

A Comrade, A Mother, A Trophy: Women's Narratives in Soviet Latvian Prose of the 1920s and 1930s

Bendražyge, motina, trofėjus: naratyvai
apie moteris sovietinės Latvijos prozoje
XX a. 3-iame ir 4-ame dešimtmetyje

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Abstract: The article explores the constructed images and narratives of women in Latvian prose written in the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s. It examines how these diaspora texts reflected and negotiated ideological, social, and gender transformations in early Soviet culture. The study asks what kinds of women-centred narratives circulated among Soviet Latvians, how they intersected with questions of identity, belonging, and political loyalty. Methodologically, the article treats narratives as discursive acts that construct meaning and selfhood, combining feminist, imagological, and postcolonial approaches with close textual analysis. The article maps key narrative types to show how literature shaped the image of a “new woman.”

Keywords: Soviet Latvian literature, women's narratives, diaspora identity, gender and ideology, socialist realism, feminist literary analysis.

Santrauka: Straipsnyje nagrinėjami moterų įvaizdžiai ir naratyvai apie jas Latvijos prozoje, sukurtoje SSRS XX a. 3-iame ir 4-ame dešimtmėčiais. Analizuojama, kaip šie diasporoje parašyti tekstai atspindėjo ir bandė suderinti ideologinius,

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socialinius ir lyčių vaidmenų pokyčius ankstyvojoje sovietų kultūroje. Keliamas klausimas, kokie naratyvai apie moteris buvo paplitę tarp SSRS gyvenusių latvių, kaip jie susiję su tapatybės, priklausymo ir politinio lojalumo klausimais. Straipsnyje naratyvai traktuojami kaip diskursyvūs veiksmai, kurie konstruoja prasmę ir savastį, ir yra nagrinėjami derinant feministinę, imagologinę ir postkolonijinę perspektyvas bei atidžią tekstų analizę. Straipsnyje išryškinami pagrindiniai naratyvų tipai, siekiama parodyti, kaip literatūra formavo „naujos moters“ įvaizdį.

Raktažodžiai: sovietinė latvių literatūra, naratyvai apie moteris, diasporos tapatybė, lytis ir ideologija, socialistinis realizmas, feministinė literatūros analizė.

Introduction

The article examines how women were imagined, debated, and disciplined in Latvian prose produced in the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s. It focuses on the Latvian diaspora that settled in the USSR, or remained there, after the First World War. The article questions how women-centred narratives reflected ideology, daily life, and Soviet Latvian identity.

The analysis is based on a purpose-built corpus¹ of prose texts published in the USSR by Latvian authors² in the 1920s and 1930s. It includes short stories, novellas, and sketches by Alvilis Cepulis (1897–1938), Arturs Kadiķis–Groznijs (1901–1934), Eduards Salenieks (1900–1977), Ernests Eferets–Klusais (1889–1927), Jānis Eiduks (1897–1943), Konrāds Jokums (1894–1941) and Roberts Eidemanis (1895–1938). Soviet Latvian prose created by the Latvian diaspora in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s remains a marginal and little-studied body of literature.³ The period in

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- 1 The corpus consists of all prose works by Latvian authors published as books in the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s. No additional thematic or ideological selection criteria were applied.
 - 2 Ironically, despite the abundance of women as central characters and ideological symbols in literature, no female Latvian author was active in the Soviet Union during this period. The entire corpus was written by men, which makes the construction of womanhood in those texts doubly mediated—both by ideology and by gendered authorship.
 - 3 During the Soviet occupation of Latvia (1940–1941 and 1944–1990), the Latvian diaspora in the USSR was discussed extensively but almost exclusively through an ideological framework that idealised its members as exemplary Soviet citizens. In contemporary Latvia, however, the 1920s–1930s diaspora in the USSR has been frequently characterised as a group of “inconvenient Latvians” who chose to live outside the independent nation-state, which has contributed to the marginalisation of their cultural production. At present, I am the only researcher systematically examining this diaspora’s literature from multiple perspectives.

question covers the transition from early revolutionary openness to the codification of socialist realism and Stalinist family policy in the 1930s. It was the time when women's emancipation was proclaimed, reworked, and curtailed.

Methodologically, I follow Catherine Kohler Riessman and Jerome Bruner in treating narratives as discursive units that construct meaning and identity (Riessman 2007: 7–8; Bruner 1993: 20–21). Following Gregory Currie, I examine narrative segments and functions rather than entire plots (Currie 2010: 6). I use methodological approaches complementarily: new historicism and imagology help to situate the texts under consideration within their ideological and cultural contexts, feminist and postcolonial perspectives inform the analysis of gendered and hierarchical representations, whereas the narrative theory of Riessman and Bruner provides with conceptual tools for examining the construction of the meaning and identity in specific narrative segments. My main argument is that the analysis of women-centred narratives in Soviet Latvian diaspora prose provides a cultural-historical perspective on how Soviet Latvians imagined womanhood and constructed collective identity through narrative. To ensure the analytical coherence, the discussion focuses on several recurring narrative categories: the tension between old and new models of womanhood, the representation of feminine (a)sexuality, the woman's position in the family and society, and the construction of woman as the Other.

Although this article focuses on Latvian writers in the USSR, their representations of womanhood did not develop in isolation; rather, they unfolded within the broader aesthetic and ideological currents of Soviet literature, closely reflecting thematic tendencies characteristic of contemporary Russian prose.

