

Jonas Hassen Khemiri and the Swedish Novel: Autofiction, Intertextuality, and Postmigrant

Melancholy

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Abstract

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This dissertation interrogates questions of belonging and identity in Swedish author Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels in relation to autofiction, intertextuality, and postmigrant melancholy. The dissertation situates the novels in postcolonial and cultural studies, and theories of affect and melancholy, and investigates how the representation of transcultural identities in contemporary postmigrant literature relates to the current discourse on Swedishness as whiteness. By using the term postmigrant literature, the dissertation shifts the discussion away from racialized categories of authorship to argue for the salience of other categories of analysis, such as genre, gender, and transnationalism. The dissertation offers an innovative approach to Khemiri's authorship by arguing that his novels employ a multitude of narrative strategies, which convey a resistance to immigrant tropes and racialized readings. I argue that these strategies destabilize Khemiri's position as a postmigrant writer and place his work in conversation with the Swedish literary canon.

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Det är ju en roman, säger han. Och i en roman får man hitta på saker.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Systrarna*

It's a novel, he says. And in a novel, you can make things up.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *The Sisters*

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

In this dissertation, I focus primarily on four of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels; his debut novel *Ett Öga Rött* (2003; *An Eye Red*), the novel *Montecore: en unik tiger* (2006; *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, 2011), the novel *Pappaklausulen* (2018; *The Family Clause*, 2020), and his latest novel to date, *Systrarna* (2023; *The Sisters*, 2025).

The dissertation consists of five chapters: In the introductory chapter, I contextualize the dissertation in the current Scandinavian and European discourse regarding migration and issues of race and ethnicity, and I discuss how the discourse has evolved over time. This contextualization conveys the urgency, novelty and importance of the study. Following that, I describe the theoretical background and methodology which informs my approach. Thus, the introduction provides three elements: First, it introduces the urgency of the project and how it relates to the contemporary public and academic discourse in Sweden regarding migration, race and identity. Secondly, the introduction provides an overview of the theoretical concepts organizing the study and contextualizes the project in a framework of postcolonial and cultural studies. Further, the introduction defines the scope of the study and explains how the dissertation provides a unique and innovative perspective on Jonas Hassen Khemiri's authorship. Lastly, the introduction defines the methodology of close reading and describes the literary analysis that includes the investigation of narrative voice, tone, imagery; characterization, gaps and omissions; blurring of genre boundaries; and the representation of identity regarding race, class and gender.

Chapter 2. *The Melancholic Family: Khemiri and the Postmigrant Novel* investigates the representation and the construction of transcultural identities in Khemiri's novels and explores

how the concept of the post-ethnic turn relates to Khemiri's work and its place in the contemporary Scandinavian literary landscape. The chapter engages in conversation with works by Swedish writer Marjaneh Bakhtiari and Danish poet Yahya Hassan and explores the concept of the melancholic migrant as defined by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Ahmed critiques notions of happiness ideals and examines how these ideals relate to issues of migration, belonging, and the family. Ahmed's concept of the melancholic migrant informs my discussion of identity formation in the portrayal of postmigrant families in Khemiri's novels. Subsequently, the dissertation explores how the trope of the family functions as a site for the inheritance of melancholic displacement and intergenerational disappointment in relation to Ahmed's theories.

Chapter 3. Writing Life: Autofictionalization in Khemiri's Novels discusses Khemiri's novels in relation to Claus Elholm Andersen's study of Karl-Ove Knausgård's work in his book *Knausgård and the Autofictional Novel* (2023). In this chapter, I apply Andersen's concept of autofictionalization to my analysis of Khemiri's novels and I discuss how the texts employ performative biographism as defined by Jon Helt Haarder in *Performative biografisme: En hovedstrømning i det senmodernes skandinaviske litteratur* (2014). In addition, this chapter explores how the texts relate to contemporary literature in an era of post-truth as described by Marjorie Worthington in *The Story of "Me"* (2018).

Chapter 4. Writing into the Canon: Khemiri and The Swedish Novel examines the strategy of intertextuality in Khemiri's novels in relation to novels by Swedish authors August Strindberg, Hjalmar Söderberg, and Selma Lagerlöf. In this chapter, I explore themes such as the flâneur, the supernatural, and the haunting, and I position Khemiri's authorship in the context of Swedish literary history. In addition, I conduct a comparative analysis between Jonas Hassen

Khemiri's novels and August Strindberg's novel *Röda rummet* (1879; *The Red Room*, 1913), Hjalmar Söderberg's novels *Förvillelser* (1895; *Diversions*, 2014), and *Doktor Glas* (1905; *Doctor Glas*, 1963), and Selma Lagerlöf's novel *Kejsarn av Portugallien* (1914; *The Emperor of Portugallia*, 2021). Chapter 5. Conclusion. In the conclusion, I return to the research questions in my introduction and discuss how my analysis of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels relates to the contemporary academic and public discourse and the understanding of postmigrant identity and Swedishness as whiteness.

As stated, this dissertation investigates the representation of postmigrant, transcultural identities in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels and examines how his work relates to the contemporary discourse on migration and the understanding of Swedishness as whiteness. By exploring Khemiri's work from a postcolonial perspective, the dissertation investigates to what extent Khemiri's novels convey a strategy to move away from racialized readings to align with European modernist and postmodernist literary traditions. Furthermore, the dissertation argues that the trajectory of Khemiri's work conveys how the texts engage the Swedish literary canon and escape biographical and racialized readings. Previous research on Khemiri's work has focused primarily on the author as a spokesperson for a new (read: other) perspective in the contemporary Swedish literary landscape and on the reception of his work in the media. Consequently, previous scholarship on Khemiri's work has largely examined topics like ethnolects and hybridity in relation to Khemiri's perceived position as a representative for a new generation of so-called immigrant writers and his role as a public figure in Sweden.

This dissertation offers an innovative approach to Khemiri's authorship by arguing that his novels employ a multitude of narrative strategies, such as the blending of boundaries, autofictionalization, and intertextuality, which in combination display a strategy of resistance to

immigrant tropes and racialized readings. Furthermore, the dissertation provides a unique, intersectional analysis of Khemiri's authorship by exploring his work in conversation with contemporary scholarship on affect theory, intertextuality, and autofiction. In the dissertation, I engage with the following questions: In what ways do Khemiri's novels employ strategies such as blending languages and genre boundaries, autofictionalization, creative creolization, and intertextuality to challenge and navigate racialized otherness? How do Khemiri's novels relate to the contemporary Scandinavian discourse on postmigrant literature? How do Khemiri's novels engage with literary tropes such as the flâneur, the family, and the supernatural, and how does Khemiri's utilization of these strategies relate to works by Swedish canonical writers like August Strindberg, Hjalmar Söderberg, and Selma Lagerlöf? How do Khemiri's novels challenge and engage with notions of identity, genre, and authorship in ways that convey an attempt to avoid racialized and biographical readings and align with modernist and postmodernist traditions? In what ways do Khemiri's novels employ strategies that place them in dialogue with the Swedish literary canon?

1.2 Aim & Scope

In this dissertation, I focus primarily on four of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels; his debut novel *Ett Öga Rött* (2003), the novel *Montecore: en unik tiger* (2006; *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, 2011), the novel *Pappaklausulen* (2018; *The Family Clause*, 2020), and his most recent novel, *Systrarna* (2023; *The Sisters*, 2025). In addition, I briefly discuss Khemiri's essay/letter "Öppet brev till Beatrice Ask" (2013; "An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask", 2013; "Sweden's Closet Racists", 2013) because a substantial amount of scholarship has focused on the

international phenomenon of the letter and on Khemiri's role as a public figure in the contemporary discourse in Sweden and abroad.

For the purpose of limiting the scope of this study, I have chosen not to include Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novel *Allt jag inte minns* (2015; *Everything I Don't Remember*, 2016), nor the novel/play *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012; *I call my brothers*, 2012). The novel/play *Jag ringer mina bröder* is a short novel which was adapted into a play and performed in Stockholm and in New York City in 2013. My premise for my selection of texts for this dissertation is primarily that the four novels in my study provide an overview of the trajectory of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's authorship from the debut novel *Ett Öga Rött* (2003) to the most recent novel *Systrarna* (2023). The novel *Allt jag inte minns* (2015) is different in terms of genre and style from most of Khemiri's work since it is a thriller/mystery-novel.

The dissertation investigates a span of twenty years in Khemiri's authorship, which provides a wide-ranging yet appropriately limited scope for the study. Jonas Hassen Khemiri, who was born in 1978, is currently in the middle of an active and productive career as an author and as a playwright. Khemiri has written six novels. (I include *Jag ringer mina bröder* among the number of novels, although it is most often referred to as a play, since it is listed under both genres on Khemiri's webpage.) In addition, Khemiri has written seven plays and multiple essays, short stories, and articles, and he has won a multitude of awards. His work has been translated into more than thirtyfive languages. The novels that I investigate in this dissertation are similar in the sense that they all engage with and navigate themes of family, relationships, and coming of age, while simultaneously challenging notions of postmigrant identity in contemporary Swedish society. Thus, the novels in my study offer opportunities to explore Khemiri's evolution as a writer, particularly with regard to the themes and topics of interest for this dissertation. In addition,

I argue that the four novels in my study are connected as if they are tied together by an invisible string. Although the novels stand alone, they explore different eras of one main, male character's life, which can be interpreted as versions of the author persona. Thus, the texts navigate similar topics and issues but from multiple perspectives. However, although it is outside the scope of this dissertation, it would be an interesting avenue for future research to perform a comparative analysis of Khemiri's novels in relation to his plays and his short stories.

1.3 Theoretical Approach

The investigation of identity and how the construction of identities manifest in contemporary postmigrant literature requires an awareness of the transcultural European landscape to situate Sweden's current and historical discourse in a broader context. To this end, I propose the following inquiry: How do systemic racial discrimination and European colonialism relate to the observance of universal human rights in Sweden and the representation of belonging and identity in postmigrant literature? To answer this question, I will define a few theoretical concepts of importance to this study.

We are currently living in an era of post-globalization, which indicates a shift toward increasingly multicultural nation images and diversity regarding how identities are constructed in contemporary European societies. In *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011), German scholar Fatima El-Tayeb discusses how the prevalence of European colorblindness has prohibited discourses around racialized oppression due to an internalist narrative stemming from the continent's colonial history. Swedish scholar Michael McEachrane claims in *Afro-Nordic Landscapes: Equality and Race in Northern Europe* (2014), that Sweden may be put forth as a special case in this regard, as the country has

benefitted from European colonialism and contributed to the subjugation of people of color and indigenous people, and the perpetuation of white superiority. McEachrane states: “There is an argument to be made that there is a continuing colonial legacy in Europe which is expressed both externally in relation to poor and so-called developing countries—and internally in relation to people of color” (McEachrane 2014, 3). Yet, until recently, Sweden has positioned itself as without any colonial history. McEachrane argues that after World War II, Sweden has not recognized racism as a social problem; in fact, since 2009, Sweden has banished the term race from its antidiscrimination law. McEachrane states that Sweden has made itself known as a prominent defender of universal human rights. They have actively supported struggles against colonialism and apartheid, been an outspoken critic of racism and imperialism, and generous toward refugees. However, McEachrane argues that: “On the whole, the Nordic countries too share a legacy of making white Europeans the picture of virtue, civilization, history, beauty, human dignity, rights and the identity of the nation” (McEachrane 2014, 2). Subsequently, the legacy of colonialism affects even the Nordic societies. In this dissertation, I position my analysis of Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s novels in this European context.

This analysis of the historical and current situation in Sweden is confirmed by an article about the changes in Sweden’s immigration policies which was published by the *U.S. News & World Report* on December 30, 2022, titled: “Sweden, Once Welcoming to Immigrants, Changes Course” (2022). The article describes the changes in Sweden’s immigration policies following the national election in September 2022. In October 2022, the new conservative Swedish government announced an agreement that included proposals aimed at decreasing the number of immigrants to Sweden; a dramatic shift for a country long-

known to be welcoming to immigrants. The article describes this as a paradigm shift taking place in Sweden.

The article quotes the new Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson from the conservative Moderate Party, who addressed the country's legislative body, Riksdagen, on October 18, 2022: "Immigration to Sweden has been unsustainable. This government's message is that this cannot continue" (2022). Furthermore, Erik Engstrand, the press secretary for the government's migration minister, announced a new proposal with the specific task of adapting Swedish asylum legislation to a minimum level, suggesting a quota of only 900 total refugees per year, after allowing at least 5,000 each year since 2018. In addition, the proposal included restrictions in the requirements for labor migrants and family reunifications.

Swedish political analysts argue that this push began when the Sweden Democrats, a far-right political party, gained power in the country's September 2022 parliamentary elections and as a result, gathered more political influence over Sweden's migration policy. Furthermore, the article suggests that the shift in the public discourse regarding immigration can be traced back to the 2015 refugee crisis in Syria. According to the Brookings Institution, a public policy organization in Washington D.C., Sweden took in more refugees per capita than any other European Union country. During 2015, the year of the so-called refugee crisis, nearly 163,000 people were seeking asylum in Sweden. Following these events, the country's public discourse with regard to immigration changed drastically. According to Annika Lindberg, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Gothenburg's School of Global Studies, who is quoted in the article, there has been a "merging of migration and crime in the public discourse even though there is no research showing that there exists such a causal relationship" (2022). She states that former Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson of the

center-left Social Democrats, said in August 2022, that the country's failure to integrate immigrants has led to parallel societies and gang violence.

Correspondingly, Swedish scholars Tobias Hübinette and Paula Mählcck argue that in the wake of World War II, Sweden has developed into a colorblind, anti-racist society. In “The Racial Grammar of Swedish Higher Education and Research Policy: The Limits and Conditions of Researching Race in a Colour-Blind Context”, they state that “in the 1960s and 1970s, Sweden pioneered and more or less formulated what is today considered anti-racism not just in Sweden but in many other European countries, namely colour-blindness and a practical understanding that race has been relegated to the past or to other countries. This has resulted in the belief that a sort of non-racial utopia has been accomplished for good” (Hübinette & Mählcck 2015, 11). Subsequently, Hübinette and Mählcck claim that the public and academic discourse on immigration in Sweden since World War II has framed multiculturalism as a problem which implies a nostalgia for Swedishness as whiteness.

This cultural and national narrative was challenged in the early 1990s by Swedish journalist and author Maria-Pia Boëthius in *Heder och Samvete* (1991). Boëthius introduced a moral questioning of the postwar narrative of “small-state realism” which dominated the Swedish public discourse. Since then, there has been an ongoing discussion regarding the historiography of Sweden's position during the war. In “Sweden's Ambiguous War: Contradiction and Controversy” (In *Nordic War Stories: World War II as History, Fiction, Media, and Memory*, edited by Marianne Stecher-Hansen. 2021, 81—95), historian John Gilmour describes Swedish politicians after 1945 as “rather smug about their wartime accomplishments” (Gilmour 2021, 93). Gilmour states that Sweden's strategy of small-state realism was a tactic by Sweden's social democratic prime minister Per Albin Hansson to keep

Sweden out of war by using a “negotiated neutrality”, meaning an official Policy of Concessions that accommodated German demands. According to Gilmour, this strategy was deemed a success by postwar politicians in Sweden. Gilmour states: “This was seen as a triumph of skillful Swedish diplomacy and a refusal to buckle under Nazi pressure, but rather undervalued the fact that the Allied armies took the pain while trade with Germany, albeit necessary, contributed in some way to German war effort” (Gilmour 2021, 93). Gilmour argues that the failure to deal with ethical issues regarding Sweden’s neutrality policies has led to controversies which persist in today’s discourse. He describes the national consciousness of the 1990s as a time of reckoning like a “hangover similar to survivor’s guilt” (Gilmour 2021, 93).

Similarly, Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström discuss the current sociopolitical climate in Sweden in *Vit Melankoli: En analys av en nation i kris* (2020; White melancholia: An analysis of a nation in crisis). They describe how Sweden has evolved from a homogeneous country to a colorblind postwar society and they argue that Sweden is suffering from what they describe as “vit melankoli” [white melancholia]. They define the condition of white melancholia as the affliction of a nation which is suffering from the loss of identification with being a “good nation”, which derives from an understanding based on a connection between whiteness and solidarity. According to Hübinette and Lundström, there is now a sense of loss of the old (white) Sweden as the country is facing a new reality and needs to recreate its national identity as a more diverse nation. Thus, Hübinette and Lundström state that Sweden as a nation suffers from the loss of self-identification with an inherent identity of goodness, which is rooted in a historical relationship between whiteness and solidarity.

In addition, looking at Sweden through the lens of whiteness theory (a discourse based on critical race theory that argues that whiteness is a constructed concept and the centric standard to which racial minorities are compared), Hübinette and Lundström argue that an analysis of race requires an intersectional approach that incorporates an awareness of issues of class and gender. In *Vit Melankoli: En analys av en nation i kris*, they end their analysis with a call for action for the future of Sweden: “Our hope for the future is that there will be a new transition period which dissolves the current regressive and destructive situation that defines this time of white melancholia, a condition which may most accurately be described as a white psychosis” (Hübinette & Lundström 2020, 94). In this dissertation, I build on the work by Hübinette and Lundström. By providing opportunities for new ways of understanding racialized identities, my study contributes to the scholarship of whiteness, race, and gender studies in Sweden and beyond. In addition, I apply the notion of the good nation to my analysis of Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s novels in relation to cultural scholar Sara Ahmed’s discussion of the concept of “the good family” in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010).

Closely related to the concept of white melancholia, is the notion of “white innocence.” Dutch scholar Gloria Wekker describes the concept in *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016). In her work, she primarily situates whiteness in the context of the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands has a different colonial history than Sweden, I argue that Wekker’s description of white innocence applies to Swedish society as well. Wekker defines white innocence as follows: “It encapsulates a dominant way in which the Dutch think of themselves, as being a small, but just, ethical nation; color-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding light to other folks and nations” (Wekker 2016, 2). In the Swedish context, this informs the public

discourse of not seeing and not speaking of race, which illustrates the notion of Nordic exceptionalism. The concept of Nordic Exceptionalism is discussed by Nordic scholars Kristin Lóftsdóttir and Lars Jensen in relation to colonial history in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic region: Exceptionalism, Migrant others and National Identities* (2016). Lóftsdóttir and Jensen define Nordic exceptionalism as the self-perception of the Nordic countries as being global good citizens, peaceloving, and rational. Their study of Nordic Exceptionalism places the Nordic countries in the context of globalization and the large-scale migration movements in Europe since World War II. In addition, Lóftsdóttir and Jensen emphasize the importance of the intersection between cultural identity, race, gender, and class which informs my approach to Jonas Hassen Khemiri's work in this study.

Consequently, this dissertation investigates how these changes in the public and political discourse manifest in contemporary postmigrant texts like Khemiri's novels. Building on scholarship of whiteness and Nordic exceptionalism, the dissertation connects the current discourse on Swedishness and the reassessment of Sweden's national image with the representation of postmigrant identities in contemporary Scandinavian literature. By doing so, the dissertation positions Jonas Hassen Khemiri's authorship in a broader framework. In addition, my analysis is rooted in the understanding of the importance of employing an intersectional perspective in the analysis of society, art, culture, and literature. American civil rights advocate and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw defines intersectionality as a lens through which you can see where power structures collide and intersect when studying the relations between different aspects of identities (1989). This understanding of intersectionality informs my approach to Khemiri's novels, and my investigation of how the texts portray the construction of transcultural identities which entail a multitude of positions.

In parallel, Swedish literary scholar Magnus Nilsson argues in “Swedish ‘Immigrant Literature’ and the Ethnic Lens: The Representation of Cultural Diversity in Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s *Ett öga rött* and Marjaneh Bakhtiari’s *Kalla det vad fan du vill*” (2012) for a critical reading of identities in contemporary literature. He advocates for an alternative view on ethnicity which includes non-pervasive categories which opens the possibility of less homogeneous cultural identities. This position informs my analysis of Khemiri’s novels, and supports my aim to position Khemiri’s authorship in relation to both contemporary Scandinavian literature and Swedish literary history. Subsequently, I investigate how Khemiri’s novels challenge dichotomies and employ strategies which explore possibilities to reassess and reconstruct the representation of transcultural identities.

As previously mentioned, by using the term postmigrant literature, the dissertation shifts the discussion away from racialized categories of authorship to argue for the salience of other categories of analysis, for instance genre, gender, and transnationalism. To this end, I situate the term postmigrant in the context described by cultural scholars Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm. In “(Post-)Migration in the age of Globalisation: New Challenges to Imagination and Representation” (2017), Petersen and Schramm argue that the intensified migration of today’s world presents new challenges to our imagination and modes of representation. They state that using the term postmigration directs attention away from migrants and people with a migration background toward society at large. Petersen and Schramm describe their understanding of postmigration as a condition which affects us all today, and they emphasize that migration does not only concern individuals with a migrant background, but society at large: “Migration is no longer an exception but an integral part of everyday life, which has influenced—and will continue to influence—most societies around the globe” (Petersen & Schramm 2017, 6).

Regarding early scholarship in the field of migration literature, postcolonial scholar Sten Pultz Moslund argues in *Migration Literature and Hybridity* (2010), that previous research has prioritized “celebratory readings of migration literature and transcultural hybridity discourses” (Moslund 2010, 6). Therefore, Moslund suggests that European social and cultural studies need to undergo a so-called “migratization”, which indicates that migration is the norm, not the exception. Moslund states that postmigrant readings should entail an understanding of society as fundamentally and historically shaped by migration. Consequently, Moslund argues for a critical re-engagement with the concept of hybridity, and he proposes a “critical hybridity” that entails not rejecting hybridity but finding new ways to read hybridity in transcultural novels by moving away from value-laden conceptualizations.

Subsequently, this dissertation engages critically with concepts like hybridity and attempts a more complex, contemporary investigation of identities in a postmigrant society in accordance with Moslund’s proposition. In addition, by exploring the representation of identities from an intersectional perspective, the dissertation answers Moslund’s call for a critical position that transcends binarism. Similarly, cultural scholar Stuart Hall argues in his essay “Europe’s Other Self” (1991): “Identity is always an open, complex and unfinished game—always ‘under construction’ (in Europe as much as in the Middle East, Africa, or the Caribbean). It always moves into the future by a symbolic detour through the past. It produces new subjects. But they always bear the indelible traces of those specific histories, traditions and cultures through which identities form themselves—produce themselves anew” (Hall 1991, 2).

Hall claims that the investigation of identity formation and how it manifests in postmigrant literature must entail an awareness of the contemporary, transcultural European landscape: “Face to face with the contradictory realities of 'globalisation', *everybody* is discovering their ethnicity: not the purity of their origins, which in a migrating world is impossible to discover, but simply the fact that they come from particular places, speak particular languages, inhabit distinctive cultural traditions, belong to particular landscapes” (Hall 1991, 3). Thus, building on Hall’s assertion that the construction of contemporary European identity entails moving away from historical amnesia and postmodern nostalgia, my investigation of Khemiri’s novels aims to make room for new voices in the archive of postmigrant stories and to situate the texts in the contemporary field of cultural and literary studies.

German scholar Fatima El-Tayeb builds on Hall’s theories, and she argues that ethnicization has been used to differentiate between insiders and outsiders. El-Tayeb states that, “race is both at the center of postwar European identity and doubly invisible” (2011, 6). In her discussion of European identity construction, El-Tayeb proposes a method of creative creolization to examine racialized minorities, strategies of resistance, and what it means to think “European.” Building on El-Tayeb’s theories, this dissertation situates Khemiri’s work in a European context and argues that his novels display creative creolization in the use of narrative voice and the blurring of boundaries regarding language, genre, and intertextuality.

Subsequently, the dissertation explores Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s novels in a theoretical framework defined by postcolonial scholars like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha, and cultural and literary scholars such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Fatima El-Tayeb, Sara Ahmed, Sten Pultz Moslund, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Tobias Hübinette, Catrin Lundström, Michael McEachrane, Anne Ring Petersen, and Moritz Schramm, among others.

1.4. Method & Claim

We are currently living in an era of post-globalization and there has been a shift towards increasingly multicultural and nation images and diversity in terms of how identities are constructed in contemporary European societies. Despite the prefix “post”, the term “postmigration” does not imply that migration is over. In contrast to terms like “postcolonial”, the concept of postmigration does not necessarily describe temporality or a destination. Although it is debatable whether the age of colonialism is over, the common understanding of the term postcolonial is that we are currently living in an era where we are facing the consequences of colonialism; thus, it is implied that we live in a time *after* colonization.

As mentioned earlier, Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm argue that the term postmigration describes a cultural condition rather than a temporal, political, geographical or racial situation. They argue that “as a societal process, migration does not end, nor can it or should it be overcome once and for all, it remains important to search backwards in history to trace the early developments of cultural expression” (Petersen & Schramm 2017, 4). The term postmigration was coined by artists and intellectuals in Berlin, to gain acceptance and avoid marginalization based on cultural and national background. The artists considered the term useful to escape being racialized and objectified in the political discourse and to promote an understanding of the plurality of contemporary society (Petersen & Schramm 2017, 5). Petersen and Schramm claim that the fact that the term postmigration is critiqued and debated in academia today makes it even more useful, since “it is more important for the critical work what it can do as a strategic term than as a descriptor for a specific, clearly delimited phenomenon or idea” (Petersen & Schramm 2017, 6).

Although the term postmigrant is used to describe second and third generation of migrants, it is also used to describe society at large and to acknowledge that migration is a never-ending, ongoing process in today's world. This broadens the term postmigration in the cultural and social discourse to not only refer to individuals with a particular ethnic, racial or national background. Similarly, cultural scholar Paul Gilroy argues in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) for a more expansive understanding of multiculturalism in a post-imperial, melancholic society. Gilroy describes the national condition of melancholia in the aftermath of Britain's colonial rule which manifests in the nation's difficulties in dealing with issues of race and immigration: "The imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries" (Gilroy 2005, 2). Thus, although we live in a postcolonial world, we use the language and the methodology that we inherited from the past, which according to Gilroy, shapes our discourse today. Gilroy discusses how attempts by scholars and critics to make room for new voices in the contemporary field of literature have focused on biographical readings which perpetuate marginalization rather than increase the understanding of migration as part of society.

In addition, Gilroy addresses the refusal to speak about race or racism in contemporary postcolonial European societies. Gilroy describes postcolonial melancholia as "a refusal to think about racism as something that structures the life of the postimperial polity is associated with what has become a morbid fixation with the fluctuating substance of national culture and identity" (Gilroy 2005, 12). Thus, Gilroy problematizes the refusal to deal with racism and he states: "Advocacy of the idea that there is a political or ethical obligation to deal with racism and its consequences has been dismissed as an endorsement of victimology, as special pleading, or as an implicit rejection of universal and liberal standards of justice and governance" (Gilroy 2005, 13). Consequently, the refusal to deal with racism has been hidden in plain sight, based on the

misconstrued notion that the person who brings up the issue of racism is causing more pain. This relates to Sara Ahmed's discussion of the melancholic migrant who causes disruption and brings forth negativity by refusing to let go of pain and dredges up the hurtful past (read: colonialism). In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) Ahmed defines happy immigrants as those who willingly assimilate, whereas the immigrant who remains attached to their origins functions as a ghost, haunting Western cultures by bringing up pain. Furthermore, Gilroy argues: "We need to know what sort of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile" (Gilroy 2005, 3)

Similarly, Sten Pultz Moslund argues in "Postmigrant Revisions of Hybridity, Belonging, and Race in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*" (2019) that the concept of postmigration opens the possibility to move beyond reading contemporary transcultural literature with a focus on dichotomies, and helps us keep in mind that European societies today are racially and culturally diverse. Furthermore, Moslund argues that in the field of postcolonial studies, the term postmigration is now being reconceptualized as a point of departure rather than as an object of study. He states that using the term postmigration indicates breaking away from the migrant/non-migrant binary, and he argues that cultural and racial heterogeneity are now "ordinary features of everyday life, that affect all citizens, regardless of background" (Moslund 2019, 1).

Thus, Moslund suggests that migration is the norm, not an exception, and that a postmigrant reading of literature entails an understanding of society as fundamentally and historically shaped by migration. Therefore, my investigation of Khemiri's novels builds on my understanding of the term postmigration according to Moslund's theories as the

foundation for how to approach contemporary, transcultural literature. This position provides opportunities to examine narrative strategies and characters in the texts as non-fixed and unstable. I argue that the investigation of identities, and how they manifest in contemporary postmigrant literature, must entail an awareness of a transcultural, postcolonial European landscape where identities are constantly merging and changing. Thus, the theoretical framework for this dissertation connects the representation of postmigrant identities in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels with the contemporary Swedish and European public and academic discourse. In my analysis, I examine how the displacement of previous generations manifests as anxiety and emotional resistance in the texts, displayed through notions of happiness ideals as described by Sara Ahmed.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed critiques notions of happiness ideals and examines how these ideals relate to issues of migration, belonging, and the trope of the family. She describes happy immigrants as those who willingly assimilate, whereas the immigrants who remain attached to their origins act as affect aliens who refuse to accept the nation as the good family into whose arms they must willingly go. In my discussion of Khemiri's novels, I explore how the family is portrayed as a site for melancholic displacement and intergenerational disappointment. I argue that the novels can be read as narratives of rage, and that the texts belong in an archive of "unhappy families," a concept described by Ahmed as "families from the point of view of those who are alienated from its promise" (Ahmed 2010, 49). Further, Ahmed argues that the imperial archive is an archive of unhappiness, and that the immigrant's unhappiness is viewed by the dominant culture as a failure to integrate, as if they lack the necessary qualities for happiness. She states: "The happiness of imperial culture is guaranteed as a happiness formula: in making happiness our end, we can impose our end" (Ahmed 2010, 125). In her discussion,

Ahmed defines the melancholic migrant as a character who will not let go of what has been lost and refuses to participate in the country's narrative of the happy family and the good nation, where the formula of happiness has been used to tie migrants to a national ideal; to what has already been established by the dominant culture as good. In my analysis, I apply Ahmed's theories to my reading of Khemiri's novels, and I discuss how Ahmed's concept of the promise of happiness manifest in the texts and how the representation of postmigrant melancholy evolves throughout Khemiri's authorship.

Subsequently, this dissertation engages with the concepts of melancholia and the melancholic migrant in accordance with Ahmed's theories. However, the concept of melancholia is often discussed in reference to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917). In his essay, Freud describes melancholia as the process of grieving for something that has been lost to be able to let go of the object. Freud claims that "mourning impels the ego to renounce the object by declaring its death and offers the ego the reward of staying alive" (Freud 1917, 217). Similarly, according to Ahmed, the difference between mourning and melancholia lies in the distinction, namely: "to let go becomes a healthy relation to loss, and to hold on becomes a form of pathology" (Ahmed 2010, 139).

Furthermore, Ahmed argues: "The melancholic may appear *as a figure* insofar as we recognize the melancholic as the one who 'holds onto' an object that has been lost, who does not let go, or get over loss by getting over it" (Ahmed 2010, 139). Ahmed argues that according to Freud, melancholia involves self-hurt, and the melancholic subjects expect to be hurt and are unable to form new attachments (Ahmed 2010, 141). Freud states: "The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing investment energies to itself from all sides" (Freud 1917, 212). Subsequently, Ahmed claims that if this wound draws investment, it also drains energy:

To stay sore is to be drained of energy. We might even suggest that the figure of the melancholic provides ‘us’ with a wound; by providing a sore point, the melancholic might allow us to keep what is sore at that point. This is how the melancholic migrant *comes to figure*: if the migrant is a sore point, then soreness can be attributed to the migrant” (Ahmed 2010, 141).

Ahmed’s contextualization of melancholia in relation to the migrant and the postmigrant condition informs my use of the concept in this dissertation. For instance, in my analysis of Khemiri’s novels, I discuss the characterization of the first generation of migrants, who are consumed by melancholia which inadvertently manifests as open wounds. For example, the father/grandfather in *Pappaklausulen* (2018; *The Family Clause*, 2020) is portrayed as a melancholic migrant who has internalized the point of soreness and simultaneously turned it inward, in the form of depression and outward, in the form of rage toward the country and toward his children. In addition, the son is drained by the energy of the family clause which ties him to the hurtful past and makes it impossible for him to let go of his father’s past. Thus, I argue that the son’s attempt to revoke the family clause (the Swedish title *Pappaklausulen* translates to the dad-clause) symbolizes his desire to let go of the object that is preventing him from forming new attachments. In addition, my approach is informed by Paul Gilroy’s application of the concept of melancholia to describe the postcolonial condition in European societies at large.

1.5. Previous Scholarship on “Immigrant Literature” in Sweden

Before the contemporary generation of postmigrant writers appeared on the literary stage, the most well-known Swedish writer with an immigrant background was the Greek author Theodor Kallifatides (born in 1938) who immigrated to Sweden as a young adult and who has written multiple novels, plays, poetry collections, and essays in Swedish from his debut in 1969 with the

poetry collection *Minnet i exil: dikter* (1969; *The Memory of Exile: Poems*). Norwegian scholar Ingeborg Kongslien argues in “Innvandrarlitteratur i Norge” (in *Litteraturens Gränsland. Invandrar- och minoritetslitteratur i nordiskt perspektiv*, edited by Satu Gröndahl. 2000, 243—256) that due to the scarcity of books written by immigrants to Scandinavia in the 1970s and 1980s, Theodor Kallifatides came to represent the entire immigrant population of Sweden, just like the Pakistani author Khalid Hussain did in Norway (Kongslien, 2000).

Furthermore, Swedish literary scholar Lars Wendelius discusses the lack of scholarship on the topic of immigrant literature in *Den dubbla identiteten: Immigrant- och minoritetslitteratur på svenska 1970-2000* (2002). Wendelius argues that the Swedish literary establishment’s failure to accommodate and include immigrant writers was partly due to their scarcity and partly due to biased expectations regarding the literary quality of the literature (Wendelius 2002, 36—58). For instance, Wendelius notes that in a volume on Swedish literature, *Den svenska litteraturen* [Swedish Literature] (1997; edited by Lars Lönnroth and Hans-Erik Johannesson) contemporary immigrant writers are represented on only two pages under the title “The New Swedes.”

Theodor Kallifatides has spoken and written widely about the importance of learning Swedish both regarding his own identity formation and assimilation to Sweden, and more generally with regard to immigration issues in Sweden. Interestingly enough, there is not much scholarship written about Kallifatides despite his productive career. At most, he is mentioned briefly as the first immigrant writer in Sweden, but his work is rarely discussed further. In fact, a search in the scholarly archives resulted in an article written in English by Kallifatides himself and published in *Harvard Review* in 1993. In his article “Language and Identity” (1993), Kallifatides emphasizes the importance of

learning the language of the country where you have settled. He describes arriving in Sweden at age 26, and he writes about his experience working in a restaurant with other immigrant men. In his article, Kallifatides states that their lack of Swedish language resulted in tension between the men:

We were five young men from five different countries. No one spoke Swedish. We had no common language. We constantly got on each others' nerves, and the atmosphere was explosive. Everyone kept muttering in his own language, and no one ever understood anyone else. This life of speechlessness affected me deeply. I was always more or less depressed. I felt like a brute and I would have returned home if possible (1993, 114).

