Migrant or multicultural literature in the Nordic countries

Ingeborg Kongslien
3 August 2006

Authors with immigrant backgrounds have been writing and publishing in the Nordic countries for the last three decades. Dealing with themes of migration and exile, biculturalism and bilingualism, and acculturation and identity formation, they have introduced new fields of reference into the Nordic literatures and have challenged and expanded the national literary canons. An overview of the range of "migrant literature" in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.

The Nordic literary landscape has seen a number of names of somewhat unfamiliar origin emerge during the last three or four decades. Since around 1970, more and more authors with immigrant backgrounds have published poems, short stories, and novels in the Scandinavian languages, and in doing so have added new themes, settings, and fields of references to the national literatures. Some of these texts are translations or collaborations between the writer and the translator. Mostly, however, they are written in the language of the country of immigration; these writers have either acquired a new literary language as adults, or, as members of the second generation, their “first” language is that of the respective Scandinavian country. As might be expected, the third group - those who write in the language of their new countries - is the largest (especially in Sweden) and they include some of the most popular authors on the contemporary literary scene. Literary endeavours in immigrant languages exist in all of these countries but are necessarily restricted to their respective groups and, except for some of the larger immigrant groups in Sweden, are relatively few. They will not be included here.

The terms “immigrant literature” and “immigrant writer” (their respective Scandinavian counterparts “indvandrerlitteratur/-frafattet”, “innvandrarlitteratur/-førfattar”, “invandrarlitteratur/-författare”) have turned out to be problematic. Many of the writers dislike these terms because they feel that “immigrant literature” indicates a marginal type of literature and denigrates their artistic ambitions. Despite this, literary scholars, critics, and the media continue to employ the terms, which probably indicates their usefulness, especially when it comes to promoting this writing. Comparisons can be made with the terms “proletarian literature” and “feminist literature”, which enabled these literatures to carve out their own space in the literary field and to introduce new fields of reference.
Writers with immigrant backgrounds often – although by no means always – deal with topics related to their experience of immigration, with the meeting of cultures, and with majority society seen from the margins. A broader concept is embedded in the term “exile literature” (which would include many writers in today’s world), where “world literature” and “transnational” literature are also used. To avoid some of the negative associations, but at the same time in order to have a working tool, I will employ the terms “migrant literature” and “multicultural literature”.

The new voices in contemporary Nordic literature are important in terms of identity and integration. The themes of migration and exile, of biculturalism and bilingualism, express the process of acculturation, integration, and identity formation. The relation to reality and the comprehension of identity implicit in these texts represent the process found in the meeting of cultures. Since migration is a global process, this literature can and should be studied comparatively. Some of the major names in world literature today are of bilingual and bicultural background: Bharati Mukherjee, V. S. Naipaul, Zadie Smith, and Wole Soyinka, to name just four. Their Nordic counterparts are becoming parts of the general literary discourse and are beginning to challenge the established national canon with themes and fields of reference pertaining to the multicultural societies emerging in the Scandinavian countries.

Unsurprisingly, Sweden has the longest history as well as the largest output of this new literary tradition, which conforms to the features of the immigration processes in the Nordic countries. Scholarly attention to this field is also led by Sweden, with a thoroughly researched and well-written study that treats the subject both sociologically and thematically. [1] Norway has seen some articles on the topic, and dissertations have been written in all three countries. The emergence of migrant or multicultural literature can be dated from around 1970 in Sweden, from the mid-1980s in Norway, and the late 1980s and early 1990s in Denmark. Anthologies have been published in all three countries, indicating both a wish and an interest to promote this literature as well as a need for categorization. Poems, short stories, and essays, in anthologies and in individual collections, as well as a number of novels, have emerged. The introduction of new themes and fields of reference, and of new aesthetic and formal patterns, means an expansion and enrichment of the national literatures.

