Review

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Identity Is a Curse

Published on 24.09.2025

The Sisters Jonas Hassen Khemiri
Farrar, Straus and Giroux Jun 2025 $25,74 656 pp.

Die Schwestern Jonas Hassen Khemiri übers. v. Ursel Allenstein
Rowohlt Jul 2025 €26 736 pp.

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile.
>
> —*We Wear the Mask* by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Being part of a family—and, by extension, a society—means inheriting and fabricating symbolic roles: narratives we are forced to perform to be seen and loved. As we enter the world and become conscious, we slowly squeeze ourselves into legible and sometimes sterile identities. Most of these are pre-assigned: the eldest son or daughter, the middle child, the youngest one, the only child, the "gifted" one, the fun one, etc. These roles precede our conscious will and often dictate who we are allowed to become.

In a way, our roles are supposed to help us fit in, belong and function. Maybe the need to assign or adopt them is simply a human way to survive reality—the patriarchal symbolic order we are made to conform to. To be named and validated by normative structures is a necessity, and the goal is recognition. With a recognizable identity, we gain access to safety, belonging, sanity, rights, and selfhood. But these labels also trap and fragment us. Late-capitalist performance culture constantly exposes us to a mind-numbing stream of

binaries: toxic/healthy, self/other, mature/immature, rational/emotional, desirable/undesirable, and so forth. Yet no matter how aggressively we humans fragment ourselves, we cannot help but strive for wholeness—and we are actually capable of achieving it. We stubbornly remain more complex and irreducible, more multidimensional and whole than the roles we are pushed to perform.

A Swedish Novelist

Jonas Hassen Khemiri, born in Stockholm in 1978 to a Swedish mother and a Tunisian father, is one of the most important voices in Swedish literature today. With six novels, seven plays, and numerous short stories and essays to his name, he is not just a star at home, but his work and artistic persona have also turned out to be eminently translatable. After winning virtually every literary award his native country has to offer, along with major literary prizes and fellowships in Italy, Norway, France and Germany, he moved with his family to New York in 2021, where he now teaches creative writing at NYU.

Although it first appeared in Swedish in 2023, *The Sisters*, Khemiri's latest novel, was originally written in English—a first for the author. The novel marks a significant shift from his earlier work. As he noted in an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, "these characters were adamant about speaking English, so I went, 'Well, let me give you a chapter or two, maybe three, maybe 20 … maybe 637 pages.' I was afraid of stopping, so I wrote the whole book in English." The novel is currently longlisted for the 2025 National Book Award for Fiction, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the English-speaking world.

The Sisters is a novel about the fracturing of the self under the pressure to be legible—especially within the confines of gender, family and immigrant identity. It traces how both personal and ancestral histories shape our limits and potentials, the boundaries of who we are and who we might become. At the heart of the novel are the Mikkola sisters—Ina, Evelyn, and Anastasia—who grow up in a working-class suburb of Stockholm. Their mother of Tunisian descent is volatile and superstitious, and her intense presence dominates their childhood. The reality of the household is filtered through her obsessions. She is portrayed as unstable and unreliable, convinced that "bad energies" are catching up with her and the family. By contrast, the father's role is defined by absence. His function in the novel is precisely his non-function: he is not a source of protection or stability, but rather a space left unoccupied, a void around which the lives of the sisters take shape. By the time they reach their twenties, the narrative mentions in passing that the father has died.

The lives of the Mikkola sisters unfold alongside a narrator named Jonas. Throughout the novel, the name Jonas is used to refer to multiple characters, dissolving the line between author and fiction, or even reality and the story. As

Khemiri noted in a recent *New York Times* article, "Jonas is always shifting. (...) The recurring name is a reminder that identity is fluid and all labels are invented." Jonas is not a stable narrator but a shifting chorus of selves: immigrant-child, depressive adult, neighbor, writer, and eventually, a shadow of Khemiri himself. His role is not only to narrate, but to continuously destabilize the narration, making it impossible for the reader to locate its point of origin.

