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**Between Sweden and Tunisia. (Auto)biography  
and Multicultural Experience in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's  
*Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger***

**Abstract**

Jonas Hassen Khemiri, born in 1978, is one of the most interesting contemporary Swedish and European writers with a Tunisian immigrant background. His second novel *Montecore: en unik tiger (Montecore: The Silence of the Tiger)*, published in 2006, has got an epistolary form deducted from the exchange of letters between Kadir and Jonas. However, the main character of the novel is Abbas Khemiri – the disappearing, estranged father of Jonas – a figure close to the real writer. Khemiri's book has got an innovative linguistic form and contains many erudite references to the phenomena of popular culture. It is also a complex portrayal of the different generations of (mainly Arab-based) immigrant and post-immigrant communities in Sweden coupled with a nuanced look on bright and dark sides of the Swedish state, model of identity and integration. This material is enriched by the examples taken from Khemiri's novel *Everything I Don't Remember* and short story *As You Would Have Told It To Me (Sort Of) If We Had Known Each Other Before You Died*.

**Keywords:** Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, contemporary literature, Sweden, Tunisia, immigration, immigrant literature, crime fiction, hybridity, popular culture



“Does anyone at all understand anything about a story that is not their own?”<sup>1</sup>

The very name of Jonas Hassen Khemiri is still not as acclaimed and widely recognised as e.g. Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru are in the Anglophone literature, but he can be listed among the best writers that can be attributed to the widely understood immigrant literature or literature related to the issues of immigration, assimilation and cultural hybridity in Europe and especially among the Muslim-born groups.<sup>2</sup> The Swedish writer, very popular in his own country and more and more often translated into other languages, can be seen as one of the most interesting contemporary novelists (adding experience as a playwright) in Europe, not to mention his half-immigrant Arab Tunisian background.<sup>3</sup> The main research problems posed in this article revolve around the multi-layered issue of transforming biography into literary fiction, and the writer’s sombre critique of the Swedish model of multicultural society.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri<sup>4</sup> was born in Stockholm in 1978, from the Tunisian father and the Swedish mother. Despite of a strongly (auto)biographical character of Jonas’s works, he seems to be reluctant to speak more about the details of his family life and early years. Perhaps, it is also because, according to his view expressed in the talk with Malin Linneroth, “some things are such that you have to create fiction around them, because you cannot handle them in any other way.”<sup>5</sup> It opens the question that perplexes almost all Khemiri’s works: what is fictional and real in someone’s biography/autobiography, and who is the person narrating it and constructing someone’s identity.

The Arabic surname (*nisba*) Khamīrī probably refers to Ġabāl Ḥamīr, “a mountainous region with extensive forests of cork-oak in north-western Tunisia,”<sup>6</sup> close to the city of Ġandūba. The simplified Latin names of the region are spelled as Khroumire, Kroumirie

<sup>1</sup> Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, (trans.) Rachel Willson-Broyles, Alfred P. Knopf, New York 2011, p. 273.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Emilia Mirkowska-Moch for her important help in gathering Khemiri’s books and additional sources.

<sup>3</sup> As for the current scientific research on Khemiri so far, there are two articles written by Eila Rantonen: ‘Cultural Hybridity and Humour in Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s “Montecore”’, in: Svante Lindberg (ed.), *Le roman migrant au Québec et en Scandinavie. Performativité, conflits signifiants et créolisation/The Migrant Novel in Quebec and Scandinavia. Performativity, Meaningful Conflicts and Creolization*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 141–160; ‘Writing Biography by E-mail. Postcolonial and Postmodern Rewriting of Biographical and Epistolary Modes in Jonas Khemiri’s “Montecore”’, in: *Migrants and Literature in Finland and Sweden*, Satu Gröndahl and Eila Rantonen (eds.), Helsinki 2018, pp. 204–223.

<sup>4</sup> His name can be spelled in Modern Standard Arabic as: Yūnus Ḥasan Ḥamīrī. “Hassen” is a simplified transcription of Ḥasan, often used in case of Tunisian names. For the transcriptions of the Arabic proper names, words and expressions, I utilise the Brill’s online *System of Transliteration of Arabic and Persian Characters* <<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-islamica/system-of-transliteration-of-arabic-and-persian-characters-transliteration>>, Viewed 20 June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Malin Linneroth, ‘Jonas Hassen Khemiri – skriver för att finnas kvar’, *Skriva*, 20 September 2016, Viewed 15 June 2019, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160920001255/http://tidningenskriva.se/jonas-hassen-khemiri-skriver-for-att-finnas-kvar/>>.

