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VOICING ONE'S STORY IN LATVIAN EXILE LITERATURE



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Whenever big displacements of people occur because of war, political changes or natural disasters, an exile community is born. Such a community maintains complex relationships with the society that it comes from and sometimes it happens that the new community is reunited with the old one. The individuals which belong to the exile community (*trimda* in Latvian) create a literature that attempts to understand the process of exile and find effective ways to go on living. The Latvian exile caused by WWII and the subsequent Soviet occupation gave birth to such a literature. Stories, novels, autobiographies, memoirs, and documentary novels about the deportations of Latvians to Siberia (in 1941 and 1949) started to appear at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, becoming a visible thematic group in Latvian literature including *Ekshumācija* by Anita Liepa, *Vestules Mātei* by Margita Gūtmane, *Gadsimta Gobelēns* by Aina Vāvere, and many more. Some very prominent narratives of the western diaspora have also emerged in the exile society – like Modris Ekšteins's documentary novel *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II and the Heart of Our Century* (1999) and the novel *A Woman in Amber* (1995) by Agate Nesaule about the lives and historic contexts of the Latvian emigrant community in the USA and Canada. In this article all kinds of displacements, exile or deportation, are referred to by a general term “exile”.

Why do authors decide to tell their stories of exile and deportations that took place during and after the Second World War? How much are they based on the existing literary canon and to what extent is it voicing one's personal story in a new and most often contradictory way? This paper analyzes three novels of Latvian women writers – Malānija Vanaga, Agate Nesaule and Sandra Kalniete. The fact that all the authors are women is a coincidence and does not carry any special meaning. All three texts were written or published close to the turn of the 21st century and are about the authors' families experiences of deportation to Siberia or exile and how the authors reflect on

voicing their stories. In all cases the authors made a conscious decision to speak about contradictory issues, i.e. their losses, the pain, the individual and the community that keep influencing people's lives long after actual displacements.

Here, I will consider three basic motivations for displacement stories in Latvian literature; even though *A Woman in Amber* was originally written in English and published in the USA, it has much in common with the Latvian historical and cultural context to be analysed as part of Latvian literature. The novel *Veļupes krastā* (*On the Banks of Velupe*) by Melānija Vanaga tells what had happened and what keeps the memories alive; an author and politician Sandra Kalniete in her *Ar balleš kurpēm Sibīrijas sniegos* (*With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows*) investigates the true story, and Agate Nesaule, an American literature professor, in her novel *A Woman in Amber* presents a story of cleansing, personal purification, and coming to terms with the trauma.

CONTEXT

Autobiographies in general and exile/ deportation stories in particular have become a very popular genre since Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. American scholar Michael Rothberg (2003) notes that "... narratives of conspiracy and trauma have emerged in recent decades as two of the most powerful logics through which the subject of postmodern U.S. culture register and reflect on history". This is to a great extent also the case in Latvian literature where the stories of exile, deportation and displacement in general have been an attempt to create the missing part of the history. Ilona Ļaha (2009) suggests that after Latvia became independent again, there was an organic need for new motifs, stories and themes – so much had been kept secret and silenced. The autobiographies that can be used as a generic term of various kinds of writing – memoirs, documentary prose, chronicles, diaries, letters, biographies - focus on both individual and collective stories. They are an attempt to (re)write if not the modern Latvian creation myth, then at least the survival myth.

Sandra Meškova (2002) classifies the autobiographic discourse as having two main missions: the first is to establish continuity with the pre-Soviet times, the 1920-1930s that were mythologized during the Soviet period; the second is to adjust the new tradition to social, political, cultural and literary values of the West. The three novels analyzed in this article represent the spectrum of this mission as well as literary tradition: the narratives of Vanaga and Kalniete are an organic part of Latvian autobiographical canon, while Nesaule, a literature professor, brings in tangents of psychoanalytical and feministic literary research and a very rich layer of intertextuality. Even though both local Latvian authors (Vanaga and Kalniete) use a lot of personal details, they still concentrate on the collective experience; Nesaule is mostly concerned with what happened to her as an individual.

