

POST-EXILE RETURN NARRATIVES: EMPATHY OF THE NOVEL *MAYBE IT WAS* BY AINA VĀVERE AND *BRAVE-HEART OF* THE NOVEL *CRAVING FOR SUNRISE* BY JĀNIS KLĪDZĒJS

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Abstract

The article focuses of return narrative in Aina Vāvere's (1924–2011) novel *Maybe It Was* (1992) and Jānis Klīdzējs' (1914–2000) novel *Craving for Sunrise* (1995). These works show an imaginary landscape of post-exile writers shortly before the Third Awakening and establish the idea of returning to homeland. The term post-exile is used in this article to refer to the end of displacement and achieving national goal of exile – the restoration of Latvian independence. It also marks the formal end of exile [Bannasch et al. 2020]. This allows us to look at the transition as former exile writers search for new themes and portrait meeting with Latvian post-Soviet society. The post-exile concept lacks a specific methodology, so the article uses a postcolonial approach to analyse texts. The structural similarities of the novel's narrative by different writers appear in post-exile literature. It contained three parts: history of exile, first impressions in Latvia during the Third Awakening, and choices of return. These three narrative parts will form a genre of return novels. The first writers of this narrative were Aina Vāvere and Jānis Klīdzējs, who placed the future of exile at the centre of their works. Their works depict a generation that was either born or grew up in the Latvian exile community, with a sense of belonging inherited from their parents. It refers to forming the hybridity of new transcultural expressions and identities [Bhabha 1994].

Keywords: *post-exile, Third Awakening, postcolonial studies, hybridity, diaspora*

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Introduction

In 1969, German literary scholar Walter Berendsohn, in his introductory remarks at the International Congress in Stockholm on *German Literature of the Exiles of the Third Reich*, emphasized that the study of *Exilliteratur* cannot be limited to the period from 1933 to 1945. He expressed that “literary history must deal with the literary works themselves and that to the present-day exile writing had been intrinsically different from nearly everything written”. The researcher of the history of exile, Helmut Müssener, expressed the idea, that “the history of exile literature would not be terminated until its last representative in exile had died or had returned to his native country”. [Rosenfeld 1982: 333]. Both arguments support the idea that exile literature should be studied in conjunction with historical experience, from which the influence of the writer’s self-identity on literature also emerges. Edward Said uses musical term to describe exile notion – *contrapuntal* (the relationship of two or more simultaneous musical lines); he writes: “what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” [Said 1988: 191]. Or with physical return from exile to homeland is possible to rediscover the roots of self-identity and “acceptance of the dual identity formed during exile” [Tamba & Harahap 2024: 94].

Exile ends with the opportunity to return to the homeland, usually facilitated by an improvement in the political situation or democratic processes. In that case, a two-way process takes place: the exiles encounter the changes of cultural space that they left behind, as cultural space encounters the exiles, who have changed. Therefore, it is necessary to record both changes and characterize the future potential of this contact. These issues become themes in the post-exile culture.

The feminist and cultural researcher Amy Kaminsky argues against adding the suffix “post” to exile, stating that “every “post” contains what it purports to supersede, always marked by the term whose decadence it reports. The more colloquial “after” also registers perpetuation in change, strangely denoting the pursuit of the original term” [Kaminsky 1999: 3]. Karin Berkman writes that exile is not initially detached from the post-exile state; it can only be fixed with a time delay. “Exile constantly beckons to post-exile, and both figure as stations on a continuum rather than as antithesis. Exile, then, constantly proclaims its finitude and is most often not a description of a present state but of an envisaged afterward” [Berkman 2020: 101]. Similarly, Latvian exile literature was studied already in the post-exile period with a view towards the past.