Reflected in the plot is Khemiri's own life: his Tunisian background, his experience as a child of an immigrant father in Sweden, and his status as a writer, an observer who toggles between languages. Jonas portrays the characters of the trapped sisters while also using their lives to process his own contradictions. This instability ensures the book never settles into a fixed narrative perspective, which is a constant reminder that identity itself is the most unreliable story of all.

The Sisters at 19, 21, and 24

The eldest sister Ina is 24 at the start of the novel. She is steady, responsible, cautious, and anxious. She often feels invisible, overshadowed by her more charismatic siblings, who she perceives as far more attractive and captivating. Ina's function, and in many ways her tragedy, is to anchor the family. She clings to structure and tries to live by the rules: she marries, becomes a mother, and searches for a sense of balance. Evelyn, 21, the middle sister, is the charismatic one, with "laughter-filled dimples" and a natural gift for storytelling. Her charm is effortless, her presence magnetic. She becomes the object of fascination for the narrator, Jonas, who carries his fixation from childhood into adulthood. The youngest sister Anastasia, 19, is wild and unpredictable—the "crazy sister." Always the subject of rumors, she is audacious, artistic, and rebellious: she sneaks off to parties, snorts substances in secret, is always testing the limits. Self-destructive at times, she spirals and loses direction, but also tries to reinvent herself and escape the script she has been prescribed. But in an all-too-true paradox, her attempts to break free only seem to solidify the script and trap her even further.

The novel opens at a 1999 New Year's Eve party where, from the very first page, the sisters are already performing their roles along with the myth of their trio, their inseparableness. Anastasia talks her way past the doormen by insisting she is about to start her "DJ set in less than twenty minutes" with her sisters as "back-up dancers." Once inside, she is everywhere at once, "first on one dance floor and then on another, and then on top of a bar, then up on a windowsill, arms in the air, hands transformed into parentheses." Evelyn, by contrast, is "constantly surrounded by three to five people, everyone hypnotized by whatever story she was telling," her charisma and magnetism shining through anecdotes that may not even be hers. Ina, meanwhile, struggles with being there at all: she is "walking around a huge party with nobody to talk to," with two untouched drinks in her hands, burning with embarrassment. The narration

lingers on her efforts to imitate Evelyn, rehearsing funny stories "that happened 'earlier today' or 'yesterday' or 'recently,'" only for the narrator to underline the gap between them: "But Ina wasn't Evelyn. And she wasn't Anastasia."

Instead, Ina performs being preoccupied—"trying really hard to look like she was looking for someone and she saw herself from the outside looking like a person trying to look like a person who was looking and not fooling anyone." Earlier, in the elevator, before they entered the party, she had declared that "whatever happens, we stay together," and both sisters had reassured her: "of course," Evelyn said, and Anastasia confirmed, "don't worry, we got you." Yet within twenty seconds, they are gone, dissolved into the crowd, leaving Ina alone. When she later meets Hector, someone who seems genuinely interested in her, the narration shows how quickly Ina imagines him encountering her sisters and already foresees the outcome: "Hector would see Anastasia… and Hector would fall in love with Anastasia… and then he would catch sight of Evelyn… and it would be Evelyn who took him home, and Ina who went home alone on the night bus."

Later in the book, in a conversation with her partner, Ina mentions the curse their mother believed was placed on their family—that everything they loved would eventually be taken away from them. "Mom had some delusions when we were growing up. She really liked moving. She talked quite often about a sort of curse that someone had put on her and her daughters, and as soon as she felt that bad energy had caught up with us, we moved." Both symbolically and literally, the sisters grow up under the looming threat of predestined tragedy and the attempts to escape it. They internalize a belief that if they get too attached to someone or something, they will inevitably lose them or it. This belief seems to define the trajectory of their entire lives.

The Relational Economy

In the *LARB* interview, Khemiri said that "a curse is a negatively defined story that you're trapped in. I had a friend who said, 'A myth is actually just a story that you can't get out of.' I remember thinking about that as I was writing the book—some stories that we have can empower us, they can help us. But ultimately, if you attach too much to anything or anyone, you will lose that entity." Each Mikkola sister is trapped in a symbolic role and suffers precisely because that role fails to reflect the depth of her inner life, and so deprives her of the freedom and fluidity to change. But their entrapment runs deeper: they are defined not only by family roles, but by the weight of history itself—by ancestral lineage, by the condition of womanhood, by the long shadow of patriarchy and immigrant identity.

