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## Negotiations of Ethnic and Cultural Capital in the Swedish Literary Field From Immigrant Writer to Racialization and the Impact of Aesthetic Value

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# NEGOTIATIONS OF ETHNIFYING DISTINCTIONS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE SWEDISH LITERARY FIELD

From Immigrant Writer to Racialization and the  
Impact of Aesthetic Value

CRISTINE SARRIMO

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**ABSTRACT:** The goal of this article is to investigate how authors in the Swedish literary field respond to predominant public discourses related to migration and how a shift has occurred from the 1970s to the present regarding the ascription of ethnicity to authors and their works. Earlier categorizations such as “immigrant author” and “immigrant literature” have become obsolete. Instead, the concept of racialization is in the process of being established. This discursive shift is viewed as one response to a postmigrant condition. The concept of postmigration is introduced as a societal condition in which migrants and their descendants gain visibility in the cultural field in general and influence the literary field specifically by negotiating ascriptions of ethnicity and cultural capital. Bourdieu’s field theory captures negotiations of cultural capital, but in a Swedish context negotiations of aesthetic value also have to be acknowledged. The framework of migration requires that Bourdieu’s field theory is complemented with how ethnifying distinctions may be strategically used for political reasons and transformed to cultural capital. The empirical interest is directed at how individual authors and a cultural journalist respond to migration policies, racism, and the ascription of a migrant identity. Their personal stories on professional establishment, recognition,

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and gaining positions in the literary field were collected through face-to-face open-ended interviews. How these actors negotiate cultural capital and the question of class in relation to a migrant identity is discussed. These individual responses to ethnifying ascriptions and boundaries in the literary field, as well as the contemporary awareness of structural inequalities, are signs of a postmigrant condition in the field, where demarcation lines are being made public, negotiated, and transformed.

**KEYWORDS:** postmigration, Swedish literary field, ethnifying distinctions, aesthetic value, class, racialization

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The focus of this article and my empirical interest is the contemporary Swedish literary field and how authors who are visible and recognized negotiate ethnifying ascriptions and cultural capital to their own benefit or for political reasons. I discuss previous research on how ethnicity and the concept of racialization have been discursively constructed in the Swedish literary field and analyze newspaper articles and one play by Jonas Hassen Khemiri. Qualitative interview material was obtained in the frames of the project “Academia and Cultural Production as ‘Postmigrant’ Fields in Sweden.” Personal stories on professional establishment, recognition, and gaining positions in the literary field were collected by face-to-face open-ended interviews (Rapley 2001, 303–23) characterized by exploratory questions. This article uses material from two interviews. They were conducted with an author and with a senior cultural journalist who is a former editor of a newspaper’s cultural section. The interviews were carried out via Zoom in 2021 and were transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5–2 hours, and the same interview guide was used in each. The interview material is pseudonymized and archived in accordance with the project’s ethical approval. Authors, whose proper names appear herein, have not been interviewed.

## **Field Theory and the Differentiation of Cultural Capital and the Notion of Ethnicity**

Obvious references, when discussing cultural production and field theory, are Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1996). As Maanen states, Bourdieu’s “main work on the theory of fields” is *The Rules of Art* “where he

brings all his views . . . on the working of cultural fields together . . . in order to demonstrate the working of field laws and mechanisms in the literary field during the second half of the nineteenth century in France” (Maanen 2009, 54).

A unique aspect of this French field was its rupture with the economic order, which led to “a more autonomous sector” in various genres (poetry, the novel, and drama) and the fact that each genre tended to split into a “research sector” and a “commercial sector,” defined by their antagonistic relationship but still part of the same space. This was a process of “differentiation of each genre” that was “accompanied by a process of unification of the whole set of genres, that is, of the literary field” (Bourdieu 1996, 120). Consequently, “a field can be viewed as a hierarchized system of positions in which actors and works are placed according to the specific capital accrued by them” (Bourdieu 1993, 30). Economic capital is convertible to money, whereas cultural and social capital are symbolic: “prestige, authority and having a known, recognized name” (Bourdieu 1993, 75). Cultural capital appears in three forms; it is embodied, corresponding “to socialization as a whole,” family, educational qualifications, knowledge, taste; it can be “objectified in material careers, such as books, paintings, films”; and it can “adopt an institutionalized form,” diplomas, titles and “other forms of institutional recognition” (Maanen 2009, 60, 61). In this article, “cultural capital” refers to an author’s position in the literary field; whereas “aesthetic value”—or the value of literary style and form—is used to differentiate ascribed cultural capital by showing how it is used to renounce ethnifying ascriptions. Aesthetic value is continuously a strong marker of excellence in literary public spheres. Researchers investigating how different literary values such as the aesthetic one are discursively performed and negotiated in the contemporary Swedish literary field conclude that a “modernist regime of value” is one of the two most dominant ones (the second is a regime oriented toward the value of existential knowledge):

I den modernistiska värderingen finns bestämda krav på textens språkliga och formmässiga kvaliteter med fokus på originalitet. Därtill har stil- och formvärdena alltid ett överordnat värde: påvisade brister i fråga om formmässig komplexitet tenderar att påverka bedömningen av textens övriga värden och få negativa konsekvenser för helhetsvärderingen. (Forslid et al. 2015, 311)

(In the modernist regime of value, there are specific requirements for the linguistic and formal qualities of the text with a focus on originality. In addition, the values of style and form always have an overriding value: demonstrated deficiencies in formal complexity tend to affect the assessment

of the other values of the text and have negative consequences for the overall evaluation.)

