

# ”Gebrokken”: Refugees, Trauma, and Poetry in Aasne Linnestå’s *Morsmål* (2012)

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## ABSTRACT:

This article offers an analysis of Aasne Linnestå’s long poem *Morsmål* (Mother Tongue) published in 2012. It is a postfeminist poem about an encounter between a Norwegian woman and a refugee woman arriving from outside Europe. Linnestå’s poetic method in capturing this encounter, I argue, may be understood at the intersection of three verbal strategies: that of trauma, that of postmonolingualism, and that of an *écriture féminine*, all of which entail a kind of broken language and narrative. A central term in *Morsmål* is precisely the Norwegian word “gebrokken”, from the German “gebrochen”, meaning broken, and used to describe verbal expressions marked by incorrect grammar and accented speech, especially language as it is spoken by people for whom it is not their mother tongue. In order to further explore this interest in non-fluent linguistic expressions, I draw on E. Ann Kaplan’s theory on how trauma may be represented, on Yasemin Yildiz’ discussion of a postmonolingual paradigm, and above all on Julia Kristeva’s understanding of a poetic, rhythmic language linked to bodily experience.

KEY WORDS: Refugees, Linnestå, Postfeminism, Poetry, Postmonolingualism, Trauma

Through immigration, media and aesthetic representations, refugees and asylum seekers from various countries have come to constitute an increasing part of Scandinavian life and imagination in the new millennium. Often, they are traumatized by experiences pertaining to war and their attempts to escape it. On a political level, Scandinavian governments have to decide how to help and socially integrate them. Meanwhile, in the cultural arena, writers work through the question of who “they” are and who “we” are (or become) in our encounter with them in literature (among other media) that seeks to explore, reflect, and shape Scandinavian attitudes towards refugee Others. Examples of novels that focus on encounters with refugees seen primarily from the

perspective of Scandinavian protagonists, include Lars Sund's *En lykkelig liten ö* (2007), Lone Aburas' *Politisk roman* (2013), and Simon Stranger's so-called Emilie-trilogy consisting of *Barsakh* (2009), *Verdensredderne* (2012), and *De som ikke finnes* (2014). Within the poetic realm we find Kristian Lundberg's *Vi är de döda, nu snart* (2014), Peter-Clement Woetmann's *Bag bakkerne, kysten. En klagesang* (2017), and Aasne Linnestå's *Morsmål* (2012).<sup>1</sup>

Aasne Linnestå is one of several Scandinavian writers who have been actively involved with newly-arrived refugees in Scandinavia, both inside and outside her literary work. Linnestå worked as a Red Cross refugee guide. Her personal experiences led to active engagement in Norwegian refugee politics as well as an urge to write about her encounter with women who have been subjected to violence and abuse. This resulted in her epic poem – or long poem – entitled *Morsmål* published in 2012, about an encounter between a Scandinavian woman poet and a refugee woman arriving from “outside Europe’s borders”. She subsequently published *Opphold* in 2014.<sup>2</sup> In this novel, the protagonist is a male doctor who tries to keep his family of three children intact after his author wife disappears. Through the course of half a year we follow the consequences brought about by an artist who – like an Ibsenian Brand-figure – sacrifices her family to follow her calling high up in the mountains. This story of flight and its consequences is paralleled by a story about an Iranian refugee family that moves in next door and, within the same six months, has their application for asylum rejected and is deported. The protagonist is physically and emotionally exhausted in his role as caregiver at home and at work, and is furthermore guilt-ridden by a sense that he should have done more for his neighbors: “Hver eneste dag tenker jeg på alt jeg kunne gjort annerledes. At jeg burde gjort mer for dem, mye mer” (‘Every day I think of all I could have done differently. That I ought to have done more for them, much more’).<sup>3</sup> Hence, both works thematize how – and how much – we ought to help refugee Others, and both build on a tension between ethics and aesthetics, with the artist figure being present and productive in *Morsmål* while absent and destructive in *Opphold*. In interviews, Linnestå has insisted that the political left cannot just work on a structural level, since – for integration to be successful – we need to extend ourselves and become personally engaged.<sup>4</sup> One of the key messages in *Morsmål* – reproduced on its back cover – is that refugees are not only a public but also a private matter: “staten / sa / ja // så / hva / sier / jeg?” (‘the state / said / yes // so / what / do I / say?’)

*Morsmål*, in particular, was well received by literary critics among whom Mari Reinholt Aas described it as “inderlig vakker” (intensely beautiful), maintaining that: “sjelden har vel så ømtålige og vanskelige tema som asylpolitikk, overgrep og misbruk blitt behandlet flottere” (‘rarely, I think, have such sensitive and difficult topics as asylum politics, violence and abuse been treated in a grander way’).<sup>5</sup> As it is a linguistically more complex work than *Opphold*, I will devote the rest of this article to its analysis, while briefly touching on the novel only in the introduction and conclusion. *Morsmål*, I would argue, constitutes an important voice in what may be termed a postfeminist debate on refugees.<sup>6</sup> It is a debate maintaining a belief in female solidarity while also remaining sensitive to cultural difference, as gender is regarded intersectionally, in relation to race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other categories of identity construction.<sup>7</sup> The white Western woman, in other words, cannot assume that hers is a universal position and that she can understand and represent the Other woman. As Ann Brooks writes in *Postfeminisms* (1997): ”There is a fine balance between showing solidarity with oppressed groups and assuming a position where one claims to speak on behalf of that group.”<sup>8</sup> The act of giving voice to someone voiceless might even be experienced as a new form of assault.<sup>9</sup> This is something the poet-narrator reflects upon in metapoetic passages and furthermore a criterion used by reviewers who have evaluated the work in a positive light.<sup>10</sup>

