

Det Etniske Gennembrud – Multicultural Literature in Denmark

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Despite being held in rather low esteem by literati, fiction-writing contests nevertheless often attract considerable attention from the general public. In 2006, Denmark's Gyldendal publishing house and the daily *Berlingske Tidende* initiated a literary competition called NewVoices that sought to find authors with "a different cultural background" who could reflect Denmark's newfound multicultural identity. In this article, Peter Leonard relates some of the twists and turns of this event, how it was launched and how it was received in the press. He also outlines some of the features of the "new Danish" literature and literary scene, in its Danish context, and compares it to the corresponding one that has existed for a few years in Sweden, associated with names such as Marjaneh Bakhtiari, Jonas Khemiri and Alejandro Wenger.

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☞ 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. "Poesi og prosa, der ser den danske virkelighed med nye øjne," was the phrase that the Gyldendal publishing house and the *Berlingske Tidende* newspaper used to describe the goal of their competition *Nye Stemmer*, a "litteraturkonkurrence for alle med anden etnisk og kulturel baggrund." The resulting volume by the same name, published in early 2007, was an anthology of those writers who would, hopefully, represent the new, multiethnic Denmark. In this way, Gyldendal and *Berlingske* hoped that Danish literature would catch up with neighboring Sweden, where since 2001 authors such as Johannes Anyuru, Marjaneh Bakhtiari, Jonas Khemiri and Alejandro Wenger have formed the basis of an imagined ethnic literature: a minority perspective within the nation-state but with roots beyond it, capable of depicting mainstream society through new eyes.

That Denmark had to kick-start this phenomenon was nothing to be proud of, judging from the tone of the competition's press release. Danish literature had apparently fallen behind in a crucial measure of worldliness: an internal ethnic literature had now become an important metric of modern European society. "I dansk litteraturs store spejl er der total mangel på romaner fra indvandrerforfattere," worried *Berlingske's* cultural editor Jakob Høyer in the February

2006 article¹ that spurred the competition. The Gyldendal press release in June that announced the competition wondered: "Vores nabolande har dem allerede... Hvorfor er den slags forfattere meget mindre synlige i Danmark?"

The committee that judged the submissions consisted of author Naja Marie Aidt, writer and editor Jens Andersen, and the journalist Rushy Rashid Højbjerg, whose recently-published book formed the last part of a semi-autobiographical trilogy of a family's migration from Pakistan to Denmark. That Højbjerg's own books (*Et løft af sløret*, *Bag sløret*, and *Du lovede, vi skulle hjem...*) availed themselves of the mantle of autobiography says much about the present condition of ethnic fiction in Denmark: narratives describing ethnic or cultural difference have claimed the documentary value of the memoir, rather than the artistic value of the fictional novel, as their justification and marketing message. The internal Danish political and cultural landscape no doubt plays a part in what is writable and marketable: both Denmark's involvement in the Iraq War, as well as the "Mohammed Crisis" of late 2005 and early 2006, has no doubt lent a higher value to that literature which can lay stake to a claim of sociological value, rather than artistic imagination.

Yet it was nevertheless the literary imagination, rather than autobiographical claims to documentary realism, that the *Nye Stemmer* competition sought: "Hvis du tænker på Rushy Rashid eller Naser Khader [a moderate politician; P.L.], så er der tale om faglitteratur eller biografier, om du vil," noted Gyldendal editor Lene Wissing. "Det, vi efterlyser, er ren skønlitteratur."² But was there really no fiction that tackled ethnic identity and national belonging before the *Nye Stemmer* competition? Maja Lee Langvad's 2006 poetry collection, *Find Holger Danske*, was a well-received collection of experimental art and verse exploring her personal history as an adopted child from South Korea. Drawing upon the imagery of the legendary national hero, Langvad challenged the reader to "Find Holger Danske / Find Holger Nydanske / Find Holger Udanske / Find Holger Nudanske." Rewriting Aksel Sandemose's Jante Law, she warned:

Dette er Danskerloven:

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.

The critic Lars Bukdahl, writing in *Weekendavisen*, suggested that “ærligt talt kunne Berlingske og Gyldendal godt aflyse deres konkurrence om nydansk litteratur og bare give Maja Lee førstepræmien.”³ But even in the intimate scale of Denmark’s literary world, certain lines had to be drawn, as editor Wissing noted: “Når vi kræver anden både etnisk og kulturel baggrund, så udelukker det bl.a. koreanske adoptivbørn...”⁴ It’s hard to know whether Wissing was referring to Langvad specifically, or if the category of adoptive children as a whole was seen as too “integrated” to be able to supply the ethnic difference that *Nye Stemmer* promised.

What, then, can we learn from the volume that resulted from this competition? Unlike the reception of the Swedish author Jonas Khemiri’s first novel, *Ett öga rött*, in 2003, none of the works in *Nye Stemmer* seems to have heralded a new way of writing about identity. “Hvis man forventer, at den nydanske litteratur, der nu er på vej, vil være skræmmende og enormt fremmedartet, så bliver man, at dømme efter disse bidrag, skuffet,” noted reviewer and editor Christian B. Korsgaard. “De var bare stille og roligt godt lavet.”⁵ Some contributions, such as Nassrin el Halawani’s “Den etniske lov,” took their cues from Langvad’s re-appropriation of legalistic language to describe the iron-clad laws of ethnic performance in Danish society: “Paragraf 3: Én gang etnisk, altid etnisk / Paragraf 3a: Ingen kan tage den etniskes borgerrettigheder som etnisk fra den etniske / Paragraf 3b: Den etniske kan ikke frasige sig sin etnicitet.” This similarity between El Halawani’s and Langvad’s style suggests that

Lene Wissing may have been disappointed in her hope that “authentic” cultural difference amongst the applicants would lead to a genuinely new literature. The loaded nature of over genuine ethnic difference was evident in the competition’s press release, which sought to encourage submissions by assuring that “Det er [...] lige gyldigt, om din kulturelle og/eller etniske baggrund afspejler sig i det, du skriver om, eller blot ligger som en undertone eller som en usynlig præmis.”

