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New Scandinavians, New Narratives

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A range of terms – kebabnorsk, Rinkebysvenska and perkerdansk – has been deployed to describe speech varieties mixing standard language, slang and minority languages, employed by young people in Scandinavian suburbs with demographic concentrations of immigrants. In recent decades, fictional texts have emerged from these spaces – often considered marginal in relation to a perceived homogeneous and normative culture – which creatively use hybrid languages to explore issues of identity, relationships between majority and minority cultures, and cultural diversity.

This chapter discusses three such texts, each from one Scandinavian country: Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s *Ett öga rött* (One Red Eye, 2003) from Sweden, Yahya Hassan’s *Yahya Hassan* (2013) from Denmark, and Maria Navarro Skaranger’s *Alle utlendinger har lukka gardiner* (All Foreigners have their Curtains Closed, 2015) from Norway. The chosen texts prompt comparative analysis because they deal with themes of identity, issues of national and cultural belonging, and youth experiences in ethnically heterogeneous urban spaces on the periphery of cities (respectively: Stockholm, Aarhus, Oslo). Formally, they also share a number of features such as their use of constructed, non-standard sociolects and their focus on an adolescent first-person narrator/lyrical voice in intimate genres: the diary form (Khemiri and Skaranger) and autofictional poetry (Hassan).1

Another common feature of these works is their pigeonholing by media and academics in the ostensibly self-evident yet problematic category ‘indvandrerlitteratur’ (immigrant literature) and its Norwegian and Swedish equivalents – a category where questions of authenticity, supposedly accurate accounts of life in the ‘ghettos’, and authors’ biographical backgrounds have been blended with literary appreciation. To this
extent, the works have also generated broader debates – in which the writers themselves have participated – on issues of immigration, integration, multiculturalism and multilingualism.

This chapter, following a summary of the texts’ reception and of terminological issues concerning how they are situated by commentators in the cultural landscape, will focus on their employment of speech styles which are seemingly characteristic of multi-ethnic youths, and function as a means for them to record the experience of suburban environments and to engage with issues of identity.

Categorisation and Terminology

One preoccupation of literary criticism when it engages with texts which deal with issues of identity in intercultural contexts, has been that of labelling and categorisation. Multicultural literature (Leonard 2008), minority literature (Gröndahl 2007), immigrant literature (Hauge 2014), transnational literature (Walkowitz 2007), migration literature (Frank 2013) are but a few of the designations applied to these texts, of which some deserve further comment.

The media attention generated around writers with immigrant backgrounds has prompted scholarly talk of an ‘ethnic breakthrough’ (from the Danish: ‘Det etniske gennembrud’) in Scandinavian literature (Leonard 2008), implicitly alluding to the late-nineteenth-century literary and social movement ‘Det moderne gennembrud’ (‘The Modern Breakthrough’; see chapter 7 in this volume). Leonard highlights a competition organised by the publisher Gyldendal and the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, aiming to attract Danish authors with other-ethnic backgrounds in order to bring Denmark up to speed with the other Scandinavian countries in terms of the ‘important metric’ of modernity constituted by ‘an internal ethnic literature’ (Leonard 2008, 32). The ethnic background of the writer is perceived as a selling point at a time when Scandinavian societies are experiencing demographic change: ‘The iconic images of “immigrant writers” can be seen as a marketable commodity […] profitable for both domestic and international consumption and reflect[ing] many levels of power struggle of superiority and inferiority, center and periphery’ (Gokieli 2015, 212).

Another way of approaching these texts is to see them as part of a wider literary trend reflecting an age of migration. Khemiri, Hassan and Skaranger are not the first authors to record experiences of migration and navigation of multiple cultural spaces in literature. Rather,
publications like theirs can be seen in terms of a twentieth-century trend, which Frank (2008) coins as ‘migration literature’. Reflective of cultural shifts relating to demographic, ethnic and social changes, this category also includes works by modernist and late-modernist writers from James Joyce and Henrik Ibsen to Doris Lessing and Salman Rushdie, all exiled either by force or by choice and thus living between two or more languages and cultures (Frank 2013, 200–3). In a similar vein, Walkowitz (2007) employs a broad and inclusive definition and specifies that ‘the political and social processes of immigration shape the whole literary system [...]’, and not simply the part of that system that involves books generated by immigrant populations’ (533).

