

Alf Nilsen-Børsskog: The Author Chosen by the Language

ANITTA VIINIKKA-KALLINEN, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

This article discusses Alf Nilsen-Børsskog's four-volume series of novels *Elämän jatko* [Continuation of life, 2004–2015], seen as the first literary works treating the Kven culture from a native perspective. Nilsen-Børsskog's novels are analysed as constituting a "counterstory", a term coined in the postcolonial cultural research paradigm to refer to self-representation. The Kvens have been considered a national minority in Norway since 1999, and their language has been an official minority language since 2005. The present author scrutinizes how Nilsen-Børsskog's work differs from previous literary descriptions of this minority, often marked by the frequent use of stereotypes of the Kven language and culture.

Alf Nilsen-Børsskog (1928–2014) wrote six novels and five poetry collections in the Kven language.¹ The language of the Norwegian Kvens is seriously endangered and does not remain in everyday use in the Kven community, and much less have entire books been published in it before. The Kven community as well as academic circles consider Nilsen-Børsskog's novels proof of the ongoing expressive power of the Kven language and of both the uniqueness and multifaceted nature of Kven culture. The author's works have also been used as materials for the teaching and standardisation of the Kven language. The literary work of one individual author has thus obtained unusually great significance in the context of the cultural emancipation of an entire ethnic minority.

In this article, I will discuss Nilsen-Børsskog's four-volume series *Elämän jatko* [Continuation of life], published 2004–2015. The four volumes are *Kuosuvaaran takana* [Beyond Kuosuvaara Mountain], *Aittiruto* [The mountainous region of Aittiruto], *Rauha* [Peace], and *Viimi vuodet* [The last years]. The story starts at the time of the German occupation of Norway in the fall of 1944, when the German military evacuated the entire population of northern Norway from the theatre of military operations.² A group of inhabitants of a small Kven village escape to nearby mountains to evade this forcible removal. The first two volumes of the series describe the time of refuge and other war experiences of civilians. The third volume focuses on the period of reconstruction after the war and follows the lives of the main characters into the 1960s. The fourth volume moves the story from the early 1970s into the 2010s.

Nilsen-Børsskog's novels are strongly rooted in recent history and society. To clarify the context, I will first consider the Kvens' current minority position,

the events that led to it, and the tradition applied in Norwegian fiction when depicting the Kvens.

Nilsen-Børsskog's novels are the first to portray the Kvens from a native perspective. The author focuses directly on the Kvens and the power of their native culture, displacing the ethnifying stereotypes found in earlier portrayals. The key themes in the novels guide us towards ethnosensitivity in our reading and, within the framework of postcolonial theory, towards interpreting the works as a counterstory by the Kvens in which the most important element is the Kven language. In my reading, I will concentrate on the narrative strategies of the author: how he creates his counterstory, how his portrayal of the Kvens differs from those by non-Kven writers, and the most important themes in the novels. I will also examine *Elämän jatko* as partly dealing with traumatising experiences caused by discriminatory assimilation policies.

From a national problem to a national minority

Since 1999, the Kvens have been recognised as a national minority in Norway, and their language has been an official minority language since 2005.³ The Kvens are of Finnic ethnic origin and have lived in the country for centuries – long before current state borders were established. The classification of the Kvens as an ethnic minority dates from the 1800s and the ideology of national romanticism, which expressed the desire to build a foundation for national identity based on one language and one uniform culture (Storaas 2009–2010, 104–105, Eriksen & Niemi 1981, 30–31).

Racial theories arose in Norway during the second half of the 1800s.⁴ Cultural unity was the goal in an atmosphere in which the Norwegian race and, more generally, the Aryan race were seen as supreme. When this ideology was combined with nationalistic policies, the positions of the Kven, Sami, Jewish, and Romany peoples became more difficult. This cultural–racist way of thinking saw ethnic minorities as problematic groups that should be assimilated into the majority (Seip 1998, 103–104, Skorgen 2002, 189–191).

