

The Iconicity of an 'Immigrant Writer'

Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Yahya Hassan

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Abstract

What do Jonas Hassen Khemiri from Sweden and Yahya Hassan from Denmark have in common? Apart from the visual commonalities – they both have a non-white physical appearance – they share an outstanding commercial and critical success. Using these young, highly hyped, bestselling authors as examples, this paper aims at discussing the iconic function of the 'immigrant writer's' authentic body in the public discourse on 'national' and 'immigrant' identities. The emphasis lies on the marketability of an 'immigrant writer', which derives its commercial value from the iconicity based on ethnic visibility, recognizability and exemplarity. I want to draw a connection between the existing fixed iconography of an 'immigrant' in the mass media and the visual ethnicized representations of Khemiri and Hassan in the daily press and put their literary performance into the socio-political context. This paper considers their popular author-images as objected icons of hegemonic normative discourses on national culture, while it simultaneously understands their subversive literary and extra-textual renegotiations of national self-imagery as iconoclasm of traditional order of 'Swedishness' resp. 'Danishness'. Rather than going

into deep textual analysis, I focus on the para-texts such as newspaper articles and book covers as iconic performances of the discourse on the 'immigrant literature'.

Keywords Immigrant authors, author image, Jonas Khemiri, Yahya Hassan, iconoclasm

Introduction

Literary criticism has long been concerned with the figure of the author as an interpretative point, announcing him as dead, absent or disappeared, whereas young debutants as Jonas Hassen Khemiri in Sweden and Yahya Hassan in Denmark were celebrated as originators of authentic texts and could establish themselves as authoritative 'immigrant writers'. The mystical notion of an author-figure discarded by Barthes and Foucault shows perseverance when it comes to writers with a foreign name and a non-white physiognomy.

With these young and highly hyped, bestselling authors as examples, this article pays particular attention to the iconicity of a much sought and contested category that is often called 'immigrant literature' in Sweden and in Denmark. This article also considers what should be called the iconic function of the 'immigrant writer's' racialized body in the public discourse on identity (re)negotiations. In this paper I will argue for an inextricably close link between the marketability of Khemiri and Hassan and the iconicity of an 'immigrant writer', which in turn derives its commercial value from ethnic visibility, recognizability and exemplarity. The analysis of the mass media reception aims at showing their function as metonyms for an entire social, generation, religious and gender group. As I draw up a connection between the existing fixed iconography of an 'immigrant' in the mass media and the visual ethnicized representations of Khemiri and Hassan, it can be argued that the cultural production promotes and sacralizes the body of the author as a marketable commodity for purposes of enrichment and re-vitalizing of the national self-imaginary. What matters, as Goh puts it in his study on semiotics of the foreign body, is "their visibly and tangibly foreign bodies, made to appear aberrant and intractable within the smooth abstract socius [...]" (2014, 220) of the majority culture. The authors with the attribute 'immigrant' build a pivotal

point, around which the renegotiation and reconstruction of the non-specified culture's self-imaginary takes place. At the same time this paper understands Khemiri and Hassan as iconoclasm of traditional order of Swedish resp. Danish national identities. The controversial debates around the 'immigrant writer' as a welcome addition to the national literature illustrates how the non-white 'other' becomes an inseparable part of the 'self' and causes fascination as well as irritation. It is remarkable that both writers have sparked unique public debates of large political dimensions on integration, multilingualism, homophobia and Islam. At the same time they have become online-sensations: Hassan's interview (Omar 2013) and Khemiri's open letter to Sweden's minister of justice (Khemiri 2013) are the most shared articles in the online history of Denmark and Sweden. Thus iconicity should also be seen as a stylistic tool for the authors to crave public attention and become active participants in renegotiations of social-symbolic systems.

The departing point of this paper is Khemiri's and Hassan's function as multifaceted cultural icons who actively shape and reconstruct the normative category 'immigrant writer'. This approach highlights the ethnic visibility of these authors without reducing their literature on author's ethnicity as a given factor.