Thus, Kallifatides describes the lack of a common language between the young men as dangerous which implies an inherent, violent masculinity (“the atmosphere was explosive”). Furthermore, he states that the absence of a common language made him depressed. He claims that he felt like “a brute”, which confirms a stereotypical notion of a savage, non-verbal figure. As he continues his story, it is evident that Kallifatides’s description of his own experience before learning Swedish, is the basis for his assessment of Swedish society’s failure to deal with issues of language and immigration in general. Kallifatides describes how he arrived in Sweden in the 1960s and how he, and other immigrants, had to find their own way into society without any support or help from the government:

Back in those days there was nothing of the whole apparatus that exists today to meet the needs of newcomers. No one cared—but no one bothered you either. You were left alone to make your way into society. There was, however, a rather vicious regulation stating that a foreigner must have a residence permit in order to get a work permit, or a work permit in order to get a residence permit. (1993, 114)

In his narrative, Kallifatides is the lone hero who overcomes the barrier of alienation by learning the language by himself. He describes living in Sweden without knowing the language as a dangerous position because according to Kallifatides, language is connected to morality, and without language, he is living in a state of precarious instability, as if his identity is unstable: “In one sense I was tremendously free because no one understood what I said, but this freedom was, at the same time, like imprisonment. I felt as if I could do anything—but in a vacuum. My moral values, strongly connected to my identity as a Greek, started to deteriorate under the burden of alienation” (1993, 115). Kallifatides’s point of view illustrates the perspective on language and immigration which forms the basis for many scholars, critics, and journalists who wrote about so-called immigrant literature during the 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, Kallifatides’s article forms an interesting backdrop to my study considering how these views are reflected and internalized by the first well-known Swedish author with a non-ethnically Swedish background. According to Kallifatides, to exist in Sweden without access to the Swedish language and without “the moral impact of language”, puts him in danger of losing himself, his moral values and his identity. Consequently, using his own experience as a cautionary tale, Kallifatides explains that learning the language of his new country eventually gives him hope and a sense of belonging. In fact, learning Swedish saves him from depression, and possibly even from a life of crime. However, before learning Swedish, writing letters home to his father in Greek helps him stay sane and on the right side of the law: “What was missing in my life at that time was precisely the moral impact of language. I am pretty sure that I could have committed maybe even serious crimes had I not been corresponding frequently with my father. Reading his letters and answering them proved to be the only way I could keep my identity as I perceived it” (1993, 115). In the article, which is constructed as a narrative of his life as a young immigrant,

Kallifatides shares how he is accused of stealing money from the restaurant and taken to the police station where the police officer says: “Listen, why don’t you admit that you took the money and we’ll all be happy!” (1993, 115). In his narrative, Kallifatides does not engage with the possibility of racism, but it is interesting that the police officer states that if Kallifatides admits to a crime that he has not committed, he can make everyone happy. This relates to Ahmed’s theory of the happiness duty, where the migrant has the duty to adapt and keep everyone happy by succumbing to the nation’s values and resist bringing up racism.

However, Kallifatides refuses to accept blame for a crime he has not committed. Consequently, he gets fired. Later, when the money has been found, he is asked to come back to work, but he declines. The unfair accusation gives him a new purpose; he decides to learn Swedish. In his article, Kallifatides writes passionately about how he proceeds to learn Swedish by reading canonical Swedish author August Strindberg’s classic play *Fröken Julie* (1888; *Miss Julie*, 1912): “I pursued my self-designated studies with great zeal, and three months later I had read *Miss Julie* and knew the text by heart.” (1993, 116) It is noteworthy that Kallifatides connects learning Swedish and thus, being saved from a life of depression, alienation, and possibly crime, with reading the most canonical of Swedish authors; August Strindberg. The fact that Kallifatides connects his assimilation to Sweden and the construction of a Swedish identity, to Strindberg’s well-known, critically acclaimed play *Fröken Julie* relates to my argument about how the intertextuality in Khemiri’s novels indicates a desire to move away from racialized readings and avoid marginalization.

Furthermore, Kallifatides’s article illustrates Swedish society’s historical perception of immigrants and the national narrative regarding the importance of assimilation through learning Swedish. This relates to how scholars in the 1990s and 2000s discussed the early work by

postmigrant authors such as Jonas Hassen Khemiri and others. Kallifatides's article reflects the attitudes in Swedish society and the literary establishment toward Swedish immigrant literature at the time. In addition to describing his lived experience as a Greek immigrant and his own journey towards learning the Swedish language through reading August Strindberg, he engages with the political and societal discourse on immigrants and language learning. For example, he weighs in on the topic of the so-called Rinkeby-dialect, named after a suburb to Stockholm known for a large immigrant population or, as Kallifatides describes it as, "mainly inhabited by immigrants":

A tragic but highly illuminating example of the close connection between language and identity is the so-called Rinkeby dialect. Rinkeby is a suburb northwest of Stockholm, mainly inhabited by immigrants. Their children do not have a real chance to learn either their mother tongue or Swedish. From a language point of view, these children have landed between two languages—not a very pleasant or easy position. As a result, there is among them a rather large group with problems ranging from psychological disturbances to social misbehavior. (1993, 113)

Swedish scholar Elisabeth Helena Karlsson argues in her dissertation "Toward a Multiculturalism for the 21st Century: German and Scandinavian Literary Perspectives, 1990—2005" (2008) that although the frequent use of the term "immigrant literature" in Scandinavian literary scholarship was problematic, it had good intentions. Karlsson claims that using the term immigrant literature was "a way to draw attention to the relatively few texts that were written by non-natives and to the specific themes, experiences and other worlds that these texts brought to the literary landscape" (Karlsson 2008, 17). In her study, Karlsson builds on the

work by previous scholars in the field and she argues for the use of the term “multicultural literature” instead of immigrant literature.

In parallel, Ingeborg Kongslien proposes the utilization of the term multicultural for future scholarship in Scandinavian literature and she argues in “New Narratives in Norwegian and Nordic Multicultural Literature” (2005) for a shift in the discourse. Kongslien suggests “a change in the literary paradigm, from the concept of a national identity of an idealized homogeneous nature towards an appreciation of the multicultural discourse in postmodern society” (Kongslien 2005, 144). It is outside the scope of this dissertation to further investigate the societal connection between language, identity, and the capacity for immigrants to create long-lasting and healthy connections to society. However, as a background to my study, it is noteworthy to take into account Sweden’s limited attention to literature written by immigrants. Subsequently, Kallifatides’s position as the first Swedish “immigrant writer” in combination with his article on the topic of language and identity, reflects how the discourse at the time suffered from stereotypical assumptions about immigrants and resulted in the othering of writers with a non-ethnically Swedish background.

These conceptual frameworks inform my approach in this dissertation which contributes to the conversation about the construction of identities in Scandinavian postmigrant literature. Consequently, the dissertation explores how contemporary literary voices provide new insights into the postmigrant condition in a society which is being reconstructed in a world of post-globalization. The literary analysis employs the critical method of close reading and includes the investigation of narrative voice, tone, characterization, language, contradictions, paradoxes, gaps and omissions in the texts; mixing of genres; blending of literary fiction with non-fiction; memoir and autobiography as genre-bending modes; ethnolects/sociolects/code-switching (the

mixing of languages), intertextuality and the representation of identities with regard to race and gender. Building on previous research in the field of Scandinavian literary studies, the dissertation explores the following questions: How do the novels relate to the national discourse regarding whiteness, Swedishness, and Nordic exceptionalism? How does the literature confront and challenge the construction of cultural and national identity in contemporary Swedish society? How do the texts navigate issues of ethnicity and manifestations of otherness in Scandinavian society today?

1.6. Previous Scholarship on Jonas Hassen Khemiri's Work

Previous scholarship on Jonas Hassen Khemiri's authorship has predominantly positioned him as a representative for a new generation of "immigrant" voices and consequently, his work has often been read and analyzed in conjunction with other Swedish writers with a "multicultural" ethnic background such as Swedish authors Johannes Anyuru, Alejandro Leiva Wenger, Athena Farrokhzad, and Marjaneh Bakhtiari. In addition, previous scholarship focused primarily on these writers as representatives for the "immigrant" point of view, which often resulted in racialized and biographical interpretations. Instead of critically analyzing their work or discussing the authors in comparison with their "non-immigrant" peers or in relation to Scandinavian literary history, literary critics and journalists mainly considered them as spokespersons for a particular group. Consequently, their work was viewed as informative rather than analyzed and discussed regarding their literary value or style.

For example, Finnish literary scholar Satu Gröndahl argues in *Litteraturens gränsland: Invandrar- och minoritetslitteratur i nordiskt perspektiv* (2002), that "the aesthetic disciplines have an important role to play in the research on ethnic relations, since art, music, and literature are important expressions of ethnic identities and function as

illustrations of ethnic communities” (Gröndahl 2002, 12). Similarly, Lars Wendelius argues that immigrant literature should be studied because it thematizes “the experience of being an immigrant or belonging to a minority group” (Wendelius 2002, 41). In accordance with these statements, previous scholarship on Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s work has largely examined topics like ethnolects and hybridity in relation to Khemiri’s perceived position as a representative for a new generation of so-called immigrant writers, and his role as a public figure in the Swedish media landscape, particularly as a spokesperson for migration issues.

Since then, literary scholars have further explored and contextualized the investigation of so-called immigrant literature in society at large. For example, literary scholar Natia Gokieli argues in “I want us to trade our skins and our experience: Swedish Whiteness and ‘Immigrant Literature’” (2017) that the reception of immigrant writers in Swedish media and society is often placed in a socio-political context. For instance, Gokieli claims that the discourse in media has emphasized the marketability of the immigrant writer. She argues that this stems from a desire among critics in the Swedish cultural and literary landscape to find the voice of the immigrant writer. Gokieli states: “The non-whiteness of an ‘immigrant writer’ is mainly connected to the ethnic affiliation of the author, specifically to his racialized body” (Gokieli 2017, 267).

Similarly, Swedish literary scholar Magnus Nilsson problematizes previous approaches which viewed so-called immigrant literature through the lens of the dominant culture. In “Swedish ‘Immigrant Literature’ and the Construction of Ethnicity” (2010), Nilsson refers to German scholar Thomas Mohnike who coined the term “ethnographic gaze.” Nilsson argues that the reception of authors like for example Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Marjaneh Bakhtiari in the media and by scholars suffered from an ethnographic gaze, which Nilsson defines as a “reading-

strategy based on the assumption that the work in question is an expression of ethnic identity politics” (Nilsson 2010, 203). Regarding the term “immigrant literature,” Nilsson states:

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. (Nilsson 2010, 201)

As mentioned earlier, literary scholars and critics have consistently placed authors such as Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Alejandro Leiva Wegner and Johannes Anyuru among others, in the same category and discussed them as a group based on their background being different than ethnically Swedish. Swedish writer Astrid Trotzig argues in her essay “Biografi som kategori” (2004) [Biography as category] that this is a consequence of a critical blindness toward writers with foreign origin and/or a bicultural background. Trotzig claims that the problem with the definition of *invandrarlitteratur* [immigrant literature] is that it defines writers merely by association to their biography. She argues that ethnically Swedish writers are evaluated for their individuality in style and experiences, while authors with more complex ethnical origins are labeled *invandrarförfattare* [immigrant writers].

Subsequently, the implication is that each “immigrant writer” is expected by media and the literary establishment to strictly portray their own life in their work because what is most representative about them is their background, and the critics tend to consider their work from this perspective. Consequently, Trotzig argues that while certain writers are considered capable of portraying the world in a universal way, authors who are defined as *invandrarförfattare* are expected to depict the world from their personal point of view. She claims that in the public discourse and in the media, no weight is given to these authors’ capacity to explore and define society at large. Instead, they are perceived as merely capable of describing a different ethnic perspective which makes their work valid primarily for immigrants or at most for Swedes with a multicultural background (Trotzig 2004, 24).

Consequently, in my investigation of Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s work, I argue that an analysis of postmigrant literature requires a moving away from biographical and racialized readings. Furthermore, I claim that Khemiri’s novels employ a multitude of narrative strategies, such as autofictionalization, blending genres, and intertextual allusions which conveys a resistance to immigrant tropes and racialized readings. Thus, I situate my analysis of Khemiri’s novels in relation to previous scholarship, and I explore the texts through an intersectional, postcolonial lens which opens up opportunities for new ways to understand postmigrant identity formation.

As described by scholars in the field, racialized and biographical interpretations were abundant in the beginning of Khemiri’s career. There were multiple misconceptions regarding the author’s background, such as the notion that he was a voice from the suburbs although he grew up in central Stockholm, and the assumption that his debut novel *Ett Öga Rött* (2003; An Eye Red) was written by an author who could not speak or write Swedish correctly. In fact, when *Ett Öga Rött* was first published, it was received by critics as an example of a book written in so-

called “broken Swedish” supposedly spoken by second-generation immigrants. However, the novel was a linguistic experiment by Khemiri, deliberately written in non-standard Swedish; an ethnolect broadly referred to as *rinkebysvenska* [Rinkeby Swedish], a term which was first used by Swedish scholar Ulla-Britt (1983) and named after the aforementioned, densely immigrant-populated suburb Rinkeby outside of Stockholm. The novel was celebrated as a realistic and documentary depiction of immigrant youth; presumably written in authentic “immigrant-slang,” when in fact, the language of the novel was an intentional narrative strategy by Khemiri.

Halim, the main character of *Ett Öga Rött*, is a teenager who claims to be a “tankesultan” [thought sultan]. Halim wants to reclaim his Arab identity while his father wants him to assimilate to Swedish society, speak perfect Swedish, and achieve the successful life that seems out of reach for the father. But Halim plans to open an Arab Cultural Center directly opposite the Royal Castle in Stockholm, and he swears to fight against what he believes is the Swedish government’s conspiracy to “Swedify” him. Throughout the novel, Khemiri deploys humor, parody, and hyperbolic language as literary strategies in order to challenge the trope of the immigrant. In addition, the cover of the novel plays with the trope of the exotic with its stereotypically “orientalist”-looking gold foil arabesques on a red background.

The misunderstanding of Khemiri’s novel *Ett Öga Rött* in the media has been discussed by scholars in the field. For instance, literary scholar Peter Leonard argues in “Identity and its Discontents: Corporal Indexicality in Claus Beck-Nielsen and Jonas Khemiri” (2006) that the use of immigrant slang and non-grammar Swedish in *Ett Öga Rött* functions as an aesthetic, not a sociological strategy, and he states that it is “an attempt to broaden the confines of what is an acceptable literary language” (Leonard 2006, 2). In addition, Khemiri remarks ironically on the misinterpretation of *Ett Öga Rött* in his second novel *Montecore: en unik tiger* (2006;

Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger, 2011) where a character named Kadir speaks to another character who is a writer named Jonas Khemiri. Kadir challenges the author-character in his monologue which functions as a metafictional commentary on the reception of *Ett Öga Rött*:

Trots dina protester celebreras du för att ha skrivit en bok på “tvättäkta Rinkebysvenska.” Tydligen har du gett liv åt “invandrarens historia” på ett språk som låter som om man “sänker ned en mikrofon” i valfritt invandrarområde. Skrev du inte att din bok handlade om en svenskfödd man som bryter sitt språk med intention? Vad hände med din påstådda exploration av “autenticitetstemat”? (Khemiri 2006, 39).

Despite your protests you are celebrated because you have written a book in ‘Authentic Rinkeby Swedish’. Apparently you have brought “the immigrant’s story” to life in a language that sounds as though one has “dropped a microphone” into an immigrant area of one’s choice. Did you not write that your book was about a Swedish-born man who breaks his language with intention? What happened to your asserted exploration of “the authenticity theme”? (Khemiri 2011, 27).

This passage in Khemiri’s second novel *Montecore* illustrates how the text speaks back in response to the misconceptions in media regarding his first novel *Ett Öga Rött*. This example conveys Khemiri’s playful use of narrative strategies such as irony, humor and intertextuality, and illuminates how Khemiri employs performative biographism and autofictionalization to challenge the reception in the media. Interestingly, Kadir’s description “as though one has dropped a microphone into an immigrant area” implies that getting the immigrant’s point of view entails allowing someone to speak from a position below something/somebody, as if speaking from the bottom of society. In parallel, Kallifatides reveals a similar marginalization of

immigrants in his article, where he argues that immigrants who live close together without learning Swedish are at risk of being imprisoned in a “ghetto mentality”:

It may take years to reconstruct yourself, and most of us never succeed. Some give up entirely from the very beginning, which is the surest way to imprison yourself in a ghetto-mentality—something which already may be observed in Sweden where large groups of immigrants are not really part of society but rather a deviation from it. (Kallifatides 1993, 113)

It is evident that Kallifatides perceives the voluntary or involuntary segregation of immigrants to certain areas of Stockholm as cause for concern. In his article, he argues that only through the perfection of the language, is it possible to achieve assimilation. In fact, one could almost envision Halim, the main character of *Ett Öga Rött*, enraged about the attempt by Kallifatides to “Swedify” him. In addition, Kallifatides speaks back to potential critics. He states that it is a misconception to encourage the conception of the “Rinkeby dialect” as a “cultural asset” and he claims that those who are of a different opinion “do not seem to care very much about these youngsters”:

There are those who think that the Rinkeby dialect is a cultural asset, that it should be encouraged. They do not seem to care very much about these youngsters who for lack of an appropriate and developed language, are unable to express themselves by any means but gang violence or worse. (Kallifatides 1993, 113)

Kallifatides’s language is heavily influenced by a European colonial perspective as he speaks about “the children” and “the youngsters” as if they need saving from their own culture by the Swedish language. Consequently, I argue that Kallifatides’s article illustrates his internalization of the racialization of immigrants in Swedish society and his identification with the discourse on

immigrant literature during the 1990s and early 2000s. Kallifatides's emphasis on the importance of learning Swedish is reflected in the misunderstanding of Khemiri's first novel by critics and this illustrates the discourse in society regarding language and immigrants at the time.

In addition to the much-discussed reception of Khemiri's first novel *Ett Öga Rött*, a significant amount of scholarship has focused on Khemiri's letter "Öppet brev till Beatrice Ask" (2013) ("An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask," (2013) which was published in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in March 2013. The letter went viral and made history as the most shared article ever in Sweden. Soon thereafter, Khemiri re-wrote it in English, and it was published as "Sweden's Closet Racists" (2013) in *The New York Times* in April 2013, which according to Khemiri's website, was the first essay by a Swedish author published in *The New York Times*. The letter was later translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles and published by *Asymptote Journal* (2013). In the letter, Khemiri addresses Beatrice Ask, who was the Swedish Minister of Justice at the time, regarding the treatment of immigrants in Sweden, particularly in relation to a project called REVA, which allowed the police to check anyone's ID to find illegal immigrants. In the English version, Khemiri opens his letter with the words "Welcome to my body" (2013). He invites Beatrice Ask to switch bodies: thus, he invites her to share his lived experience as a person of color. In "An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask", Khemiri steps outside the constraints of his authorship and brings his literary voice into the debate on immigrants and racism in Sweden. However, I argue that the letter is simultaneously an article and an essay. By interpolating his own story into the letter, Khemiri creates a bridge between fiction and non-fiction. For example, Khemiri begins the letter by listing things that are different between him and Beatrice Ask and listing things that they have in common. He addresses the Minister of Justice directly using short sentences interspersed with humor:

Du är kvinna, jag är man. Du är politiker, jag är författare. Men det finns vissa saker som kopplar oss samman. Vi har båda pluggat internationell ekonomi (utan att ta examen). Vi har ungefär samma frisyr (även om hårfärgen skiljer oss åt). Och vi är båda fullvärdiga medborgare i detta land, födda inom dess gränser, förenade via språk, flagga, historia, infrastruktur. Vi är båda lika inför lagen. (2013, 1)

You are a woman. I am a man. You're a politician; I'm an author. But there are things we have in common. We've both studied international economics (without graduating). We have almost the same hairstyle even if our hair color is different. And we're both full citizens of this country, born within its borders, joined by language, flag, history, infrastructure. We are both equal before the law. (2013, 1)

Through an effective strategy of humor and irony, Khemiri's letter suggests that he and the Minister of Justice are in fact not treated equally in a society that accepts racial profiling. Thus, his statement "Vi är båda lika inför lagen" [We are both equal before the law] is an ironic commentary on the fact that they are not equal before the law. Khemiri begins the letter as an attempt to open a dialogue with the minister. Then, he continues to describe several seemingly autobiographical events, following the chronological order of his life, from childhood to young adulthood. In one section of the letter, all paragraphs begin with the repetition of the words "Att vara" [Being] in combination with his age until the narrator reaches adolescence. For example:

Att vara sex år och landa på Arlanda, i vårt gemensamma hemland. Vi går mot tullen, med en pappa som har handsvett, som harklar sig, som rättar till frisuren och bättrar på putsen på skorna mot knäveckan. Två gånger kontrollerar han att det svenska passet ligger i rätt innerficka. Alla rosafärgade människor släpps förbi. Men vår pappa stoppas. Och vi tänker: Det kanske var slumpen. Att vara sju år och börja skolan och få en

introduktion till samhället av en pappa som redan då var livrädd för att hans utanförskap skulle gå i arv till sina barn. Han säger: När man ser ut som vi så måste man alltid vara tusen gånger bättre än alla andra för att inte bli nekad. (Khemiri 2013, 2)

Being 6 years old and walking towards passport control with Dad, who has sweaty hands, who clears his throat, who fixes his hair and shines up his shoes on the backs of his knees. All the pink-colored people are let by. And we think, maybe it was by chance, until we see the same scene repeated year after year. Being seven and starting school and being given an introduction to society by a dad who was already, even then, terrified that his outsidership would be inherited by his children. He says: When you look like we do, you must always be a thousand times better than everyone else if you don't want to be denied. (Khemiri 2013, 2)

Throughout "An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask", seemingly dreamlike memories from the narrator's childhood are interspersed with humorous, absurd statements such as "vi kunde ha valt att ha mindre melatonin i huden." (2013, 3) (we could have chosen to have less melatonin in our skin) (2013, 3). The letter ends with the narrator sitting in the back of a police car, where he reflects on the impossible task of looking innocent when everyone around you looks into the police car and assumes that you are guilty:

I tjugo minuter satt vi där i polisbilen. Ensamma. Fast ändå inte ensamma. För hundratals människor passerade. Och de tittade in på oss med en blick som viskade: "Där. En till. Ännu en som betar sig helt i enlighet med våra fördomar." Och jag önskar att du hade varit med mig i polispiketen, Beatrice Ask. Men du var inte det. Jag satt där ensam. Och jag mötte alla förbipasserande blickar och försökte signalera att jag inte var skyldig, att jag bara hade stått på en plats och sett ut på ett visst sätt. Men det är svårt att argumentera

för sin oskuld i baksätet av en polisbuss. Och det är omöjligt att vara en del av gemenskapen när Makten ständigt förutsätter att en är en Annan. (Khemiri 2013, 4)

We sat in the van for 20 minutes. Alone. But not really alone. Because 100 people were walking by. And they looked in at us with a look that whispered: “There. One more.

Another one who is acting in complete accord with our prejudices.” I wish you had been with me in the police car. But I sat there alone. And I met all the eyes walking by and tried to show them that I wasn’t guilty, that I had just been standing in a place and looking a particular way. But it’s hard to argue one’s innocence from the back seat of a police van. And it’s impossible to be a part of society when everyone constantly assumes that you are not. (Khemiri 2013, 4)

Finally, he is released from the police car, but without any explanation or apology; just with the following dismissive words from the police officer: “Du kan gå nu.” (2013, 4) (You can go now.) (2013, 4) The poetic tone and the repetition of personal pronouns, jag, du, and eventually, vi (I, you, and we), creates an effective narrative strategy which pulls the reader in. In addition, switching from the first-person singular pronoun “I” to the plural form of “we” gives the letter a sense of communal relevance and emphasizes the collective responsibility for a society tainted by racism. At the end of the letter, the narrator confirms this and emphasizes the collective responsibility for what is happening: “Och jag skriver “vi” för vi är en del av denna helhet, denna samhällskropp, detta vi” (2013, 4). (And I write “we” because we are a part of this whole, this societal body, this we.) (2013, 4) Finally, Khemiri ends his letter to Beatrice Ask by repeating the same words that the police officer had used when the narrator was released from the police car, where he had been held without reason: “Du kan gå nu.” (2013, 4). (You can go now.) (2013, 4) By speaking directly to Beatrice Ask in the same dismissive manner as the police

officer, Khemiri emphasizes the impossibility of reversing the power structures, although he makes a futile attempt through his narrative voice.

Helena Wulff claims in “Writing Truth to Power: Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s Work in Stockholm and New York” (2019) that Khemiri’s letter to Beatrice Ask illustrates Khemiri’s position as a public intellectual. Wulff positions Khemiri in a tradition of writers as public intellectuals and she refers to postcolonial scholar Edward Said who argues in “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals” (2002). (In *The Public Intellectual*, edited by Helen Small. 19–39) that “writers have a separate, perhaps even more honorific, place than do intellectuals” (2002, 24–25). Wulff derives the title of her article from Said, who states: “Yet, during the last years of the twentieth century the writer has taken on more and more of the intellectual’s adversarial attributes in such activities as *speaking the truth to power*, being a witness to persecution” (2010, 24–25). Subsequently, Wulff claims that Khemiri through his letter to Beatrice Ask occupies the position as public intellectual and that he performs in this role in accordance with Said’s description.

However, I claim that in Khemiri’s authorship, his preferred medium is fiction, not non-fiction, and this informs my decision to focus primarily on Khemiri’s novels in this dissertation. Although “Öppet brev till Beatrice Ask” (2013) was widely read and has generated plenty of scholarly discussion, I argue that the letter/essay exemplifies a rare participation in the political debate by Khemiri. In addition, this informs my argument that Khemiri’s authorship conveys an intention to escape biographical and racialized readings and position himself primarily as a fiction writer. Thus, I argue that Khemiri’s limited participation in the contemporary cultural and social debate as a public intellectual indicates a desire to be viewed as a Swedish author and avoid being positioned as a representative for immigrants or immigrant writers. In addition, I

argue that the amount of scholarship and attention given to the letter indicates the continuous inclination by the media and scholars to focus on Khemiri's biographical self, which perpetuates stereotypical and racialized interpretations of his work.

To conclude this overview of the previous scholarship on Jonas Hassen Khemiri's work, I want to mention literary scholar Christian Mark Gullette who approaches Khemiri's work from a unique perspective in his dissertation "Challenging Swedishness: Intersections of Neoliberalism, Race, and Queerness in the Works of Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Ruben Östlund" (2018). Through an intersectional analysis, Gullette investigates race, queerness, and neoliberalism in Khemiri's work in conjunction with an analysis of Swedish director Ruben Östlund's films. Gullette's comprehensive study offers a unique and innovative approach to two contemporary Swedish artists, and he explores how Khemiri and Östlund navigate and challenge topics of neoliberalism and queerness in their work. In his discussion of neoliberalism as it is portrayed in Khemiri's work, Gullette states:

Khemiri's protagonists internalize, enact, and wrestle with neoliberal economic values of competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and materialism.

These characters are determined to succeed economically, not just as a challenge to privilege, but as a method of establishing a form of stable identity in Swedish culture. However, Khemiri frequently undermines these characters' ability to gain access to or redefine 'Swedishness' often leaving them in states of ambiguity as disillusionment (Gullette 2018, 18).

In his study, Gullette examines several of Khemiri's plays and novels, and his investigation also draws on his own (and other people's) interviews with Jonas Hassen Khemiri and additional

material from the discourse in media. My dissertation differs from Gullette's study in multiple ways, in terms of the chosen materials as well as the methodology and application of theories.

For instance, the focus of my dissertation is primarily Khemiri's novels and his authorship. Therefore, I have almost completely excluded any discussion of Khemiri's engagement with media in the form of interviews and public appearances. In fact, although I interviewed Khemiri for the University of Washington's podcast *Crossing North* in December 2022, I don't refer to my own experience from the interview in this dissertation. Furthermore, while performing this study, I have refrained from reaching out to Khemiri with any questions regarding his authorship. The reason for this approach, which differs significantly from Gullette's methodology, is to align my research with the purpose of the study, namely, to investigate the texts themselves, rather than perpetuate a biographical interpretation of Khemiri's work. In addition, while Gullette investigates the intersection of neoliberalism, race, and queerness in Khemiri's texts and in Östlund's films, my study focuses primarily on the trope of the family and the use of autofictionalization and intertextuality in Khemiri's novels. However, although the topic of neoliberalism is outside the scope of this dissertation, I briefly explore transactional aspects of family relationships and the portrayal of the exchange of money in relation to emotional labor. This topic is discussed in chapter 4, where I explore the connection between money and power in family relationships in Khemiri's novel *Pappaklausulen* (2018; *The Family Clause*, 2021) in conversation with Selma Lagerlöf's novel *Kejsarn av Portugallien* (1914; *The Emperor of Portugallia*, 2021).

Chapter 2. The Melancholic Family: Khemiri and The Postmigrant Novel

2.1. Postmigrant Melancholy and the Promise of Happiness

This chapter explores the portrayal of postmigrant melancholia and the anxiety of everyday life in three novels by Swedish author Jonas Hassen Khemiri; *Ett Öga Rött* (2003; *An Eye Red*), *Montecore: En unik tiger* (2006; *Montecore: The Silence of the Tiger*, 2011, from now on referred to in this dissertation as *Montecore*), and *Pappaklausulen* (2018; *The Family Clause*, 2020). I examine how displacement and alienation manifest in postmigrant literature and how intergenerational trauma is conveyed as a silent narrative of rage. I explore the representation of postmigrant identity in the novels through the lens of the family trope to discuss the postmigrant experience in relation to the broader idea of the family as a symbol for the nation.

To this end, I situate the novels in the field of cultural studies invested in theories of affect as described by cultural scholar Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Ahmed argues that previous discourse on “immigration literature” has framed multiculturalism as a problem, which invokes a sense of nostalgia, often inferring whiteness as sameness. As previously mentioned, Ahmed states that a formula of happiness has been used to tie migrants to a national ideal, an ideal which has been established by the nation and by society as inherently good. In this chapter, I investigate how the family is portrayed in the novels as a site for intergenerational disappointment and trauma, and I explore how postmigrant melancholia and everyday anxiety is conveyed through notions of happiness ideals as defined by Ahmed. Thus, my analysis of the novels employs Ahmed’s concept of melancholic migrants who refuse to let go of past suffering or comply with a happiness duty which Ahmed defines as “a duty not to

cause unhappiness by speaking about your disappointment” (Ahmed 2010, 249). These conceptual frameworks inform my analysis of the representation of family in the novels, and I argue that this approach provides new insights into the postmigrant condition of today and the construction of identity and belonging in contemporary Scandinavian society.

For example, I claim that *Pappaklausulen* can be read as a narrative of rage and that the characters in the novel manifest as melancholic migrants who belong in an archive of unhappy, postmigrant families. Ahmed claims that the melancholic migrant who refuses to let go of past suffering or racism, acts as an “affect alien” who kills the joy of the family. In this chapter, I focus on the representation of melancholic migrants, and I explore the possibility of emotional resistance as it manifests in the novels. For example, my analysis of the novel *Pappaklausulen* conveys how the melancholia of the father and the anxiety of the son are displayed through notions of happiness ideals. I argue that the family is portrayed as a site for melancholic displacement and intergenerational disappointment. Thus, I claim that the characters in *Pappaklausulen* belong in a literary archive of unhappy families and melancholic migrants, who will not participate in the forgetting of racism or comply with the happiness duty. Furthermore, I investigate how the displacement of previous generations of migrants and the shared trauma of alienation manifest as anxiety, fear, and self-doubt and how this is conveyed in the form of a silent narrative of rage.

Ahmed argues that the study of unhappiness is unknown in much philosophical literature, and even in happiness studies. She critiques the presumption that unhappiness is simply defined as a lack of, an absence. Furthermore, Ahmed proposes that the historical use of the word “unhappy” has the meaning of “causing misfortune or trouble” and later came to entail the meaning of “wretched in mind” (Ahmed 2010, 17). Consequently, Ahmed relates the word

“wretched” to “wretch” which means “stranger, exile, banished” as well as “a miserable, unhappy, unfortunate person.” Thus, Ahmed poses the question “Can we rewrite the history of happiness from the point of view of the wretch?” (Ahmed 2010, 17), which forms the basis for my inquiry. Ahmed relates her discussion of the wretched to French scholar Frantz Fanon’s book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). According to Ahmed, Fanon argues that the revolutionary consciousness entails feeling at odds with the world and feeling odd in the world. In Fanon’s work, the decolonization process is described as inevitably violent, but in Ahmed’s discussion of the revolutionary consciousness, the suffering manifests as stress and anxiety. Ahmed proposes that “you can be unhappy as a way of doing nothing; unhappiness as a belief can be a way of holding on to the present” (Ahmed 2010, 169) In my discussion of the representation of anxiety in Khemiri’s novels, I explore the possibility of emotional resistance as it manifests in the texts in a non-violent way. For example, in *Pappaklausulen*, the migrant grandfather exposes the unhappiness crack in the family and in the nation, while his son has internalized the pain and the melancholia of his father. Thus, the representation of postmigrant melancholia manifests as anxiety in the son, who is haunted by the failures of his father, the breakdown of the family, and the ghost of his older sister. Consequently, his own role as a father is filled with anxiety and neurosis which he tries to control by researching strollers, following his girlfriend’s instructions on what to feed their children, being painfully present at indoor play centers, and trying not to have a breakdown and drive off into the night and leave his family. Until he does.

In my analysis of *Pappaklausulen*, I explore how Ahmed’s theory of the melancholic migrant and notions of happiness ideals manifest in the novel. The novel begins with the arrival of the grandfather to Arlanda airport in Stockholm, Sweden, on one of his regular visits to his adult children and for the purpose of keeping his Swedish citizenship. The character is described

with humor and irony, yet he is defiant, ready to fight for his right to belong to the nation. The portrayal of the grandfather who has been coming and going throughout his children's lives, exemplifies Ahmed's definition of the melancholic migrant, who is consumed by contradictory feelings, forever alienated from the promise of happiness in his family and in the country that he claims to belong to, yet constantly berates:

En farfar som är en pappa är tillbaka i landet som han aldrig har lämnat. Han står i kön till passkontrollen. Om polisen bakom glasrutan ställer misstänksamma frågor ska pappan som är en farfar hålla sig lugn. Han ska inte kalla polisen för grisen. Han ska inte fråga om polisen har köpt sin polisuniform på postorder. Istället ska han le och visa upp sitt pass och påminna polisen om att han är medborgare i det här landet och att han aldrig har varit borta längre än sex månader. (2018, 9)

A grandfather who is a father is back in the country he never left. He is standing in the queue for border control. If the officer behind the glass asks any suspicious questions, the father who is a grandfather will keep calm. He won't call the officer a pig. He won't ask whether the officer bought their uniform from a mail-order catalogue. Instead, he'll smile and hold up his passport and remind the officer that he is a citizen of this country and that he has never been away for longer than six months. (2020, 3)

The grandfather's interior monologue conveys his struggle between feelings of defiance and nostalgia, and he asks himself why he keeps returning to the country that he has left behind. "Varför? För att hans familj bor här. Hans älskade barn. Hans fantastiska barnbarn. Hans svikande exfru." (2018, 9) [Why? Because his family lives here. His beloved children. His fantastic grandchildren. His deceitful ex-wife.] (2020, 3) Further in the same paragraph, his detachment and rage become increasingly evident as he describes his contradictory feelings

toward his son. In the following passage, the fact that the son looks like his Swedish mother symbolizes the detachment the father feels from his children and the nation and how this lack of belonging manifests as rage:

Sonen är så lik mamman att pappan som är en farfar ibland, ganska ofta faktiskt, känner för att luta sig fram och skalla honom. Men han gör det aldrig. Såklart inte. Han lägger band på sig. Han har levt länge nog i det här landet för att veta att känslor är dåliga.

(2018, 9—10)

The son is so like his mother that the father who is a grandfather sometimes, quite often actually, feels like leaning in and head-butting him. Not that he ever does it. Of course he doesn't. He restrains himself. He has lived in this country for long enough to know that feelings are bad. (2020, 4)

There is an undertone of silent rage despite the humorous descriptions of the grandfather's arrival, his ironic commentary on the border control officers, and his complaints about the Swedish cultural manner of restraining one's emotions. Shockingly, and in contrast to the loving words about his children and grandchildren, he justifies his choice not to head-butt his grown son with more critique towards the country and the culture to which his family belongs. Thus, in *Pappaklausulen*, the melancholic migrant, exemplified by the grandfather, exposes the unhappiness crack in "the good family" by simultaneously longing for his family while also expressing contempt, disappointment and rage toward his children, his ex-wife (whom he sometimes refer to as his wife) and the country which he refuses to fully leave. The following passage conveys his mixed feelings about Sweden:

En farfar som är en bortglömd pappa väntar på en flygbuss som aldrig kommer. Han är sjuk. Han är döende. Han hostar upp sina lungor. Han är snart blind och kommer troligen

inte överleva natten. Allt är hans barns fel. Fyfan i helvete för det här jävla landet med sitt kalla höstväder, sina hutlösa taxipriser och sina trista tv-kanaler. (2018, 29)

A grandfather who is a forgotten father is waiting for an airport bus that never comes. He is sick. He's dying. He is coughing up his lungs. He is almost blind and probably won't make it through the night. It's all his children's fault. Damn this stupid country with its freezing autumn weather, its scandalous taxi fares and its boring TV channels to hell. (2020, 21).