Cultural values have been discussed since antiquity; a traditional point of dispute is if it is an intrinsic essential quality in the artwork itself or is contingent, depending on acts of evaluation and negotiations performed by authors, critics, publishers, scholars and readers, and different communities and institutions related to these agents (Bourdieu 1996, 285–312). Thus, here aesthetic value is considered an effect of negotiations in the literary field, not as an essential quality in itself. To avoid possible misunderstandings regarding the notion “modernist regime of value,”<sup>1</sup> the term “regime of literary aesthetic value” will be used instead. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the “binding effect” of a literary field on a collective level “stems from the shared *illusio*” (Maanen 2009, 77), that is, from a shared belief, interest and investment in the “game” that is played in the field (Bourdieu 2009, 227–31). In this case, the shared *illusio* is the belief in the power of a regime of literary aesthetic value that can be used to renounce ethnifying ascriptions,

The concept of ethnicity is not used in a “groupist” way, that is, as referring to homogeneous ethnic groups conceptualized as units of cultural analysis (Kim 2019, 358; Brubaker 2002, 164).<sup>2</sup> Instead, I view “ethnicity” as discursively ascribed distinctions. They can be strategically used or rejected and given different meanings depending on contexts and individual professionals’ actions and utterances. Ethnicity has also been considered a means to market oneself as a migrant cultural worker, that is, to gain access to a field and become professionally accepted (Gokiel 2015, 209; 2017, 267, 276; Swyngedouw 2022, 14–6). Similar to cultural capital, ascribed ethnicity is differentiated, and in certain instances is viewed as an epistemological value and autobiographical position strategically used by authors.

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1. In “modernist regime of value”, the term “modernist” might be misleading. If used as a definition of a historical period or a specific literary tendency in Swedish literature, the sole focus on style and form or aesthetic qualities is insufficient. As used in Forslid et al. (2015) it refers to a prevailing discourse that constructs aesthetic qualities as among the most predominant ones.

2. Kim positions herself in the field of sociological migration studies where ethnicity is a key concept and is used, according to her, by certain researchers in a “groupist” manner as “discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups, that function as both ‘basic constituents of social life . . . and fundamental units of social analysis.’” Kim quotes Brubaker (2002, 164).

## Postmigration in a Swedish Context: Discursive Shifts and Demographic Changes

To capture the ongoing negotiations of cultural capital and ethnifying distinctions in the Swedish literary field, as well as the societal condition in which migrants and their descendants gain visibility, the concept of postmigration is useful. A crucial point of departure when framing the concept is the claim that society has been and will continue to be transformed by migration and that people are affected by migration regardless of their background: “an irreversible change, affecting all members of society, has already taken place and is taking place, and that this change will spur, and necessitate, further change. In this sense, postmigration refers to a recognition of what has already happened (post-) as well as to a process of ongoing change” (Moslund and Ring Petersen 2019, 67). Postmigration was promoted in the independent theater scene in Berlin in the early 2000s. Shermin Langhoff, artistic director of the Maxim Gorki theater Berlin, was an important promoter of the term. It was used by artists, intellectuals, and activists in Germany who refused to be labeled “foreigners” or “immigrants” (Ring Petersen, Schramm, and Wiegand 2019, 3; Meera Gaonkar et al. 2021, 11–2; Stewart 2021, 269–82). Scholars developed the postmigrant perspective to capture the plurality of life stories and background in the cultural field (Ring Petersen, Schramm and Wiegand 2019, 3), and the societal condition in which migrants and their descendants are recognized as professionals while reflecting on inequalities influenced by actual or ascribed migrant background (Çağlar 2016). The postmigrant perspective acknowledges antagonistic positions and struggles related to participation and representation but also new alliances not limited to heritage and cultural belonging or to binary distinctions between “migrants” and “natives” (Glick Schiller 2012, 520–32; Römhild 2017, 69–75). The terms “immigrant literature” and “immigrant author,” later contested and rejected, were established in the Swedish literary field in the 1960s and 1970s in line with cultural and social policies at the time. The term “immigrant” was “officially introduced during the late 1960s by various government authorities who wished to get away from the term ‘imported foreign labor’” (Molina and Tesfahuney 1997, 23; quoted in Pred 2000, 73). The expanding economy and labor market and social welfare politics “formed a basis and possibility for the development of (im)migrant literature in Sweden on a large scale” (Gröndahl 2022, 28). In 1973, Immigrant-institutet [Immigrant Institute] was founded. It was later located in a building called *Invandrarnas hus* [Immigrant House] in the town of Borås. In 2012, it was closed due to lack of funding. The institute published an annual report titled *Invandrarrapport*

[Immigrant Report] from 1973 to 2001. In several editions of this report, a bibliography was published under the heading “Immigrant Authors,” including nonfiction and fiction. The aim was to keep a record of literature published by immigrants. This publication shows that it was considered feasible to keep track of all authors who were identified as immigrants. Today, a similar goal would be viewed as out of date.