'Swedish' and 'Danish' identities and the 'immigrant literature'

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the literary market in Sweden and Denmark experienced the emergence of 'immigrant literature'. As Behschnitt and Nilsson (2013) argue, ethnicity became the master code for understanding the culturally diverse society, and literature was considered to provide the key to it. In 1995 Clemens Altgård formulated the longing for the first novel about the new multicultural reality and in 2003 the 24-year old half-Tunisian Jonas Hassen Khemiri hit the market with his novel "One Eye Red" (Ett öga rött). The novel, written as a diary, about a teenage boy's struggle for what he assumes to be an authentic Muslim Arab identity in the midst of the Swedish everyday life was an outstanding commercial and critical success. Khemiri established himself as one of the most sought-after literary celebrities, being much in demand as lecturer on topics as language, power, anti-racism and identity. While Alejandro Leiva Wenger's, Johannes Anyuru's and Jonas

Hassen Khemiri's appearance on the Swedish literary market marked what Leonard calls "the ethnic turn in Swedish literature" (2008, 33), the neighbouring countries were very anxious to keep up with the trend. In 2006 publishing house Gyldendal and the daily Berlingske Tidende initiated a fiction-writing contest "New Voices" in order to promote new literature about experiences unknown to broader Danish society (Gaettens 2010). Denmark was actively looking for a Danish Khemiri – a young, authentic, fierce voice with a firsthand experience of the new multi-ethnic Danish society. In October of 2013 Gyldendal promoted Yahya Hassan's "Digte" as an explosive book and an indispensable story about today's Denmark. An 18-year old debutant with Palestinian and Muslim background and a solid police record hit the Danish market with his poetry, each of these attributes contributing to the unique medial sensation. In both cases, the hype started already before the book release, as Khemiri was interviewed by radio Kulturnytt and Hassan's interview was printed in Politiken and then broadcast in a TV-show Deadline on DR2. Both literary debuts reached record sales figures, which is an extremely rare case for debutants, nearly impossible for poetry debuts with lyrics. The success of hoped-for 'immigrant literature' is based on the felicitous interplay of the figuration of the 'immigrant writer' and explosive themes as taboo-breaking, critiques of religion and unmasking of social unfairness. It was more than a longing for a novel that depicts social issues, it was a desire for specific writers – angry young men as they were known in the British literary tradition of the 50s, – whose exasperation would lend urgency and weight to their literary testimonials.

In both countries, the 'immigrant literature' has received huge public and scholarly interest. Behschnitt and Mohnike (2006) deliver two explanations for this. First is what they call the "ethnographic gaze" ("Der ethnographische Blick", Mohnike 2007) or "intention of education" ("Bildungsintention, Behschnitt/Mohnike 2006), meaning the reader's expectation to gain ethnological knowledge about the unknown ethnic 'other' through literature. I want to attach this mode of reading to the figure of the reader as a voyeur. The craving of the cultural spheres for 'immigrant literature' very much resembles a voyeur's lust to peep through the curtains and to get a view into private lives of strangers. The voyeuristic reader is a passionate collector and

consumer of 'authentic artifacts' of the ethnic 'other' in the literary work, author-interviews and features.

The second explanation given by Behschnitt and Mohnike for the popularity of 'immigrant literature' – the ambition of cultural circles to enrich national literature – sheds light on the special emotionality of the hot debates around it. The modern literature in the USA and the UK had well-established authors with immigrant backgrounds, an ennobling label that marked the multiculturalism of the new literary world. With their own 'immigrant literature' Swedish and Danish literatures would thus prove their progressivity and claim their place in the world market. Therefore the 'immigrant writer' became a sacralized object of high importance for the status of the national 'self'. It is a legitimation strategy rather than a random choice of image, that Khemiri and Hassan are often compared to Sweden's and Denmark's most authoritarian writers, Hassan to Georg Brandes, with his critique of religion and hypocrisy and his wish to stand out of a collective (Olsson 2014), whereas Khemiri's name is mentioned next to Strindberg's for his disposition to fight for truth and seek beauty in hate, as the reviewer puts it (Strömberg 2003). Hardly any other name than Strindberg's would tie Khemiri to the Swedish literary canon, and hardly any other example than the example of Brandes in the Danish literary tradition would appropriately describe the tumult around Hassan's person and poetry. Both names are controversial authoritative male cultural icons, that are inseparable from the national cultural identity. The iconic images of 'immigrant writers' can be seen as marketable commodity which is profitable for both domestic and international consumption and reflects many levels of power struggle of superiority and inferiority, center and periphery.