Linnestå’s poetic method, as I see it, may generally be understood at the intersection of three verbal strategies: that of trauma, that of postmonolingualism, and that of an *écriture féminine*, all of which entail a kind of broken language and narrative. A central term in *Morsmål* is precisely the Norwegian word “gebrokken”, from the German “gebrochen”, meaning broken, and used to describe verbal expressions marked by incorrect grammar and accented speech, especially language as it is spoken by people for whom it is not their mother tongue. In order to further explore this interest in non-fluent linguistic expressions, I will draw on E. Ann Kaplan’s theory on how trauma may be represented, on Yasemin Yildiz’ discussion of a postmonolingual paradigm, and above all on Julia Kristeva’s understanding of a poetic, rhythmic language linked to bodily experience. *Morsmål*’s ultimately optimistic and Dionysian feminist outlook (with its focus on sexuality, intoxication, dance, and happiness) suggests that Kristeva provides a central understanding of the work’s poetic language. It is a language that captures and expresses unstable meaning, ambivalence, play, *jouissance*, and thus also holds a potential for revolution on an individual as well as a cultural level. In the following I will further discuss how Linnestå through

her poet-narrator seeks to capture her encounter with the refugee Other in a constructive manner that benefits the poet, the woman, and finally also the reader and society at large as they are also encouraged to engage with refugees.

### *The Structure of Morsmål*

Linnestå proceeds with caution, with a few selected scenes, reports, and dialogues. She uses no periods as punctuation and no capital letters in a book of about 250 pages. On a visual level, we see that Linnestå shapes her message through play with typography, indentation, font size, repetition, blank pages, and a reversal of print colors. The fragment “tida / som / går” (‘the time / that / passes’) for instance, is followed by two blank pages allowing the reader to experience time simply passing (as she leafs through the book).<sup>11</sup> A page consists of five words lined up underneath each other and printed in significantly greater font than that used in the rest of the book. The words constitute a wordplay in which the letters continue to be rearranged so that ultimately the notion of accented and broken speech (the first word) is linked with gender (the fifth word): “gebrokken / bebrokeng / enderbrok / kengender / gender”.<sup>12</sup> Every now and then English words are used, indicating the status of English as a lingua franca.<sup>13</sup> In addition, three pages are printed in white font on a black background, repeating ad infinitum the phrase “boys will be boys” in quotation marks.<sup>14</sup>

Structurally, the work consists of ten lyrical sections titled “terskel” (‘threshold’), “vredsel” (a portmanteau made up from *vrede* [‘anger’] and *redsel* [‘fear’]), “kalveland” (‘land of calves’), “søstre” (‘sisters’), “gebrokken” (accented and grammatically incorrect), “vinter” (‘winter’), “norge” (‘norway’), “poesi” (‘poetry’), “du” (‘you’), and “opphold/tillatelse” (‘stay or break/permission’ [“oppholdstillatelse” means ‘residence permit’]). The sections suggest a plot line – from the first section in which the refugee woman appears on the doorstep of the poet-narrator and both consider whether they want to meet, to the final tenth section in which the refugee woman leaves, crossing the same doorstep in her ”nyeste språkdrakt” (‘newest linguistic form’) and asks: ”skriv meg ikke i natt” (‘don’t write me tonight’).<sup>15</sup> This statement carries a significant ambivalence: The refugee is clad in a new language as she has learned Norwegian, something with which the poet-narrator has assisted; and she is clad in the language of Linnestå’s

poetic work which at this point is about to terminate. This dual perspective on the refugee woman is maintained throughout the work as she is depicted both referentially as a real-life person with an existence outside the text, and as a woman captured by and figuring in a poem. It is this dualism that creates a sense of tension, pertaining to aesthetics as well as ethics. Will the poet be able to capture her aesthetically in a political poem? And will she be able to do so without harming her muse in the process?

Through the intermediary sections, we approach the refugee's trauma and childhood memories ("vredsel"), question whether she may regain a state of happiness ("kalveland"), explore a sense in which she becomes the poet-narrator's sister ("søster"), consider various positions of masculinity in relation to language and violence ("gebrokken"), further consider what types of men the refugee woman may meet in Norway ("vinter"), regard her as liberated in terms of men, clothing and alcohol ("norge"), delve further into metapoetic commentary ("poesi"), and finally come to regard her as a strong, independent being ("du" and "opphold/tillatelse"). In the first eight sections, the refugee woman is referred to as "she", while in the last two sections the pronoun is exchanged for an apostrophizing "you" – an indication that we are moving from narrative to lyrical poetry.<sup>16</sup> The poem and poet culminate in calling attention to themselves as art and artist.

