

After the ‘Cartoons’: The Rise of a New Danish Migration literature?

The Absence of Migration Literature in Denmark?

In 2005 the Norwegian scholar Ingeborg Kongslien wrote an article on the development of “migrant or multicultural literature” in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Here she specifies that, during the last three or four decades, the “Nordic literary landscape has seen a number of names of somewhat unfamiliar origin emerge.” Since around 1970, she continues, “more and more authors with immigrant background have published poems, short stories, and novels in the Scandinavian languages and in doing so, added new themes, settings, and fields of references to the national literatures” (Kongslien 2005: 34). To illustrate this, Kongslien discusses various names and important books in the different countries, starting with Sweden and Norway.

When turning to Denmark, however, she emphasizes that the development has been somewhat different from other Scandinavian countries. The establishment of “multicultural literature”, as she terms it, has occurred much later there and has been much less successful. Danish literature by immigrants was in general first established “during the 1990s” and while other European countries are currently experiencing the huge successes among young writers of migrant background, this development has no equivalent in Denmark. Even though a number of novels, short story anthologies and poetry have been published in Denmark over the last fifteen years or so, only few of the writers were of immigrant background. Indeed, Kongslien specifies the only few “seem to have succeeded in getting into the major publishing houses compared to their counterparts in Norway and Sweden” (Kongslien 2005: 34). Just one year later, in 2006, the cultural editor of the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* went even further and stated that, seen in the broader picture of contemporary Danish writing, “there is a complete lack of novels by writers from a migration background” (Høyer

2006). Until recently, it seems there was a consensus in Denmark that literature by migrants was almost non-existent.¹

Of course, the claim that literature by writers with non-Danish background does not exist in Denmark at all is beyond warrant. When taking a closer look, one can easily find some distinguished writers during the last decades who have immigrated to Denmark during their lifetime and later began to publish in Danish. Here Ruben Palma, Milena Rudez, Munima Alfaker, Adil Erdem, Sara Mathai Stinus, Paulina Heise, Thomas Kennedy and Janina Katz may be mentioned. While other names could be added, the fact is that none of those writers, with very few exceptions, such as Janina Katz, have an outstanding position on the Danish literature scene as specified by Kongslie. Also, the public awareness of migration literature is far more limited when compared with other countries. For instance, we find young authors such as Jonas Khemiri in Sweden, or Feridun Zaimoglu in Germany, who belong to the most outstanding and best selling writers.

Since 2006, this absence of migration literature has, however, become an issue in the Danish cultural debates. As the American scholar Peter Leonard writes retrospectively in 2008, literary Denmark “has spent the past two years searching within itself for a kind of literature common elsewhere in Europe but sadly lacking at home” (Leonard 2008: 31).² In public discourse, media, research and on the literary scene as such, one can observe a new and broader interest, perhaps even a longing for migration’s literature or literature by migrants. The influential literary competition *New Voices* (Nye Stemmer), initiated by the publishing house Gyldendal and the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* in summer 2006, is one example of that new trend.³ In a situation, where there seems to be a lack of literature written by migrants or literature discussing themes of migration, one obviously tried to “kick-start” the development in 2006. But what was happening? What re-opened the debate on migration literature in Denmark?

¹ And even the major publishing house in Denmark, *Gyldendal*, wondered in a press release, why writers with migrant background are relatively obscure on the Danish literature scene, when compared with most other European countries: “Why are those kinds of writers [writers with migration background, M.S.] far less visible in Denmark?”, the press release asked. Gyldendal press release, quoted in Leonard 2008: 31-33.

² Unless indicated all translations are mine.

³ Leonard reads that primary as an attempt to reconnect to the outside world, which has been lost in Denmark. “That Denmark had to kick-start this phenomenon was”, Leonard points out, “nothing to be proud of, judging from the tone of the competition’s press release” (2008: 31).