In addition, the Kvens were depicted almost as enemies, accused of voluntary segregation, holding onto their own language and customs, and practicing Laestadian Lutheranism. Suspicions were also voiced that the Kven had no patriotic feelings for Norway (Larsen 2012, 20, Storaas 2009–2010, 124). On the other hand, the Kvens were useful for industry because they had skills in Arctic agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, and small-scale industry. There was no shortage of living space; on the contrary, the government wanted more people to live in northern Norway to ensure a stronger presence at the borders (Eriksen & Niemi 1981, 127–130). Therefore, there were no expulsions based on ethnicity, though it was decided to assimilate the Kvens into the Norwegian population.

The threat brought on by this nationalistic policy explains why the Kvens were silent in public life for so long. It was not until the 1980s, encouraged by global ethno–political turmoil and changes in the general social atmosphere, that the Kvens started organising themselves and presenting demands to the government concerning the revitalisation and support of their language and culture. The key goals include building the Kvens' own cultural institutions, teaching the Kven language and Finnish at schools, establishing their own me-

dia, and participating in political decision making.⁵

The discriminatory long-term assimilation policies to which the Kvens were subjected represented a traumatising experience for the Kvens, and they have only recently been able to collectively acknowledge this trauma and deal with it in public (Viinikka-Kallinen 2010a, 164). In psychology and social psychology, it is understood that it takes a long time for individuals and communities that have experienced traumas to deal with them, because their primary need is to put the painful experience behind them, and move forward. Only after that does the traumatised community want to remember its experience and seek an explanation for it, helping the community heal and build a future. It is important that justice be done, even if belatedly, and redress be found in some form (Robben 2005, 121–123).

In the 2000s, the Kvens, who suffered from discrimination and the denial of their rights, started to demand that past events be remembered and documented, and that the government admit to the injustices done. Appropriately, there is political will in Norway to address past mistakes. In 2018, the Norwegian parliament set up a Truth Commission to study the assimilation policy to which the Kvens and Sami were subjected and to map its consequences.⁶ The Commission will present its report to parliament in September 2022.

One task of socially oriented fiction is to help the community understand its past. An author may use art to address issues that are not treated in historical studies and other reports. Nilsen-Børsskog supplements the Norwegian national story with the Kvens' experiences and perspective. Among ethnic minorities, it is common to find a similar desire to master their own history. Another Nordic example is the modern Romany literature, which often depicts the creation of an autonomous identity and often also addresses a past of persecution and violence (Gröndahl 2010, 114). The public representation of individual insights and experiences forms an important part of the healing process of a traumatised community.

Towards representation in their own voices

Kven characters started appearing in Norwegian fiction in the 1870s, but it would be wrong to regard most of these as accurate portrayals of the Kven people. In fiction, the Kven people were depicted mostly as ethnic others, inferior and unpleasant. With a few exceptions, Kvens appear as flat minor characters, and most of the authors seem to know next to nothing about them. These representations reflect the views of their authors more than the objects depicted (Viinikka-Kallinen 2010a, 164).

Since the late 1800s, Kven representations reproduced a number of intertextual clichés: the fictive Kven is primitive in character and looks, a dull plodder of taciturn and threatening manner. He or she often has supernatural powers, an unusually strong sex drive, and fanatical religious practices. The origins of these clichés can be found in public discourse, the imagery of racist theories, and earlier fiction. It is a grim picture, but we must remember that ethnifying narrative strategies were common and generally accepted in the 1800s. Ethnic and cultural differences were presented in literature as early as the Middle Ages (Leerssen 2007, 64–66), and ethnic characterisations that would not be seen in

print today were usual. The ethnifying mode has particularly been criticised in postcolonial research, being regarded as a tool of ethnic marginalisation (Jan-Mohamed 1986, 83–88).

In old Norwegian fiction, the narrative function of Kvens is usually to provide ethnic conflict and local colour for the story. However, there are a few interesting exceptions, such as the novel *Eda Mansika* (1875) by Konrad Dahl, in which the main character, a young Kven woman, is intelligent, energetic, and self-assured.

Jonas Lie is one of the classic authors of Norwegian literature. His novel *Den fremsynte, eller Billeder fra Nordland* (1870) features a Kven woman called Anne Kven. Anne is a taciturn servant who smokes a pipe and looks glum but is adorably attached to her sick mistress. Anne Kven represents the metaphysical forces central to the themes of the book and her ethnic otherness highlights her special character.