The term ‘immigrant literature’ is thus far from helpful, yet it has been a persistent feature of discussion of works of the kind outlined above. A typical example can be found in a 2014 article by Hans Hauge, the title of which – echoing postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s famous enquiry ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1985) – asks: ‘Kan indvandrere skrive litteratur?’ (Can immigrants write literature?). Unlike Spivak’s complex reading of subalterity, however, the framing of the discussion following this question presents ‘immigrant literature’ in very narrow terms:

[I]mmigrant literature in the Nordic countries is literature written by Arabs, who are more or less culturally Muslim. [...] [P]articular about migrant literature is that it is a closed category for the majority. I cannot as a native Dane write it. I cannot choose to be a Palestinian-Danish author.

(Hauge 2014)

Hauge, defining his label solely in terms of the writer’s (Muslim, Arab) background, links it to a notion of authenticity: ‘Suddenly, place of birth, biography and nationality have become defining categories [making] the texts authentic’ (Hauge 2014). A position on ‘immigrant literature’ such as Hauge presents has been criticised by scholars and writers alike. The author Astrid Trotzig (2005) has mounted a far-reaching critique of the term’s use in the Swedish context, where ethnicity has become the ‘lens’ through which all works written by writers of foreign background are mediated. This view, for Trotzig, risks ‘homogenizing’ and ‘discriminating’, in that it overlooks authors’ or narrators’ highly individual perspectives (2005, 107–10). Literary scholar Magnus Nilsson takes this point further in Den föreställda mångkulturen (The Imagined Multi-Culture), shifting the focus of critical attention from the biography of the authors to one of discursive context:
The key to understanding the relationship between ethnicity and literature is the insight that ethnicities are *culturally constructed identities*. And this insight implies in turn that literary texts can never be considered as an *expression* of any ethnic culture or identity. The fact that ethnicities are cultural constructions implies that they are *constituted* in cultural practices. And given that fiction is one of these practices it must be regarded as a phenomenon contributing to the *construction* of ethnic identities.

(2010, 220)

Bounced against readers’ expectations, ethnic identity in Khemiri, Has-
san and Skaranger’s works is therefore manifestly a construct in dia-
logue with prior constructs, in the same way as the supposedly mimetic representations of ‘ethnic’ youth language in these works are constructs, subverting expectations of linguistic ‘authenticity’. This subversive qual-
ity can be seen in all the respective examples, which we will now exam-
ine in turn.

**Jonas Hassen Khemiri: *Ett öga rött* (2003)**

Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s *Ett öga rött* (2003) was marketed by publisher Norstedts as ‘den första romanen skriven på tvättäkta Rinkebyvenskska’ (The first novel written in real Rinkebyvenskska) (Khemiri 2006, 28). Media responses followed suit, hailing Khemiri’s debut novel as ‘a break-
through for Swedish immigrant literature’ in which the readers can get ‘to know how the “other side” lives’ (Gunnarson 2003). These narrated ‘experiences of the ethnically-defined underclass’ depend ‘not least on the fact that the sociolect – Rinkeby Swedish or whatever you choose to call it – gives an expressive contemporary colour’ (Gunnarson 2003). Another characteristic of journalistic engagement with the novel is the inclination to merge Khemiri and his protagonist: *Ett öga rött* is not characterized by subtle distinctions between the author and the written […]. [Khemiri] stands for every word, every assertion about the order of things’ (Strömberg 2003). Khemiri himself, however, rebuts the recep-
tion’s reductive classification of *Ett öga rött* regarding his protagonist Hal-
im’s use of language:

I would probably call it innovative Swedish or Halim-Swedish. The worst word is Rinkeby Swedish, that’s such a simple box to close
the language into. It would be great if the book wasn’t seen as a ‘Rinkeby book’ or a ‘ghetto book’.