Invisible premise or not, the most productive comparison of *Nye Stemmer* might not be with other works publish-

ed by adopted Danes, but rather with that work of fiction which arguably started the ethnic turn in Swedish literature: Alejandro Leiva Wenger’s 2001 collection of short stories, *Till vår ära*. In one of the tales from that volume, “Elixir,” Wenger recounts the story of Latino teenagers in Stockholm who receive a mysterious bottle in the mail. Being teenagers, they decide to drink it – and discover the next morning that their black hair has become a little blonder, their brown eyes slightly bluer, and their performance on a Strindberg test remarkably improved. Equal parts humor and horror, “Elixir” is the assimilationist ideology of the welfare state made visible and corporeal, a metamorphosis of the body as metaphor for transubstantiation of the soul.

Zelal Önder’s short story in *Nye Stemmer*, entitled “Ghetto,” relies more on realism than the supernatural for its narrative, but the similarities are striking: in her tale, a group of Muslim teenage girls conspire to drink alcohol, a substance common enough in mainstream Denmark but taboo in these girls’ families. Önder avails herself of subtle yet effective ways of describing an urban milieu which deviates in small ways from the normative Danish: “Hun brugte ikke ringklokken, for det havde de aftalt i sin tid. Så vidste Nurhan, at det var Mariam, der bankede på. Nurhans familie betalte ikke licens, og de havde desuden også en ulovlig parabol, så det var egentlig en god ordning.”⁶ Yet the protagonist’s bittersweet depiction of the urban immigrant

Gyldendal and Berlingske Tidende invited authors with other ethnic and cultural background living in Denmark to a literary competition called “New Voices.” The winners were published in 2007.



stanna för jag ville ändå prov smaka och nästa dag var Marco nÅstan helt blOND i håret och läraren och alla frågade och han sa jag har färjat. jag märkte jag kunde koncentrera mej bättre på leksjonen plus att sen kom Flaco och sa han kunde inte komma ihåg nästan ett enda ord på spanska. vi sa fan den där läskan gör att man blir svenne. fan tänk om vi skrattade som fan men sen så marco nej jag vill inte bli för jag är stolt över att va svarthing och jag sa jag med för jag är det. vi provade läskan bara för att prova. flaco sa nu måste vi sluta annars kanske vi blir iNne i själva järtat och i järnan. så vi sa att vi skulle sluta innan det var för sent. men jag tror dEt var redan för sent för när jag skulle åka hem från vårberg hit till Fittja så våga jag inte planka. jag stog där och sa till mej själv kom igen men jag vågade inte gå förbi spärren. så jag gick hem hela vägen och tänkte är det för att jag har burjat bli i järtat?? nu är klockan halv två på natten. jag borde lägga mej nu men jag är inte

A page from Alejandro Wenger's collection of short stories *Till vår ära* (Stockholm 2002).

- environment, with its gossiping mothers who sit on park benches “over te og let ristede solsikkefrø,”⁷ provides a traditional foil for the teenagers’ emerging feminist consciousness. Upset that their brothers enjoy far more social freedom than themselves, the girls decide to open and drink one of their father’s forbidden bottles of whiskey.

Thus in both Önder and Wenger does a mysterious, unknown liquid serve as an externalized symbol of that change which the characters both fear and are curious about. The promise and threat of change – of ethnic identity, of gender roles, of cultural belonging – finds its symbolic vocabulary in a kind of liquid forbidden fruit, something that enters the body and brings with it undetermined change. Önder’s pro-

tagonist has, through drinking the whisky, discovered something about herself, occasioned by fellowship in a homosocial environment in the midst of ethnic heterogeneity: “Det havde været sjovt sammen med pigerne, de havde grint og hørt musik, og hun kunne ikke huske, hvornår hun sidst havde moret sig sådan.”⁸

But characters in both short stories demonstrate a marked ambivalence about change, unease about any elixir’s ability to change those who drink it: “Hun tænkte, at hun havde fejlet i aften,” writes Önder. “Dummet sig. Men bag den lille sprække var det et andet glimt. Hvad det afslørede, kunne hun ikke helt forstå, men hun følte det.”⁹ Meanwhile, in Stockholm, Alejandro Wenger’s male teenagers wonder what has happened to them after drinking the mysterious elixir: have they really become Swedish “i själva järtat och i järnan”?¹⁰ The “new” Nordic body, in both Denmark and Sweden, seems likely to continue being the site of these questions over identity and belonging in the literature that follows after both *Nye Stemmer* and Wenger.

Notes

1. Jakob Høyer, “Dansk litteratur savner indvandrere,” *Berlingske Tidende*, 18. februar 2006.
2. Jannik Lunn, “Romankonkurrence: Nye stemmer,” *Bogmarkedet: Tidsskrift for den danske bogbranche*, Nr. 13, 2006.
3. Lars Bukdahl, “Blæk er tykkere end vand,” *Weekendavisen*, 2. juni 2006.
4. Lunn. “Romankonkurrence”.
5. Søren Kassebeer, “Mens vi venter på fortællingens genkomst,” *Berlingske Tidende*, 13. juli 2007.
6. Zelal Önder, “Ghetto,” in *Nye Stemmer* (København: Gyldendal, 2007), 55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Alejandro Leiva Wenger, *Till vår ära*, Bonnierpocket (Stockholm: Bonnier, print. 2002), 39.