The Latvian Diaspora in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Latvian population in the USSR⁴ was not homogeneous. The diaspora encompassed people of diverse social background, occupations, and ideological worldview. Most were peasants who moved to

4 Although the independent Republic of Latvia was established in 1918, not all Latvians in the 1920s lived in their ethnic homeland. Around 160,000–180,000 Latvians resided within the territory of the USSR, forming a diaspora with its own language, culture, periodicals, school network, and literature.

the future Soviet lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Latvia, land was scarce and expensive, and it was mostly owned by the German and Polish nobility; thus, Latvian peasants migrated to nearby provinces to acquire land (Kikuts 2015: 231). Most emigrants and their descendants did not return to Latvia, but not for political reasons, rather, due to limited interest in the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent regime change. They expected life in the colonies to return to normal after the Russian Civil War. Returning, or for some moving to Latvia for the first time, would have meant abandoning their homes and a stable life that provided them with land and work.

A distinct, ideologically motivated Soviet Latvian diaspora developed among those who left Latvia after the First World War. Latvians had a strong connection to socialist ideas, with some radicals advocating for communism. Considering the newly independent Latvia bourgeois, tens of thousands of Latvians moved to the USSR, to their imagined ideal country (Skujenieks 1927: 371).

Although Latvians in the USSR had limited ties to those living in Latvia, Soviet Latvians actively established and maintained their own cultural institutions (Šalda 2010: 85–87). The Soviet Latvian intelligentsia—although a minority in predominantly Russian environment—actively worked to preserve the Latvian language and identity. Literature was particularly important, refining the language and uniting the widely dispersed diaspora across the USSR. Latvian culture in the USSR, like other minority cultures, developed under censorship and repression.

The Latvian diaspora in the USSR encompassed diverse groups with distinct backgrounds and trajectories, partly due to the social and political changes that began in the late 1920s with the introduction of collectivisation. Many Latvian farmers, used to independent single-farm living, resisted joining collective farms. Private land ownership and self-sufficiency were deeply rooted in their way of life. Their reluctance to follow the Soviet model led to persecution, arrests, and deportations to remote areas. Fear increased after 1937, when the so-called *Latvian Operation* became part of Joseph Stalin's (1878–1953) Great Terror, during which thousands of Latvians, including loyal Soviet writers, teachers, and farmers, were executed or sent to labour camps in the USSR (Riekstiņš 2009).

The Women's Question after the Revolution

After the 1917 Revolution, society sought to create the new Soviet person from a pre-revolutionary individual. Women faced the most significant changes. The granting of rights to women and making them equal to men was a central aspect of Bolshevik propaganda (Chatterjee 2002: 7). After the Revolution, women gained unprecedented rights. Divorce became easier, since Bolsheviks looked at the women's inability to initiate a divorce as a source of "bourgeois degradation, oppression, and humiliation" (Lenin 1974a: 185). However, Vladimir Lenin (1970–1924) argued that the "final solution" to the "women's question" required women's full participation in socially productive labour. He also stressed freedom from the "drudgery of domestic work and ongoing household tasks" (Lenin 1974b: 192–193).

In 1919, the Central Committee established the Communist Party's Women's Section (*Женотдел (Zhenotdel)*), led by Inessa Armand (1874–1920), Konkordia Samoilova (1876–1921) and Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952). They organized campaigns and meetings through delegate networks across the USSR, published documents and bulletins, as well as journals, such as *Работница (Rabotnitsa)* and *Крестьянка (Krestyanka)*, which targeted the working-class and peasant women respectively (Buckley 1989: 58).

Those significant changes were manifested in the works of Latvian authors living in the USSR. However, it is misleading to speak of a single perspective or a uniform integration of Soviet ideology in their texts.

Gender (In)Equality

The question of a woman being equal to man, together with the problems associated with this notion, was one of the recurring issues in this body of texts. Eiduks' novella "The Revolutionary Tribunal" ("Revolucionārais tribunāls," 1930) serves as a vivid example. The thematic framework of the story revolves around the Latvian communists, who in 1918–1919, live in the forests of Latvia, waiting for the communist revolution to spread into the Latvian territory. They spend their daily life distributing proclamations and attacking class enemies under the cover of night. Eidis Ievzars, one of the partisans, sometimes meets his

youthful love, the farmer's daughter Oļā, who represents the old type of woman. Although Oļā has obtained an education and thus, a certain independence, her musical education does not represent the new type of woman. Rather, Eiduks constructs her character as that of a fragile and weak woman, as she engages in the arts and has a romantic worldview (her reading material often includes works by Jānis Poruks, a representative of Latvian Romanticism and Symbolism). Oļā's world changes with the death of her father, the patriarch and provider of the family. Eventually, she is given a chance to join Eidis and the other partisans. One of the fighters Milams, upon welcoming Oļā into their ranks, makes a lewd remark: "It's been a long time since a girl's been felt!" Milams murmured to himself with a sigh. "A pity she's the only one! But they say one is enough. Congratulations to the battle-hardened partisan... the woman partisan. Auzāns, which is the right way to say it?"⁵ (Eiduks 1930: 74)

However, Oļā's inclusion does not make her equal to men: sexualized undertones permeate nearly every interaction with male partisans. She is also assigned only "women's work": cooking and tending wounds. Eiduks consistently portrays Oļā as an old-type woman. Her presence among the partisans is a mistake; she does not belong to the new society, even though she makes great efforts to integrate into it and accept its conditions. One of Oļā's complaints addresses men's sexual harassment directly. Her protest against the sexual harassment exposes the gap between the revolutionary ideology and lived gender relations. In this context, Oļā's portrayal highlights a critical tension in the narrative of identity construction, as her unequal treatment by her male counterparts exemplifies the clash between the traditional gender roles and the new ideological expectations of the time.