<sup>6</sup> *Kroumirie, Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Viewed 19 June 2019, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kroumirie>>.

or Khroumirie. So, it seems that Jonas Hassen Khemiri's family from the father's side has lived in (or was somewhat related to) the mountainous region of Tunisia on the borderland with Algeria. The writer studied Literature at Stockholm University and International Economics at Stockholm School of Economics,<sup>7</sup> and his debut was a press reportage from the checkpoint in the occupied Palestinian territories, written in the early 2000s.<sup>8</sup> Then the Norstedts published his first novel, *Ett öga rött* (2003, English: *One Eye Red*), which was sold in over 200 000 copies in Sweden,<sup>9</sup> a huge success also in commercial terms. It paved the way for his four subsequent novels: *Montecore: en unik tiger* (2006, English: *Montecore: The Silence of the Tiger*), *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012, English: *I Call My Brothers*), *Allt jag inte minns* (2015, English: *Everything I Don't Remember*), and the last one to date: *Pappaklausulen* (2018, English: *The Father Clause*). The important one was also *Invasion!*, a collection of plays, short stories and essays, published in 2012. The writer himself was very moved with the publication of the translation of his short story *Så som du hade berättat det för mig (ungefär) om vi hade lärt känna varandra innan du dog* (2017, English: *As You Would Have Told It to Me (Sort Of) If We Had Known Each Other Before You Died*) in the acclaimed American magazine, *The New Yorker*. Apart of being first and foremost the novelist, Khemiri has been still active as a playwright (he wrote six plays so far), essayist, and antiracist activist, e.g. in 2013 he published an open letter to the then Swedish Minister of Justice, Beatrice Ask, that widely circulated on the Internet,<sup>10</sup> and later was developed into the English text published in *The New York Times*. It criticised the police project REVA, (e.g. procedure called by Khemiri "racial profiling of passengers on Stockholm's subway"),<sup>11</sup> using, by the way, the examples and experiences attributed to the protagonists of his novels, especially *Montecore*...

His works were quite extensively translated in the last years, especially the novel *Everything I Don't Remember*, which, according to Albert Bonnier's publishing office, is accessed in more than 25 linguistic versions.<sup>12</sup> In this text I refer mostly to the English and French translations (*Montecore*...), and the only Polish one as well (*Everything I Don't Remember*).

Khemiri, as he declared in one of his English-language video interviews, was inspired by the writers "who broke the rules," being himself "addicted to" masters as Franz Kafka, William Faulkner and Vladimir Nabokov, but taking as well inspiration from the authors of contemporary musical lyrics songs.<sup>13</sup> For example, he admitted to being influenced,

<sup>7</sup> Information after: *Jonas Hassen Khemiri*, Viewed 20 June 2019, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonas\\_Hassen\\_Khemiri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonas_Hassen_Khemiri)>.

<sup>8</sup> Linneroth, 'Jonas Hassen Khemiri'.

<sup>9</sup> *Ett öga rött*, Viewed 20 June 2019, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ett\\_öga\\_rött](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ett_öga_rött)>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Jonas Hassen Khemiri: Life', Viewed 20 June 2019, <<http://www.khemiri.se/en/life/>>

<sup>11</sup> Jonas Hassen Khemiri, 'Sweden's Closet Racists', *The New York Times*, 20 April 2013, Viewed 20 June 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/swedens-closet-racists.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>>.

<sup>12</sup> 'Allt jag inte minns', *Albert Bonnors Forlag*, Viewed 1 July 2019, <<https://www.albertbonniersforlag.se/bocker/201213/allt-jag-inte-minns/>>

<sup>13</sup> 'Jonas Hassen Khemiri Interview: Reading Has To Be Dangerous', *Louisiana News*, 6 April 2017, Viewed 20 June 2019, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPN3qBbg\\_A8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPN3qBbg_A8)>.

especially in his formative years, by the famous American rapper, Nas, whose works taught the Swedish writer that “grammar is secondary to telling the story.”<sup>14</sup> It perfectly rhymes with the contemporary textological approach entailing that “the text can be both spoken and written.”<sup>15</sup> By the way, Khemiri conducted himself the interview with Nas which was published in the leading Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter (4 November 2008) and can be accessed at the official website of the writer ([www.khemiri.se](http://www.khemiri.se)).<sup>16</sup>

A constant multi-voice and multi-layered storytelling, being a major feature of Khemiri’s works, is rooted in his personal defining of fiction as showing “how many different worlds are possible.”<sup>17</sup> So, interpreting these views, we could say that his books, short stories and plays introduce a kind of a game, in which the author, narrator and reader create together new worlds in a constant interplay filled with a sort of intimacy and feeling of participation.<sup>18</sup>

### *Montecore. The Unique Tiger* – (auto)biography and self-fashioning

Probably the best example of this complex game is the second novel of the Swedish author entitled in English *Montecore: The Silence of The Tiger* or *Montecore. The Unique Tiger*.

