bevkop in Porsanger, Norway. Persen is an artist and a writer. During the 1970s and ‘80s, she participated in the struggle for Sami rights by joining a hunger strike in support of the land rights movement against the construction of a dam in Alta, Norway. The 1979 Sami protests in front of the Norwegian Parliament received a great deal of media coverage. Alit lottit girdilit (1981) was her Sami language debut, reinterpreted in Norwegian by Laila Stien in Blå fugler flyr (1983; Blue Birds Fly). The poetic narrator is a woman in love, whose emotions are reflected in the changing seasons, mountains, and expanses of nature in Northern Norway. At first, a fire dances in her eyes, before dying down, transformed into glowing embers: “the fire dies/ the smoke makes embers/ in her eyes/ blue birds fly”. Persen was short-listed for the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1992 for her poetry collection, Biekkakeahites bálggis (1992; Vindløs sti, 1992; Windless Path), and in 2008 for Meahci šuvas bohciidit ságat (2005; Av skogens sus spirer nytt, 2007; From the Whispering Forest New Things Grow).

‘The Daughters’

Female writers, born from the 1960s onwards, have been called ‘the daughters’ by Sami literature scholar, Vuokko Hirvonen. Having been taught Sami language at school, they have all benefited from the education struggles of the previous generations. Still, not all writers know Sami or write in Sami but the revitalisation of the language has resulted in some writers writing and publishing their works in Sami. Inger Mari Aikio-Arianaick (b. 1961), from Polmak in Utsjoki on the Finnish side of the Tana River, belongs to this generation. She is a journalist, a certified North Sami-Finnish translator, documentary filmmaker, and writer. Above all, she is a poet. She has also published children’s books and children’s song lyrics. The poetry collection, Máilmmis dása (2002, 2004; Fra verden og hit, From the World to Here), was shortlisted for the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2004. Her poems describe the lives of couples, pregnancy, birth, and the first years of a new-born in a language that is at times entertaining and to the point, but above all is very precise:

akkurat da
jeg satte stempelet i panna mi
“mestermor”
sluttet han å suge
og mesteren gik fra vettet

just when/ I put the stamp on my forehead/ ‘mastermother’/ he stopped suckling/ and the master went mad

Sara Margrethe Oskal (b. 1970) made her breakthrough quite recently. She trained as an actress at the Helsinki Theatre Academy and was awarded a PhD from the Oslo National Academy of Arts in 2010. Her thesis, Skealbma ut i verden – samisk gjøglertradisjon i fortellinger og joik, og moderne sceneuttrykk (The Mischievous in the World – The Sami Minstrel Tradition in Narratives, Joik, and Modern Stage Expressions) was an artistic work-in-progress. In 2009, her prize-winning solo performance The Whole Caboodle / Full Pakke / Guksin Guollemuorran premiered at the Riddu Riđđu Festival. Her poetry collection, Savkkuhan sávrri sániid, was published in North Sami in 2012 and the Norwegian translation, Utrettelige ord (Tireless Words), was published two years later. Her poems describe the sense of loss and antagonism between the Sami and the majority population: “families'/ stories/ wither/ when laws are observed”, but also express the way mores and traditions live on in people’s minds and memories: “I always want to/ gather my herd/ drive my dog/ even though I am/ without”. These themes recur in Sollaug Sárgon’s (b. 1965) poetry collection, Savvon bálgáid luottastit, (2010; Gå opp gjengrodd sti, 2013; Go Up an Overgrown Path), which describes the Northern shores of the Arctic Ocean as “the never-ending landscape of indigenous peoples”. In this landscape, the legacy of the ancestors speaks to the narrator: “the sacrificial stone whispers/ the beams of the hut wave/ the fireplaces call out” and the goddesses Máttaráhkká, Sáráhkká, Juksáhkká, and Uksáhkká protect the living: “Sáráhkká is the flower goddess/ she opens buds/ comforts little girls”.