In the 1920s, the concept of free love dominated in the USSR. Alexandra Kollontai's work and speeches became one of its theoretical cornerstones; for example, in one speech, she compared a wife to a prostitute, claiming that they were essentially the same: only one is engaged in sexual relations for long-term financial benefit, whereas the other does that for short-term benefit (Kollontai 1921b). The concept of monogamous relationships was questioned and replaced by the idea of individual freedom. When Eidis brings his common-law wife into the forest, other partisans note that it is unfair (since others had not done so),

5 Here and throughout, translations from Latvian are mine.

implying that in the forest commune, they too should have rights to sexual relations with Oļā. Yet Oļā remains faithful to Eidis; their relationship leads to the young woman's pregnancy (Eiduks 1930: 169–170).

Oļā's pregnancy weighs heavily on Eidis. He tortures himself with reproach for letting her come to the forest, for not being able to overcome his instincts and desires. In the story, he cannot imagine the future partisan struggle with Oļā, expecting a child, or caring for an infant. He feels shame and fear of what the comrades will say. This shows that in Eiduks' world, women and men are not truly equal; each has their own functions and duties to perform, which should not be confused. A woman must be in a safe place, and one of her functions is to bear children—a role that cannot be an integral part of the partisan lifestyle. This is underscored in the plot. When Oļā takes part in the attack on a landowner's house (something she has never done before, thus symbolically taking on a male role), she mishandles a grenade and blows herself up (Eiduks 1930: 183–184).

The attitudes of patriarchal society toward women are also evident in other works by Latvian authors. For instance, Salenieks in his novella "Gnat" ("Knislis," 1935), set in a Belarusian village school before the First World War, emphasizes that only four girls study at the school—a major exception requiring twice as much effort from the girls than from the boys, owing both to social prejudice and to the many duties at home (Salenieks 1935a: 125).

Yet in pre-revolutionary patriarchal society, education was a privilege for only lower-class women, peasants, and workers, whereas for the wealthy strata of society, women's education was taken for granted. For example, in Salenieks's novella "Wolf Pup" ("Vilcēns," 1937), which is a continuation of "Gnat," a considerable number of girls attend private schools and gymnasiums in Vitebsk, yet their interests are shallow and frivolous. The landowner's daughter Oļā, whom the protagonist Roberts Zalāns meets, admires him as an exotic representative of another class calling him *Lomonosov*,⁶ and sees both the world and the war through a romanticized lens (Salenieks 1935a: 155). These examples reveal that women's education in Soviet Latvian prose is framed through class and ideology: while the working-class girls embody perseverance and social progress, the upper-class women's learning is portrayed as superficial and morally suspect.

6 A reference to the Russian scientist and poet Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765), who likewise came from a relatively modest family background but obtained a solid education becoming one of the most influential representatives of the Russian intelligentsia of his time.

Glass of Water and Free Love

Returning to post-revolutionary women in the early 1920s in the USSR, by vulgarizing Kollontai's famous phrase that "a sexual act should be regarded neither as shameful nor sinful, but as natural, a manifestation of the organism just as healthy as the appeasement of hunger or thirst" (Kollontai 1921a: 31), the society generated the so-called "glass of water theory,"⁷ which was very popular among young Soviet citizens (Цеткин (Tsetkin) 1933: 77). The concept meant that the satisfaction of sexual needs should be as simple as quenching one's thirst (by drinking a glass of water). An idea that love itself is a shameful, bourgeois feeling and a weakness to be overcome was also present at the time. Two competing strands of revolutionary thought emerged: one celebrated sexual freedom and even polygamy, whereas the other promoted abstinence and moral discipline. Both ideas are reflected in Soviet Latvian short prose.

One of the most vivid proponents of the "new love" was Ceplis in his early prose works. In one of his best-known stories, "The Deniers" ("Noliedzēji," 1922), which portrays servants in Maliēna (village in Latvia) after the First World War, women are active revolutionaries and work alongside men. Jānis Gauss brings his youthful love, Milda, to the commune:

Here, she likes rifles, long conversations in the free evening hours, and the colourful floor coverings. And much else that the youth had once denied [us]. Gauss and Milda are assigned a bed behind the flower-patterned screens, which until now has been the "property" of me and Liepiņš. We ourselves settle on the floor, and as we drift off to sleep at night, we hear for a long time how Gauss and Milda make love passionately. This love is beautiful! Springlike! Only those who have always been a servant and dependent can love like this. (Ceplis 1924: 47)

However, soon Jūlijs Liepiņš, who also lives in the commune, begins to take an interest in Milda. This makes Gauss jealous, although over time, he understands that Milda is not his property and is free to choose (Ceplis 1924: 49).

7 Although the "glass of water theory" has been closely associated with Kollontai, she never actually defined it (the origin of the term can be traced back to the statements of the French writer George Sand (1804–1876)) and in fact, was opposed to such a simplification of her remark.

Love intrigues grow more complicated: Gauss leaves the commune, unable to endure Milda's relationship with Liepiņš; yet then Liepiņš' own youthful love arrives. At first, he spends nights with her, thus Milda turns to the third member of the commune (the first-person narrator):

We lie down in our usual sleeping places, but soon Milda calls me over. I do not understand; I say that sleep is overcoming me terribly; I remain on the floor, and as I fall asleep, I am thinking, "How simply and naturally human relationships collapse—relationships that once the refined aesthetes of poetry and the hoary, hoarse and slobbering moralists wrapped and perfumed with *eau de cologne*." (Ceplis 1924: 52)

Milda's character embodies ideas central to the early Soviet period, particularly regarding free love and the satisfaction of an instinctual drive. In the 1920s, Ceplis characteristically followed various tendencies of proletarian writing, thus, Milda's character may be the construction of a perfect revolutionary woman. Yet, it is already clear that by the 1930s, such a female figure was no longer viewed positively. For instance, critic Anna Pērle considered Ceplis' portrayal of Milda offensive to revolutionary women and even compared it to decadent art (Pērle 1930: 46).