The ambition of the Immigrant Institute goes hand in hand with national cultural policies in the 1960s and 1970s. Sweden was the first European country where the “idea of multiculturalism emerged in the political mainstream in the latter half of the 1960s and became public policy in the mid-1970s” (Wickström 2015, 7). In 1975 the Swedish legislature passed an act on a new policy that “rejected the ideal of ethno-cultural homogeneity and the policy of assimilation” in favor of a “freedom of choice” for “ethno-cultural minority groups” to retain “their own languages and cultures” (Wickström 2015, 7–8). The Immigrant Institute and its work was part of the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism. Ethnocultural minority authors should be recognized in relation to majority cultural expressions. In 2006 the government initiated *Mångkulturåret* [Year of Multiculturalism]. The goal for this venture was formulated differently than in the policy act in 1975:

Syftet är också att skapa incitament för att offentligt finansierade kulturverksamheter på ett tydligt sätt speglar och införlivar den etniska och kulturella mångfald som finns i dagens Sverige. . . . Kulturutbudet under 2006 och därefter skall generellt vara mångfacetterat och i större utsträckning än idag aktualisera andra kulturuttryck än det traditionellt svenska eller västerländska. (*Agenda för mångkultur* 2005, 9)

(The aim is also to create incentives for publicly funded cultural activities to clearly reflect and incorporate the ethnic and cultural diversity that exists in today’s Sweden. . . . The cultural offerings in 2006 and thereafter should generally be multifaceted and to a greater extent than today highlight cultural expressions other than the traditional Swedish or Western.)

Cultural “differences” should be integrated in and represented in the majority culture. Terms such as “multiculturalism” and “cultural diversity” are ambivalent; they were previously hailed in their alterity and defined as different from a majority culture they should or should not be integrated in.

Thus, a noticeable change appeared in the 1970s when the term “immigrant writer” and “immigrant literature” became established in the Swedish literary field, and a quest was to identify and keep a record of immigrant literature as an important aspect of a multicultural society.



In the early 2000s, a similar game changer as in the German cultural field was initiated at a time when terms such as *invandrarförfattare* [immigrant author] and *invandrarlitteratur* [immigrant literature] were being debated and rejected. Authors, cultural journalists, and academics started to oppose these labels and the exoticizing they entail (Trotzig 2005, 106, 126; Motturi 2007, 23, 57; Nilsson 2010; 2013, 52–4). In fact, the notion of *invandrarlitteratur* was both an outcome of an imagined multicultural Swedish society and a literary practice that contributed to the emergence of (and criticized) this imagined multiculturalism (Nilsson 2010, 12). Today, the “immigrant writer” is no longer a valid notion, but a “historical object associated with late twentieth-century Swedish literary history,” not “an important figure in the Swedish literature of the new millennium” (Nilsson 2013, 61).

Another central discursive change, besides the one that questioned terms such as “immigrant writer,” “assimilation,” and “multiculturalism,” is critically addressing racism and racialization and is in the process of being established in the contemporary cultural field in Sweden (see Anyuru 2012; Leiva Wenger 2013; Mohtadi and Mavi 2014; Astorga Diaz et al. 2015; Ndow Norrby 2015; Diakité 2016; Orrenius 2020; Lindh 2022) and in literary studies (see Gokieli 2015; 2017; Hübinette 2019). An “Afro-Swedish renaissance” in the literary, performing, and visual arts has been identified (Skinner 2022, 217), and Jagne-Soreau identifies a group of Nordic writers, the “postmigration generation,” who “have a connection to migration and are racialized but have no experience (or memories) of migration themselves: typically, second-generation migrants, mixed-race people and transnational adoptees” (Jagne-Soreau 2021, 163).

This discursive shift goes hand in hand with research on migration from the perspectives of race and racialization, which has “increased considerably in the Nordic countries since the Millennium” (Keskinen and Andreassen 2017, 64). It is also a consequence of demographic changes (Hübinette 2019, 14). Migration to Sweden has increased from the 1970s up to the present day. In 2022 20 percent of the population was registered as migrants.<sup>3</sup>

3. During the 1970s, approximately 387,000 people migrated to Sweden (5 percent of the population in 1979). From 2000 until June 2022, 2.22 million were registered as migrants. To be a migrant is defined by Statistics Sweden as a person who has the right to be registered as a resident for at least twelve months. Citizens of the Nordic countries have the right to migrate freely. EU citizens outside the Nordic have to apply for a right of residence if they stay more than three months. Migrants from all other countries have to apply for a residence permit from the Migration Board. Those born in Sweden who return to the country are included in the statistics, and undocumented migrants are not included.



The consequences of demographic changes and discursive shifts is that ethnifying alterity prefixes (Motturi 2007, 57), such as immigrant literature/author, have become obsolete.

Thus, the postmigrant perspective makes structural discursive changes visible. The aim is to understand “change through migration” and not just to analyze migrants (Sievers 2024, 22). At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge individual authors and their responses to issues related to migration and if and how they are affected. Contemporary authors who are ascribed migrant identities often “reveal that they are well informed about the last 20 years international and theoretical debate in the political, cultural, sociological, and aesthetical aspects of migration,” and there is a “striking multitude of strategies” that “play with readers’ expectations” (Beschnitt 2010, 79–80). The ways authors respond to being identified as a presumed Other is discussed in more detail below by taking the example of Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s work and public exposure.

## Rhetorical Positional Struggles and Political Strategies

Khemiri is a well-known novelist and playwright in Sweden whose work has been translated into several languages. His position in the literary field is bestowed with high cultural capital, and he has made an international career as well (Wulff 2019, 10–2).<sup>4</sup> Khemiri is no longer identified as an “immigrant” writer, as was the case when he published his first novel in 2003, a label he immediately rejected (Nilsson 2013, 50). He is considered a politically engaged writer, but first and foremost a writer of high-quality works with humorous twists.