In many ways, the roles they inhabit are the very curse they've inherited: the responsible one, the charismatic one, the chaotic one. Each sister contributes to keeping the others confined, because the balance of their bond depends on each

member performing her designated function or dysfunction. Their intimacy is built less on true recognition than on a choreography of assigned identities. To break free would mean not only to redefine the self, but also to shatter the entire relational economy they've constructed around survival, loyalty, and most importantly, belonging. They see one another not for who they are but for the roles that they fill, thus solidifying one another's psychic prisons—holding each other hostage.

The novel's pacing echoes the way time feels as we move from childhood to adulthood and eventually to old age: expansive and slow at first, then shrinking, accelerating, and blurring together all at once. As the story progresses, even the timelines begin to contract. The narrative jumps ahead by years, then months, then minutes; echoing the experience of adult life: rushed, fragmented, marked by the loss of emotional immediacy and presence. As the author mentions, "each part covers a shorter and shorter period of time, from a year down to a minute."

2035

In that sense, *The Sisters* moves not just through time, but through the psychological weight of time—its cruelty, elasticity and strangeness, and its capacity to disorient us. Ina becomes a ghost of herself under the weight of responsibility; Evelyn exhausts herself in pursuit of desirability; Anastasia enacts chaos as a form of self-destruction and resistance. In a way, the novel shows how our attempts not to be trapped in our identities is a race against time. The narrator's own struggle to label himself mirrors the struggles of the sisters and, ultimately, the larger theme of the novel that is the tension between legibility and freedom.

> "I grew up ashamed of all these things, ashamed for having been born in the wrong area, ashamed of my privilege, ashamed that my grandparents had money, ashamed of being one of the kids with a summerhouse, just because I on some level felt that the summerhouse and the tennis and the Bible Christmases made me less what? immigrant? less street? less svartskalle [literally blackskull, a derogatory Swedish term]? less real? Svartskalle was the only identity I had back then, if I wasn't a svartskalle, then what the hell was I, I wasn't a Christian, I wasn't a Muslim, I wasn't Swedish, I wasn't Tunisian. I had the genitals of a boy, but I looked like a girl, I had the age of a teenager and the height of a grown man, I had the shoulders of a seven-year-old and the acne of a fifteen-year-old, I listened to straight-up muddafucking gangsta rap, kill that bitch, suck that dick, and had the best grades in school, I claimed to be a womanizer and was a virgin, I claimed to be left-wing while planning to apply to the prestigious right-wing Stockholm School of Economics."

In the final section of *The Sisters*, Book seven, which takes place in 2035 and describes just one minute of their lives, the sisters are gathered around "the

woman who had been the family's rock, the foundation, everything's center" as she is dying in a hospice. Even at her deathbed, their mother mentions the curse.

The sisters, who have have been scattered in different parts of the world for all these years, sometimes converging only to drift apart again into separate cities and separate lives, endlessly running away from something—each other, their destinies, their own selves—now find themselves back at the central axis around which their psyches, histories, and fraught relationships have always turned. In a way, this moment carries a faint hope: the possibility of departure, of loosening from the figure that defined them, from the gravity that held their identities in place. Maybe, as the force around which they once revolved begins to vanish, so too does the curse.

In the world of *The Sisters*, the self is a battleground of recognition, performance, and loss. What Khemiri lays bare is that identity is a script we inherit from history, a function we perform, a role we occupy, the reality we adapt to at the cost of fragmentation. And yet, the novel also reveals how willing —how desperate—we are to make that sacrifice, even if we are torn. We trade freedom, fluidity, and truth for legibility. We accept the names assigned to us and even assign them to ourselves, because to be named is to belong, to serve a function, to have a map—within a family and within society. It's not just that we are confined to our roles. It's that we fear what we might become without them.

auct.: Natalia Lomaia is a writer living in Berlin. Her articles have appeared in World Literature Today and New York Times, among others.