In 1924, the Soviet psychoanalyst Aron Zalkind (1888–1936) published a brochure *The Twelve Sexual Commandments of the Revolutionary Proletariat* (*Двенадцать половых заповедей революционного (Dvenadtsat' polovyh zapovedey revoliucionnogo proletariata)*), which sought to counter the ideas of sexual freedom by advocating monogamy, the legalization of relationships, and sexual moderation (Zalkind 1990: 224–255). One cannot say that the brochure immediately suppressed all previous ideological currents, but as Stalin's dictatorship consolidated, the role and functions of women also changed. Since a total control is more closely associated with strict order and conservatism,⁸ Stalin likewise sought to "settle the women's question," foregrounding female chastity and sexual relations solely for the purpose of procreation. The importance of maternal role was emphasized.

By the end of the 1920s, the "feminist" Women's Section was gradually weakened and ultimately abolished in 1930 (Goldman 1996: 63). Its functions

8 See for example, Geyer and Fitzpatrick 2009.

were taken over by the Department of Agitation and Mass Campaigns, where activists were expected to demonstrate party discipline and support for Stalin's policies (Heitlinger 1979: 62). More creative Bolshevik feminists were marginalized, for example, Kollontai was reassigned as the ambassador to Norway and later, Sweden, and lived in exile (Sypnowich 1993: 189). The sharp ideological shift between the 1920s and the 1930s serves as a crucial contextual dimension for understanding the textual narratives of the time. The early Soviet years encouraged experiments in sexual freedom, alternative domestic arrangements and women's social autonomy, but by the mid-1930s, the trajectory had been reversed, with state policy reasserting the family, moral discipline and reproductive obligation as central pillars of social order.⁹ Positioning Soviet Latvian prose within this broader transformation helps explain why representations of women in the 1920s foreground emancipation and fluid intimacy, whereas the texts of the 1930s increasingly promote chastity, domesticity, and ideological conformity.

Asexuality and Comradely Life

As Soviet ideology shifted from early revolutionary permissiveness toward moral discipline, literature began to valorise asexuality and comradely relations as markers of ideological purity. Another Latvian author, Kadiķis-Groznijs, created interesting and diverse female characters. In his novella "On the Banks of the Daugava" ("Uz Daugavas krastiem," 1936) about the Latvian Red Riflemen occupying Riga in 1919, Irma and Elza, who serve in the Red Army, are assigned a shared room together with a male character, comrade-in-arms Raits. Their daily life is dictated by a comradely, asexual way of living.

First, in the evenings, he was the last to go to bed, waiting for his turn outside the door. Second, in the mornings, he was the first to get up and immediately go outside. But since there was nothing to do behind the door, he went to the market, bought milk, and on his way back, stopped at the bakery for pies, rolls, and other food items. By the time his comrades had dressed and "beautified" themselves, Raits

9 See for example, Timasheff 1946; Carleton 2005.

was already back with breakfast, waiting outside the door for “permission to enter.” These duties did not bore him. They lived in harmony, joked with one another, laughed, went to work together, and the three of them attended the Komsomol committee meetings... (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1936: 227)

Such disciplined, asexual relations between Raits and his female comrades reflect the emerging paradigm of socialist realism in the 1930s. Kadiķis-Groznijs depicted exemplary Red Army women in other stories as well. For instance, in the miniature “The Girl Who Has No Brother” (“Meitene, kurai nav brāļa,” 1927), set during the Civil War, a young woman, who guards the station, encounters her brother, a White Guard, and compelled by duty, shoots him (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1927: 8). In “In the Girls’ Unit” (“Meiteņu posmā,” 1932), the writer portrays a women’s detachment fighting in the Russian Civil War (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1932: 107–114).

Similar female characters also appear in the stories of Eferts-Klusais. For example, “The Rifle Wives” (“Plinšu sievas,” 1923) depicts the farmhand’s wife Mare, whose husband, like those of other servant women in the area, is mobilised during the First World War. Left alone with children, the woman is forced to take on heavy, unfamiliar work typically done by men and cannot devote proper attention to her children. This fuels Mare’s anger and hatred toward the war and her exploited role. The situation worsens when the landlord dismisses her from work, since a woman with a child and with no husband is not a sufficiently profitable investment for the estate (Eferts-Klusais 1923: 164–165). However, Mare goes to Riga, where her brother, who is involved in the Bolshevik underground movement, lives. Soon, she herself joins the movement, takes up a rifle, and starts patrolling the city streets. She also participates in active combat, and at the same time, establishes and maintains a children’s home in Āgenskalns, where her own son is also housed.

Both Kadiķis-Groznijs and Eferts-Klusais construct female characters who embody ideological and moral discipline. These women transcend traditional gender roles, becoming both agents of revolutionary action and symbols of collective virtue. Their emotional restraint, self-sacrifice, and unwavering dedication to duty reflect a broader literary tendency of the 1920s and 1930s to idealize women as bearers of socialist values—figures who merge personal with political, and maternal with militant.