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed applies her theory of the melancholic migrant to her analysis of the British films *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002, directed by Gurinder Chadha) and *East is East* (1999, directed by Damien O'Donnell) which both feature migrant and postmigrant characters. Ahmed states that the consciousness of racism is complicated for the melancholic migrant. She claims that "racism itself becomes a defense mechanism, a way of refusing to embrace the happy diversity promised" (2010, 146). In the portrayal of the father/grandfather in *Pappaklausulen*, this is conveyed through his overt expression of disdain toward Sweden and the Swedish people, the contempt for his ex-wife, and his anger toward his children, who all represent the notion of belonging to the country, which is out of reach for him. Ahmed argues:

Consciousness of racism becomes somewhat counterintuitively readable as a form of melancholia. This point is counterintuitive because melancholia is usually associated with unconscious processes, and with what cannot be revealed to consciousness. If consciousness of racism is framed as melancholic, it becomes a kind of false consciousness, in the sense that it is imagined as a way of not becoming conscious of what has been lost, and thus a way of holding on to what has gone. I would even say that racism becomes readable as what the melancholic migrant is attached *to*, as an attachment

to injury that allows migrants to justify their refusal to participate in the national game.
(Ahmed 2010, 143).

The portrayal of the father in *Pappaklausulen* exemplifies Ahmed's concept of the melancholic migrant who refuses to participate in the game of happiness. He holds on to past injuries and projects his dissatisfaction and his disappointment onto his children, particularly his son. In contrast, the father in Khemiri's first novel *Ett Öga Rött* (2003; *An Eye Red*), has not yet reached this stage of disappointment. In *Ett Öga Rött*, the father is adamant about wanting his son to assimilate to Sweden, to speak perfect Swedish, and to stop talking about racism. The father is struggling to make a living and succeed in the new country, while his son, Halim, is convinced that the Swedish authorities are trying to "Swedify" them. Thus, although the father is disillusioned about his own opportunities for success, he still has hope for the next generation. He has not yet reached the same point of rage as the father in *Pappaklausulen* who represents an older version of the melancholic migrant. For instance, in the following passage in *Ett Öga Rött*, the father speaks to his son about the importance of language which is a point of contention between the two characters:

Jag vet vad dom säger om språket...men du måste fatta att svenskan är viktigast...titta på mig...jag vet vad som händer om man inte kan språket...(Khemiri 2003, 130)

(I know what they say about the language...but you must understand that Swedish is the most important thing...look at me...I know what happens if you don't speak the language...) (my translation).

Language, and the importance of separating yourself from your past, and avoid marginalization through learning the language of the new country, is a main theme in the novel *Ett Öga Rött* and as previously mentioned, the novel's experimental linguistic strategies were widely discussed

and misinterpreted in media. This mirrors the discourse in Swedish society and media, exemplified by Kallifatides's article, about the language as the key component for successful assimilation. In the novel *Montecore*, which follows *Ett Öga Rött* chronologically, Khemiri employs multiple linguistic strategies which illustrates Fatima El-Tayeb's concept of creative creolization. For example, the characters and the narrator transgress boundaries by mixing different languages in the same sentence. In addition, *Montecore* features the invention of the characters' own language, "Khemirish":

Vanliga föräldrar pratar antingen svenska eller intesvenska, men bara pappor har sitt eget språk, bara pappor pratar khemiriska. Ett språk som är alla språk blandade, ett språk som är extra allt med glidningar och sammanslagna egenord, specialregler och dagliga undantag. Ett språk som är arabiska svordomar, spanska frågeord, franska kärleksförklaringar, engelska fotograficitat och svenska ordvitsar. (2006, 108)

Normal parents either speak Swedish or Not Swedish, but only Dads have their own language, only Dads speak Khemirish. A language that is all languages combined, a language that is extra everything with changes in meaning and strangewords put together, special rules and daily exceptions. A language that is Arabic swearwords, Spanish question words, French declarations of love, English photography quotations, and Swedish puns. (2011, 88)

Khemirish is a secret language, mainly spoken by the father and the son, and the portrayal of this connection between the father and son illustrates a happy time in the past, when the father and the son playfully engaged with a multitude of linguistic possibilities. This implies that back then, there was a belief in the possibility of a cosmopolitan identity, which illustrates the hope for a future multilingualism, potentially within reach for the characters.

Khemiriskan är pappors språk och familjens språk, det är ett språk som bara är ert, som ingen annan äger och som du aldrig kommer visa för någon (fram tills nu?). (2006, 111)

Khemirish is Dads' language and the family's language; it's a language that is only yours, that no one else owns, and that you will never show anyone (until now?). (2011, 91)

As part of these childhood memories, the father and the son call themselves "Den Dynamiska Duon" [the Dynamic Duo]. In *Montecore*, the father takes his young son to downtown Stockholm, where the father, the aspiring photographer, takes pictures of flâneurs:

Den Dynamiska Duon åker in till stan och medan pappor fotar flanörer på Drottninggatan och prisar solglänset i Åhlénsklockan samlar du pantflaskor och sitter tålmodigt väntande på cykelställ. (2006, 152)

The Dynamic Duo goes into the city and while Dads photograph flaneurs on Drottninggatan and extol the sunshine on the Åhléns clock, you collect redeemable bottles and sit waiting patiently on bike racks. (2011, 126)

In contrast to these idyllic passages in the novel *Montecore*, the relationship between father and son is portrayed very differently in *Pappaklausulen*, where the adult son seems to perform in his role as a Swedish dad on paternity leave in the urban setting of Stockholm. His performance is tainted by insecurities that manifest as anxiety and eventually, a narrative of rage, when disturbances, memories, and the feeling of being haunted unravel his daily existence. The monotonous life at home with two small children is described in tedious, Knausgaardian detail. The son who is also a father, acts as if he is being observed and judged by everyone around him. For example, when he drops off his daughter at preschool, he is acutely aware of how he is being perceived, and his behavior reveals his insufferable desire to be liked and accepted:

Pappan frågar förskolepersonalen hur dom mår. Han hälsar på städaren. Han ställer sig utanför glasdörren och tittar fram sådär roligt bakom hörnet så att fyraåringen ska skratta. Han gör det en gång. Två gånger. Tre gånger. Fjärde gången har dottern tröttnat. Trots att pappan dyker fram med en ny min varje gång. Pappan går tillbaka mot kapprummet. Allt han vill är att dottern ska titta på honom och tycka att han är rolig. Och att hennes kompisar ska tycka att han är en bra pappa. Och kompisarnas föräldrar. Och förskolepersonalen. Och städaren. (2018, 38—39)

The father asks the playschool staff how they are. He says hello to the cleaner. He stands outside the glass doors and peeps out from around the corner in that funny kind of way that makes the four-year-old laugh. He does it once. Twice. Three times. By the fourth, the daughter is bored. Even though the father pulls a new face every time. The father heads back to the cloakroom. All he wants is for his daughter to look at him and think that he is funny. For her friends to think he's a good father. And her friends' parents. And the playschool staff. And the cleaner. (2020, 29).

In this passage, the narrative of rage manifests as a steady stream of anxiety which conveys an experience of othering, although never expressed or defined. The fact that the main characters are simply described as “a father”, “a son”, “a sister”, “a girlfriend”, and variations such as “a father who is a grandfather” or “a son who is also a father” emphasizes their floating identities as they navigate the melancholia of their postmigrant existence. The anonymity of the characters conveys the loneliness and silences that prevail between them, the unspoken emotional scars, and the transcultural, intergenerational trauma. What might be read as an expression of urban, millennial everyday anxiety relates to the characters' postmigrant condition of melancholia, which is conveyed through gaps and silences, like the omission of names and other markers of

identity in the character descriptions. I argue that the omission of names illustrates how the texts move away from racialized and biographical readings, and portray the experience of universal anxiety, dysfunctional family relationships, and the inertia of the millennial modern man.

However, the significance of names for the construction of identity is emphasized in the following passage which portrays how the main character orders lunch for his family:

Han beställer tofusallad till sin flickvän, macka och latte till sig, smoothie och biskvi till barnen. Flickvännen hör beställningen och tittar på honom, han byter ut biskvin mot en raw-boll. Och vad heter du? säger killen bakom kassan. Förlåt? säger pappan. Namn? säger killen. Han står med spritpennan redo. Sonen tänker efter. Han säger ett av sina namn. Killen skriver namnet på en kopp, och frågar om han vill ha kvitto. (2018, 157)

He orders a tofu salad for his girlfriend, a sandwich and a latte for himself, smoothies and biscuits for the kids. The girlfriend hears his order and turns to him, and he swaps the biscuits for protein balls. Can I take your name? says the man behind the counter.

Pardon? says the father. Your name? says the man. He has the marker pen ready in his hand. The son thinks. He says one of his names. The man writes it on a cup and asks if he needs a receipt. (2020, 131—132)

The fact that he pauses before giving the barista “one of his names” conveys a notion of anxiety regarding which name to use, and his hesitation implies that the name is an important marker of identity. I argue that his hesitation implies that he is aware of how he might be perceived differently depending on which of his names he shares with the barista. Thus, this passage illustrates the character’s postmigrant anxiety. These examples of postmigrant identity formation are rare in the text, which enhances their significance; the absence of names, the mention of languages, or ethnicity emphasize their importance for the characters in the story.

Furthermore, in this passage, the character is described as both “the father” and “the son” in the same sentence which highlights the connection between his anxiety regarding his role in the family as an adult and to his experience as a child, growing up in Sweden. The representation of the son’s everyday anxiety is consistently but loosely tied to flashbacks and dreamlike childhood memories which are mixed up with the present in his mind. For example, in the beginning of the novel, while the son and his sister are waiting for his father’s arrival, the son remembers similar moments in the past, when he and his sister were waiting for his father to arrive to Sweden. He remembers how he would grow increasingly frustrated and worried, always imagining the worst:

Deras pappa hade blivit gripen. Militären tog honom när han var på väg att borda planet, dom bad att få se hans pass, dom anklagade honom för att vara en hemlig agent, en smugglare, en medlem av oppositionen. (2018, 14)

Their father had been arrested. The military had grabbed him as he was boarding the plane, asked to see his passport, accused him of being a secret agent, a smuggler, a member of the opposition. (2020, 7)

Throughout the novel, the main character is struggling with crippling paranoia and fear without understanding the reasons why. However, what seems like an expression of everyday neurosis reveals an underlying tone of melancholia, which is conveyed through memories from his childhood and everyday encounters as he makes his way around the city, like a modern-day flâneur on paternity leave. The everyday anxiety of the son, who is also a father, is conveyed through the monotonous life as a stay-at-home dad in the cold, wintry, urban setting where a deeper level of discontent and rage simmers below the surface:

Sonen hade aldrig hängt in en rock i en obebakad garderob. Han låste sina cyklar med dubbla lås. Han satt alltid med ryggen mot väggar på kaféer när han skulle svara på mail. Hela tiden hade han en känsla av att världen var ute efter honom och det var först långt senare som hon som skulle bli mamma till hans barn berättade att en förklaring till paranoia är att man har blivit övergiven av sina föräldrar och i frånvaron av deras omsorg inbillar man sig att man är övervakad. Hellre förföljd än ignorerad. (2018, 171)

The son had never left a coat in an unmanned cloakroom. He used two locks on his bike. He always sat with his back to the wall whenever he wanted to reply to his emails in cafés. He constantly felt like the world was out to get him, and it wasn't until much later that the woman who would become the mother of his children told him one cause of paranoia is having been abandoned by your parents and feeling like you are being watched in the absence of their care. Rather persecuted than ignored. (2020, 142)

Although the son seems to accept his girlfriend's analysis, this passage describes the condition of the postmigrant who has internalized his father's disappointment and suspicion toward the new country, the country where the son was born and raised, the country which the father keeps leaving and returning to, but never staying away from for longer than six months, to keep his citizenship. In the passage where the son and his sister are waiting for their father to arrive to Sweden, the son remembers how they used to greet him when they caught sight of him: "Dom sa välkommen hem, och varje gång undrade dom om hem verkligen var rätt ord" (2018, 16). [They said welcome home, wondering every time whether home was really the right word] (2020, 18). This indicates that the children of the migrant father are uncertain of whether their country is their father's home anymore, and if it is not, can it still be their home?

The novel *Montecore* displays a creative creolization of literary strategies in terms of narrative voice and positions of identity. The main character Abbas is a Tunisian man who marries a Swedish woman, Pernilla, with whom he has a son named Jonas Khemiri. The novel plays with the epistolary genre, and the story centers around letters between Abbas's friend Kadir and Abbas's adult son Jonas. Kadir wants to share Abbas's life story with Jonas, hoping that he will write his father's biography. The prologue of the novel includes a metafictional preface where the reader is addressed directly: "Hej, kära läsare!" (2006, 9) [Hello, dear reader] (2011, 1). Literary scholars Eila Rantonen and Satu Gröndahl argue in *Migrants and literature in Finland and Sweden* (2018) that *Montecore* is a postmodern novel which according to Rantonen and Gröndahl, conveys a "constant play with truth-claims" (2018, 206). In a postmodern way, *Montecore* suggests two alternative endings. One is a happy ending with the successful marriage between Abbas and Pernilla, and the other one describes the disappearance of Abbas from the family and portrays dream-like visions of him as a wildly successful international photographer, which is in stark contrast to the portrayal of his failure to succeed as an immigrant in Sweden. However, on the day of his son's birth, Abbas is ecstatic:

Visualisera fotona på min nyfödde son!!! Jag har blivit far!!! Hans namn är Jonas i svensk version och Younes i arabisk. Hans nationalitet ska bli dubbelt svensk och tunisisk (...) en framtida kosmopolits födsel! (2006, 99)

Visualize the photos of my newborn son!!! I have become a father!!! His name is Jonas in the Swedish version and Younes in the Arabic. His nationality will be doubly Swedish and Tunisian (...) a future cosmopolitan's birth! (2011, 80)

This passage conveys the migrant's dream that his son will encompass both cultures, Swedish and Arabic, and portrays the father's hope for his son to become a future cosmopolitan who can

blend the two different worlds and identities. However, as the story continues, Abbas grows more anxious, and he tries to no avail to ensure that his son assimilates to Swedish culture. Abbas wants his son to be more Swedish and less Arabic. Abbas is portrayed as the migrant who is at first, eager to be welcomed into the arms of the new nation, and into his new wife's family, convinced that he will achieve his goal of belonging through his future success, and through his wife and his son. Abbas aspires to become a successful photographer and a fully assimilated Swede, while his son Jonas listens to hip-hop, deliberately speaks with an Arabic accent and resists his father's desire for him to make friends with ethnic Swedes. Thus, Abbas represents the melancholic migrant who slowly realizes that his ethnicity and his lack of language stand in the way of his success in the new country, despite his determination to adapt to Swedish culture.

The juxtaposition of these radically different positions emphasizes the difference between first and second generations of migrants and the tension between their aspirations and the positions available to them in society. Christian Mark Gullette describes how Abbas' dream of success illustrates his adaptation to neoliberalism, and he argues that Abbas's dedication to success is "intimately connected not just to economic agency but to access to Swedish identity and 'Swedishness'" (2018, 29). In the novel, during an extremely agitated rant to his Swedish wife Pernilla, Abbas exclaims:

Min mentalitet ska bli mer svensk än deras tänkbara ideal. Min fotografiska succé ska bli mer illuminerad än deras jävla julgranar. Vår ekonomis tillgångar ska växa sig högre än deras jävla Kaknästorn. Låt oss starta nedräkningen tills den dag då Khemiri bildar en familjisk svensk storsläkt med inflytande som Bonniers och finanser som Rockefeller. (2011, 69)

My mentality will be more Swedish than their imaginable ideal. My photographic success will be more illuminated than their goddamn Christmas trees. The assets of our economy will grow higher than their goddamn Kaknäs Tower. Let us start the countdown to the day when Khemiri creates a family-style Swedish superclan with the influence of Bonniers and the finances of Rockefeller. (2006, 86)

In addition to the narrative strategy of using non-grammatical Swedish, this passage mentions Bonnier family; the most esteemed and successful Swedish publishing family, the famous American Rockefeller family, and the Swedish cultural symbol of the Christmas tree, which conveys how desperately Abbas wants to reach financial success and attain his idea of Swedishness. He wants to ensure that the Khemiri family becomes a wealthy Swedish superclan. Thus, *Montecore* begins and ends with hyperbolic descriptions of happiness and success. However, the hyperbolic tone, the exaggerated imagery, and the partially epistolary tale invokes the notion of a modern-day fairy tale, which implies that Abbas's dreams are unrealistic and on the verge of hypomania. The reference to the Rockefeller family illustrates the dream of materialistic success as it invokes the idea of the American dream. Also, the reference to the Bonnier family relates to the recurrent theme of writing and authorship throughout Khemiri's authorship. Finally, the fact that both these well-established, enormously successful companies are families illuminates the theme of family in the novel. Subsequently, Abbas fails to succeed in Sweden, and he cannot support his family without continuously borrowing money from his friend Kadir, who is back in Tunisia. After their son Jonas is born, Abbas's wife Pernilla goes back to nursing school. Abbas quits his job as a dish washer and becomes a stay-at-home dad. He writes to Kadir:

Min lycka är obeskrivlig. Min fru är mig lika kär som vanligt. Den enda konflikten vi har berör finanser. Sen min sons födsel har hon med subtila indikationer visat på vikten att jag börjar perfektionera min svenska. Hon har presenterat mig med mängder blanketter från lärarinstitut och repeterat mantrat att svenskan i Sverige är en mycket vital kunskap. Hon har påpekat att jag nu passerat en lång tid här och bara uppnått en position som deltidig diskare och gratisarbetande studioassistent. (2006, 100)

My happiness is indescribable. My wife is as dear to me as usual. The only conflict we have is about finances. Since my son's birth, she has with subtle indications pointed out the importance that I begin to perfection my Swedish. She has presented me with multitude of forms from the teaching institute and repeated the mantra that Swedish in Sweden is a very vital knowledge. She has pointed out that I have now passed a long time here and only achieved a position as a part-timely dishwasher and working-for-free studio assistant. (2011, 80)

This passage reveals the strong belief by his Swedish wife and by Abbas, that mastering the Swedish language will lead to assimilation, belonging, and financial success. Similarly to Khemiri's use of irony in *Ett Öga Rött* and "Öppet brev till Beatrice Ask", this notion of the importance of language in *Montecore* reads as a critique towards Swedish society and the opinion that language is the main obstacle to assimilation, which puts the responsibility (and the blame) onto the immigrants to succeed. This speaks to the aforementioned belief in Swedish society that language acquisition and the perfection of the Swedish language would lead to successful assimilation of immigrants to Sweden, as exemplified by Theodor Kallifatides's article. Finally, Abbas reassures Kadir that he will pay back the loan:

PS: Känn ingen oro för dina finanser, lånet kommer snart att returneras. Du behöver inte korrespondera mig fler påminnelser om räntans utveckling. (2006, 100)

PS: Do not feel unease about your finances; the loan will soon be returned. You do not need to correspond me more reminders about the development of the interest. (2011, 81)

It is noteworthy that in *Pappaklausulen*, the son is also a stay-at-home dad, who is struggling with his identity in relation to his successful working wife, and in relation to his father who berates him for his lack of success. In *Pappaklausulen*, the son who is also a father, represents the postmigrant who on the surface is fully integrated with society. He speaks Swedish fluently, he identifies with Swedish culture, norms and gender roles. Yet, he is struggling with the intergenerational trauma of his father's lack of assimilation which is like a ghost that haunts him. Consequently, he wants to break free from the emotional burden of having to take care of his father's financial and practical affairs, which is the unwritten agreement of the family clause (as previously mentioned, the novel's title *Pappaklausulen* means "the dad-clause" in Swedish, but the English translation of the title is *The Family Clause*). At the end of the novel, the father and the son are walking toward Gamla Stan. This passage is described as if it were a classic happy ending-scene in a movie. The narrator says, "let the reader see," and using the verb "see" further highlights the cinematic aspect of the scene. Also, by mentioning the childhood memory of the father and son as "the Dynamic Duo", the passage conveys a notion of happiness:

Låt sen läsaren se hur du och din far i glädjens accompanjemang vandrar bort mot Gamla stan, ni nostalgiserar den Dynamiska duon, ni pekar skrattande på några ljusblå målarfärgsspår. (2006, 352)

Then let the reader see how you and your father, in the accompaniment of happiness, wander away toward Gamla Stan, you nostalgize the Dynamic Duo, you point at some light blue traces of paint, laughing. (2011, 302)

By acknowledging the reader through the words “Then let the reader see”, the narrator breaks the fourth wall again, which enhances the unrealistic, ironic portrayal of the scene. Furthermore, this image of happiness and reconciliation is contrasted by the letters from Kadir, who tells Jonas about his father’s destiny; how his struggles made him leave his family and the country which he never managed to belong to, despite learning the language and giving his son a Swedish name:

Abbas bar en constant längtan till sin familj, till Sveriges deliciösa kranvatten, till broars vyer i solläggningar, till syreners somriga odör. Men att leva isolerad i detta land som han gett sitt allt var honom omöjligt. Han hade transformerat sitt namn, han hade kurvat sin tunga till att perfektionera svenska språket. Han hade till och med namngett sin son Jonas istället för Younes! Vad mer fanns att begära? Ändå var Sverige landet där han fortfarande sågs som ständig främling. (2006, 340)

Abbas bore a constant longing for his family, for the delicious tap water of Sweden, for bridges’ views in sun layings, for the summery odor of lilacs. But to live isolated in that country where he gave his all was to him impossible. He had transformed his name, he had curved his tongue to perfection of the Swedish language. He had even named his son Jonas instead of Younes! What more could be expected? For all that, Sweden was the country where he was still seen as a constant outsider. (2011, 292)

In this passage, the text critiques the notion that assimilation is possible if you try hard to learn the language and adapt to the new culture. This position removes all responsibility for any issues with migration or adaptation from society and places the burden of happiness (which supposedly

can be achieved through an unrealistic absorption of Swedishness) on the migrant. This is illuminated by the words “he was still seen as a constant outsider” in the text. The contrasting narratives, one in Kadir’s letters, and one through the narrator which speaks directly to the reader like a storyteller, tell a contradictory story. On one hand, it conveys the idea that assimilation is possible if you work hard, learn the language and assimilate enough to learn to appreciate Swedish tap water and enjoy the summery scents of lilacs. On the other hand, Kadir’s letters reveal a tragic side of a less successful migrant story. In addition, this passage speaks to the importance placed on language, names, and naming as markers of belonging for migrants by Swedish society. The father’s experience reveals that despite mastering the language, giving his son a Swedish name, and giving the country “his all”, he is still considered and treated as a stranger and as a “constant outsider.”

This informs my analysis of *Pappaklausulen*, where the absence of names and markers of ethnicity and language challenges the narrative of the possibility of assimilation. Despite the migrant father’s attempt to do everything right, he still fails to achieve a sense of belonging. The absence of names emphasizes the postmigrant experience of anxiety and indicates that the inherited rage and disappointment from the previous generation trumps the outwardly signs of belonging such as cultural and linguistic assimilation. Like in *Montecore*, there is a sense of hopelessness in the story of the father who abandons his family when he fails to succeed financially; he is torn apart by the discrepancy between the hopeful story he has told himself (and which is told to him by society as exemplified by Kallifatides’s article), and the reality of never reaching a sense of belonging. The tension between the father and the son grows and Kadir becomes the messenger who reveals to the son what his father has said about him:

Vad har den ormen för rätt att säga att jag har svikit mina rötter? Vad vet den förvirrade jävla idioten om rötter? Vad vet han om kamp? Han som spenderar sin ständiga tid i förvirringens fas. För hur ska man annars namnge en person som är född i Sverige av en svensk mor och ändå passerar sin tid i idiotiska invandrares sällskap ivrigt proklamerande kampen mot rasister som sitt mål? Vad annat kan man namnge en person som med intention bryter på det språk som han själv är uppvuxen med? Min son är en sorglig figur som saknar kultur. Han är inte svensk, han är inte tunisier, han är INGENTING. (2006, 340)

What does that confused damn idiot know about fighting? He spends his constant time in the phase of confusion. Because what else could one call a person who is born in Sweden of a Swedish mother and still spends his time in the company of idiotic immigrants, eagerly proclaiming the fight against racism as his goal? What else can one call a person who, with intention, has an accent in the language he himself was raised with? My son is a sad figure who lacks culture. He is not Swedish, he is not Tunisian, he is NOTHING. (2011, 292)

In this passage, the father, the melancholic migrant, speaks about his son's involvement with "idiotic immigrants" as a betrayal. The father has strived to belong to Sweden, so that he, or at least his son, would finally be treated as a Swede. The father has internalized the shame of being different and he projects his anger and internalized racism onto his son and other immigrants. At this point, the father has given up on the dream of a hybrid Swedish-Tunisian cosmopolitan identity, and he directs his disappointment and rage toward his son. He ridicules his son's alignment with other immigrants in the fight against racism, because according to him, there is only one way for his son to succeed: to participate in what Ahmed describes as the happy

migrant mentality, to refrain from anger and complaints toward society, and to avoid other immigrants who cause trouble in society. This narrative reflects the attitude towards immigrants in Sweden as discussed in the articles by Kallifatides, Kongslien, Wendelius, and Gröndahl, among others.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Abbas in *Montecore* reflects Ahmed's description of the migrant's anger at his family as an expression of shame: "The melancholic migrant is ashamed of his family for not being what he wants to be" (Ahmed 2010, 147). In the passage above, the father claims that his son knows nothing about fighting. He is furious about his son's refusal to embrace the opportunities in Sweden that the father never had. He has no interest in the son's complaints about racism in society. Thus, the melancholic migrant, the father in *Montecore*, has internalized his own failures and does not want to talk about racism.

Similarly, the father who is also a grandfather in *Pappaklausulen*, directs his anger toward the nation, Sweden, and toward his children (and his ex-wife) but he refrains from using the vocabulary of racism in his rants toward the country that has betrayed him. For instance, when he meets a tourist from Vancouver in Stockholm, they wander around the city together and the grandfather acts as the guide. It is ironic that the father who doesn't feel like he belongs to Sweden is accompanied by an actual tourist on a stroll through Stockholm which turns the father into someone who belongs. Furthermore, they meet at "Suckarnas Bro" [The Bridge of Sighs], a place which is mentioned by the father in an earlier passage in the novel, when he and the son visit the same place together. Interestingly, when the grandfather meets the Canadian tourist, the grandfather describes himself as a visitor to Sweden, and not as a Swedish citizen:

Jag bor utomlands. Jag är bara här för att hälsa på mina barn. Jag som trodde du var turist, säger turisten. Jag? Turist? Pappan skrattar. Vad fick dig att tro det? Kanske påsen

från turistinformationen? säger hon. Äh den där har jag bara för att den gör människor snällare. Vilka människor? säger hon. Alla, säger pappan. (2018, 158)

I live abroad. I'm just here to see my children. And here's me thinking you were a tourist, says the tourist. Me? A tourist? The father laughs. What made you think that? Maybe it was the bag from tourist information? she says. Ah, that's just to make people nicer, he says. Which people? She asks. All of them, says the father. (2020, 132)

This passage conveys that although the father is aware of racism, he has found ways of coping by using little tricks such as pretending to be a tourist to be treated differently than if he were perceived as an immigrant. In addition, he seems to have surrendered to the destiny of not belonging to Sweden, since he does not tell the tourist that he is a citizen. However, by choosing the words "I live abroad", he subtly reveals that he is looking at the world from the point of view of Sweden as the starting point, as his home base.

Dom går över bron mot stadshuset. Turisten läser högt ur sin guidebook. Hon säger att Stadshuset tog tolv år att bygga och krävde åtta miljoner tegelstenar. Slöseri med tid och tegel om du frågar mig, säger farfadern. (2018, 159)

They walk over the bridge towards City Hall. The tourist reads aloud from her guidebook. She says that City Hall took twelve years to build and that it required eight million bricks. Waste of time and bricks if you ask me, says the grandfather. (2020, 133)

The imagery of bridges and water while walking through Stockholm, connects *Pappaklausulen* to novels by August Strindberg and Hjalmar Söderberg. While for Strindberg, the scenes of bridges, water and Stockholm's harbor represent the hard-working people of the city, for Söderberg the scenes represent a life filled with consumption and abundance. For Khemiri, it represents Swedish society, the ancient history of Gamla Stan, the natural beauty, and the City

Hall. The tourist and the father walk past City Hall which hosts the headquarters of the political power in Sweden, and the father states that building City Hall was “a waste of time and bricks.” This illustrates his disdain for the nation who has not welcomed him into its arms despite his efforts, which conveys the novel’s critique of Swedish society and its failure to deal with issues of immigration and assimilation.

2.2. The Post-Ethnic Turn

Literary scholar Peter Leonard argues in “Swedish Identity and the Literary Imaginary” (2022) that the contemporary literary imagination offers a new perspective on Scandinavian migration discourse. Leonard compares the current literary moment with the influential Scandinavian authors of the Modern Breakthrough in the late 1800s. He argues that Swedish authors of the “post-ethnic turn”, starting in the early 2000s, engage in contemporary morality debates similar to authors of the Modern Breakthrough. He claims that postmigrant authors represent a new national identity where multiculturalism is the norm, instead of as in previous migration literature, the exception. He argues that contemporary postmigrant authors describe a society where multiculturalism is “the normal state of affairs, a default rather than a condition that is new or unusual” (Leonard 2022, 192). Leonard states that postmigrant authors of the early 2000s convey identity as unstable and employ strategies reminiscent of cultural scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism. Diana Fuss describes Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism in “Reading Like a Feminist” (1989) as: “humanism can be activated in the service of the subaltern; in other words, when put into practice by the dispossessed themselves, essentialism can be powerfully displacing and disruptive” (Fuss 1989, 77). Leonard illustrates his discussion with examples from early works by Johannes Anyuru, Jonas Hassen

Khemiri, Marjaneh Bakhtiari, and Alejandro Leiva Wenger. He contrasts this generation of writers with early immigrant writers like Theodor Kallifatides who wrote about conquering the Swedish language whereas contemporary postmigrant writers intentionally deconstruct the Swedish language. In my analysis, I concur with Leonard's assessment of the contemporary, postmigrant literary landscape. Although I avoid using the term "multiculturalism," I build on Leonard's theories regarding the critique of Swedish society in postmigrant and transcultural Scandinavian literature. In particular, I agree with Leonard's notion that postmigrant authors invoke imagination and irony as strategies to construct identity as performance.

For instance, Leonard argues that Jonas Hassen Khemiri's characters reject the concept of perfect Swedish and invoke a "post-ethnic Swedish imagination, a sense of belonging that somehow exceeds the bounds of Swedishness" (Leonard 2022, 196). In my analysis of *Ett Öga Rött*, I consider the novel an expression of the post-ethnic turn, through its deliberate use of irony and humor and themes of language and belonging. Furthermore, I discuss the trope of the family in relation to the concept of the post-ethnic turn. In the novel, the family is the backdrop to the story about the teenager Halim who believes that he can see through the ongoing conspiracy of the Swedification of foreigners. In his performative activism against Swedification, Halim intentionally intersperses his language with a multi-ethnic vocabulary, disrupts the Swedish language, and aggressively speaks out towards the concept of Swedishness:

Jag kommer för alltid stå tvärtemot svennifieringen. Aldrig jag kommer äta sur strömming med sillnubbe på Skansen eller dansa smårodor i träskor runt töntigaste midsommarstång. (2003, 55—56)

(I'm always gonna stand against the Swedification. Never will I eat sour herring with akvavit at Skansen or dance little frogs in clogs around the silliest Midsummer pole.) (my translation)

In *Ett Öga Rött*, the portrayal of the father exemplifies the first generation of immigrants, who are filled with the hope of integration. As mentioned, he wants his son to speak perfect Swedish to assimilate and succeed in Sweden. The following passage describes how the father and his friend Nourdine are engaged in conversation, when the father suddenly insists that they switch to speaking Swedish. This illustrates the importance the father places on conquering the language as a tool for success and assimilation: “Såja, nu går vi vidare på svenska, pappa avbröt. Visa uttalet för Halim.” (2003, 29) [Now, let's continue in Swedish, Dad interrupted, show Halim the pronunciation (my translation)].

In *Ett Öga Rött*, Khemiri playfully juxtaposes the portrayal of the father who aspires to become a fully assimilated Swede, with his son Jonas who listens to hip-hop, deliberately speaks with an Arabic accent and resists his father's desire for him to make friends with native Swedes. In *Ett Öga Rött*, the father represents the hopeful migrant, whereas the son is the reluctant postmigrant who criticizes society and is convinced that there is a conspiracy towards them: “Jag sparade tidningen för att ta hem till pappa. Den var solklaraste bevis på politikerna gör allt för att vända blattar till svensnar” (2003, 55) [I saved the newspaper to bring home to Dad. It was the most obvious proof that the politicians are doing everything to turn the immigrants into Swedes my translation)]. Meanwhile, his father sells knick-knacks in his small shop and spends most of his free time playing chess with his friend Nourdine and watching game shows on TV. The father is convinced that his ability to answer all the jeopardy questions correctly indicates that his

intelligence far surpasses his position in society, which illustrates his role as a melancholic migrant who has not been able to reach his full potential in the new country, at least not yet.

Pappa totalknäckte allt och alla och lättigt han skulle klara svåraste nivån utan livlina.

Efter första omgången han skickade mig att hämta resten av glöggflaskan och russinpaketet från köket. (2003, 246)

(Dad crushed everything and everybody and he would easily get the highest level without a lifeline. After the first round he sent me to the kitchen to get the bottle of glögg and the box of raisins.) (my translation)

The son consistently destabilizes his postmigrant identity by using the wrong syntax (except when he transcribes Arabic into perfect Swedish, which proves that the incorrect use of grammar is an intentional strategy by Halim). The description of how the father enjoys the most typically Swedish Christmas drink, glögg with raisins, conveys their different positions in relation to Swedishness. In addition, the past is present in a conversation between the father and the son, when the father gets upset after reading Halim's writing, which is deliberately interspersed with words from other languages, slang and curse words. He asks Halim why he writes like that, and he asks him rhetorically "Varför tror du vi flyttade? (...) Tror du inte jag vet att du kan bättre svenska än sådär? För några år sen pratade du helt perfekt och nu?" (2003, 215) [Why do you think we moved? (...) Don't you think I know that you speak better Swedish than this? A few years ago you spoke perfectly and now? (my translation)]. Then, Halim replies with an argument about kampen [the fight], saying that at least he is no traitor: "Jag är iallafall ingen svikare. Jag har iallafall inte glömt kampen." (2003, 215) [At least I'm not a traitor. I have not forgotten the fight (my translation)]. This is followed by a rare moment of emotional expression when the

father reveals his disappointment about his past. He explains that he had only one semester left of school when he had to leave, and he tells Halim that there is no such thing as a fight anymore:

Kampen? Vilken kamp? Det finns ingen kamp! Titta på mig, Halim. Se mig i ögonen.

Föreställ dig vad jag hade haft om jag hade valt annorlunda. En termin. EN jävla termin hade jag kvar när statskuppen misslyckades. Vad kunde jag göra? (2003, 215)

(The fight? Which fight? There is no fight! Look at me, Halim. Look me in the eye.

Imagine what I would have had if I had chosen differently. One semester. ONE goddamn semester was all I had left when the coup failed. What could I have done?) (my translation).