On 4 May 1990, the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) Supreme Council passed the declaration *On Restoring the Independence of the Republic of Latvia*. On 6 September 1991, the new ruling council of the USSR recognized the independence

of the three Baltic republics – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania [Plakans 2007: 259]. Literary researchers can focus on researching exile literature in Latvia after censorship. The concept of exile literature becomes problematic, where Latvian exiles do not form geographical borders or communities of time. “It is impossible to create a concept that would characterize exile literature. Everything called exile literature is nothing more than the number of works by writers who are no longer allowed or do not want to be published in their homeland.” [Gūtmane 1992: 84]. Literary scholar Inguna Daukste-Silasproģe, marking the Latvian post-exile phenomenon as the next stage of research, concludes “that the concept of post-exile is still searching for its research streams, and each national literature, with this exile component, can expand the understanding (boundaries) of what to include in it and what the most important accents should be” [Daukste-Silasroģe 2024: 118].

What happens to exiled writers wanting to publish after Latvia regains independence? What new topics did exiled authors explore? Did they find new readers in post-Soviet society? In 1989, literary scholar Valters Nollendorfs pointed out to Soviet Latvian writers in Sweden about the ability of the exiled society to write – “they would write differently” [Čaklais 1989: 4].

The article will examine notion of return narrative in Latvian Australian Aina Vāvere (1924–2011) novel *Maybe It Was* (1992) and American Latvian Jānis Klīdzējs (1914–2000) *Craving for Sunrise* (1995). Vāvere’s first publications were during a refugee period in Germany, 1956; she emigrated and lived in Australia. Klīdzējs made his debut in Latvia, 1931; emigrated from Germany refugee camp to USA and lived on the West Coast.

In 1993, Vāvere writes letter to head publishing house *Preses nams* Māra Caune (1941–2010) about the difficulties of getting published: “I cannot and do not want to pay for publishing (we have already discussed the principles and reasons). I am willing to donate the writer’s fee back to the publishers (...). In this way, I hope to support Latvian publishers” [Vāvere 1993]. In another letter, poet Andrejs Eglītis (1912–2006) writes about Latvian society to Klīdzējs: “The spirit of the mafia reigns in the writers’ union. The Soviet man still lives in souls” [Eglītis 2005: 212]. If one letter indicates the economic difficulties in publishing works, then other emphasizes on difference in society between exiles and post-soviet Latvians.

Estonian cultural and literary researcher Epp Annus emphasizes that the Baltic states have experienced profound and systematic violence, the collective trauma of which was preserved in the memory of Soviet deportations after the restoration of independence. As an example, Annus cites the personal memories of Estonian writer Mari Saat (1947), where suitcases were rearranged, and clothes of outgrown children were replaced with new ones: “Calculation for possible deportation persisted

in the scar tissue of people's imaginations as late as 1996, five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of the Russian occupation" [Annus 2019: 37].

Under these circumstances and the opportunities for both groups to meet in Latvia's geography, it is problematic for post-exiled Latvians and post-soviet Latvians with their different historical heritage and memories. Many writers have continued to publish works outside Latvia and remain in exile subjectivity, because the rejection and trauma were too strong.

After the restoration of Latvia independence, when the exiled community returned, post-soviet Latvians started *othering* post-exile Latvians. As Gayatri Spivak points out, to regain lost self-respect, *othering* takes place in postcolonial societies; it is necessary to strengthen one's identity and the branding of *others*. Whatever the markers that mark the line between *us* and *them* – race, geography, ethnicity, economy, or ideology – there is a danger that they become the basis for self-affirmation, which depends on the denigration of the other group. "Same-and-othering, the groups that receive some attention in the cultural sphere are the new immigrants (sometimes unjustifiably conflated with exiles, refugees, diasporic, and postcolonial in the former colonies)" [Spivak 1995: 269]. *Othering* takes place on both sides – from the post-exiles and post-soviet Latvians. *Others* do not always have a negative connotation. The series of novels about history *The 20th Century*, writer Arno Jundze's (1965) novel *Red Mercury* (2017) includes an imaginary conversation between sisters – Dzidra stayed in Soviet Latvia, and Mirdza lives in Canada – the exiled Latvian admits that she does not always understand the customs of Soviet Latvia.