(cited in Leonard 2005, 24)

In fact, the starting point for the novel’s narrative is precisely a departure from the ‘ghetto’. After his mother’s death, Halim moves to a less ethnically diverse part of Stockholm with his father, who makes concerted attempts to assimilate to Swedish culture. The novel, written from Halim’s point of view in diary form, tells of the complex relationship between the Moroccan-born father trying to escape his cultural background and his Swedish-born son, rebelliously refusing to ‘svennefieras’ (‘be Swedified’) and seeking his Arab roots (31). Convinced that the government has designed an integration plan for the purpose of suppressing the Arab identity he aims to (re)discover, he sets out to assert it through the element of it with which he has familiarity: language. Dalanda – the elderly Libyan woman who shares her Islamic-world perspectives with Halim – introduces him to a pithy aphorism (in the form of an invented Arabic proverb) implicitly linking language with individual identity and worth, and demonstratively deploying a stereotype associated with the cultural identity Halim aims to inhabit: ‘A man without language is like a camel without humps – worthless’ (12). Having internalised the importance of language, Halim singles out writing as its most significant vehicle. The notion of language as recorded in text is something stable and liberating, established as a theme in the novel from the outset: Dalanda gives Halim a notebook, an action she accompanies with a speech about prominent Arab writers and how Arabs invented letters. Dalanda, asserting that ‘texts are not like people who change and forget’, advocates Halim’s use of the book (a star and crescent on its cover) as a means of preserving his Arab identity. This is doubtless also reflected in the red and gold ‘Oriental’ rug motif on the cover of the novel in the Norstedts edition.

Halim’s conscious choice to break the grammatical rules of Swedish when writing his diary therefore forms part of his rebellion against the pressure placed upon him to become Swedish and forget his Arab roots. Halim’s creative use of broken syntax and invented vocabulary is an example of a subversive productivity arising from imposed cultural constraints, and yet sits at odds with his utterances to his father in Arabic, which are rendered in grammatically perfect Swedish.

Language is closely connected to Halim’s physical and mental well-being. When Dalanda moves away at the end of the first part of the novel, his language collapses at the same time as he falls ill. In a stream of consciousness with fragmented syntax and scarce punctuation, he
describes a feverish bath focusing on each of his body parts. Fragmentation of the body into discrete and disconnected components no longer forming a coherent whole is mirrored in the incoherent sentence structure. This breakdown of bodily and textual stability leads to Halim’s deliberations at the beginning of the novel’s second part, where he considers abandoning his diary. These thoughts are closely related to the young teen’s grief at the loss of Dalanda, which further mirrors the loss of his mother. The physical loss of loved ones projects itself into agonising thoughts about the text, concluding with it being regarded as a force that prevents memory from fading away, significantly when Halim consciously chooses his Arab voice:

> It’s been like two voices fighting in the brain. One says it’s time to put the writing on the shelf […] For why keep writing philosophies and thoughts when people like Dalanda say they will always be there, and then leave town? The other voice has spoken with a Libyan accent and reminded me that the text is the best way of keeping the memory and at the same time keeping the balance. Plus, words are the hardest weapon, never going blunt or running out of bullets. 

Halim refers to himself as ‘not a complete Swede’. The notion of incompleteness is reinforced further by a motif of fragmentation: in particular, a fragmentation of the self. This fragmentation is also played out on a narrative level where Halim, who is writing his diary in the first person, frequently removes the I from the text and adopts third-person description. This often happens when Halim finds himself in an insecure position – he steps away from the first-person narrative voice and observes himself from the outside: ‘It’s not often that Halim speaks, but when he does, people understand that it’s serious. Despite this he sometimes gets the feeling that they are laughing when he’s not looking’ (38–9).

Just as Halim inhabits different narrative personae, he also inhabits different varieties of language, between which he can switch to suit a given situation. It bears reiteration that the language in Khemiri’s novels is above all literary, and not to be mistaken for a faithful reproduction of Rinkebyvenska (Myhr 2018, 84). Khemiri’s description of the language Halim employs focuses similarly on the youth’s cognisant manipulation of the language: ‘What Halim does is to try to dissect the Swedish language on purpose – he can speak the language perfectly, but tries to give the impression of the opposite’ (Thompson 2005, 3). This linguistic dissection, which can be seen as another form of fragmentation, is essential to Halim’s assertion of his own individuality. For Khemiri, again: ‘he purposely gets expressions and constructions “wrong” in order to create an
identity for himself, in order to express himself in a language he doesn’t regard as being his own’ (Thompson 2005, 3).

Halim, then, who feels he does not belong in Sweden, longs for a homeland, but the ‘homeland’ for which he longs is not geographically located in Morocco, where his parents originate, but is rather an imaginary dreamland constructed across the Arabic-speaking Muslim world of North Africa and the Middle East. This imaginary setting is at odds with the notion of imposed assimilation in Sweden, represented by the authorities’ integration plan that Halim is convinced is real and designed to make all Arabic-speaking people assimilate and abandon their own identity. His proof for this sinister agenda is an article he finds, which asserts that multiple housing associations have threatened to give notice to ‘all blattar [≈‘pakis’] who have a satellite dish on their balcony’ (55).