Khemiri has responded promptly to Swedish and European migration policies and xenophobic discourses in public debates and in his plays. He attained massive public attention in 2013 when he wrote an open letter to the Minister of Justice at the time, Beatrice Ask (Khemiri 2013a). He criticized a policy called the REVA project.<sup>5</sup> The letter was translated and partly rewritten before it was published in the *New York Times* as “Sweden’s Closet Racists” (Khemiri 2013b). The letter “became international news

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4. Khemiri’s website is published in Swedish and English and gives a snapshot of his success nationally and internationally; interviews, performances, awards, lectures, translations, articles are listed and the site is continuously updated. At the time of this writing, he is a visiting graduate faculty member teaching creative writing at New York University. <http://www.khemiri.se>.

5. In 2009 the government, along with the Swedish Migration Board and law enforcement, implemented project REVA (Rättssäkert och effektivt verkställighetsarbete). The goal was to deport undocumented migrants.

on Al Jazeera and other news sites . . . In the end it was available in twenty languages” (Wulff 2019, 12). The letter was shared more than 250,000 times the same day it was published (Gokieli 2017, 279). It still is one of the most linked articles in Sweden, and its hashtag trended on Twitter as people shared their experiences of discrimination and oppression.

The aim of REVA was to deport people living in Sweden without residence permits, so-called paperless or illegal migrants. The project was initiated 1 January 2009 and ended 30 June 2014. The police performed internal identity checks and were criticized for racial profiling. Khemiri responded to this profiling in 2013, a year before the project ended, after the Minister of Justice had participated in a hearing to discuss criticism of the project and was interviewed on Swedish radio. In his original open letter in Swedish, he addresses the minister personally:

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. Därför blev jag förvånad när du i torsdags fick frågan av “P 1 Morgon” om du som justitieminister känner dig oroad över att personer (medborgare, skattebetalare, röstare) hävdar att de har blivit stoppade av polisen och frågade på pass enbart på grund av sitt (mörka, icke-blonda, svarthåriga) utseende. Och du svarade: – Upplevelsen av varför någon har frågat mig kan ju vara väldigt personlig. Det finns tidigare dömda som uppfattar att de alltid är ifrågasatta, fast det syns ju inte på någon att man har begått ett brott. . . . För att göra en bedömning av om polisen arbetar enligt lagar och regler så måste man ha helhetsperspektivet. (Khemiri 2013a)

(We are both fully fledged citizens of this country, born within its borders, united by language, flag, history, infrastructure. We are both equal before the Law. Therefore I was surprised when you were asked last Thursday by “P 1 Morgon” [public service radio channel] whether you, as the Minister of Justice, are worried when individuals (citizens, tax payers, voters) claim that they have been stopped by the police and asked to show their passports solely because of their (dark, not blonde, blackhaired) appearance. And you answered:)<sup>6</sup>

“One’s experience of ‘why someone has questioned me’ can of course be very subjective,” suggesting that racially profiled subway passengers were overreacting and that their anger was irrational. Without missing a beat, she continued, “There are some who have been previously convicted and feel that they are always questioned, even though you can’t tell by looking at a person that they have committed a crime.” (Khemiri 2013b)

6. This paragraph is not included in the English version of Khemiri’s letter. My translation.

Khemiri targets the minister's choice of words in that interview, particularly the words "previously convicted":

För det är precis det vi är. Alla vi som är skyldiga tills motsatsen har bevisats. När blir en personlig upplevelse en rasistisk struktur? När blir den diskriminering, förtryck, våld? Och hur kan ett "helhetsperspektiv" utesluta en stor del av medborgarnas personliga upplevelser? Vilka upplevelser räknas? (Khemiri 2013a)

Because that's exactly what we are. All of us who are guilty until proved innocent. (Khemiri 2013b) (When does a personal experience become a racist structure? When does it become discrimination, oppression, violence? And how is it possible that the 'holistic perspective' excludes a large part of citizens' personal experiences? Which experiences count?)<sup>7</sup>

Khemiri goes on to propose that the minister swap bodies with him for twenty-four hours, and lists various personal experiences from his childhood, youth, and adult life when he was racially profiled and discriminated against in public places in Sweden. Rhetorically, Khemiri positions himself autobiographically as the previously convicted person who is racially profiled solely because the color of his skin and hair. He recognizes himself as an Other and is designated by the REVA project and the minister as a racialized person who is obligated to prove his innocence. He fights back and renounces these ascribed labels by using his position in the Swedish public.

A cultural journalist and former editor I interviewed for this study (I call her Sarah) positioned herself as a writer who, similar to Khemiri, raised issues related to racism and migration policies. She shares the personal consequences it had for her to publish articles on these issues. In the first week she had a temporary position in an editorial office she received a racist letter: "Det var . . . en 'amuse-bouche' på det som komma skulle. . . . Det intensifierades . . . när jag blev chef . . . en maktperson och det var fler som tyckte illa om mig, hatade mig och störde sig på mig" [It was . . . an 'amuse-bouche' for what was to come. . . . It intensified . . . when I became a manager . . . a person of power and there were more people who disliked me, hated me and were bothered by me].

She did not, as many women journalists have testified in Sweden and globally (see *Fojo Media Institute* 2022), receive sexualized and misogynic responses: "Det var nästan aldrig kopplat till mitt kön . . . De här rasisterna har inte sett mig som kvinna . . . utan jag har varit en s—— helt enkelt" [It

7. Only the two first sentences in the quote is included in the English version of Khemiri's letter. The notion of structural racism is not included and is well known in the Swedish media discourse on racism. My translation.

was almost never linked to my gender . . . These racists have not seen me as a woman . . . but I have been a w——].<sup>8</sup> Sarah's home address was published on a Nazi website; she received letters that were classified as threats by her workplace's security department and installed an alarm system at home. Someone came to her home and left death threats: "Det var rätt tufft för mig, och då fick jag faktiskt också psykologhjälp och blev till och med sjukskriven några månader för att det var så jobbigt" [That was pretty tough for me, and then I actually also got psychological help and even went on sick leave for a few months because it was so hard].