Klīdzējs' novel *Craving for Sunrise* was published in fragments in the newspaper *Laiks* (1990–1991), and literature researcher Ilona Salcēviča prepared the text in book format. In the afterword to the novel, she points out many historical inaccuracies, including "quite a few pages that indicate a poor knowledge of local conditions. The description of universities and some other institutions is inaccurate, but it has been left unchanged because this is not a documentary work".

Despite the historical inaccuracies of the novel's narrative and the incorrect depiction of Soviet Latvia, Klīdzējs immediately became a prominent figure after Latvia regained its independence. He was well known by his previous written novels. This increased attention is associated with release of film *The Child of Man* (1991) by Jānis Streičs. This film has not lost its popularity still nowadays. It is based on Klīdzējs' childhood memories in novel *The Child of Man* (1956). Klīdzējs becomes a symbol of the rise of self-confidence among the Latgalian-Catholic people. Similarly, Gūtmane writes about the legacy of poet Veronika Strēlerte's personality and poetry in the early 1990s: "She understood very well how this attention around her personality will pass away, that it is currently more related to the fact that she is

still alive, and not because of her works. Strēlerte was very aware that exile literature is hardly needed. She is just a symbol". The symbol of Klīdzējs' personality was created through the film, as a religious practice or ritual made him a social phenomenon of *popular worship* [Sundahl 2022: 437].

Vāvere receives similar attention, her cult of personality was portrayed as a representative of the Baltic German Vērmaņi family. Her ancestors donated the Vērmanes Garden to Riga. Vāvere participated in the opening of the Anna Vērmane monument in 2000, and she was described in newspaper, as the guest of honour of the event and a descendant of the Vērmaņi family in the fifth generation. Also, increased attention was attracted by the fact that the prestigious publishing house *Penguin Books* published Vāveres short stories, *The Blue Mountain in Mujani* (1990). The novel *Maybe It Was* (1992), published in Latvia, is a modified and expanded version of this collection of stories. The artistic design of the Latvian publishing house for the novel *Maybe It Was* is alike the *Penguin Books*. This also indicates the new ambitions of the Latvian publishing house to emulate the model of Western publishing (Figure 1).

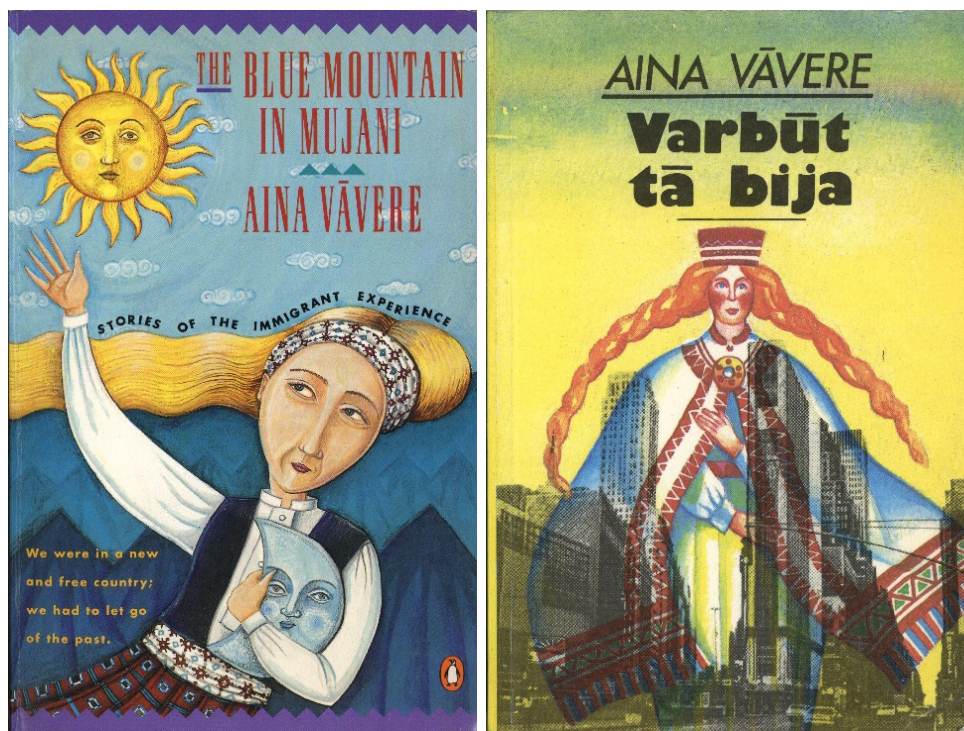


Figure 1. *The Blue Mountain in Mujani*, 1990; *Maybe It Was*, 1992.