In defiance of this imagined threat, Halim undertakes precisely to obtain a satellite dish as a birthday present for his father, Otman, whose assimilation to Swedish culture is linked with watching TV programmes such as Who Wants to be a Millionaire? Expedition Robinson and Jeopardy. The satellite dish, Halim assumes, can enhance the signal and provide them with authentic Arab culture, countering what he sees as an unthinking and unquestioning assimilation. However, when his father finally installs the antenna, they are presented with the same range of programmes dominating the television entertainment industry worldwide. Within globalising geopolitical structures, the novel suggests that the hope for a single cultural identity is futile.

Maria Navarro Skaranger: *Alle utlendinge har lukka gardiner* (2015)

Like Khemiri’s *Ett öga rött*, Norwegian-Chilean author Maria Navarro Skaranger’s debut novel depicting the fringes of society and challenging contemporary Norwegian literature – ‘full of narratives from the academic middle class’ (Prinos 2015) – is written in a fictional diary form. The novel’s reflections on life in the ethnically heterogeneous and multicultural Romsås in suburban Oslo, written in the teenage narrator’s own composite, hybrid language, immediately attracted attention upon publication. Not surprisingly, familiar tropes were used to describe the book, here summed up from excerpts from newspaper reviews chosen for the back cover of the novel’s second edition: ‘Bullseye in Kebab Norwegian’, ‘a rare experience of authenticity’ and ‘everybody who wants to know more about the society in which we live, ought to have a look at this novel’.
Skaranger, brought up in Romsås, intends her book to counter a public discourse on immigrants and where they live: ‘You get tired of the way Romsås is stigmatised’ (Petersen 2015). Questioned about the novel’s prejudicial titular claim, she says: ‘This is how the media depicts places like Romsås […] My book shows the opposite: that it is a diverse and open place’ (NRK 2015). The leopard skin on the front cover of the novel, which has been seen as an allusion to kitsch hip-hop music videos (Jagne-Soreau 2018, 10), likewise plays with people’s preconceptions of the Romsås environment.

Mariana, the main character, has a Norwegian mother and a Chilean father, and she captures this bicultural background in her email address Chica_chile_norge@hotmail.com. Linguistically, her Spanish-speaking background is barely identifiable. She adopts a variety of Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu and English-American words and phrases. Mariana’s constructed suburban language is therefore decisively a multi-ethnolect, which in sociolinguistic terms can be outlined as ‘a variety or style which has developed in multi-ethnic urban communities and which is associated with speakers of mixed ethnic groups’ (Quist 2008, 44).

Another important dimension of the multi-ethnolect is the users’ conscious linguistic choice to establish a common expression of identity: ‘several minority groups use it collectively to express their minority status and/or as a reaction to that status to upgrade it’ (Clyne 2000, 87). Whereas Khemiri’s text deploys the distinct speech style as an expression of the narrator’s assertion of an individual identity in his navigation of two cultures, Mariana’s language is a manifestation of a multicultural collective identity where age and place (being young in Romsås) are more significant markers of identity than individual ethnic and cultural origins. However, it is also clear that Mariana’s language is a literary manipulation of the variation of Norwegian spoken in Romsås, and Skaranger emphasises herself that the novel’s language is ‘exaggerated and constructed’ (NRK 2015).

Similarly to what we have seen in Khemiri, language is also for Mariana a means of searching for and expressing an identity. On the one hand, Mariana subverts normative linguistic strictures within society; on the other, she challenges familial authority by asserting the very same linguistic norms she elsewhere subverts. In an exchange with her father, this irony is articulated in a linguistic assertion that reveals linguistic gaps typically existing between first- and second-generation immigrants:

Mariana, why have you put your ‘sminsker’ in the middle of the corridor, and I’m like: it’s ‘smykker’ [jewelry] and not ‘sminsker’, and
dad’s like: what do you mean, and I’m like: learn Norwegian before you get you to Norway, so daddy goes mental and that’s why I’m now sitting in my room.6

Mariana counters the paternal authority to which she is subjected by in turn subjecting her father to integrationist authority, reminding him of the need to speak the host language.