Operating consistently with a sense of ambivalence pertaining to the ethics of the poet's project, the work ultimately concludes in a thought about a constructive cultural encounter and a successfully completed writing project that catches a life story without reducing either the narrative or the individual. On the penultimate page, we read: "det ligger ingenting igjen etter deg / [...] når du har gått // du får alltid alt du eier / med deg" ('there is nothing left behind / [...] when you are gone // you always take all your belongings / with you').<sup>17</sup> And the last page simply states: "men du er her // nå" ('but you are here // now'). Which "you" is here now, we may ask? Clearly it is the absent refugee woman addressed through the trope of apostrophe. It is the apostrophe that can pin down the transient in an alternative, lyric moment.<sup>18</sup> In Jonathan Culler's words, we are left with "a play of presence and absence governed not by time but by poetic power".<sup>19</sup> The poet has succeeded in creating a poetic event, yet it is important to her that she has succeeded in doing so ethically. For this to be a political poem, however, it is also important that the reader return to the vision of the real-life woman – and women (and men) like her – who may need our actual

personal attention. Thus, we are left with a juxtaposition of two sorts of images – the woman who is gone and the woman who is still with us in the poem. As Culler explains this is characteristic of the elegy “with a dialectical alternation between attitudes of mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence”.<sup>20</sup> The difference, however, is that whereas the poet mourns the loss and absence of the woman in the elegy, this loss becomes a source of celebration in *Morsmål* as it suggests that the refugee woman has learned enough from her Norwegian teacher and friend to live on independently and leave the poetic project unscathed.

### *Paratextual Metapoetic Awareness – the Epitaph*

Overall, *Morsmål* shows great metapoetic awareness of the ability of language to capture people and their relations in structures of power – empowering as well as oppressive. The title in and of itself is suggestive in this regard (I will return to that below), and so is the introductory epitaph quoting the French-Jewish philosopher Simone Weil: “Ethvert menneske skriker i taushet etter å bli lest på en helt annen måte” (‘Every human being screams in silence for being read in an entirely different way’). The epitaph indicates a human condition of misrecognition, leaving each individual with an unspoken and perhaps unspeakable, yet passionately felt, desire to be better understood. This is something that can only be expressed through negation as one wants to be understood differently from the way one is already (mis)understood. The point may be that one is not able to articulate exactly how one does want to be understood. Alternately, the point may be temporal: One wants continually to be understood anew throughout one’s life and not at any point have one’s identity pinned down. Life, like reading and understanding, remains a process of change. When this changing stops, life itself stops; living becomes meaningless. Hence, the epitaph may be read in a Kristevan light, where it does not just constitute the desire of an individual, but also the condition of being a subject in process, specifically a heterogeneous subject, who may be captured in modernist literature.<sup>21</sup>

Figuring at the threshold to Linnestå’s text, the epitaph may be said to capture the poet’s predicament vis-à-vis the reader who will judge her ethic and aesthetic success. The person she portrays may be viewed as Weil’s screaming human being who feels misunderstood and misrepresented. Yet, there is also the possibility that *Morsmål* captures – or at least approaches –

the “entirely different way” the Other woman wants to be read. This is an alternative text that is different from the prosaic accounts about refugees we encounter in the daily media. Key to this possibility of capturing a different understanding is the oxymoronic “silent scream”. Through what is not voiced – through gaps in the text – the poet-narrator suggests how the refugee may be understood in an alternate way, one of which she might perhaps approve. Thus, the epitaph could serve as a humbling gesture on the part of the poet, yet like so many humbling gestures, it could also be turned around to suggest the superiority of the poet and her genre, leaving it ultimately for the reader of the writerly text to carry out the desired task of understanding better and understanding anew.<sup>22</sup>

The first of the ten sections, “terskel” (‘threshold’), is about the refugee woman showing up on the poet-narrator’s doorstep. The latter opens the door to the refugee, hoping they can work out a common language that will enable the poet-narrator to tell the other woman’s story – as well as what becomes their common story: “jeg drysset et språk over lydene hennes / men heller ikke jeg kan dette språket / før det iblant treffer oss / samtidig” (‘I scatter a language across her sounds / but I don’t know this language either / until it at times strikes us / simultaneously’).<sup>23</sup> The poet-narrator has to experiment to capture what is perceived as a linguistic encounter with the refugee woman’s sounds, a process that she finds intermittently successful, allegedly with the approval of the other woman. Essential to the merger of the two are the abovementioned feminist and trauma-based understandings of language.

### *Kristevan Poetry*

As the title *Morsmål* (‘Mother Tongue’) suggests, Linnestå focuses on language, gender and nation. This may, as indicated above, be understood in light of Kristeva’s language theory, linking the female and maternal to the poetic. According to Kristeva, poetic language is tied to that which is feminine, fragmented (broken), and rhythmic, and is to be regarded as a semiotic language, subversive to symbolic, rational, and grammatically complete language tied to the masculine.<sup>24</sup> Whereas symbolic language seeks to repress the semiotic, poetic language cultivates it. This concept of language is highlighted in *Morsmål* as the women are often said to understand each other through the unspoken and through silence: ”utenfor taletid og skriverom / finnes en

stillhet som overgår tausheten” (‘outside time for speech and room for writing / there is a silence that surpasses quietness’);<sup>25</sup> ”stillheten skiller ut en tone hørselen nesten forstår” (‘the silence discerns a tone hearing almost understands’).<sup>26</sup> The reception of *Morsmål* indicates a similar understanding of poetic language as a counter-language. The critic Cathrine Strøm, for instance, sees *Morsmål* as poetry that captures those conversations that are marginalized and repressed in the public sphere, and Mari Reinholt Aas reads the work by dividing language into a stiffened patriarchal language in opposition to the language through which the women succeed in communicating.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Language of Trauma*