Klīdzējs' and Vāvere's novels are similar in narrative structure, which was determined by adaptation to the new Latvian reader. It can be divided into three parts: history of exile, first impressions in Latvia during the Third Awakening, and choices of return. Klīdzējs' characters from America get familiar with Latvian society, which has existed in *systemic violence*, as Slavoj Žižek continuously, "is thus something like the notorious dark matter of physics" [Žižek 2009: 2]. Freedom of speech is suppressed in various ways, and society lives in hidden fear.

If the characters offered by Klīdzējs encourage them to act spontaneously and bravely, then Vāvere's offer is focused on the future potential of cultural interaction. The sibling characters created by Vāvere enter the intercultural territory, where each Latvian individual appears as a separate and individual personality in a unique situation and does not lose his belonging to the overall picture. Vāvere crosses the boundaries of the *other* existence without trying to deny or make them less important, thus not falling into binary opposition of colonizer/colonized, allowing for new, hybrid expressions and meanings. Also making cultural elements to create new hybrid expressions, because both – post-exiles and post-soviet society contains the same language. Both novels feature characters with hybridity [Bhabha 1994]. The main characters of both novels are a generation with no direct memories of Latvia before their refugee journeys. Therefore, the interpretation of hybridity helps to understand the possibility of post-exile return from a postcolonial perspective.

Aina Vāvere: Which way is the return?

The novel *Maybe It Was* (1992) by Vāvere is a reworking of texts from the short story collection *Foreigner Album* (1989) published in Latvian and the short story collection *The Blue Mountain in Mujani: Stories of the Immigrant Experience* (1990) published in English. *Maybe It Was* represents an empathetic and unusual work of Latvian hybridity in post-exile literature. In it, the author talks about the existence of Australian Latvian belonging, sexuality, and mutually different identities unusual in Latvia at the beginning of the Third Awakening. The Latvian identity of the main character, Edme, is closely intertwined with Australia's colonial history, nature, and mythology. Vāvere introduces the view that the identity of a Latvian in post-exile can consist of such two mutual nationalities.

Edme arrives in Soviet Latvia and meets a distant relative, to whom she develops a romantic attachment. She considers living together and a future with someone who indirectly connects to the former colonizer's discourse, an attempt to find an empathetic contact zone. She recognizes the meeting, coexistence, and mutual enrichment of different ethnic groups as valuable without denying the reality of historical events. The main action takes place in the city. In some episodes, the character remembers the Australian desert in connection with Aboriginal mythology.

Five characters are created in the part of the novel depicting Soviet Latvia. Edme and Edmunds, a brother and sister from Australia, visit Soviet Latvia for the first time. They are driven to get to know their father's relatives, improve their Latvian language, and experience spiritual excitement. It is important for Edmunds that his father's relatives are associated with idealized heroic stories of resistance. He gets to know local Latvians to help in the efforts to restore independence. Edme experiences an intense identity crisis. She realizes it is impossible to return to a place she has not been to before. Jānis Kalve, a distant relative, was born in Kotlas, in northern European Russia, where he works in a paper fabric. Because of his appearance, he experiences a dismissive attitude towards Latvians. Anna is dreamy, a young Latvian American with rainbow-colored hair, who meets and happily gets engaged to Edmunds in a hotel. Mētra's aunt is a relative living outside the capital, she works as an accountant.