In Khemiri’s Ett öga rött, Halim, desperately trying to separate Swedish culture from his self-imagined homogenous Arabic culture, discovers that in a globalised world different cultures have merged. For Mariana, however, cultural plurality and mixing is an integral and unproblematic part of the cosmopolitan community where she lives. The fact that she has a mixed background is nothing unique in Romsås, where there are only a few ‘poteter’ (potatoes), i.e. ethnic Norwegians, in her class. In a lesson on Norwegian emigration to the United States, the discussion touches upon questions of nationality, on which the narrator comments:

In class we are all Norwegian, but everybody, except Ruben, Nora, Johnny and Marius, also considers themselves foreigners, either halfway or fully, and Johnny wants always to discuss if can you say that everybody who is half-Norwegian and half-foreigner also can count as genuine foreigners (22).7

It is clear here that the notion of a ‘true’ identity – whether foreign, or, as is implicit, Norwegian – does not make sense. Hybridity has become, paradoxically, a norm, which is reiterated throughout the text, such as when Hispanicophone and South-Asian identities are unproblematically juxtaposed during an international week at the school: ‘Til slutt punjabigruppa kom på scenen som er alle pakkisgutta pluss Anders som også er blitt pakkis på sin egen måte og hadde tatt på seg sårne hvite pakkisklær, og Anders også er latino og derfor de kaller gruppa El Punjabi’ (At the end the Punjabi group came on stage which is all the paki guys plus Anders who has also become a paki in his own way and had put on these like white paki clothes, and Anders also is Latino and therefore they call the group El Punjabi) (41).

Yahya Hassan: Yahya Hassan (2013)

Danish literary scholars at the beginning of the twenty-first century had been concerned with the dearth – by Scandinavian standards – of Danish
writers from immigrant backgrounds on the literary scene (Hauge 2014, Leonard 2008, Frank 2013). Yahya Hassan’s volume of poems therefore stirred considerable debate in the Danish media on publication in 2013: ‘When Yahya Hassan’s poetry collection finally came out, it was a moment of release. Finally, many people sighed. They can write’, Hans Hauge wrote in his review of the book (2014). The book, which sold over 100,000 copies within a couple of weeks, also tapped into ongoing debates in Denmark, prompting remarks on literature as a potential vehicle for societal critique:

In this tribal country, we have for decades shouted about the need for ‘coherence’, while in reality we have treated refugees and immigrants as second-class people in asylum centres and special areas of towns, which have been put on the government’s official ghetto list, but we needed an 18-year-old poet from the ghetto to talk, before the elite would listen.

(Pedersen 2014)

The publication was subsequently employed by people on different sides of the political spectrum to argue their case for/against immigrants and integration in Danish society, and was deemed equivalent in its provocation of debate on freedom of speech to the publication of the Mohammed drawings in 2005 (Søndergaard 2013).

In addition to the political readings, Yahya Hassan also prompted discussion because of its autofictional character, blurring the already ambiguous space between fiction and biography. The biographical content of the self-titled collection of poems centres around the reflections of a young poet raised in a Muslim-Palestinian family in the housing estate Trillegården in a suburb of Aarhus – which the speaker refers to as ‘GHETTOEN’. The back cover of the collection carries the brief statement ‘Yahya Hassan, født 1995. Statløs palæstinenser med dansk pas’ (Yahya Hassan, born 1995. Stateless Palestinian with a Danish passport), conflating the author’s biography with the collection’s textual substance. As a contrast to the Oriental(ist) paratextual wrapping of Khemiri’s Ett öga rött, the cover of Yahya Hassan is streamlined and monochrome, suitable for any coffee table in a setting surrounded by minimalist Scandinavian interior design. However, the contrasts can also be seen as a comment on the binary and rigidly deadlocked schemes dominating the discourse on cultural cohabitation: ‘The colours mime the dichotomous categories of the “self” and “other” in the debates on “immigrant literature”, the black and white of the ethnicized world view, the alleged insurmountability of cultural differences’ (Gokieli 2015, 217).
The poems shout. Entirely written in uppercase, the exclamatory and angry typography matches the content, which mounts a fierce and aggressive attack on authorities (the father, Islam, the Muslim community, drugs, the police, etc.) and their physical and mental abuse. The poems have as such been seen as ‘a breaker of taboo of political correctness’ (Hoffmann 2018, 143). The author’s controversial public interventions, featuring angry critiques of his parents, the Muslim community, religion and Danish authorities – alongside his criminal history – added considerably to the media hype surrounding the publication, further blurring the borders between text and context: ‘[t]he iconicity of an “immigrant writer” makes an immediate assumption between the signifier and the signified, the migrant experience inscribed in the foreign body and the textual story of the same’ (Gokieli 2015, 218). As a literary phenomenon, the publication has therefore also been seen as a catalyst for revising literary methodology and theory, as well as renewing literary reading practices by including extra-textual elements.