The Discursive and Political Context

To arrive at a somehow sufficient answer, it would not be enough merely to look at aesthetical developments in Denmark. It is rather, I will argue, clear that the literary developments in Denmark are directly connected to recent developments in the Danish cultural and political landscape: both the new interest in literature written by migrants since 2006 and the texts themselves seem to react to the latest developments in the political and cultural field. Especially the so called Cartoon-Crisis of 2005 and 2006 seems to have influenced the new interest in migration literature. It also seems to have led to a new openness and awareness in the Danish literature field. This crisis, however, can not be seen as a single event. It must rather be read with the controversial debate on immigration and the changes in the "normative horizon" (Butler 2005: 24) in mind, we have seen in Denmark over the last couple of years. The development, however, cannot be understood without reverting to a historical perspective, at least to the middle of the 80s.⁴ One single event in the middle of the 80s may in particular illustrate the starting point for the changes in the cultural and political landscape. In the 80s, Danish identity was still bound to the idea of an open minded society, which helps developing countries and refugees come to Denmark.⁵ However, in 1986, this was challenged for the first time in newer history. This year, a major public initiative to grant financial support to refugees by door-to-door collections and a huge TV-event was initiated by *Dansk Flygtningehjælp (Danish Aid for Refugees)*. That same year however, the drive for money was attacked in major Danish newspaper campaigns, made and paid for by a well-known priest from Jutland, called Søren Krarup. Under the headline "Ikke en krone", "Not one penny", it disowned the financial support for refugees and was combined with aggressive attacks upon Danish immigration policies. Immigration and multiculturalism would – according to the campaign – not only unfold a threat to what was seen as a homogeneous Danish culture and society, but would finally, it was claimed, lead to civil war and the potential extinction of the Danish culture and Danish people.⁶

⁴ Leonard writes in a similar way, that the "internal Danish political and cultural landscape no doubt plays a part in what is writable and marketable". He then refers to two specific events: Denmark's "involvement in the Iraq War", and the "'Mohammed Crisis' of late 2005 and early 2006" (Leonard 2008: 32).

⁵ See on this and the following argumentation e.g. Larsen 2001: 18ff.

⁶ Krarup's refusal to support the collection of money for refugees is not, he emphasizes, rooted in reservations against the help for refugees as such, but rather aimed against the organisation behind it, the *Danish Aid for Refugees*. They have, he writes, "in recent

This ‘narrative’ is no doubt well known. Its semantic structure has been described a number of times in scientific publications.⁷ However, this narrative did not find much traction in Danish society at the time. Public figures and politicians from all parties rejected the campaign aggressively and supported the humanitarian cause: more money was collected than ever and it all seemed a huge success.⁸ However, the situation changed in the following years, as Krarup’s own history illustrates. After being isolated at the end of the 80s, Krarup slowly began to gain influence. At the beginning of the 90s, the red top newspaper *Extra Bladet* started to use Krarup as a political commentator, even though the chief editor of the newspaper had openly rejected his political position. What was meant to be provocative, gradually became mainstream: In the middle of the 90s the chief editor of the newspaper started to over bid Krarup’s position in his own commentaries and the newspaper launched an influential – and controversial – series of articles about the “strangers” in Denmark.⁹ At the end of the 90s even Denmark’s largest newspaper *Jyllands Posten* began to assume the same critical position on immigration and the atmosphere in the political and cultural landscape changed: The critical position on immigration, which before was only an outsider-position, became more and more mainstream in political thought. In the following years, the *Danish People’s Party*, which was founded in 1995, became a major player in Danish politics, sustaining a critical discourse on immigration and multicultu-

years established itself as a state inside the state”, forcing “the adaption of laws” through the Danish parliament. As a consequence, Krarup compares them to a new “occupation-force”, and even threatens them, already in 1986, with the remark, that they shall “not be forgotten” later on. Krarup equally suggests that immigration would lead to the distinction of the Danish people; how can Danes continue to exist as a people, “when language, history and religion are no longer common?”, he asks in the ad; multiculturalism is furthermore explicitly compared to the civil war, going on in Lebanon at that time (all quotations from Larsen 2001: 19ff).

⁷ We find a similar narrative in the semantic of modern anti-Semitism, developed since the late 19th century. This narrative is, besides all difference, built on the nearly identical structure of arguments: the assumption of a homogeneous culture, threatened by an outside minority, which would overtake and distinct the original culture. The role of the “international” intellectual and his “political correctness”, preventing the necessary uprising against the allegedly existing danger, is as well established there (see on the semantics of modern anti-Semitism, e.g. Holz 2001; see also Schramm 2005).

⁸ On the public reaction in detail see Larsen 2001: 21f.

