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## Swedish 'Immigrant Literature' and the Construction of Ethnicity<sup>1</sup>

In recent decades the Swedish national self-image has undergone a radical change. Historic developments such as the end of the cold war, economic globalization, and European political integration have caused a crisis in the national symbolic economy. Above all, these developments have challenged a national self-image based on ideas about the particularity of the 'Swedish model' – i.e. the image of Sweden as a military non-aligned welfare state positioned between the socialistic and capitalistic power blocks – and facilitated the emergence of a new self-image, in which Sweden is viewed as a society which because of immigration has become *multicultural* – i.e. characterized by a high degree of *ethnic diversity*.<sup>2</sup> Thus *ethnicity* has come to function as what Fredric Jameson calls a 'master code or interpretive key' for understanding contemporary Swedish society.<sup>3</sup> And the basic distinction produced by this code is that between Swedish and immigrant culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Behschnitt and Mohnike, 'Interkulturelle Authentizität', 2007, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, *The political unconscious*, 1981, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> For a more substantial discussion of the discursive connection in contempo-

One indication of the focus on ethnicity, and on the opposition between Swedish and immigrant culture, characteristic of contemporary Sweden is the overwhelming attention given to Swedish 'immigrant and minority literature' in recent years. As an example of this one can mention the commercial and critical success for a new generation of 'immigrant writers' since the mid 1990s, and the establishment, during the same period of time, of 'immigrant and minority literature' as an academic field of study.

This attention is, as has been pointed out by Wolfgang Behschnitt and Thomas Mohnike, to a large extent conditioned by the belief that 'immigrant and minority literature' can be viewed as an expression of a 'new multicultural reality'.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, this kind of literature is expected to express the writer's identity and experiences *as an immigrant* and, especially, as a member of a non-Swedish *ethnic culture*. Thus 'immigrant literature' can function as a source of information about the very phenomena that make contemporary Sweden a multicultural society.<sup>6</sup>

As has been pointed out by several scholars, this expectation has been a dominant theme in the reception of contemporary Swedish 'immigrant literature' in newspapers and literary journals.<sup>7</sup> But it is also one of the fundamental assumptions underpinning the academic study of 'immigrant and minority literature'. A good illustration of this can be found in Satu Gröndahl's programmatic statement in the anthology *Litteraturens gränsländ: Invandrar- och minoritetslitteratur i nordiskt perspektiv* (Literature's borderland: Immigrant and minority literature in a Nordic perspective), that the aesthetic disci-

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rary Sweden between the concept 'multicultural' and ideas about *ethnic* diversity, see Nilsson, *Den föreställda mångkulturen*, 2010, pp. 18-24.

<sup>5</sup> Mohnike, 'Doppelte Fremdheit', 2007, p. 150; Behschnitt and Mohnike, 2007, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Nilsson, 'Litteratur, etnicitet och föreställningen om det mångkulturella samhället', 2008, pp. 278-282.

<sup>7</sup> Wendelius, *Den dubbla identiteten*, 2002 p. 41; Nilsson, 2008, pp. 285-288.

plines have an important role to play within the research on ethnic relations, since ‘art, music, and literature are important expressions of ethnic identities and function as illustrations of “ethnic communities.”’<sup>8</sup> And a similar argument is put forward by Wendelius, who argues that ‘immigrant literature’ should be studied because it repeatedly thematizes ‘the experience of being an immigrant or belonging to a minority group’.<sup>9</sup>

In this article I argue that the understanding of ‘immigrant literature’ as an expression of ethnic culture or identity is highly problematic. The first reason for this is that the representation of ethnic experiences and identities in the works of Swedish ‘immigrant writers’ is conditioned by the discursive construction of the category of ‘immigrant literature,’ rather than by the ‘ethnic cultures’ to which these writers may belong. The second reason is that this construction of ‘immigrant literature’ limits the representational scope of this literature, and produces othering and exoticizing representations of non-Swedish ethnicities. The third reason is that the understanding of Swedish ‘immigrant literature’ as an expression of ethnic culture or identity runs contrary to the understanding of ethnicities as cultural constructs, and thus contributes to the racialization of non-Swedish ethnicities.