Hassan’s poetic playfulness runs through a spectrum of rhetorical registers from a linguistically complex and vocabulary-rich version of Danish pertaining to a formal, standard variant of the language to a rudimentary and grammatically ‘incorrect’ suburban youth version. The chronological order of the poems runs from early childhood, where the speaker narrates criminality, brutality and violence (both at home and in the housing estate), the lack of understanding of the welfare institutions, break-ins, assaults, police chases, Yahya’s arrest (making up the first 75 poems), to adulthood, where Yahya is a sought-after poet (the last poem).

Curiously, the descriptions in the first part are written in standard Danish, whereas the last and longest poem, ‘LANGDIGT’ [Long-poem], is written entirely in what has been characterised as ‘a stylised perkerdansk’ (Andersen Nexø 2013). ‘LANGDIGT’ functions as an epilogue that rewinds time to past childhood events, to which is added a fierce critique, from the perspective of the adult writer, of parental, religious and societal authorities. In this 34-page poem, ‘Yahya’ having been accepted at the prestigious Forfatterskolen and about to have his poems published, starts off with the self-assessment: JEG ER EN SUND OG VELINTEGRERET DIGTER (I am a healthy and well-integrated poet; 135). The following description of the performance of the ‘well-integrated poet’, however, mocks a perceived view of the ‘immigrant writer’ as someone who ought to behave in engaged and productive dialogue with the establishment on unproblematic issues:
Writing poetry about the beauty of nature is decisively not the errand of the speaker. This initial ironic staging of the writer as a nature-loving poet in a classic pastoral tradition is denounced by the contrasting story of life in the ‘ghetto’, which is laid out for discussion:

**HER ER MIN HISTORIE! DISKUTER DEN**
**MED SUKKERKNALD OG KAFFE I JERES MÆLK**
**NU DER ER OPKALD FRA MELLEMØSTEN IGEN (137).**

There follows an aggressive litany of incoherent biographical flashbacks in random order, reiterating many episodes already described in the first part of the collection, all spiced with abundant profanities, sexual explicitness and inserted Arabic words.

The double referent MIG JEG (Me I), which is a typical linguistic feature of speakers of Danish from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, appears more than 150 times in the poem. This rhythmic recurrence of MIG JEG enforces the sense of centrality of the speaker’s navigation of a hyphenated identity:

**MIG JEG SIGER HEJ DEM DE SIGER SALAM**
**MIG JEG SMILER JEG KIGGER PÅ MIN SELV I SPEJLEN**
**JEGEN I SPEJLEN KIGGER PÅ MIN SELV (151).**

However, the significant split of the speaker into both an object (MIG) and a subject (JEG) pronoun can also be regarded as a poetic device alluding to the construction of the immigrant voice from both internal and external positions.

Language is an explicit theme in the poem, in which the alternation between different linguistic registers forms part of the subject’s navigation of different environments (the intellectual and literary scene versus the ‘ghetto’). A well-crafted sentence such as JEG SIGER AT JEG I DET
MINDSTE TALER MANIPULERENDE GODT DANSK (I say that at least I speak Danish manipulatively well; 139), in which form corresponds to content, contrasts with the following sentence, characterised by oral speech markers, informal contractions, swearing and grammatical incorrectness: MIG JEG SIGER HAN SKA HOLD HANS FUCKING KÆFT (Me I say he should keep his fucking mouth shut; 139). Pointing to the linguistic markers characterising ‘perkerdansk’, the MIG JEG speaker is conscious of the characteristics of the speech style: MIG JEG KOKSER I MIN ORDSTILLING/OG JEG SIGER WALLAH (Me I mess up the word order/ and I say Wallah; 149). At various points in the poem, the pulsing MIG JEG is interrupted and replaced by an equally ambiguous second person pronominal addressee: the hypocritical religious criminal, who is linguistically incompetent in both languages:

DIG DU BLIVER HIP HOP OG KRIMINEL OG MUSLIM
DIG DU TALER EN GEBROKKEN DANSK
OG EN GEBROKKEN ARABISK (147).  