We also understand that the refugee woman has experienced trauma that may only be communicated fragmentarily. In *Trauma Culture* (2005), E. Ann Kaplan explains the notion of being vicariously traumatized. One relationship to perception of trauma is that of the person hearing (i.e. witnessing) a patient’s trauma narrative, a situation involving intimacy and a face-to-face encounter.<sup>28</sup> The refugee, in the case of *Morsmål* is not a patient, but a student and friend. This nevertheless puts the poet in a complex position of experiencing vicarious trauma. Kaplan explains, “vicarious traumatization may be a component of witnessing, but instead of only intensifying the desire to help an individual in front of one, witnessing leads to a broader understanding of what has been done to victims, of the politics of trauma being possible”.<sup>29</sup> Vicariously traumatized, the poet-narrator, in this case, produces a poetic correlative to “the subjective, emotional, and visual experience of trauma”.<sup>30</sup>

This especially appears to be the case in the second section, “Vredsel”. Here, the poem suggests communication consisting of verbal fragments, pointing to traumatic events. The events evoke such a strong sense of shame that the refugee woman is incapable of narrating them straightforwardly: “det bygger seg opp / noe skal ut i dagen / og helt inn i dagene mine / men hun blir den stumme” (‘It is building up / something is about to see the light of day / and penetrate my days / but she remains the mute one’).<sup>31</sup> In turn, the poet-narrator, as a witness, starts recounting the story she comes to vaguely apprehend: “de stumme dagene danner utsiktsløse rom / der innefra dikter jeg fortellingen videre” (‘the mute days form viewless rooms / within which I

continue the narration of the story’).<sup>32</sup> The image of the women verbally creating the site where something has burned down – a ground zero – and then digging out a thin layer of happiness as they build a shrine suggests trauma, something utterly destructive that nevertheless needs to be recounted so that it may finally be put to rest.<sup>33</sup> Emphasizing a debilitating sense of shame (often experienced by rape victims) that the women need to work through, the poet-narrator and the refugee woman evoke an ideal heaven, dedicated to women, free of shame, and free of men. Or rather, it is ambivalently described as “herreløs”, suggesting that it is without any kind of patriarchal power figure – without a god, without men, and without an owner. These, evidently, are the figures installing the trauma victim with a sense of shame.<sup>34</sup>

Shame is further touched upon as the women – when the refugee woman gets closer to revealing the core of her horrors – wander away from culture, into the Norwegian forest and stand near “skogskammen”.<sup>35</sup> Again, the reader is left uncertain as to what this might mean. Depending on how one divides the composite noun, it could be ‘the forest ridge’ (“skogskammen”), or it could be ‘the shame of the forest’ (“skog-skammen”). The equivocal nature of the words, however, captures how trauma and trauma narratives are experienced, recalled and subsequently represented. Trauma aesthetics tend to reflect the way in which traumatized people experience their memories of trauma – memories that are repressed, but surface by means of the subconscious, through dreams and various forms of dissociation and fragmentation.

Further underscoring the notion that the poet is vicariously traumatized, the long poem presents the reader with images of what appears to be a rape dream in which the poet-narrator experiences a shared rape. Building upon several meanings of the word “kav” (the deep of the ocean, abyss, commotion, unrest, heavy snow in the air) she describes being submerged in an icy ocean in wintertime at night: “når en mann presser en stang inn mellom brystbeina / før han stiger opp fra havet og griper etter sprekkene / både mine og hennes” (‘when a man pushes a rod in between my/our breast bones / before he emerges from the ocean and grabs for our cracks / both hers and mine’).<sup>36</sup> The poetic and fragmentary depiction may be understood both as a form of trauma aesthetics, and as being in line with a Kristevan poetics, in which a feminine, semiotic language opposes a masculine, symbolic one. In these dream images, what is linear, solid and phallic (the rod) is opposed to what is feminine and fragmented (the cracks). The man is furthermore aligned with “eiendomsretten” (‘property rights’), which he does not want to

relinquish. This sense of male ownership and dominance (patriarchy) was precisely what the women sought to escape in their imagined heavenly abode— an abode found in nature, away from civilization, and in a poetic language.

### *Grandma's Semiotic and Postmonolingual Language*

Finally, the poem's linguistic and thematic strategy may also be understood in terms of a combination of a Kristevan poetics and postmonolingualism – both posited, in this case, as sites of female solidarity and sisterhood. In the following verses from the fourth section, “søstre”, we see how the women are united through common childhood memories and attachments to a maternal figure:

hun spør meg om de gamle om mødrene særlig om dem  
og jeg tar henne med til mormors rom  
kanskje til sprekke i stemmen hennes når hun gynger i stolen  
og snakker med den nye søstra mi og den nye søstra mi forteller  
til en hun gjenkjenner på en eller annen måte  
forteller små ord på mormors språk<sup>37</sup>  
[she asks me about the old people, about the mothers, especially about them  
and I bring her along to grandma's room  
perhaps to the cracks in her voice when she rocks in her chair  
and talks to my new sister and my new sister tells  
someone she recognizes in one way or another  
tells little words in grandma's language]

Grandma is someone the refugee woman recognizes and in whose language she is able to partake. From the perspective of trauma, we realize (on the following page) that the grandmother and the refugee – in contrast to the poet-narrator – share traumatic first-hand experiences of war and ”enkesorg” (‘a widow's mourning’), something that may be fundamental for a sense of

common understanding and empathy.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, from a Kristevan point of view, “mormors språk” (‘grandma’s language’) is described as a voice distinguished by cracks and a certain recognizable tone, which may reflect something maternal and pre-linguistic. Thus the title’s “mother tongue” need not be understood as a national language, but rather as a transcendental language of mothers. Yet, grandma’s language can also be viewed in light of Yasemin Yildiz’ understanding of what she calls a postmonolingual condition.