⁹ Among the journalists publishing that series was Ulla Dahlerup, today member of the European parliament for the populist *Danish People’s Party*, and Claes Kastholm, until recently head of the Cultural minister’s influential *Literature Council*, giving out major scholarships to writers from the government.

ralism.¹⁰ Using the terminology of Judith Butler, one could say that a completely new “normative horizon” had been established. Especially the election campaign immediately following the 11 September attacks in New York supported this tendency. A situation emerged where all the major parties began to compete in their stand against the assumingly dangerous consequences of immigration – mostly connected to migrants with Islamic background.¹¹

Furthermore, immediately after the election, the new government – which since then has been dependent on votes from the *Danish People’s Party* – announced a new debate on culture and values, which it termed the ‘culture battle’ [‘kulturkampen’]. In the beginning, this ‘culture battle’ was directed mainly against liberal intellectuals who by the new government were seen as dominating the cultural field and political discourse in Denmark. This “culture battle”, however, soon widened to another aspect: the struggle against, what has been called, “the medieval values” of Islamic culture.¹² Both sides of this “culture battle” are clearly connected: It is because of the “failure” of intellectuals with their positive internationalist view of multiculturalism, that Danish culture now is threatened by immigration. The “culture battle” therefore aims at the assumed domination of left-wing intellectuals, with their naïve ideas of multiculturalism and against Islamic migrants who are seen as not being in accordance with the assumedly Christian-Danish culture. Since 2001 the political discourse on immigration and the alleged threat of multiculturalism has been one of the major subjects in Danish debates.

“New Voices” in 2006

The literary developments in Denmark regarding migration literature are clearly connected to those changes of the “normative horizon”. The atmosphere in the Danish political and cultural landscape towards immigrants has no doubt influenced what is “writable and marketable” in Denmark, as Leonard points out (2008: 32). Even though “multicultural literature” of course was possible, writing “outside the nation” did so in an atmosphere of open cultural battle against the concept of multiculturalism,

¹⁰ See on the development of the *Danish People’s Party*, among others: Trads 2002 and Ignazi 2006. Krarup later joined the party and he is now an influential member of the parliament for the right wing populist party.

¹¹ See on the role of e.g. the Socialdemocrats in the Danish developments before 2001, Larsen 2001: 150ff.

¹² See on the rethoric of specifically the *Danish People’s Party*, Trads 2002: 39ff.

which does not fit into the mainstream of the political and cultural landscape. The atmosphere was simply not favourable for that kind of writing. The space for migration literature or “multicultural literature”, as Kongslien has called it, was probably more limited in Denmark, than in other European countries.

However, the situation changed with the ‘Mohammed Crisis’ in 2005 and 2006, which was a consequence of a number of cartoons about the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*.¹³ The purpose was officially to counter self-censorship, the cultural editor assumed to exist in the Danish society regarding critics of Islamic culture, but it can not be separated from the Danish debates on immigration and the so-called culture battle in general, which *Jyllands Posten* had supported for a number of years.¹⁴ Due to aggressive reactions in the Arabic world, where fundamentalist groups used the Cartoons for their own purposes in their own countries, the international media focused on Denmark’s discourse on immigration politics, the predominant narrative of the ‘threat of migration’, especially the Islamic one, began to look one-sided. Suddenly, there was an increasingly outspoken demand for complex distinctions and nuances. Something as simple as the need for a clear distinction between radical, political Islam on the one side and democratic Muslims on the other came into focus. And the internal developments and reactions, one can assume, also lead to new focus on literature written by migrants or inhabitants with “different ethnic background”. Especially the competition *New Voices*, initiated just some weeks after the peak of the Crisis, seemed to be directly influenced by the Cartoon-Crisis and the internal debates in Denmark. In the foreword to the anthology, published in 2007, the writer Naja Marie Aidt, who was part of the jury, explains the background of the writers by referring to the fact, that they all had a “so called *different ethnical background*”. But this notion, she explains, “can mean many things”, before referring more or less directly to the public discourse and the *Danish People’s Party*:

¹³ See on the background for the publication of the Cartoons and for the following crisis among others: Seidenfaden and Larsen 2006.

¹⁴ Cf. Seidenfaden and Larsen 2006. Even the story behind the publication was never assured: the Danish writer Kåre Bluitgen, who is known for his critical position against migration, claimed on a social event mentioned to a journalist, that a couple of illustrators had rejected to make a drawing of Mohammed for his children’s book, because of their fear of Islamic fundamentalism. None of those illustrators has been found yet, and the whole assumption of self-censorship in the Danish debates seems, when seen from outside, at least questionable.