The enunciation (about broken language) and the way the enunciation is performed (in broken Danish) thus correspond to and are further refracted from the MIG JEG to the DIG DU.  

Rather than just being a mimetic rendition of language spoken in multicultural suburban Aarhus, the ‘perkerdansk’ employed in ‘LANGDIGT’ is a poetic device which retains both issues of identity and meta-literary commentary on the stigmatisation and stereotyping of the ‘immigrant (writer)’ in a re-appropriation of language:

MIG JEG LAVER BARE EN KLICHÊ
SÅ VÆRSGO/EN KLICHÊ
TIL DIN LILLE KLICHÊHOVED (163). 

To this effect, the poem, after its tirades of fierce attacks and obscene language, points to its own poetic fictionality in the concluding sentence by having the JEG retreat to the initial classic vision of the poet in harmony with nature: ‘OG UGEN PÅ UGERNINGEN JEG DØSER HEN I FORÅRSSOLEN’ (And following the misdeed I doze off in the spring sun; 169).

Conclusion

On the one hand, texts such as those discussed here have been sold precisely on the basis of their authors’ and protagonists’ non-normative
identities, giving rise to suspicions of a commercialisation of ethnicity and a fetishisation of otherness. However, the texts explicitly engage with these questions: self-consciously and ironically, they reflect critically on expectations relating to literary categories such as ‘immigrant literature’. While the reception of these authors suggests that a binary us/them mentality is flourishing in Scandinavian media and on the cultural-criticism scene, the works themselves contrarily accentuate their subjects’ multi-positionality. Rather than constituting stable categories, individual, cultural and national identities are negotiated from a plurality of positions and narrative perspectives, rendering them a process, rather than a state of being. Language, as a signifier of identity, likewise undergoes a manipulation, making the notions of authenticity and reality ambiguous. While the categories of Rinkebysvenska, kebarnorsk and perkerdansk assume one single homogenous language entity of ‘young people with immigrant background’, these speech varieties and the identities associated with them become literary devices functioning within their own literary framework to different ends.

Notes
1. A sociolect is a term used in sociolinguistics to designate a language variation pertaining to a particular social group, defined by, for instance, age, ethnicity, gender or class. The sociolects employed by the works discussed in this chapter are intersectional, used in speech communities characterised by youth, non-normative ethnicity and lower socio-economic standing.
2. In this and all subsequent instances of quotations given in English from Scandinavian texts, the translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
3. Rinkebysvenska – named after the Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby, which has a high demographic proportion of immigrants – has come to refer to any language variety spoken by youths mixing slang, loanwords mainly from English and Arabic, and a simplified Swedish grammar. The Swedish Language Council recommends the term ‘förortssvenska’. The quotation is a statement by the protagonist Khemiri in Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s second novel, Montecore: en unik tiger (2006), in which the boundaries are blurred between fictional and authorial persona – perhaps as a meta-literary commentary on the conflation in the reception of these two otherwise separate categories.
5. Expedition Robinson (1997–) is a Swedish reality TV programme set on a tropical island where the contestants compete in various survival disciplines.
7. ‘[I] klassen vi er alle norske, men alle utenom Ruben, Nora, Johnny og Marius også regner seg som utlendinger enten halvt eller helt, og Johnny alltid skal diskutere om kan man si alle som er halvt norsk og halvt utlending også kan regnes som ekte utlendinger’ (Skaranger 2015, 9).
8. ‘And me, I inspire an article/and me, I say it to A-level students/to artists too/me, I say it to interviewer/from Denmark’s Radio/Me, I talk about the field the trees/me, I say/it is beautiful country.’

9. ‘Here is my story! Discuss it/with sugar lump and coffee in your milk/now is there a call from the Middle East again.’

10. ‘Me I say hi them they say salam/Me I smile I look at my self in the mirror/ the I in the mirror looks at my self.’

11. ‘You [object] you [subject] become hip hop and criminal and Muslim/you you speak broken Danish and broken Arabic.’

12. The noun phrase incorrectly uses common gender instead of neuter, and it should have read ‘du taler et gebrokkent dansk og et gebrokkent arabisk’.

13. ‘Me I just make a cliché/so there/a cliché/for your little cliché head.’

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