Exposure via the public visibility and prominent position in the cultural field also entails a position of vulnerability; it can trigger racism and lead to personal suffering. It is possible that Khemiri has experienced similar racist attacks; to my knowledge, he has not made them public.

Khemiri's strategy to use personal experiences politically is fully developed in some of his plays with humor and acuity. I discuss how this is achieved in *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012). It has been translated into English and has been performed in theaters in New York and London as *I Call My Brothers* (2015). As the title indicates, it is a first-person spoken-word piece that highlights the racial profiling Khemiri criticizes in the open letter. The voices speaking, from mobile phones and restlessly in the mind of the main protagonist, Amor, all interact with one another and at the same time seamlessly respond to the threat of the policing gaze that dictates Amor's mindset and movements in public places in Stockholm. Two bombs have detonated, but it remains unclear why (the words "terrorist" or "terrorist attack" are never used, but it is easy for the reader or audience to make assumptions). In the opening scene, Amor says:

Jag ringer mina bröder och säger: Det hände en så sjuk sak nyss. Har ni hört? En man. En bil. Två explosioner. Mitt i city. Jag ringer mina bröder och säger: Nej ingen är gripen. Ingen är misstänkt. Inte ännu. Men nu börjare det. Gör er redo. (Khemiri 2012, 7)

I call my brothers and say: Something really sick just happened. Have you heard? A man. A car. Two explosions. Right downtown. I call my brothers and say: No, no one has been arrested. No suspects. Not yet. I call my brothers and say: Now it begins. Get ready. (Khemiri 2015, 9)

8. A survey made by the Swedish Journalists' Union, "Hot och hat mot journalister 2019" [Threats and Hatred towards Journalists 2019] concludes that the most common reason for journalists in Sweden to be harassed are texts or features addressing migration, refugees, and integration.

This voice is the implied authorial one that appears as an interlude between each scene, in which a new voice starts speaking with Amor. The function of this authorial voice is to articulate the different strategies the presumed “previously convicted,” targeted by the policing gaze, should use after a bomb explosion. The first strategy is to lie low, stay at home, turn off the lights, lock the doors, unplug the television, turn off the phone, and repeat to yourself, “We are innocent” (Khemiri 2015, 25). The second strategy voiced by Amor is to shave your faces; put on clean, neat clothes; and try to be anonymous, but not too anonymous. The goal is to blend in, become invisible, smile at pets and mannequins, whisper on subways, apologize for existing, and transform into “invisible gas” (Khemiri 2015, 41–3). The third one:

Jag ringer mina bröder och säger: Glöm det jag sa. FUCK tystnad. FUCK osynlighet! Byt ut era anonyma kläder mot neonfärgade bastkjolar. Dekorera kroppen med glittrande julgranskulor. Smeta in ansiktet med självlysande färg. . . . Gör er maximalt synliga ända tills dom fattar att det finns motkrafter. . . . Tills ni dör. Tills dom fattar att vi inte är dom som dom tror att vi är. . . . Vi går med stolta steg in i en framtid fylld av uppluckrade gränser med en fast vetenskap om att inga klockor någonsin kan vridas tillbaka! Upprepa för er själva: Vi är inte rädda. V-v-visst är vi inte? (Khemiri 2012, 83–4)

I call my brothers and say. Forget what I said. FUCK silence. FUCK invisibility! Exchange your anonymous clothes for . . . Neon colored grass skirts. . . . Decorate your bodies with glimmering Christmas ornaments. . . . Rub neon paint on your face. . . . Make yourselves maximally visible until they understand that there is an opposition. . . . Until you die. Until they understand that we’re not who they think we are. . . . We march proudly into a future filled with dissolved borders, knowing that no clocks can ever be turned back! We are not afraid. We are *not* afraid. We’re not, right? Right? Come on—repeat after us. We are *not* afraid. (Khemiri 2015, 66–7)

Finally, in an epilogue the implied authorial voice returns to the policing gaze that identifies the subject as a suspect:

Jag ringer mina bröder och säger: Det hände en så sjuk sak nyss. Jag var på väg hem när jag fick syn på en väldigt misstänkt individ. Han hade svart hår och en ovanligt stor ryggsäck och hans ansikte var täckt av en Palestinasjal. . . . Det tog bråkdelen av en sekund innan jag insåg att det var min spegelbild. (Khemiri 2012, 127)

I call my brothers and say: Something really sick just happened. I was on my way home when I caught sight of an extremely suspicious individual. He had black hair and an unusually large backpack. . . . It took a split second for me to realize that it was my reflection. (Khemiri 2015, 95–6)<sup>9</sup>

9. In the English translation, the word *Palestinasjal* (Palestinian shawl) is omitted.

Thus, the structure of this play and its voices respond to contemporary Swedish discourses on racial profiling and migration policies. Khemiri's response is similar to the one voiced by Shermin Langhoff who promoted the notion of "postmigration" in her work: "No matter what we do, others will define us. Traits are ascribed to us. So, now we will take control and construct ourselves. . . . Postmigration allowed for this. With the term we could finally decide how we want to situate and contextualise ourselves" (quoted in Meera Gaonkar et al. 2021, 18). The message is: whatever strategies you as a presumed Other might use, you risk remaining a suspect, and there is no "neutral" position for you to take.