After presenting my critique of the understanding of ‘immigrant literature’ as an expression of ethnic culture or identity I analyze two novels which, as Mohnike puts it, occupy ‘a central position in the contemporary Swedish discourse about literature and cultural diversity,’ namely Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s *Ett öga rött* [One Eye Red] (2003) and Marjaneh Bakhtiari’s *Kalla det vad fan du vill* [Call it what the heck you want] (2005).<sup>10</sup> The aim of this analysis is to

<sup>8</sup> Gröndahl, *Litteraturens gränsland*, 2002, p. 12. (All translations of non-English sources are mine, MN).

<sup>9</sup> Wendelius, 2002, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> Mohnike, 2007, p. 244.

show that two archetypical examples of Swedish 'immigrant literature' actually thematize, and criticize, the understanding of this kind of literature as a source of information about ethnic cultures. Thus my analysis can be read as an illustration of Behschnitt's claim that Swedish 'immigrant novels' often 'distort or subvert the same political and theoretical discourses with which critics [...] try to conceptualize them as literary phenomena'.<sup>11</sup>

Finally I will draw some conclusions about how the study of Swedish 'immigrant literature' may contribute to the understanding of the construction of ethnicity in contemporary Sweden.

#### The discursive construction of Swedish 'immigrant literature'

As has been pointed out by Behschnitt and Mohnike 'immigrant literature' is a discursive category, which structures both the production and reception of literary texts.<sup>12</sup> The core value in the discursive construction of this kind of literature is that it gives an 'authentic' representation of reality.<sup>13</sup> And since the 'reality' in question is the ethnic culture to which the writer belongs, this authenticity is guaranteed by the writer and his or her 'cultural affiliation'.<sup>14</sup>

Hence the most important guarantee of authenticity in 'immi-

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<sup>11</sup> Behschnitt, "The Voice of the "real migrant"", in press. Of course, not all Swedish 'immigrant novels' aim at questioning the readers' expectations on this kind of literature. And some of them even seem to try to live up to these expectations. One such novel is Zbigniew Kuklarz' (pen name) *Hjälp jag heter Zbigniew* (2005), which can be read as an attempt to describe Polish diaspora experience and identity. For a theoretical analysis of the different attitudes among writers with 'immigrant background' to the author position 'immigrant writer' in the contemporary literary field in Sweden, see Nilsson, 2010, pp. 43-53.

<sup>12</sup> Behschnitt and Mohnike, 'Bildung und Alteritätskonstruktion in der jüngsten schwedischen Migrantenliteratur', 2006, p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Behschnitt and Mohnike, 2007, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> Behschnitt and Mohnike, 2007, p. 81.

grant literature' is, as has been underlined by among others Mohnike and Volker C. Dörr, the paratextual fact – in the form of, for example, a foreign-sounding name – that the writer has an 'immigrant background.'<sup>15</sup> But authenticity can also be guaranteed thematically – by the description of an 'immigrant problematic', such as the question about 'double or split identity' – or stylistically – by the use of a literary style that can be interpreted as 'immigrant Swedish.'<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the discursive category of 'immigrant literature' produces a reception of this literature that can be understood in terms of what Mohnike calls an 'ethnographic gaze,' or, what I have called a 'reading-strategy based on the assumption that the work in question is an expression of ethnic identity politics.'<sup>17</sup> And, when viewed from the perspective of production, 'immigrant literature,' can be seen as what Immacolata Amodeo has called a 'biography generator,' which produces life stories centered only on the writer's identity as member of a marginalized ethnic group.<sup>18</sup>

The discursive category of 'immigrant literature' hence limits the potential representational scope of literary texts in that it directs the attention of both writer and reader toward the former's ethnic identity. And the result of this is that the representation of the writer's identity is reduced to what Amodeo calls 'splinters of a real biography,' since every aspect of the author's life other than those relevant for the function of this kind of literature – namely to express or illustrate the writer's ethnic belonging – becomes irrelevant to writer and reader alike.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mohnike, 2007, pp. 242-243; Dörr, 'Deutschsprachige Migrantenliteratur', 2008, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Mohnike, 2007, pp. 242-243.

