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Settling in a Foreign Land: Women's Experiences in Exile in Latvian Writer Irma Grebzde's Prose Fiction

By Ingrīda Kupšāne¹, Sandra Meškova²

Abstract

Exile is a central motif of 20th century European culture, and literature was often tied to historical events throughout this century, especially during World War II. In Latvian literature, this motif was partially the result of the emigration of a great part of the population in 1944; many were fleeing direct warfare and the return of the Soviet army, escaping from Latvia. This paper examines the peculiarities of women's experiences in exile in the prose fiction of Latvian émigré writer Irma Grebzde (1912–2000). Grebzde was among those 250,000 Latvians who fled as fugitives in 1944 for Sweden and Germany and then proceeded further to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries. Grebzde fled to Germany where she stayed at Wurzburg refugee camp and in 1948 moved to Canada. She worked in New Brunswick, Ottawa, Montreal in 1973 and then settled in Toronto. Grebzde has produced about 30 short prose fiction collections and novels. An important subject in Latvian émigré literature is the lives of Latvian émigrés in lands of settlement. Their fiction is generally autobiographically marked, capturing the authors' own experience in a fictional form. This goes for Grebzde's short prose fiction texts and novels. In her works Canada is depicted as a land of welfare, a place unaffected by World War II. European refugees are safe there, though they face low social status and a condescending attitude from Canadians. Both in Latvian émigré literature generally and Grebzde's works, exile consciousness is often presented in an urban setting. Canadian cities are positioned as a comfortable environment for consumer society, with posh resident areas, shops, advertisements, cafes, whereof just a small share may be enjoyed by European refugees due to their poorer financial means. The sphere of nature functions as the space where exiles can develop dialogical relations with the foreign land and search for similarities with the Latvian rural environment.

Keywords: Diaspora, Exile's consciousness, Latvian émigré literature, Memory studies, Postcolonial studies, Trauma

Introduction

The subject of exile permeates all twentieth-century history, especially when it comes to both world wars. Twentieth-century European literature uses the motif of exile and highlights its

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philosophical, political, biographical and psychological effects. Despite the diversity of historical, political, and economic factors in twentieth-century emigration waves, exile is still referred to as a universal phenomenon; exile is a common issue that unites these diverse emigration waves. In recent decades, exile has often been understood as something faced by particular groups/communities that occupy a marginal/subjected position in the social and cultural sphere in relation to other groups/communities. Feminist theorists see women as being in exile, existing in a patriarchal culture that is always foreign and even hostile to them. Exile is doubled from a postcolonial lens as it involves people being alienated from their country of origin and also feeling disconnected from their settlement's culture. According to psychoanalysis, exile projects the subject's state of inner schisms; a subject is exiled by language, sociality, or the Symbolical, to use Jacques Lacan's term. According to French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva, exile characterizes the situation of a subject, especially a feminine subject. In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Kristeva analyzes the category of stranger/foreigner/other; she explains that, in the contemporary global world, it is counterfactual to categorize any individual or group as a 'stranger' based on national, religious, political, or any other principles. Rather, new attitudes to 'otherness' are to be practiced learning to live side by side with others without assimilating their difference, avoiding the expulsion of a stranger but discerning this category first and foremost in oneself. Moreover, exile is becoming more and more regularly associated with writing. The Nigerian playwright, poet, and essayist, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka acknowledged that a writer's temperament is like that of a creature in a permanent state of exile, and the writer's goal is to help readers cross imaginary borders – between people, nations, languages, and cultures (Snaije, 2014).

In Latvian twentieth-century literature, exile is broadly tied to post-WWII emigration; in 1944 a large part of the population fled direct warfare and the advancement of the Soviet army to Latvia. Among the 250,000 people who fled from Latvia, there were numerous established and future writers, poets, artists, scientists, and other cultural figures who worked in exile, developing Latvian literature and culture in diaspora which continued through the second and third generations. Women poets and prose fiction writers constituted a large part of the émigré authors. Their works portray exile as the lyrical heroine's or narrator's subjective world feeling.