This passage is near the end of the book, and it reveals the discrepancy between their different positions and conveys the deep melancholia in the family. Nevertheless, the novel ends with a scene that portrays a moment of connection between father and son. As they walk outside in the snowy winter storm, Halim is filled with pride and he says, still speaking in broken syntax: “Hela vägen hem jag gick mellan pappa och Nourdine och kände stolthet för jag vet ingen någonsin kommer kunna knäcka oss” (2003, 252) [I walked between Dad and Nourdine the whole way and I felt proud because I know that nobody will ever be able to crush us (my translation)]. The portrayal of post-ethnic belonging in combination with the melancholia inherent in the father’s position, is a recurrent theme in Khemiri’s novels and in other postmigrant authors’ work. As mentioned above, there is a similar ending to Khemiri’s novel *Montecore*, where the resolution of conflict between father and son is described in a sentimental tone. In the following passage, which I referenced earlier, the reader is described as “teary-eyed” which further emphasizes the sentimentality of the scene:

Läsaren ser hur du ler mot din far och lovar honom din eviga vänskap och förlåtelse. Era siluetter försvinner i ett försiktigt vaknande soldis medan läsaren star tårögd kvar under kastanjen i ett grynande Stockholm. (2006, 352)

The reader sees how you smile at your father and promise him eternal friendship and forgiveness. Your silhouettes disappear in a carefully awaking haze of heat while the reader remains standing teary-eyed under the chestnut tree. (2011, 302—303)

Furthermore, breaking the fourth wall by referring to the reader is a strategy used by Swedish postmigrant author Marjaneh Bakhtiari and this invokes the epistolary genre as well as elements of the fairy tale. Although the theme of the melancholic family is evident throughout Khemiri's novels, the juxtaposing of the generations can also be read as an embodiment of the old and the new, the new Sweden versus the old Sweden. This illustrates the conflict between the ethnic national (white) identity and the unstable, transcultural identities of a diverse society which the nation is struggling to come to terms with, as reflected in the intergenerational alienation and displacement in postmigrant literature.

Marjaneh Bakhtiari employs similar strategies in her novel *Kalla det vad fan du vill* (2005), where she conveys dialectal expressions and even spells out the pronunciation: “Va inte en sån mes. Du e fortfarande svartskalle. (...) Ja, en svensk halvtimme. I blattetid blir de minst en timme” (2005, 128) [Don't be such a chicken. You are still a 'svartskalle'. (...) Yes, a Swedish half hour. In 'blatte'-tid that's at least one hour (my translation)]. Similar to the family structure in *Ett Öga Rött*, the younger generation in Bakhtiari's novel strives to connect to their family's ethnic background while the parents want to leave the old country behind. In fact, when the daughter Parisa in Bakhtiari's novel *Kalla det vad fan du vill* wants to visit her parents' country of origin, Iran, her mother is furious and lectures her daughter on being ungrateful for

being in Sweden: “Vet du hur många ungdomar det finns i Iran som skulle göra vad som helst för att vara i ditt ställe?” (2005, 18) [Do you know how many teenagers there are in Iran who would do anything to be in your place? (my translation)].

Similarly to Khemiri’s novels, Bakhtiari’s novel ends with the portrayal of a happy ending which is conveyed from the point of view of the narrator and invokes a notion of fairy tale, albeit ironically. The narrator breaks the fourth wall by referring to the reader who is watching the scene: “I den här scenen, när familjen plaskar i kärlek och lycka, är det dags för oss att dra oss undan och återlämna dessa människors liv till dom själva.” (2005, 199) [In this scene, when the family is frolicking in love and happiness, it is time for us to retreat and leave these people’s lives to their own devices (my translation)]. The narrator’s use of the hyperbolic and unexpected verb “plaskar” [splash/frolic] and the noun “scenen” [the scene] emphasizes the irony and the performative manner of the characters which suggests the unsustainable nature of happiness in the family and the nation. The narrative strategy of hyperbolic language creates a notion of the imaginary, which enhances the contrast between the everyday reality of the characters and the imaginary concept of Swedish assimilation and Sweden as the good nation.

In short, the strategic use of irony, humor, and fairy tale-like features enhances the characters’ detachment from Swedish society and the portrayal of their displacement and alienation convey the postmigrant condition as a performative place. This confirms Leonard’s claim that postmigrant authors employ the irrational as a purposeful performance. He states: “these authors have placed the *irrational*—specifically, imagination and fantasy—in explicit opposition to a society that, since the 1930s, has imagined itself as guided by progressive, utilitarian, and logical underpinnings” (Leonard 2022, 193). Leonard argues that in these novels from the early 2000s, there are possibilities for new imaginations of post-ethnic identity and

belonging. In addition, I argue that these postmigrant texts describe the divide between the older generation who strives to integrate to Sweden and the younger generation who rebels against the idea and the possibility of assimilation.

2.3. Everyday Anxiety and a Narrative of Rage

In my analysis of Khemiri's novels, I apply Ahmed's theory of the melancholic family and the notion of the happiness turn. I examine how the texts illustrate Ahmed's concept of melancholic migrants who refuse to let go of past suffering or comply with a "happiness duty" which Ahmed defines as "a duty not to cause unhappiness by speaking about your disappointment" (Ahmed 2010, 249). According to Ahmed, happy immigrants are those who willingly assimilate, whereas immigrants who remain attached to their origins function as ghosts, haunting Western cultures by dredging up hurtful pasts. Ahmed claims that they act as affect aliens who refuse to accept the nation as the good family into whose arms the migrant must be received and willing to go (Ahmed 2010, 148). In my discussion of Khemiri's novels, I investigate how the displacement of migrants and the shared trauma of intergenerational alienation manifest as anxiety and fear in the texts and how this is conveyed in the form of a silent narrative of rage.

Furthermore, I examine the construction of postmigrant identities and how notions of hybridity manifest in Khemiri's novels. In *Montecore*, Khemiri juxtaposes the portrayal of the father Abbas, who aspires to become a fully assimilated Swede, with his son Jonas who listens to hip-hop, deliberately speaks with an Arabic accent, and refuses to make friends with native Swedes. The juxtaposition of these radically different positions emphasizes the difference between first and second generations of migrants and the tension between the

aspirations and the positions available to them in Swedish society.

Furthermore, I explore the portrayal of postmigrant melancholia and the anxiety of everyday life as it is conveyed in the novel *Pappaklausulen*. I employ Ahmed's concept of melancholic migrants who will not take part in forgetting racism or comply with a happiness duty. I argue that the characters in *Pappaklausulen* belong in a literary archive of unhappy, postmigrant families, melancholic migrants, who will not participate in the forgetting of racism. The migrant father in *Pappaklausulen* exposes the unhappiness crack in the family as well as in the nation, Sweden, while his son is haunted by the failures of his father and the breakdown of the family. What might be read as an expression of millennial everyday anxiety is weaved into a narrative of rage which emphasizes the postmigrant condition and illustrates the intergenerational alienation and displacement.

As discussed earlier, the melancholic migrant in *Pappaklausulen* is the grandfather who visits his children in Sweden regularly as a strategy to not lose his Swedish citizenship. Thus, in the first sentence of the novel, there is tension in the description of the father and his relationship to the country that he is returning to, although he has "never left." This speaks to the concept of postmigration as a condition with no beginning or end and illustrates Stuart Hall's argument that "identity is always an open, complex and unfinished game—always 'under construction'. It always moves into the future by a symbolic detour through the past." (Hall 1991, 2). A couple of paragraphs into the novel, the grandfather is waiting for his children to pick him up from the airport. The description of the father's complicated relationship to the nation and the humorous characterization of him emphasize the alienation between the father and the nation as well as with his children. Ahmed argues that "the melancholic migrant is ashamed of his family for not being what he wants them to be" (2010, 147). This relates to the portrayal of the father's anger in

relation to the country where his children were born and raised, and toward his children as representing the country.

In contrast to Khemiri's earlier novels, the characters in *Pappaklausulen* are nameless and defined in terms of their positions in the family; "a father", "a son", "a sister", and "a father who is a grandfather" or "a son who is also a father." This narrative strategy enhances the unstable identities available to migrants and postmigrants, while emphasizing the significance of the family as a trope in the novel. In addition, the intertextual references between Khemiri's novels illuminate the theme of intergenerational trauma. As mentioned previously, the father in *Montecore* is a stay-at-home dad, not by choice, but from lack of employment when his wife goes to nursing school. In *Pappaklausulen*, the son is also a stay-at-home dad, and he is struggling with his identity in relation to his successful partner, as well as to his own father. Thus, the son represents the postmigrant who is fully integrated in society, he speaks the language fluently, and he has fully accepted Swedish norms and gender roles. Yet, he is struggling with a lack of purpose, and the inherent trauma from his father's lack of success which is haunting him like a ghost. The title of the novel refers to the family clause which is the financial and emotional burden of the son who needs to take care of his father.

The omission of all signifying details such as names, language, nationality, and ethnicity relates to Leonard's discussion of the utilization of the imaginary and the irrational and enhances the performativity of the characters. Leonard describes this narrative strategy as "the way in which their characters *performed* their own identities as wholly constitutive of that identity. In other words, they figure identity as performance rather than essence" (Leonard 2019, 3). The transgression of the unstable boundaries of the characters' identities and the omission of all markers of identity exemplify Khemiri's resistance to immigrant tropes and positions in Swedish

society and in previous so-called immigrant literature. Furthermore, the universality invoked by the nameless characters demonstrates the migrant's struggle to find a sense of belonging which reflects Ahmed's discussion of alienation. The unstable nature of the postmigrant identities is enhanced by the interchangeable nature of their positionalities. For example, the son is sometimes described as both "the father" and "the son" in the same sentence, which emphasizes the melancholia he has inherited from his father, as well as the vulnerable and unreliable nature of their transcultural identities. Furthermore, I argue that the omission of any signifiers of identity in the text illustrates the silencing of the postmigrant subject and the lack of access to the nation and to Swedish identity.

In comparison, Danish rapper and poet Yahya Hassan's poems from the first of two volumes, titled *Yahya Hassan* (2013), convey the melancholic family as a place of violence. Similarly to Khemiri, Hassan uses irony and humor which emphasize the rage and terror in the narrator's life. However, in contrast to Khemiri's novels, the anxiety of everyday life in Hassan's work is amplified through violent descriptions of his father's physical abuse which mirrors the nation's punishment in the form of the poet's incarceration. The blending of pronouns and the anonymous characters in Hassan's poems convey anxiety and melancholia, like at the end of this poem about the impossibility of switching places and being loved:

JEG SPILDER TYVE LITER MØRKE
OG EN BARNDOM OP AD VÆGGEN
ENSTENALDERSHÅND EN PAPERBACK-KORAN
MÅSKE VILLE JEG HAVE ELSKET DIG
HVIS JEG VAR DIN FAR OG IKKE DIN SØN

(“FAR MIN UFØDTE SØN” In *Yahya Hassan*, Yahya Hassan 2013)

I SPILL TWENTY LITERS OF DARKNESS^[L]_[SEP]
AND A CHILDHOOD UP AGAINST THE WALL^[L]_[SEP]
A STONE-AGE HAND A PAPERBACK KORAN
MAYBE I COULD HAVE LOVED YOU^[L]_[SEP]
IF I WAS YOUR FATHER AND NOT YOUR SON

(translated by Kuku Agami & Al Agami 2015)

In this poem, Hassan describes a child who is spilling liters of darkness, and the imagery of the wall and the Stone-Age hand conveys a sense of imprisonment while the paperback-Koran mixes notions of modernity, while at the same time eliciting fear by mentioning the hand, the wall, and the darkness. Furthermore, the sentence “maybe I could have loved you” invokes a sense of affection and simultaneously indicates the impossibility of love within the family.

In addition, Hassan’s poem conveys the displacement and shifting identities as the poem plays with the idea of switching positions between father and son, which implies a lack of stability and the possibility of rearranging the roles of parent and child. This speaks to the unstable transcultural identities and the challenge for the postmigrant child to take on the role of the caretaker in the new country, where the migrant parent has lost a lot of power from lack of language and not belonging culturally to the new society. Hassan’s poems describe an abusive family, yet there are moments of tenderness as the narrator views the father through the lens of his disappointment, like when he describes his Muslim father dressed in a Western tracksuit, grilling the traditional food halal:

MEN JEG ER STOLT AF DIG
SOM DU STÅR DER OG GRILLER HALAL

IKKE BARE EN FLYGTNING MED
FULDSKÆG OG JOGGINGTØJ

(“Ramadan” In *Yayha Hassan*, Yayha Hassan 2013)

BUT I AM PROUD OF YOU
AS YOU STAND THERE AND GRILL HALAL
NOT JUST A REFUGEE WITH A BIG
BEARD AND A TRACKSUIT

(translated by Jordan Barger 2025)

Hassan’s poems are written in caps with no punctuation, and the narration shifts between present and past tense, switches between pronouns, and blends signifiers from different languages, cultures, and religions. The strategy of blending identities and mixing pronouns is similar to Khemiri’s strategy in “Öppet brev till Beatrice Ask.” These linguistic strategies speak to El-Tayeb’s notion of creative creolization, in the sense that the positions and perspectives are constantly merging and changing. In addition, the capitalization infuses the poems with a narrative of rage and emotional resistance as described by Ahmed. Ahmed states: “To be alienated from happiness is to recognize not only that you are the one who is out of place but also that you cannot make yourself be in place” (Ahmed 2010, 156). This speaks to the representation of postmigrant identity in Hassan’s poetry. Throughout Hassan’s work, there is a refusal to participate in the happiness ideals of the new country, Denmark. Thus, the narrator in Hassan’s poems takes on the position as contrarian, much like the main character Halim in Khemiri’s novel *Montecore*.

In addition, Hassan’s use of violence, ironic descriptions of teachers and social workers, and the omission of names and signifiers illustrate Ahmed’s discussion of the melancholic

migrant who refuses to accept the happiness formula of assimilation, similarly to Khemiri's novel *Pappaklausulen*. Ahmed states: "to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force" (Ahmed 2010, 132). Thus, in both Khemiri's and Hassan's work, the melancholic family is an unstable place of alienation from the promise of happiness and the texts perform a form of resistance through the irrational and the imaginary, which echoes Leonard's description of an imagined nation "where ethnicity and citizenship were more flexibly coupled and dynamically combined than in the assumed homogeneity of the past" (Leonard 2019, 192). Furthermore, both Hassan and Khemiri use irony and humor to emphasize the rage and anxiety of the characters. They portray the displacement and shifting identities by switching positions between father and son, which implies a lack of stability and reflects the rearranging of the roles in the family.

Subsequently, reading Khemiri's novels in conversation with texts by Swedish author Marjaneh Bakhtiari and Danish poet Yayha Hassan opens up interesting avenues for further research to explore authors from the post-ethnic turn of the early 2000s and how the theme of the family has evolved in postmigrant literature. Throughout Khemiri's work, there is a defiance and a refusal to participate in the happiness ideal of the new country. In relation to the re-evaluation of Swedish and European identity and new ways of writing about belonging, I argue that this generation of writers are part of a postmigrant turn in contemporary, Scandinavian literature.

Chapter 3: Writing Life: Autofictionalization in Khemiri's Novels

Swedish novelist and playwright Jonas Hassen Khemiri has stated in interviews that he is a fiction writer with no desire to write in the genres of memoir or autobiography. However, I argue that in his work, there is a recurrent strategy of blending the boundaries of fiction and autobiography, for example, by using his own name for characters and including seemingly autobiographical details. This chapter explores Khemiri's novels *Systrarna* (2023), and *Pappaklausulen* (2018) in relation to “autofictionalization,” a term coined by literary scholar Claus Elholm Andersen in his book *Knausgård and the Autofictional Novel* (2023) that examines Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård's novel *Min Kamp* (2009—2011; *My Struggle*, 2013—2019). Andersen defines autofictionalization as blending the narrative strategies of autofiction and fiction. According to Andersen, autofictionalization creates a distance between the narrating self, who is narrating the story in present time, and the voice of the former self: “Autofictionalization places the voice or the narrative consciousness not with the narrator, as we have come to accept it in autobiography, but with the author's former self” (Andersen 2023, 25).

This chapter argues that Khemiri's novels employ strategies that indicate an attempt to move away from being positioned merely in postmigrant literature and align with postmodernist and modernist literary traditions. In addition, I claim that Khemiri, through autofictionalization and engaging in “performative biographism” (Haarder, 2014), tries to escape racialized readings and position himself as a Swedish novelist in the field of modern Scandinavian literature. Subsequently, I claim that Khemiri's latest two novels convey an intention to shift the discussion

away from racialized categories of authorship and argue for the salience of other categories of analysis.

In his comprehensive study, Andersen calls Karl Ove Knausgård a literary centaur, a term originally used by Swedish scholar Arne Mellberg who describes Knausgård's novel as the body of a novel with an autobiographical head (Andersen 2023). Andersen states: "I argue that Knausgård decouples the novel from fiction, muddling the boundary between the two. Doing so, he renews and revitalizes the genre" (Andersen 2023, 1). In contrast, I suggest that Khemiri is a reluctant autofictional author, who employs autofictionalization to blend the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. The following example from the novel *Systrarna* illustrates how Khemiri uses autofictionalization to portray the relationship between the main character and his father; narrated through the consciousness of the former self of the son:

Det finns en regel som vi måste respektera och det är denna, sa pappa, när tunnelbanan började åka. Pojkar har kort hår och tjejer långt hår. Men mamma har kort hår, sa jag. Det är ett undantag, sa pappa. Hade inte du långt hår när du var ung? Det var länge sen. Men jag gillar mitt långa hår, sa jag. Du ser ut som en tjej, sa pappa. Jag bryr mig inte, sa jag. Du kommer bry dig, sa pappa. (2023, 32)

There is one rule that we should respect and that's this one, he said, when the subway accelerated. Boys have short hair and girls have long hair. But mom has short hair, I said. That's an exception, Dad said. Didn't you have long hair when you were young? That was a long time ago. But I like my long hair, I said. You look like a girl, Dad said. I don't care, I said. You will care, Dad said. (2025, 23)

In this passage, the reader experiences the situation alongside the boy without the perspective of the adult narrator. There is no foreshadowing of what happens later, when the father takes the

son to the barber, who cuts off his hair without warning. Thus, through autofictionalization, the reader sees the events as they unfold from the point of view of the boy. Furthermore, this passage illustrates the significance of the relationship between the father and the son in the novel and conveys their complicated connection.

3.1. Autofictionalization and Performative Biographism

According to Andersen, the term “autofiction” was first used in 1976 by American novelist Paul West. The next year, French author Serge Doubrovsky wrote a blurb for his novel *Fils* (1977), describing it as “fiction, of strictly real events and fact; autofiction, if you like” (In Ferguson 2018, 29). Doubrovsky’s definition of autofiction was in response to Philippe Lejeune’s (1989) phrase “the autobiographical pact” which implies an understanding between reader and author based on a homology between author, narrator and character with regard to name. Literary scholar Claudia Gronemann states in “Autofiction” (2019. In *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner Egelhaaf, 241—246): “An autofictional text purports to be both fictional and autobiographical, and thus represents a paradox in the traditional understanding of the genre” (Gronemann 2019, 241). Furthermore, Gronemann claims that “any text could be called autofiction if it bears the subtitle ‘novel’ while producing referentiality as an autobiography does, usually by virtue of the author and protagonist sharing the same name” (Gronemann 2019, 241). She notes that genre theorists like Philippe Gasparini and Vincent Colonna consider autofiction a renewal of the autobiographical paradigm, related to the debate on boundaries of literary self-presentation (Gronemann 243).

Furthermore, Gronemann notes that autofiction brings existential motives for writing into the debate as components in a never-ending process as an integral part of existence. Andersen

defines autofiction as “a subgenre of the novel that involves a blurring of fiction and reality that has created a new sense of sincerity that suggests a departure from the poetics of postmodernism” (Andersen 2023, 8). Similarly, Dutch scholar Inge Van de Ven claims in “The Monumental Knausgård: Big Data, Quantified Self, and Proust for the Facebook Generation” (2018) that Knausgård’s novel *My Struggle* conveys significant traits of autofiction through the large scope, abundance of everyday details, and blurring of genre boundaries:

I choose for the larger class of autofiction (or fictionalized autobiography) as a denominator for Knausgård’s writing, but also call them “literary autofictions” because I wish to underscore the *literary quality* of these works and their author’s literary ambitions. In other words, I seek to foreground their innovative character and aesthetic properties without disregarding the truth claims that inform this project. To my mind, literary autofiction maintains and highlights the tensions and hybridizations between ‘real-life’ materials and literary treatments of them (Van de Ven 2018, 323).

I argue that Khemiri’s novels destabilize the distinction between autobiography and fiction, which challenges and uproots the contract between reader and author, and between the genres of fiction, autofiction, and memoir. For example, Khemiri describes his texts as novels, while using strategies like autofictionalization to destabilize notions of genre, making the reader question which parts of the texts are fictional versus autobiographical. It is noteworthy that his writing trajectory differs from Swedish author Johannes Anyuru, whose novels engage deeply with themes of religion, cultural identity, and race. Although Khemiri’s earlier novels *Ett Öga Rött* (2003) and *Montecore* (2006) thematically engage with postmigrant and migrant identity

formation, his two latest novels, *Pappaklausulen* and *Systrarna*, focus less on cultural and national identity and more on existential anxiety and individualization.

According to scholars in the field, there is a tendency in contemporary postmigrant literature to blend genres and experiment with new forms as a strategy of resistance. Maïmouna Jagne-Soreau argues in “I don’t write about me, I write about you.” Four major motifs in the Nordic postmigration literary trend” (2021) that autofiction is a major current trend in postmigrant Scandinavian literature, and she claims that this can be viewed as an attempt to escape racialized readings. Jagne-Soreau states that postmigrant authors employ strategies such as “blurring of the issues of authenticity and performative biographism” (Jagne-Soreau 2021, 166) and “a play with authenticity and a specific address to the imagined readership” (Jagne-Soreau 2021, 167). Furthermore, she argues that postmigrant authors convey a strategy of resistance by playing metafictional games such as referring to the writing process and the publishing business, and by mentioning prolific authors of autofiction as *mise-en-abyme*, exemplified by for example Danish poet Yahya Hassan and Norwegian poet Sara Zahid who both mention Knausgård in their texts. Although Khemiri does not directly mention Knausgård in his novels, I argue that the texts are related through the theme of the stay-at-home dad, modern-day masculinity, everyday anxiety, in *Pappaklausulen*. Furthermore, Knausgård’s novel *My Struggle* is divided into several books (Bok 1-6) and similarly, Khemiri’s novel *Systrarna*, although just one volume, is divided into seven chapters called Bok 1-7.

According to literary scholar Marjorie Worthington, autofiction is an increasingly common feature of contemporary fiction. She claims in *The Story of “Me”* (2018) that the rise of autofiction in American literature since the 1960s is an extension of the poststructuralist notion that all writing is “a representation of reality, and therefore, a fiction” (Worthington 2018, 19).

She notes that autofiction combines two modes of writing, autofiction and fiction, in an era which she defines as “post-truth.” She claims that autofiction belongs in a postmodern frame, and she problematizes the genre as being mainly “written by white men” (Worthington 2018, 19), often promoting masculinity. Nigerian-American novelist Tope Folarin argues that authors of color who write autofiction are often placed in categories of immigrant literature, and literary critics focus more on the content of texts rather than on their place in the contemporary literary landscape (Folarin 2020). My analysis of Khemiri’s novels is informed by the arguments put forth by Worthington and Folarin. I claim that in addition to using autofiction as a strategy of resistance, Khemiri engages in performative biographism to further challenge assumptions about contemporary postmigrant literature.

The concept of performative biographism is described by Danish scholar Jon Helt Haarder in *Performativ biografisme: En hovedstrømning i det senmodernes skandinaviske litteratur* (2014). Haarder defines performative biographism as a strategy where biographical references transfer from being a secret behind the artistic or literary work to being an effect or material on the surface between reader/audience, artist/author and the work. According to Haarder, performative biographism places “the biographical” as a stake in a game as a hidden resource (Haarder 2014, 78), and he argues that this problematizes the modernist concept of de-personalization and moves the discussion away from poststructuralist notions of authorship: “Kunstneren tilegner sig sin egen biografi og omdanner den til materiale” (Haarder 2014, 79) [The artist acquires their own biography and converts it to material (my translation)]. In addition, Haarder argues that an aspect of performative biographism is the utilization of both the author’s lived experience and the reception of their work in the media: “Performativ biografisme betegner det at kunstnere bruger sig selv og andre virkelige personer i en æstetisk betonet interaktion med

laeserens og offentlighedens reaktioner” (Haarder 2014, 9) [Performative biographism denotes that artists use themselves and other real people in an aesthetically charged interaction with the reader's and the public's reactions (my translation)]. This applies to Khemiri’s intertextual and metafictional references in *Montecore* in relation to the reception of *Ett Öga Rött* in the media, as exemplified by the discussion about his supposed use of “Rinkeby-svenska.” Haarder builds on scholars Kristin Langellien and Eric Peterson who describe the historical background to performative biographism in “Shifting Contexts in Personal Narrative Performance” (2006). For instance, Haarder refers to Langellien and Peterson who place the concept of performative biographism in a broader contemporary field:

Performing personal narrative is fueled by several broader cultural contingencies burgeoning after World War II in the United States, among them the memoir/autobiography boom in writing: the new identity movements organized around civil rights, gender, sexuality, age, and ability; the therapeutic cultures of illness, trauma, and self-help, and the many self-performance practices of performance art, popular culture, and electronic media (Langellien & Petersen in Haarder 2014, 152).

Similarly, Swedish scholar Christian Lenemark investigates authors who write in the genre of autobiography in his analysis of the mediatization of authors. In *Sanna lögner. Carina Rydberg, Stig Larsson and författarens Medialisering* (2009), Lenemark examines the interplay between author, literature, and the media in Sweden around the year 2000, and he explores the following questions: In what ways does the media produce the image of the author? How does the author produce the image of a self through their writing and participation in the media? How do these images relate to one another, and what literary effects do they have on aesthetics and content? These questions are discussed in relation to Swedish authors Carina Rydberg and Stig Larsson

who, according to Lenemark, are pioneers of the mediatization of the author in the postmodern era. He examines how their work and their participation in media explore the border zone between life and text, fact and fiction, and the private and the public sphere.

As mentioned, Jagne-Soreau argues that contemporary Scandinavian postmigrant authors purposefully blur the boundaries between authenticity and performative biographism. She states that “there seems to be an intention on the authors’ side to confuse the reader” (Jagne-Soreau 2021, 166). Jagne-Soreau claims that one strategy commonly used in Scandinavian postmigrant literature is to use a first-person perspective “using a profusion of biographical elements, like their own name, background, age, family constellation or even their own birth and adoption certificate in their works” (Jagne-Soreau 2021, 166). She argues that one aspect of performative biographism is playing metafictional games, as in Finnish poet Adrian Perera’s book *White Monkey* (2017), where the author speaks of the commercial niche of his poetry, calling it “wog poetry”, and invokes intertextual references to Swedish poets Athena Farrokhzad and Johannes Anyuru, and Danish poet Yahya Hassan. Furthermore, Jagne-Soreau explains that additional examples of how postmigrant authors engage with performative biographism are by referencing the writing process, the literary establishment, and the publishing business, exemplified by Hassan and Zahid, who mention Knausgård in their texts.

In Khemiri’s novels, there are similar strategies at work. For example, *Ett Öga Rött* and *Montecore* engage with migrant and postmigrant identity formation by mixing languages and deliberately breaking up syntax and grammar. Furthermore, Khemiri references the writing process and the literary establishment in all of his novels, which aligns him with the postmodernist tradition and Jagne-Soreau’s discussion. For example, in *Montecore* (2006), one of the characters, Kadir asks the main character, an author named Jonas Hassen Khemiri, to write

his father's story. Kadir is a friend of Khemiri's father from their home country. I argue that *Montecore* and *Ett Öga Rött* employ imagery and hyperbolic language, humor, and irony as strategies of destabilization. Despite autobiographical signifiers such as the migrant father character and using the same name for the author character as the name of the real-life author, *Montecore* was received as a novel, as declared on the front page: "En Roman" [A Novel]. Although there has been an increase in genre-blending literature—Knausgård's novel *My Struggle* being the most groundbreaking example, at least in Scandinavia, in terms of size, reception, and debate—one reason *Montecore* was received as a novel, and not as autofiction, is timing. In 2006, we had not yet arrived at what I call the autobiographical turn.

Andersen discusses the significance of timing and argues that the release of Knausgård's novel is closely related to the financial crisis of 2008, which "revealed a system of exchange based on fictitious evaluations of worth" (Andersen 2023, 2). Andersen claims that this event marked a turn in the political and economic climate and that the blending of genres in literature and the rise of autofiction coincide with what David Shields calls "reality hunger" (Shields 2010). In addition, *Montecore* was published before the shift in contemporary discourse regarding the so-called immigrant literature. There was a reluctance to engage with performative biographism among authors from the second and third generation of migrants, no doubt due to the biographically centered and racialized readings of their texts.

3.2. An Era of Post-Truth

Marjorie Worthington claims that autofiction differs from memoir by "consciously both connecting to and departing from the facts of their author/characters' extra-textual lives in order to test the limits of the connection to the external world that memoirs maintain" (Worthington

2017, 476). She states that despite a narrator sharing the author's name, this connection is purposefully challenged in the genre of autofiction. Similar to Jagne-Soreau's analysis of Scandinavian postmigrant literature, Worthington argues that autofictional texts often include plots pertaining to writers who struggle with their art of writing, which reads as an attempt to reassert authorial authority. For example, this applies to *My Struggle*, which uses the struggle of writing as a main theme. In the novel, time is often described in connection to real-life events related to his writing career: his time as an aspiring writer in Paris, his scholarship to Berlin, his fellowship to New York City, which was postponed due to Covid-19. Thus, *Systrarna* destabilizes and uproots the contract between reader and author, and between fiction, autofiction and memoir, which creates what Worthington describes as "a synergistic effect" (Worthington 2017, 481). She argues that writers of autofictional novels show what fiction writers have known for centuries, that "fiction can portray truths that non-fiction cannot" (Worthington 2017, 481), and she states that the contemporary mode of autofiction engages readers because the genre combines "the gesture towards reality that memoirs provide and the gesture toward abstract truth that we typically associate with the novel" (Worthington 2017, 481).

Similarly, Khemiri's novels have modernist features such as experimenting with form, blending images and themes, non-linear temporality, stream of consciousness, symbolism, and magic. In addition to blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, Khemiri's novel *Systrarna* performs a balancing act between past and present, Sweden and America. The novel spans over 723 pages and consists of seven chapters, each covering a shorter amount of time – a year, six months, three months, a month, a week, a day, a minute – moving forward in time, mirroring how we experience time as passing faster as we grow older. Adding to the ambiguous narration and its play with temporality is the fact that the last chapter covers only one minute in

2035, yet it seems as real as any other part of the text, despite taking place in the future and thus, cannot be autobiographical. The story centers around three sisters and a writer. They meet as children in Stockholm, and the novel follows them until middle age, through the pandemic and into the future. The characters travel, not only through time but geographically, from Stockholm to Paris, to North Africa, and to New York City. Facts and historical details convey the unreliable nature, not just of the narration of the novel, but of our memories, which makes us question the concept of time.

For example, we learn that Jonas and Evelyn were at the Stockholm Water Festival in 1993 and that they witnessed the spectacular crash of a JAS fighter plane: a real-life event. But when they later discuss the event, Evelyn has no memory of Jonas being there. This destabilizes our perception of the narrative, because we know that the crash took place in Stockhol, and the narrative confirms Evelyn's presence there. This makes us question the narrator, which highlights the autofictional nature of the text. Similarly, the sisters believe that they are related to one of the men in the famous photo "Lunch atop a Skyscraper" from the construction of Rockefeller Center in New York City. Again, we know that this photo exists and that it portrays the workers, who are having lunch while sitting on a steel beam above the city, but the novel never reveals whether the sisters are related to them.

However, Khemiri's work also conveys postmodern traits like the destabilization of the subject, the reversal of narration and voice, and a resistance toward the notion of truth, which according to Worthington are features of an era of post-truth. Worthington argues that the current rise in popularity of memoir and autofiction indicates an interest in a discussion of truth in contemporary discourse. The Oxford dictionary named "post-truth" word of the year in 2016, and Worthington draws a connection to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which spurred a

political debate on issues of truth. Regarding trends in contemporary literature, Worthington states: “Perhaps, then, rather than a reaction *against* poststructuralist ideas of language’s fallibility and the impossibility of objective truth, it could be argued that the popularity of the memoir is due to in large part an acceptance of those very ideas” (Worthington 2017, 475). Andersen claims in “Narratives of a Life: Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle* as a literary centaur” (2018) that Knausgård uses narrative techniques to create tension and drama, which adds vitality and energy to the genre of the novel by incorporating biographical elements: “Knausgård uses his own biography in what I call narratives of life in an attempt to reinstate the subject at a time when it has otherwise been declared dead. In doing so, Knausgård seems to reawaken the tradition of the great modernist novel in the early twentieth century” (Andersen 2018, 25). He notes that despite Knausgård’s claim to write his life as a diary, the novel entails characteristics associated with fiction, indicating the author’s literary ambitions. Similarly, Khemiri’s presentation of *Systrarna* suggests an attempt to establish a fictional pact with the reader. The book has the word “Roman” (novel) on the cover and the chapters are titled “Bok 1” and “Bok 2” (book). Furthermore, the novel is introduced by two quotes by Toni Morrison and Selma Lagerlöf, both canonized authors. These quotes are further discussed in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

There are several additional narrative strategies in Khemiri’s novels which play with the concept of genre. In *Systrarna*, Khemiri challenges the reader’s expectation of narration when he reverses the authorial positions. Throughout the novel, the narrative voice switches between first-person and third-person. At the end, the perspective pivots and one of the sisters, Evelyn, becomes the focal point as the third-person narrator. The remainder of the story is narrated from her point of view as she describes how an author

from Sweden contacts her and wants to discuss their families' joint history. It is obvious to the reader that the author in the novel is identical to the real author, Khemiri, but we are as surprised as he is when it turns out that Evelyn is writing a monologue with her sister Anastasia:

I januari 2022 stämmer de träff på Grand Central för att ta tåget upstate tillsammans.