It is important to identify a connection between the iconicity of an 'immigrant writer' and the medial icon of an 'immigrant man'. Media scholars Agius (2013), Bredström (2003), Keskinen (2009) and Vuori (2009) pointed out the impact of the daily press on the constitution of the national self-imaginary as opposite to the immigrant 'other', in which the core elements of the modern and progressive Swedish resp. Danish identity are considered to be gender equality, peaceful civil society, welfare and open democracy. Hultén (2006) and Blaagaard (2008) argue that Swedish and Danish journalism have a long history of marginalization of visible minorities through

dichotomization, stereotyping and exclusion. The Swedish 2005-2006 public debates on 'Swedishness' and the Danish "Cultural Battle" (kulturkampen) illustrate, how particularly Muslim communities were marked as a threat to the national values (Andersson 2009, Hübinette/Lundström 2011, Blaagaard 2010). As Brune (2006) writes, back since the first reports on labour migration, the Swedish media opened up present binary oppositions of 'us', meaning the Swedes who are white, educated, progressive, liberal, non-problematic and the 'others', the non-Swedish, non-white, with lack of education, regressive, patriarchal and violent. The medial reception of the 'immigrant literature' makes this unsettling 'other' the object of high interest.

In the mass media discourse on migration it is the migrant's non-white body that serves as a projection screen for stereotypical characteristics that are inconsistent with the notion of 'Swedishness' resp. 'Danishness'. The media's representation of visual minorities created long-lasting stereotypes of the dark-haired, dark-skinned, criminal, sexually violent, aggressive, non-integrated Muslim man (Brune 2002, Andreassen 2005, Soei 2011). This stereotype of an immigrant body is a remarkable synergy of sign and object, as visual ethnic markers lead to immediate recognition of character, habits and social status of the marked person. Simultaneously the icon urges the viewer to take a position on his or her own cultural identity. I want to point to the importance of the visibility of these demarcation criteria and state that the same physical signs shape the category 'immigrant writer'.

Iconicity of an 'immigrant writer's' authentic body

The iconicity of an 'immigrant writer' meets with the fundamental presupposition of "recognition and familiarity" (Sørensen 2011, 122). The first aspect is ensured by establishing an easily recognizable author-image as a brand name on the literary marketplace. The continual references to the writer's physical features connect these brand names to the resilient stereotype of an 'immigrant man' and create a sense of familiarity. I want to emphasize the essential components of age, gender, confession and ethnicity which add up into the iconicity of an 'immigrant writer' and are all equally indispensable. This article considers two male authors, hence gender is the first aspect that I want to address. It is striking, that in both countries the controversial debate on the above mentioned socio-politi-

cal topics primarily took place around male 'immigrant writers'. Especially Marjaneh Bakhtiari, but also Shadi Angelina Bazeghi and Nassrin el Halawani certainly are popular writers, but they were never hyped or reached the stardom as Khemiri and Hassan did. A possible explanation can be found in the synergy of authenticity as a symbolic value of the 'immigrant literature' and the medial stereotypes. Stereotypically, the 'immigrant woman' is bound to the family-sphere, she is less visible in the society and certainly constructed as a victim of the patriarchal immigrant society. The potential source of conflict is the 'immigrant man', either as an unemployed person with a disposition for violence and criminality, or as a dissatisfied employee with scorn for the established socio-political order of the state. As the symbolic value of the 'immigrant literature' is to depict the conflict of cultures, the angry young Muslim man becomes the pivotal point of the discourse. Khemiri's and Hassan's youth gives them credibility of a first-hand experience of the young generation, which makes them the authentic 'other' within the nation state. Their visible ethnic features as skin, eye and hair colour and the religious confession again distinguish them from the 'white' angry young man of the working class.