Rawdna Carita Eira’s løp svartøre løp / ruohta muzetbeallji ruohta (2011, run blackear run) is an interesting debut collection, which reflects the poet’s experiences of reindeer herding. In the prologue, the narrator, a young girl, brands the reindeer, Svartøre (Blackear), in the traditional manner by making an incision in the animal’s ear. The animal is subsequently released and encouraged to: ‘run blackear run’. Eira is also a playwright affiliated with the Sami National Theatre Beaivváš in Kautokeino. Her first play, Guohcanuori šuvva / Sangen fra Rotsundet (The Song of Rot Sound), premiered in 2011. She has also written lyrics for the popular Sami artist, Mari Boine. The North Sami environment described in løp svartøre løp is also evoked in the debut collection, Virvelvind (1991; Whirlwind) from the Swedish Sami poet, Anna Stina Svakko (b. 1967): “The lasso whistles/ the calf is caught./ Small Knife, the sharp one./ Cuts pieces from/ calves’ ears.” Svakko, who is from Porjus in Northern Sweden, writes in Swedish, but she uses Sami words as cultural identity markers. The young generation’s search for traditions to bolster Sami identity is an important theme in her work. To Svakko, the women’s traditional crafts are a positive force in female Sami identity processes, while Rauni Magga Lukkari, who belongs to an older generation, describes the oppressive aspects of the traditional gender order where women were responsible for the tanning of hides and the sewing of shoes and clothes.
Contemporary literature is often based on ancient Sami myths. In her third poetry collection, *Sortsolsafari* (2013; Black Sun Safari), Irene Larsen (b. 1964), a Norwegian poet of Coastal Sami descent, bases her poetry on a Sami myth about a male bear that impregnates a girl. The girl gives birth to a son born with a human hand and a bear paw. The setting is contemporary and urban. In the first part of the poem, the son has been admitted to a closed psychiatric ward while his father, the bear, hunts sheep and reindeer. The myth is adapted to a contemporary, everyday setting in which the hunting authorities organise bear hunts in order to eliminate the threat to livestock. Larsen was awarded the Blix Prize for her debut collection, *Anemonpust* (2005; Anemone Breath).

**The Search for Sami History. Palimpsest, Fragments, and Subtext**

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Aagot Vinterbo-Hohr’s (b. 1936) acclaimed debut, *Palimpsest* (1987), is a collection of prose poems. The title refers to the author’s interest in the life histories of Sami women, whose narratives remain hidden under the surface, concealed by the narratives of the majority population and men’s histories. The novel was awarded the Tarjei Vesaas Prize for best debut novel. *Palimpsest* and Hanne Ørstavik’s (b. 1969) novel, *Presten* (2004, The Pastor) are both engaged with the search for a Sami history, which has been suppressed by official historiography, thereby marginalising and rendering invisible the Sami people. In *Presten*, the protagonist, Liv, moves to Kautokeino in Finnmark, the northernmost region in Norway, in order to take up a position as pastor. She is interested in the Kautokeino Rebellion of 1852 when Sami, inspired by the popular Laestadian revival movement, attacked the state church, the local head official, and the town merchant. Liv studies texts written by the pastor and the bishop involved in the Kautokeino Rebellion. She is searching for a subtext that may shed some light on the history of the Sami people, but becomes aware of the distance between herself and the history as well as her fellow human beings: “No matter how much I read, regardless of the efforts I put into it. I did not gain entry.”

**Tornedalian Literature**

The Tornedalians, like other ethnic and linguistic minorities in Sweden, have been subjected to discrimination and policies of assimilation. This theme has received attention thanks to Mikael Niemi’s novel, the international bestseller *Populärmusik från Vittula* (2000; Popular Music from Vittula, 2003). The novel narrates the story of a boy who grows up on the Swedish side of the border.
in the Torne Valley. Here, forced Swedification and general socialisation taught children to be culturally inferior to the majority population: “Our childhood was inadequate. We did not want for material things. But in terms of identity we were lacking. We were nobodies. Our parents were nobodies. Our ancestors had made no impression whatsoever on Swedish history.” The subject is reiterated in the internationally acclaimed children’s film, *Elina – som om jag inte fanns* (2003; Elina, As If I Wasn’t There), based on the children’s book *Som om jag inte fanns* (1978) by Kerstin Johansson i Backe. Elina, a Tornedalian girl who does not get along with her South Swedish teacher, is the main protagonist of the film. At school, the children are expected to speak Swedish, no small feat since their native language is Tornedalian Finnish. Socialisation at school is described as exercising a kind of colonial power, which robs the children of their cultural identity and self-esteem. These themes are also central to the work of the writer, pundit, and publisher, Bengt Pohjanen.