Författaren som påstår att han eventuellt är hennes halvbror har erbjudit sig att åka med, vilket passar utmärkt för Evelyn har inga pengar till att köpa tågbiljetter. (2023, 707)

In January, 2022, they arranged to meet at Grand Central to take the train upstate together. The author who claimed to possibly be her half-brother offered to join her, which was perfect, since Evelyn didn't have money to buy train tickets. (2025, 625)

In a metafictional twist, the author gives Evelyn a manuscript to read on the train, and it turns out to be the manuscript for the novel *Systrarna*. Through the third-person narration, we get Evelyn's reaction after reading the manuscript:

Det handlar om tre systrar som står i en hiss på väg upp till en nyårsfest. Texten är skriven på engelska, men är tydligt skriven av någon som inte har engelska som modersmål. Vissa meningar känns klippta och klistrade från Evelyn's monolog. (2023, 708)

It's about three sisters in an elevator on their way to a New Year's Eve party. The text is written in English, but clearly authored by someone whose native language isn't English. Some sentences feel cut and pasted from Evelyn's monologue. (2025, 626)

In this part of the novel, Khemiri deploys narrative strategies that challenge the boundaries of memoir, fiction, and autofiction. Through an intertextual relationship in the novel, Khemiri destabilizes the reader's expectation of genre and narration in three parts: First, the scene described by Evelyn, who is reading the script on the train, is identical to the beginning of

Systrarna, except it is written in English, not Swedish. As mentioned, Khemiri has spoken in the media about how he first wrote the novel in English and then rewrote it in Swedish. This relates to Worthington's argument about using the writer's life as a theme in autofictional novels. Second, Evelyn's comment about how the text is "clearly" written by someone who is not native in English speaks a larger discussion about language and identity in the contemporary postmigrant field, as discussed by Jagne-Soreau. Third, the boundary between fiction and reality is challenged by the last quote in the text, which is identical to part of the monologue that Evelyn is writing. If the book is identical to Evelyn's monologue, who is really the author? This plot twist challenges our understanding of genre, fact and fiction, which is further illustrated when the author asks Evelyn:

Känner du igen dig? säger han med ett stolt leende. Varför har du hittat på ett låtsasnamn till mig? säger hon. Varför försöker du inbilla läsaren att du kom fram till mig och försökte prata på nyårsfesten? Det är ju en roman, säger han. Och i en roman får man hitta på saker. Men du och dina bröder har ju riktiga namn? säger hon. Texten handlar ju mer om min bild av er än om era riktiga jag, säger han. (2023, 708—709)

Do you recognize yourself? he says, with a proud smile. Why did you give me a made-up name? she says. And why do you try to make the reader believe you approached me at that New Year's Eve party? It's a novel, he says. And in a novel, you can make things up. (2025, 626)

(But you and your brothers have real names? she says. The text is really more about my idea of you rather than your real selves, he says). (my translation)

This quote illustrates several aspects of Khemiri's narrative strategy. By asking Evelyn if she recognizes herself, he implies that the sisters are not fictional. Then, Evelyn asks him why he has given her a fake name and continues to critique his portrayal of the New Year's Eve party. Thus, she implies that the party as described by the author does not correlate with the real event. This is confirmed by the author, who states that it is a novel and "in a novel, you can make things up," which implies that Khemiri's intention for the book is to be read as fiction. It is an interesting detail that the event which the plot returns to here is a New Year's Eve party, just like one of the main events in Knausgård's novel *My Struggle*. Furthermore, there is an omitted part of the English translation. When Evelyn states that the author has kept his own and his brothers' real names in the text, the author responds: "The text really is more about my idea of you rather than your real selves." It is noteworthy that Khemiri has opted out of keeping these two sentences in the English translation of the novel, and it speaks to my argument that Khemiri attempts to move away from biographical readings of his work and present *Systrarna* as fiction. At this point, Khemiri shifts from using third-person narration when describing his childhood memories and his present self, to portraying himself as seen through the eyes of Evelyn as the focal point. Thus, the narration transgresses the boundaries between fiction and reality at an intensifying speed, which destabilizes the reader's perception of truth. Evelyn says:

Först ville jag berätta min historia, säger hon. Sen blev min historia kopplad till mina systrars historia, och våra föräldrars historia, och sen tänkte jag att det skulle handla om förbannelsen, och sen skyskraporna och sen förstod jag att hela monologen måste kretsa kring tid. (2023, 699)

First, I wanted to tell my story, she says. Then, my story became intertwined with my sisters' stories and our parents' stories, and then I thought it would be about the curse,

and then the skyscrapers, and then I realized that the entire monologue must revolve around time. (2025, 618)

This passage speaks to Khemiri's process of writing *Systrarna*, and perhaps his process of writing in general, using stream of consciousness, the genre-bending conflation of fiction and reality, the merging of author and narrator, and finally, the surprising revelation (to the author in the text as well as the reader) that the monologue that Evelyn is writing is called "Systrarna," a fact she reluctantly admits to the author:

Vad heter den? Jag har ingen titel, säger hon. Såklart du har. Nej, säger hon. Men du har ju filat på den i åtta år, säger han. Den måste ju ha en arbetstitel. Anastasia ville att den skulle heta *Systrar upphöjt till tre*, säger hon. Men jag kallar den *Systrarna*. Han är tyst. (2023, 699)

What's the title? I don't have one. Of course you do. No, she says. But you've been working on it for eight years, it must have a working title. Anastasia wanted it to be called *Sisters Raised to the Power of Three*, she says. But I call it *The Sisters*. He falls silent. (2025, 618)

This sequence exemplifies the use of metafictional traits in the novel. At the end of chapter 135, which describes one day in 2022, the author returns to Evelyn's apartment in New York, only to find out that she has left. A maintenance man tells the author that there are two cats left behind, and the author offers to take them home to his children:

Han tar hem dem till sina barn, de blir överlyckliga, de döper om katterna till Gråtass och Svarta Natten, även om författaren fortfarande tänker på dem som Evelyns katter. (2023, 712)

He takes them home to his children, who are overjoyed, they rename the cats Graypaw and Nightshade, even though he still thinks of them as Evelyn's cats. (2025, 629)

This passage further blurs the boundary between fiction and autofiction. From the media, we know that Jonas Hassen Khemiri has moved from Sweden to New York City with his family: thus, the fact that the children give the cats Swedish names imply that they are Khemiri's actual children. Thus, Khemiri destabilizes our understanding of reality and fiction, which further adds to the reader's confusion. It remains uncertain whether he actually visited a woman named Evelyn in New York, and we are left to wonder whether she and her sisters even exist. In addition, the mystery regarding whether or not they are the author's half-siblings remains unsolved.

3.3. Searching for Said

Earlier in his career, Khemiri was reticent about his biographical background both in the media and in his texts, which indicates an aim for his work to be read as fiction and to avoid the conflation of the author and the characters, despite using his own name in his texts. *Systrarna* marks a change in the sense that Khemiri as first-person narrator engages in more depth with his father's background and describes traveling to Tunisia with him. Even so, the part of the novel that takes place in Tunisia is thematically focused more on relationships than on cultural and ethnic identity. In *Systrarna*, the young narrator, who we assume to be identical to the author, tells his girlfriend Emma about his father, sharing details he has never spoken about before. He opens up about family secrets that he has been hesitant to share. This relates to how Khemiri, after the release of *Systrarna*, spoke openly in the media about how he wanted to write about

issues from his own family story. As the narrator shares secrets about his father with Emma, the author simultaneously reveals details about his autobiographical self to the reader:

Men när Emma frågade om honom så sa jag att han var försvunnen, han hade lämnat oss och ingen visste var han var, hon var den första personen jag erkände allt för, det bara kom ut, alla sakerna jag inte sagt till någon under alla dessa år. (2023, 265)

But when Emma asked about him, I said he was missing, he had left us and nobody knew where he was, she was the first person I confessed everything to, it just came out, all those things I hadn't told anyone in all these years. (2025, 238)

It is noteworthy that he uses the word *erkänna* (confess) to describe what happened to him, which implies a sense of shame. The conversation is conveyed as a stream of consciousness in the narrator's mind, which ends when Emma asks:

Kanske var det bara insikten om att livet aldrig skulle bli som han hade föreställt sig det, kanske var det bara tiden som förstörde honom. Menar du tiden här i Sverige? sa Emma. Nej bara tiden generellt, sa jag. (2023, 265)

Maybe it was just the realization that life would never be as he had imagined it to be, maybe it was just time that destroyed him. Do you mean his time here in Sweden? said Emma. No just time in general, I said. (2025, 238)

Emma's question implies that she assumes that the father's problems are related to being an immigrant, struggling to assimilate to Sweden. Through the narrator's response, the author conveys his attempt to tell a universal story about human experience which suggests that the postmigrant, or migrant experience, is not the most important theme of the novel. This marks a change from Khemiri's earlier novels, in which the postmigrant (and migrant) condition is a central theme.

As discussed by Magnus Nilsson (2007, 2010, 2012) and Natia Gokieli (2017), the generation of postmigrant, Scandinavian authors who began publishing novels in the late 1990s were analyzed through an ethnic lens. As scholars noted in recent years, most of these authors never experienced a different country than Sweden, since they had not themselves migrated. Subsequently, the themes in their work are not primarily issues of migration or national identity. As mentioned before, we are currently experiencing a shift in the literary discourse. I argue that the experimental form, blurred genres, mixed languages, and the intertextual references in Khemiri's novels suggest an attempt to avoid racialized readings and being positioned as primarily a postmigrant author.

Thus, I claim that the blending of genres and mixing of languages are strategies in the contemporary field of literature among authors who are positioned as postmigrant writers. The novel *Systrarna* begins with a few words English: "And so it was told att historien om Mikkolasystrarna började den sista december, på millenniets sista dag" (2022, 11) (And so it was told that the story of the Mikkola-sisters started on the last of December, the last day of the millenium) (2025, 5). By using English in the opening of the novel, Khemiri sets the tone for a multilingual, cosmopolitan text. In addition, he invokes the genre of the novel by emphasizing the fictionality of the text through the word "story" ("historien") which creates a sense of ambiguity since the word "story" implies fiction. In addition, the term millenium speaks to the significance of the current time, which confirms my argument that Khemiri's recent novels indicate an attempt to position his authorship as a millennial, Swedish author. As mentioned earlier, this reflects an intention to avoid being positioned as a postmigrant author, or as was the case earlier in his career, an immigrant writer. After the introduction, the story continues with the first person narrator who describes how he first heard about the Mikkola-sisters:

Första gången jag hörde talas om Mikkolasysterna var jag fem eller sex år gammal, jag satt på vardagsrumsgolvet i vår gamla lägenhet, på Drakenbergsgatan 8, fem trappor upp, en trea. (2023, 20)

The first time I heard about the Mikkola-sisters, I was five or six years old, sitting on the living room floor of our old apartment, the one on Drakenbergsgatan 8, five stairs up, a two-bedroom apartment. (2025, 13)

By stating his age and his exact address, Khemiri constructs a narrative where the combination of reality markers and the first-person narration suggests an autobiographical reading of the text. However, when he mentions the Mikkola-sisters, it is uncertain whether the sisters are part of his memory, or if it is implied that the scene with the sisters, who were introduced in the first chapter, is fictional. As previously mentioned, I argue that the trajectory of Khemiri's authorship indicates an increased use of autofiction in his later novels compared to his earlier work. Literary scholar Melissa Schuh argues in "The (Un)making of a Novelist's Self: 'Late Style' in Günter Grass' and J.M. Coetzee's Autobiographical Writing" (2015) that the late work (as in later in their career) of authors Günter Grass and J. M. Coetzee employ narrative and stylistic strategies that merge fictional and autobiographical genres. To define "late work," Schuh refers to Edward Said who conceptualizes late style as "an aesthetic quality in an artist's late work, which can convey either of two notions: reconciliation and contradiction" (Schuh 2015, 289). Schuh argues that Grass and Coetzee move between first and third-person narration in an attempt to remember and structure the past in relation to the present. She claims that Grass combines narratives in a way that "undercuts the notion of a straightforward relationship between the self, the novelist and his works" (Schuh 2015, 291). She argues that Grass writes about himself in third person, which contradicts the novelist's present self. Furthermore, Schuh states that comparing strategies

authors use in their late work “uncovers the writing life of the novelist as a source of stylistic innovation” (Schuh 2015, 294). To be clear, *Systrarna* is not necessarily Khemiri’s “late work,” since he is in the middle of his career. However, I argue that the strategy of blending genres, using first-person narration, and then shifting to third-person narration in the latter part of the novel, as well as portraying the author as a character as seen through a third-person narrator, all act as commentary on the notion of autobiographical self-representation and writing life as fiction.

Speaking of Said (1935–2003), known for his groundbreaking work in postcolonial literary theory, *Orientalism* (1978), it is noteworthy that he appears as a character in the middle of *Systrarna*. In Bok 2, which takes place over six months in 2003, the sisters and their friends attend a lecture by Said in Stockholm. In this passage, there is no mention of the author or the narrator Khemiri. The fact that the characters who attend the lecture are the characters who are portrayed as “more” fictional than the first person narrator emphasizes the fictionality of the scene. Thus, the narration adds to the destabilization of concepts such as truth, reality, and fiction and confirms the novel’s experimental form, balancing between the genres of fiction and autofiction. Ina’s inner monologue implies that her search for identity is intertwined with a longing for a father she never knew, which speaks to the theme of family and the postmigrant condition:

Hon sa inte till Hector att en av njutningarna med att läsa Said var att han var en arabisk intellektuell. Det skulle kännas konstigt att säga, kanske till och med lite rasistiskt, för Ina var inte tillräckligt mycket arab för att claima någon sorts anknytning till andra araber, hon pratade inte arabiska, hon hade bara varit i sin mammas hemland tre fyra gånger, och vad kom hon ihåg från de besöken? (2023, 320—321).

She didn't tell him that one of the pleasures of reading Said, was that he was an Arab intellectual. It would sound weird to say, maybe even a bit racist, because really, Ina wasn't Arab enough to claim any affiliation with other Arabs, she didn't speak Arabic, she had only been to her mother's home country three or four times, and what did she remember from those visits? (2025, 288)

It is noteworthy that Khemiri is absent from this scene and that the discussion of identity is conveyed through Ina's inner monologue. Furthermore, the connection between her mother's background and Said's ethnicity takes place in Ina's mind, and she doesn't share her thoughts with Hector. The passage where Ina questions whether she is "Arab enough" to claim a connection to Said speaks to how issues of belonging and identity are sometimes internalized as shame. This is amplified when Ina wonders if she is being racist for thinking that she has anything in common with Said, which alludes to her internalization of racism. The omission of Khemiri as a character from this passage emphasizes its function as commentary on the discussion of racialized identity in general and shifts the attention away from the author. Nevertheless, the fact that Ina connects her admiration for Said with her longing for a father speaks to the parallel story in the novel about the author's absent father :

Ändå gjorde Saida's ord något med henne, han var pappan hon aldrig haft, eller snarare, pappan som hade passat henne bättre, det var något med hans perspektiv på världen, hans ton, hans värdighet, hans författarfoto, hans efternamn, något med vetenskapen om att han också hade blivit förflyttad, han hade också startat i ett land och förlorat ett annat land, eller snarare: han hade också ett drömland som han på något plan visste att han aldrig skulle

kunna återbesöka, eftersom det bara existerade i det förflutna (eller kanske inte i det förflutna). (2023, 321).

Still, Said's words did something to her, he was the dad she never had, or rather: the dad who would have fit her better, there was something about his perspective, his tone, his author photo, his last name, something about the knowledge that he too had been displaced, he too had started in one country, and lost another country, or rather: he too had a country of his dreams that he on some level knew he would never be able to revisit because it only existed in the past, (or maybe not even in the past). (Khemiri 2025, 289)

The notion of Said's dream country ("drömland") speaks to the concept of the imaginary homeland and the recurring theme in the novel about New York City, and the United States, as a dream destination in the novel. The sisters mix Swedish and English throughout the novel, and the book ends in New York City with the meeting between Evelyn and the author. There is a metafictional and intertextual connection between *Systrarna* and in *Ett Öga Rött* where Edward Said is also mentioned. In *Ett Öga Rött*, a Swedish character named Kerstin brings Said's book to Halim's dad for his birthday:

Pappa öppnade Kerstins paket först och inuti det låg en bok av en kille som hette Edward. Men tydligen han var ändå arab för efternamnet var Said. Pappa spelade glad fast man såg egentligen han hade hoppats på något roligare. (2003, 74)

(Dad opened Kerstin's gift first and inside was a book by a guy named Edward. But apparently he was still an Arab because the last name was Said. Pappa acted happy although you could tell that he had been hoping for something more fun.) (my translation)

Neither the book, nor its author, are mentioned again in *Ett Öga Rött*, but the character Kerstin is portrayed as a politically correct Swedish woman who brags about writing feminist articles and hides refugees: “På middagen hon snackade hela tiden och sa hon hyrde rum till turister och ibland gömde flyktingar plus jobbade på en ny feminismartikel och massa annat ointressant” (2003, 74) [At dinner, she talked the whole time about how she rents out rooms to tourists and sometimes hides refugees, and that she was working on a new feminist article and a lot of other uninteresting things (my translation)].

Thus, the exoticization of the immigrant and the othering of the foreigner in Swedish society is exemplified by the behavior of the Swedish character Kerstin. She has befriended Halim’s Dad at the library and Halim describes her as trying to be “best friends” with him and his Dad: “Ända sen pappa och hon träffades med lite slump på Medisbibblan i somras hon verkar tro hon är en av oss och ska bli bästis” (2003, 74) [Ever since she and Dad met somewhat by coincidence at the Medis library last summer, she seems to think she is one of us and wants to be best friends (my translation)]. The implication of this brief passage in *Ett Öga Rött* is that Kerstin represents the stereotypical Swedish goodness (the good nation) who gives the dad Said’s influential book *Orientalism* (the title of the book is not mentioned, but it is implied) which, ironically, is about the stereotypical racialization of the foreigner/the other.

3.4. Boyhood, Manhood, and Fatherhood

As previously discussed, there are multiple intertextual connections between Khemiri’s novels and Karl Ove Knausgård’s work. One example is the similarity in themes, such as boyhood, manhood, and fatherhood. Knausgård writes about childhood in connection to real time in *My Struggle*, using memories to understand the present. This strategy allows Knausgård to engage

with his childhood self through memories, but instead of lingering in the past, he retrieves memories as a means to arrive at the present time. Khemiri uses a similar strategy in *Pappaklausulen*, where the main character describes flashbacks from his childhood in relation to events in the present. For example, when he is waiting for his mother to arrive at a restaurant, his internal monologue reveals his anxiety, and the past is mixed with the present:

Han är inte det minsta orolig för att mamman inte ska komma. Hon har aldrig inte kommit....Han minns när pappan var borta och mamman var ute med sina tjejkompisar....Han undrade var han och syrran skulle bo nu när mamma var död (2018, 221—222).

He isn't the least bit worried that his mother won't show up. She has never not showed up....He remembers when the father was away and the mother went out with her girlfriends....He wondered where he and his sister would live now that their mother was dead. (2020, 183)

Over the course of two pages, as he is sitting at the lunch table with his sleeping child in the stroller next to him, the narrator travels back to the traumatic dark space of his teenage years after his father had disappeared, when the son used music (he plays his favorite, new CD by American rapper Tupac Shakur) to invoke the power of magical thinking (he tells himself that if he can hold his breath throughout a particular song, his mother will come home safely) to stay calm and control his panic:

Han hade precis upptäckt kraften i musiken och om han bara lyssnade på Tupac's "Part Time Mutha" och lyckades hålla andan under hela låten så skulle mamman komma hem oskadd. (2018, 221—222).

He had just discovered the power of music, and if he could listen to Tupac's 'Part Time Mutha' and hold his breath for the whole of the track, his mother would come home unscathed. (2020, 184)

This walk down memory lane serves its purpose by keeping him occupied while waiting for his mother, and just as the narrator describes the final moment from his memory bank, when his mother returns home, she arrives at the restaurant:

Du behöver inte oroa dig, sa hon. Det är inte upp till dig att hålla ihop världen. Med trettio sekunder till godo ser han hennes Prius komma åkande i alldeles för hög hastighet. (2018, 224)

You don't need to worry, she said. It's not your job to keep the world together. With thirty seconds to spare, he sees her Prius approaching far too fast. (2020, 186)

Interestingly enough, this scene illuminates the fact that *Pappaklausulen* does not employ autofiction to the extent that *Systrarna* does. In the media, Khemiri has acknowledged that *Pappaklausulen* is inspired by autobiographical experiences, but the text provides fictional qualities with regard to details. For example, the author Khemiri has two younger brothers (one is a well-known actor), not one younger sister, and in real life he has two sons, not a daughter and a son. In the media, Khemiri has shared how *Pappaklausulen* originated in his own experience of being on paternal leave. Furthermore, Khemiri has mentioned his apprehension about writing about personal topics such as his own family. However, in a conversation with Swedish author Sara Stridsberg on the Swedish literary podcast *Vi-podden* (2019) Khemiri mentions that Knausgård's novels are among his favorite books. Thus, even though *Pappaklausulen* is a novel, the author's performative biographism adds to the reader's perception of the text. Furthermore, the older sister's presence in the novel functions as a revelation of a

secret (the author has previously never spoken about his older sister in the media, but after the release of the book, he does) and adds a notion of the supernatural and the haunting to the text. The sister appears only once, halfway through the novel: “En dotter som är en syster som inte lever längre, eller som lever extra mycket nu när hon äntligen har förlorat sin kropp, svävar över staden på jakt efter sin pappa” (Khemiri 2018, 209) [A daughter who is a sister who is no longer living, or who is actually living more than ever now that she has finally lost her body, floats above the city on the hunt for her father (Khemiri 2020, 173)].

In interviews, Khemiri has described how he knew that the sister would appear in the book; like a testament to the magical power of writing. Also, he has said that he was surprised by the sister’s act of forgiveness in the text. He had expected rage and a desire for revenge. Thus, in conversations about *Pappaklausulen*, Khemiri engages in performative biographism as described by Haarder in the postmodern discourse of post-truth as discussed by Worthington. At the end of the novel *Systrarna*, Evelyn describes the monologue that she is writing to the author, who is still unnamed but whom the reader assumes is the real author; Khemiri. She describes the monologue as having the same structure as *Systrarna*, which consists of seven parts:

Först ville jag berätta min historia, säger hon. Sen blev min historia kopplad till mina systrars historia, och våra föräldrars historia, och sen tänkte jag att det skulle handla om förbannelsen, och sen skyskraporna och sen förstod jag att hela monologen måste kretsa kring tid, så nu håller jag på att strukturera om allt material i sju delar, och varje del täcker en kortare och kortare tidsperiod, ett år ner till en minut, målet är att monologen ska reflektera känslan av att tiden går snabbare och snabbare när vi åldras. Som en nedräkning. Krystat, va? (2023, 699)

First I wanted to tell my story, she says. Then my story became intertwined with my sisters' stories, and our parents' stories, and then the skyscrapers, and then I realized that the whole monologue has to revolve around time. So now I'm organizing all the material into seven parts, and each part covers a shorter and shorter period of time, from a year down to a minute. The goal is for the monologue to reflect the feeling of time passing faster and faster as we age. Like a countdown. Cheesy, huh? (2025, 618)

In this passage, Evelyn's description of her monologue also describes the structure of the novel *Systrarna* which implies that Khemiri's intention is for the novel to be a story about family, time, the curse and the skyscrapers that symbolize the city of New York. This informs my analysis of Khemiri's authorship as moving away from racialized readings. Rather than mainly focusing on the migrant/postmigrant theme, I claim that Khemiri's work is evolving over time, throughout his own work through intertextuality and themes, but also into the Swedish literary canon. In the novel, we follow Khemiri's alter ego from childhood to young adulthood, to middle age and into the future; from 2000 to 2035, where finally, his name is revealed as Jonas. Also, he destabilizes the notion of fiction through multiple reality markers that the reader knows to be true from Khemiri's engagement with the media, such as the fact that his father is from Tunisia, that Khemiri grew up in Stockholm, that he was a student at a prestigious school of business but dropped out, that he has two younger brothers, and that he has obtained a writing fellowship to New York City. In combination with these reality markers, the portrayal of the Mikkola sisters, whose lives are intertwined with the narrator's life in the novel, seem both autobiographical and fictional—thus, autofictional. Thus, *Systrarna* exemplifies what Worthington describes as an effort to “keep the reader guessing” (2017, 472) which characterizes contemporary fiction,

memoir, and autofiction. In addition, Khemiri engages with the notion of magic through the story of the curse that accompanies the sisters.

Okej you can tell everyone, sa Evelyn, samtidigt som hon reste sig upp och bytte till engelska, that we are special because we have an ultra-strong curse placed on us, saying everything we love will get taken away from us, and despite that curse we are still here! (2023, 65)

Well, you can tell everyone, Evelyn said, while getting up on her feet and switching to English, that we are special because we have an ultra-strong curse placed on us, saying everything we love will get taken away from us, and despite that curse we are still here! (2025, 53)

The curse is repeated multiple times in the novel, and it is a curse that primarily affects the lives of the Mikkola-sisters, but it can also be read as a curse that Khemiri is trying to write himself free from. Writing about his father's failure to reach the success he had hoped for in Sweden, informs how Khemiri engages with themes of family, relationships, fatherhood, and masculinity. Furthermore, the curse can be interpreted as the curse of being placed in the position of a postmigrant writer and the curse of having his work interpreted through biographical and racialized readings and misconceptions.

Thus, the notion of the supernatural informs the narration, which balances truth and fiction. I claim that his narrative in-betweenness is another strategy in contemporary literature, particularly among authors positioned as postmigrant writers. The novel begins in English: "And so it was told att historien om Mikkolasysterna började den sista december, på millenniets sista dag" (Khemiri 2023, 11) [And so it was told that the story of the Mikkola sisters started on the last day of December, on the last day of the millennium (Khemiri 2025, 5)]. By using English in

the opening sentence, Khemiri sets the tone for a multilingual, cosmopolitan text. In addition, he emphasizes the fictionality of the text through the word “historien” (the story), which creates a sense of ambiguity since the word “story” implies a fictitious construction. However, in the next chapter, Khemiri uses first-person narration to describe how he first heard about the Mikkola sisters:

Första gången jag hörde talas om Mikkolasystrarna var jag fem eller sex år gammal, jag satt på vardagsrumsgolvet i vår gamla lägenhet, på Drakenbergsgatan 8, fem trappor upp, en trea. (Khemiri 2023, 20)

The first time I heard about the Mikkola sisters, I was five or six years old, sitting on the living room floor of our old apartment, the one on Drakenbergsgatan 8, five stairs up, a two-bedroom apartment. (Khemiri 2025, 13)

By stating his age and his exact address, Khemiri constructs a narrative in which the combination of reality markers and the first-person narration suggests an autobiographical reading of the text. However, as soon as he mentions the Mikkola sisters, he destabilizes this notion, and the reader is left to wonder whether the sisters are part of his memory, thus conveying the mode of autofiction, or if by referencing the sisters, Khemiri implies that the scene, including the description of the memory, is fictional.

To conclude, I claim that Khemiri’s most recent novels indicate an attempt to move away from being positioned exclusively as a postmigrant author through narrative and linguistic strategies, genre blending, and themes of magic. Furthermore, I argue that Khemiri positions himself in the contemporary Scandinavian literary landscape through autofictional modes and performative biographism. Looking to the future, I agree with Andersen, who claims that the second wave of autofiction includes a more diverse cast of authors (2023, 169). He suggests that

autofiction offers contemporary authors a way “to engage with the present and the intersections of their identities in the genre that historically most successfully has interpreted modern life: that of the novel” (169). Subsequently, I argue that through autofiction and performative biography, Khemiri destabilizes notions of genre and challenges the literary status quo, which opens up new avenues for representation of transcultural identities in contemporary Scandinavian literature.

Chapter 4. Writing into the Canon: Khemiri and The Swedish Novel

4.1. Rethinking the Canon

As mentioned, this dissertation investigates Khemiri's authorship in relation to the discourse on Scandinavian postmigrant literature and a transnational, European literary landscape. This final chapter explores Khemiri's novels in relation to the Scandinavian literary canon and examines how Khemiri's work engages with Swedish canonical literature. The chapter argues that Khemiri's novels display intertextual relationships with novels by August Strindberg (1849–1912), Hjalmar Söderberg (1869–1941), and Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940), as well as explore intertextual references between his own novels. Furthermore, I claim that intertextuality is used as a strategy to move away from being positioned as a postmigrant writer and align with other authors in Swedish literary history. Through an analysis of multiple literary tropes, I argue that Khemiri's novels convey an attempt to write into the Swedish literary canon. In addition, I claim that intertextuality functions as a form of resistance in response to racialized readings which indicates an intention to move away from a postmigrant position. This chapter explores Khemiri's use of the supernatural and magic in the form of dreams and ghosts, which is reminiscent of the aesthetic revolt of the 1890s, seen in works by August Strindberg and Selma Lagerlöf, and the trope of the flâneur, reminiscent of Hjalmar Söderberg. Thus, this chapter argues that Khemiri's novels use of intertextuality functions as an escape from biographical and racialized readings and align with the Swedish literary canon.

In Khemiri's novels, a red thread is the coming-of-age story of the cosmopolitan millennial writer who moves seamlessly between national and cultural identities and locations, and who struggles with existential anxiety and the neurosis of everyday life. I argue that through narrative strategies like autofictionalization, blending genre boundaries, and intertextuality,

Khemiri's novels investigate family relationships, generational trauma and individualization in a postmodern world. This dissertation examines how Khemiri's novels convey everyday life and explore issues of belonging and identity formation, using ghosts, haunting, and the supernatural.

As previously mentioned, there is a curse in Khemiri's novel *Systrarna* which is described by the character of Evelyn as "everything we love will get taken from us" (Khemiri 2025, 53). I suggest that this curse manifests as a haunting in Khemiri's novels in multiple ways. For example, the curse is a metaphor for the writer's struggle to create, the anxiety surrounding fatherhood, the relationship to the father figure, and the attempt to write into the Swedish literary canon. Throughout the novel *Systrarna*, the narrative point of view shifts from third person to first person and back again to third person. The characters rush through time and place and their desperate search for meaning conveys a sense of urgency. Interestingly, Khemiri first wrote the novel in English, and he has shared in interviews that it was difficult for him to express himself in his native language Swedish. The language is charged with emotional tension in the portrayal of the breakdown of the family, the absence of his father, and the description of the love story between Jonas and his girlfriend Emma. As previously discussed, the character Jonas talks to Emma about how his father left the family and disappeared for years, and he tries to make sense of his father's actions:

Jag sa att pappa hade krigat hela sitt liv för att vara motsatsen till en stereotyp, han hade tagit ut pappaledighet, han hade hjälpt till med städning och tvätt hemma, och sen, för några år sen så förvandlades han, något hände, kanske var det diabetesen, kanske var det depressionen, kanske var det att mamma ville skiljas, kanske var det hans dotter i det andra landet som gick under efter att han lämnat henne, kanske var det huset i Tunisien som aldrig blev klart, kanske var det bara insikten om att livet aldrig skulle bli som han

hade föreställt det, kanske var det bara tiden som förstörde honom. Menar du tiden här i Sverige? sa Emma. Nej bara tiden generellt, sa jag. (2023, 265)

I said that Dad had fought his whole life to be the opposite of a stereotype, he had taken paternity leave, he had helped with cleaning and laundry at home, and then, a few years ago, he changed, something happened, maybe it was diabetes, maybe it was depression, maybe it was that Mom wanted a divorce, maybe it was his daughter in the other country who fell to pieces after he left her, maybe it was the house in Tunisia that never got finished, maybe it was just the realization that life would never be as he had imagined it to be, maybe it was just time that destroyed him. Do you mean his time here in Sweden? said Emma. No just time in general, I said. (2025, 238)

In this passage, the text speaks to the anxiety of the postmigrant son who carries his father's pain and trauma. In addition, he mentions his sister, the father's eldest daughter, who was abandoned by the father "in the other country" and who "fell to pieces after he left." The mention of the eldest daughter functions as an intertextual connection between *Systrarna* and *Pappaklausulen* and illustrates the genre of autofictionalization. Furthermore, Emma's question "Do you mean his time here in Sweden?" implies that she thinks that the father's struggles are related to his difficulties in the new country. But the narrator's response implies that it is a universal story about the human experience, and that being an immigrant to Sweden is not the main theme.

This marks a change from Khemiri's earlier novels, *Ett Öga Rött* and *Montecore*, where the postmigrant/migrant condition is a central theme. Although *Ett Öga Rött* and *Montecore* discuss assimilation and postmigrant identity formation, his later novels *Pappaklausulen* and *Systrarna* focus primarily on themes like family, relationships, and the internal struggle of the cosmopolitan, urban, postmodern flâneur. As previously discussed, Khemiri has been hesitant to

reveal personal details about his father's background, which suggests an attempt to present his work as fiction and avoid the conflation of the author with characters, despite using his own name in the texts. In the novel *Systrarna*, Khemiri engages in more depth with his father's story and describes traveling to Tunisia with his father. Even so, the section that takes place in Tunisia is thematically focused on relationships rather than national and cultural identity formation.

The literary field and canon in the Nordic countries are under constant negotiation and transformation, with various alternative literatures having evolved alongside the majority literatures of these nations in recent decades. In *Rethinking national literatures and the Literary canon in Scandinavia* (2015), editors Ann-Sofie Lönngrén, Heidi Grönstrand, Dag Heede and Anne Heith argue that the societal and political developments of past decades have resulted in a questioning of established ways of looking at genre and the categorization of literature. They claim that national literary canons are challenged by different critical perspectives such as postcolonial, gender and queer theories, indigenous and ethnic studies. These phenomena, constructed around perspectives regarding language, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and social class, have been categorized as migration, minority and queer literatures. In their study, they pose the following question: "What potential does the plurality of perspectives in literary studies have to question the very concepts of literary canon, canon formations, national self-understanding and national identity?" (2015, ix). In response to this inquiry, I argue that analyzing Khemiri's novels from the perspective of intertextuality provides an answer to the call for a modernized canon which allows for a wider range of dialogical voices.

Critical theorist Julia Kristeva introduced the notion of intertextuality into literary theory, and her theories build on Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of dialogism where language is inherently dialogic and exists in relation to other voices and perspectives. Literary scholar

Toril Moi explains that Bakhtin suggests that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Moi, 37). Kristeva argues that intertextuality entails a passage from one sign-system to another and she notes that the novel is a result of a redistribution of different sign-systems: “the term intertextuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another” (Kristeva, 111). Furthermore, David Duff discusses intertextuality in “Intertextuality versus Genre Theory: Bakhtin, Kristeva and the Question of Genre” (2002) and he argues that the concept of intertextuality completes this transformation by treating the whole of literary history and history itself as a text or system in which every part has a potentially infinite number of relations with other parts. He states that Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality derives from Bakhtin’s new linguistics: “The central premise of this new linguistics - to study the 'word', in its broadest sense, as 'a territory in which instances of discourse confront each other' - is directly incorporated into Kristeva's notion of intertextuality” (Duff, 58). In a sense, he claims that the individual text becomes a 'space' in which other texts intersect.

4.2. Fin de Siècle Revisited

In “Nordic Modernism for Beginners” (2018), literary scholar Susan Brantly describes the Fin De Siècle and Decadence period in Nordic literature between 1890–1910. The Fin de Siècle, or literary decadence, peaked around the turn-of-the-century throughout Europe and Brantly describes the most significant features of the period:

There is a growing pessimism about science. The irrational is of interest. Realism is used as well as dream-like symbolism. An interest in existential issues. A belief in subjectivity. (The only mind you can know is your own. The only reality you can know is your own

subjective reality.) A suspicion of language—Is it possible to communicate fully with others? (Brantly 2018, 5).

Furthermore, Brantly defines the features of postmodernism, and she notes that “these labels are generated by scholars, and the writers themselves write the world as they see it, without concerning themselves overmuch with labels” (Brantly 2018, 8). Thus, Brantly argues that “postmodernism is not a radical break from modernism, but rather a shift in tone, interests, and attitudes” (Brantly 2018, 8). She notes that postmodernism is modernism which has developed a sense of humor, and she lists the most prominent features of postmodernism:

Contemporary existence is in a state of confusion. The world is absurd—The modernist quest for coherence is abandoned. Contradictory orders of reality—A taste for science fiction and the eruption of the fabulous into the secular world. An interest in the products of culture. (A distinction between “high” and “low” culture is dissolved. Styles are mixed. Commercialism and the media are key players.) Disbelief in traditional literary values. (Originality is challenged through parody, narrative authority is undermined, stories lack closure, the canon is questioned, as is the “normal self”) Radical questioning of the integrity of language. (Brantly 2018, 5)

In agreement with Brantly’s description of modernism and postmodernism, I argue that Khemiri’s novels manifest features of modernism as well as postmodernism. In *Systrarna*, Khemiri engages the idea of the supernatural and the narrative strategies of the text are balancing between truth and fiction. Furthermore, I argue that this ambiguity illustrates a common feature in the contemporary field of literature and as discussed by Jagne-Soreau, in postmigrant writing, namely the increasing use of autofictionalization. In his article “Narratives of a life: Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle* as a literary centaur” (2018), Claus Elholm Andersen argues that

“Knausgård uses his own biography in what I call narratives of life in an attempt to reinstate the subject at a time when it has otherwise been declared dead. In doing so, Knausgård seems to reawaken the tradition of the great modernist novel in the early twentieth century” (Andersen 2018, 25). Similarly, I argue that Khemiri’s novels *Pappaklausulen* and *Systrarna* convey modernist traits such as experimenting with new forms, blending images and themes, non-linear temporality, stream of consciousness, and invoking the supernatural. However, Khemiri’s novels also manifest as postmodern texts through the resistance towards the notion of truth and by challenging the binary between reality and fiction, which places the texts in an era of post-truth as described by Worthington.