Each of these characters plays out an attitude scenario with identity. These experiences affect the perception of identity in general; Vāvere shows that the emphasis on Latvianness for the place of birth is less important than the attitude to create and construct identity. By emphasizing that identity is cultivated in a specific geographical place, it is not automatically guaranteed. Vāvere models various types of belonging and identity concerning the character. Jānis and Edme's conversation about belonging takes place in a smithy, where symbolically, one can transform into a new quality with willpower and hard work. Jānis rejects Edme's call for closer relationships. Jānis expresses ambivalent thoughts, feeling *non-belonging* as an oppressive burden and at the same time as his identity.

Edmunds and Anna's joyful relationship flourishes in the hotel. It is a liminal space between their birthplace and their visiting the Latvian SSR, and like their two identities, they can move freely between these two spaces without choosing one. The five characters visit the Dome Church on the last evening, where the cantata *God, Your Land is Burning!* by pianist and composer Lūcija Garūta and poet Andrejs Eglītis is played. It is a prayer of the Latvians, a powerful sign of a tragic era, first performed in Riga on 15 March 1944, during the Second World War. Edme reinterprets the cantata, focusing not on the challenges Latvians have faced throughout history, but rather on the significance of climate catastrophe, she reflects on the eucalyptus forest fires in Australia.

Characters from the distant shore

Along with Vāvere's novel, the motifs of return can be found in the prose voice of Klīdzējs' novel *Craving for Sunrise* (1995). It is dedicated to adventures in the cultural space of the Latvia SSR, which depicts the emotional decline of Soviet Latvians and the loss of meaning in life. This work belongs to the final works of Klīdzējs' creative period in the 1990s when reprints of his novel *The Child of Man* (1953) with images

of the melodrama by director Jānis Streičs were published one after another. In 1948, in the writing of the refugee period [Daukste-Silasproģe 2001], the collection of stories *People on the Bridge* was published, the content of which is harshly criticized by literary critic Jānis Rudzītis: "The division of the characters into black-and-white principle, which destroys the will and need to delve into the subject objectively". In the continuation of the criticism, Klīdzējs receives praise for the characters of the people of the native side – Latgale: "he is a typical person from this part, and he should remember this every time another topic tempts him" [Rudzītis 1948: 4]. These two principles also appear in the novel *Craving for Sunrise*.

Klīdzējs' three characters (godfather Jēkabs, and best friends – Keizijs and Pēteris) reflect the idea, rooted in the collective consciousness of the Latvian exiles, that it was necessary to resist attack of the USSR. Klīdzējs opposes the Latvian resistance tactics of that time, with fight of Finns during Winter War (1939–1940), when the Finns showed bravery and did not allow occupation of Finland by the USSR. This idea of resistance becomes part of adventure narrative by Klīdzējs, which do not form together with an accurate interpretation of the history of the Latvian SSR in 1984. On the one hand, Klīdzējs could not been aware of the social and economic conditions of Soviet Latvia, or on the other hand, guided by aesthetic motives, where he chooses to exaggerate the gloomy environment. The portrayal has moved towards the genre of a dystopian novel for these two reasons.

Klīdzējs' three characters experience urban and countryside environment, where they reflect on poverty, gloomy and sad faces of the people and look for a way to help. The depiction of the market highlights the townspeople's lack of money. The main characters, Keizijs and Pēteris, buy food for a poor woman and pay the taxi driver with dollars to take woman home with heavy shopping bags. Klīdzējs uses the exaggerated generosity of dollars to indicate the economic poverty of the Latvian SSR comparing with rest of the world. At the market gate, Keizijs is approached by long-haired currency speculators, who buy foreign currency from tourists. In this depiction, Klīdzējs portrays the currency speculators as greedy self-interest seekers who think about their individual, not the common good of Latvian society.

A teenage boy asks Keizijs to give him American dollars so he can show them to his school friends. Keizijs gives him the money and wants to give him a Latvian flag pin. The boy's mother does not allow him to take the patriotic symbol. The reason is that the boy could be expelled for such a gift. The narrator points not only to the controlling mechanism of the power structure, but also the fears of the middle generation and living with oppressive circumstances.