The present paper is focused on women's experiences in exile in the novels of post-WWII first generation Latvian émigré writer Irma Grebzde (Irmgarde Aleksandra Priecīgā, 1912–2000) who settled in Canada and produced about 30 novels and short prose collections in her lifetime. In the first Latvian diaspora generation's literature, especially women writers' oeuvre, there is a common theme of settling for life in a foreign land and the difficulties of acculturation that accompany it. We will examine these common tropes in this paper and the poetic diction that these issues are communicated through in two of Grebzde's novels: *Pelēkā māja* (Grey house) (1954) and *Te nu es esmu* (Here I Am) (1964). The former is an early work she produced some years after settling in Toronto, while the latter was written later in her life. The methodology of this research is based on postcolonial, trauma, and memory studies, with a focus on highlighting issues of personal and collective memory, mental colonization models, encapsulation, and self-victimization.

Experience of Exile in Latvian Émigré Writing: Historical and Theoretical Aspects

At the end of World War II, fleeing from direct warfare and the return of the Soviet army to Latvia, about 250,000 Latvians fled as fugitives to Sweden while the majority escaped to

Germany, settling in refugee camps. After the war, from 1947, the camps gradually ceased functioning and the fugitives had to make a decision: return to their native land or search for refuge elsewhere. But the end of the war marked the end of the independent Latvian state; Soviet power overtook Latvia. Because of this, fugitives did not want to risk returning home to a totalitarian regime in which they would be repressed; these fugitives had already experienced the effects of this regime in 1940/41 during the first stage of the Soviet occupation in which 15,424 civilians and military personnel were deported to distant northern regions of the Soviet Union. Because of this, Latvians mostly settled in countries that were ready to accept European refugees.

One of the first countries among these was Canada. Like many other countries, Canada accepted refugees as contracted workers. Abiding by Canada's act on immigration, and with assistance from the International Refugees Organization, the first ship of Latvian refugees entered the port of Halifax on July 31st, 1947. The first years in their new settlement proved hardest for the former philosophers, actors, university professors, writers, and other intellectuals who had to become blue collar workers and manual labourers—forest workers, railway builders, agricultural workers, mine workers, textile workers, domestic servants, etc.—in order to support themselves. Their previous accomplishments proved worthless, and they had to start from scratch to find their place and establish themselves in this new place of settlement. It is estimated that by the end of 1953 the number of Latvians who settled in Canada had reached 13,000. Upon completing their contracts, the majority of Latvians moved to towns and cities. Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, and Ottawa became the major centres of settlement for Latvians, who developed an active social and cultural life with Latvian societies, dance groups, theatres, and literary events. A number of well-known Latvian writers settled for life in Canada: e.g. Indra Gubiņa, Velta Toma, Arturs Voitkus, Ingrīda Vīksna, and Aina Zemdega, to name some. Many of these great writers were women.

Among them was also Irma Grebzde. She left Latvia as a fugitive in 1944 for Germany where she stayed at Wurzburg refugee camp and then moved to Canada in 1948. She first worked on farms in New Brunswick, then lived in Ottawa, then in 1951 she moved to Montreal. In 1973, the writer settled in Toronto. Grebzde started writing in the 1930s and has produced about 30 short prose fiction collections and novels, written in the trend of realism. Much Latvian émigré literature focuses on the lives of Latvian refugees in lands of settlement. Their fiction is generally autobiographically marked, encoding the authors' own experience in fictional form. The same is characteristic of Grebzde's short prose fiction texts and novels.

In Latvian literary scholarship, the phenomenon of post-WWII Latvian émigré literature has been studied through a historical context, emphasizing the split of Latvian literature into two streams: literature produced in the Soviet Latvia (Latvia incorporated into the Soviet Union, from 1940 to 1990) and literature in the Latvian language produced in diaspora. But recently theoretical aspects relating to contemporary postcolonial, memory, diaspora, trauma studies have been taken up in regard to Latvian émigré authors' oeuvre. The problematic nature of the terminology used to label writers who stayed in lands of settlement (émigré, exile, diaspora) is a topic of current debate (Kupšāne, 2018). It has not yet been established which term best characterizes post-WWII Latvian literature in emigration; in the present paper these terms are used on the basis of their general meaning: émigré – to denote that the authors produced their works in emigration; exile – referring to the experience of exile; diaspora – to emphasize that the authors used the Latvian language and lived and worked within Latvian communities in their

lands of settlement. More research is needed regarding the implications of these terms that describe the cultural and literary phenomenon of post-WWII Latvian literature in emigration.