The impulse of intensive investigation of one’s forgotten and complex past and identity is the basis for inventive writing of Jonas Hassen Khemiri. *Montecore...* is a fictional biography or mock-biography of a Tunisian migrant to Sweden, Abbas Khemiri – who is firstly introduced as a famous international photographer. Later the reader realizes that it seems to be one of his numerous internally conflicting masks or just a piece of imagination by the narrator which is not easy to define. Actually, the novel is narrated by the two talking subjects, including the Swede Jonas Khemiri, a young acclaimed writer (probably close to real Jonas Hassen Khemiri, who is thus at the same time the author, the subject and the part of the plot of the novel), and the Tunisian Kadir, a childhood friend of Jonas’ father who is also obsessed with an idea of a novel that would be a sort of son’s tribute to estranged father. Jonas, a little bit sarcastically, distances himself from this project, at the same time trying to focus on his intimate, often very painful, memories and feelings.

*Montecore...* itself has an epistolary form which is deduced from the exchange of letters between those aforementioned two, however including also the older correspondence between Abbas and Kadir. So, Khemiri in a rather ironic way refers to the polylogic<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cited after: Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Jerzy Bartmiński and Stanisława Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, *Tekstologia*, Warszawa 2009, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Nas Interview*, Viewed 20 June 2019, <<http://www.khemiri.se/en/texts/nas-interview/>>

<sup>17</sup> ‘Reading Has To Be Dangerous’.

<sup>18</sup> I am reformulating here the Khemiri’s thought taken from the aforementioned video interview.

<sup>19</sup> One of the most acclaimed examples of a polylogic epistolary novel is Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) using letters, diaries and other texts written by many characters. In such type of an epistolary novel, at least three

type of epistolary novel, exposing discrepancies, building self-esteem (especially in the case of Abbas), and lack of sincerity in the relations between three protagonists. These stylistic figures make the novel so inventive because the strange investigation regarding life and fate of the estranged, disappearing father of Jonas is presented from two radically different points of view. Jonas and Kadir are differed by the means of language they use, the world-views they have and the vision of Abbas they preserve. Khemiri's method of writing underlines the fact that "autobiographical and biographical writing are complex practices, which appear to defy simple generic classifications."<sup>20</sup> The fact-fiction dichotomy doesn't exist, and fictional forms such as novel may reveal the author's self, often held secret in other contexts.<sup>21</sup> *Montecore...* can be interpreted as well as a sort of a Bildungsroman because it pictures Jonas's childhood, teenage years, and his growing disillusionment as to the opened and inclusive character of Swedish society. It results in the process of constant transforming, or "colouring" his identity, and radicalising his world-view, what is expressed e.g. by his constant fascination with the African American gangsta rap (the band NWA), growing identification with similarly "ethnic" friends, and trying to organise a sort of a resistance movement (partially imagined) against the racist incidents in Sweden.

After his first novel *One Eye Red*, Khemiri was often treated as an author using a sort of an urban jargon called Rinkeby<sup>22</sup> Swedish (*rinkebysvenska*).<sup>23</sup> This type of a dialect or slang has got a lot in common with hip-hop/rap poetics, embraced by Khemiri, as well as it includes many borrowings from English or African American. Anyway, Rinkeby Swedish vocabulary also consists of the forms borrowed from native languages of the immigrants as e.g. linguistic forms describing money: Turkish/Kurdish/Serbian/Bosnian *para* or Arabic-influenced *flos* (from literary Arabic *fulūs*).<sup>24</sup>

In *Montecore...*, the narration is performed in the peculiar version of Swedish with many French, Arabic and English elements, what is probably the most inventive and brilliant aspect of Khemiri's fiction/non-fiction and helps in characterizing the main characters as well. The Khemirish language is the word used in the novel for this special convention: a "language that is all languages combined, extra every/thing with changes in meaning and strange words put together, special rules and daily exceptions. A language that is Arabic swearwords, Spanish question words, French declarations of love, English photography quotations and Swedish puns. (...) Khemirish is Dads' language and the family's language; it's a language that is only yours, that no one else owns, and that you will never show anyone (until now?)."<sup>25</sup> Probably the linguistic brilliance of this work must be somehow "lost in translation", because it is not Abbas Khemiri's life, but

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protagonists are introduced as authors of the letters or other written sources.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research*, New York 2009, p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Rinkeby – one of the suburbs of Stockholm, strongly inhabited by the immigrant or post-immigrant population.

<sup>23</sup> Linneroth, 'Jonas Hassen Khemiri'.

<sup>24</sup> Examples after: *Rinkeby Swedish*, Viewed 24 June 2019, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rinkeby\\_Swedish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rinkeby_Swedish)>.