Rethinking the Soviet Family

Female characters, who perform not only the role of exemplary, socially active women but also that of exemplary mothers, manifest what scholars later termed the “double (or even triple¹⁰) burden.” They were Soviet super-women who were expected to be outstanding mothers and wives, to work diligently at their workplace, and to participate in social or political life (Buckley 1989: 136). Mare’s establishing of children’s home also accords with the ideological imperatives of the time. During the Russian Civil War, children’s homes fulfilled the social function, caring for abandoned children or those who had lost their parents in the war (Stevens 1982: 243). No less important, however, was the ideological factor. First, children’s homes and round-the-clock nurseries freed large numbers of women from the duty of childrearing, allowing them to be mobilized for labour or even for war (Stevens 1982: 243). Second, this was in line with early Soviet ideas about dismantling the family as an institution and replacing it with communes (Engels 1884). After Stalin’s rise to power at the end of the 1920s, the concept of the family was rehabilitated, the new state likewise needed vast human resources for reconstruction. Thus, preschool institutions were widely promoted for two reasons: to relieve the labour force, i.e., parents, of childcare responsibilities, and to make the upbringing of new Soviet citizens a state duty, thereby forming a new, ideologically educated generation partially isolated from the family and potentially, from undesirable influences (Kreusler 1970: 431).

In Salenieks’s children’s story “Do This and Do That (“Dari tā un dari šitā,” 1935), the protagonist is a pioneer from children’s home, where “almost all residents had once been homeless” (Salenieks 1935b: 3–7). In several stories, “children’s crèches” and “children’s playgrounds,” where collective-farm women can leave their children so they can fully concentrate on their work, also appear (Ceplis 1932a: 10).

Politicized education, which enables young Soviet citizens from the early childhood to accept the Marxist-Leninist ideology, Soviet realities, and its ideals in a non-critical way, pervades many texts. Naturally, Salenieks’s collection of stories for children “Līvija’s Stories” (“Līvijas stāsti,” 1935), and the novella for

10 On the triple burden borne by women in socialist societies, see for example Einhorn 1991: 16–36.

youth “The Merry Autumn” (“Jautrais rudens,” 1934) depict life in the Soviet school directly: the politicized curriculum, a pioneer movement’s struggle against injustice and class enemies, and so on. Indirectly, other works also highlight the differences between youth educated in the USSR and their parents, as well as their parents’ ideals. In the story “The Unbreakable” (“Nesalaužamie,” 1931), a young girl, Elija, risks her life by going into the forest during a thunderstorm to save the collective farm’s best cow. This act outrages her grandfather, a farmstead man: “How can one crawl into such hell? How can one deliberately risk one’s health, one’s life like that? However, new people are growing up. They do it. And they do it for the sake of the accursed commune. That is the power that fears neither the blows of raging thunder nor the gusts of the storm” (Salenieks 1931: 23).

Children who return from studies in the cities to visit their parents in the Belarusian Latvian colony in Ceplis’ collection *A Tractor in the Cornflowers* (*Traktors rudzupuķēs*, 1932) also often choose to help not their parents, who refuse to join the collective farm, but the commune instead (Ceplis 1932b: 23; Ceplis 1932a: 17). In this way, short prose narratives illustrate the erosion of parental authority, especially maternal one. Child-rearing values and ideals and not the family become the prerogative of the state; autonomy and individuality are not the values of the Soviet citizen. In Salenieks’s story “Son and Mother” (“Dēls un māte,” 1930), the adult son is sent by the Communist Party to head a spirits factory, which deals a painful blow to his elderly mother. The son was raised solely by his mother, as his father drank continually. Harboring a hatred toward the alcohol, the mother cannot accept her son’s career and begs him to do anything else. Yet the young Soviet citizen’s loyalty to Soviet decisions and discipline are unbreakable, even if it means destroying one’s mother (Salenieks 1930: 62–63).

The choice between family and duty is a pervasive motif in many of Ceplis’ short prose works, showing that wife and children are not the Soviet man’s priority. In the story “The Red Banner of Vedinga” (“Sarkanais Vedingas karogs,” 1935), the Latvian Red Rifleman, Zvaigzne, after the Civil War marries the Ukrainian Gaņa and has a son with her. Yet, life in the village seems too philistine and narrow to Zvaigzne, so he goes to the Urals to build the iron and steel industry in Magnitogorsk. This aligns with Stalin’s policy and the First Five-Year Plan, which urged the development of heavy industry (Keefe 2009).

Zvaigzne finally finds happiness and satisfaction working all day long, building blast furnaces, living in poor, bedbug-ridden barracks, subsisting on modest fare—far from his family. Zvaigzne receives letters from his wife:

I do not know what to do when Juris asks for his father every day. He guards even your old cap, which he found somewhere under the eaves, as if it was a treasure... But soon the collective will drive us out of the house, and Juris will then be able to go with his cap to beg for coins. Where else could he go with his mother... Or else, we will drown ourselves in the first deep pond in honour of a father who has abandoned his own... (Ceplis 1935: 64–65)

Although Zvaigzne finds ideological fulfilment in his contribution to building the socialist life, this fulfilment comes at the significant emotional cost of neglecting his family's needs and intimacy, underscoring the dissonance between duty and personal relationships. In the Stalinist conception of family, emotional and sexual intimacy was secondary to collective duty: sex serves only the necessity of procreation, and the relationship between husband and wife should be comradely rather than romantic (Goldman 1993). This idea also appears in Ceplis' stories, idealizing Soviet reality. For example, in "A Pilot's Tale" ("Lidotāja stāsts," 1930), the narrator's passion for work is explicitly contrasted with his relationship with a woman:

It was not hard for me to get to know the airplanes. I lived among them all day long and often even slept with them at night, crawling into the pilot's cockpit and covering myself with an old greatcoat. Comrades joked, and I myself knew it: [I'm] in love. Yes, I was in love with these steel eaglets more than with Anna Baltiņa, with whom I did not sleep for the revolution's sake, with whom we retreated, firing our machine gun. ... I loved the airplane more than Anna. However, our relationship could not and must not suffer because of that. Would Anna Baltiņa have been capable of thinking about philistine "conjugal rights" if I spent the night in the airplane and in my sleep, stroked the control stick—instead of my comrade of war? (Ceplis 1930: 35)