MELĀNIJA VANAGA – IN THE MEMORY OF ANCESTORS AND CONTEMPORARIES

The novel by Melānija Vanaga most closely represents what we may call the Latvian canon depicting deportations of Latvians to Siberia in the 1940s. The author admires the first independent Latvia, its people, traditions, nature and work ethics; in contrast, everything that is Soviet comes as a brutal intrusion, violation of moral and legal systems that the people of Latvia have come used to living in. Her whole family was deported to Siberia in 1941. Her book consistently contrasts her idyllic Latvia with the dark, numbing routine of Siberia and the recited, reinforcing stories of injustice.

Veļupe krastā (1991) is the final novel, out of seven, providing a broad family saga where the author follows the life and history of the time of her ancestors since the 17th century. Guntis Berelis (1999) says in his history of Latvian literature that in her novels Vanaga displays “a gigantic cultural- historic material”.

The author returned to Latvia in 1957. She started to take random jobs at a collective farm (*kolhoz*). Vanaga did not start writing her memories right away; it took her some years to gather her strength. The author said in an interview for the literary monthly journal *Karogs*: “During the *kolhoza* time I did not write about Latvia not to hurt my not still properly healed heart. People were also simply forbidden to write – even about a flower or a cat” (Jugane 1995). The book *Veļupes krastā* was written over several years and then published in 1991 as the last novel in the family and history epic consisting of 7 huge volumes. Vanaga’s central motivation for writing this novel was to share the memory of her family to keep it alive.

Vanaga’s novel recounts the trip to Siberia and then the life and work there. The daily routines are described over and over again in great detail. She includes names and ingredients of daily meals, daily chores and all that was repetitive and enshrouding about her life in Siberia. Days sometimes become reiteration of each other: they are so mundane and similar. Vanaga’s narration contains a wealth of details, such as place names, names of people in the Latvian and local communities, and testimonies of other deportees.

The testimonies and the recitation of the details of daily life in Siberia are in dark contrast to the perfect life in the pre-Soviet Latvia. Her novel provides an account of the injustice inflicted on an individual by the Soviet regime, her desire to remember the past as a ray of light, and preservation of the memories shaped by national, religious and human values. Though a political aspect is present, the novel focuses on the injustice experienced by an individual.

SANDRA KALNIETE AND THE POLITICAL AGENDA

Sandra Kalniete is an outstanding politician of Latvia – she was a member of the Popular Front that fought for restoring the independence of Latvia. She has been

a diplomat, an MP in the parliament of Latvia, and is currently a member of the EU Parliament. The story of her parents' deportation, *With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows*, was published in Latvia in 2001. The book was translated into ten languages; it is the most translated modern text in Latvian literature.

Kalniete plants her family saga in the world of facts: she is the first Latvian author who provides a detailed analysis of archival documents both about her parents' deportation and about the political situation in Latvia and Russia; her aim is to show the context of her parents families' deportation. Kalniete tries to reconstruct the pre-war Latvian politics and the mindset of people. She is eager to understand why and how the things happened the way they did. Kalniete has a very clear agenda which has to be explained to the readers and politicians, especially those outside Latvia. The story is told at the cost of revealing a heartbreaking story of her family sufferings and humiliations.

Kalniete's main motivation to write the story of her parents' deportation was to cast informed light on what had happened in Latvia since 1940. The author has indicated many times that in order to write this testimony "she has forbidden herself to feel" (Kalniete 2001). The stories of her parents' physical and mental suffering were just too much. Kalniete is kind of confused about her mother's detached memories of what it was like eating rats and the dead horse meat; the author cannot take these memories calmly. Such interludes in the book are very effective – they show that what has been viewed as acceptable to the deported people is not acceptable in general. This is a history that cannot leave the reader indifferent.

For Kalniete, unlike Nesaule, the social, political and historical contexts dominate, whereas Nesaule in her novel deliberately avoids the big picture of the historical and political background, concentrating on the individual experience.

AGATE NESAULE – A QUEST FOR HER OWN STORY

As a narrator, Agate Nesaule focuses on the courage to tell her story because for her to become the subject and voice of her story is the way to overcome otherness. Being different, being "the other" is very firmly and steadily planted in her since her first exile from Latvia. Later this feeling is reinforced by a dramatic split-up with her mother in Germany when the mother tries to pull the girl to the first lines of the imprisoned civilian women and children to be killed, and then by her life in DP camps in Germany and emigration to the USA.