<sup>25</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of The Tiger*, p. 88, 91.

rather the language and linguistic role-playing that are main subjects of the story. It is strongly underlined in the excellent and funny passage presenting “Mnemonic Rules” of learning Swedish that were established by Abbas and Kadir with the help of small Jonas. This part of the book is a challenge for the translator what can be also observed in the French translation of *Montecore...*, where some of the Swedish proper names and expressions (e.g. Stockholm, *kronor*-crowns) are translated in a more extended and direct manner than in the Rachel Willson-Broyles’ English version.<sup>26</sup>

Developing this context, Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of *self-fashioning* can be used to analysis. He has been associated with the intellectual current called *new historicism* which “traces connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of subjectivity.”<sup>27</sup> Fundamental seems to be a category of *narrative self-fashioning*, which relates to the formation of one’s identity through invention and storytelling, sometimes even through conscious fiction-making.<sup>28</sup> The researcher himself characterised his approach to the latter term arguing that “self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life.”<sup>29</sup> This phenomenon is based on crossing “the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being moulded by forces outside one’s control, [and] the attempt to fashion other selves.”<sup>30</sup> Adding to it, Matthew Potolsky discovers the fact that Greenblatt’s research is based on the foundation of the ideas of the Italian Renaissance thinker, Pico della Mirandola, who “defined human beings as at once actors and spectators of creation.”<sup>31</sup> Despite of the fact that Greenblatt’s research was based mainly on the literature of Renaissance and Shakespeare, the aforementioned and other ideas seem to fit perfectly into Khemiri’s *Montecore...* as well, also taking into account the influence of Clifford Geertz, well acquainted with the Arab-Islamic civilisation, on Greenblatt. In the case of *Montecore...*, the self-fashioning concerns both fictional characters and the author/authors (Jonas, Kadir, Abbas), who try to rewrite their two (or even three) countries, Sweden and Tunisia (and sometimes Algeria), to give them textual form and to show that constructing one reliable autobiographical story is absolutely impossible. Also, the Pico’s-related idea of life as a *theatrum mundi* or theatrical mimesis can be attached to *Montecore...*, in which Khemiri (himself a playwright as well) so often includes motifs of role playing both in metaphorical and direct way (e.g. sophisticated role-playing games invented by young Jonas).

<sup>26</sup> Compare: Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Montecore, un tigre unique*, (trans.) Lucile Clauss and Max Stadler, Paris 2008, p. 220. For example, the French translator preserved the original Swedish word for the currency: *Kronor*, and then translated it in brackets as *couronnes* or *cimes*. In the English edition (p. 176), it is just expressed in the phrase as: *And their economic currency is called “Crowns”*.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford–New York 2000, p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> See also: Markku Lehtimäki, ‘Self-Fashioning in *Seven Brothers*. Narrative and Identity In a Classic Finnish Novel’ (unpublished paper presented during the conference ‘Northern Self-Fashionings: Narrating the Self in the Nordic Region’, Kolding, Denmark, 21 November 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago-London 2005, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis*, New York–London 2006, p. 77.

In the course of years, especially in the turbulent early 1990s, the growing father-son conflict between Abbas and Jonas is emerging. It is mainly about strategies of living in the Swedish society. Abbas presents an ideal of total integration, trying to hide his Arab background and master perfect, imagined Swedishness. These (sometimes rather hopeless) activities are largely unsuccessful, because Abbas still remains an outsider inside the Swedish society. Probably his most desperate trial is adapting the “really Swedish” fictional name of Krister Holmström in order to make his photographic studio more popular.<sup>32</sup> It gives Abbas-Krister a short-time success as a specialised pets’ photographer, but in a tragic twist of fate his studio is burned and looted in another episode of anti-immigrant violence.

Jonas has got a different strategy, being totally against father’s attitude. He tries to change overwhelming feeling of being a second-class citizen into positively celebrated identity of an “immigrant, coloured” Swede, coupled with some sort of aggression against institutions of the state. That is the reason why Jonas proudly uses the Swedish slang term *blatte* (plural: *blattar*)<sup>33</sup> similarly to the primary offensive term *nigger/nigga*, which became for African Americans a kind of a manifestation of their distinctiveness and communal pride. Abbas does not understand the son’s appreciation of *blatte*’s identity, his *gangsta rap* image and openness to Arab-Islamic tradition<sup>34</sup> what provokes the photographer to make one of the saddest statements in the novel: “My son is a sad figure who lacks culture. He [Jonas] is not Swedish, he is not Tunisian, he is NOTHING. He is a constant cavity who varies himself by his context like a full-fledged chameleon.”<sup>35</sup> Kadir responds with an ironic question (“But... aren’t you too?”) and Abbas responds: “Yes! But for me it is a proud prestige! I am a free cosmopolitan. But for my son it is a shame!”<sup>36</sup>