As I have mentioned, not all writers of immigrant background deal with migrant or multicultural themes; however a majority of the texts somehow explore the experience of migration and exile, of the meeting of cultures and the search for identity, and are thus expressions of the individuals’ reorientation and reestablishment in the new country. In the following selection, I try to demonstrate the diversity of ethnic backgrounds and of modes of literary expressions, as well as to highlight authors who have had both critical and popular success.

**Sweden**

It seems natural to start by presenting some names from Swedish literature. The obvious first choice is Theodor Kallifatides, one of the most prolific and popular contemporary writers in the country. Kallifatides was born in Greece in 1938, came to Sweden in 1964, and made his Swedish debut in 1969. He addresses such a variety of themes and settings that it seems unreasonable to put him in a category of “immigrant writer”, one he would
almost certainly find restrictive.

In his recent collection of personal reflections and recollections, he comments on and laments the fact that after thirty-six years in the country, and more than thirty books in Swedish, he is still subject to exactly this categorization of “invandrar-författare” in the standard histories of literature. His novel, *Ett nytt land utanför mitt fönster* [A new land outside my window], presents evidence of how the bilingual and bicultural situation, although at times difficult and driving the author to desperation, is a powerfully creative situation, providing him with the opportunity to make a new language his own – to devour it, so to speak. Although there are ample examples of reflections on loss and homelessness, there are equally strong statements of gain for the mature migrant: “I have not become Swedish, even though I am no longer the Greek I thought I was. I am not even a total stranger […] There are times when I feel more naked than when I was born […] But there are times when I feel a profound peace for having learned to love something else than what was (originally) given to me.” [all translations – I. K.] [2]

In his large output, two novels in particular deal with immigration and integration. In *Utlänningar* [Foreigners] (1970), Kallifatides portrays a young Greek immigrant entering Swedish society in the late 1960s. It is a depiction of the young man’s process of acculturation, of cultural meetings both tragic and comical – for example, when Greek male behaviour and Swedish liberalism clash. It has the classic feature of migrant narratives: a double perspective with numerous flashbacks to the home country of the first person narrator, whose project it is to re-establish “reality” in his adopted homeland. He seems to be able to cope, in the end even communes with the Swedish landscape: “My body whistled. I sat down and started to flirt unrestrainedly with the winter landscape.” [3]

After twenty-five years and many books on a variety of subjects, in 1995 Kallifatides returned to the subject of immigrant lives and a multicultural community in *Det sista ljuset*. [4] It is set in Rinkeby, a Stockholm suburb with a very high immigrant population – hence the term “rinkebysvenska”: Swedish with strong influences from immigrant languages. The novel is the story of a middle-aged Greek man and his family, especially the young son. Tragically, the clash between a modern individualist lifestyle and the demands of a traditional immigrant culture drives the son to suicide, causing Odysseas to reflect on his Greek background and his life in Sweden. The book draws a broad picture of an immigrant community, of people from various countries and continents seeking relief from many types of oppression and hoping to establish new lives. It is truly a picture of contemporary multicultural Sweden.

Interestingly enough, three Iranian writers – women who immigrated from a traditional and patriarchal society – have successfully entered the Swedish literary scene in the last decade. The novelists Fateme Behros and Azar Mahloujian (the latter has also published essays and memoirs) and the poet Jila Mossaed have been well received by the reading public and critics alike. Mossaed wrote in her native country; she has expressed the poet’s change of language as a creative challenge: “Teach me the origins of the words/let me play with your words/let me create/new and strange meanings with them/let me give the words/new colours/new dimensions/lend me your language/your nouns/let me take them on an adventurous journey.” [5] In her first book, *De sönderrivna bilderna* [The torn up pictures], Mahloujian gives voice to the destiny of the political refugee, ably
combining analytical and emotional aspects in her description of the three steps in such a process: the departure, the journey, and the re-settlement, including keen observations of her new homeland.