One often connects immediately and wrongly the representation of other cultures in Denmark exclusively with people from Arabia, the Middle-East or Pakistan. But it is only the rhetoric from specific parties, which is so unambiguous. The contributions, sent to us, show with all clarity the diversity of immigration.¹⁵

Already here we see an attempt to nuance the cultural and political debate, which obviously, according to Aidt, was lacking. Also, the motivation behind the competition and the anthology, published in spring 2007, clearly mirrors the political situation and the ongoing debates on immigration in Danish society. After referring to the published texts – chosen among nearly 200 contributions – not being “grown out of a Danish, Scandinavian or Western European tradition”, but rather being products of “some kind of empty space between two cultures”, Aidt continues to describe the purpose of the anthology:

We need so desperately new voices, speaking from new places. We need stories about, how it is to be considered a stranger, even though one does not feel as a stranger at all. Stories about how one, on the other hand, can feel as a stranger in, what ethnic Danes consider their homeland. And all the other stories. About not being welcome. About racism, but also about warm feelings and happiness and grief and hope and all the other things, which are not connected to ethnicity. We need to get surprised by the language, suddenly showing new sides: sometimes a brutal hardness and ugliness, other times an unexpected softness and beauty. (Aidt, Andersen, Rashid and Bak 2007: 8)

Even though Aidt – at the end of the paragraph – also focuses on the literary developments, it is difficult not to see this description in the context of the discourses and political developments in Denmark. In other words: The attempt to “kick-start” a new literature of migration seems to be connected to the political circumstances and recent developments. This element becomes equally clear, when including Johannes Riis’ (head of Gyldendal’s publishing house) point of view on the anthology. This book, he emphasizes, is supposed to connect Denmark to the world around the country and simultaneously to teach us – the Danes – more about the world around us. Riis states: “We seem now to come closer to the literary developments out in the world. Those writers will bring a new sensibility and new images into

¹⁵ “Ofte forbinder man umiddelbart og fejlagtigt andre kulturers repræsentation i Danmark med arabiske, mellemøstlige eller pakistanske folkeslag. Men det er kun retorikken hos visse politiske partier, der er så entydigt. De indsendte tekster viser med al tydelighed bredden af ‘indvandringen’” (Aidt, Andersen, Rashid and Bak 2007: 7).

the Danish literature, and this can only be a positive contribution, helping us to understand the world around us” (Dannemand 2006).

The migrant writers, it seems, are the ones who can connect the internal Danish perspective on the world with an outside perspective. At the same time, those migrant writers seem to attain an internal function in Denmark in being connected to integration. Especially children or teenagers with ethnic minority backgrounds in Denmark need, as Aidt emphasizes in the foreword “some literary examples and role-models” (Aidt 2007: 8). Literature has here become a part of the project of integration and intercultural understanding, which in this way seems to be directly connected to the internal situation in Denmark.¹⁶

Aesthetic Reactions

The political and cultural context did not however only influence increasing interests in new migration literature on behalf of the editors, but also the content and aesthetics of literary texts as such. As we will see, texts of writers like Nassrin El Halawani, Maja Lee Langvad or Lotte Inuk react to public discourses on immigration – at least they reflect upon it in an indirect way. Shadi A. Bazeghi, born in Iran in 1975 and who was the winner of the competition, emphasizes in her poetry a woman’s longing “to be recognized / as a good and fully / integrated example” (“for at blive anerkendt / som et godt og vel / integreret eksempel”, Bazeghi 2007: 16). While this line can be read as a more general criticism of the unquestioned attempt to be integrated in some kind of normality, it does not necessarily have to be read from an ethnical perspective. Nassrin El Halawani’s often quoted “Ethnical law” (“Den etniske lov”) from the same anthology, refers directly to the political debate in Denmark. In this text, she formulates eight

¹⁶ Also the debates on the competition’s target group has to be understood out of this context. Especially the discussion whether young Danes who have been adopted to Denmark, are included in the group of potential writers, is telling. After the Danish critic Lars Bukdahl in a newspaper ironically supposed to cancel the whole competition, and give the prize to the Danish writer Maja Lee Langvad, who had just published a collection of poetry dealing with her own background as adopted child from Korea, one of the editors of *Gyldendal*, Lene Wissing, openly declared, that, since they were looking for “both ethnical and cultural background”, this would “exclude e.g. adopted children from Korea”. The concept of ethnical differences and meeting between cultures, it seems, is clearly more connected to the internal debate on immigration, rather than the question of cultural belonging or literary imagination as such. It is hard to know, Leonard comments, “whether Wissing was referring to Langvad specifically, or if the category of adopted children as a whole was seen as too ‘integrated’ to be able to supply the ethnic difference that *New Stemmer* promised” (Leonard 2008: 32).

paragraphs, a couple of them combined with sub-paragraphs. Together they form what can be called the informal “laws” for Danes with different “ethnic background” – emphasizing among others that the “ethnic person” (“etniske mennesker”) cannot “break with his ethnicity” (“frasige sig sin etnicitet”), as she points out: “Once ethnic, always ethnic” (“Ën gang etnisk, altid etnisk”, El Halawani 2007: 63).