This fundamental dialogue highlights also the issue of Swedish ambiguity towards the immigrants. It is being constantly mentioned in the novel, as in Kadir’s assertion: “This country is very bizarre to me, first you’re an Arab and then you’re Swede of the Year and then you’re an Arab again.”<sup>37</sup> Khemiri depicts contemporary Sweden, multicultural and multi-layered, but at the same time intolerant and xenophobic country far from its international reputation. Khemiri’s literary talent is proved by his ability to present his characters with sensitivity and empathy, often broken up by a biting irony. Background protagonists are also ambiguous and complex: Pernille – Abbas’s wife and Jonas’s mother with her often naive radical left-wing activism, a group of Arab-born immigrants called Aristocrats/Aristoidiots, and Jonas’ Swedish-Danish grandmother full of anti-Arab prejudices but at the same helping Abbas in fulfilling his photographic ambitions.

<sup>32</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, p. 194.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 277–281. Jonas even pretends to found a half-imagined organisation “Blatte For Life”, which aims at defending the social and political rights of *blattar*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 266. Kadir ironically assesses Jonas’s interest in Islam, talking to Abbas: “The Koran? Your son? But... he is as Swedish as a potato! His Arabic is more innovatively comical than academically accomplished.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 292.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

Interesting could be also assessing to what extent Khemiri's works can be associated with crime fiction which has been so flourishing in the Scandinavian literature of the last years. Some elements of crime stories are still present in Khemiri's prose: atmosphere of secrecy and aforementioned impulse of intensive investigation of one's forgotten and complex past, hiding or multiplying identities by the protagonists, critique of violence and corruption caused by the state institutions (police, immigration office) correlated with a bitter image of the Swedish society. Probably, the most clean usage of crime fiction motifs characterises the aforementioned short story *As You Would Have Told It To Me (Sort Of) If We Had Known Each Other Before You Died*. The narrator is arrested by the police, jailed and then convicted after the strange judicial proceedings. The reader doesn't know exactly where is the border between fiction and reality, for the long time the narrator is giving clues that all these events are just an extravagant bachelorette party organised by his friends. The figure of a close friend – a creator of events, is introduced another time after *Montecore...*: “And Miro, of course. Miro, who has planned everything in detail and who pops the first bottle of champagne when he sees the patrol car arriving.”<sup>38</sup> Even though it is still not the crime story *per se*, because intrigue is more hidden in the language itself and linguistic imagination, not in the plot.

### Post-colonial dimension, identity and cultural hybridity

The additional aspect of Khemiri's novel is its postcolonial character, and in case of *Montecore...* it has got a flavour of the immigrant story breaking with the positive image of Swedish multicultural identity accepting each one's diversity. The Orientalist imagining of the Arab world in the West (in Saidian sense) is still ironically recalled or ridiculed by Khemiri.<sup>39</sup> For example, Kadir tries to force Jonas to include in his future novel supposed dreams of Abbas regarding specialty of the city of Tabarka and all of Tunisia: “A symbol for the globally modern meeting place where East crosses West, where Jesus crosses Muhammad, where redemption is a rendezvous in symbolic manly form, a little like the Lionel Richie of race and music.”<sup>40</sup> This passage obviously ridicules the colonial or postcolonial stereotypes of the sensual and religious Orient against the background of globalisation and universal domination of Western popular culture.

The issue of identity, its unfixeness and variability is therefore ubiquitous in Khemiri's works. The Swedish writer's ideas can be juxtaposed with a famous Amin Maalouf's

<sup>38</sup> Jonas Hassen Khemiri, ‘As You Would Have Told It To Me (Sort Of) If We Had Known Each Other Before You Died’, *The New Yorker*, 25 September 2017, Viewed 19 June 2019, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/25/as-you-would-have-told-it-to-me>>.

<sup>39</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London 1991, pp. 2–3, 12. The famous Saidian definitions of “Orientalism” state that it is: “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” or “a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts”.

<sup>40</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, p. 49.

collection of essays *In The Name of Identity. The Violence and The Need To Belong* (published first in 1998 in French under the title *Les Identités meurtrières*). Maalouf defines so-called “murderous identities.”