Behros’s 2001 novel, Fångarnas kör [The prisoners’ choir], is a story of female emancipation, a young Iranian immigrant woman’s development from honouring the rules and values of her own culture, through experiences both tragic and happy, towards new self-reliance. The process of integration into Swedish society is accompanied by the destinies of other immigrant women of various ethnic backgrounds and by flashbacks to her past, here in the form of recollections of her grandmother’s voice and comments. The double perspective, so typical of the migrant story, is an important structural pattern here. At the end of the story, the narrator and protagonist plan to write a book entitled Fångarnas kör. [6]

The poet Cletus Nelson Nwadike adds another dimension to the overall picture of Swedish multicultural writing. Born in Nigeria in 1966, Nwadike came to in Sweden in 1990 escaping political oppression in his home country. From a trilingual background of Igbo, Hausa, and English, Nwadike chose Swedish as his literary language; in an interview he has said that “the Swedish language is like honey and I am like a bee”. His writing seems to have input from oral storytelling and is characterised by the short, aphoristic poem. These lines are taken from the title poem of his first collection of poetry in 1998: “When I die/I want to be buried/in two graves. In the hearts of my friends/and in a short black/poem.” Nwadike reads his own poetry at poetry festivals in Sweden.

Mehmed Uzun merits special attention and a place of his own in this selection. He is a Kurd from Turkey; born in 1953, he came to Sweden in 1977 as a political refugee. He writes in Kurdish, Turkish, and Swedish. His great project is to establish a contemporary literature in the Kurdish language; the novel whose Swedish title is I skuggan av en förlorad kärlek [In the shadow of a lost love] (2001) is a major contribution to this. Uzun combines his work for the Kurdish language, literature, and culture with promoting transculturalism. This is demonstrated in the anthology co-edited by him entitled, Världen i Sverige. En internationell antologi [The world in Sweden. An international anthology] (1995). The anthology testifies to the richness the field of migrant or multicultural writing in Sweden; it brings together around seventy-five writers and literally tells of the realities that people have brought with them to Sweden from all corners of the world.

A Swedish language writer of immigrant background in Finland completes the Swedish perspective. Zinaida Lindén was born in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, where she studied Swedish. She settled in Åbo in the mid 1990s and became a writer and translator. Her latest novel, I väntan på en jordbävning [Waiting for an earthquake] (2004), which depicts a man travelling between Russia and Japan, was praised for bringing much needed new themes and references into Finnish-Swedish literature.

Norway

Norwegian migrant literature is usually considered as having started with Khalid Hussain. His novel Pakkis (1986) – the title is a pejorative term for a Pakistani – a book describes the search for identity of an adolescent second generation Pakistani boy caught between the demands of the immigrant family with its strict value norms and the liberal
majority society. The novels counterpart came a decade later: Nasim Karim’s *IZZAT*. For ærens skyld (1996) (“izzat” is Urdu for “honour”; the rest of the title translates as “for the sake of honour”) depicts a young woman’s development from child to teenager in a problematic bi-cultural situation where the liberal Western individualism clashes with the more collectivist and family-oriented culture of the East. Both authors were young when their books were published, both are second generation (the largest immigrant group in Norway), and both novels portray the acculturation and identity formation of the young protagonists. Gilbert Muller’s observation that “the motif of generational conflict” often serves as “a collective subtext in the fiction as today’s immigrants and their children interrogate their fate” seems valid. [7] This motif is recurrent in a number of the short stories included in the anthologies as well.