In the media reception Khemiri's and Hassan's immigrant bodies are highlighted as the location of the immigrant-writing both in literal and indirect meaning. While analyzing the extensive media coverage, I came upon a repetitive pattern: many critics put an emphasis on figurative descriptions, a narration strategy which refers to Khemiri's and Hassan's ethnic attributes as language, clothes, rituals, music and food preferences, religion etc. (Brovall 2014, Castelius 2003, Kellberg 2003) and distinguishes them as non-White, thus legitimating the label 'immigrant writer'. Their visual appearance, hair colour, eyes, body height, gestures, manners, clothes, voice or intonation are described in detail repeatedly, linking them to the stereotype of a dark-haired, dark-skinned 'immigrant man' from a geo-culturally distant country. The mass media narration stages Khemiri as a modern, attractive man who comes to the meeting on a bike, with disheveled hair, mp3 music plugged into his ears and a friendly smile (Rogeman 2006). His food and music tastes are often referred to (Castelius 2003), mainly to underscore his belonging to two cultures. Hassan's deep and loud voice is often mentioned, (Brovall 2014), connecting the young, criminal, rebellious

author to his aggressive way of recital and the breathless outcry of his angry poetry. His voice is characterized as a particularly melodic mixture of rap and and Koran-reading. Pedersen (2013) writes that Hassan's way of recital varies between aggressiveness and the state of trance, a comparison that is a strong image of a white man's imagination of a religious oriental man. The frequent references to the Koran and rap enhance the conflation of the 'immigrant author' with the stereotype of an unpredictable, dangerous, explosive 'immigrant man' on the peripheries of society.

The marketability of Khemiri and Hassan is connected to their status as writers of suburbia, though only the "ghetto poet" (Pedersen 2013) Hassan grew up in the Trillegården suburb of Aarhus, Khemiri comes from Stockholm's middle-class district Södermalm. The segregation of immigrants is a common phenomenon, but Sweden and Denmark have a striking pattern of racial segregation (Hübinette/Lundström 2011, Sund 2005). I believe this is the reason why it seems to be important for the critics either to locate them in one of these suburbs, or to emphasize them being an exception in the middle-class white center. Several critics like to point to the fact that Khemiri likes to listen to Hip-Hop, that he used to hang around with his friends and play basketball, an image which once again positions him in a stereotypical group of migrant youngsters playing in the high rise suburbs. The 24 and 18 year old debutants with long black hair and black eyes with a connection to the rap culture can be expected to represent the "voice of a real migrant" (Behschnitt 2010), therefore their living condition is subject to public interest (Rogeman 2006).

The reception often reduces the 'immigrant writer' on ethnified patterns of lifestyle, mentality and bodily inscriptions, sometimes completely leaving out a reference to the literary quality. Kassebeer (2013) lauds Hassan's lyric and provides many examples, which only illustrate biographical data, without a reference to its literary qualities, biographic information being also the pivotal point of interviews with Khemiri (Castelius 2003, Kellberg 2003). Only some reviewers emphasize that the works gain their efficacy from the socio-political playback and the literary work on its own is less remarkable (Sandström 2003) or in need for a years ripening (Andersen Nexø 2013, Larsen 2013). Just as Rabe (2003) tries to concentrate on Khemiri's novel, Munk Rösing praises Hassan for

his language, word creations, the rhythm and melody, his strong poetry work, describing the book as one that "burns between the hands" (2013), the firewood surely being the social and not the literary quality of the work.

The inscription of 'otherness' on the writer's body becomes even more visible when in her extended feature Brovall (2014) writes about Yahya Hassan's tattoo on his right hand. The tattoo says "ord", Danish for "word". Tattoos in general are visual inscriptions on the body, the three letters on Hassan's arm have an enhanced iconic function: this tattoo is an irreversible visible inscription of 'Danishness' through a Danish language, an identity marker on a foreign body, the veracity of his firsthand experience literally burned on his skin. When Brovall mentions Hassan's tattoo, she reasserts the writer's position within the nation state and highlights the question about legitimacy of power: who has the right on words around the migration issues and how should these words be said.