The research on exile as a denominator of displacement in cultural terms highlights the complex interconnectedness of various aspects such as marginality, loss, and melancholia but also ludic irony and emancipation (Draga-Alexandru, 2000; Kristeva, 1991). Kristeva (1991) broadly treats exile as a permanent state of a speaking being conditioned by the structure of loss that is also a source of melancholia. This concerns both men and women, yet for women the experience of loss causes a deeper crisis. In her psychoanalytical study on Latvian women writers in exile, Inta Miške Ezergailis (1998) refers to this as characteristic of depictions of exile in texts by émigré writers and poetesses. In her opinion, this testifies to the fact that physical exile is the climax of existential exile, and expulsion from one's native land is just a phase in the series of the state of exile that begins with a subject separating from the mother/child dyad, tearing away from the maternal breast, and entering the order of signification and language as a subject marked by the structure of a loss. When it comes to Latvian post-WWII émigré literature, this aspect is deeply revealed in Margita Gūtmane's poetry and autobiographical prose; her works reveal the loss of the mother as the traumatic nucleus of the narrator's sense of exile, making the daughter an exile in the world, in language, and in her sense of subjectivity (Meškova, 2020).

The basic text corpus of Latvian post-WWII émigré literature of the first generation has been produced from the position of victims of political processes; this literature is literature of suffering. Latvian literary scholar Zanda Gūtmane acknowledges that this reveals the importance of the metaphorical sense of exile that characterizes a marginal and subjected position of a group of persons in relation to other groups or a sense of alienation typical of a particular group (Gūtmane, 2019, p. 185). This greatly determines the peculiarities of character depiction and the narrative structure of texts.

The narrative pattern that dominates in Latvian émigré literature is constructing the national self-image in the form of a collective suffering victim. According to Aleida Assmann, victim identities are formed which means that a person's history of suffering becomes their identity and the main content of collective memory (Asmane, 2018, p. 117). She also states that, in relation to the traumatic past, there are usually only three sanctioned roles that can be accepted by national memory: winner who has overcome evil; oppositional fighter and martyr who has fought against evil; and passive victim who has suffered from evil.

When it comes to representations of exile, Gūtmane refers to three types of mental conduct in postcolonial criticism. The first one is an anticolonization model characterized by ignorance of the new situation of exile. In this case, introversion is used as an attempt to preserve one's ethnic identity by distancing from the culture of the host country, focusing on relations with compatriots and thus trying to create an environment similar to one's native culture environment. The second model of extraversion, according to Gūtmane, is that of self-colonization or auto-colonization, which is marked by mimicry or adjusting to the dominant culture and tends to imitate its forms. Maximal openness to new influences inevitably causes a loss of ethnic identity and facilitates the construction of a new identity. The third one is hybridization; this consists of a synthesis of introversion and extraversion, ethnic identity transformation, sustaining one's own culture and adopting the new one (Gūtmane, 2019, pp. 186–188).

When it comes to exile, Grebзде's fiction reveals the anticolonization model that directly affects the creative process of the writer and determines the specific features of her prose fiction,

such as depicting the traumatic experience of émigrés in the host culture environment and projecting the exile's consciousness in the urban environment of Canada.

Encapsulating in Trauma

In the novels *Pelēkā māja* (Grey House) (1954) and *Te nu es esmu* (Here I Am) (1964), the writer sketches out the first years of Latvian émigrés' lives in Canada, depicting them from a woman's viewpoint. In the former novel, the protagonist is young widow Anda Rietuma who has three children. She was a nature scientist in Latvia but is now working as a maid and a cashier in a second-rate café. The protagonist of *Te nu es esmu*, Dace, has just arrived to Canada. According to the contract, she is to work for a year as a housekeeper for a wealthy Canadian family.