<sup>17</sup> Mohnike, 2007; Nilsson, 2008, p. 277-282.

<sup>18</sup> Amodeo, *Die Heimat heißt Babylon*, 1996, pp. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Amodeo, 1996, p. 27.

Furthermore, those remaining splinters will often be stereotypic rather than 'authentic,' since the discursive category of 'immigrant literature' – as has been underlined by a large number of commentators – often produces an *othering* and *exoticizing* picture of ethnicity.<sup>20</sup> The fundamental reason for this is that 'immigrant literature' is viewed as a source of information about ethnic cultures, which are already defined as fundamentally different from the majority culture.

### Ethnicity as a cultural construct

Another fundamental problem with viewing 'immigrant literature' as a source of information about ethnic cultures is that this view runs contrary to the understanding of ethnicities as cultural constructs. And this, in turn, means that it is indicative of (or even contributes to) the dominant Swedish discourse about ethnicity – a discourse which, as has been pointed out by Aleksander Motturi, racializes non-Swedish ethnicities.

According to Motturi, the fact that racist discourses have fallen into disrespect after World War II has resulted in a desire for meaning in relation to phenomena that used to be understood in terms of racial difference. This desire has been satisfied by 'the conceptual couple of culture/ethnicity,' which, however, by reproducing 'semantic residues from abandoned scientific and political discourses' has become 'the functional equivalent of the concept of race.'<sup>21</sup>

This failure to move from the biological concept of race to the cultural concept of ethnicity is not unique to Sweden. As Walter Benn Michaels has showed in *The Trouble with Diversity*, the culturalization of race often amounts to nothing more than an empty ges-

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<sup>20</sup> Amodeo, 1996, pp. 44-46; Trotzig, 'Makten över prefixen', 2005; Behschnitt and Mohnike, 2007, p. 87; Nilsson 2006; Motturi, *Etnotism*, 2007 p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Motturi, 2007, p. 20.

ture:

Two things make the notion of culture look like an attractive alternative to race. One is that culture is learned rather than inherited (it's on the nurture side of nature/nurture); the other is that culture is a looser concept than race; not all black people have to love *The Black Album* in order for it to be a part of black culture (and some white people can love it too). The problem is that the minute we call black culture black, both these advantages disappear since in order for a sentence like 'Some white people are really into black culture' to make sense, we have to have a definition of white and black people that is completely independent of their culture. Culture cannot replace our concept of race as a biological entity. Learning how to rap doesn't make you a black person; it just makes you a rapper. The problem with culture, then, is that it's utterly dependent on race. We can only say what counts as white or black or Jewish culture if we already know who the whites and blacks and Jews are.<sup>22</sup>

This argument shows how the view of 'immigrant literature' as an expression of ethnicity runs contrary to the understanding of ethnicity as a cultural construct. If cultural practices, such as literary texts, can express or illustrate ethnicity, then ethnicity has to exist independently of (and prior to) these practices.

That this view is underpinning the discursive construction of 'immigrant literature' is indicated by the fact that the authenticity of this literature to a high extent is guaranteed by paratextual information about the author's 'immigrant background.'

#### Self-deconstructing 'immigrant literature'

Both Khemiri's *Ett öga rött* and Bakhtiari's *Kalla det vad fan du vill* meet the standard criteria defining an 'immigrant novel.' Firstly,

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<sup>22</sup> Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity*, 2006, p. 43.

both authors have foreign-sounding names, as well as ‘immigrant background’ (Khemiri’s father is from Tunisia, and Bakhtiari was born in Iran.) Secondly, both novels thematize questions about ‘immigrant identity.’ *Ett öga rött* is written in the form of a diary, kept by the teenager Halim, who tries to come to terms with his identities as an immigrant, a Muslim, and an Arab. In *Kalla det vad fan du vill* Bakhtiari tells a story about how immigrants as well as Swedes try (and fail miserably!) to make sense of a reality that they understand in terms of ethnic diversity. In addition to this, Khemiri also uses a literary style, which by most critics has been understood as a form of ‘immigrant Swedish.’<sup>23</sup>