The majority of the migrant or multicultural writers in Norway are from non-European backgrounds, a situation reflecting the country’s immigrant population. However, one distinct voice in this group is a European, namely the novelist and essayist Czech Michael Konupek. Born in Prague in 1948, Konupek came to Norway in 1977 and made his Norwegian debut in 1987. His novel *I sin tid* (*In its own time*) (1993) is somewhat reminiscent of Kallifatides’ *Utlänningsar*. It tells the story of a young Czech and his new life as an immigrant or exile in Norway in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Permeated with irony, the novel balances the tragic and the hilarious in its depiction of a young political refugee from an intellectual and oppositional central European background who encounters Norway, his fairytale country, “where, according to myth, freedom is so self-evident that when you utter the word you get only empty stares”. [8]

It is a story of an attempt to gradually become part of this new society, a classical immigrant and acculturation tale, presented with flashbacks and a double perspective that negotiates continuously between past and present, and along the way offers some intriguing perspectives on Norwegian society. Although the protagonist is an immigrant struggling to integrate and find his place in the new society, his perspective from a central European culture with rich traditions and a long cultural history at times causes him to deprecate Norway as a country with a deficient cultural history, lacking cultural significance particularly because it never experienced the Baroque. When the book ends, in the tumultuous year of 1989, he decides that his next challenge will be to write about exile. He finally realizes that, “Every time he is able to tear himself away from the past and his dreams, something that does not happen very often, he is actually living in Norway. The thought of that makes him happy.” [9]

As already mentioned, some of the migrant texts published in Nordic languages are translations. A special type of publication interesting in this context is the bilingual one. In Norway, two poets who have acquired considerable attention have published bilingual collections of poetry, in which the Norwegian texts resulted from collaboration with a Norwegian poet: He Dong in Chinese and Norwegian and Jamshed Masroor in Urdu and Norwegian. The poems in Chinese and Urdu respectively are printed opposite the Norwegian texts. Both poets are immigrants and writers, but elements of immigrant experience or biculturalism in their texts are minor. What they do is to challenge and expand the literary canon through their bilingualism, by the introduction of images that reflect other landscapes, and through introducing new forms such as the “*gahzal*”, an old Arabic verse form later also used in Urdu and Farsi, and, in Masroor’s poems, now also in Norwegian.
Denmark

Bilingual publications are relatively uncommon in Nordic migrant or multicultural literature. However, in addition to the two Norwegian poets above, one example from Denmark needs to be mentioned. In Milena Rudez’s collection of poetry, *Den blinde reisende fra Sarajevo* [The Blind Traveller from Sarajevo] (2002), Danish texts (translations) make up the first part of the book and the Bosnian texts (originals) the second part. Rudez, from Bosnia-Herzegovina, was born in 1958 and came to Denmark in 1992; she represents the immigrant that is also a political asylum seeker. The political element – war, flight, and homelessness – is central in her poetry: lines from the poem “Våben” [Weapons] read, “Milja was taken away/she is in prison/they say. That’s good/that means/she is alive”. [10]

Danish literature by immigrants established itself mainly during the 1990s. Several anthologies have been published, including *Fuglevingen – en indvandrerantologi* [The bird’s wing – an immigrant anthology] (1992) and *Mellom land og land – bjergene, vandene, vindene* [Between country and country – the hills, the waters, the winds] (1995). Like the Norwegian anthologies, they are presented in such a way as to show how “immigrant writers” contribute to Danish culture and society, as well as to give positive input to the general debate about immigration and integration. Novels, collections of short stories and poetry by individual writers have also been published over the past fifteen years. Fewer of the writers of immigrant background seem to have succeeded in getting into the major publishing houses compared to their counterparts in Norway and Sweden.

Rubén Palma, a Chilean born in 1954, came to Denmark as a political refugee in 1974 and started writing in Danish little more than a decade later. The novel *Brevet til Danmark* [The letter to Denmark] (1989) tells of his experience as a refugee and an immigrant. Palma employs several genres: in addition to the novel he has published short stories, drama, a children’s book, and essays, in which he has entered the public debate about immigration and integration. A collection, *Fra lufthavn til lufthavn – og andre indvandrerfortællinger* [From airport to airport – and other immigrant stories; English: *The Trail We Leave*] (2001) consists of ten short stories, all of which use the metaphor of life as a transit hall. Although the migrant experience is at the core of these stories, Palma expands this notion to give it more general validity. In a lecture on writing in exile, he has said that his motivation for starting to write in 1985, and for choosing Danish as his literary language, was the realization that he would never return to his home country: “I saw the rest of my life in my Danish exile [...] and this vision made a writer out of me.” He acknowledges that it has been difficult to acquire a new language as an adult and become a writer in this new language; however, he also acknowledges its advantage in the freedom from tradition and influence it offers.