The novel *Pelēkā māja* is a third person narrative from Anda's point of view, whereas the novel *Te nu es esmu*, as indicated in the title, is narrated in the first person. The shift of this strategy from distancing (third person) to personal identification (third person) was most likely affected by the times in which she was writing. *Pelēkā māja* was produced when the author's memories of moving to Canada and first steps in the foreign land were still fresh in her experience. While the author most likely felt this experience could not be silenced, she might have still had a desire to psychologically distance herself from it, writing as if it happened to someone else. The autobiographical aspect of Grebzde's novels is manifested in the potential for self-transformation noted by researchers on autobiography (Gilmore, 2001). Treated as a project in how to become other, the autobiographical mode of writing reveals diverse strategies of textualizing painful experiences and memories, from silencing to overtly presenting them via the autobiographical pact (Bruner, 2001; Lejeune, 1989). Grebzde's earlier novels reveal a strategy of distancing from the fugitive's experience, but the novel *Te nu es esmu* was produced after 15 years in exile when she began to overcome the extremes of the opposition between other/self. The "I" form in this case brings up experiences that existed in the depths of memory and makes them direct and vivid again. The author does not allow herself to sink into self-satisfaction when the material side of life has stabilized. Grebzde states that the material side of life is not essential for her: *I lead a small grey life as without my native land I am dried up. [...] we have white bread and sweet sweet tea and a refrigerator...! But our hearts have been lost in our refugee routes.* (Sproģis, 2009, p. 214) (here and henceforth translation mine – S.M.)

In Grebzde's works Canada is characterized as a land of welfare that has not been tainted by World War II. European refugees can feel safe there, though without feeling happy because they must face low social status and often a condescending attitude from Canadians. Alienation is intensified by the refugees' distanced attitude towards the land of settlement.

Representatives of various generations differ in their attitude towards Canada. In the novel *Pelēkā māja*, Anda, who has experienced many shifts in her life, directly encounters the harshness of the present life more than anyone else in her family; she lives through her memories of the past and finds it very hard to accept the new land of settlement. A similar attitude is shared by her adult eldest son Evalds who finds the lifestyle of Canadian young people strange and distances himself from his new reality, enclosing himself in the Latvian world. He falls in love with a Latvian girl and together they dream of building a new family house in Canada, similar to those they were forced to leave in Latvia, thus forming their own enclosed micro world. Yet, Anda's children Ieva and Guntis, who are in their teens, grow fond of Canada. Their attitude to Canada represents the auto-colonization model. They are open to the new space with its

impulses. It attracts and enchants them. They find mother's stories of the past and her native homestead uninteresting and even superfluous. Ieva tells her mother that one can find houses like those in Latvia everywhere. The headmaster of Latvian school says regarding Ieva: *She turned into a Canadian fast with unbelievable craving. You could never think that a year ago Ieva lived in Europe.* (Grebzde, 1954, p. 141).

In Grebzde's understanding, Canadians perceive refugees mostly through the prism of labour – how useful they are for doing hard physical work. In this respect, European refugees are considered to be good workers. But when it comes to communication, immigrants are mostly not treated as subjects; many do not believe that they could discuss serious matters with refugees as equals. However, sometimes Canadians in Grebzde's prose fiction are depicted as self-critical, saying that people in Europe are still capable of thinking, whereas in Canada people have only hands for raking money. Anda admits that Canadian people are kind. The novel *Te nu es esmu* portrays Madam Svenson who takes care of the 16-year-old girl Vaiva who has been hospitalized from a nervous breakdown. She cares for the girl selflessly, like a mother.

In the novel *Pelēkā māja*, Anda often faces a condescending attitude from the local people at her workplace. The refugee working as a cleaner in a café is not treated like a respectable and equal person. Roger, who does the same work, considers himself superior because he is Canadian. He openly makes indecent offers to Anda, inviting her to come to his quiet flat. Anda feels humiliated by the fact that her status provokes the lad to indiscreetly express his intentions. Her refusal enrages the man and builds tension between them. Roger insults Anda at each opportunity, calling her a European beggar who has come to eat his bread and take employment away from the local people. He expresses suspicion about whether she is a secret partisan of Hitler's ideas.

The protagonist of the novel *Te nu es esmu*, Dace (named after the author's daughter) faces denigration from the local people daily. She says with bitter irony that she is a European refugee who has sold her freedom for a year in order to get into the land of wellbeing. Working in the Carsons' house, she is constantly reminded that she is only a servant. Nobody is interested in what she feels or thinks. Dace is not entitled to her own private space in the Canadian family's home. She has a small room with worn out furniture, which the family members may enter whenever they wish.