J.A. Friis's novel *Fra Finmarken. Skildringer* (1881), the title of which later became settled as *Lajla*, is a hugely popular, romantic, and exciting adventure story of a young Sami girl. The Sami representations in Friis's fiction are romanticised and, at the same time, discriminatory. He depicts the Kvens as representatives of an almost metaphysical evil. The Kvens in *Lajla* and *Ella*, which came out ten years later, are quarrelsome, violent, and dishonest.

The great names of Norwegian national literature, Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun, have also included Kvens in their works. In Ibsen's play *Fruen fra havet* (1888), the Kven is a mystical stranger, arrived in a foreign ship, whose magical attraction the main character, Ellida, is incapable of resisting. It turns out the Kven is parading under a false name because he has murdered the captain of his previous ship and is now on the run. His ethnic otherness highlights his exclusion as well as his unwillingness to abide by accepted laws and moral norms.

In Hamsun's novel *Mysterier* (1892), the main character is the neurotic intellectual Nagel, who arrives at a small coastal village and causes confusion with his curious way of life. Nagel announces that he is a Kven and comes from Finmark. The motif of ethnicity comes up only briefly, but the information that Nagel is Kven is thematically important. Restlessness and rootlessness are among the basic characteristics of Nagel's personality, and they are, at least partly, attributable to ethnic otherness.

One reason for the mechanical nature of outsiders' representations may be that intertextual models were abundant in fiction and other public forums. The description of an ethnic group that lives in the same country but is foreign to the writer poses a definition challenge, which in research has been referred to as "the other within" and the "domestic other" (Parente-Čapková 2011, 3–4). The main outlines of earlier Kven descriptions seem to have taken form as a result of the intertextual continuum, as did Sami descriptions in older literature (Lehtola 1995, 47–49). The mechanism of ethnifying representation is often straightforward: certain real or imagined characteristics of the subject are singled out, and the fictive characters are based on these (Clark 2004, 232–234).

Kven portrayals became fewer starting in the 1920s and were almost non-existent until briefly resurfacing in the 1970s when Idar Kristiansen published his series of novels *Kornet og fiskene* 1–4 (1978–1981). These novels depict the hopeless situation in northern Finland during the famine of the 1860s and the

main character's new life in Norway. These books do not actually depict Kvens, but instead first-generation Finnish immigrants.

As we have seen, Kvens occasionally appear in Norwegian fiction, but their own voice was missing for a long time. The Kvens lived far from centres of power and they had no intellectual, political, or economic elite and no institutions of their own. It was difficult to step into the literary limelight from this position.

As Spivak remarks, representations of marginalised groups by outsiders seem to stagnate until these groups' own voices begin to be heard (1996, 205–209). For the Kvens, the great turning point was Nilsen-Børsskog's *Elämän jatko*, which rejects the categories applied in earlier representations and instead takes up themes important to the Kven community.

The many possibilities of the counterstory

The term “counterstory” was coined in the postcolonial cultural research paradigm to refer to the self-representation, the subject's own voice, of a marginalised ethnic minority or other repressed group. Literary studies also speak of “native description”, a term stressing the author's native subject-matter expertise. According to Spivak, a genuine counterstory can be told only by a member of the represented marginalised group. External parties do not have the prerequisites to understand the lives, thinking, and goals of marginalised groups. Even intellectuals, who may consider themselves culturally neutral, cannot detach themselves from their premises but instead transfer their own views and cultural hierarchies into their representations (Spivak 1996, 205–209).