Khemiri (2013a) uses an autobiographical position strategically to criticize a policy aimed at racial profiling and deportation. He connects the policy to his body and his experiences in public places. He targets racism, not the benefits of cultural diversity. This represents the major discursive shift in the Swedish literary and cultural field: a focus on racism and racialization, instead of constructing difference in terms of ethnic groups, cultural diversity, exoticism, and multiculturalism. How ethnifying ascriptions are used in a different manner than by Khemiri is discussed below.

### **"I think I Have Become More of a Writer and Less of an Immigrant": Renouncing Ethnifying Distinctions in Favor of Aesthetic Value**

A position in the literary field that is different from Khemiri's politically engaged one is articulated by an author I interviewed (I call him Kim). His debut book was published in 2012, and more followed in 2013, 2018, 2019, and 2023. Kim is younger and has not been active as long as Khemiri, and he has not publicly made political statements. Nor are discourses on migration policies as present in his literary output as they are in Khemiri's. Kim came to Sweden as a child, whereas Khemiri was born in Sweden.

When I asked Kim if his background as a migrant had any influence on him as a writer, he says that it is difficult to answer the question. "För det finns så många okända variabler" [Because there are so many unknown variables]. He wonders whether he would have been able to publish his first book if he had not written about being a migrant in Sweden. "Jag [har] hört författare missunnsamt säga ibland att 'det är din bakgrund som gör dig intressant, jag är bara en vit snubbe, det är ingen som bryr sig om mig'" [I have heard writers sometimes say disapprovingly that "it's your background that makes you interesting, I'm just a white guy, nobody cares about me"].

The question is articulated on whether his migrant background had anything to do with him being able to become established and consecrated as an author. Questions like these makes him insecure. He "doubts"

himself because he cannot find answers to whether he has been positively discriminated. “Jag har tänkt att jag har blivit positivt diskriminerad, ja. Men jag har inte kunnat . . . jag har inte kunnat fastlägga att det är så [I have thought that I have been positively discriminated against, yes. But I have not been able to . . . I have not been able to establish that this is the case].

This suspicion and feeling of doubt and insecurity about experiencing positive discrimination, or treated differently due to a migrant background, was further developed in the interview. I asked Kim if he had experienced any competition when working as an author. “Om man utgår ifrån hypotesen att man är här på grund av sin bakgrund så innebär det att man konkurrerar med alla andra som har den bakgrunden. Så min fru brukar reta mig ibland för detta; ‘de unga de kommer, de kommer och tar din plats’” [If you start with the hypothesis that you are here because of your background, it means that you are competing with everyone else who has that background. So, my wife sometimes teases me about this; “the young people come, they come and take your place”]. I laughed and asked him if he keeps track of the debutants; no, he said, and continued: “Jag försöker inbilla mig att jag har något annat än min bakgrund” [I try to imagine that I have something other than my background].

A feeling of competition in the field, according to Kim, is expressed by a colleague. When the colleague's first novel was about to be published, another writer, who was identified as a migrant by reviewers, published his debut book first. Kim's colleague said, “Satan, det är över. Det finns bara utrymme för en, och han har tagit den platsen som skulle vara min” [Shit, it's over. There is only room for one, and he has taken the place that was supposed to be mine].

But his colleague continued writing. “Då insåg han att alla författare, invandrare, ser sig själva som konkurrenter för att de tänker att det bara finns en plats . . . Man slåss om . . . den platsen. Men han insåg att det var ett meningslöst sätt att tänka på” [Then he realized that all writers, immigrants, see themselves as competitors because they think that there is only one position . . . You fight for . . . that position. But he realized that it was a meaningless way of thinking]. Kim emphasized that Swedish society gives the impression that there is only one position and that only one is needed.

Kim nevertheless detected a shift in how his works are received: “Jag tror att jag har blivit mer författare och mindre invandrare. . . . Och jag tror inte att den här idén om att det bara finns utrymme för en gäller. Jag får inte längre lika mycket kommentarer om ‘vad duktig du är på svenska’” [I think I have become more of a writer and less of an immigrant. . . . And I don't think this idea that there is only room for one applies. I don't get as many comments about “how good you are in Swedish” anymore].



Kim's debut novel received much attention, and he became visible and recognized by critics and readers. It was difficult for him "to take it seriously" at first, but after publishing several books he realized that he has had "a lot of luck." Being publicly acknowledged contributed to him being able to continue writing. Thus, the public attention is necessary to be hailed as a writing subject, and it is a first step toward being consecrated in the field.

Competition and envy among contemporary Swedish authors exist. Khemiri's popularity and public visibility "evokes envy among some of his lesser known and less successful colleagues, especially those of his generation and of migrant background" (Wulff 2019, 11). One writer referred to Khemiri as "the boot-licker" (Wulff 2019, 11). To be "media savvy" (Wulff 2019, 11) and publicly exposed is necessary for attaining success. Kim expressed an opposite posture; he seemed to prefer concentrating on his writing in solitude without public exposure. At the same time, he was aware that public performances are useful and unavoidable for making a career as a writer.

Kim reflected on the "power game" in the field and what it could mean to be admitted to the field (or not). "En sak som jag blev förvånad över är hur enkelt det är när man har tagit sig in. Jämfört med hur svårt det var att ta sig in. . . . Jag känner folk som skriver jättebra, men de kan inte ta sig in. . . . Jag är mer inne än många. . . . Det är svårt att acceptera, att man inte är en underdog när man har det inbyggt i sig" [One thing that surprised me is how easy it is once you get in. Compared to how hard it was to get in. . . . I know people who write really well, but they can't get in. . . . I'm more inside than many. . . . It's hard to accept that you're not an underdog when it's built into you].