In *Kalla det vad fan du vill* Bakhtiari repeatedly thematizes the ideas about the relationship between literature and ethnicity underpinning the discursive construction of ‘immigrant literature.’ One example of this is the description of one of the characters’ reading habits: ‘Pernilla was [...] reading books written in “broken Swedish” [...] in order to really *understand* and address herself to the situation of the poor creatures.’<sup>24</sup> Pernilla thus uses ‘immigrant literature’ as a source of information about the situation of immigrants. And the authenticity of the representation of this situation (note the formulation about how this literature makes it possible for Pernilla to ‘really *understand*’ the writers’ ‘situation’) is guaranteed stylistically, by the fact that the books are written ‘in “broken Swedish.”’

The most detailed description in *Kalla det vad fan du vill* of how aesthetic practices are understood as expressions of ethnicity doesn’t, however, concern literature, but music. In one scene Bakhtiari portrays a music teacher, who tries to get access to her pupils’ ethnic cultures by asking them to bring music ‘from home.’ ‘At the Johannes-school, the music teacher Carina had decided that there

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<sup>23</sup> Källström, “Flygande blattesvenska”, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtiari, *Kalla det vad fan du vill*, 2005, p. 168. Emphasis in original.

should be a day of culture, when pupils were to bring music from home, from “their own culture.” Stuff you couldn’t watch on the music channels.’<sup>25</sup> The pupils, however, refuse to grant Carina’s wishes. One reason for this is that they don’t view themselves as ‘coming from other cultures.’<sup>26</sup> Another is that they are not at all interested in the music that you can’t watch ‘on the music channels:’

‘Here’s the thing: When I say that it shouldn’t be music that is shown on MTV [...], I mean that it shouldn’t be modern music. Do you understand? Or, it could be modern. Dragan, for example. What do you listen to at home?’

‘That depends, you know.’

‘I understand that, but do you listen to anything from Yugoslavia, for example?’ Carina pleaded.

‘Serbia.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry, Serbia. Serbian folk music, for example [...].’

‘You can just forget that I’m gonna bring folk music. Do you know how LAME that is? My old man listens to that all the time. Makes me go crazy.’

‘I mostly listen to the kind of music that’s on MTV’, Sandra said, a bit insulted. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘No, of course there’s nothing *wrong* with that. [...]’ *Dear, sweet, colored, exotic, warm children, WOULD IT KILL YOU TO SHARE?* Carina shouted at the kids in her thoughts.<sup>27</sup>

This scene describes how Carina views ‘ethnic music’ as an expression of ethnic culture and identity. By pointing out that the pupils are more interested in contemporary popular music than in music associated with their ethnic cultures, Bakhtiari criticizes this view.

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 24.

And at the same time she highlights how the understanding of ethnic music as an expression of ethnic culture produces an othering and exoticizing picture of non-Swedish ethnicities. This theme is hinted at in Carina's description of the pupils as '*exotic*,' and further spelled out in the following passage:

She dreamt of completely different rhythms and instruments that couldn't be captured by musical notation. The dream that she would get an opportunity to listen to traditional African music, or vernacular samba, which was mostly enjoyed by the Latinos themselves and not known by her friends, or why not (if you wanted to be extra unique) Pakistani folk music – that dream was now shattered by yet another egoistic class. Carina was so interested in, and curious about, their rich rhythms. The ones that were so life-affirming, and so often marked by Oriental wisdom.<sup>28</sup>

In *Ett öga rött* the satire directed against the construction of the category of 'immigrant literature' as an expression of ethnic culture is closely linked to the novel's central theme, namely the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with his ethnic identity. For Halim it is important to have an *authentic* identity as an immigrant, a Muslim and an Arab. And since he uses his diary to construct such an identity, he often has to confront questions about what constitutes an authentic *textual* expression of an ethnic identity. Thus, the description of the young Halim's struggles constantly brings to the fore the demand for *ethnic authenticity* underpinning the discursive construction of 'immigrant literature.'