Observing Dace's clothing, Madame Carson has a strict judgement of how backward Europe is. To Dace's objection that Europe has just gone through the war, the Canadian woman retorts that it is no excuse for wearing a skirt of indistinct colour. Madam Carson does not care to pronounce Dace's name properly and calls her in the way she finds more convenient – Dais. Dace is always hungry because noone invites her to join a meal and she is too shy to take something herself: *When I eat, madam is usually in the kitchen and it always seems that she is counting every piece going into my mouth.* (Grebzde, 1991, p. 30)

During family parties when the Carsons receive many visitors, Dace is especially humiliated. She must meet guests and serve them at the table. She is shown off as a servant from Europe; guests speculate about her former profession of a teacher and males discuss her body. Children also treat Dace disrespectfully. 11-year-old Kate never misses an opportunity to make a mean comment on any action of the servant; Dace is never good enough in the girl's opinion.

The protagonists of both novels, Anda and Dace, acknowledge their status and humbly accept it because they realize that in a foreign land, they cannot set their own rules. Anda often swallows her pride and is humiliated for the sake of her children; she needs to keep her job in order to support herself and her three children. Dace tells herself that it is just a year of suffering

and then she will be free. Dace takes care of her mental health, by taking a day off each week to do what she likes, including having a hearty meal and socializing with other Latvians who make her feel like a worthy person.

The life story of Anda and Dace showcases the daily life of a refugee, particularly a female refugee. All refugees share the status of outsider, but women encounter an especially openly condescending and denigrating attitude from locals. This may be one of the factors that encourage Anda and Dace to get married, as married women are more protected from open humiliation.

It is also obvious that both protagonists' self-assessments and attitudes about their present lives are affected by their past experiences; they remember a better life and believe that they should be living in their native home in better conditions than they are in currently. The sense of irretrievable loss of the world of their past and the vivid memories of this provoke an unwillingness to accept their new realities and feelings of deep dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Encapsulation in trauma slowly occurs. The denouement of the novels models a partial overcoming of this state, allowing for a compromise. An attempt at creating a balance in the exile's consciousness is made, allowing an opportunity for a meaningful existence in the present while still remembering the past. Anda gets married to a Greek man named Sakritis. On the one hand, this may be viewed as her giving up her past; this is how she herself perceives it. On the other hand, Sakritis has also immigrated to Canada and does not identify with Canadians. Anda and Sacritis are from Europe, and Sakritis comes from Greece, the cradle of European culture. Thus, for Anda, this marriage results not only in stabilizing her material status but also in reasserting her otherness. Dace gets married to a Latvian man named Kaspars Donis (*dona* in Latvian means 'a slice of bread'), and in the finale of the novel their child is born. This model signifies a more distinct closure, preserving the framework of their own (Latvian) culture and creating a future perspective for it through the possibility to cultivate the collective (national) values and pass them down to the next generation.

Projecting the Exile's Consciousness in the Urban Environment of Canada

Grebzde's novels mostly take place in urban settings. In this respect, Grebzde's novels fit into the general corpus of Latvian post-WWII émigré prose fiction that presents an émigré's consciousness as urban, thus marking its alienation from the traditionally rural culture model of the pre-war Latvia that most refugees share. City spaces with its noises, commotion, and car lights embody a dynamic living environment. The Canadian city is positioned as a comfortable environment for consumer society, with posh resident areas, shops, advertisements, and cafes, yet just a small share can be enjoyed by European refugees. Latvians are immigrants who find this space foreign, disturbing, and scary. Comfort is sought in compatriots: Anda in the novel *Pelēkā māja* lives in a house where all residents are Latvians. Dace in *Te nu es esmu* is trying to meet other Latvians on her days off, either by visiting the Latvian community centre or paying visits to her Latvian acquaintances' homes.