Since tourists are forbidden from leaving Riga, so the characters secretly exit the city. Keizijs concludes that you can talk freely and openly with your friends when you get away from the city. Keizijs meets his grandmother on the periphery

of the countryside for the first time. She symbolizes memories of Latvia before World War II. Keizijs has brought various gifts – perfume, winter boots, and sewing accessories. It is exaggeratedly emphasized that buying such an everyday thing, as a needle, is impossible.

In the countryside, the characters meet a poorly dressed priest, for whom they want to buy a suit trousers and shoes. The Soviet government imposed strict restriction of the church's activities, viewing it as a potent vehicle for an ideology opposed to communist ideology. The KGB recruited clergy and priests to cooperate, with various compromising materials, promising various benefits or the opportunity to travel abroad [Krūmiņa-Konkova 2017]. Often, clergy agreed to cooperate to keep the congregation together.

The characters notice that the store shelves are empty, but when they show them dollars, the saleswoman locks the door and finds all the necessary goods. The narrator describes the conditions of lack of goods, where not all goods are available to everyone, but can be obtained through *blats*. Term *blats* mean a personal and illegal trade of material benefits within the Soviet planned economy.

After the heroes return to Riga, Keizijs is caught and taken to the KGB. He meets with Comrade General Boriss Karlovičs. (The prototype of this character is Boris Pugo (1937–1991), the chairman of the State Security Committee of the Latvian SSR from 1980 to 1984). The peculiar interrogation turns into a conversation about national identity. Keizijs says that he was born in German occupied Latvia in October 1944 and was adopted by an American couple. Keizijs has recently mastered the Latvian language and culture, which has become part of his personality. Klīdzējs points out that American identity can harmoniously consist with Latvian part. Such a combination embodies the democratic self-confidence of the West and the spiritual connection with Latvia.

At the end of the novel, Keizijs becomes an equal part of the local landscape in the ritual of kneading bread dough in his grandmother's house. Food can signify the revival of family connections in different ways. When Keizijs kneads bread dough, it symbolizes a shift from frivolously spending money to engaging in meaningful, physical labour. For Latvians, kneading bread dough represents a change in status [Friks 2023]. Since the heroes have helped many residents with money, gifts, and moral support, everyone can sit at a common table, which symbolizes the horizon from which one can await the Sunrise – the independence of Latvia.

Conclusions

The novels by Klīdzējs and Vāvere expressed the essence of the early Third Awakening period in Soviet Latvia. *Craving for Sunrise* emphasizes economic conditions and outside world; *Maybe It Was* concentrates on the emotional inner

world. Both novels address the crucial issue of Latvian exile identity for a generation not born in Latvia. Klīdzējs encourages searching for relatives, recovering, and restoring property, while Vāvere points to creating new meanings. Her character hearing the cantata *God, Your Land is Burning!* imagines climate change as the next catastrophe, more dangerous than war.

The exile writers' portrayal of Soviet Latvia is associated with poverty and the emotional decline of people. At the same time, this view is formed by comparing people arriving from the Western world. The Western view prevents one from delving into other levels of society, to which the authors do not have access. In both novels, the image of Soviet Latvia is formed from the outside before the characters arrive.

The postcolonial experience of Latvian exile marks the inability to return to the original state, but a new transformative beginning must be sought. Soviet Latvia is a foreign, unfamiliar place for the characters of both novels; their desires to help are idealized and guided by the world of Western European human rights and democratic values. At the same time, there will be a lack of in-depth depiction of the everyday life of Soviet Latvian society and the fate of people. Post-Soviet writers who wrote about this time in the early nineties used other emphases and did not highlight the poverty discourse as Latvian post-exile writers emphasize.

These authors understand that 45 years have passed since the occupation of Latvia, and a new generation has grown up who will seek a connection with Latvia; therefore, in order not to lose this generation, the first generation depicts a narrative of return to connect the next generation with the potential opportunity to *return*. Considering the postcolonial Latvian society, a hybrid identity model emerges, where different experiences of living space can be found in mutual interaction. Postcolonial Latvian society is also not monolithic and retains its differences. However, this does not mean that there is one option that determines some more accurately than others; rather, it is necessary to understand the more diverse experiences of Latvianness and not try to equalize, but to highlight the differences.

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