When Halim tries to come up with something to write about in his diary he first considers telling a story about 'a drug-guy who gets bad smack from the Yugoslav mafia and then gets gun for re-

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<sup>28</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 25-26.

venge.<sup>29</sup> But almost immediately he reconsiders, realizing that he doesn't know anything about drugs or guns, and decides to write about his personal experiences instead. This is justified by a reference to his literary hero, Naguib Mahfouz, whom Halim attributes an aesthetics based on extreme authenticity: 'Of course it must be as genuine as possible, and obviously Naguib Mahfouz would never write stories about other things than himself and his life.'<sup>30</sup>

A similar view of literary authenticity is voiced later in the novel, when Halim addresses the reader directly: 'Maybe you, the reader of this text, find it totally airy-fairy. What can I say? I write honest and if you rather would like to read falseness you can read other text by goof-Swede-philosopher. [...] I think it's important being real, and in the same way one must think when writing.'<sup>31</sup> These thoughts should, as has been stressed by Behschnitt and Mohnike, be read as commentaries on the construction of 'immigrant literature' as authentic reports from the author's ethnic culture.<sup>32</sup>

Halim's thoughts about the necessity of establishing an authentic relationship between aesthetic practices and ethnicity is also illustrated in an episode describing how he and his father help their friend, the unemployed actor Nourdine, to rehearse some scenes from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Halim doesn't understand why Nourdine is so excited by the prospect of getting a role in a production of this play, and argues that he should try to get a different kind of role for which he is better suited:

Even though Per was a geek, I felt Nourdine played the part with maximum feeling. At the same time it is hard to understand how Nourdine can be so happy when he has played more genuine roles earlier. One time, two years ago, he played a cab

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<sup>29</sup> Khemiri, *Ett öga rött*, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Khemiri, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Khemiri, 2003, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> Behschnitt and Mohnike, 2007, p. 79-80.

driver in short movie that was showed at film festival in Denmark. Also another time he played kebab-vendor in *Different Worlds* [a Swedish soap opera] (we have that on tape). First he stands in the background, and then he leans forward and asks the guy called Daniel: 'Sharp sauce? Salt on the fries?' Myself, I think such roles are more suitable because, after all, they are more genuine for Nourdine then playing airy-fairy Norwegian called Per.<sup>33</sup>

Here Halim demands accordance between Nourdine's ethnicity and his work. Without such accordance the work becomes inauthentic.

Halim's ideal of authenticity is constantly described ironically and parodically. His use of Mahfouz as an authentic role model is, for example, undermined by the fact that the reader – as Behschnitt and Mohnike have pointed out – is informed that Halim knows his hero only by hearsay.<sup>34</sup> Halim also sometimes admits that his text is not as genuine or authentic as he claims. These admittances have the form of direct addresses to the reader and reveal, among other things, that Halim has kept us uninformed about his masturbation habits and that he has sometimes presented things he has been fantasizing about as if they really happened.<sup>35</sup>

What more than anything undermines Halim's assurances about his text's authenticity is, however, the representation of his use of language. According to himself, language use guarantees ethnic authenticity. This argument is put forward during a fight with his father, who is abhorred by his son's use of immigrant slang. When Halim is asked by his father why he uses such language in his diary, Halim replies as follows: 'Do you want me to talk Swede-talk? At

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<sup>33</sup> Khemiri, 2003, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Behschnitt and Mohnike, 2007, p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Khemiri, 2003, pp. 80-81.

least I know who I am, and where I come from.’<sup>36</sup> Thus it is made clear that Halim views his language as a sign of his remaining true to his cultural background. But for the reader it is impossible to overlook the fact that Halim’s language use is far from authentic – that he, as has been underlined by Mohnike, actually *chooses* to write the way he does, and that he often uses a totally different language.<sup>37</sup> This is pointed out in the novel by Halim’s father: ‘Are you completely mad? Don’t you think I know that your Swedish is much better than that? Only a couple of years ago you spoke fluently.’<sup>38</sup> And several times Halim himself admits that he can switch over to standard Swedish when this serves his purposes.<sup>39</sup>