At the same time, Kim expressed a feeling of insecurity, probably a common trait among authors whose careers depend on continuously being creative and publishing. "Men jag tror inte att det är ett konstant tillstånd utan det kan gå utför" [But I don't think it's a constant state, it can go downhill]. If you "become irrelevant," Kim said, or write books of no quality, you are easily excluded from the cultural world.

Kim has not been excluded, but when does one consider oneself an established author who does not risk losing the position? It is not a protected title, and the basic requirement for membership in the Swedish Writers' Union is to have published two works that meet a certain standard of quality (*Swedish Writers' Union*). When Kim heard the question, he said: "Jag är på väg. Jag tror inte det räcker att bara ha text" [I am on my way. I don't think it is enough just to have texts]. Another requirement is the quality of his future work:

Skriva något ännu bättre. Något som skiner så starkt. . . . Att förverkliga det som man har i sitt huvud. Att lyckas ännu bättre med det. . . . Att göra något som ingen kan reducera till något annat. . . . De förutfattade meningarna, det tar stopp på dem. Det är en drivkraft.

(Write something even better. Something that shines so bright. . . . To realize what you have in your head. To succeed even better at it. . . . To do something that no one can reduce to something else. . . . The preconceived ideas, it stops them. It's a driving force.)

I did not ask Kim what preconceived thoughts his writing could generate among readers or thoughts that his future writing could put an end to. It seemed to be implied that one of them was the ethnifying one we discussed, but that has not reappeared when his later works were reviewed and marketed by his publisher. Kim called it a “driving force” to keep on improving his writing, which is an aesthetic standpoint connected to an author’s craftsmanship. In this respect, ethnic ascriptions are rejected in favor of aesthetic value.

### **The Ambivalence of Ethnifying Distinctions, the Impact of Aesthetic Value, and the Question of Class**

On an individual level the path to recognition and visibility in the literary field is filled with feelings of insecurity, which Kim shares with any writer regardless of background. The Swedish cultural field can broadly be described as a “risk sector”; the stakes are high initially in relation to the outcome an actor can expect (Flisbäck 2005, 230–1). An advantage is if you already have a network and social and cultural capital (Swyngedouw 2022, 10–4), which Kim did not have when he published his first novel. Nor did an ally, a friend who took responsibility for sending his manuscript to publishers, have any position in the literary field. This industry does not have formalized career paths, and its “structures and actors give the impression that the path to literature is open to everyone, as long as their texts meet certain quality criteria” (Sievers 2024, 30). It has informal rules, which you have to learn how to handle, and the risk of being excluded is in Kim’s mindset and probably that of many other authors as well. The attention space is limited when you have been published, and there is a continuous struggle for attention and recognition (Thompson 2012, 239–44; Fürst 2019, 40).

A difference between Kim and other authors is what he calls positive discrimination, which is based on him being identified as a migrant when his first novel appeared. He told me that a friend reacted with a “surprising comment” when he understood that Kim was a Muslim; this could be viewed

as a racist reaction, but Kim did not describe it as such. Thus, to be ascribed ethnicity is an ambivalent experience that in some cases questions one's abilities and competence to be established on one's own merits. Khemiri used it strategically to make a political point and gain public attention, even if he renounced it many years earlier; Kim views it as discriminating but at the same time as a resource that might have helped him enter the literary field (Gokieli 2017, 267, 276; Swyngedouw 2022, 14–6).

When Kim's first novel was marketed his publisher used his migrant background strategically to underscore presumed authenticity and epistemological value. Ethnifying distinctions in the Swedish literary field have been related to the construction of authenticity, to a way of reading that takes for granted that writers, who presumably are migrants or identify as such, write about their own experiences and their country of origin. The author is considered to produce a source text that is open for ethnographic and epistemological readings instead of aesthetic ones (Beschnitt 2010, 89). Authenticity is a search for, first, the "uncontaminated self, the origin"; second, the "un-mediated experience"; and third, "authenticity as legitimation" (Beschnitt 2010, 83). To avoid being "authenticized" and read autobiographically Kim hails the aesthetic value of his work.

In my interview with Sarah, the cultural journalist, she seemed to argue that class was more formative than gender and a migrant background. Even if she had received racist comments and threats, she did not express any feelings of insecurity or doubt in relation to if her migrant background has had any influence on her career. "Ett fåtal personer, som har vågat, har sagt . . . att det . . . skulle ha varit en fördel för mig att jag var en ung tjej med invandrarbakgrund. Då har jag tänkt att de inte vet vad de snackar om . . . Det är en klyscha" [A few people, who have dared, have said . . . that it . . . would have been an advantage for me to be a young girl with an immigrant background. Then I have thought that they don't know what they are talking about . . . It is a cliché].

One colleague of hers even said that she would have "ticked all the boxes" if she had "been a lesbian." Instead, she had to "prove" herself, and she felt deep down that she was more ambitious than most. She was convinced that she was "much more qualified than all others" and attained prominent positions in the field mainly due to her own merits.