The utilitarian aspect of city in both novels is positioned as a tool of emphasizing the alienation of the exile from the land of settlement. Heroines of both novels associate the dominance of material values as characteristic of Canadians. For them provision of minimum physical comfort is just an issue of survival but not a decisive factor in their life as a whole. Both Anda and Dace have received good education and represent Latvian intelligentsia. Elements of the urban environment that are significant for Anda and Dace are beyond utilitarian functionality.

For Dace, visiting an art gallery is refreshing after a hard day of work: *The gallery surrounds me by its quaint air and wondrous silence. I go from one room to another, and my eyes are full of sparkles.* (Grebzde, 1991, p. 43) Dace perceives the silence in the art gallery as miraculous. It embraces her and makes her feel out of time and space. Enjoying art in complete silence is like balm for her soul helping her regain psychological balance. Solitude in the art gallery implies absence of other people, thus making Dace think that Canadians are pragmatically minded people who prefer the noise of shopping and enjoy life in restaurants and cafes, whereas Latvians under all circumstances appreciate the spiritual dimension of life associated with culture consumption and also creation.

Grebzde's novels demonstrate another characteristic feature of émigré prose fiction: modeling the land of settlement. Nature in Canada functions as the spatial segment through which refugees can form dialogic relations with their land of settlement. Characters seek in nature what is close, familiar to them, and what resembles the Latvian landscape. In the novel *Te nu es esmu* it is stated that in spring everything is in bloom, like in the protagonist's homeland; soil has the same odour in autumn both in Canada, Germany, and Latvia.

Nature components are often positioned as signs from the native chronotope. For instance, when Dace is alone at home looking through a window, a red leaf falls on the windowsill. Dace receives it as a token from her homeland – a gift from her mother or sister who remained in Latvia. The natural realm is the part of the land of settlement that is accepted. If the urban space is dominated by alienation and a negative connotation, nature in the rural areas of Canada bears a distinctly positive marking. Anda thinks: *Maple woods glared in the red leaves. The autumn splendour in this land was fabulous!* (Grebzde, 1954, p. 112)

Nature is often used to illustrate the psycho-emotional state of the characters. Spring, with blooming crocuses and sunny days, is associated with the time of hope. An overcast autumn day with the grey cold sky contrasts Dace's joyful feelings when, on her day off, she has bought a pack of pastries and hot chocolate. At last, she can treat herself to something nice.

Characters seek refuge in nature and a rural environment where they find the most comforting model of life in emigration; this is marked by the finale of both texts. In both novels, the finale is constructed in a similar way, using the motif of building a Latvian house. In *Pelēkā māja*, Evalds and Svīps have purchased farmsteads with squalid buildings that seem appropriate for rebuilding them in the Latvian style, modelling them after their native homesteads back in Latvia. Evalds has purchased two cows and a horse. Svīps is dreaming of growing clover and flax. In the novel *Te nu es esmu*, Dace and Kaspars Donis have bought land in the neighbourhood of other Latvians and are building houses. They are constructing a micro-world where Latvians can live like they would in their native land. Living in the rural environment is emphasized as a component necessary for sustaining Latvianness. Hence, it is revealed that ethnic identity, culture, and language can be sustained only by staying enclosed and distanced from the influences of the land of settlement.

Conclusion

Women's experiences in exile depicted in the prose fiction of Latvian post-WWII émigré writer Grebzde reveal the traumatic experience of émigrés in the host culture environment, their attempts at preserving the ethnic identity in a possibly unchanged form. This model of resisting the acceptance of the new situation of exile or self-victimization model (Asmane, 2018, p. 157) is especially characteristic of first-generation Latvian émigré literature in various lands of

settlement including Canada. The projections of fear, sense of loss, lack of material, and spiritual stability enhanced by feelings of nostalgia and melancholia experienced by first generation refugees determine the negative connotations of the representation of the land of settlement, its practices and local residents' attitude toward the immigrants. Novels *Pelēkā māja* and *Te nu es esmu* provide a woman-centred perspective, emphasizing the woman refugee's positioning in the patriarchal society's power structures encountered in her work-place, local community, and Latvian diaspora community. Both texts encode the author's own traumatic experience as a European refugee in Canada. The autobiographical incentive of Grebzde's writing reveals a shift from distancing from the depicted experience of refugee women to transforming traumatic experience into accommodating models of the family environment and domestic life.

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