Worthington argues that the current rise in popularity of memoir and autofiction implies an interest in the discussion of truth in the contemporary literary landscape. For example, the novel *Systrarna* radically breaks away from the expectations of genre, and destabilizes the narration at the end of the novel through the reversal of authorial positions. In the novel, the narration shifts from first-person authorial voice to third-person narration, and then, suddenly pivots in the latter part of the story when one of the sisters, Evelyn, becomes the focal point as the third-person narrator. In addition, *Systrarna* employs narrative strategies which challenge literary convention regarding memoir, fiction and autofiction. By imposing an intertextual relationship in the novel itself, Khemiri destabilizes our expectations of genre and our understanding of narration, which exemplifies the consistent strategy of destabilization of the boundaries between fiction and reality throughout Khemiri’s authorship.

As previously mentioned, Khemiri’s novels transgress boundaries and challenge expectations of genre and language. Furthermore, Khemiri uses irony and parody which destabilizes notions of truth, which are features of the current era of post-truth, as defined by

Marjorie Worthington. In addition, the theme of melancholia features abundantly in Khemiri's novels, as discussed previously in relation to Sara Ahmed's concept of melancholic migrants. Regarding Khemiri's relationship to Swedish and European literary history, I argue that there are similarities between the authors of the Fin de Siècle and Khemiri's work, which interrogates many of the same topics and themes. Building on Peter Leonard's theory of the post-ethnic turn, I claim that the contemporary generation of postmigrant Scandinavian authors, including Khemiri, are part of a millennial Fin de Siècle-generation of writers. Subsequently, I claim that Khemiri, whose debut novel *Ett Öga Rött*, was published in 2003, not technically at the end of the 19th century, but at the very beginning of the 20th century, embodies traits and artistic sensibilities that align with European artists of Fin de Siècle and Decadence. This is further emphasized through intertextual relationships between Khemiri's novels and Swedish canonical literary works of the time.

Subsequently, this chapter discusses how notions of melancholia and anxiety in Khemiri's texts emphasize the intertextual relationship to novels by authors from the Fin de Siècle, such as Hjalmar Söderberg, August Strindberg, and Selma Lagerlöf. I suggest that Khemiri's novels employ themes and images from Neo-Romanticism and Symbolism which are evoked in the decadent era. Thus, I argue that Khemiri's work exemplifies a new era of millennial neo-romanticism. Literary scholars Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen describe the Symbolists Poets of the Decadence as "rejecting descriptions of nature in favor of a kind of aesthetic artificiality, of an indulgence in the realms of the senses, imagination, and individual experience" (Härmänmaa and Nissen 2014, 4). French author and literary critic Théophile Gautier writes about the precepts of the Decadence in his preface to the 1869 edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Gautier describes the style of Decadence as "an ingenious

style, complex, wise, full of nuances and refinements, forever extending the limits of language, borrowing from all technical lexicons, taking colors from every palette and notes from every musical instrument” (Gautier 1869, 16-17; translated by Christopher Nissen). Incidentally, there are references throughout Khemiri’s work to various elements reminiscent of the literary period of the Decadence. For example, as previously described, there is a passage in *Montecore* when the father brings his son downtown to take photos of flâneurs, and there is another reference in *Montecore* to the father reading his future Swedish wife poems by Baudelaire.

Literary scholar Kyle Mox describes the mode of the Decadence, Fin de Siècle and the transition into modernism as anxiety-provoking, and he notes that “a key characteristic of both decadent and modernist literature was an inherent urge for repetition and return, for the resurrection of older stories reshaped into new forms” (Mox 2014, 127). Mox mentions the resurrection of fairy tales, myths, legends, and classical texts as touchstones of this era. Furthermore, he claims that “the unifying characteristic of works from this period is their aesthetic relationship to loss” (Mox 2014, 128). In his discussion of fairy tale motifs in works by August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and Oscar Wilde, Mox argues that “the appropriation of fairy tale motifs serves both as an efficient means of situating the new work in the cultural canon and as a means of layering complex, perhaps even subversive, themes upon the story at hand” (2014, 130). Similarly, I argue that Khemiri employs fantasy, elements of the fairy tale-genre, and the supernatural in his novels and makes use of references to classical texts to situate his work in the Swedish literary canon. Mox claims that typical features of the fairy tale trope are the presence of a supernatural or magical atmosphere, which he exemplifies with the setting of Midsummer in Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* (1888), and the plot of transformation and integration, such as starting a story with a disturbance in the “home” or point of equilibrium, followed by the protagonist

overcoming a challenge which often takes the form of a return to the point of origin. However, Mox states that in *Miss Julie*, as well as in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1891), and Wilde's *Salomé* (1893), there is no "happy ending." Further, Mox argues that a third element of the fairy tale is that the protagonist's point of origin is undesirable, often outside of mainstream society, because of an abnormal upbringing (Mox 2014, 130—131).

Subsequently, Khemiri's novels employ elements like fantasy, notions of fairy tale, and the supernatural in various ways. For instance, the protagonists struggle to fit into society, and they are portrayed as anxiety-ridden postmigrant male millennials who navigate family responsibilities and intergenerational trauma. Literary scholar Ulrike Peters Nichols investigates male melancholia as a representation of masculinity in Scandinavian and German texts, including Swedish author August Strindberg. She explores how the crisis of masculinity is conveyed in literature by male authors from the Fin de Siècle, and she claims that "the depiction of these suffering men resulted in melancholic texts, which are marked by attempts to work through a loss and yet never arrive at a solution" (Nichols 2004, 11). Khemiri's *Pappaklausulen* conveys an intertextual relationship to Strindberg's *Röda Rummet* in various ways. For example, both novels' main characters are young men who opt out of a career that seem too materialistic or immoral to them. In *Röda Rummet*, Arvid Falk leaves his position as a government official and decides to become a writer. Early in the novel, Arvid Falk meets up with the journalist Mr. Struve, who is less than encouraging:

Jag nämnde nyss för bror, upptog Falk samtalet, att jag idag brutit med mitt förra och övergivit ämbetsmannabanan; nu vill jag blott tillägga att jag ämnar bli litteratör!

Litteratör! Å, kors, varför det då? Men det är ju synd. Det är icke synd; men nu har jag att fråga, om bror vet vart jag skall gå för att få något arbete? Hm! Det är verkligen svårt att

säga. Det strömmar så mycket folk till från olika håll. Men det ska du inte tänka på. Det är verkligen synd, att du ska avbryta; det är en svår bana, den här litteratörsbanan! (1879, 17)

I mentioned a little while ago, Falk resumed, that I've broken today with my past life and thrown up my career as a government employe. I'll only add that I intend taking up literature. Literature? Good heavens! Why? Oh, but that *is* a pity! It isn't, but I want you to tell me how to set up finding work. Hm! That's really difficult to say. The profession is crowded with so many people of all sorts. But you mustn't think of it. It really is a pity to spoil your career; the literary profession is a bad one. (1913, 7)

Strindberg's portrayal of how Arvid Falk decides to give up his career and become a writer speaks to the trope of the author and the field of writing as it relates to society, masculinity, and the possibility to earn a living as an artist/writer. As previously mentioned, themes of writing and authorship are significant traits in autofictional writing and among contemporary postmigrant writers. In *Röda Rummet*, the role of the writer is described as more noble than a government employee, but it comes at a risk. Arvid Falk continues to talk to Mr Struve about his choice to become a writer: "Och nu gör jag som så många andra skeppsbrutna: jag kastar mig i armarne på litteraturen!" (1879, 24) (And now I shall do what so many other shipwrecks have done: I shall throw myself into the arms of literature) (1913, 15). The words "shipwrecked" and "throw myself into the arms of literature" indicate that Arvid Falk is feeling lost and disillusioned and therefore, he is ready to take the risk of losing his income and his respectable position for the life of a writer. Mr Struve argues that it is a foolish endeavor: "Och du vet inte hurudan en litteratörs ställning är. Litteratören står utanför samhället!" (1879, 25) (And you've no idea what the position of a writer is. He stands outside society) (1913, 16). Interestingly, the role of the writer

and the risk inherent in living the life of an artist is a theme throughout Khemiri's work. The novels *Ett Öga Rött*, *Montecore* and *Systrarna* discuss the theme of writing and include a writer-character named Jonas Hassen Khemiri. Similar to in *Röda Rummet*, the risk of being a writer is described as being in a position outside of society, in terms of financial success as well as security, class, and respectability. Through intertextuality, these themes and their autofictional implications connect Khemiri's texts with Strindberg's novel.

In addition, the texts are related through the portrayal of the disconnect between the main characters, who are young adult men, and their families, in particular their fathers. Instead of a father, Arvid Falk has an older brother, Carl Nicolaus [Charles Nicholas], who has inherited the family business and whom Arvid considers to be like a stepfather. However, when Arvid approaches his brother on the topic of his inheritance, his brother is outraged and attacks him in a manner similar to the father's reaction in *Pappaklausulen*, when the son expresses his desire to end the family clause. In *Röda Rummet*, when Arvid asks his brother if they have any business to take care of, meaning if he can expect any more of his inheritance, his brother lashes out at him:

Våra affärer! Ha vi några affärer? började han. Jag vet inte det! Har *du* några affärer, *du*? Jag menade endast, att jag ville veta om jag hade någon-ting att få vidare. Vad skulle det vara om jag får lov att fråga? Skulle det vara pengar kanske? Va? skämtade Carl Nicolaus och lät bro-dern njuta av lukten från den fina cigarren. (1879, 26)

Business? Are we doing business together? he began. I don't know anything about it. Are you doing business? Are you? I only meant to say that I should like to know whether there's anything more coming to me? What, may I ask? Do you mean money? said Charles Nicholas. (1913, 22)

Charles Nicholas continues to berate his brother, and by using his position of power, he reverts the narrative and imposes guilt upon Arvid by listing all the things he has done for him. This hostile display of anger and imposing of guilt is similar to the father's behavior toward the son in *Pappaklausulen*. In *Röda Rummet*, Charles Nicholas says to Arvid:

Få? Har du inte fått allt vad du skulle ha? Har du inte själv kvitterat räkningen till förmyndarkammaren; har jag intesedan dess fött dig och klätt dig, det vill säga förskotterat dig, för du skall få betala det när du kan en gång, som du också har begärt; jag har skrivit upp det för att ha, den dan då du kan förtjäna ditt bröd själv, och det har du inte gjort ännu. (1879, 26)

Coming to you? Haven't you received everything due to you: Haven't you yourself receipted the account for the Court of Wards? Haven't I kept and clothed you since—to be strictly correct, haven't I made you a loan, according to your own wish, to be paid back when you are able to do so? (1913, 22—23)

Subsequently, Arvid Falk is dismissed, humiliated, and accused of being ungrateful, based on their financial transactions, which is similar to the relationship dynamic in *Pappaklausulen*, both between the son and the father, and between the son and the mother. In both cases, the family relationships are portrayed as complicated due to their transactional nature which is illustrated by the emotionality in the exchange of money and services. As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, this portrayal of the transactional component of family relationships illustrates Khemiri's intertextual connection to Strindberg's work as well as to novels by Selma Lagerlöf and Hjalmar Söderberg. After leaving his brother's house, Arvid strolls through the city filled with disappointment, lack of confidence and anxiety about his future:

Han var så van att ställa höga fordringar på sig, och han var inlärd att i brodern se ett slags styvfar, för vilken han hyste stor aktning, nästan vördnad. Men även andra tankar dök upp och gjorde honom bekymrad. Han var utan pengar och utan sysselsättning. Detta senare var kanske det värsta, ty sysslösheten var honom en svår fiende, begåvad med en aldrig vilande fantasi som han var. (1879, 27)

He was accustomed to be severe on himself, and it had always been drummed into him that his brother was a kind of stepfather to whom he owed great respect, not to say reverence. But he was worried and depressed by other thoughts as well. He had neither money nor prospect of work. The last contingency was, perhaps, the worse of the two, for to him, with his exuberant imagination, idleness was a dangerous enemy. (1913, 29)

The anxiety with regard to the lack of money and a meaningful career relates to the main character in *Pappaklausulen*, who is a stay-at-home dad, but who is portrayed as lacking direction in terms of his career. The father complains that the son has accomplished nothing despite completing a degree in economics. When the father sees his son's office, he complains about the simplicity and the disarray of the place, which implies that he thinks of his son in a similar way, as someone who has failed at achieving any real success:

Enligt lappen på ytterdörren är sonen redovisningskonsult. Massa år har gått sen han tog examen från sin prestigefyllda ekonomutbildning. Ändå ser hans kontor ut som en knarkarkvart. Riktiga ekonomer har kontor högst upp i skysrapor, med fin utsikt, sexiga sekreterare, kaffemaskiner med massa kapslar och smaksatt bubbelvatten på kylning. Men hans son har aldrig förstått poängen med att göra något ordentligt. (Khemiri 2018, 52—53)

According to the sign on the front door, his son is an accountant consultant. Years have passed since he graduated with his prestigious economics degree, but his office still looks like a drug den. Real economists have offices at the top of skyscrapers, with beautiful views, sexy secretaries, coffee machines full of capsules and flavoured fizzy water in the fridge. But the son has never understood the point of doing anything properly. (Khemiri 2020, 40—41)

The father's disparaging attitude and his disappointment in his son reveals the father's obsession with financial success and materialistic values, which is emphasized by the comparison to offices that seem straight out of an American movie, with skyscrapers reminiscent of New York City. This tension between fathers and sons based on financial dependency, failed expectations, anger and disappointment is evident in Strindberg's and Khemiri's texts as well as in Hjalmar Söderberg's *Förvillelser*. Consequently, the next chapter investigates the representation of melancholia in relation to masculinity as displayed through the male characters and their roles in the texts, such as the boy, the father, and the concept of the male author. In addition, the chapter explores the trope of the flâneur and the notion of the urban pastoral as further manifestations of intertextuality in Khemiri's novels.

4.3. The Flâneur and the Urban Pastoral

This chapter explores the trope of the flâneur as a feature of intertextuality in Khemiri's novels and examines the relationship to the city and the urban pastoral in the texts, which provide additional examples of intertextuality. Hjalmar Söderberg's first novel *Förvillelser* (1895; *Diversions*, 2014) is considered one of the first examples of a flâneur-novel in Sweden. The main character in *Förvillelser*, Tomas Weber, is a young man with plenty of time and money who

spends his days socializing and “flâneuring” in the city of Stockholm. In fact, the detailed description of the city is one of the most important features of the novel. Similarly, Söderberg employs the backdrop of Stockholm in his novel *Doktor Glas* (1905; *Doctor Glas*, 1963) which is another flâneur-inspired novel about a doctor who is struggling with moral and ethical dilemmas. The French poet Charles Baudelaire coined the term flâneur in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863). Baudelaire describes the flâneur as a “passionate spectator in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” In his article “Hjalmar Söderberg’s Stockholm: The Precinematic Flâneur in *Förvillelser* [*Diversions*]” (2022), Swedish scholar Joakim Wrethed discusses Baudelaire’s impact on Hjalmar Söderberg’s authorship and argues that Baudelaire is a source of inspiration for Söderberg. For instance, Wrethed notes: “It is also noteworthy that Hjalmar Söderberg translated Baudelaire into Swedish, so the French poet’s influence on Söderberg is undoubtable” (2022, 901).

This chapter argues that Khemiri’s novels are in conversation with Söderberg’s and Strindberg’s texts through intertextuality, irony and parody, and suggests that Khemiri’s texts align with the work of these canonical Swedish authors. In addition, Khemiri’s novels expand the concept of the cosmopolitan flâneur by encompassing a wider world arena, by invoking New York City and America. In Söderberg’s novels, Baudelaire’s Paris is replaced by Stockholm, as is the case in August Strindberg’s first novel *Röda Rummet* (1879; *The Red Room*, 1913), which features the young man Arvid Falk and describes his life in the city of Stockholm. This chapter explores Khemiri’s novels in relation to how Söderberg’s and Strindberg’s novels convey the trope of the flâneur, and the city of Stockholm, and argues that Khemiri employs irony and parody in the portrayal of the trope of the flâneur. For example, in *Pappaklausulen*, the main

character who is portrayed as a flâneur, is not a young man, but a father on paternity leave who navigates his family relationships in the city of Stockholm. Subsequently, I claim that Khemiri's novel *Systrarna* employs the trope of the flâneur but expands it in various ways. For example, in the novel, the characters roam the cities of Stockholm and New York City. Thus, in Khemiri's texts, New York City takes the place of Paris in his predecessors' works as the city of the world and the city that the characters dream about, from *Montecore* to *Systrarna*.

This implies that the characters are citizens of the world and illustrates how the American dream is perceived as the epitome of financial success and glamor. In addition, the idea of America as the dream country challenges notions of national belonging in a contemporary, postmodern society which is heavily influenced by American culture and the English language. In Khemiri's novels, the characters consistently mix Swedish and English, and there are a multitude of references to American pop culture, which further speaks to the significance of the English language and the notion of America as the dream country and New York City as the city of dreams. Thus, if Stockholm is Söderberg's and Strindberg's response to Baudelaire's Paris, New York City is the utopian city of the characters in Khemiri's novels.

In addition, this chapter argues that the symbol of New York City in Khemiri's novels illustrates the concept of the "urban pastoral." The term "urban pastoral" derives from the concept of "pastoral" in literary theory. In *Pastoral* (1999) Terry Gifford defines the concept as an author's perspective on nature, life in the countryside, and the life of a shepherd. Gifford defines the pastoral as a feature in literature which "describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (Gifford 1999, 12). Further, Terence Diggory expands on the concept of the pastoral and introduces the term "urban pastoral" in his discussion of American beat poetry. For example, Diggory argues in "Allen Ginsberg's Urban Pastoral" (2000) that the

concept of the pastoral is useful for exploring the American beat poet Allen Ginsberg's work. He claims that "Ginsberg engages in opposition not only to literary tradition but also to existing social structures" (Diggory 2000, 104). In addition, Diggory notes Ginsberg's affinity with the New York Poets, particularly with the poet Frank O'Hara whom Ginsberg paid tribute to in his poem "I see New York through your eyes" (Ginsberg 1956). Furthermore, Diggory refers to literary scholar Helen Vendler who applies the concept of the urban pastoral to O'Hara's work and positions him in the literary tradition that extends back to American poets William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman, two poets whom Ginsberg has expressed affinity with (Diggory 2000, 106). Vendler argues that the intertextual references to William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman in Ginsberg's poetry illuminates the connection to the poetic sensibilities of these canonical American poets.

Similarly, literary scholar Timothy Gray applies the concept of urban pastoral to his reading of the New York Poets, and he claims that there are no clear-cut definitions of the term urban pastoral, or even the pastoral. He argues that the concept signifies a mode rather than a genre and he states that the term urban pastoral "can signify either a synthesis of rural and metropolitan traditions, or a division between them, depending on one's perspective" (Gray 2005, 215). In addition, Gray argues that in the well-known poem "America" (1956), Ginsberg brings a spiritual sensibility to the counterculture of the Beat Generation: "America, when will you become angelic?" This search for spirituality, Gray notes, continued for decades in New York City's East Village where they "sought their own version of angelic selfhood, advocating the kind of simplicity found in traditional pastoral idylls, while searching for the kind of purity that religious institutions routinely promised, but often failed, to deliver" (Gray 2005, 213). For instance, Gray notes that in their poems about New York City in the 1970s, poets "Jim Carroll,

Ken Norris and Frank O'Hara exemplify the meditations on the pastoral aspects of city life through a series of ironic juxtapositions" (Gray 2005, 216). Gray argues that artists such as Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, and writer Susan Sontag from the bohemian counterculture preferred to experience nature through the city's parks and beaches and through art and commercials. For example, Gray notes that in the poem "Fragment: Little N.Y. Ode", "American poet Jim Carroll magically links earthly city and heavenly cosmos" (Gray 2005, 223) as he writes "the city is on my side" (Gray 2005, 223). Similarly, the multitude of references to New York City is a theme throughout Khemiri's novels and I argue that the portrayal of New York City exemplifies the urban pastoral in the texts. Furthermore, Khemiri's novels display a multitude of intertextual references to American writers and artists, often in relation to the dream of New York City.

Subsequently, I claim that New York City illustrates the dream of financial and artistic success in the form of the American dream in Khemiri's novels. If Allen Ginsberg's New York City is an urban pastoral which signifies an escape from religious oppression and homophobia, Khemiri's New York City functions as an escape from the racialization of migrant and postmigrant identities in Sweden. Thus, I argue that Khemiri's New York City symbolizes an escape from the position as a postmigrant author in the contemporary Swedish literary landscape. The novel *Montecore* begins with a dream-like sequence in which the reader is asked to look into the future, where the father, the migrant, has attained success as a photographer in New York:

Låt oss tillsammans visionera hur världens bästa pappa och bokens superhjälte vandrar vitt kostymerad på sitt luxuösa lofts takterass i New York. Fågelskuggor svävar över den rodnande himlen, taxitutor tonar bort och i bakgrunden bubblar en gigantisk jacuzzi. Vår hjälte observerar Manhattans myller. (2006, 9)

Let us together visionate how the world's best dad, and superhero of this book, wanders white-costumed on his luxurious loft's rooftop terrace in New York. Shadows of birds soar over the reddening sky, taxi horns fade away, and in the background bubbles a gigantic jacuzzi. Our hero observes the swarms of Manhattan. (2011,1)

The hyperbolic language describes the father as the world's best father and as a superhero, and the description of the gigantic jacuzzi and the luxurious loft invokes a sense of dread, as if the exaggerated tone destabilizes the meaning of the words and displays a contrasting, ironic image. The opening passage of the *Montecore* conveys hope and exhilaration, similarly to the beginning of Hjalmar Söderberg's novel *Förvillelser* where the main character Tomas Weber is stepping out of a store, where he has just purchased a pair of new, red gloves:

En ung herre i mörkblå vårrock och röda handskar kom ut ur en butik vid Arsenalsgatan.

Handskarna voro alldeles nya, han hade just köpt dem i butiken. (1895, 1)

A young gentleman in a dark-blue spring coat and red gloves came out of a shop on Arsenalsgatan. The gloves were brand new; he'd just bought them in the shop. (2014, 15)

Following the parodic description of the father's future success in the beginning of *Montecore*, the narrator describes a number of famous guests who arrive carrying balloons. It is noteworthy that in the beginning of Söderberg's *Förvillelser*, where we meet Tomas Weber who strolls through Stockholm, there are also balloons. The first chapter of *Förvillelser* introduces the lifestyle of a young man whose life is filled with the superficial pleasures of consumption and socialization in the city. Tomas is the flâneur who is walking the sunny streets of Stockholm and like in the opening scene of Khemiri's *Montecore*; there are balloons; symbolic of childlike joy and hope. It is April, and the anticipation and happiness of spring is palpable:

Gatorna vimlade af människor. Det var en af de första vårdagarna, ty våren hade kommit sent. Vid hvartannat steg mötte man en svartmuskig och godmodigt leende ballongförsäljare med sitt färglysande knippe af gummiblåsor, fyllda med gas. (1895, 1)

The streets were teeming. It was one of the first spring days, for spring was late this year. With every other step you encountered some swarthy, brightly smiling balloon seller with a colourful clutch of gas-filled rubber balloons. (2014, 15)

The balloons symbolize happiness and invoke a feeling of celebration. Similarly, in *Montecore*, the balloons emphasize the festive celebration of the father's materialistic success:

Vilka är dom ballongbärande surprisgästerna som hurrande lämnar hans personligt installerade hiss? Där vinkar fotografiska ekvilibrister som Cartier-Bresson och Richard Avedon. Där välkomnas intellektuella prominenser som Salman Rushdie och Naomi Klein. Där anländer storhjärtade världssamveten som Kofi Annan och Sting. (2006, 9)

Who are those balloon-bearing surprise guests who, cheering, are exiting his personally installed elevator? Photographic equilibrists like Cartier-Bresson and Richard Avedon are waving. Intellectual prominences like Salman Rushdie and Naomi Klein are being welcomed. Big-hearted world consciences like Kofi Annan and Sting are arriving. (2011, 1)

However, the migrant father does not become a successful photographer in Sweden, but instead, he is a salesman of various knick-knacks with the help of his son. The extravagant guest list for the party and the name-dropping of successful photographers highlight the melancholia in contrast to the hopes and dreams that the father had when he first arrived in Sweden. The character who is called Jonas Khemiri in the book, symbolizes the author's dream of success, highlighted by mentioning Salman Rushdie, one of the most prominent postcolonial authors who

has written about topics such as hybrid identity and migration. There is something parodic about juxtaposing Rushdie with famous activist and author Naomi Klein, and United Nation's former Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the singer Sting, which conveys the narrator's ironic position in relation to these celebrities and their perceived roles and positions as highly successful in Western culture. The urban pastoral is evident in the juxtaposing of the soaring birds, and the reddening sky which implies the sunset, with the most typical feature of New York's landscape: the blaring taxi horns. Furthermore, our hero is seen looking down onto the streets, "observing the swarms of Manhattan", which resonates with the opening scenes of *Röda Rummet* (1879), where Arvid Falk is looking down on the city from the hills of Mosebacke in Stockholm.

Khemiri's portrayal of Stockholm is in stark contrast to the description of Stockholm by Strindberg and Söderberg. As previously mentioned, Söderberg's *Förvillelser* begins with the main character Tomas Weber coming out of a store, where he has just bought himself some new red gloves. Starting the novel with a purchase of red gloves indicates that Tomas has money to spend on something as frivolous as new gloves, and the color of red implies that it was a fun purchase, and not a necessary purchase. The color of red also speaks to the joy and excitement of the carefree character. Just a few sentences further into the novel, we learn that Tomas has no need for employment, since he is provided for financially by his family. Similarly, August Strindberg's *Röda Rummet* (1879) begins with the portrayal of a young man, Arvid Falk, who steps out into the city of Stockholm in the spring and is exhilarated by the beauty and life of the city, although as it turns out, Arvid Falk's financial and societal position is quite different from Söderberg's Tomas Weber. Falk steps out of into the garden to a restaurant in Stockholm in the neighborhood of Mosebacke:

Emellertid fortsatte köksan sitt arbete med innanfönstren, och inom några minuter hade dörren från källarsalen till verandan blivit öppnad och ut i trädgården trädde en ung herre, enkelt men fint klädd. Hans ansikte företedde intet ovanligt, men där låg en sorg och en ofrid i hans blickar, som dock försvunno, då han, utkommen från den trånga källarsalen, möttes av den öppna horisonten. Han vände sig mot vindsidan, knäppte upp överrocken och tog några fulla andetag, vilka tycktes lätta hans bröstorg och sinne (1879, 14).

Meanwhile, the maid continued her work at the double windows: in a few minutes the door leading from the restaurant stood open, and a man, well, but plainly dressed, stepped out into the garden. There was nothing striking about his face beyond a slight expression of care and worry which disappeared as soon as he had emerged from the stuffy room and caught sight of the wide horizon. (1913, 3)

We learn that Arvid Falk (who is still unnamed in the text), in contrast to Tomas Weber, is suffering from sorrow and struggles, which are elevated by the sight of the beautiful city, particularly the open horizon. A few paragraphs further, the transfer of energy from the city to Arvid is described as invigorating but also as a challenge. In fact, Arvid is not feeling safe and surrounded by joy and hope, but rather, he is portrayed as an underdog, ready to fight for his survival in the city, or even against the city, as he stands on the hills of Mosebacke, looking down onto the city:

Långt nere under honom bullrade den nyvaknade staden; ångvinscharne snurrade nere i stadsgårdshamnen, järnstängerna skramlade i järnvågen, slussvaktarnes pipor visslade, ångbåtarne vid Skeppsbron ångade,, Kungsbacksomnibussarne hoppade skallrande fram på den kullriga stenläggningen; stoj och hojt i fiskargången, segel och flaggor som fladdrade ute på strömmen, måsarnas skri, hornsinaler från Skeppsholmen, gevärsrop

från Södermalmstorg, arbetshjonens klapprande med träskorna på Glasbruksgatan, allt gjorde ett intryck av liv och rörlighet, som tycktes väcka den unge herrns energi, ty nu hade hans ansikte antagit ett uttryck av trots och levnadslust och beslutsamhet (1879, 14—15).

Far below him lay the noisy, reawakening town; the steam cranes whirred in the harbour, the iron bars rattled in the iron weighing machine, the whistles of the lock-keepers shrilled, the steamers at the pontoon bridge smoked, the omnibuses rumbled over the uneven paving-stones; noise and uproar in the fish market, sails and flags on the water outside; the screams of the seagulls, bugle-calls from the dockyard, the turning out of the guard, the clattering of the wooden shoes of the working-men—all this produced an impression of life and bustle, which seemed to rouse the young man's energy; his face assumed an expression of defiance, cheerfulness, and resolution (1913, 3—4).

In the description of what Arvid is seeing, there is an abundance of signifiers regarding the working class of Stockholm, which is quite different from the Stockholm as it is described in Söderberg's *Förvillelser*. Later in the novel, Arvid joins a community of bohemians and develops a desire to dismantle and speak back against the corruption and hypocrisy of modern society. It is noteworthy that the symbol of the horn is also used in the introductory pages of Khemiri's *Montecore*, but in the description of the taxi horns of New York City.. In contrast, the beginning of Strindberg's novel *Röda Rummet*, introduces a young man who is contemplating his life choices and who is ready to make some big decisions. As Arvid Falk looks out over the city, he is suddenly filled with a desire to do something to change things, for himself and for society at large. In *Röda Rummet*, the detailed description of what Arvid Falk is looking at foreshadows his intellectual awakening. As mentioned above, he later decides to leave the bureaucracy and

join a group of writers who meet regularly and discuss intellectual and social matters. Standing on the hills of Mosebacke and looking down onto the city is the moment when he decides to seek out a different lifestyle, find comrades, challenge his family's expectations and give up the constant striving for success:

Och då han lutade sig över barriären och såg ner på staden under sina fötter, var det som om han betraktade en fiende; hans näsborrar vidgades, hans ögon flammade och han lyfte sin knutna hand, som om han velat utmana den stackars staden eller hota den. (1879, 15)

And as he leaned over the barrier and looked at the town below, he seemed to be watching an enemy; his nostrils expanded, his eyes flashed, and he raised his clenched fist as if it were challenging or threatening the poor town. (1913, 4)

In contrast, the main character Tomas Weber in Söderberg's *Förvillelser*, moves between bars, shops, and restaurants, living off his inheritance seemingly quite unaware of any class discrepancies. For example, despite stating that he loves his girlfriend Marta, he dreams of seducing the girl Ellen, who works in the glove shop. Tomas is portrayed as a hedonistic, self-involved man without any moral concerns:

Ellen, flickan i handsbutiken, hade runnit honom i minnet. Han kunde icke låta bli att tänka på hennes armar. Det var Märta han älskade, och likväl föreföll det honom som om han hade gått miste om något väsentligt af lifvets lycka, om han aldrig finge se dessa armar blottade och hvita sträckas emot honom från någon mörk vrå af ett rum med fällda gardiner. (1905, 13)

Ellen, the girl in the glove shop, had run through his mind. He couldn't stop thinking of her arms. It was Marta he loved, and yet it seemed to him that he would have forgone some substantial part of the pleasures life offered if he never set eyes on those arms, bare

and white, reaching out to him from some dark corner of a room with blinds drawn down.
(2014, 28-29)

Tomas and his friend Johannes Hall are also looking out onto the harbor, but they only see beauty and tranquility, and there is no mention of the working class like in Strindberg's novel. Instead, the two young men are joking about how to pursue the girl in the glove shop before they continue their way to a restaurant called "The Oriental" for drinks. The name of the restaurant implies the backdrop of colonial trade. In *Röda Rummet, Förvillelser*, as well as in Khemiri's *Pappaklausulen*, the main characters are flâneurs in Stockholm, a city built on islands and peninsulas and surrounded by water. The men are all looking out at the harbor, and the sea, but their perception of their environment reflects their personalities. Tomas and Johannes Hall are looking at the water and the boats and it is a peaceful, quiet view:

De hade kommit ut på Blaiseholmshamnen. Skärgårdsbåtarna vid kajen hade röda färgklattar, som lyste i solen. Strömmen låg bred och blå och tom; sjöfarten hade ännu icke kommit riktigt i gång för året. (1895, 2)

They had come out onto Blaiseholmen quay. Red patches of colour on the boats on the quayside shone in the sun. The harbour lay broad and blue and empty; traffic had yet to get into full swing this year. (2014, 16)

For Tomas, the harbor means business, trading, and transportation and when they order wine at the restaurant, the detail of the waiter's shirt stitching becomes an indication of the value of the wine, but there is no awareness of conditions of the working class unless it relates to the product and the customer's experience. The narrator reveals that Tomas has recently received some money from his father and he is eager to spend it:

Vinet kom in. Man såg på vippningen af kyparens frackskört, att det var någonting mycket dyrt. Tomas hade fått en del pengar af sin far med anledning af sin examen och han hade ingen högre önskan än att göra slut på dem. (1895, 2)

The wine arrived. You could tell from the stitching on the waiter's dress shirt that it was a costly thing. Tomas had received a fair sum of money from his father on account of his examination success and had no greater wish than to be rid of it. (1895, 16)

The fact that Tomas is in a hurry to get rid of the money implies that he is either an irresponsible young man who doesn't appreciate the value of money, or that there is a contentious relationship between him and his father. Thus, Strindberg and Söderberg employ the trope of the city in different ways, and I argue that both Tomas Weber and Arvid Falk are portrayed as flâneurs despite their contrasting experiences of the same city, Stockholm. Similarly, Khemiri's novels take place in Stockholm, the main characters are men, and the focus is on their coming-of-age and how the internal process of individualization evolves through the interaction with other characters. However, in Khemiri's novels, the focus is on family relationships, and the character development takes place almost exclusively in parallel with the interaction with other family members, rather than through socialization with people in the city. Even in *Systrarna*, where the sisters are essential characters, the main theme is the family as the novel revolves around the quest for truth regarding their possible connection through their father.

In *Pappaklausulen*, there are fewer descriptions of the natural environment, and very few scenes from the bustling street life, restaurants, or neighborhoods, except for certain landmarks such as Arlanda (the airport) and Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan (the Royal Technical College, where the author Jonas Hassen Khemiri studied). However, a large part of the novel takes place outside in the city of Stockholm, which functions as a backdrop for the characters and their

internal struggles of detachment, anxiety and melancholia. Thus, although the portrayal of the city is less vivid and detailed than in Strindberg's and Söderberg's novels, I argue that the main character is a flâneur in his own right, who walks the streets of Stockholm with his young children, struggling with anxiety and his self-doubt and the lack of purpose in his life.

Instead of socializing over drinks like in *Förvillelser*, or discussing the political problems of society as in *Röda Rummet*, he contemplates his relationship to his father, his partner, and his children and the constant anxiety keeps his internal monologue in an endless loop. In addition, the portrayal of Stockholm in *Pappaklausulen* is grey and cold, both internally, since his life is filled with the drudgery of domestic work, interspersed with errands and walks with the stroller, and in terms of the weather. It is winter. The unnamed character, who is on paternity leave, goes for a silent walk after dropping up his daughter at preschool:

Ettåringen somnar i vagnen. Pappan går ner till vattnet och tittar på ankorna.

Pensionärspär går i armkrok. Barnlediga mammor sitter på soliga bänkar och äter äpplen med ena foten på barnvagnens bakdäck. Två hundar leker med varandra nere vid kajplatserna. Gräset är vitt av tunn frost. Gruset på gångstigen sådär stelt som det blir när temperaturen närmar sig nollgradigt. (2018, 39)

The one-year-old falls asleep in the buggy. The father walks down. To the water and watches the ducks. Retired couples walk arm in arm. Mothers on maternity leave sit on sunny benches and eat apples, one foot on the back wheel of their buggies. Two dogs are playing down on the quay. The grass is white with a thin layer of frost. The gravel on the foot path is solid, the way it always is when the temperature approaches zero. (2020, 29—30)

Just like in *Förvillelser* and in *Röda Rummet*, the quay and the harbor are significant places in *Pappaklausulen*, but the characters' experiences are completely different, not just because of the different time periods, but also due to differences in temperament. In the passage above, the brief mention of the frost and the temperature fit the mood of the main character. He is not interacting with the people around him, who, he assumes, are either retired or stay-at-home parents like himself. The passage conveys a slow-paced, domestic life and the narrative focus is on his thoughts and feelings, although the setting is outside in the city.