A different tension between personal life and political ideology unfolds in Ceplis' story "The Revolt of Axes" ("Cirvju dumpis," 1925), where a man

struggles to accept his wife's commitment to Soviet values. The village's most beautiful maiden, Maņa, marries the strongest dockworker in the village. Ceplis outlines Maņa's duties as a woman:

Klokov was satisfied. He could come home late, staggering, reeking of the dockside tavern, could arrive with his face drawn in wrinkles, exhausted—there was always a cabbage pot steaming lovingly, and the bony fish tasted good. And in the morning, there was a clean shirt. [His] Love tended a couple of vegetable beds, went to market, and spent the short nights caressing him. (Ceplis 1926a: 20–21)

After the revolution, however, a rupture appears in Klokov's and Maņa's accustomed dynamics. Maņa becomes more politically educated and begins giving preference to the work of building socialism (Ceplis 1926a: 24). Although Maņa is drawn to her husband's physical strength, in the story, she increasingly distances herself from her former way of life and grows closer to the party-educated, rational Petrov. Realizing that she and Petrov as comrades wish to build a different—socialist—future, she decides to divorce and leave Klokov with the children. Here, naturally, the new rights and freedoms of women to divorce appear (ВЦИК (VTsIK) 1917). It should be added that in the 1930s, Stalin criticized the early socialists' carefree attitude toward marriage; a pronatal program was created, resulting in the prohibition of abortion and making the process of the divorce much more complicated (Engel 1987: 788). Klokov is portrayed as a man of old, patriarchal thinking, who regards Maņa as his property. In the end of the story, unable to forgive his wife for no longer attending to her duties and fearful that she might leave him for another man, Klokov murders Maņa with an axe (Ceplis 1926a: 40).

Sexuality

One of the most striking and perhaps most interesting stories in terms of character construction is Kadiķis-Groznijs's novella "Ens" (1930), which employs Soviet realities and background, yet it grounds its character building on psychological principles. The young couple, Arvids Ens and Erna, move to Petrograd. At

the beginning of the story, Kadiķis-Groznijs quite skilfully depicts their daily life: shared visits to the theatre, dinners, and walks, which at the same time, is suffused with a certain mood of doom and routine (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 3–11). Ens goes on a work trip and is forced to leave his family for a long time and attend to his immediate duties (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 14); however, duty is not the reason why the otherwise exemplary Red Army soldier Ens is unable to concentrate and think about the wife he has left behind. At the destination of his work trip, he meets the local reading-room director, the exemplary Komsomol member Toņa Jagoda, with whom he spends much of his free time.

Erna and Jagoda. The first—withered, cloying in her striving to revive old love squandered in youth, cool, homely, drooping, and apathetically dry as an autumn leaf. It crackles, crumbles—and nothing remains... Completely the opposite is Jagoda—with ringing blood in her veins. Every movement of hers breathes strength, in her vicinity, the aroma of life makes one's nerves reel, every word from her lips sounds like spring, and in her eyes clear will-o'-the-wisps of glowworms burn. Insatiably yearning is her will, which slyly probes, attracts, and pushes away—and yet still is not all. Do not the same youthful rhythms of life pulse in Ens's veins? Does his pulse not beat in agreement with Jagoda's pulse, if only the flame, buried in the ashes of domesticity is kindled? Why is Erna not like that? And... what does Erna know beyond homeliness! What more does she want to know! She needs nothing more; she has found peace, reached what is attainable, and is satisfied like a lake overgrown with peat bogs. (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 31)

Ens faces a moral dilemma: remain faithful to his wife or succumb to the allure of new desire. Ens understands that giving into adultery is a betrayal of Erna; therefore, this humanly universal, familiar situation is depicted in a psychologically inflected manner atypical of Latvian short prose written in the USSR. A psychologically multifaceted man emerges in the depiction of Ens' personality—traumatized by war and the past, dissatisfied, who finds it difficult to form and sustain full, mutually fulfilling relationships. If his relationship with Erna is associated with drabness, routine, and habit, then in the new relationship, he feels unsure of himself and increasingly longs for the attention of the busy young Komsomol woman, thus trying to fill the void within himself (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 40).

Yet the new relationship soon ends, because Ens realizes that he has contracted a sexually transmitted disease (the story uses the word *trippers*, i.e., gonorrhoea). In this respect, in shaping Jagoda's character, Kadiķis-Groznijs does not attempt to endow her with the exemplary traits, traditionally associated with young Party women—Komsomol members engaged in the building of socialism. Research shows that in the 1920s–1930s, Soviet society suffered from inadequate sexual education and knowledge about diseases and their treatment (Kon 1995: 3). However, Kadiķis-Groznijs does not stigmatize the disease, on the contrary, Ens educates Jagoda and urges her to seek treatment, encouraging her that life does not end because of it (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 51). The continuation of the story is also grounded psychologically—the admission of the illness and the extramarital relationship with Jagoda estrange Erna and Ens even more. The subsequent course of life is heavy—the married couple's life in a small apartment without communication oppresses and erodes Ens, yet he does not contemplate divorce, because “to break up a family at a time when the Party and society demand the protection of family life would be a crime” (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 62). Ens cannot stay at home for long; thus, he increasingly begins to frequent nightspots, where he seeks solace in alcohol and meets a prostitute. The description of this woman and their interaction is terse; possibly, because Kadiķis-Groznijs overstepped a certain taboo by writing about nightlife and prostitution, in which, moreover, a Red Army man is involved. Ens is morally shattered and uncharacteristically for a Soviet citizen, and especially for a soldier and revolutionary, he also gives up, lacking the will and strength to fight: “You know, friend, my troubles: illness, a shattered family atmosphere, social atrophying, some damned inner impulses... I loathe everything I see. I do not want to loathe [it], but I cannot overcome myself” (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930a: 77).