In *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (2012), Yildiz differentiates between three contemporary feminist perspectives on the notion of a mother tongue. Some feminist critics, she claims, “celebrate the ‘mother tongue’ as bearing residues or traces of the maternal body.”<sup>39</sup> It is thus valorized “as the expression of the repressed and dominated maternal and set [...] against male authority.”<sup>40</sup> Other feminists take a perspective developed in particular by Kristeva regarding “the maternal as preceding language.”<sup>41</sup> Language and the law of the father are thus a separate category from the mother, “who is ‘pure bodily closeness.’”<sup>42</sup> Yildiz herself, however, follows a third strand of feminism, which rejects both of the previous “utopian figurations of the mother.”<sup>43</sup> Yildiz historicizes the notion (and idealization) of a mother tongue and is ultimately more critical of the fundamental coupling of notions of the maternal and the linguistic to begin with, the reason being that since the late 1700s, this has empowered the monolingual paradigm of the nation state. This paradigm excludes people who do not speak the nation’s “mother tongue”; hence, Yildiz is interested in texts that through various forms of multilingualism seek to “disrupt the homology between language and ethno-cultural identity that the [monolingual] paradigm installs”.<sup>44</sup>

Linnestå’s *Morsmål* comes across as fueled by the first two feminist perspectives, yet it could also be viewed as operating within a postmonolingual paradigm. In the quote above we note that the refugee enquires about older women in particular; that is, the redemptive language is neither that of the poet-narrator nor of her mother, but rather that of her grandmother. With this we are given a sense of a language reflecting something primordial as well as premodern. As Yildiz points out in an analysis of Turkish-German author Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s work, the figure of the grandmother often represents traditional folk wisdom, and as such she is premodern, representing an era before the construction of the monolingual nation state.<sup>45</sup> Hence, the (presumably) Norwegian-speaking grandmother can bond on equal terms with the refugee speaking another language within a pre-monolingual paradigm, turned postmonolingual as it is

presented to us in a new millennium. The grandmother becomes an atavistic figure, open to a state of multilingualism that those rooted in the nation state are not. She may be thought of as someone who does not carry the monolingual bias. In an age of globalization where the monolingual condition often serves to exclude foreign immigrants from the national community, the refugee woman has good reason to desire a postmonolingual paradigm represented through the attachment to former generations of women.

We may need to keep this in mind when the "mother tongue" subsequently is described as redemptive. After visiting the grandmother, the poet-narrator writes that she "finner en tone / den flyter opp fra morsmålet / vi kan dele denne" ('finds a tone / it floats up from the mother tongue / we can share it').<sup>46</sup> Given the context, this tone may pertain to trauma, to the maternal body, as well as to a pre- and postmonolingual condition in which one national language takes no precedence over another – where all are equal before the state in terms of belonging, regardless of their mother tongue, and regardless of whether they speak a new tongue accented and broken.

Still, right and wrong, fluent and accented is also a matter of definition, and the poem goes on to question who has the power of definition. In the fifth section, "gebrokken", the refugee suddenly claims that she does not speak "gebrokkent".<sup>47</sup> The poet-narrator considers this claim and concludes that it is in fact those who represent violence that should be regarded as speaking a broken, wrong language:

menneskes språk da de tok henne, og trakk alt ned,

mens øyeblikket ble til år

*den* aksenten er det knekte språket

av høylytt eldgammel flerstemt

feilaktighet<sup>48</sup>

[the language of the men when they took her, and pulled everything down,

while the moment turned into years

*that* accent is the broken language

of loud ancient polyphonic

inaccurateness]

By questioning evaluative linguistic terms, the refugee – and the poem – turn our ordinary way of thinking about gender and language upside down and thus may be regarded as disturbing not only a monolingual paradigm, but also a Kristevan, dichotomously gendered language perception, of which Yildiz, too, is critical. *Morsmål*, then, disrupts the monolingual paradigm, not just by featuring various forms of multilingualism (bits of English and also forms of internal multilingualism in which one focuses on foreign-derived words, such as “gebrokken”), but also by questioning what is correct and who decides.<sup>49</sup> It furthermore appears as post-Kristevan as it switches around her gendered notions of the feminine (tied to broken language) and the masculine (tied to fluent language). As we shall see, *Morsmål* consistently operates with binary gender divisions that it subsequently seeks to deconstruct.

### *Advantages and Disadvantages of Simple Dichotomies*

Since the poet-narrator has postcolonial misgivings about representing the Other – ”kanskje legger jeg ordene mine / i hennes munn” (‘maybe I put my words / in her mouth’)<sup>50</sup> – it becomes crucial to her, as we have seen, that she participate in a cultural encounter in which the Other woman talks back and corrects or questions prejudiced, cultural assumptions. These corrections often take place within a feminist discourse in which the women direct anger and hostility at patriarchy, yet not always with the same consistency. A feminist point of departure in the book is that the women’s common hostility towards patriarchy brings them together: “det ensidige samles / og rettes mot kjønn [...] det ensidige blir en åpenbaring” (‘One-sidedness is gathered / and directed at gender [...] one-sidedness becomes a revelation’).<sup>51</sup> In using the term “one-sided”, the poet-narrator suggests that she will problematize dichotomies of us versus them. Admittedly they are “one-sided” in the sense that they are simplistic and narrow-minded. Yet, they are also useful as in this case they serve to unite the two women across their own differences and lead to “a revelation”.