Naturally, a work written by a member of a marginalised group does not automatically constitute a counterstory, but the native background of the author forms the starting point of one. We may summarise the situation in this way: a literary work constitutes a counterstory if it reveals the group's own experiences and values and adds to the diversity of the earlier created public image of the group.⁷

The term “counterstory” might suggest not only that there will be a great many thematic items in a work intended to refute earlier representations but also that the native author would focus on overriding earlier, negative depictions. In such a case, the counterstory would be bound to the contents of earlier representations that it was intended to oppose and remediate. We find justifications for such an interpretation if we think of literature mostly as a continuum in which new works are largely structured on the basis of earlier works, engaging in active intertextual discourse with them. Nevertheless, when an author is writing a counterstory, he or she can choose whatever perspective and narrative mode is desired. The writer does not need to present his or her views of earlier texts but is free to discuss themes not raised in earlier texts at all. A Kven author does not need to write about ethnicity-related conflicts or the injustices experienced by the Kvens for his or her work to be called a counterstory. Even remaining silent on certain matters is an effective contribution. A fictive text carries out a dialogue in its historical context and with other works of fiction. Literature is in a dialogic relationship with its own tradition and with other discourses; we may say that literature not only carries out a discussion with the current real world but also creates new worlds and realities (Karkama 1994, 8–9).

Nilsen-Børsskog directs his attention to issues unlike those treated by-Nor-

wegian writers, who repeatedly emphasise the otherness of the Kvens, seen as caused by their foreign language and ethnicity. In *Elämän jatko*, the storyteller's voice stresses the strength and skills of the Kvens, and we see a conscious background decision to avoid themes of martyrdom and not to depict the Kvens as helpless victims of their circumstances. Neither does the author indulge in the opposite ethnifying cliché: he does not make heroes out of the Kvens.

Nilsen-Børsskog's narrative strategy is consistent. He focuses directly on the Kvens and thereby chooses to overwrite ethnifying stereotypes. He does not choose the role of a Norwegian minority author but instead carries himself as the national author of the Kvens, portraying his ethnic group from within and doing so without making comparisons. Neither are the other ethnic groups in northern Norway, i.e., Norwegians and Sami people, represented in negative or marginalising terms; rather, they are treated as natural elements of the multicultural Cap of the North (Nordkalotten). The author does not ethnify: the characteristics of his personages are unique to them as individuals. The Kvens do not feel a sense of otherness in their homeland, but feel they are a part of the Norwegian people:

“Miksi justiin met pidämä elläät tämmäistä vainon ja rauhattomuuden aikkaa? Mitä pahhaa Norjan kansa on tehny, että tämmäinen rangaistus on langenu meidän niskoile?” huokkaili emäntä ... [“Why is it that we are the ones who have to live with such persecution and restlessness? What evil deeds have the Norwegian people done for this punishment to be handed down to us?” sighed the matron ...] (*Aittiruto*, 258)

No single person or group is presented as structurally evil, even though the dialectic of good and evil is central to *Elämän jatko*. Evil is presented as an aberration, and the reasons for evil are contemplated in a philosophical way, mostly as a result of unfortunate circumstances. Violence and chaos are represented by the war and the Nazi army. The key defence, the author suggests, is to keep one's own moral sense and worldview ethically sound and to prevent contagion from hatred and the violent atmosphere. In the first two war-time novels in particular, the refugees repeatedly discuss how they must consciously oppose the atmosphere of violence and hatred.

Calling the work of a minority author a counterstory is a functional but not entirely unproblematic way to place a work in a societal and cultural context. It has been claimed that, in the postcolonial cultural research method, when the researcher works towards ethnopolitically appropriate interpretations, he or she may become stuck in inflexible theory formation and categorised interpretations. However, postcolonial cultural research is not a literature research method as such but rather one attempt among others to interpret the human and global conditions in a way that exposes, in particular, hierarchical power structures and their consequences (Gandhi 2019 [1998], 167–168).

The tendency of postcolonial research to seek out binaries, thereby producing categorising interpretations, is partly explained through its social motivation. The method was developed for the purpose of uncovering hidden, discriminatory, and oppressive structures (Spivak 1996, 205–209). The presentation of binaries has clarified the key point of the interpretation and therefore been justified. Another subject of study has been the native counterstory, but in the in-

terpretation of counterstory, binarism may lead to nuances in the works being bypassed and presentations being categorised as previously mentioned. Nilsen-Børsskog's work is a good example of a counterstory that is not done justice if it is seen primarily as accounting for and repairing the discrimination to which the Kvens were subjected. *Elämän jatko* depicts an extended historical period and crystallises the aged author's philosophical views. The author reflects on, among other matters, the importance of one's own language and culture, the relationship between humans and nature, the realisation of justice, and the possibilities of healing for traumatised individuals and communities.