A prolific writer in Denmark, who is also a representative of a large immigrant group, is Adil Erdem, a Kurd from Turkey. He was born in 1964, and came to Denmark as an eighteen-year-old. He writes books for children and adolescents as well as adults and has published textbooks, poetry, and short stories. *Tidens uven – Ett klip* [Time’s enemy – A clip] (1997) is a collection of poetry in which elements reflecting the poet’s ethnic background and Kurdish political and cultural issues feature prominently. The short stories in the collection *Fremmedord: noveller* [Foreign words: short stories] (2000) tell
of individuals living between two cultures, of their feelings of alienation both in relation
to their immigrant background and to Danish society, and of the problems of
communication and identity.

By way of conclusion

The selection of writers and texts from the three Scandinavian countries presented here
gives ample evidence of the diversity of this literature, in terms of genre, ethnic
background, and not least, individuality. What is here called migrant or multicultural
literature brings new themes and fields of references into the Nordic national literatures
and means a challenge to, and eventually an expansion of, the literary canon. Because
these authors have chosen to write in the majority language of their countries of
residence, their minority discourse is set against the majority discourse. As mentioned,
they introduce new themes and references because they convey their immigrant
experiences, the acculturation and transculturation processes, and route towards
integration.

To add a historical perspective: it is interesting to note that Scandinavian-American
writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries adopted a different strategy. Between
1870 and 1930, literatures in the immigrant languages flourished; texts were aimed at
the national group and very often dealt with its immigrant experience on an individual
and a group basis. The Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish literatures were paralleled by
many others: German, Italian, and Yiddish, to name just a few. This “immigrant
literature” flourished as long as the respective immigrant languages were in use; they
then gave way to “ethnic literature” and to “multicultural representations” written in
English. Contemporary Scandinavian writers of other ethnic backgrounds have for the
most part chosen to write in the majority languages and therefore have been part of the
national literatures from the outset.

Despite having labelled this literature “migrant” and “multicultural”, I consider it to be
part of the contemporary Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish literature respectively. To
single it out is to acknowledge its uniqueness, to draw attention to its existence (because
that it is not always sufficiently done so), and to assess its contribution to a “rewriting” of
a nation by those who start out living at its margins. The experiences of immigration and
integration are very much at the centre of these texts, and the writers’ bilingual and
bicultural situation is focused on. The cultural meetings and double perspectives inherent
often express split personalities and divided identities, and thereby depict problems of
integration for the individual. But it has also been noticed that the theme of migration
and exile includes feelings of freedom and creative challenge, notably in the bilingual
situation. While these writers mediate migrant experiences and look at society from the
outsiders’ perspective, they are at the same time also insiders; these texts are therefore
eamples of cultural interpretation.

As immigration remakes Scandinavian societies, it rekindles creativity in life and
literature. This is a challenge to all writers in these societies, whether they are of
immigrant background or ethnic Danes, Norwegians, or Swedes. A central dynamic
within Western societies today is shaped by migration, by shifting, multicultural
populations. Immigrants and “others” redefine the relationship of the margin to the
centre; in their search for identity, they “rewrite” national identities and move them
towards a transnational ones. The writers considered here are part of this dynamic.

Footnotes


9. Ibid. 238.


Published 3 August 2006

Original in English


Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/migrant-or-multicultural-literature-in-the-nordic-countries/)

© Ingeborg Kongslien/Nordbok Eurozine