“From the very beginning of this book I have been speaking of murderous or mortal identities. Identities that kill. The expression doesn’t strike me as inappropriate insofar as the idea I’m challenging: the notion that reduces identity to one single affiliation – encourages people to adopt an attitude that is partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently even changes them into killers or supporters of killers. Their view of the world is biased and distorted. Those who belong to the same community as we do are ‘ours’, we like to think ourselves concerned about what happens to them, but we also allow ourselves to tyrannise over them: if they are thought to be ‘lukewarm’ we denounce them, intimidate them, punish them as ‘traitors’ and ‘renegades’.”<sup>41</sup>

Maalouf, the Lebanese Christian from the minority community of Greek Melchites, an admirer of the Arab culture and language with the Western world-view, now the fully acclaimed French author of some magnificent historic novels and famous essays, refers to his personal experience of Lebanon destroyed by religious and tribal affiliations, and the horror of civil war. He wonders how to exceed the threshold of the spiral of crime still living in the subsequent generations of inhabitants of the Middle East. The essayist concludes with the idea that “each of us should be encouraged to accept his own diversity.”<sup>42</sup>

It would seem that almost nothing would link Lebanese “murderous identities” and carnage of the civil war to the issues of Swedish integration and building of a coherent society from groups with different background. However, Khemiri shows that some aspects of a “Swedish dream” have become an actual nightmare. He refers to the crisis between August 1991 and January 1992, when there was a wave of shooting attacks in Stockholm against the immigrants, performed by the man hidden under alias Laser Man.<sup>43</sup> Also, in

<sup>41</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In The Name of Identity. The Violence and The Need To Belong*, (trans.) Barbara Bray, New York 2000, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 159.

<sup>43</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, pp. 243, 245. See: Philip Oltermann, ‘Sweden’s “laser man” killer John Ausonius goes on trial in Germany’, *The Guardian*, 13 December 2017, Viewed 20 June 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/13/swedens-laser-man-killer-john-ausonius-trial-germany-murder-woman-frankfurt>>. John Ausonius, known as Lassermannen or Laser Man, himself a Swiss-German immigrant to Sweden, committed 11 shootings directed against Swedish people with immigrant background or “look”, killing one person and injuring or disabling all his victims. In 2017, when Ausonius was serving a life sentence in Sweden, he was also accused of killing Blanka Zmigrod, then the 68-year-old Holocaust survivor. It took place in 1992 in Frankfurt after an accidental quarrel between the two in the restaurant. Philip Oltermann argues in the aforementioned article that Anders Breivik cited Laser Man (even in the court statement during his Oslo trial in 2012) as an important inspiration for his “lone wolf” strategy of attacks.

conjunction with Maalouf's ideas, Khemiri, with ironically coloured empathy, describes growing animosity between Swedes and different groups of immigrants,<sup>44</sup> who at the same time hate each other: "understanding for idiot *blattar/blatte* who routine-complain about Sweden and understanding for Swediots who complain about *blattar's/blatte's* welfare craving and understanding for Arabs who hate Iranians because they always want to be better than other *blattar/blatte* (except when it's a matter of allocating themselves into the *blattar/blatte* quota) and understanding for Iranians who hate Arabs because of all the historical rubbish (...)." <sup>45</sup> As Ander Monson, one of the reviewers of *Montecore...*, wrote, the humour of this lively novel is often "so black: rage and tragedy pulse beneath the fireworks. Particularly in the last section, we understand the extent to which Jonas has lost himself in his fantasy life, as Swedish racism escalates into anti-immigrant violence."<sup>46</sup>

However, the crisis of identity is not only connected to contemporary problems of Swedish society. It is rooted in the early experiences of Kadir and Abbas yet in Tunisia. A childhood and an adolescence period of the life of Abbas is an enigma itself and is known just from his stories narrated by Kadir. Abbas declares he was born ca. 1950 in an Algerian village near the Tunisian border.<sup>47</sup> His mother was a village, however Westernised, woman named Haifa, and father, a member of pro-French Algerian elite, Moussa, who met Haifa just one time in Algiers during the "erotic rendezvous",<sup>48</sup> was accused of being a *harki*<sup>49</sup> (or so-called *béni-oui-oui*), a collaborator with colonial power of France. It took place in the early 1950s, just before the war between FLN and France, and according to Abbas, his father left the country after the Évian agreements were terminated (1962), and there opened the possibility of the full independence for Algeria.<sup>50</sup> In the subsequent passages of the book this history is problematized and put into doubts. Moussa seems to be a product of imagination, and the truth is coming out that a real biological father of Abbas was "a poveritous neighbour farmer" Rachid.<sup>51</sup> As for later Abbas's history, Kadir narrates that they met for the first time in "an unofficial orphanage for anticolonial martyrs" led by Cherifa and Faizal in the city of Jendouba<sup>52</sup> (Ġandūba) located in western

<sup>44</sup> Compare: Marta Woźniak-Bobińska, *Współczesna diaspora asyryjsko-aramejska w Szwecji*, Łódź 2018, pp. 280–281. The researcher writes about growing enmity between Assyrians and Somalis living in the aforementioned district of Rinkeby. The reciprocal perceptions of both communities are very negative and it coincides with Khemiri's observations.

<sup>45</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, p. 268.

<sup>46</sup> Ander Monson, 'Untamable Tongue. The Review of Jonas Khemiri's "Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger"', *The New York Times Book Review*, 25 February 2011, Viewed 19 June 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Monson-t.html>>.