In “gebrokken” – which we have seen revolves around the notion of a broken language, of broken women, and of broken human beings in general – the women’s conversation once more turns to the numerous sexual assaults to which the refugee woman has been subjected. Bibi Aisha

is also brought into their conversation, with a description of her case and face, presumably as it figured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2010. Bibi Aisha was an 18-year-old Afghan woman who had fled from her abusive Taliban husband and, upon being returned to him, was subjected to a brutal revenge as her husband and in-laws cut off her nose and ears and left her to die in the mountains.<sup>52</sup> She was subsequently found and rescued by aid workers and US military: “vi snakker om et ansikt / (Bibi Aisha) / [...] domsavsigelser / skam / [...] hullet i et ansikt / [...] hull for øre / [...] hull og søkk og graver” (‘we talk about a face / [Bibi Aisha] / rulings / shame / [...] the hole in a face / [...] hole for ear / holes and indentations and graves’).<sup>53</sup> The stanza come across as a photographic ekphrasis, assuming that the poet-narrator is referring to the world-famous documentary portrait, as it was used, in part, to support US-led involvement in Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup> Bibi Aisha’s name is mentioned parenthetically four times on this page, each time appearing in a line of its own. As such it comes across as an explanation, given the status, perhaps, of a whisper. Yet, as it is repeated four times, it takes on further significance, suggesting that the image of her disfigured face has become haunting. The parentheses could be viewed as a sign of the repressed, which nevertheless keeps resurfacing. The name also contains the only capital letters used in the poem (place names like Norway and Scandinavia, by contrast, are not capitalized), giving this woman particular importance as someone who has, conceivably, been a major source of inspiration for the poet. As a verbal representation of a visual representation we find the emphasis on holes – holes in a face/head matched by holes in the text. In addition to ekphrastic equivalences, we are also still operating within trauma aesthetics as well as Kristevan poetics, where patriarchal violence against women ends up expressed through a fragmentary and broken language of representation, connecting the poem’s female protagonists to each other – and to Bibi Aisha.

Bibi Aisha is presumably a more visibly horrific and sensational case than that of the refugee woman, yet it is represented as a case to which the refugee woman can relate. The thought of it fuels the women’s sense of anger and injustice as they continue their line of thought and ”snakker om hakkene, knivene, spettene, pikkene, mennene / mennene, mennene” (‘talk about axes and knives / hammers and cocks / men men men’).<sup>55</sup> The criticism of patriarchy culminates in an outburst of rage at the sentence ”boys will be boys” situated halfway through the book. These three pages covered with “‘boys will be boys’” are, as mentioned earlier, black and the letters are white.<sup>56</sup> Thus standing apart, the pages disrupt the rest of the work – they could

well feel like an insistent reprimand coming from beyond the sense of solidarity that the women have established. However, they also resound as subversive, repetitive sneering (or mocking) from this discursive location the women have established. In addition, the pages are introduced by the words: ”testosteronet // alt som stivner” (‘the testosterone // everything that hardens’), a further indication of a theory of language in which that which has stiffened, hardened and fossilized is attributed to the masculine (phallus), while the feminine is that which is open and creative.<sup>57</sup> This may once more be understood in relation to Kristeva’s symbolic and semiotic language.

At this point in the book, in its attacks upon patriarchy and the masculine, *Morsmål* appears more traditionally feminist than postfeminist. Yet, the text also moves away from ”one-sidedness” (once it has served its purpose), with the refugee woman insisting that we not judge all men alike; we must keep in mind that there are men who weep ”på tvers av kjønn” (‘across gender’), and ”vi må elske dem, skriker hun / må elske mennene også” (‘we have to love them, she screams / have to love the men, too’).<sup>58</sup> This relation to men points to an essential difference between feminism and postfeminism as black feminists such as bell hooks criticized white second-wave feminists for too simplistically regarding man as enemy.<sup>59</sup> Being against patriarchy does not entail being against men. Taking this into account, the work shows how the refugee woman ultimately offers the poet-narrator a new perspective on Norwegian men related to emotions and *jouissance*. The perspective, evidently, pulls the poet-narrator away from solidified categories that are characteristic of an earlier form of feminism. The poet-narrator exclaims: ”og regnet av menn ligger strødd og det nye landet for henne / er landet mitt for meg // på en annen måte” (‘and the rain of men lies sprinkled and that which to her is a new country / to me is my country / in a different way’).<sup>60</sup> The poet-narrator sees her own country and countrymen in a new way as Linnestå’s refugee simply succeeds in evoking love and tolerance in the Norwegians she meets – including Norwegian men whom she softens up. Then again, another meaning emerges if we read this metapoetically. The countrymen may represent language – in this case standard Norwegian, the poet’s mother tongue, which she has come to perceive in a new, malleable, playful way through her encounter with the refugee. The mother tongue understood as a masculine, symbolic language (grammatically correct, standard Norwegian) has become the poet’s *Morsmål*, a feminine, poetic, open language.