Despite this very explicit thematizing of Halim’s use of different language codes, many critics have – as Källström has shown – interpreted Khemiri’s style along the lines of Halim’s understanding of the style he uses in his diary, namely as an authentic expression of the writer’s ‘immigrant identity.’<sup>40</sup> Thus, Khemiri’s satiric description of Halim’s understanding of his language use as a guarantee for ethnic authenticity can at the same time be read as a satiric description of the ideas about textual ethnic authenticity produced by the discursive construction of the phenomenon ‘immigrant literature.’

Another indication of Khemiri’s ambition to enter into critical dialogue with the discursive construction of ‘immigrant literature’ is the fact that *Ett öga rött* actually contains an attempt to counter (in advance!) the interpretation of the novel as an autobiographical text which expresses the author’s ‘cultural belonging.’ This is done by way of the inclusion in the narrative of a character by the name of

<sup>36</sup> Khemiri, 2003, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> Mohnike, 2007, p. 250.

<sup>38</sup> Khemiri, 2003, p. 215.

<sup>39</sup> Khemiri, 2003, pp. 165, 229, and 235.

<sup>40</sup> Källström, 2006, p. 154.

Khemiri. This has by one critic been interpreted as an attempt to signal the agreement between protagonist and writer.<sup>41</sup> But the appearance in the novel of a character by the same name as the author does first and foremost signal a *non-identity* between the protagonist and his creator, and should thus be understood as an aspect of Khemiri's attempt to distance himself from the interpretation of his novel as an example of 'immigrant literature.'

### The re-culturalization of ethnicity

Bakhtiari and Khemiri both deconstruct the discursive construction of 'immigrant literature'. And Bakhtiari also presents an alternative to the idea about ethnicity underpinning this construction (the idea that ethnicity is something that exists outside of and prior to cultural practices) by representing ethnicity as a culturally constituted phenomenon.

In the description of the music teacher Carina's view of ethnic music as an expression of ethnic culture, Bakhtiari explicitly points out that this view is based on ideas about biology, rather than culture, by letting the narrator make the following comment: 'It was as if she believed that the kids were walking around with their "cultures" in their blood.'<sup>42</sup> As an alternative to this racializing construction of non-Swedish ethnicities, Bakhtiari puts forward a series of descriptions of how ethnicity is constructed in cultural practices such as literature, film, and journalism.

One such description is found in a comment about the role of 'authors' on what in the novel is called 'the immigrant market.' 'On the immigrant market,' the narrator states in connection to a scene describing how a journalist tries to make an unemployed immigrant conform to his stereotypical understanding of the ethnic other, 'there was no unemployment, and journalists, experts, politicians,

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<sup>41</sup> Strömberg, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 25.

know-it-alls, haters, defenders, analysts, executers, AUTHORS, secretaries, and assistants at various departments were all busy making a living.’<sup>43</sup> That the word ‘AUTHORS’ is capitalized indicates that this profession is attributed a special status in the production of ‘knowledge’ about non-Swedish ethnic identities.

Another example of how Bakhtiari represents ethnicity as a cultural construct can be found in a scene describing how Bahar’s father tries to convince her teacher, Max, to devote more time to teaching the glorious Persian history, so that his daughter doesn’t get confused by the films she watches and the music she listens to. In particular, Bahar’s father is worried about the fact that his children are so interested in black culture:

Listen to me, Mister Max. My children, they watch movies. They often watch black people. They listen to hip-hop, that they call music. Blacks again. But you know as well as I that that isn’t music. Music is culture as well. We have lots of beautiful traditional music from Iran. It’s been part of our culture for many, many years. Then they have Malcolm X’s picture in their rooms. But we aren’t black. Do you understand, Mister Max? Cassius Clay was a great boxer. Indeed. But we are *Aryans*, we have our own Gholam Reza Takhti, actually. You know, Persian is Indo-Iranian. The same roots as Indo-European languages. Indeed. We are *not* black.<sup>44</sup>

Even if Bahar’s father is ridiculed in this scene, his highlighting of the role played by artistic representations for ethnic identities constitutes a counterpoint to Carina’s construction of non-Swedish ethnicities which helps the reader discover the racializing aspects of her view. And the same thing can be said about the description of Bahar’s mother’s attempts to become Swedish by studying Swedish

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<sup>43</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 159.