Critics condemned Kadiķis-Groznijs's psychological approach as insufficiently proletarian.¹¹ The story caused a considerable stir. Newspaper editorial offices received letters from readers; readers' discussions were organized as well. For example, in 1930, a well-attended discussion (30 speakers) was held at the Library of Latvian Central Workers' Club in Moscow; it concluded that the story was not suitable for workers, since it contained no positive hero, all the characters in the story were degenerate petty bourgeois, the writer had not

11 See for example, Janele-Viena 1930: 44–49, Jākobsons 1930: 46–50, and Janele-Viena 1931: 38–45.

unmasked Ens and Jagoda as people unfit for Soviet life, the author showed no social standing, etc. ([Bez autora] 1931: 4). This precedent showed both Kadiķis-Groznijs and other Soviet Latvian authors that deviation from a strictly ideological stance and from a binary, clear division into “right” and “wrong” was not permissible.

The theme of female sexuality is present in other works of Soviet Latvian authors. In one of the most formally unusual Latvian texts of this period produced in the USSR, Eidemanis’s modernist, ornamental novella “The Surrounded” (“Ielenktie,” 1925) (Ļaksa-Timinska 2024a: 29–51), female sexuality is the central theme of the narrative. It is not reduced to degeneracy, sin, or the satisfaction of a man’s desires; rather it is viewed as a natural facet of personality, a motivating and driving force—something that may be linked with the paradigm of modernist literature. One of the main motivators and impulses for the protagonist Aņa is sexual dissatisfaction, which she experiences in her relationship with the Bolshevik Ivanov.

“Why don’t you want to put on a clean shirt? You smell like a polecat!”

But Ivanov is already asleep. Aņa looks at the man’s unshaven, flattened cheeks, listens to his snoring, and thinks: “Run!... Run!... Where to? Anywhere!”—To the Polish front, to the Wrangel front, or the Far East! Is it for such life—grey, mildewed, without joy and caress— Aņa has fought?

Ivanov loved her in an animal-like manner, without inner shivers, without the beauty of love.

Aņa knew what would follow. Let it go! She wanted to feel something greater, sharper, more vivid than what Ivanov’s love had given her. Aņa was famished for a bright moment. (Eidemanis 1930: 58)

It is Aņa’s sexual dissatisfaction that brings everything to a tragic conclusion—she abandons and betrays Ivanov and goes to the sensual political antagonist Volkov (Eidemanis 1930: 75). However, Volkov uses Aņa to obtain information about the Bolshevik plans. On the one hand, Eidemanis presents female sexuality as a destructive drive that could be read as censure; on the other hand, it is precisely this drive that frees Aņa from a life that oppresses and dissatisfies her, allowing her to break out and live in more pleasurable way (albeit briefly and with tragic consequences).

In modernist literature, the “new woman” is often depicted as having the right to choose for herself what to do with her life: to marry, to obtain employment, to become a mother, to express her sexuality, and so on. The new woman has intellectual freedom; she seeks self-realization to utilise her intellectual abilities and talents, to discover herself and her true identity; she is no longer defined by the fulfilment of a man’s desires or playing a secondary role (West 1955: 58). At the same time, as the feminist theorist June West notes, the new woman in early modernism should not be taken as an unambiguous model—some of her strivings and behaviour are far from admirable, often because she is not yet accustomed to the freedom of choice (West 1955: 58). This is vividly marked in Aņa’s character and her choices.

Foreign Women

Women’s sexuality can also be examined from an imagological perspective.¹² Associating women of certain nationalities with particular types of sexuality was quite widespread in the literature of the period under consideration. Tatar and Caucasian women were among the most frequently depicted ethnic types; for example, in Kadiķis-Groznijs’s story “About” (“Par,” 1930), a Red Rifleman encounters a Georgian maiden in a village:

...a girl with a silver belt drawn tight around her hips, her face half veiled, swelling with the silence of the mountains and a languorous invitation. Her arms, like snakes of cast metal, twined about her hips and around the smooth neck, the colour of autumn copper, so that they would more deftly grasp the metal jug for carrying water; for it seems, the strange gaze of the rifleman standing opposite her and his bashfully burning eyes were the reason for her surprise. Smiling, she looked at the foreign rifleman’s face, flushed with confusion and beauty. (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930b: 102)

The allure of this woman is defined purely through physicality, standing in sharp contrast to the desexualised Soviet heroines discussed earlier, who are

¹² For Eidemanis’s story “Ielenktie” analysis from the imagological perspective, see: Ļaksa-Timinska 2024b: 30–49.

first and foremost comrades and fighters. The Red Rifleman and the Georgian woman portrayed in Kadiķis-Groznijs's story have no need to converse or to share a common language; their communication takes place through touch, glances, and bodily proximity (Kadiķis-Groznijs 1930b: 103), reducing intimacy to a purely physical exchange that underscores the story's colonial and gendered dynamics.

Similar attempts to reduce the characters to ethnic types appear in other stories, constructing passionate, exotic, and sexually available "Orient" women. For instance, in Jokums' "Riflemen and Grenades" ("Strēlnieki un granātas," 1936) sensuous Tatar women spend the night with the riflemen in the city (Jokums 1929: 34–35). In Eidemanis's "Uprising of the Stones" ("Akmeņu sacelšanās," 1929), a Tatar woman is in the relationship with the revolutionary Osman (Eidemanis 1929a: 36), and in his another story, "Ensign Petrov's Love" ("Praporščika Petrova mīlestība," 1929), the Gypsy woman Maša is sexualized: she has caught the eye of the Red Army soldier Petrov and yet at the same time, is forced to spend the nights with the White Guard officers and priests (Eidemanis 1929b: 126–127). The construction of such female ethnic types also reveals a colonial gaze of the Soviet Latvian authors, as these women are fashioned as "exotic" sexual objects.¹³

From another angle, however, the objectification of women is also highlighted when the colonizers or assailants are not "our own." For example, in the aforementioned "Uprising of the Stones," when the Red Army retreats, the soldiers of the White Guard Army enters the town and brutally rapes the Tatar beauty Guldžana.