## *Reevaluating the Mother Tongue*

In conclusion we may return to the initial epitaph: ”Ethvert menneske skriker i taushet etter å bli lest på en helt annen måte” (‘every human being screams in silence for being read in an entirely different way’). In the course of *Morsmål*, we do not only see the refugee being represented and read in an alternative and indeterminate way. We also see a Norwegian narrator-poet gaining a new perspective on herself, her country, her countrymen, and her mother tongue. At first she hesitates in letting the stranger in, knowing that the encounter may pull her out of her comfort zone of daily routine.<sup>61</sup> Yet, the encounter also brings new and liberating perspectives – on individual and cultural identity. The premise presented through the epitaph is that human beings are in constant need of new perspectives; they are subjects in process. They are ambivalent as they scream silently, but ultimately they want to resist pre-established understandings, prejudices, and misrecognitions. They want to be reread and understood anew. This may pertain to the Self as well as the Other. In addition, as the quote suggests through the figure of reading, it pertains to language and texts.

In its final apostrophe *Morsmål* proclaims its own success as a poetic event. A refugee “you” has succeeded as an inspiration. The poet-narrator also suggests that the refugee muse has come out unharmed – maybe even strengthened – from her encounter with the poet. Yet, from the perspective of the refugee, we will, of course, never know. We will not know if she (or people like her) feels somehow Orientalized. She is presented in terms of exotic instruments and colors: the tambourine, flamingo-colored skirt and eyes of black coral.<sup>62</sup> Her body is intermittently sexualized, revealed as bathing half-naked in the ocean at one point, and as dressed in a risqué dress at another, “og låra og rumpeballene til syne / under silkeglansen” (‘and your thighs and buttocks show / beneath the glossy silk’).<sup>63</sup> There is an overall risk that she may feel essentialized as feminine. This critique has long since been launched against Kristeva, arguing that her theory posits woman as the Other in a stereotypical manner, as body and emotion rather than logic and reason.<sup>64</sup> Writing in this tradition, Linnestå risks presenting her refugee woman as Other to the second degree: as female and non-European. Nevertheless, the refugee woman questions the poet-narrator’s categorizations and in doing so does not seem reduced to body and emotion. She is able to reason and does so in surprising ways, making the poet-narrator and her readers

reconsider patriarchal notions and evaluations of what is broken and what is intact. This pertains to national language, a monolingual paradigm, poetry, as well as human beings.

As a postfeminist work about a Scandinavian woman's encounter with a woman refugee, I find *Morsmål* to be one of the most unabashedly constructive, optimistic, and least skeptical of its kind as it presents us with an example to follow.<sup>65</sup> *Morsmål* ends on a positive note about a successful encounter. This is also true of Linnestå's novel *Opphold*, which ends with the protagonist fighting for the Iranian family after their deportation, hoping to have their verdict overturned so that they will be able to return to Norway. This fight is described in positive terms as giving the widower "en viss energy" ('a certain amount of energy').<sup>66</sup>

As *Morsmål*, however, is writerly – requiring the reader to fill in gaps and discontinuities – its success in fronting an optimistic cause vis-à-vis refugees ultimately depends on the reader's ability and willingness to put misgivings aside and enter its playful realm, opening up to this particular experience of Otherness and subsequently to real-life encounters with refugee Others.

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<sup>1</sup> In English the titles of the novels translate into *A Happy Little Island* (published in translation in 2016), *Political Novel*, *Barzakh*, *The World Savers*, and *Those Who Don't Exist*. The titles of the poetic works translate into *We are the Dead*, *Soon*, *Behind the Hills*, *the Coast*. *A Song of Lamentation*, and *Mother Tongue*.

<sup>2</sup> The novel is a loose follow-up to *Hagesang* (2011). Whereas the perspective in *Hagesang* was carried by the woman, seeking to reconcile family life with her author calling, the perspective in *Opphold* is carried by her husband. "Opphold" can mean pause as well as stay, but it is also the first part of the composite noun "oppholdstillatelse" which means residence permit.

<sup>3</sup> Aasne Linnestå, *Opphold*, Oslo 2014, p. 189. Translations of Linnestå's work into English are my own, except in one case where I have found parts of *Morsmål* translated into English on Linnestå's website. In this case I have cited and referred to the translator.

<sup>4</sup> Astrid Hygen Meyer, "Strekker seg mot det gode", *Klassekampen* 19.08.2014.

<sup>5</sup> Mari Reinholt Aas, "Språkmakt", *Vårt land* 10.09.2012. Although Linnestå's work has received positive reviews, it has so far not received academic attention.

<sup>6</sup> For a broader discussion on this topic see Elisabeth Oxfeldt, "'Staten sa ja, så hva sier jeg?' Flytning og følelser i postfeministisk litteratur", in *Skandinaviske fortellinger om skyld og privilegier i en globaliseringstid*, ed. Elisabeth Oxfeldt, Oslo 2016, s. 230–254 (open access: <https://www.idunn.no/skandinaviske-fortellinger/12-staten-sa-ja-sa-hva-sier-jeg> [14.11.2017]) and Elisabeth Oxfeldt, "Global sisterhood", *The History of Nordic Women's Literature* <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/2016/10/13/global-sisterhood/> (14.11.2017). Linnestå, however, is not at the forefront of contemporary Scandinavian poetry written by women if we consider *Morsmål* in light of Åsa Arping's overview: "Body + Language = Politics" (2016). While *Morsmål* does fit with the overall title (body + language = politics), it clearly does not include the anti-colonial stance that Arping discusses under the subheading "Critique of Whiteness in the Nordic Countries". As we shall see, Linnestå may be skeptical of patriarchal violence, but she does not address the white, male imperialist – nor does she consider Norway critically in a geopolitical context. Åsa Arping, "Body + Language = Politics. Nordic Poetry at the Turn of the 21st Century", *The History of Nordic Women's Literature*, <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/2016/11/24/body-language-politics-nordic-poetry-at-the-turn-of-the-21st-century/> (14.11.2017).