<sup>47</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> *Harki*, from Algerian Arabic *ḥarka* "military operation" and literary Arabic *ḥaraka* "movement" – a local soldier or volunteer supporting France, especially in the period of Algerian war of independence in years 1954–1962.

<sup>50</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> I generally utilise spellings of the Arabic proper names that were included in the Swedish, English and French versions of Khemiri's novel. Sometimes the Brill's style transcriptions are given in parentheses.

Tunisia.<sup>53</sup> The latter two became adoptive parents for Abbas who had been mute until fourteen years of age. It seems that Abbas was rescued from tragic fire of the Haifa's family house (probably an attack of an arsonist) by Rachid and then transported by him to Jendouba's orphanage.<sup>54</sup> This tragic introduction is little bit brightened by funny and ironic descriptions of later adventures of Kadir and Abbas – physical work in Jendouba, their rather failed stays in Tunis, and first photographic fascinations of Abbas coupled with assistant work at Tabarka's<sup>55</sup> photographic laboratory. This period culminates and ends with a meeting of the Swedish tourist, Pernilla Bergman, a future wife of Abbas. This is the beginning of the immigrant phase in the life of Algerian-Tunisian admirer of photography.

People with hybrid identities are central in Khemiri's novels and short stories. Their hybridity can be described, in reference to Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, on many levels: linguistic (mixing of languages or using a sort of a pidgin language), political (relation of a coloniser with colonised), racial, and, last but not least, cultural. Cultural hybridity, employed especially by members of minority groups, can be perceived as a strategy used "in order to translate or inscribe the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity."<sup>56</sup> In *Montecore...*, Abbas and Kadir often aspire (both in their Tunisian and Swedish periods of life) to integrate and embrace the dominating Western culture, e.g. the aforementioned *Mnemonic Rules* created by them as a means to fully absorb Swedish language and culture. The other type of hybridity is performed by Jonas who in his teenage years started to vehemently resist the mainstream type of Swedish culture despite being raised and educated in Europe. The Jonas's cultural and political resistance can be also juxtaposed with Edward W. Said's notion of "hybrid counter-energies,"<sup>57</sup> or what was called by the Palestinian-American scholar "a particular sort of nomadic, migratory, and anti-narrative energy,"<sup>58</sup> however with the omission of the last element, because Jonas (both real writer and character) really likes creating and playing with different narrations.

Khemiri's main characters are often unstable, ambiguous persons who use cultural mimicry (also an important concept in Bhabha's research) in order to prosper or survive, leave their new Swedish homes, break relations with their siblings and family, or just die in a dramatic turn of events. Also, Abbas's strategy of mimicry (or even a somewhat hopeless trial of a full assimilation into Swedish society) is exemplified in opening a photo studio under imagined Swedish alias. Probably, the figure of Abbas as a disappearing, estranged father is the most characteristic one. According to Khemiri's observation,

<sup>53</sup> Khemiri, *Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>55</sup> Tabarka (Ṭabarqa or Ṭbarqa) – a city in the north-western part of Tunisia, a well-known Mediterranean resort, close to the Algerian border and the city of Jandūba where Abbas and Kadir had lived in the orphanage.

<sup>56</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, "Routledge Classics", London–New York 2004, p. 9. See also: Nasrullah Mambrol, 'Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity', *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 8 April 2016, Viewed 20 June 2019, <<https://literariness.org/2016/04/08/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity/>>.

<sup>57</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, New York 1994, p. 335.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 279.

“people have a tendency to exist and then not exist. The words have got to come in as their representations [deputy bodies] in some way, they shape fantasies about those who are not there.”<sup>59</sup>

This assertion is proved as well by the construction of his another novel, *Everything I Don't Remember*. The narration is split into set of narrations spoken by different narrators, but arranged by a figure of interviewer/researcher, someone who collects material about life and tragic death of a man named Samuel. The latter is a son of an Arab immigrant, another estranged father who was perceived by his Swedish environment as preaching Islam, but “it was extremely difficult for Samuel to agree that he [his father] was a Muslim, and if it had been true, he would have been the worst from those known to him.”<sup>60</sup> The interviewer, hidden and secretive, becomes more defined in the last part of the book, from which we can deduct that he was a Swedish writer of half-Tunisian origin and spent time on the artistic scholarship in Berlin.<sup>61</sup> So, it is still a sort of a complicated interplay with the real biography of Jonas Hassen Khemiri. Almost all people closest to the main protagonist have got hybrid complicated identities and post-immigrant experiences: Samuel's love, translator from Arabic, Laide, Vandad – a close friend of him, and former girlfriend Pantera. Their conflicting stories about the same events from Samuel's life constitute the framework of the novel similarly to tension between Kadir's and Jonas's accounts of the life of Abbas in *Montecore...*

