

# The “Alien” within “One’s Own” in the Twenty-first Century Latvian Literature: On the Material of Dace Rukšāne’s Novel *Russian Skin*

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**Abstract** The paper is aimed at analysing the novel *Russian Skin* (2020) by Latvian prose writer Dace Rukšāne and focuses on the problem of self-identification, transformation of woman’s identity under the impact of political and social changes in the context of a binary opposition “one’s own—alien.” Within the frame of everyday life in Soviet Latvia, this literary work reflects and brings to the forefront the specificity of the inclusive identity, when the opposites “one’s own” and “alien,” in the result of interaction, are seen not as dualities but rather as a new wholeness embodying both opposites. Via the theme of partner relationships, so characteristic of this writer, the author employs the model of intimate relationships between two outwardly incompatible worlds—the world of the main heroine of the novel (a Latvian) and that of her partner (a Russian), representative of the colonizing power, to symbolically show not only the existence of two causal world principles, but also the possibility for the two outward opposites’ merging into a new entity characterised by inclusivity. This is just the mother—a bearer of a new life—, who strives to create “one’s own” (a new-born) from the “alien,” and who, due to transformations in self-identity, becomes the embodiment of the “alien” among “one’s own.” The novel is the interpretation on the issue, widely discussed in Latvia in the context of preserving national identity, concerning the development of hybrid/ inclusive/ multiple identities, and on factors responsible for this (invasion, occupation, ethnic relations, interaction between cultures etc.).

**Keywords** cultural memory; identity; Soviet past; Latvianness; Russianness; literature of self-reflection

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## Introduction

Seeking for self-identification in the contemporary literature is related to the topicality of the reflection on the past within today’s context and to marking alternative developmental variants of the future. The novels on national history and peculiarity of processes and events of the past published during recent decades in Latvia have several functions. Along with their own artistic inherent value, they contribute to the re-evaluation of the past, to strengthening of patriotism, shaping the civic consciousness, and, among other things, are involved in the social construction of ethnic and national identity, and in revealing discursive manifestations. In the attempt to find answers to the question “Who am I?,” the narratives about “self”/ “one’s own” approach problems of how the individuals create their self-identity and in what way the categorization of “others” is carried out. The process of identity construction includes interaction: the conceptions about oneself and about others develop during interactions under the influence of social reality and values and norms existing in the society, and in the result of the subjective experience as well.

The Soviet occupation (1940-1941; 1944/5-1991) and the imposed Russification had essential consequences not only for the structure of state management, but also for the human consciousness. This is confirmed by the notion of the “unburied (Soviet) past” fixed as painful memory in collective mind (Etkind 182). The issue about a collective memory and identity was brought to the foreground, when Latvia was on the way to restoring its sovereignty (the last decades of the twentieth century), and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, within the context of openness, blending of cultures and globalization, when in the national cultural policy several significant decisions for the renewal and maintenance of national cultural heritage as well as for preserving national and ethnic identity were adopted. One of the supportive plans was related to the publication of a unique series of novels *Mēs. Latvi-*

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by Daugavpils University (Latvia) research development grant No 14-95/2021/19 “Festivity Culture in the Colonial and Postcolonial Latvia: Celebration and Transformation”.

ja. 20. *gadsimts* [We. Latvia. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century], based on studies of documents and testimonies of the epoch, and issued in the framework of the programme *Nacionālās identitātes veicināšana* [Promotion of National Identity] supported by the National Culture Capital foundation (Kacane and Romanovska). The idea of creating a series of historical novels was given by Gundega Repše (b. 1960), winner of the Baltic Assembly Award in literature, after the publication of a story collection *Mēs. 20. gadsimts* [We. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (2011) (Žolude). To initiate the discussion within the frame of Latvia's centenary celebrations on the processes of self-identity development and on multiform and multi-layer impacts of historical, political and social events upon Latvian national identity and culture, several novels<sup>1</sup> telling “about us ourselves, about how a Latvian has dwelt under the shade of different historical events, what he has felt, how he has survived or—on the contrary—has perished both bodily and spiritually” (*Laimis kods* 33-34) were published starting from 2013 and onwards. Although the novel *Krieva āda* [Russian Skin] (2020) by writer and publicist Dace Rukšāne (b. 1969) formally is not included in this series, content-wise it relates to the ideological nature of the series and depicts the life on the occupied territory of Soviet Latvia during the 1950-1960s—the time under Nikita Khrushchev<sup>2</sup> when initial steps in de-Stalinization were taken.

The new postcolonial literature creatively develops the theme of relationships between “one's own” (colonized people/ nation) and the “alien” (colonizers' people/ nation). “One's own” is given a positive connotation in most cases, while many aspects of the “alien” carry a negative connotation: “The ‘Other’, by definition, lacks identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense, he can be described as the foreign: the one who does not belong to a group, does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs; he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorized, inappropriate, and the improper” (Al-Saidi 95). Thereby, the depiction of the “alien” culture and its representatives in a caricatured and stereotypical way is facilitated (Costa; JanMohamed). Although it is fiercely criticized by the deniers of a postcolonial theory, “[p]ostcolonialism is a manifestation of the desire for the acceptance and understanding of otherness [...]” (McGillis and Khorana 15). In addition, at comprehending events

1 Osvalds Zebris' *Gaiļu kalna ēnā* [In the Shadow of Rooster Hill], Guntis Berelis' *Vārdiem nebija vietas* [Words Were of No Use], Pauls Bankovskis' *18*, Inga Gaile' *Stikli* [The Glass Shards], Gundega Repše's *Bogene*, Māris Bērziņš' *Svina garša* [The Taste of Lead], Inga Ābele's *Duna* [The Rumble], Andris Akmentiņš' *Skolotāji* [Teachers], Nora Ikstena's *Mātes piens* [Soviet Milk], Andra Manfelde's *Virsnieku sievas* [The Officers' Wives], Kristīne Ulberga-Rubīne's *Tur* [There], Laima Kota's *Istaba* [The Room], Arno Jundze's *Sarkanais dzīvsudrabs* [Red Mercury] etc.