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<sup>7</sup> In the vein of Ann Brooks, I use the term "postfeminism" to refer to a continuation of feminism, which has attained a new level of critical reflection by incorporating insights from postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism. This was a response to the second-wave feminists from the 1960s and 70s. Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms. Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms*, London 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks 1997, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Jf. Gayatri C. Spivak, "Kan de underordnede tale?" Translated by M.E. Selvik. *Agora*, 2009:1, p. 40–103.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Carina Elisabeth Beddari, "Den andres tungemål", *Morgenbladet* 24.08.2012.

<sup>11</sup> Åsne Linnestå, *Morsmål*, Oslo 2012, p. 221–223.

<sup>12</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> It appears that when the women do not communicate in a more or less broken Norwegian, they speak English (Linnestå 2012, p. 141, 191).

<sup>14</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 125–27.

<sup>15</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 239.

<sup>16</sup> In Jonathan Culler's terminology the apostrophe allows us to move from the representation of an event, to a fictive, discursive, poetic event – from a referential temporality to a temporality of discourse (writing). Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs. Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London 1981, p. 152–153, 150).

<sup>17</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 247.

<sup>18</sup> Culler writes about "the tension between the narrative and the apostrophic" which "can be seen as the generative force behind whole series of lyrics" (Culler 1981, p. 149).

<sup>19</sup> Culler 1981, p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Culler 1981, p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Fra én identitet til en annen," in *Moderne litteraturteori. En antologi*, 2. ed., ed. Atle Kittang et al., Oslo 2003, p. 246–267.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes distinguishes between "readerly" and "writerly" texts. Whereas the first term refers to texts containing a more or less closed meaning ("We call any readerly text a classic text"), writerly texts are open to be filled out by the reader ("The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language [...] can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of the networks, the infinity of languages. The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure"). Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller, New York 1974, p. 4–5.

<sup>23</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Aas 2012 and Cathrine Strøm, "Kom sannheten som et dikt?" *Klassekampen* 01.09.2012.

<sup>28</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture. The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, New Brunswick, New Jersey 2005, p. 91–92.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan 2005, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan 2005, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 65–66.

<sup>35</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 99.

<sup>38</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Yasemin Yildiz *Beyond the Mother Tongue. The Postmonolingual Condition*, New York 2012, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Yildiz 2012, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Yildiz 2012, p. 11.

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- <sup>42</sup> Yildiz 2012, p. 11.
- <sup>43</sup> Yildiz 2012, p. 11.
- <sup>44</sup> Yildiz 2012, p. 26.
- <sup>45</sup> Yildiz 2012, p. 153.
- <sup>46</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 102.
- <sup>47</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 111.
- <sup>48</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 111.
- <sup>49</sup> Yildiz points to how the monolingual paradigm "relegated linguistic practices without proper names to the status of deviation, hodgepodge, or simply invisibility, rather than recognizing them as 'language'" (Yildiz 2012, p. 7).
- <sup>50</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 21.
- <sup>51</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 62–63.
- <sup>52</sup> Andrew Anthony, "Afghanistan's Propaganda War Takes a New Twist", *The Guardian* 05.12.2010.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/bibi-aisha-afghanistan-disfigured-taliban> (14.11.2017).
- <sup>53</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 115.
- <sup>54</sup> I have the term photographic ekphrasis from Hans Kristian Rustad, *Fotopoetikk: Om dikt og fotografi i norsk lyrikk*, Oslo 2017.
- <sup>55</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 115. The English translation is from Linnestå's website. This one is translated by Gaye Kynoch.  
<https://aasnelinnestaa.wordpress.com/translations/> (14.11.2017).
- <sup>56</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 125–127.
- <sup>57</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 124.
- <sup>58</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 178, 116, 188.
- <sup>59</sup> Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Boston 1984, p. 67–81.
- <sup>60</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 188.
- <sup>61</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 30.
- <sup>62</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 142.
- <sup>63</sup> Linnestå 2012, p. 183, 216.
- <sup>64</sup> Jacqueline Rose, for instance, writes that "Kristeva's works splits on a paradox, or rather a dilemma: the hideous moment when a theory arms itself with a concept of femininity as different, as something other to the culture as it is known, only to find itself face to face with, or even entrenched within, the most grotesque and fully cultural stereotypes of femininity itself." Jacqueline Rose, "Julia Kristeva – Take Two" in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London 1986, p. 157.
- <sup>65</sup> Several of the other works I mentioned in the introduction operate with examples *not* to be followed, such as Aburas' protagonist, Sundt's island-inhabitants, and Peter-Clement Woetmann's cynical "my body" (referring to a Danish national "we"). Hence, their attempts to engage readers politically and socially seem to be the same, but they go about it by operating within different emotional regimes, such as those of shaming and guilt-tripping..
- <sup>66</sup> Linnestå 2014, p. 189.