The language chooses the author

Language is often considered the most important mark of an ethnic minority culture. In national policies and in the work of minority organisations as well as in texts of international treaties,⁸ a usable minority language is considered proof of the existence of a unique culture.

When Nilsen-Børsskog discussed his authorship after his first novel was published, he said that the only option for him was to write in the Kven language. He justified his choice of language by saying that it was impossible for him to write a genuine, honest story about the members of the Kven community of his youth in any other language. The author stressed the great significance of his childhood home and the close-knit village community for his life and work. The community was bilingual: in the store, school, and church, many people spoke Norwegian, but otherwise the common language in the village was Kven. The author says of the language of his novels, "Mie en valinnu kväänin kieltä, kieli valitti minut" ("I did not choose the Kven language, the language chose me") (Norsk Riksringkasting 2004, Viinikka-Kallinen 2010b).

Nilsen-Børsskog's published prose comprises about 2500 pages. Choosing the Kven language for his working language meant a double job for the author. While working on his novels, he also had to establish his grammatical rules and spelling practices as he proceeded (Norsk Riksringkasting 2004). The choice of language sends a strong message, and the author gives the key to its interpretation at the very beginning: the first volume of the tetralogy is dedicated to "ihmisille, jotka on antaneet minulle kielen" ("the people who gave me my language") (*Kuusuvaaran takana*, 5). The metaphor of a mother tongue as a gift is a weighty one in the context of a minority when so many people have lost the chance to learn the traditional language of their community.

The choice of language can be seen as signalling the pursuit of authenticity and a desire to represent and even document, as precisely as possible, the way of life of the community, the people, and their environment. This interpretation is supported by, for example, the fact that *Elämän jatko* contains considerable dialogue and reported conversation, bringing polyphony into the narrative and highlighting its role in portraying the community. In the first two novels in particular, the point of view shifts among several key personages and there is no one obvious main character. From the third novel on, the main character is Are, whose life is followed in the story from his youth to his old age.

When Nilsen-Børsskog's first novel was published in 2004, it attracted considerable media attention. In addition to the author, researchers and Kven activists were interviewed, and everybody unanimously stated that the publication was an important event. The regrettable fact was also highlighted that very few Kvens could read the rich, subtle language of the book. The publication encouraged Kvens in their emancipation drive and raised their cultural self-esteem, but it also reminded everyone of the tragic state of affairs: the policy of Norwegianisation and modernisation had caused Kven language skills to deteriorate dramatically.

The significance of language to one's identity and mental wellbeing is a frequent theme in *Elämän jatko*. The character Are often reflects on the significance of one's own language and moral values; these topics are discussed a great deal in the novels, and the narrator makes weighty statements on how important it is to achieve and maintain a sustainable cultural identity. Iisakki, a key personage early in the story, summarises the important theme in the words "ihmisen oma kieli se on hänen tuntomerkki. Omatta kielettä ihminen on pärjäämättömissä" ("A person's own language is their essence. Without our own language, we humans are lost") (*Rauha*, 400).

Elämän jatko contains a lot of autobiographical material. Like Are in the novel, the author as a young student was encouraged to write fiction in the Kven language (Viinikka-Kallinen 2010b). In the third volume of the series, Are is a language student at the University of Oslo, where his professor encourages the young man to write in his native language. As Are does not believe that such a project will be successful, he starts to study English and history to qualify as a teacher. Because Are still feels the need to write fiction in his own language, he writes novels and poems in the Kven language, but is unhappy with his writings and destroys them (*Rauha* 394, 416–417).