In contrast to Söderberg's character Tomas Weber, Khemiri's main character does not interact with his surroundings, neither is he filled with energy nor has any desire to challenge the city, as does Strindberg's character Arvid Falk. In fact, his desire for change is displayed much later in the novel, when he, in a moment of internal crisis, suddenly drives off in the night and disappears from his family until the next day. It is an act of resistance fueled by his anxiety about his position as a father and as a man, and the stress of his own father who brings past trauma to the surface. Instead of a political awakening like in *Röda Rummet*, it is a psychological crisis where the character must face his demons, and it is directed inward instead of outward which exemplifies the underlying narrative of rage which is part of the postmigrant melancholia.

I argue that by placing the stories in Stockholm without providing a lot of details about the characters and their interactions with the city, Khemiri's novels convey a strategy of resistance. In addition to the omission of details about the national and cultural background of the characters, *Pappaklausulen* resists placing the characters in relation to certain neighborhoods. This opens for an analysis of belonging and identity in Swedish society without positioning the characters in a certain socio-economic class or ethnicity. Furthermore, the consistent references to New York City as the dream city implies a desire to position the characters as citizens of the

world. New York City, famous for being a melting pot of diversity functions as the ultimate urban pastoral where migrant positions or ethnic backgrounds are irrelevant. This speaks to the author's desire to move away from being positioned as a spokesperson for a particular group of immigrants. Furthermore, it speaks to the discussion of the postmigrant condition as a condition of the world, where we all live in a state of postmigration as discussed by Moslund, Petersen, Schramm and others. It is significant that the dream of New York City is a red thread throughout Khemiri's novels. This indicates that the city symbolizes a desire to escape national and cultural boundaries and illustrates the dream of a refuge from racialization and provides an opportunity for the characters to create their own identities in a world of post-globalization.

4.4. The Father and the Author

Throughout Khemiri's work, one of the main themes is the complicated relationship between fathers and sons. I argue that this theme relates to the overarching claim of this dissertation which is that Khemiri's novels manifest as an attempt to move away from racialized readings and instead of being positioned only as postmigrant texts, align with modernist and postmodernist traditions, and contribute to the Swedish canon. I argue that the trope of the father connects Khemiri's work to canonical Swedish authors August Strindberg, Hjalmar Söderberg, and Selma Lagerlöf as does the notion of time as the common denominator which connects us through history. The dissertation explores melancholia and anxiety in relation to postmigration, identity and belonging, and how these issues are portrayed through family relationships. Building on the discussion of the trope of the flâneur and the urban pastoral, this chapter examines the figure of the father in Khemiri's texts in relation to Swedish literary history.

Literary scholar Harold Bloom coined the concept of “anxiety of influence” in relation to writers and artists, and he defines the term as the anxiety to create in the shadow of the work of previous writers. In short, Bloom argues that poets and artists struggle against their literary predecessors to create original work. Bloom claims that poets may overcome this obstacle through what he calls “creative misprision” which means to distort past works to assert their own vision and thus, gain recognition. In "The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry" (1973) Bloom compares this struggle of the artist to the Freudian Oedipal conflict between father and son. In response to Bloom’s theory, feminist scholars Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert argue in *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), that female writers struggle with the “anxiety of authorship.” Their argument is that while the male author feels that he must overcome his literary precursors, the female author is searching for the precursor to find evidence that she can express herself creatively. Therefore, she feels an even greater anxiety than the male poet because she has a lack of equal representation in the literary canon. Building upon these theories, I argue that part of the postmigrant anxiety is “the anxiety of representation.” Postcolonial anxiety or melancholia is often used to describe the struggles of nations and societies in the process of decolonization, as discussed in the work by Paul Gilroy. However, I argue that Khemiri’s novels convey postmigrant anxiety in the portrayal of themes and characters in relation to the Swedish literary canon. For example, this anxiety manifests in the texts in the contentious relationships between fathers and sons, i.e. between the migrant father and the postmigrant son.

The theme of the father has been discussed by scholars in relation to novels written by Hjalmar Söderberg and August Strindberg. In “Murdering the Father: Hjalmar Söderberg’s *Doktor Glas* (2016), Susan Brantly discusses Söderberg’s portrayal of the main character in *Doktor Glas* (1905) and she claims that Dr. Glas’s murder of Pastor Gregorius symbolizes

science conquering religion. Furthermore, Brantly argues that in an allegorical sense, Dr. Glas is also murdering his father. She refers to literary scholar Ross Shideler who writes in *Questioning the Father* (1999) about “the correlation between Darwin’s displacement of God and the undermining of male authority figures in nineteenth-century literature” (Shideler 1999,13). Brantly suggests that “the trigger for Glas murdering Gregorius is the realization that Helga Gregorius is pregnant, that Gregorius is about to become a false father” (Brantly 2016, 72). She argues that Dr. Glas realizes that he cannot replace either Gregorius or Helga’s lover Klas Recke, and in the Oedipal narrative, the son wishes to replace the father. Brantly states: “The Church Father and his endorsement of the rules of patriarchy are not just undermined, but handily dispatched” (Brantly 2016, 72). Dr. Glas murders Gregorius by offering him a poison pill that he claims to be medicine. In this sense, Dr. Glas murders the Father and thus, science replaces religion. Thus, Brantly applies a Freudian reading to the novel and argues that “Dr. Glas has murdered his father in the form of Gregorius” (Brantly 2016, 72). In addition, Brantly argues that Söderberg’s novel illustrates a shift in the view of science and religion during the later part of the Modern Breakthrough. She suggests that the fact that Glas murders the Father indicates a paradigm shift where science has replaced religion. However, Brantly states that although science has won in the shape of the doctor, it is not satisfactory, because: “The threat of Modernist meaninglessness and arbitrariness lies just around the corner” (Brantly 2016, 78). Brantly’s interpretation of Söderberg’s novel informs my analysis of Khemiri’s novels, both regarding the role of the father, as well as the underlying tone of anxiety and melancholia.

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation explores the trope of the father as well as discusses male identity and fatherhood in Khemiri’s novels. Literary scholar Linda Haverty Rugg writes in “Male Reproductive Rights: Mark Twain, August Strindberg, and Literary Paternity” (2016)

about the father complex in the work by August Strindberg and Mark Twain. Rugg explores how August Strindberg and Mark Twain “make a patrimony of their writing” (Rugg 2016, 3). She notes that both Strindberg and Twain have been viewed as father figures in European literary history: “Mark Twain and August Strindberg might be considered (and have been named as) the literary fathers of entire national traditions (Rugg 2016, 4). Moving away from Freudian readings, Rugg emphasizes the anxiety about literary and biological paternity that the works express, and she claims that the authors focused on autobiography, gaining control of their public image and “assuming the stature of literary icons” (2016, 6). Rugg argues that a driving factor behind the trajectory of their authorships is related to the authors’ anxieties about fatherhood. She claims that their writing conveys a response to how their perception of societal, cultural, and economic developments “led to a threat of traditional notions of fatherhood and authority” (Rugg 2016, 15). In short, Rugg asserts that Twain’s and Strindberg’s survival as literary fathers are enforced by their response to attacks on paternity, which, she argues, is proof of their anxiety (Rugg 2016, 15).

In Khemiri’s novels, there are intertextual relationships to canonical authors, but as mentioned, the roles are often reversed in Khemiri’s novels. The older generation of migrants, the father and his friends, have lost their power as paternal figures in the family and in society. Consequently, the postmigrant son, even when he becomes a father himself, is left with the task to take care of himself and everyone around him, despite his crippling anxiety. The son is portrayed as the antihero, in comparison with the authorial father figures in literary history. In Khemiri’s novels, there is often a character with the author’s name, who may or may not be identical to the autobiographical author Jonas Hassen Khemiri. In addition, Khemiri’s narrative strategies emphasize the intertextuality between his novels. For instance, he employs irony and

parody to challenge the concept of authenticity through an unreliable narrator in *Ett Öga Rött*, while *Montecore* emphasizes the interplay of different backgrounds through the display of the language and experiences of the characters, which creates a metafictional layer in the text. In *Pappaklausulen*, the character of the father is portrayed as a complicated and melancholic man, who blames his ex-wife, his children, and the nation for his unhappiness.

In *Systrarna*, the portrayal of the father has changed. He is no longer described as a sarcastic, melancholic figure; an outsider who is looking in, unable to fit in with the new country, or the family, like in *Pappaklausulen*. In *Systrarna*, his selfishness and his lack of empathy and understanding for how his actions have affected his family becomes painstakingly clear. Slowly, throughout the text, the full effect of the father's actions is revealed, through the lens of the narrating son. For example, the mother develops mysterious symptoms of illness after her husband's disappearance. This is conveyed in the following passage which starts with the seemingly casual mention of the father's disappearance and continues to contrast this event with the "endless sunlight" of the Swedish summer of 1994, when Sweden's national soccer team won a bronze medal in the World Cup:

När pappa försvann, började mamma utveckla underliga symptom, det här var sommaren 1994, sommaren av oändligt solsken, den mirakulösa sommaren när Sveriges usla fotbollslag på något sätt gjorde flest mål i fotbolls-VM i USA och lyckades få brons. (2023, 145)

When Dad disappeared, Mom started developing strange symptoms, this was in the summer of 1994, the summer of endless sunlight, the miraculous summer when Sweden's crappy soccer team somehow scored more goals than any other team in the World Cup in the U.S and secured a bronze medal. (2025, 127)

The juxtaposing of the notion of the endlessly sunny summer (which is a stereotypical Swedish illusion) and the collective, national joy and pride of the soccer team's "miraculous" success with the tragedy of his father's absence and his mother's illness highlights the son's position as an outsider, where the national happiness as well as the happiness of the family, is out of reach. Further in the novel, the first-person narrator, the oldest son, describes how his grandmother steps in to help his mother by taking care of the kids over the weekends, and through a short dialogue, we find out the extent of the father's disappearance:

En kväll efter att hon hade kört hem oss ringde mormor och frågade om vi hade hört något från pappa.

Nej, sa jag. Hur så?

Jag hade bara en känsla av att han skulle komma hem snart, sa hon.

Han har varit borta i över ett år, sa jag.

Jag vet, sa hon. (2023, 152)

One evening my grandmother called me and asked if I had heard anything from Dad.

No, I said. Why?

I just had a feeling that he would be back soon, she said.

He's been gone for over a year, I said.

I know, she said. (2025, 33)

The short dialogue reveals that his father has been gone for over a year, as if it is a random fact, not a piece of information that severely impacts the reader's understanding of the narrator's pain and confusion. Similarly, this strategy of minimalistic and sudden revelation of facts and clues are utilized throughout *Systrarna*. For example, there are hints about the father's relationship with the mother of the three sisters, but the information is scarce and vague and it is never

confirmed. The narrator is on a quest to find out the truth, but the truth is never revealed, only referred to as a mystery, causing an underlying tension in the family. This tension is displayed through short memories seen through the eyes of the narrator as a boy, who overhears his parents who are arguing about it in French. Suddenly, following the passage quoted above, the father returns home after a year of absence. The narrator describes the parents as they are standing in the hallway, observed by their young children:

Det är för sent, sa hon på franska.

Jag var tvungen att hjälpa en vän, sa pappa.

Vilken vän?

En vän.

Var det hon?

Pappa tittade på oss. Han suckade. Hon har ingen annan.

Det kändes som en underlig befrielse när mamma äntligen började skrika. Jag tog in mina bröder i vardagsrummet och stängde dörren och satte på tv:n extra högt för att vi skulle slippa höra svordomarna. (2023, 154)

It's too late, she said in French.

I had to help a friend.

What friend?

A friend.

Her?

Dad looked at us and sighed. She doesn't have anyone else, he said.

It felt like a strange relief when Mom finally started screaming. I took my brothers to the living room, closed the door and put on the TV extra loud to drown out the curse words.

(2025, 134—135)

The intertextuality between Khemiri's novels provides the reader with a new perspective on the father's actions which indicates that the curse that the sisters have grown up with, is a metaphor for the man himself; the father, who, according to the subplot that never gets resolved, might also be the sisters' father. Earlier in *Systrarna*, there is a passage where the mother suggests that the son and the father sign up for a computer class together. During their first class, the son is proud to be the one who can successfully set up the computer and he says to the father:

Nu behöver vi bara ett lösenord, sa jag.

Vilket lösenord?

Bara hitta på ett, sa jag.

Evelyn, sa han.

Som i Evelyn Mikkola?

Det är bara ett namn, sa han. Ett lösenord. (2023, 139)

Now we just need a password, I said.

What password?

Just invent one, I said.

Evelyn, he said.

Evelyn? I said.

Evelyn, he said.

Like Evelyn Mikkola?

It's just a name, he said. A password. (2025, 120)

This passage is an example of how the text subtly hints at the unresolved mystery of the father's relationship to the mother of the Mikkola-sisters. Thus, closely connected to the trope of the father, is the theme of fatherhood in Khemiri's novels. In the novel *Montecore*, there is a passage where the father picks up the son from day care and it is described as the son's first childhood memory: "Första minnet är från dagis och du ligger gömd i kudrummet efter att ha bråkat med någon, antagligen han Gabrieltönten" (2006, 104) [The first memory is from day care, and you're lying hidden in the pillow room after having fought with someone, probably that jerk Gabriel] (2011, 83). While waiting for his father to pick him up from day care, the son drifts into an interior monologue which describes how special and different from other 'normal' parents his father is. Then, suddenly his father appears to pick him up:

Och precis då hör du pappors röst ute i hallen och du vet vem det är för rösten ropar:

Tjena jävla galoscher! och direkt efteråt blir det alltid lite tyst eftersom dagisfröknarna aldrig vet hur man ska svara. (2006, 104)

And just then you hear Dads' voice out in the hall and you know who it is because the voice shouts: Hello, you damn fools! And right after that it always gets a little quiet because the day care ladies never know how to answer. (2011, 84)

In this passage, the father is described as a fun and playful dad, which is very different from the portrayal of the father in *Pappaklausulen*, where the son, now a father himself, is struggling with his relationship to his aging father, now an absent grandfather. Interestingly, there is a scene in *Pappaklausulen* which is almost identical to the scene in *Montecore*. However, now it is the son who is dropping off his own child at playschool, and in contrast to the extroverted father, the son is anxious and painstakingly conscious of how he is perceived by the staff:

Pappan frågar förskolepersonalen hur dom mår. Han hälsar på städaren. Han ställer sig utanför glasdörren och tittar fram sådär roligt bakom hörnet så att fyraåringen ska skratta. Han gör det en gång. Två gånger. Tre gånger. Fjärde gången har dottern tröttnat. Trots att pappan dyker fram med en ny min varje gång. Pappan går tillbaka mot kapprummet. Allt han vill är att dottern ska titta på honom och tycka att han är rolig. Och att hennes kompisar ska tycka att han är en bra pappa. Och kompisarnas föräldrar. Och förskolepersonalen. Och städaren. (2018, 38)

The father asks the playschool staff how they are. He says hello to the cleaner. He stands outside the glass doors and peeps out from around the corner in that funny kind of way that makes the four-year-old laugh. He does it once. Twice. Three times. By the fourth, the daughter is bored. Even though the father pulls a new face every time. The father heads back to the cloakroom. All he wants is for his daughter to think that he is funny. For her friends to think he's a good father. And her friends' parents. And the playschool staff. And the cleaner. (2020, 29)

The son's internal monologue reveals his negative self-talk, and he contemplates the reasons for his anxiety, and he even describes himself as "broken" ["sönder"]:

Hur sjukt det är att than inte ens kan lämna på förskolan utan att känna kravet på prestation och det blir ännu ett bevis på att han är sönder, på att han inte fungerar som all andra, på att något måste ha hänt i hans historia som kan förklara varför han har så svårt att göra saker som vanliga människor gör helt utan ansträngning. (2018, 39)

How insane it is that he can't even drop off his daughter at playschool without feeling the urge to perform, how this is yet another sign that he is broken, that he doesn't work like

everyone else, that he must have gone through something that explains why he struggles to do things that ordinary people manage with zero effort. (2020, 29)

This passage employs intertextuality in multiple ways. It connects the novel *Pappaklausulen* with the novel *Montecore* by portraying almost identical scenes but with different generations in the role of the father. However, whereas in *Montecore*, the son is full of admiration toward his father and dismisses other parents as normal and therefore boring, the son who is also a father in *Pappaklausulen* is struggling to fit in with regular, normal parents, to fit the mold of a Swedish dad. In addition, he implies that “he must have gone through something” which indicates that his father was not the best role model. This foreshadows some of the events which will unfold later in *Pappaklausulen* and developed in even more detail in *Systrarna*. This meta-narrative approach functions as self-reflexive intertextuality and provides a bird’s eye’s view of the authorship.

The aforementioned examples illustrate how Khemiri’s novels navigate and engage with the theme of fatherhood in contemporary Swedish society. Similarly, the strained relationship between father and son and the construction of male identity are important themes in Söderberg’s and Strindberg’s novels. For example, in Söderberg’s novel *Förvillelser*, the main character Tomas Weber has a complicated relationship to his father, who is portrayed as emotionally distant. As previously mentioned, in the first pages of the book, we are introduced to Tomas, who is walking around Stockholm, buying new gloves, meeting friends at for drinks, flirting with women, and then he suddenly runs into his father, Professor Weber:

Vid röda bodarna mötte han sin far i ifrigt samtal med en liberal politiker. Professor Weber besvarade tankspridt sin sons hälsning med samma artighet som om han varit en främmande herre. (1895, 4)

On Rödbodtorget he ran into his father, in lively conversation with a liberal politician. Professor Weber distractedly acknowledged his son's greeting with the same politeness he would have accorded any stranger's. (2014, 19)

The next time his father is mentioned, it is only in relation to Tomas's need for money:

Tomas var utan pengar. Han hade gjort ett något för raskt slut på dem han fått af fadern efter sin examen, och han vågade icke genast bedja honom om mera. (1895, 16)

Tomas had no money. He'd run through what his father had given him after his exams rather too quickly and didn't yet dare ask for more. (2014, 32)

In this passage, their relationship is portrayed as transactional and lacking a deeper connection.

In Khemiri's novel *Pappaklausulen*, the roles in the relationship between the father and son are reversed but equally distant. Here, the son has assumed the practical caretaking and financial responsibility for his father, instead of the other way around. As mentioned, the Swedish title of the novel is *Pappaklausulen* (the dad clause), whereas the English title is *The Family Clause*.

The word "pappa" in Swedish means dad, and thus, the Swedish title emphasizes the theme of fatherhood and the roles between father and son, whereas the English title shifts the focus to family relationships in general. In the novel, the clause is the unwritten contract or understanding that has made the son the caretaker of his father's financial and practical affairs. However, the son is tired of this arrangement and wants to break free. But his father is resistant to change and in response to this suggestion, he gets angry, and makes his son feel guilty:

Vad är nästa steg? Ska jag börja betala för att du håller koll på min post när jag är borta?

Kommer du fakturera mig för att du gör min deklaration? Ska du ta betalt för att du bokar mina flygbiljetter? (2018, 92)

What next? Should I start paying you to keep an eye on my post while I am away? Are you going to invoice me for doing my tax return? Do you want to be paid for booking my plane tickets? (2020, 75)

Throughout Khemiri's novels, the complex relationship to the father figure is a consistent theme. In the early novels, *Ett Öga Rött* and *Montecore*, the character of the father is unreliable and unpredictable. In addition, the novels are connected through their intertextual relationship. For example, *Ett Öga Rött* ends on an ambiguous note, with the main character Halim talking to his father about the mysterious writer who lives next door and whose name is Khemiri:

Khemiri? jag frågade pappa. Det är väl ett arabiskt namn, eller? Mm, arabiskt. Från Tunisien. Han såg inte alls ut som arab, tycker jag. Han har ingen skäggstubb alls. Det är för att hans mamma är svensk. Och han är född här. Som du. (2003, 248)

(Khemiri? I asked dad. That's an Arabic name, right? Mm, Arabic. From Tunisia. He didn't look at all like Arab. He has barely any stubble. That's because his mom is Swedish. And he was born here. Like you.) (my translation)

This relates to the reception of *Ett Öga Rött* in the media and the discussion of authenticity, because Halim questions the authenticity of the author in the novel, whose name is Khemiri. Halim questions the author's ability to speak from an Arabic position since he has a Swedish mother, and Halim wants to help him make his writing more real, more authentic: "Jag tänkte Khemirikillen borde inte ge upp för Sverige behöver fler arabförfattare och kanske min hjälp kan lära honom skriva äktare än dom andra" (2003, 249). [I thought that the Khemiri-guy should not give up, because Sweden needs more Arab-writers and perhaps my help can teach him to write more real than the others (my translation)]. The comment about how Sweden needs more Arab-writers relates to the discourse in Sweden and the search for an immigrant writer, as discussed by

Natia Gokieli and other scholars. This confirms my argument that Khemiri's preferred mode is to speak back through his fiction, rather than engage with political and intellectual debates in media. In the following passage from *Ett Öga Rött* at the end of the novel, fiction meets autofiction, and Halim's comment conveys Khemiri's use of irony: "och när Khemiri-killen inte kan försvara han säger att allt är bara fantasihistoria" (2003, 249) [and when the Khemiri-guy cannot defend himself, he just says that all of it is just imaginary story (my translation)]. This relates to the ending of the novel *Systrarna* where the author says to Evelyn, when she questions his version of the story about them: "Det är ju en roman, säger han. Och i en roman får man hitta på saker" (2023, 709). (It is a novel, he says. And in a novel, you can make things up) (2025, 626).

Consequently, Khemiri repeatedly makes the case throughout his authorship that he writes fiction, and this speaks to the blending of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. The destabilization of genre and the ironic playfulness regarding metafictional strategies is reminiscent of another Swedish writer, who mixes the supernatural and the haunting in her novels, namely Nobel prize-winning, Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf.

4.5. The Curse and the Haunting: Khemiri and Selma Lagerlöf

As previously mentioned, there are two quotes in the preface to Khemiri's novel *Systrarna*, one by Toni Morrison and one by Selma Lagerlöf. The quote by Morrison is from her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) and it reads: "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Morrison 1977, 337). This quote is from the last paragraph of *Song of Solomon* which ends on an ambiguous note with regard to the characters' ability to fly. While both of the characters Milkman and Guitar appear to be able to fly, the novel does not reveal if they will live or die. The idea that Milkman

can fly suggests that he can move beyond his physical body and possibly reunite with his great grandfather Jake. In *Pappaklausulen*, the eldest daughter is introduced as flying into the story from the other side of death, which is a sudden notion of fantasy and the supernatural in the text. In addition, the concept of flying relates to the notion of the supernatural in Khemiri's novel *Systrarna*, which centers around a curse. The quote from Selma Lagerlöf is from a book about Selma Lagerlöf by Swedish writer Elin Wägner (1882-1949), called *Selma Lagerlöf II. Från Jerusalem till Mårbacka* (1943). The quote in the preface to *Systrarna* reads: "Jag är som en klocka som alltid går rätt, bara den får vara ifred" (Lagerlöf in Wägner 1943, 309) [I'm like a clock that always keeps time, as long as it's left alone] (Khemiri 2025). The quote is part of a longer paragraph which describes a conversation between Elin Wägner and Selma Lagerlöf:

En dag då Selma Lagerlöf och jag satt uppe hos Valborg Olander på Karlavägen, karakteriserade hon sig inför mig med följande ord : Jag är som en klocka som alltid går rätt, bara den får vara i fred. Som klocka var hon verkligen inte lik någon annan.

Alla människor beundrade den, tyckte om att den fanns, att dess pendel svängde, att dess visare vandrade runt och att den slog sina slag, men ingen rättade sig efter den. (Wägner 1943, 309)

(One day, when Selma Lagerlöf and I sat at Valborg Olander on Karlavägen, she characterized herself as to me with the following words: I'm like a clock that always keeps time, as long as it's left alone. As a clock she really was unlike anybody else. Everybody admired it, liked that it existed, that its pendulum swung, that its hands moved and that it struck, but nobody adhered to it.) (my translation)

Elin Wägner describes how Lagerlöf's speaks about her self-doubt and anxiety despite her worldwide success, and how she is struggling with her spiritual beliefs. At the end of the book, Wägner shares another quote by Lagerlöf:

Det var därunder Selma sade: Jag kan dö utan tro på ett evigt liv men jag vill det inte.

(Wägner 1943, 314)

(It was then, Selma said: I can die without having any belief in eternal life, but I don't want to!) (my translation).

Khemiri's novels *Pappaklausulen* and *Systrarna*, engage with similar themes, such as anxiety regarding identity and authorship, and notions of fantasy, the supernatural, and the afterlife. This chapter explores the intertextual relationship between Selma Lagerlöf's *Kejsarn av Portugallien* (1914; *The Emperor of Portugallia*, 2021) and Khemiri's *Pappaklausulen* and discusses some of the ways that Khemiri's novel relates to Lagerlöf's classic novel.

In *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, the farmer Jan is so distraught when his daughter Glory Goldy (her name is often shortened to Glory in the novel) moves away to Stockholm that he disappears into a dream world which he calls Portugallien [Portugallia]. This imaginary land provides an escape from worrying about Glory, who is rumored to have gone wrong i.e. become a prostitute in the big city. The word prostitution is never mentioned in the text, but it is implied in conversations such as in the following exchange between two men in the village who discuss Jan's predicament:

Å, det är bara det, att han har blitt sjuk av längtan efter en dotter, som har rest bort för två år sen å inte låter höra ett ord ifrån sej. Hon, som råka' i olycka. Jaså, du kommer ihåg det. Men det är inte fördenskull, som fadern sörjer sej te döds. Det är den stora kärlekslösheta, som han inte kan bära. (1914, 104)

Oh, he's just sick of pining for a daughter who went away about two years ago, and who never writes to him. The girl who went wrong? So you knew about it, eh? But it isn't because of that he's grieving himself to death. It is the awful hardness and lack of love that he can't bear up under. (2021, 102)

Finally, when Glory returns home after fifteen years, she discovers that her father has gone mad. He has fully escaped into his imaginary land, Portugallien, where Glory is the empress and Jan is the emperor. Jan madness is a reflection of his intense mourning of their lost relationship and evokes intense sorrow and melancholia in the parent-child relationship, and especially the father-daughter relationship. This chapter argues that there are similarities between Lagerlöf's novel *Kejsarn av Portugallien* and Khemiri's *Pappaklausulen* in terms of themes and elements such as the haunting, the supernatural, and the curse.

In *Pappaklausulen*, the grandfather's eldest daughter, the dead sister of the main character appears suddenly in the text, like an unexpected visitor from the other side. Interestingly, the main character's mother, the grandfather's ex-wife is introduced in the same chapter, and it is the only place in the novel where these women are portrayed. Throughout the novel, the eldest daughter's tragic fate lingers over the text like a shadow, similarly to her lingering in spirit over the father. For example, on the first page of the novel, when the grandfather is waiting in line at the border, the narrator states, without further explanation: "Farfadern som är en pappa har två barn. Inte tre" (2018, 9). [The grandfather who is a father has two children. Not three] (2020, 3). But it is not until in this chapter, midway through the novel, that the eldest daughter is introduced, in the form of a spirit, a ghost:

En dotter som är en syster som inte lever längre, eller som lever extra mycket nu när hon äntligen har förlorat sin kropp, svävar över staden på jakt efter sin pappa. (2018, 209)

A daughter who is a sister who is no longer living, or who is actually living more than ever now that she has finally lost her body, floats above the city on the hunt for her father. (2020, 173)

Over the next ten pages, we follow her journey as she soars above the city and shares the story of her tragic life. As moving and sad as it is, the narrative is also filled with tragic humor and irony, like when she visits an old boyfriend and makes him fall and hurt himself, or when she finds her old drug dealer who has turned into a Christian with a savior complex. She decides to search for her estranged father who abandoned her to start a new life with his new family in a new country. But when she finally tracks him down, she finds him living alone, back in the old country:

Men pappan var försvunnen. Han hade flyttat utomlands. Till slut hittade hon honom på en liten bar med skrikiga stålstolar i staden som han hade svurit att aldrig återvända till. Han såg ofattbart gammal ut. Han satt alltid själv, han pratade aldrig med någon. När hon såg sin pappa försvann ilskan. Hon började tycka synd om honom. (2018, 215—216)

But the father was nowhere to be seen. He had moved abroad. Eventually, she found him in a small bar full of noisy metal chairs in the city he had sworn he would never return to. He looked unbelievably old. He always sat alone, never spoke to anyone. As she looked at her father, she felt her anger disappear. She began to feel sorry for him instead. (2020, 178)

She describes her father as living abroad, which is the same words that the father used in his conversation with the Canadian tourist, as previously discussed. This implies that both the father and his daughter consider his new country, Sweden, his home base, which implies that he has left Sweden to live abroad and not the other way around. This puts the father in a place of belonging to Sweden, where he is a citizen, after all. The father's failure to succeed in Sweden is evident

when the daughter claims that he had returned to a city “he had sworn he would never return to.” The daughter’s anger transforms into compassion for her father, and they spend the rest of the night together, drinking, singing, dancing, watching TV, and eventually, fall asleep on the couch. Although we are aware that the daughter is no longer alive, the portrayal of them hanging out together conveys a moment of reconciliation. The emotionally charged portrayal of them sleeping next to each other is juxtaposed with the surrealistic description of the daughter rushing through his veins and holding his heart like a bird:

Dom somnade bredvid varandra i soffan. Hon var nära honom på ett sätt som hon aldrig hade varit när hon levde. Hon skulle aldrig lämna honom. På natten gick hon in i hans kropp, hon susade runt i hans blodomlopp, hon höll hans hjärta i sina händer som en liten fågel. (2018, 216)

They fell asleep together on the sofa. She was close to him in a way she had never been while she lived. She would never leave him. At night, she entered his body, she rushed through his veins, she cupped his heart like a tiny bird in her hands. (2020, 179)

The shift between the detailed description of metal bar stools and the sofa, to the supernatural image of the daughter metaphorically rushing through the father’s veins and holding his heart, emphasizes the emotional intensity. The effect is enhanced by the fact that these ten pages of the novel is the only place where we meet the daughter. The roles are reversed; instead of the father who should have taken care of his daughter, she takes care of him, and she states that “she would never leave him.” The heart symbolizes the source of her father’s love, and the daughter holds it as if it were a fragile bird. Similarly, in Selma Lagerlöf’s novel *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, Jan’s heart symbolizes his connection to his daughter. Jan states that the day his daughter was born, is when his heart starts beating. This mirrors the father Abbas’s excitement on the day of his son’s

birth in Khemiri's novel *Montrecore*. First, Jan is concerned, because he has never felt anything similar before, but when he asks to hold his child a bit longer, the midwife smiles:

Har Jan aldrig förr tyckt så mycke om nån, så att ni har fått hjärtklappning för dens skull? sa barnmorskan. Neej, sa Jan. Men i samma stunden begrep han vad det var, som hade satt hjärtat i gång på honom. Och inte nog med det, utan han började också ana vad som hade varit felet med honom i hela hans liv. För den, som inte känner av sitt hjärta varken i sorg eller i glädje, den kan säkert inte räknas som en riktig människa (1914, 6).

Say, Jan, have you never cared so much for somebody that your heart has been set athrobbing because of her? asked the midwife. No indeed! said Jan. But at that moment he knew what it was that had quickened the heart in him. Moreover he was beginning to perceive what had been amiss with him all his life, and that he whose heart does not respond to either joy or sorrow can hardly be called human. (2021, 16)

This awakening of his heart is further conveyed through Jan's act of compassion when he stays late at work on his daughter's birthday to help his fellow worker, Börje, finish his work. Börje is surprised by this act of kindness, and he asks Jan what he wants in return for helping him. Jan says nothing, and then he walks away, thinking to himself:

Han gick hastigt bort för att inte bli lockad att förklara vad detta andra var. Det brände honom på tungan att säga: Det är inte bara Klara Gullas födelsedag, det är också mitt hjärtas. Men det var väl, att han inte kom att säga det, för Börje skulle säkert ha trott, att han hade blivit tokig. (1914, 14).

Jan hurried away so as not to be tempted to explain what that *something else* was. It had been on the tip of his tongue to say: Today is not only Glory Goldie's birthday, but it's

also the birthday of my heart. It was as well, perhaps, that he did not say it, for Börje would surely have thought Jan had gone out of his mind. (2021, 23)

This foreshadows future events in the novel, as the love for his daughter does indeed make Jan go mad when they are separated. In *Pappaklausulen*, the father has left his daughter to start a new life in Sweden, but in *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, the daughter leaves home to go to Stockholm to earn money to help her parents keep their house. Glory encounters hardships in Stockholm, and she is gone for fifteen years, without even writing home. When the daughter returns, her mother is full of anger, but when she sees Glory, she is horrified at the sight:

Den människan, som hon hade framför sig, såg mycket äldre ut, än hon borde göra, för hon var ju inte mer än några och trettio år, men det var inte för det, att håret hade vitnat vid tinningarna, eller för att pannan var full av smårynkor, som Kattrinna blev rädd, utan därför att Klara Gulla hade blivit ful. Hon hade fått en besynnerlig grågul ansiktsfärg, och det var något tjockt och grovt omkring munnen. Hela vitögat hade gått över i grått och blivit blodsprängt, och under ögonen hängde skinnet ut i stora påsar. (1914, 115)

The person standing before her appeared much older than her years; for she was only two and thirty. But it was not because Glory Goldie had turned gray at the temples and her forehead was covered with a mass of wrinkles that Katrina was shocked, but because she had grown ugly. She had acquired an unnatural leaden hue and there was something heavy and gross about her mouth. The whites of her eyes had become gray and bloodshot, and the skin under her eyes hung in sacks. (2021, 113)

The description of Glory's appearance speaks to the difficulties she has endured, and she tells her mother: "Men jag råka' illa ut då i början. Ja, det har ni kanske hört? Ja, så mycke vet vi, sa Kattrinna och suckade" (1914, 115) (I went wrong in the beginning-but perhaps you've heard

about it? Yes, that much I know, sighed Katrinna) (2021, 113). Similarly, the description of the daughter in *Pappaklausulen* reveals the hardships she has been through:

Hjärnan var slutkörd, tarmsystemet punkterat, immunförsvaret hade gett upp, endorfinproduktionen upphört. Armarna kanske såg normala ut på håll, men dem värkte värre än reumatism av alla söndertrasade vener. Båda benen, särskilt det högra, var mörkt rödflammiga, dom såg ut som efter en brännskada. (2018, 209)

Her brain was wrecked, her intestines trashed, her immune system had given up, the production of endorphins had stopped. Her arms might have looked normal from a distance, but the pain was worse than rheumatism thanks to all her shredded veins. Both legs, the right in particular, were covered in dark red patches that looked like burns. (2020, 173)

Thus, in both *Kejsarn av Portugallien* and *Pappaklausulen*, the portrayal of the daughters' bodies conveys their tragic life stories, while at the same time omitting any details. Khemiri's story of a father's abandonment of his daughter and the consequences of the migrant's search for a new life, is related to with Lagerlöf's story of a father who is torn apart by guilt after sending his daughter away to earn money to help her parents. In the texts, the complicated parent-child relationship leads to catastrophic consequences for the characters. The father in *Pappaklausulen* is depressed and unable to form connections to his two living children. The father in *Kejsarn av Portugallien* escapes reality through madness to live in an imaginary land. In both novels, life and death are at stake, but in contrasting ways. In *Pappaklausulen*, the dead daughter saves the life of the father, not once, but twice. After spending the night on the sofa, the father returns to the bar, and after drinking three beers, he gets into the car to drive to the coast. The daughter tries to stop him and she is surprised when he can hear her voice, and responds:

Måste du åka till kusten just ikväll? sa hon. Ja, mumlade han. Hon spärrade upp ögonen. Hade hon hört fel? Varför måste du dit? viskade hon och strök honom över huvudet. Jag vet inte, mumlade han. Hans ansikte låg mot ratten. (2018, 217)

Do you have to go to the coast *tonight*? she asked. Yes, he mumbled. Her eyes widened. Had she heard wrong? Why do you have to go there now? she whispered, stroking her head. I don't know, he mumbled. His face was resting on the wheel. (2020, 180)

The reversal of roles, with the daughter stroking her father's head, and the supernatural ability to connect across the border between life and death, is a stark contrast to the rest of the novel about the everyday life of the son. Thus, in *Pappaklausulen*, the dead daughter forgives him without imposing any blame or guilt onto him. However, the ghost of the daughter symbolizes the haunting of the past which relates to Ahmed's argument that that the melancholic migrant functions as a "rather ghostly figure, haunting contemporary culture as a kind of unnecessary and hurtful reminder of racism" (2020, 148). Thus, the story of the daughter conveys the importance of letting go of guilt and shame, and reveals how the father's trauma is haunting the family. The next time the daughter saves her father's life is when he jumps down onto the train tracks. The narration is short and concise, only one page, and the daughter tries to convince her father to get off the tracks before the next train arrives. The intensity is heightened through the portrayal of how the minutes go by, and how the clock is ticking:

Skynda dig nu, säger dottern. Tio minuter till nästa tåg. Han står kvar. Nio minuter. Han står kvar. Åtta minuter. Han böjer sig ned och tar upp några svarta småstenar från spåret. Dom är underligt runda, som såna där kulor som finns i krukväxter. Kom igen nu, säger dottern och känner sig som en förälder. Jag säger det inte igen. Det här är sista gången jag säger det, okej? (2018, 219)

Hurry up, says the daughter. Ten minutes until the next train. He stays where he is. Nine minutes. He stays where he is. Eight minutes. He bends down and picks up a couple of round black stones, like those round balls you sometimes see in pot plants. Come on, says the daughter, feeling like a parent. I'm not going to tell you again. This is the last time, okay? (2020, 181)

Finally, she gets increasingly desperate, and the narration mirrors the experience of watching a movie, with shorter sentences, and the repetition of words without commas. You can almost hear the train and feel the vibrations of the tracks. The capitalization, much like in Yahya Hassan's poetry, conveys the intense emotionality:

Snälla snälla snälla pappa jag ber dig, klättra upp, du ska inte stå kvar här, inget blir bättre av det här, du ska hem, vad vill du jag ska säga, att jag älskar dig, att jag saknar dig, att jag förlåter dig, en minut, spåret ticker, rälsen vibrerar, UPP MED DIG UPP MED DIG UPP UPP UPP UPP UPP UPP U... (2018, 220)

please please please please, Dad, I'm begging you, climb up, you can't stay here, you need to go home, what do you want me to say, that I love you, that I miss you, that I forgive you, one minute, the tracks are clicking, the rails are vibrating, GET UP GET UP UP UP UP UP U... (2020, 182)

Again, the language implies a reversal of roles, as if the daughter is now the parent who is admonishing a child. It is noteworthy that the children in Khemiri's novels must rise above the anger and bitterness and reach out to the parents for forgiveness, and not the other way around. This recurring reversal of the traditional roles in the family relates to Ahmed's discussion of how the migrant's trauma becomes a burden for the next generation. Furthermore, it speaks to the discourse in Sweden about the immigrant's responsibility to assimilate and Ahmed's discussion

of the happiness duty. Thus, the next generation has only two options; to succumb to the ideal of happiness and forgive their parents, or to live with the anxiety and the rage that they have inherited. However, the intertextual relationship between the father-daughter story in *Pappaklausulen* and in *Kejsarn av Portugallien* implies that Khemiri's story is also a universal story of parent-child relationships. By interpolating the supernatural, Khemir's text connects to the canonical authorship of Selma Lagerlöf. The haunting of the dead daughter in *Pappaklausulen* implies that death is just an arbitrary boundary and that the positions of parent and child can be reversed, as can the positions of being an outsider and someone who belongs.