Even so, she had to overcome the fact that her parents went to school for five years in another country. At university she realized that most of her student friends came from the middle class and were self-assured with highly educated parents: "De tog det alltid för givet, att de skulle lyckas" [They always took it for granted, that they would make it]. Her parents assumed that she would become successful "by herself": "utan att ha medelklassjälvförtroendet

att falla tillbaka på” [Without having the middle class self-assurance to rely on]. They did not give her support, but they required her to have the highest grades in school. Similar parental demands—to study well and to work independently—are not uncommon among professionals in the cultural field who are migrants or have a migrant background (Swyngedouw 2022, 8). Consequently, Sarah became a “workaholic.” Clearly, her work ethic and capacity to overcome difficulties were part of being socialized in a working-class family. In a study of a group of Swedish women in the same generation as Sarah (born in the 1970s and 1980s), similar views are expressed. The quest for upward class mobility is based on excellent grades in school and on attaining a university degree. One of them, Nour, who has a migrant background, made a similar reflection as Sarah:

Så min klassresa började konkret på universitetet . . . Mina vänner var medelklass . . . och jag lärde hur jag skulle bete mig av mina vänner. Jag hade ingenting med mig hemifrån. . . . Jag uppfyller inte någon kategori riktigt. . . . Eller jag vet inte varför jag har haft svårt, om det är för att jag . . . är invandrare eller om det är för att jag . . . kommer från en fattig familj. (Sohl 2014, 332–3).

(So my class journey started concretely at university . . . My friends were middle class . . . and I learned how to behave from my friends. I had nothing with me from home. . . . I don’t really fit any category. . . . Or I don’t know why I have had difficulties, if it is because I . . . am an immigrant or if it is because I . . . come from a poor family.)

Sarah’s class background laid the foundation for her work ethic and stamina, and her migrant background was used as a source of knowledge and personal experience, which gives her authority as a writer (Beschnitt 2010, 83). Sometimes she said to herself: “Jag måste skriva om vissa saker [rasism] för annars kommer ingen annan göra det” [I have to write about certain things [racism] because otherwise nobody else will do it]. Sarah uses the epistemological value and authenticity related to ascribed ethnicity in a less ambivalent way than Kim does; she uses it consciously to profile herself as a writer. Her ambition is also personal, an outcome of her family and its experiences: “När jag nu har den här plattformen har jag velat skriva in mina föräldrars generation i berättelsen om Sverige . . . och att det också blev en berättelse i samtiden . . . Det är en av de saker som jag är mest stolt över” [Now that I have this platform, I’ve wanted to write my parents’ generation into the story of Sweden . . . and that it also became a story in the present . . . This is one of the things I’m most proud of].

Thus, Sarah positions herself autobiographically, as Khemiri did, and uses her personal insights and knowledge of her parents’ country of origin

to contribute to the storytelling of Sweden. Among migrant and migrant descendants in the cultural field, this is a common quest: to make previously unknown, marginalized or oppressed voices and stories heard (see Hübinette 2019; Jagne-Soreau 2021; Skinner 2022).

## The Postmigrant Condition and the Transformation of the Literary Field

“Postmigration’ describes a new social condition in which migration constitutes a founding and permanent circumstance in shaping the nation and its collective ‘we’” (Moslund 2019, 351). From a postmigrant perspective, the rejection and strategic use of ethnifying distinctions and cultural capital, as well as the promotion of aesthetic value as the main path to being acknowledged as a quality writer, can be considered different expressions of this new social condition. At the same time, it corroborates the power of the regime of literary aesthetic value: the field’s shared belief or *illusio* that the lack of cultural and social capital can be overcome by actors who meet certain standards. Wiebke Sievers has introduced what she calls a “post-migrant literary history.” It “takes the exclusion of immigrants in nationalised literary fields as the starting point for a field analysis that seeks to explain whether, how and to what extent immigrants and their descendants have succeeded in overcoming this exclusion” (Sievers 2024, 29). Because of increasing migration and “general processes of change in the field, such as the internationalisation, medialisation or even politicisation of literature” (Sievers 2024, 32), the Swedish literary field has transformed from ethnifying authors to acknowledging racialization and thus structural racism. In parallel with these discursive changes, a process of “de-migratising” to “allow migratory issues to be analysed not as an exception but as an integral part of everyday social reality” is detectable where literary works and authors are recognized by critics and literary scholars without being viewed as exceptional cases (Römhild 2015, 44; quoted in Moslund 2019, 352).

Kim’s and Khemiri’s careers reflect this process. At first, when publishing their debut books, they were ethnified and received as rare cases in a nationalized literary field. Today, they are not. “I think I have become more of a writer and less of an immigrant” is a telling sentence expressed by Kim. He seems to waver between two positions, one connected to his personal experiences of being a migrant, the other to the position as author. At present, neither Kim nor Khemiri would be identified as immigrant writers. After Kim’s latest novel was published in 2023, his position as an author is primarily based on aesthetic value, which is a consequence of how he writes. Kim reflected on his desire to be autonomous, the need to not become a part of literary networks

and participate in public events. Instead, he wanted to keep writing in solitude to improve the aesthetic quality of his work. Thus, the aesthetic value is viewed by him as the main valid currency, because it seems to be the most powerful one that will confirm Kim and his position as a writer—and allows him to renounce ethnifying distinctions. Essentially, Kim takes up the position of a writer that today would be considered a traditional modernist one. The regime of aesthetic literary value is still prominent in the literary field in Sweden (see Forslid et al. 2015, 310–7); consequently, it has the potential to be a crucial game changer for authors' career paths seemingly regardless of their origins. Sarah uses her experiences of a migrant background to enrich the “collective ‘we’” (Moslund 2019, 351) by writing her parents' generation “into the story of Sweden.” Khemiri's cultural capital is successfully used to attract significant media attention internationally to himself as a prominent and politically engaged writer and to a policy targeting migrants and people who are racialized. By contrast, Sarah identifies her working-class upbringing as the most formative experience for her attaining success. These individual responses to boundaries and opportunities, and the contemporary awareness among researchers and other agents of structural inequalities, are signs of a postmigrant condition in a field where demarcation lines are being made public, negotiated, and transformed.

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