Nassrin El Halawani’s “Ethnical law” can be read as a bitter parody of the discourse about “ethnic identity” as she has experienced it in Denmark. However, she does not only criticize the informal rules of ethnicity in public discourse. She also comments on specific juridistic laws in Denmark, as for example the controversial prohibition to bring a married partner from another country to Denmark, when one is not yet 24 years old, or the equally controversial law, preventing Danes with “different ethnic backgrounds” to holiday in countries, where the family originally comes from, for more than three weeks.¹⁷ Thus, El Halawani’s writing includes an overall attempt to counterbalance the existing framework of political discourse, established in Denmark during the last decade.

This development can also be seen in other publications, which are not part of the anthology. Especially Maja Lee Langvad’s poetry seems to point in the same direction. In her book: *Find Holger Danske* (2006), she plays with the reader’s expectations and tries to rewrite the normative basis for most common self-descriptions as Dane. Her attempt to “give an account of oneself”, as Judith Butler would formulate it, is discussed with her autobiographical background of being an adopted child from Korea. In her collection of poetry and short prose, she plays with stereotypes of autobiography and origin and puts the concept of Danishness and biological identity into question (Langvad 2006). In the title she refers to Holger Danske, Holger the Dane, the national hero and mythological figure of resistance, who obviously shall be “found”, which is wordplay on the Danish version of “Where’s Waldo”. That reference is not only a critical comment to the influential constructions of national identity, using both myth and history, but also a clear reference to the contemporary political debates: here, once again, we see a widespread use of the mythical figure of Holger the Dane to symbolize the urgent need for national resistance

¹⁷ Paragraph 8b says: “Ethnical children are not allowed to participate in holidays in ethnical continents – or/and countries (Middle East, Turkey and so on, plus North Africa) for more than three weeks. If it happens anyhow, money will be withdrawn from the parent’s pay-check” (“Etniske børn kan ikke deltage i ferier til etniske kontinenter – og/eller lande (Mellemøsten, Tyrkiet og lign. samt Nordafrika) i mere end tre uger. Sker det alligevel, trækkes der prompte i forældrenes bistandshjælp”, El Halawani 2007: 66).

against the alleged threat of mass-immigration.¹⁸ Langvad's criticism, however, is not limited to the metaphorical level. In her "Danskerlov", "Danish law", she questions the most common assumptions of national identity and cultural belonging in a manner similar to El Halawani. This "law" represents/is a bitter comment to the most widespread stereotypes in the political debate. It says:

1. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you are born in Denmark.
2. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you speak Danish fluently.
3. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you have the Danish citizenship.
4. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you live in Denmark.
5. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you respect the Danish laws.
6. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because your grandparents believe it.
7. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you hoist up the Danish Flag in your garden.
8. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you call others for New Danes.
9. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you are ready to die for Denmark.
10. You shall not believe that you are a Dane, because you feel Danish.¹⁹

¹⁸ According to the myth, the proud knight Holger Danske will wake up and arise in his castle in Kronenburg, when the nation is in danger. In the political debate, this symbol for national resistance is often quoted, also connecting the struggle against immigration with the resistance movement under the Second World War, where one of the most influential resistance-groups used the name of Holger Danske. The connection between the threat of Nazi Germany on the one side and contemporary movements of migration, are often expressed, and already stated in the 1986 campaign against the refugee-aid-campaign (see Larsen 2001: 20).

¹⁹ "1. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du er født i Danmark. 2. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du snakker flydende dansk. 3. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du er dansk statsborger. 4. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du bor i Danmark 5. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du respekterer de danske love. 6. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi dine bedsteforældre tror det. 7. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du hejser Dannebrog i din have. 8. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du kalder nogle for nydanskere. 9. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du vil dø for Danmark. 10. Du skal ikke tro, at du er dansker, fordi du føler dig dansk" (Langvad 2006: 46).