The novels also deal with language policies. The subject is thematised most clearly in a discussion in which Iisakki describes his experiences of the policy of Norwegianisation. He thinks that the treatment of the Kvens exemplifies the prevalent philosophy of social Darwinism. Children being locked up in boarding schools was proof of the government's objective of Norwegianising the entire nation with a hard hand. Iisakki reflects on the importance of language from a practical and philosophical point of view. He considers it obvious that everyone should be able to speak the language of the majority, but that the most important language is one's own mother tongue:

En mie usko, ette ihminen tullee paremaksi sillä, ette hän puhuis norjan kieltä. Kaikilla ihmisillä on juuret ja perintö. Niitä ja maan lakkii ihminen pittää kunnioittaa. [I don't think a person will be any better for speaking Norwegian. All people have their roots and inheritance. Those and the country's laws are what people must respect.] (*Rauha*, 400)

It is Iisakki to whom young Are confides his dream of writing a novel in his native language. The older man instructs Are to learn Finnish first to support his Kven skills, to practice writing in the Kven language, and especially, to find a good subject for the novel. The young man feels encouraged by Iisakki's non-sense approach to the writing project, and his budding hope of a career in writing is strengthened (*Rauha*, 400–401). The actual authoring work is not

described in the novels, but Are's pride in his native language and his strong cultural identity remain throughout his life.

The key themes in the first two volumes are justice, ethics, and the importance of one's own culture. The third volume contains many individual psychological themes. The war is over and the main character, Are, has grown up. Following the form of the classical Bildungsroman, the author describes how Are observes people, phenomena, and the environment and fumblingly searches for his place in the world.

The important life-spanning decisions are channelled into questions of language and culture. Are's natural tendencies are towards deskwork, so questions relating to language are particularly important and also difficult for him. This intelligent young man with an inquiring mind enjoys meaningful discussions at his home as well as in the capital city after he moves there to study. His discussions with acquaintances in his home village are often deep and philosophical but, nevertheless, natural and straightforward. In Oslo, his surroundings are Norwegian speaking, and communication becomes stiffer:

Are puhuskeli nyt moitteetonta norjan kieltä – mutta näitten ihmisten kans Are ei saattanu puhuskella kotikieltä, vaikka hän mielelä oliski puhuskellu sitä. [Are could now speak Norwegian properly – but with these people Are could not speak his home language, even though he would have liked to do so.] (*Rauha*, 415)

In the last volume, Are considers going back to his home village. The lure is his native language:

Ja vieläki nämät kolmikieliset ihmiset puhuskelhaan ommaa sonoorista kieltä, perustamattakhaan siitä, ette joku kerran oli kiellästännyki kielen käytön. – Sillä kielelä on ydin. Ja sielu. [And even today these trilingual folks speak our own sonorous language without worrying about someone at some point prohibiting even the use of that language. – Because languages have a gist. And a soul.] (*Viimi vuodet*, 6)

Nilsen-Børsskog's novels frequently seek to answer the question of how an individual and a community can find a balanced identity. In addition to cultural coherence, the answer lies in the creation and maintenance of solid connectedness to nature.

The author describes arctic nature as home and as a mental and spiritual place of safety for humans. His descriptions of nature and connectedness with it are plentiful and richly nuanced. They can be seen as the counter-story to a long tradition of fiction and travel literature in which northern regions are described as exotic, highlighting the extremes and making them the settings of catastrophes and conflict (Myklebost 2010, 8). According to, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan, research and art both feature many binary divisions between culture and nature, a view that tends to lead to the categorisation of places into civilised centres and primitive peripheries (Tuan 2004, 731–732). With his descriptions, Nilsen-Børsskog breaks away from the tradition of such concepts of nature. In his work, nature is not a place in the periphery, where people occasionally withdraw from their cultural environments to be refreshed. He describes the harmonious relationship between people and nature as a prerequisite for people's functioning, peace of mind, and ethical way of life.

In conclusion

Alf Nilsen-Børsskog's life work is immense. He wrote six novels and four poetry collections in a language whose continued existence was doubtful and whose spelling and many other norms he had to create during the course of writing. Through his novels, he presents a previously unreported narrative of the recent history of Norway. The material necessities of life in the Kven villages on the Arctic Ocean were destroyed near the end of the Second World War. Structural change hit them rapidly and mercilessly, nearly breaking up the communities that had been close knit in terms of language and culture. After the war, it was almost impossible to rebuild the Kven identity based on the old one. Nilsen-Børsskog's novels can also be read as stories of the Kven community and its fate: the dissolution of this close-knit community, leading to the beginning of the road to modernisation and a new identity.