In *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, the daughter, Glory Goldie, returns home without having earned any money to help her parents, and she is filled with guilt when she realizes that her father has gone mad because of her. When Glory arrives, her father is not home, but while she and her mother Katrina unload her luggage from the wagon, they notice a group of shrieking children surrounding an old, disheveled man in a green leather cap with a feather and a chain of paper stars and crosses around his neck.

“Vem är det? sa hon och såg alldeles förskrämd ut. Är det far? Har han blivit tokig? Ja, sa Katrinna. Hon började gråta i sin upprördhet och förde förklädet upp till ögonen. Är det för min skull? Vår Herre ställde det så av barmhärtighet, sa Katrinna. Han såg, att han hade det för svårt. (1914, 116)

Who is that man? she asked her mother in a frightened voice. Is it father? Has he gone mad? Yes, said Katrina, the tears coming into her eyes. Is it because of me? Our Lord let it happen out of compassion. He saw that his burden was too heavy for him. (2021, 114)

Then, the father sees Glory, and he is described in the text as “The Emperor of Portugallia” which emphasizes his self-possessed dignity. In addition, he is described as delivering a speech, which adds weight to his character. He stands in the doorway and says, in a shivering voice:

Kejsarn av Portugallien gick inte ända bort till dottern. Han stannade strax innanför dörrn och framsade sin välkomsthälsning. Välkommen, välkommen, du Klara, du Fina, du rika Gullborg! (1914, 117)

The Emperor of Portugallia did not go straight up to his daughter but stopped just inside the door and delivered his speech of welcome: Welcome, welcome, O queen of the Sun! O rich and beautiful Glory Goldie! (2021, 114)

However, Glory is embarrassed and shocked at the sight, and she yells at him to stop, but her father still sees her as through the eyes of his own insanity:

Tyst med er för all del! sa hon. »Är det meningen å göra mej te ett spektakel å kalla mej för kejsarinna? Han såg litet snopen ut, men det gick över i en blink. Hon var ju den stora kejsarinnan! Allt, vad hon gjorde, var väl gjort. Allt, vad hon sade, var honung och balsam. (1914, 117)

For heaven’s sake, shut up! she cried. Do you want to make a laughing-stock of me by calling me an empress? Jan looked a little hurt, but he was over it in a twinkling. She was the Great Empress, to be sure. All that she did was right; all that she said was to him like honey and balsam. (2021, 114)

Katrina believes that her husband’s madness is God’s remedy for his unbearable sorrow from losing his daughter. Later, when Jan has passed away and Katrina is dying, Glory is devastated and filled with remorse, but her mother says: “Jag är så glad, Klara Gulla, sa hon, för att du har blitt vacker igen.” (1914, 128). [I’m so glad, Glory Goldie, that you have grown beautiful again.]

(2021, 123). Thus, in Lagerlöf's novel, the moment of reconciliation happens after the father's death, whereas in *Pappaklausulen*, this happens when the daughter is dead, through a supernatural connection; a haunting. Furthermore, in *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, Katrina claims that her daughter's appearance has changed. This implies that Glory's transformation from intense anger to acceptance of guilt magically changes her looks. In contrast, the daughter (in the form of a ghost) in *Pappaklausulen* is filled with parental love which is conveyed through stroking her father's head and holding his heart. In both novels, the daughters carry the guilt and the burden to forgive their fathers. On Katrina's death bed, Glory assumes accountability for leaving her parents and submitting them to years of worry. At the end of the novel, at her father's funeral, Glory is filled with peace. She describes how she and her father are as one again and that nothing more needs to be atoned for:

Än en gång kände hon den stora ömheten skölja upp ur hjärtat som en stor våg och fylla hela hennes varelse. Och med detsamma visste hon, att nu var allt gott igen. Nu var hon och fadern ett som förut. Nu, när hon älskade honom, var det ingenting mer, som behövde försonas. (2014, 132)

Again she felt the great tenderness well up in her heart like a mighty wave filling her whole being. Then she knew that all was well again between her father and her; that he and she were one, as in the old days. Now that she loved him, there was nothing to be atoned. (2021, 126)

As she is standing by her parents' grave, she remembers the day when her father saw her in the red dress, just before she left at age seventeen when she wore a red dress to church.

Där stod Klara Fina Gulleborg ifrån Skrolycka, hon, som var uppkallad efter själva solen, vid sina föräldrars grav och lyste som en förklarad. Hon var likaså vacker som den söndagen, då hon gick till kyrkan i den röda klänningen, om inte vackrare. (1914, 132)

There, at the grave of her parents, stood Glory Goldie Sunnycastle, who had been named by the Sun itself, shining like one transfigured! She was as beautiful now as on that Sunday when she came to church in the red dress, if not more beautiful. (2021, 126)

Like in *Pappaklausulen*, the resolution is portrayed as the daughter forgiving her father, and in both texts, it is irrelevant that one of them is dead and one of them is alive. Despite being separated by death, Glory and her father are as one and this experience is described as “like a mighty wave filling her whole being.” In Khemiri’s novel, the daughter is described as “rushing through her father’s veins.” The forgiveness and connection between the father and the daughter transcend the boundary between life and death. Ahmed states: “The recognition of loss does not involve the pathos of realizing that something has gone that cannot be retrieved but rather the excitement of recognizing what can be retrieved, of what is still possible, even if it is not available at present.” (Ahmed 2010, 153). Subsequently, the intertextual relationship between the contemporary writer Jonas Hassen Khemiri and neo-romantic author Selma Lagerlöf suggests that the intergenerational trauma and the family relationships are universally relevant and can cross boundaries of life and death, and of across centuries.

Another similarity between the texts is the lost daughter, who is described in *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, as having “gone wrong.” Similarly to in Lagerlöf’s novel, the fate of the eldest daughter in *Pappaklausulen*, is vaguely described in a conversation between the son and his mother. As previously mentioned, this is the only time that the mother appears in the novel. They meet briefly in a lunch restaurant, and the son’s child is sleeping in the stroller. The son is trying

to get some answers about his father and the fate of his older sister. He tells his mother that he has decided to cancel “pappaklausulen”, the unwritten agreement that requires the son to take care of his father. The son explains that he is tired of doing everything and that he can’t do it anymore. His mother, the ex-wife of the father, the grandmother of the son’s children, says:

Det är ju upp tilll dig, avbryter hon. Hur menar du? Du får ju välja om du vill ha någon kontakt med honom eller inte. Så om jag inte tar hand om honom så kommer han att bryta med mig? Jag vet inte, säger hon. Han har gjort det förr. Med sin första dotter? säger sonen. Mamman äter vidare. (2018, 234)

Well, it’s up to you, she interrupts. What’s that supposed to mean? It’s your choice if you want to have any contact with him or not. So if I don’t look after him, he’ll break it off with me? I don’t know, she says. He’s done it before. With his first daughter? the son asks. The mother keeps eating. (2020, 194)

In this passage, the mother’s silence implies that the son is missing important information about his childhood and the father’s background, yet his mother is unwilling to open up the vault to the past and reveal anything. Instead, she places the responsibility for the son’s relationship to his father onto the son. This relates to how the mother, Katrinna, in *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, blames her daughter for deserting them, despite the fact that Glory went to Stockholm to earn money for her parents:

Hon tyckte, att hon inte kunde förlåta dottern, att hon levde och kom där frisk och färdig, efter att hon hade låtit dem vänta förgäves på henne alla dessa år. Hon önskade nästan, att dottern aldrig hade brytt sig om att komma igen. (1914, 115)

She felt that she could never forgive her daughter for being alive and coming back so sound of wind and limb, after letting her parents wait in vain for her all these years. She almost wished her daughter had not bothered to come home. (2021, 112)

At the end of the novel, Katrinna, who left her husband before he passed away, tells Glory that she looks forward to being reunited with Jan. Similarly to the mother in *Pappakalusulen*, Katrinna chooses to see her husband in a positive light and forget about past grievances: “Jag ska tänka på far, sådan som han var förr i världen, sa hon. Ni minns ju så go’a vänner vi jämt var på den tiden?” (1895, 128) [“I shall think of your father as he was in the old days. You remember what good friends we always were at that time” (2021, 122).] In *Pappaklausulen*, the son keeps asking his mother about his older sister, despite his mother’s reluctance to answer. Through his choice of words (“egentligen” [really]) and the fact that he brings up the eldest daughter twice during this conversation, it is inferred that this topic that has not been talked about in the family. It is obvious that the son is trying to push through and find out more about something that has been taboo: the fate of the eldest daughter whom the father left behind. This illustrates Ahmed’s concept of the melancholic migrant who refuses to let go of the past and keeps dredging up difficult and painful memories. By refusing to keep the peace by staying silent, the son is haunting the nation/family by dredging up the painful past:

Vad var det som hände med henne egentligen? Du vet vad som hände, säger mamman. Men varför pratar vi aldrig om det? Vad finns det att prata om? Stämmer det att hon var prostituerad? säger sonen. Fråga honom, säger mamman. Han vill inte prata om det, säger sonen. Jag vet inga detaljer, säger mamman. Jag vet bara att han var en fantastisk man som förvandlades. (2018, 234—235)

What really happened with her? You know what happened, says the mother. But why do we never talk about it? What is there to talk about? Is it true she was a prostitute? the son asks. Ask him, says the mother. He doesn't want to talk about it, says the son. I don't know the details, she says. All I know is that he was a fantastic man who changed. (2020, 194—195)

The mother's reluctance to talk about it is emphasized by her rhetorical question "What is there to talk about?" which implies that the son is stirring up issues from the past, which makes him the troublemaker. The text conveys that for the adult children, the parents' behavior is confusing and disturbing, almost as if they are being gaslit into re-remembering their past. This mirrors Ahmed's notion of the happiness duty, in the sense that the parents choose to forget any bad feelings and rewrite the story of their past. This passage conveys how Khemiri's novel refuses to offer an "affective conversion", which Ahmed describes as converting melancholia to happiness (Ahmed 2010, 145). Neither the son nor the mother brings up the topic of migration in this conversation, nor do they mention the father's (or the eldest daughter's) ethnic or national background as part of the circumstances behind the father's "change" or his daughter's fate.

In addition, this speaks to the silence in Swedish society about racialization and marginalization, and how intergenerational trauma becomes a narrative of rage and manifests as anxiety. The mother, who is Swedish, represents the nation, and she is deliberately turning away from the issues raised by the son. The mother manifests in the role defined by Ahmed as "the agent that converts bad feeling (unhappy racism) into good feeling (multicultural happiness)" (Ahmed 2010, 145). Thus, the trope of the family functions as a metaphor for the nation, and the son is the troublemaker who keeps bringing up the past. Furthermore, by interrupting the son's rant about having to take care of his father, the mother removes the son's opportunity to

complain, which reflects Ahmed's theory of the happiness duty. By stating that the father was "a fantastic man", she diminishes the son's experience, and she chooses to remember only the good things about the father. Therefore, the son does not receive any support but is placed in the position of the melancholic migrant that haunts the mother by dredging up the hurtful past.

However, the son perseveres with his questions, and this is the only time in the novel that the word prostitution is mentioned. Similarly to in Lagerlöf's novel, it is neither confirmed nor debunked. In both novels, the fate of the daughters implies that their suffering is connected to the transactional nature of human relationships at its worst. The strained interaction between the mother and the son in *Pappaklausulen* mirrors the relationship between the mother and daughter in *Kejsarn av Portugallien*. In both novels, the child becomes responsible for their parents' happiness instead of the other way around. This reflects Ahmed's discussion of the position of the migrant. Ahmed argues that the melancholic migrant is blamed for bringing up racism instead of adapting to the narrative of happiness: "The task of politics becomes one of conversion: if racism is preserved only in migrants' memory and consciousness, then racism would "go away" if only they would let it go away, if only they would declare it gone." (Ahmed 2010, 148)

In *Pappaklausulen*, the mother continuously places the responsibility to repair the relationship between the father and him on the son. Ahmed describes how the position of the second-generation child is the place where compromise can be formed, but she states that: "A compromise is happy insofar as it is a compromise in what is wanted" (Ahmed 2010, 149). Thus, compromise that is wanted by the family, or the nation, is one where no guilt is assigned to the parent/nation. In *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, the story ends with the daughter grieving both her parents. Despite her effort to help her parents keep their house, her everlasting feeling is guilt:

Men under hela dödskampen låg Klara Gulla gråtande på golvet bredvid sängen. Hon låg där och grät bort sin ångest, sina feberdrömmar, sin skuldbörda. Det kunde inte bli något slut på hennes tårar. (1914, 128)

But all through the final agony Glory Goldie lay weeping on the floor beside her mother's bed; she wept away her anguish; her fever-dreams; her burden of guilt. There was no end to her tears. (2021, 123)

Furthermore, the mother in *Pappaklausulen* refuses to accept accountability and she does not blame the father, her ex-husband, for the suffering that he has caused the family. Instead, she chooses to remember the good things, similar to Katrina in Lagerlöf's novel, and she even states that the father was "a fantastic man." This speaks to Ahmed's notion of the happiness turn and the desire to forget about the past. Ahmed states:

To turn away from such histories is thus to turn toward happiness and toward others who care for your happiness, who allow you to share in their happiness. This is why even the quiet murmur of family intimacy can offer a fantasy of reconciliation, a fantasy that we can forget about racism, and that we can put such histories of hurt behind us. (Ahmed 2010, 148).

Consequently, I argue that Khemiri employs the theme of the family to illustrate the tension between those who consider themselves part of the nation and those who are marginalized and racialized. In addition, I claim that Khemiri's novels use intertextuality to emphasize the universality of family relationships and discuss intergenerational trauma, guilt, and the consequences of silence. In both *Pappaklausulen* (as in several of Khemiri's novels) and *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, there is an element of guilt connected to the transactional value of money. In *Kejsarn av Portugallien*, Glory goes to Stockholm to make money to help her parents. In

Pappaklausulen, the unwritten agreement of the family clause, requires the son to pay his father's bills, plane tickets and necessities.

In addition, the intertextual connection between the texts speaks to the universal notion of how guilt is bestowed upon children, and how the burden to keep the parents happy makes the children feel alienated. Ahmed notes that the affective alien implies the inability to live up to the expectation of happiness. For the second-generation of migrants, this manifests as the "alienation from the abstract potentiality of the individual, premised on the belief that you can do or be whatever you want to do or be" (Ahmed 2010, 156). In *Pappaklausulen*, the son carries the burden of not being successful in his parents' eyes despite his opportunities. He is a stay-at-home dad with vague plans for his career. Over lunch, his mother speaks about her own thriving career. When she asks him how he is doing, he replies that it is alright, and says that he enjoys staying home with the baby. Then, his mother surprises him by speaking about his father:

Din pappa älskade det, säger hon. Vad menar du? Att vara pappaledig. Han var hemma med både dig och din syster. Han var helt otrolig på det. (2018, 225)

Your dad loved it, she says. What do you mean? Being on paternity leave. He stayed home with both you and your sister. He was absolutely incredible at it. (2020, 187)

By speaking highly of his father, and in particular about his parenting skills, the mother hijacks the conversation and makes it impossible for the son to continue complaining about his father. In addition, the positivity reverses the roles and makes the son responsible for the happiness duty and to not dredge up the hurtful past. Despite the fact that they both know that the father was not a great father, the son is forced to accept his mother's story, since he does not have the facts, only his memories. The mother explains how the father used to make homemade babyfood and keep track of the babies' sleep schedules:

Det hade jag ingen aning om, säger sonen. Har jag inte berättat det? säger mamman. Han var en fantastisk pappa när ni var små. Det var när ni blev äldre som han blev lite mer oberäknelig. (2018, 225–226)

I had no idea, the son says. Did I never tell you? the mother says. He was a fantastic father when you were small. It was once you got older that he became a bit more unpredictable. (2020, 187)

As a reader, we are well aware of the father's behavior at this point; his cheating, his failure to be a good father and husband, his disappearing without any explanation for years. Therefore, this passage conveys a notion of gaslighting of the son, in particular as the word "unpredictable" seems like a euphemism with regard to the father. Ahmed claims that tolerance offers a space between anger and fantasy. She states that: "Tolerance offers its own promise of happiness: as if the world is open to you, as if you can do what you want in the world that you are in" (Ahmed 2010, 157). In *Pappaklausulen*, the mother is portrayed as the representation of Swedishness and she has the prerogative to describe the past, despite her son's lived experience.

The following statement by Ahmed describes the son's position of inbetweenness where he is stuck between the reality of his experience and the fantasy of his mother's re-telling of the past: "Your experience of living in the world exposes this openness as a fantasy. Anger fills the gap between the promise and what happens." (Ahmed 2010, 157). Subsequently, the postmigrant son is the alienated alien who, as Ahmed describes, is even more alienated due to the closeness to the position of belonging. The conversation shifts and the son asks his mother what she even saw in his father: he argues that the two of them seem so different. His mother puts down her cutlery as she contemplates the question. Then, she says:

Han smittade mig med sitt mod, säger hon. Och sitt förakt för onödiga regler. Hon ler och spanar ut mot torget. Men han borde ha valt ett annat yrke. En man med en sån karisma ska inte åka runt och sälja bidéer. Han ska stå på en scen. Eller framför en kamera. Provade han det? säger sonen. Nej. Han var helt ointresserad. Det enda han ville göra var att skriva. I alla fall innan vi fick barn. (2018, 226)

His bravery was infectious, she says. And his contempt for unnecessary rules. She smiles and looks out at the square. But he should have chosen a different career. A man with charisma like that shouldn't be going around selling bidets. He should have been on stage. Or in front of a camera. Did he ever try that? asks the son. No. He had zero interest in it. All he wanted to do was write. Before we had kids, anyway. (2020, 187)

This is the only mention of the father's dream of a writing career in *Pappaklausulen*, and as far as I am aware, in any of Khemiri's novels. The character of the father is portrayed as an aspiring photographer in *Montecore*, but in all of the novels, he is actually a salesman of a variety of objects, a hustler, a small-scale businessman, always looking for the next deal. The revelation that the father wanted to be a writer speaks to the concept of the anxiety of the son in relation to the father. This adds another layer of meaning and confirms the aforementioned connection between the theme of fatherhood and Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence.

Thus, *Pappaklausulen* reveals another struggle between the son and the father regarding authorship. In the passage where the son has lunch with his mother, there is a brief moment in which the transaction of money plays an important part. The son has hurt his hand on the way to the restaurant and his mother offers him a tube of aloe vera. When she gets up to leave after their conversation, she asks him if he wants to keep it:

Vill du ha aloe veran? Gärna, säger sonen. Den kostar 119 kronor, säger hon och räcker över tuben. Sonen tackar och smörjer på lite mer kräm. (2018, 240)

Do you want to keep the aloe vera? Sure, says the son. It's 119 kronor, she says, handing him the tube. The son thanks her and rubs in some more of it. (2020, 199)

The son accepts his mother's gift, and the aloe vera, which is literally helping his skin heal, is a symbol of the potential for healing in their relationship. However, the mother continues to talk about what a great product aloe vera is and then, surprisingly, she repeats the price:

119 kronor kostar den, säger hon igen. Du kan swisha mig. Eller sätta in på mitt konto. Sonen tittar på mamman. Menar du allvar? Säger han. Det är samma pris som jag köper den för, säger mamman. Jag lägger inte på något. Sonen nickar. Han ger henne pengarna kontant. Blev du sur nu? säger mamman. Inte alls, säger sonen och försöker le. (2018, 240)

It's 119 kronor, she says again. You can give me cash. Or just transfer it to my account. The son stares at the mother. Are you serious? he says. It's the same price I paid for it, the mother says. I haven't added anything. The son nods. He hands her the cash. Are you annoyed now? the mother asks. Not at all, the son says, attempting to smile. (2020, 199)

This passage illustrates the transactional aspect of the family relationships, which is symbolized by the mother asking the son to pay for the tube of aloe vera, which he assumed was a gift.

Asking the son to pay for the aloe vera, reveals how the mother expects the son to adapt to a new set of roles, where they are independent agents, and she is free of the duty to take care of him.

When the mother asks him if he is annoyed, the implication is that he is not allowed to be mad, which speaks to Ahmed's notion of the happiness duty. Similarly, the mother makes the son responsible for his relationship with the father by stating that it is up to him if he wants to stay in

touch with him. Thus, the happiness duty applies to the son's relationship to both his migrant father and his Swedish mother in the novel. I argue that the curse runs through all of Khemiri's novels and manifests as a desire to overcome and overthrow national and narrative boundaries. This attempt to break free from the curse is conveyed through the use of a multitude of strategies such as autofictionalization, blending of languages, and intertextuality. In addition, I argue that the curse in the novels is the universal curse of intergenerational trauma in parent-child relationships. At the end of *Pappaklausulen*, the son drives his father to the airport, and in the car, the son tells his father that he forgives him: "Jag...förlåter dig. Kör nu, säger pappan" (2018, 362). [I...forgive you. Now drive, says the father (2020, 305)]. But the son insists and repeats it again, now using the plural pronoun "we":

Vi förlåter dig, säger sonen. Vilka vi? säger pappan. Jag och mina systrar, säger sonen. Pappan är tyst. Han tittar bort. Hans axlar rycker till. Han gör konstiga ljud. Sonen tittar rakt fram tills det har gått över. Kör nu, säger pappan och sätter på sig solglasögonen. Glöm inte döda vinkeln. (2018, 362)

We forgive you, says the son. We who? asks the father. Me and my sisters, says the son. The father is silent. He looks away. His shoulders are shaking. He is making strange sounds. The son looks away until it is over. Now drive, the father says, putting on his sunglasses. And don't forget your blind spot. (2020, 305–306)

The father suppresses his emotions and the son does not push further. The blind spot is the son's refusal to see that his position as his father's son affects him more than he thought. Or it might be the son's blind spot and his lack of awareness of how similar he is to his father. The novel ends with a conversation that is a fictional narrative; a fantasy. In this passage, the characters are no longer referred to as 'the son' and 'the father' but as 'the father' and 'the grandfather'. This

indicates that when the father leaves the country, the son becomes a father again and thereby, steps out of the role as a son, at least for the next six months. The son asks his father to send him a text message when he lands, because otherwise, the son will worry. The grandfather tells him not to worry, that he thinks too much, that he is too sensitive. The son who is also a father insists and asks his father several times. Finally, he speaks to his father just like the eldest daughter did when she tried to get the father off the train tracks. The son speaks to his father as if the father is the child, and the roles are reversed.

Jag menar allvar, säger pappan och känner sig som en son. Jag kommer att messa, säger farfadern och ler. Om du inte messar kommer jag att hämnas, säger pappan, halvt på skämt. Hur då? säger farfadern. Genom att skriva om det här, säger pappan. Gör det, säger farfadern. Skriv en bok om sonen som kastar ut sin älskade son på gatan. Det blir snarare en historia om en far som behandlar sin familj som ägodelar, säger pappan. Dom ler mot varandra. Det där sista säger dom aldrig. Dom säger bara hejdå. (2018, 363)

I'm serious, the father says, feeling like a son. I'll send a message, the grandfather says with a smile. If you don't send a message, I'll get my revenge, the father says, half joking. How? asks the grandfather. By writing about this, says the father. Do it, says the grandfather. Write a book about a son who kicks his beloved father out onto the street. A story about a father who treats his family like possessions, more like, says the father.

They smile at one another. They never say that last part. They just say goodbye. (2020, 307)

In these last pages of the novel, the characters finally speak their truth about their relationship. The father claims that his son is kicking him out “onto the street” and the son argues that the father treats his family members “like possessions.” It is a harsh but honest revelation of their

feelings, and the reader is taken aback by the unexpected and uncharacteristic openness and emotional honesty between the characters. Then, suddenly, as quickly as the scene has taken place, the narrator takes it all back by stating: “They never say that last part.” This illustrates Khemiri’s blending of boundaries in the sense that the writer appears in the text and speaks directly to the reader, thus breaking the fourth wall. The narrator interferes and through the power of the author’s pen, through the magic of fiction, he takes it all back. And perhaps it is only through the power of fiction that the curse can be reversed. In the novel *Systrarna*, when the narrator, the writer from Sweden, finally meets up with Evelyn in New York, he gives her the manuscript for his novel and after reading it, she asks him:

Varför har du hittat på ett låtsasnamn till mig? säger hon. Varför försöker du inbilla läsaren att du kom fram till mig och försökte prata på nyårsfesten? Det är ju en roman, säger han. Och i en roman får man hitta på saker. Men du och dina bröder har ju riktiga namn? säger hon. Texten handlar ju mer om min bild av er än om era riktiga jag, säger han. (2023, 708–709)

Why did you give me a made-up name? she asks. And why do you try to make the reader believe you approached me at that New Year’s Eve party? It is a novel, he says. And in a novel, you can make things up. (2025, 626) [But you and your brothers have your real names? she says. The text is more about my idea of you than about your true selves (my translation)].

In the English translation of the novel, the two last sentences of this conversation between Evelyn and Jonas are missing. In the Swedish version, Evelyn claims that the names of the writer and his brothers are revealed in the manuscript. It is noteworthy, that this part is omitted in the English version of the book, which indicates an attempt to avoid biographical interpretations. As

mentioned earlier, Khemiri has stated that he is a fiction writer who doesn't write in the genre of autobiography. However, this dissertation argues that Khemiri's novels make use of autofictional strategies. Therefore, it is significant that in the Swedish version, Khemiri's brothers are referred to in the text, whereas in the English version, this sentence has been removed. In *Systrarna*, the main character is described as having two sisters, although it is known from the media that Khemiri has two brothers, one of whom is a well-known actor in Sweden. Thus, it is my interpretation that Khemiri chose to omit this part in the English version of the novel to avoid the conflation of the author with the fictional characters. This speaks to my analysis of Khemiri's authorship as representing a tendency to move away from biographical and racialized readings and write into the Swedish literary canon.

In addition, the omitted sentences carry meaning for the purpose of this dissertation. The sentence "Texten handlar ju mer om min bild av er än om era riktiga jag" [The text is more about my idea of you than about your true selves (my translation)] speaks to my discussion about fiction as a strategy for resistance by letting the reader use the text as a mirror. By reading about the characters, we see ourselves and our own values, prejudices, and imperfections more clearly. This speaks to the larger discourse about belonging, identity and race, because as we participate in the discussion of postmigrant and transcultural identities, Swedishness and national and cultural belonging, it is important that we are aware of our own positionality. Thus, Khemiri's novels emphasize that we interpret the texts that we read from our own point of view. Therefore, the omitted sentence relates to the larger discussion in this dissertation about how Khemiri's texts convey an attempt to move away from racialized, biographical readings and belong to the Swedish literary canon.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored questions of belonging and identity in Swedish author Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels in relation to autofiction, intertextuality, and postmigrant melancholy. Furthermore, the study has examined the texts in relation to the contemporary discourse on migration and the understanding of Swedishness as whiteness. The dissertation has discussed how the novels confront issues of Nordic exceptionalism and how they deconstruct and reconstruct Swedish identity. Through the critical method of close reading, the literary analysis has included the investigation of narrative voice, tone, imagery; characterization, gaps and omissions; transgression of genre boundaries; and representations of identity regarding race, class and gender. The dissertation has argued that Khemiri's work displays a blending of boundaries regarding genre and employs a multitude of linguistic and narrative strategies to challenge racialized readings of postmigrant literature. In addition, the dissertation has argued that Khemiri's work deconstructs postcolonial notions of hybrid identity which positions him in a new generation of Nordic writers. Subsequently, the dissertation has analyzed how the novels confront and challenge cultural and national identity in contemporary Swedish society.

The dissertation has situated the novels in postcolonial and cultural studies invested in theories of affect and melancholy and investigated how the representation of transcultural identities in contemporary postmigrant literature relates to the current discourse on Swedishness. By using the term postmigrant literature, the dissertation has shifted the discussion away from racialized categories of authorship to argue for the salience of other categories of analysis, for instance genre, gender, and transnationalism.

In “Chapter 2: The Melancholic Family: Khemiri and the Postmigrant Novel”, I argued that Khemiri’s novels illustrate the post-ethnic turn in the contemporary Scandinavian literary landscape. The chapter engaged with works by writers Marjaneh Bakhtiari and Yahya Hassan and explored the concept of the melancholic migrant as defined by Sara Ahmed. In addition, the chapter argued that the trope of the family functions as a symbol for the nation and as a site for melancholic displacement and intergenerational disappointment in the texts. In “Chapter 3: Writing Life: Autofictionalization in Khemiri’s Novels”, I discussed Khemiri’s novels in relation to Claus Elholm Andersen’s study of Karl-Ove Knausgård’s work. I applied Andersen’s concept of autofictionalization to my analysis of Khemiri’s texts, and I argued that the texts employ performative biographism as defined by Jon Helt Haarder. In addition, this chapter explored the novels in relation to Marjorie Worthington’s definition of an era of post-truth. In “Chapter 4: Writing into the Canon: Khemiri and The Swedish Novel”, I explored intertextuality in Khemiri’s texts in relation to novels by Swedish, canonical authors August Strindberg, Hjalmar Söderberg, and Selma Lagerlöf. This chapter explored themes like the flâneur, the supernatural and the haunting, and positioned Khemiri’s authorship in the context of Swedish literary history.

In contrast to previous scholarship on Scandinavian so-called immigrant-literature and on Khemiri’s authorship in particular, this dissertation has deliberately refrained from analyzing interviews with the author, biographically framed discussions about his work or his life in the media or within the scholarship, and even excluded my own interaction with Khemiri as part of a podcast interview in 2022. This decision is part of the overall aim for this dissertation; namely to discuss how Khemiri’s work conveys an attempt to move away from biographical and racialized interpretations. While working on this dissertation, Khemiri’s novel *Systrarna* was translated into English and gained significant international success, which has resulted in press coverage,

interviews with the author and literary reviews. My dissertation has focused primarily on Khemiri's texts rather than their reception in order to stay true to the purpose of the study.

To conclude, the dissertation has provided a unique, intersectional analysis of Khemiri's authorship by exploring his work in conversation with the Swedish novel and contemporary literary discourses. Thus, the dissertation adds to the scholarship of postmigrant and transcultural literature in the field of Scandinavian studies through a combined theoretical approach of affect theory, intertextuality and autofiction. The dissertation has discussed the overarching question of how to read and speak about identities, otherness, belonging, and inbetweenness with regard to Swedishness, race and ethnicity in contemporary public and academic discourse.

It would be an interesting avenue of future research to expand the discussion of Khemiri's authorship to include an analysis of the plays and novels that were outside the scope of this dissertation. Furthermore, it would be interesting to further explore how the reception of his work in the media is incorporated in Khemiri's authorship. In addition, it would be compelling to examine Khemiri's work in relation to recent studies of monolingualism and multilingualism. This could entail an inquiry of how multilingualism is used in postmigrant literature to challenge lingual and cultural certainty, including a more expansive investigation of how linguistic strategies, mixing of languages, and creative creolization convey notions of resistance in Khemiri's work. For example, the novel *Montecore* includes the fictional language "Khemirish" which is described in the text as: "Ett språk som är alla språk blandade, ett språk som är extra allt med glidningar och sammanslagna egenord, specialregler och dagliga undantag" (2006, 108) [A language that is all languages combined, a language that is extra everything with changes in meaning and strangewords put together, special rules and daily exception. (2011,

88)]. It would be interesting to discuss the symbolic value of this fictional language and connect it to a larger discussion of the meaning of language in a postmigrant world.

This brings us back to the original inquiry of this dissertation: How does the trajectory of Khemiri's authorship convey an attempt to avoid racialized and biographical readings? This study has brought forth a multitude of answers to this question, but I will end with an anecdote that features the author himself. As mentioned, when Khemiri's debut novel *Ett Öga Rött* was published, it was misinterpreted as being written in so-called broken Swedish; Rinkeby-svenska, spoken by second-generation immigrants. The novel was received as a documentary depiction of immigrant youth; presumably written in authentic immigrant-slang while in fact, the language in the novel was an intentional narrative strategy by the author. In December 2022, as I walked across the University of Washington's campus with Jonas Hassen Khemiri, I asked him why all his books except *Ett Öga Rött* are available in English translation. He said: Because I don't want it to be translated. I asked: Why not? And Khemiri replied: Because that's the whole point. In my opinion, this speaks to the overarching purpose of this dissertation; to examine in what ways Khemiri's novels offer opportunities to discuss the construction of identities, the use of language, and how we position ourselves in a world of post-globalization.

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