These comments on the political situation are furthermore visible in the collection, when Langvad expands the traditional myth by including “Holger Nydanske”, “Holger the New Dane”, and “Holger Udanske”, “Holger the Not-Dane”. Referring to the predominant public discourse, she ironically writes:

We want to reinforce normality in Denmark. We will defend and honour Holger the Dane’s right to his own country. Denmark is the country of Holger the Dane and not of anybody else, passing by. The more laws that give Holger the Not-Dane and Holger the New-Dane rights on Holger the Dane’s expense, the more powerful his bitterness will become. It is time for a new fresh breeze over Denmark.²⁰

This text not only refers to the predominant narrative of an overall threat against the Danish nation by immigrants, but also quotes one of the main political slogans of the *Danish People’s Party*, easily recognized by every Danish reader: It is time for “a new fresh breeze over Denmark”, which, in the political spin of the *Danish People’s Party*, is meant to signify a necessary uprising against old school politicians, who had allegedly suppressed the national resistance against immigration. It is, however, presented with greater ambivalence here. On the one hand, the last sentence can be read as part of the narrative, which is hostile to immigration, as it is introduced in the paragraph. On the other hand, the text also allows a different reading, contradicting that message: Against the national paradigm, reproduced in the paragraph, one needs a “fresh breeze”, a new agenda. In this reading, it is not the left wing multiculturalists who are the old dust, which has to be blown away by the “fresh breeze”, but the political discourse of the *Danish People’s Party*, which has been dominating the internal cultural and political landscape in Denmark for years. In other words, Langvad’s text offers two readings of the last sentence, where the second one includes a re-signification of the original message, turning the discourse against its original intentions.²¹

²⁰ “Vi ønsker at genskabe normaltilstande i Danmark. Vi vil forsvare og hævde Holger Danskes ret til sit eget land. Danmark er Holger Danskes land og ikke et allemandseje. Jo flere lovindgreb, der tilgodeser Holger Udanske og Holger Nydanske på bekostning af Holger Danske, desto større bliver Holger Danskes forbitrelse. Det er tid til et frisk pust over landet” (Langvad 2006: 52).

²¹ The title of the collection, *Find Holger Danske* (Find Holger the Dane), can be read in a similar way: the title not only refers to the current discourse in Denmark, but also allows a reading, focussing on the necessity of a search for a new resistance movement, using the myth of the opponents. The imperative, find Holger the Dane, also can be read as: wake up, and liberate the country from the existing narrative.

The style, however, is quite similar to that of El Halawani. In both cases we see a tendency to engage directly and critically against the current discourse in poetry. In both cases there is a playful attempt to challenge the existing norms, by rewriting their laws and myths in a literary form. Political discourse, notions of biography and of “ethnic” belonging interfere on an aesthetic level. When Leonard writes that “none of the works in *Nye Stemmer* seem to have heralded a new way of writing about identity”, this is probably true when comparing the texts with the books of Alejandro Leiva Wenger and Jonas Hassen Khemiri in Sweden, as Leonard does (Leonard 2008: 32). Seen from a Danish perspective, however, it looks different: it is a new literary attempt to challenge the existing norms and discourses in Denmark.

Postcolonial Literature

Beside those attempts to challenge notions of ethnic identity in a new form of “migration literature”, one can still point at another tendency, which is often overlooked in discussions regarding migration and literature in Denmark. For some years, we have seen the rise of postcolonial writing in Denmark, often dealing with the heritage of the former colony in Greenland or the Faroe Islands (see e.g. Thisted 2005). Also there, concepts of cultural and ethnic identity are put into question and we deal with questions of migration also. One example of this new postcolonial literature on migration in Denmark is without any doubt Charlotte Inuk’s novel *Sultekunstnerinde* (The Starvation Artist) from 2004. Together with writers like Ole Korneliussen or Artur Kraskolnikoff, Inuk’s novel has been named as one of the beginnings of postcolonial writing in Denmark (Thisted 2005). Inuk’s novel initially tells the story of a Danish girl moving to Greenland together with her mother in the middle of the 1970s and growing up in the foreign environment with different cultural traditions and codes. The experience of being a stranger in Greenland is, however, only the specific setting of a more general conflict, which equally can be read as comment to the current political debates. What Inuk describes in the novel is, first of all, the existence of a specific system of norms and values, forced upon the young child during adolescence. More concretely in the novel, we see the power of ethnic, sexual and religious discourses, norms and values, with which the child is confronted. Sexual identity, ethnic identity and religious identification are described as social norms or normative regimes the child is bound to, but has problems to relate to. Falling in love with her best girlfriend, the female narrator is unable to identify herself with the classical,