![Image](image.png)

When. From the series Magnolia makes us forget. Mia Linnea Jørgensen, 2013.

Pohjanen co-wrote a history of Tornedalian literature with Kirsti Johansson. The first volume of *Den tornedalsfinska litteraturen. Från Kexi till Liksom*, was published in 2007, the second volume, *Den tornedalsfinska litteraturen. Från Kalkkimaan till Hilja Byström*, was released two years later. In these works, the authors aim to shed light on a specific Tornedalian literary tradition that differs from the established Swedish canon. The choice of the term, *tornedalsfinsk* (Tornedalian Finnish), in the titles is important as an indicator of the literature’s position within Finno-Ugric culture. Officially, the term *tornedaling* (Tornedalian) is currently used rather than *tornedalsfinne* (Tornedalian Finn) and the language is referred to as *Meänkieli* (literally ‘our language’) rather than *tornedalsfinska* (Tornedalian Finnish).

Nowadays, not all Tornedalians speak Meänkieli, hence the publication in Swedish. While there are excerpts in Meänkieli and Finnish, it is quite obvious that the writers do not expect all of their readers to be proficient in these languages.

The most successful and well-known female Tornedalian writer on the Nordic literature scene is Rosa Liksom, nom de plume for Anni Ylävaara (b. 1958). She was born in Ylitornio (Övertorneå) on the Finnish side of the border and is usually described as a Finnish writer and artist. She writes in Meänkieli, standard Finnish, and Helsinki slang, and her books are set in peripheral areas as well as in urban environments. In 2013, She was awarded the Pro Finlandia Medal, the same year as her novel, *Hytti nro 6* (Train Compartment No. 6) was shortlisted for the Nordic Council Literature Prize. Liksom’s prose is comparatively experimental, compared to most of the other authors included in *Den tornedalsfinska litteraturen. Från Kexi till Liksom*.

Annika Korpi, (b. 1972 in Stockholm) belongs to a younger generation. Her paternal family origins are in the Torne Valley. Her experimental first novel, *Hevonen Häst* (2003; Horse Horse), narrates
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the story of Eila Palo, whose dysfunctional family includes an absent father and a mother committed to a psychiatric hospital. Eila leaves the city and her fragmented family behind in order to spend some time visiting her grandmother in the Torne Valley. The Torne Valley of strong women, kind men, and fascinating Laestadians constitutes a positive alternative to Eila’s ordinary life. The title of the book, the word ‘horse’ in Finnish and Swedish, refers to a well-known mnemonic rhyme, which was used to teach Swedish to Tornedalian children. While older realist authors such as Ester Cullblom describe the Torne Valley from a critical, feminist perspective, Annika Korpi views the area through the eyes of Eila, who experiences a safe and exhilarating place compared to the urban environment of her childhood.

New Perspectives

The much-debated novella, Ihpil. Láhppon mánáid bestejeaddji, was published in Sami in 2008. The text was originally posted on a blog during the autumn of 2007. When the book was published the following summer, it was marketed as the work of a young lesbian Sami woman, whose dead body had been retrieved from the Tromsø harbour. Ihpil, or ghost, is the pen name of the deceased blogger introduced as the author of the book. In April 2010, a Norwegian translation entitled Ihpil. De fortapte barns frelser (Ihpil. Saviour of the Lost Children) was published. The presumably authentic blog text of the book is introduced by a few lines from the ‘Editor’: “On December 17, 2007, a 19-year-old Sami woman was found drowned in Tromsø harbour. Having just completed her first term at the University of Tromsø, she had been blogging about her life during this time. On her blog, she went by the name of Ihpil.” The introduction ends by mentioning that the blog is published in book format at the request of Ihpil’s parents.