Literary performance of 'immigrant literature'

Though the daily media and public reception of Khemiri and Hassan was highly dominant, I want to point to the authors' active involvement in the process of self-iconization, as both constantly negotiate their own image, performing identity schemes in and outside the literature and use their status for marketing strategies. Both Hassan and Khemiri generated a literary system of coding for their subversive play. The family and living environment of their protagonists mirror the reader's expectation, as does the linguistic repertoire. Both authors delivered an artful play with multi-ethnic language elements of so called 'perkerdansk' and 'rinkebysvenska'. The code-switching between normative and multi-ethnic languages mirrors the complex relation of language and identity. Adopting Jørgen Dines Johansen's argument, that literature can be defined as "the kind of discourse which may iconically represent, i.e. imitate almost any other discourse" (1996, 52), I want to pay particular attention to the book covers as iconic performances of the discourse on the 'immigrant literature'. Both covers build up strong suggestions without even turning the first page. On Khemiri's "One Eye Red" golden oriental ornaments on dominant red background decorate the borders and frame the author's exotic name. The book's strong visuality links it to the Muslim culture and religious inscrip-

tions on Korans and mosques. As Sardo states concerning the iconicity of titles, "they can mime the form of their object of reference directly or they can refer to an iconic dimension of the text" (2003, 349). The Swedish letters on oriental background and Khemiri's first name Jonas promise an authentic oriental story taken out of an otherwise marginal Swedish reality. Hassan's book is also designed in two colours – white letters "Yahya Hassan" on black background – under the name the Danish word "Digte" – poems. An uninformed reader would not know that "Yahya Hassan" both refers to the author and to the title of his poetry collection. The rear side of the cover carries one sentence that says everything the reader should know about the author: "Yahya Hassan, born 1995. A stateless Palestinian with a Danish passport." The colours mime the dichotomous categories of the 'self' and the 'other' in the debates on 'immigrant literature', the black and white of the ethnicized world view, the alleged insurmountability of cultural differences. Furthermore, the colour duality represents the urgent force of the poetry's message, that accuses immigrants in Denmark of fraud, bad parenting, violence, religious fanaticism and demands social consequences. It should be mentioned here that Hassan's poems are written in Capitals-lock, which is a skillful iconic fusion of narrativity and visuality. This mode of exclamatory poetry finds a form for a visual outcry of anger, a proclamation of protest. Obviously, Hassan's naratorial style fully exhausted middle-class Danish readers' expectation to find rebellion and provocation in the voice of the 'immigrant writer'. The iconicity of capital letters functions as an exclamation mark and fuels the message with urgency and hostility, supporting the dichotomy in the identity schemes. It creates a sense of immediacy, making the addressivity of the poems visible. The anger of the lyric "I" proves to enhance the purported facticity and derives from the expressive quality of the Capitals-lock, suggesting sincerity of emotion, honesty and testimonial quality of affectedness. I want to emphasize that both books iconically imitate the discourse on 'immigrant literature', the complexity of the identity renegotiation processes and the ambiguous space between authenticity and reality.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to elaborate the central role played by mainstream media in the production and reproduction of easily

recognizable iconic representations of an 'immigrant writer' as a marketable commodity. In line with this reasoning, the article has sought to demonstrate that the media narrative reduces the authors to bodily inscriptions, connecting the writer-image to the medial stereotype of an 'immigrant man'. The analysis of the public reception showed the iconic function of Khemiri and Hassan as complex cultural signifiers, which serve as a repository of self-images and stereotypes of 'Swedishness'/'Danishness' and 'Otherness'. The author-image created by the media proved to be a representational icon with a large commercial value that is anchored in the context of the globalized Swedish and Danish society and takes its power from the perpetual controversial debates on identity negotiations. The iconicity of an 'immigrant writer' makes an immediate subsumption between the signifier and the signified, the migrant experience inscribed on the foreign body and the textual story of the same. I have tried to point out the voyeuristic position of the hegemonic cultural society that extensively sacralized and objectified them to processes of self-constitution and have emphasized the authors' performative strategies to challenge straightforward oppositions.

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