heterosexual gender-discourse the world forces onto her. Also, her identity as Dane living in Greenland is equally challenged during the novel: As a Dane, she represents the colonial power in a country struggling for independence at the end of the 70s, while she at the same time is filled with the longing to belong to the local environment, with the specific traditions and codes. Charlotta, the narrator, here refers to all the classic motifs of national romantic national belonging – blood, language, history and cultural codes – and presents them as if they were prerequisites for a common understanding. When she sees a couple of Greenlandic boys sitting together on the windowsill and laments:

If only I had the same blood running in my veins, if only I knew what these boys knew, thought and felt! If I could wake up one morning and speak their language, know their history, decipher their codes. If *those* hairs which are growing against my will and all too fast could be as coal black and sleek and fine as the Greenlandic girls in the shower during gym class. (Inuk 2008: 17)²²

Together with her Danish friend Malou, she dreams of changing the colour of her hair, belonging to the Greenlandic culture by adapting the appearance of her body. They dream, it says in the novel “about having black, thick, sleek hair and speaking fluent Greenlandic, just like that, so no one will have the slightest doubt about where we really come from anymore” (Inuk 2008: 16). The girls therefore, as a tactic of mimicry, refuse to wash their hair, hoping, this would help them look more Greenlandic. The attempt to integrate in the specific normative horizon, established and legitimated by the surrounding society and internalized by the girls, builds on the idea of similarities, exposed in the colour of the skin and the hair. In Inuk’s novel, the young girls try to take on the codes and the perspective of the majority culture:

Anyway, in winter my hair gets darker and Malou and I eagerly compare colour, count the black strands among the lighter ones and feel that it is going in the right direction, and we go out without washing our hair for as long as possible because it seems darker then, and we practice the slang the girls in our class use as well as the unusual way, they pronounce certain Danish words. (Inuk 2008: 16)

²² The quotations stem from the chapter “Revolution” translated by Thomas Kennedy and published in *Chroma. A queer literary journal*, issue 7, Spring 2008. A first version of the same chapter has been published in: *The literary magazine* (2007).

The colour of the hair plays, as we know, an important role in other novels and short stories, dealing with the challenges of migration and integration. In books and stories by Zaimoglu or Wenger, the longing to be part of majority culture is equally expressed with the motif of the hair, where the “metamorphosis of the body” can be seen as a “metaphor for transubstantiation of the soul”, as Leonard puts it (2008: 33).²³ In Inuk’s novel, the girl’s attempt to transform herself into a pure Greenlander is, however, at the same time refused by the predominant discourses on ethnical belonging. Regarding the question if it would be possible to “dye my hair”, to avoid being excluded or even “shot” as a foreigner, when the “revolution” comes, that is the independence from Denmark and Greenland’s rising as a “proud pure kingdom”, one of the closest friends answers: “It would never look like a Greenlander’s, no matter what you do with it!” (Inuk 2008: 17). No matter how much the child tries, it will never become part of the Greenlandic culture, as long as the Greenlandic identity is build upon the idea of ethnical purity, common history and language.

In Inuk’s novel the Danish discourse on migration is turned around. Here we follow the white Dane being the foreigner, coming to another culture, struggling for integration in that partly hostile environment.²⁴ The book therefore not only describes the experience of a young Dane growing up in modern Greenland for the first time in Danish literature, it also focuses on the structure of prejudices and the social pressure of assimilation, with a somehow hidden commentary to the Danish discourse. As a reaction against the social pressure for assimilation, the child attempts to escape from those normative regimes by attempting to reduce the body that is the place in which the inscription of norms and values is situated.²⁵ The

²³ Leonard here refers to Wengers short story “Elixir” from 2001 where we, compared with Inuk’s novel, see the reversed attempt: a group of Latino teenagers finds a bottle, which makes their hair more blond and their eyes more blue – a parody on the “assimilationist ideology of the welfare-state”, as Leonard read it (2008: 33). As to the similarities between the works of Zaimoğlu and Inuk see Schramm 2006: 4-6.