Kvens do appear in old Norwegian fiction rather often, but most of the authors seem to know very little about them, instead stressing their otherness, which they see as caused by their foreign language and ethnicity. Alf Nilsen-Børsskog's novels are not only the first written in the Kven language, but also are the first to portray the Kvens from a native perspective. As seen above, depictions of marginalised groups seem to stagnate until portrayals by native authors – in other words, counterstories – start appearing. Reading the novels of Nilsen-Børsskog shows this hypothesis to be true regarding the representations of the Kvens. *Elämän jatko* is a counterstory that does not describe the crisis of the minority culture or conflicts of the Kven and the majority, but rather the power of the native culture. The author does not create an “us against them” binary, but sets the story directly in the context of the grand narrative. The Kvens establish their identity not through negation but through self-assured confidence based on pride in their own language and culture.

Elämän jatko depicts the spiritual lives and living environment of the Kven in which the cultural environment and nature are in harmony and form an important aspect of the Kven identity. Nilsen-Børsskog does not adopt the role of a Norwegian minority author but instead of the national author of the Kvens. He portrays his own ethnic group from within and does so without making comparisons. Neither does he describe the other ethnic groups in northern Norway in marginalising terms, as the author does not ethnify.

Elämän jatko supplements the Norwegian national story with the Kven's perspective, and therefore helps the community to understand its past. It seems to be especially important for the Kven community to deal with the traumas caused by experience of discrimination during and after the heavy-handed assimilation policies. Nilsen-Børsskog's novels also cover essential measures to heal those traumas and to find a way to build a strong and positive cultural identity. The significance of one's own language to mental wellbeing is a frequent theme in *Elämän jatko*.

Nilsen-Børsskog's novels portray the traditional Kven identity based on a close-knit communal way of life as well as the possibility of establishing a positive identity after a sudden, brutal rupture. What one needs for security can be found in one's own culture and harmonious connectedness with nature, both of which promote continuity, security, and community traditions.

At the end of *Elämän jatko*, Are has returned to his home and found peace of mind:

Äänetönnä luonto leppäili. Kuuntelijan sielulle tunturitten rauha teki hyvää. – Suloisen rauhan- ja levontunnetta se tuosti miehele. – Pahat ajatukset se ajasti pois ja levhäätti hänheen mitä syvviimen onnen. – keskelä suurta sielunrauhaa mies jäiki ihhailehan tätä mahtavan kaunista luonttoo, jonka sylissä ihminen ellää, josta hän on pienen pieni osa. [Nature rested soundlessly. The peace of the mountains felt good in the soul of the listener. – It brought the man a feeling of sweet peace and rest. – It drove away bad thoughts and spread the deepest happiness within him. – in the midst of this peace of the soul, the man stayed and admired nature, so beautiful, which cradles human beings and of which we are such a tiny part.] (*Viimi vuodet*, 482.)

Endnotes

- ¹ Two of the novels were published posthumously. At the time of writing, the last novel, *Johannes*, had not yet been published, though the manuscript is print-ready.
- ² During the Second World War, in April 1940, Nazi Germany occupied Norway. The occupation lasted until May 1945.
- ³ This status is based on the fact that Norway has ratified the European Council's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.
- ⁴ From the mid-1800s to the 1940s, this way of thinking was also evident in, for example, Sweden and Germany (Tamminen 2015, 36–38, 226–227, Wälstedt 2009, 15–16).
- ⁵ The Kvens' interests are promoted by the organisations Norske Kveners Forbund, Kvenlandsforbundet, and Norsk-Finsk Forbund.
- ⁶ For the Commission's assignment, see the parliamentary website at <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Hva-skjer-pa-Stortinget/Nyhetsarkiv/Hva-skjer-nyheter/2017-2018/sannhets--og-forsoningskommisjonen/>
- ⁷ See, for example, David Huddart, *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (London, Routledge, 2008).
- ⁸ See, for example, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007cdac>) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages>).
- ⁹ All the quotations from Nilsen-Børsskog are translated by the writer of this article.

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