Later the same year, it was revealed that the book was in fact not the diary of a young woman, but the work of author Sigbjørn Skåden. In a 2011 interview, Skåden explained that he had intended to write modern, contemporary Sami literature and explore the theme of homosexuality in Sami society.

This theme is also central to “Queering Sápmi”, a project which renders the lives and experiences of lesbian, gay, and transgender Sami people visible through storytelling, portraits, and performances. The project includes an exhibition and a comprehensive, lavishly illustrated book entitled Queering Sápmi – samiska berättelser bortanför normen (2013; Queering Sápmi ¬– Sami Stories Beyond the Norm, 2013). The project was initiated by Elfrida Bergman and Sara Lindquist from Northern Sweden. In the preface, they write: “it is no longer possible to deny the existence of Sami LGBT people, neither to claim that LGBTQ is nothing but a fashionable subject among the politically correct, or that this is merely the case of a few ‘sexual deviants’”. In the words of young Sarakka: “Most Sami gods are women. Maderakka is the mother of Sarakka, Uksakka, and Juksakka. They symbolise different things. Sarakka symbolises childbirth, life, and fertility. Fire and the spark of life. She is also the goddess of the erotic – and that is no mean feat! This may be the reason why I am who I am and view the world as I do. To me, there is no such thing as sexual orientation. Gender is not important. But I find it incredibly important to challenge our notions of what constitutes ‘normality’ and to be open to all kinds of love.” Or in the words of the slightly older Katarina: “I’m not ‘queer’ in the usual sense of the word. But I have always questioned the norm regarding Sami identity, gender, and sexuality. And I’m angry!” The stories investigate the nature of Sami identity, or in the words of Paulina: “There’s no need for us to parade our wounds in front of the Swedes, the Norwegians, or the
Russians, but we have to start talking about it amongst ourselves.”

The Queering Sápmi project indicates a trend within the Sami community as well as posing a challenge to the non-Sami population. Interviewed in the periodical, Feministiskt Perspektiv, Sara Lindquist explains that: “Among the Swedish majority population, the common image of a Sami is that of a heterosexual, middle-aged man who joiks and keeps reindeer. This is an incredibly distorted view of reality.”

The queer perspective renders visible aberrant and inappropriate stories. This project is an example of how Sami storytellers and writers create images and ideas about ethnicity, language, and culture. Investing images, stories, and traditional and contemporary genres with power.

**Fiction**

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- Rawdna Carita Eira: *ruohta muzetbeallji ruohta / løp svartøre løp*. Gylendal, 2011
- Irene Larsen: *Anemonpust*. Alta, 2005
- Irene Larsen: *Sortsolsafari*. Margbok, 2013
- Rauni Magga Lukkari: *Árbeeadni / Morslodd / The Time of the Lustful Mother*. Davvi Girji OS, 1999
- Marry A. Somby: *Krigeren, elskeren og klovnen / Mu apache ráhkesvuhta*. Cappelen Damm, 1994
- Marry A. Somby: *Bajándávgi* (Tordenbuen). Gollegiella jietnagirjelágádus, 2004
- Maren Uthaug og Mona Solbak: *Det er gøy å være same*. CálliidLágádus, 2010
- Maren Uthaug og Mona Solbak: *Same shit*. CálliidLágádus, 2011

**Non-fiction**

- Lill Tove Fredriksen: “*Sami Literature in Motion*”. Sami Stories: Art and Identity of an Arctic People, Charis Gullickson, Sandra Lorentzen (red.). Orkana Akademisk, 2014
- Harald Gaski (red.): *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun: Contemporary Sami Prose and
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Poetry. Davvi Girji, 1997
- Anne Heith: "Litteraturhistorieskrivning och det nationellas förändringar". Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap 2, 2008
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