Nesaule uses her past memories as an instrument to understand her own life and assign meaning to very many destructive and cruel moments and episodes of her and her parents' lives. Gaining this understanding allowed her to heal. Myra Jehlen considers that exile and marginality are the necessary pre-conditions of "the extraordinary possibility of our seeing the world from a genuinely new perspective" (Lionnet

1992:326). Nesaule incorporates her myth of creating life in the context of exile, which is a traditional pre-condition of all big creation myths.

The title of the novel, *A Woman in Amber*, is a metaphor which frames the story. Amber is a metaphor for a thought that even though the past is very important, it sometimes can trap us as a fly in amber. Inta Mi ke-Ezergailis (1998) acknowledges that this metaphor is very effective:

Nesaule, making a metaphor of this reality, sees her hurt child-self preserved in amber, unchanging, waiting, instead of living, for a long time as a consequence of the trauma of the war.

In addition to her quest for her own authentic voice and story, Nesaule uses this metaphor to come to terms with her past and a war with the mother. Both psychoanalytic and feminist undercurrents are very strong here. Verbalising the trauma, becoming a subject of her own story and then making choices determines the future of the protagonist.

Nesaule consciously avoids disclosing the historical and social context of her story; she focuses on herself instead of the outer world. This perspective differs a lot from the approach of Vanaga and Kalniete - for them the collective memory is not separable from the individual ordeals of the exile. Still, Nesaule adds a layer to her novel which is not typical of local Latvian writers: Nesaule uses intertextuality to add certain perspectives that she does not address directly in her own work. The two texts that Nesaule makes use of are *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosinsky and *Anne Frank's Diary*, and they both add new perspectives to Nesaule's narrative. Kosinsky introduces the aspect of a traumatized child's psyche that manifests as violence and revenge. *Anne Frank's Diary* brings in features of the daughter-father relationship that are muted in *A Woman in Amber*.

CONCLUSION

All the three novels discussed in the article show that the author's choice of voicing her story is an important element of the narrative. In this way the authors choose their standpoint, they position themselves in a broader political, historical, social and emotional context of exile. Some writers try to embrace a huge political picture, while others concentrate on what the exile specifically meant to them and their families. Defining the voice is also connected with the trends of literary theory and criticism; some authors employ a particular theoretical framework to structure their story, others rely more on the traditional canon already existing in the national literature.

The novels exemplify what Irina Novikova (2001) refers to as histories excluded from the dominant historic narratives of the Soviet era. They are attempts to give

voice to the silenced history and lives. As mentioned above, the discussed writings do not include all relevant exile narratives but they definitely represent some obvious trends; moreover, after 15-20 years of their publication we may even say that they represent a particular tradition.

Eva Birzniece

ASMENINĒS ISTORIJOS PASAKOJIMAS LATVIŪ IŠEIVIŪ LITERATŪROJE

Santrauka

Kodēl rašytojai nusprendžia papasakoti tremties ir deportacijos istorijas, patirtas Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais ir vėliau? Kokią formą jie tam pasirenka? Kiek ji pagrįsta literatūroje egzistuojančiu kanonu ir kiek ji nauja ar prieštaraujanti tradicijai?

Straipsnyje analizuojami trys latvių rašytojų moterų: Melānijos Vanagos, Agatės Nesaulės ir Sandros Kalnietės – romanai, išleisti XX amžiaus pabaigoje. Visi trys romanai apie autorių ir (ar) jų šeimų patirtą deportaciją. Rašytojos pasakoja apie prieštarigus dalykus, praradimus, savąjį ir visuotinį skausmą, dar ilgą laiką veikusių žmonių gyvenimus.

Melānijos Vanagos kūrinys – artimiausias Latvijos literatūros kanonui apie latvių deportaciją į Sibirą XX amžiaus ketvirtajame dešimtmetyje. Romane pasakojama apie asmeninę tremties patirtį ir neteisybės jausmą.

Agatės Nesaulės kūrinyje pabrėžiama drąsa pasakoti savo istoriją, nes tai padeda įveikti kitoniškumą, išsiskynusį tremties metu. Sandros Kalnietės romanai išsiskiria smulkių faktų gausa. Per skaudžią šeimos istoriją Latvijos skaitytojams ir politikams bei kitiems pasakojama apie tai, kas vyko Latvijoje.

Visuose trijuose romanuose asmeninė istorija pasakojama labai skirtingai. Tai iškelia daug literatūrinių sąsajų ir prasmų, pasitelktų tikrajai tremties istorijai pasakoti.

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