### Final observations

The examples taken from analysed Khemiri's novels and a short story prove how linguistically inventive the writer has been, and how such fictional writing can at the same time reveal the “true voice” of its characters and spirit of the turbulent times both in Sweden and in the Arab world. The author of *Montecore...* can be perceived, to some extent, as a younger follower of quiet a long tradition of so-called “immigrant literature” (*invandrarlitteratur*) in Sweden which has developed since 1970s due to significance of the works of such different writers as e.g. novelist Theodor Kallifatides of Greek descent (born 1938), writing in Swedish, or Mehmed Uzun (1953–2007), a Kurd from Turkey who lived in Sweden since 1977, though used the Kurmanji Kurdish and was often called a father of the modern Kurdish novel.<sup>62</sup> Taking that into account, it is rather obvious that

<sup>59</sup> Linneroth, ‘Jonas Hassen Khemiri’.

<sup>60</sup> Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Wszystko, czego nie pamiętam*, (trans.) Elżbieta Frątczak-Nowotny, Warszawa 2017, p. 266

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 199. The fragment is narrated in the first person by Vandad – a close friend of Samuel, but figure of a Swedish writer living in Berlin is introduced by Samuel himself. Vandad recalls this moment saying that “it was the one and only moment he [Samuel] exactly mentioned you [a writer close to real Jonas].” This example proves well how ambiguous is technique of narration in all Khemiri's books.

<sup>62</sup> Ingeborg Kongslien, ‘Migrant or Multicultural Literature in the Nordic Countries’, *Eurozine*, 3 August 2006, Viewed 20 June 2019, <<https://www.eurozine.com/migrant-or-multicultural-literature-in-the-nordic-countries/>>. See also: Ingeborg Kongslien, ‘The Scandinavian “Migrant Novel” – a New National Narrative and a Cosmopolitical

Khemiri's is not a voice of a specified ethnicity or minority culture as it has always been in the case of Uzun and his commitment to the Kurdish case. The concept of "immigrant literature" is increasingly discussed and problematised in the current research conducted in Scandinavian countries. For example, Søren Frank in the monograph *Migration and Literature* suggests a shift in terminology to "migration literature,"<sup>63</sup> which would be a broader concept than "immigrant" or "migrant literature". Frank suggests, what coincides well with Khemiri's *oeuvre*, that the experience of "migration is not only to be understood in relation to authorial biography,"<sup>64</sup> but it encapsulates the overall thematic, stylistic and aesthetic elements of the novels such as language, narrative form, and enunciation.<sup>65</sup>

Adding to it, the concept of "Islam" and "Arabs" in Sweden is broad and vague,<sup>66</sup> so it should not come as a surprise that Khemiri's characters rather form an ethnic mosaic (people of Arab, Turkish, Hindi, Balochi and of many other origins) than constitute a sort of an image of more general "Arab" or "Islamic" inhabitants of Sweden.

It is more likely that, notwithstanding its "immigrant" character, Khemiri's novels can be treated adequately as an important voice in the overall debate on the Swedish model of integration, leading to more self-critical image of Swedishness. It goes in line with such ironic and critical pieces of popular culture as a satirical drama film *The Square* (2017) written and directed by Ruben Östlund. This "dark comedy" is quite similar to Khemiri's works in its sombre critique of xenophobia in Sweden, however coupled with ridiculing some practices of political correctness and radical feminism. A great additional value of his novels is a micro-perspective, choosing an intimate approach and focusing on gradual building of complex characters. It results in the fact that his descriptions of Swedish reality and Tunisian roots of protagonists are nuanced and detailed, and he avoids a risk of making generalising, simplified statements about Islam and Muslims (what is so evident e.g. in the popular and critically acclaimed novels of Michel Houellebecq: *Platform* and *Submission*). All these factors make Khemiri's novels unusual achievements both in the field of so-called "immigrant (migration) literature" or as well as in the universally understood body of world literature.

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Tale', in: Svante Lindberg (ed.), *Le roman migrant au Québec et en Scandinavie. Performativité, conflits significants et créolisation/The Migrant Novel in Quebec and Scandinavia. Performativity, Meaningful Conflicts and Creolization*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 125–139.

<sup>63</sup> Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature. Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Jan Kjærstad*, New York–Basingstoke 2008, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> 'Europe's Growing Muslim Population', *Pew Research Center*, 29 November 2017, Viewed 25 June 2019, <<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>>. The Pew Research Group's report lists number of Muslims in Sweden on 8%, that is ca. 810000. These data seem to be exaggerated given the fact that it is really hard to assess someone's Islamic affiliation: is it by birth, by the ethnic origin or just by name (as the Tunisian Khemiri name is)?

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