<sup>44</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, pp. 151-152.

music:

Panthea's interest in Swedish music would suddenly grow excessively when a colleague happened to mention something about an orchestra that she liked. And then it could become essential to memorize *the entire* Swedish national anthem, with Bahar and Shervin as backing vocalists to help her learn the correct pronunciation.<sup>45</sup>

Yet another example of how Bakhtiari highlights the role played by cultural texts for the construction of ethnicity is given in a description of how Bahar's boyfriend Markus's view of his girlfriend's family emanates from representations of people with non-Swedish ethnicities in newspapers and on TV:

Markus hadn't experienced this himself, but several of his friends had, as an expression of sympathy and brotherhood, shared with him their experiences from different TV-programs, so now he knew. And he had seen with his own eyes in movies and on TV how much the fathers wanted that the daughters married their cousins. And Markus had read in the papers what could happen to the girls who refused.<sup>46</sup>

The role of mass media in the construction of ethnic identities is also highlighted in a scene describing a journalist interviewing an unemployed immigrant on the radio:

A real immigrant would now be given the opportunity to talk about her situation. The reporter did however consider it wise to describe her situation first. [...]

He explained how many different courses and internships Mirza's mother had gone through without them leading to anything. Then he turned, with his eyes filled with compassion and

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<sup>45</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 96.

<sup>46</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 63.

his voice filled with futurelessness, toward Mirza's mother:

'What are your dreams?'

'I have only nightmares,' she replied and tried to live up to the journalist's theatrical expectations.<sup>47</sup>

The journalist's intention is clearly to present an unmediated description of what it is like being an immigrant in Sweden. But what Bakhtiari points out in this scene is that it is in fact the journalist who produces the representation of the interviewed immigrant's experience, since his framing of her story makes the interviewee 'live up to' his 'expectations.'

#### Concluding remarks

The understanding of Swedish 'immigrant literature' as an expression or illustration of ethnicity is, for several reasons, deeply problematic. For the representation of ethnic experiences and identities in 'immigrant literature' is a product of the discursive construction of this kind of literature, rather than by the authors' ethnic cultures. And this construction generates extremely narrow, and often othering and exoticizing, representations of non-Swedish ethnicities, since it is conditioned by the emerging self-image of Sweden as a multicultural society – a self-image underpinned by a rigid opposition between Swedish and immigrant culture. Furthermore, the view of 'immigrant literature' as a literature expressing ethnic experiences runs counter to an understanding of ethnicity as a cultural construct, since it presupposes that ethnicities exist outside of, and prior to, cultural representations. Thereby this view is indicative of (or, even, contributing to) the dominating Swedish discourse about ethnicity – a discourse which racializes non-Swedish ethnicities.

In addition to this, the view of 'immigrant literature' as a literature expressing ethnicity is at odds with the representation of the

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<sup>47</sup> Bakhtiari, 2005, p. 160.

relationship between cultural texts and ethnicity put forward in at least some 'immigrant novels'. As I have showed in my analysis of Khemiri's *Ett öga rött* and Bakhtiari's *Kalla det vad fan du vill*, these works criticize both the construction of 'immigrant literature' as a source of information about non-Swedish ethnicities and the understanding of ethnicity as a pre-cultural category underpinning this view.

By deconstructing the idea that literature and other cultural practices can express ethnic experiences, and by arguing that these practices should rather be viewed as constitutive of such experiences, Bakhtiari and Khemiri not only criticize the dominant view of 'immigrant literature'. They also point out how the study of this literature – as well as literary criticism in general – could contribute to the understanding of ethnicity, namely by critically investigating how this phenomenon is constructed in literary texts.

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