Guldžana was alone when the five came.

"Lie down!"

"What are you playing at?"

They swore loudly and biting. Guldžana wanted to jump out of the window. Guldžana, why did you not cut off your magnificent black braids? By the braids, the intruders yanked her back into the room and threw her to the floor. In turn, biting

13 Many postcolonial theorists have written about the exploitation of colonized peoples and the objectification of women. One of the first to address this theme was Edward Said (1935–2003) (Said 1979). Among more recent studies, the article by Lugones (2020: 25–47), is an outstanding contribution to this topic.

with their teeth into her brown skin, they whispered in Guldžana's ears the very same words they had whispered to their wives and mistresses at home during the nights of passion. One whispered, and four growled... And only the fifth one felt that Guldžana was already growing cold... (Eidemanis 1929a: 42–43)

In Ceplis' "Memories of Andris Vītols" ("Andra Vītola atmiņas," 1926), by contrast, we look back to the Revolution of 1905 and the punitive executions that followed. In the story, a cavalry captain, Krasnovs, rapes the young revolutionary Milda Balta every evening. Unable to bear the humiliation, she commits suicide (Ceplis 1926b: 12–13). On the one hand, in the works of Latvian authors, the objectification of women is judged critically, with naturalistic and brutal descriptions; on the other hand, the ethnic type of the "Orient" woman is constructed in a romanticised and poetic way, emphasizing her attractiveness, femininity, and sex appeal.

Conclusion

In the early 1920s, the "women's question" in the USSR marked a new approach to women's social and political roles and the marriage itself. The debates also appeared in Soviet Latvian prose, where women characters were often imagined as party or combat comrades. The narratives, however, were not uniform: some heroines remained bound to patriarchal norms (such as Oļā in "The Revolutionary Tribunal"), whereas others embodied ideological equality (in works by Kadiķis-Groznijs, Jokums, Ceplis and Eidemanis). Female sexuality was ambivalent—depicted either as a danger to revolutionary discipline, or conversely, as a utopian expression of freedom and collective love ("The Deniers" and "The Wolves of Maliēna").

By the 1930s, with Stalin's consolidation of power, this revolutionary openness gave way to conservative ideals of loyalty, family, and duty. Women characters in Soviet Latvian prose became models of obedience and patriotic devotion, even capable of denouncing or killing their relatives branded as class enemies. Male virtue likewise meant subordinating family to the needs of the state, as in Ceplis' "The Red Banner of Vedinga," where socialist ideals outweigh personal attachment. The notable exception is Kadiķis-Groznijs's

“Ens,” which explores the psychological conflict and moral doubt rather than the ideological certainty.

From an imagological perspective, a recurring figure is the “Orient” woman, portrayed as a sensual and exotic other—an object of conquest rather than a comrade in arms. Such representations reveal the colonial and patriarchal underpinnings of Soviet internationalism, where domination is masked as liberation.

Overall, the Latvian prose written in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s constructs womanhood as a place of ideological regulation and moral discipline. The early vision of emancipation and equality gives way to the state-defined model of femininity, centred on duty, desexualisation, and loyalty to the collective. The depictions of “Orient” women expose how gender and ethnicity were instrumentalised to sustain hierarchies of power beneath the rhetoric of comradeship and equality. The analysis has demonstrated how gendered narratives in Soviet Latvian prose of the period in question mirror broader Soviet strategies of ideological socialisation and control.

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Lyginamoji literatūra postkritinių teorijų epochoje: grėsmė ar galimybė?

Comparative Literature in the Era of Post-Critical Theories: Threat or Opportunity?

Lietuvos lyginamosios literatūros asociacija (LLA) šiemet mini savo veiklos dvidešimtmetį ir ta proga pakvietė į apskritojo stalo diskusiją apmąstyti disciplinos būklės, raidos, vertimų svarbos ir ateities perspektyvų. Kaip keičiasi lyginamosios literatūros teorinis laukas postkritinių teorijų kontekste? Ką šiuolaikinės metodologinės permainos žada lyginamajai literatūrai – galimybes ar grėsmes? Ar teorinis nerimas – krizė ar gyvybingumo ženklas? Kokia lyginamosios literatūros situacija Lietuvoje ir kaip ji atsispindi globaliuose kontekstuose?

Diskusijoje dalyvavo asociacijos narės – jos įkūrėja ir ilgametė pirmininkė prof. Nijolė Kašelionienė, steigėjos: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos instituto vyriausioji mokslo darbuotoja prof. Aušra Jurgutienė ir Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto docentė Žydronė Kolevinskienė. Taip pat Vilniaus universiteto docentė Jūratė Levina. Kalbėjo ir dr. Donata Mitaitė, dr. Laura Laurušaitė, dr. Gintarė Bernotienė, prof. dr. Eglė Kačkutė-Hagan, doc. dr. Audinga Peluritytė-Tikuišienė. Diskusiją užbaigė prof. dr. Viktorija Skrupskelytė, kuriai buvo suteiktas LLA garbės nario vardas. Ją moderavo dr. Karolina Bagdonė.

Karolina Bagdonė: 2003 m. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak išleido garsųjį veikalą *Death of a Discipline*, kuriame paskelbė lyginamosios literatūros disciplinos

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