²⁴ Thisted emphasizes furthermore the role of youth culture in Inuk’s novel, she notes that we see the reversal of the political power structure among the young teenagers. While the colonial forces of Denmark still remaining predominant on a political level, they are inferior, as we see in many examples in Inuk’s novel, in the youth culture (Thisted 2005: 28).

²⁵ The novel plays already in the title with Franz Kafka’s notion of the “Starvation Artist”, who in a similar way reduces his body to gain an independency, which the social world would not allow. Inuk has in different occasions, mentioned Kafka’s short story from 1922 as one of the major inspirations to her own, partly autobiographical novel.

novel, however, does not end in that destructive way out. After being suppressed and nearly killed by the pressure of normative regimes and ideas of ethnical purity, Inuk's hero in the end turns against those specific norms in an act of rebellion. The symbol for that "revolutionary" way out is in the novel the "bastard", the one, who is never bound to one specific identity. The bastard undermines the existing norms and values, but he or she also opens up a third space: The bastard is neither Dane nor Greenlander, neither heterosexual nor homosexual, neither Christian nor Muslim, but always in between categories and distinctions. "The bastards are", the narrator emphasizes, "the most beautiful, here and everywhere else." They combine "that black hair, those light eyes, or the other way around", and make possible a new utopia: "All the best salvaged from both fallen worlds, a new beginning, a Phoenix rising from the ashes, a whole new bread of human being" (Inuk 2008: 17). The bastard as a symbol of hybridity is therefore a strongly political figure: Charlotta's experience of not being seen and recognized as an individual is the starting point of a critical examination of the existing norms, rather than just overtaking them or fleeing from them by a self-destructive reduction of the body. Certain practices of recognition or "breakdowns in the practice of recognition", as one can say with Butler, marks "a site rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institutions of new norms, putting into question the givenness of the prevailing normative horizon" (Butler 2005: 24).²⁶

Thus, even though the action in Inuk's novel is situated in the late 1970s, it is not difficult to see the criticism of an idea of ethnical purity as a comment to current developments in Denmark. While Langvad and El Halawani react directly against the Danish debate on immigration and on the current laws on immigration, Inuk's novel does this with the example of the Dane being the foreigner, the destructive power of discourses, defying and limiting the young person's identity and thereby containing a criticism against the general underlying structure of identity-building.

²⁶ Butler takes her starting point in an anthropology of singularity. The individual singularity, she argues, can never be reduced or fully recognized in the existing normative frame, and therefore with a nearly inherent power leads to the struggle for new and different norms. The impossibility of being recognized compels, as Judith Butler writes, "to adopt a critical relation to those norms" (24). The unsatisfied desire for recognition establishes in the end "a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norm" (24). In the novel this is connected to both the ethnical discourse and the gender-discourse, which also plays a central role in Inuk's latest novel, *Store Dyr* (Big animals) from 2008. (On the gender-discourse in Inuk's early novels see Schramm 2003: 90-108).

A New Migration Literature?

The three examples discussed here – El Halawani, Langvad and Inuk – are obviously different from each other in their aesthetics and themes. But they do have some similarities as well: they all show some sort of reaction against the predominant political discourse in Denmark, where immigration is often seen as a threat rather than a contribution to the Danish society. They all try, in some way, to establish a counter-message, putting into question notions of ethnical purity, biological heritage and cultural homogeneity and try to redefine the cultural and political norms and values they are confronted with in contemporary Denmark. It would therefore be insufficient only to read those attacks against the normative frame as aesthetic and formal experiences. All the three examples can rather be seen as literary attempts to challenge the specific ‘normative horizon’, established in Denmark since the middle of the 90s. Whereas El Halawani and Langvad in their writing concretely quote and rewrite elements of the public debate, Inuk rather focuses on the structure of belonging and recognition, giving a reverse picture of the Danish discourses on migration.

At the same time, the absence of migration literature described by Kongslien in her article from 2005, has not changed on an overall level: still, we do not see a great number of outstanding public successes by writers with migration backgrounds, or by writers dealing with the consequences of migration in the field of literature, as it is common in other European countries. However, some of the latest developments in Denmark suggest that there is an increasing openness for new tendencies, following up on both the anthology *New Voices* and some of the writers, discussed here. It will be interesting to follow the Danish developments further on, but already now it seems as if the conflicts surrounding the “Mohammed Crisis” have lead to a new interest in the literary field, concerning questions of migration. The texts discussed above could then probably be seen as the first attempts to start a new tendency: the rise of a new migration literature in Denmark.

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