2 N. S. Khrushchev (1894-1971)—the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1953-1964) and Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers (1958-1964).

of the past and re-assessing national historical memory, in this type of narratives the analysis of the “alien” is mostly orientated towards self-identification, namely, the perceptions about “oneself” (one’s people and nation) develop through the understanding about the “alien.” The “other” is then a social construction, which helps the establishing of the own identity (Zenelaga and Goga). Focusing on the “alien,” which due to various historical and political events influenced and to a great extent determined a life model, identity and self-confidence of another nation, create a deeper understanding about the “self” and history of one’s own nation: “[...] the construction of the O/other is fundamental to the construction of the Self” (Ashcroft et al. 156). In this way, the ethnocentrism of postcolonial literature manifests itself and “codifies and preserves the structures of its own mentality” (JanMohamed 19). In its turn (self)identity in this context may be defined as “a set of values, assumptions and meanings that guide an agent’s self-interpretations, [...] and a mode of differentiating self from other” (Todd).

Rukšāne, became known in Latvia’s literary space mainly through her literary works exploring the theme of feminine sexuality and intimacy. She “emphasizes woman’s dependence on her sexuality, thereby achieving a long-unseen popularity phenomenon in Latvian literature” (Cimdiņa 96). In the 90s of the twentieth century, the author composed basically poetry, but at the beginning of the twenty-first century Rukšāne realized herself in writing plays<sup>1</sup>, stories<sup>2</sup> and novels, as well as in translation<sup>3</sup> and journalism. In 2007, a feature film *Nerunā par to* [Don’t Speak about It] directed by Una Celma was produced, where, to reveal “psychological qualities of women on the Soviet territory” (Burve-Rozīte 3), motifs from two Rukšāne’s works—the debut novel *Romāniņš* [The Little Love Affair] (2002) and her second novel *Beatrices gultas stāsti* [Beatrice’s Bedtime Stories] (2002)—were employed. The author’s works provoked discussions, “but the reasons for them are the depicted sex episodes rather than the axiological nature of the novel” (Ceplis 59).

The center of Rukšāne’s attention has always been a female and her personal life story, usually depicted in a quite open manner, and frequently using a letter and diary form as a supplementary aid. The author’s protagonist is constantly seeking for something—trying to understand herself and her place in this world, she realizes herself in work and in the status of mother, desperately tries to meet the ideal

1 E.g. *Rīt atbrauks Florinda* [Florinda is Coming Tomorrow] (2001); *Es tev nepateicu visu* [I didn’t Tell you Everything] (2003).

2 *Kīpsalas putni* [The Birds of Kipsala Island] (2009); *Mīlasstāsti* [Love Stories] (2015).

3 E.g. Translation of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) for the staging in Daile theater (2003) by D. Rukšāne, book version in Latvian by D. Rukšāne and P. Prauliņš (2004).

spouse, actively changing partners. Rukšāne is interested in a woman who “likes to challenge old stereotypes, destroy the balance, endangering it by the unpredictable zig-zags of the primeval passion” (*Romāniņš* 49) and “to do everything that comes into her head” (*Beatrisas gultas stāsti* 11).

### **Peculiarities of the Novel’s Narrative**

The novel *Russian Skin* stands out against a backdrop of other writer’s works and appeals to a reader not so much by sensual peripetia, love triangles, but rather by its historical and documental orientation: it offers a panorama of life in Latvia of the second half of the twentieth century (harbor city Liepāja) and reveals the context of the Soviet power more in detail. In this novel, Rukšāne fully expresses herself as a psychologist and historian—an explorer of minute details and a master of disclosing them. The focus of the novel is on the life story of two women (mother Emīlija and daughter Meldra)—the struggle for a survival under the harsh World War II (WW2), postwar (Soviet) conditions, losing her first husband for mother and father for a daughter, marrying to get out into the world, seeking for their innermost self, work and, of course, falling in the abyss of romantic and sexual experience, specifically—mother’s forbidden love for a Russian (a representative of the Soviet power) and finally—milestone transformations on all levels of life.

Though the two women depicted in the novel reside together for a long time, they seem to be living in different temporalities—two parallel lives in two parallel worlds and, almost never coming into contact with one another: “The whole Meldra’s life passes alongside with mine like the tram rails, practically without any point of contact [...]” (*Krieva āda* 64). Mother devotes very little time to her elder daughter, and though she is fully aware about her negligence, sexual desire, lust, and passion outside her marriage gain the upper hand. Within this context, the sensual code brought into foreground in Rukšāne’s novel is of major importance, since it always appears when Emīlija is characterized: the emphasis is laid on some parts of a woman’s body (skin, neck, collar-bone), scents (smell of the skin, perfume *Cuir de Russie*—a distinguished oriental fragrance with a strong character—a symbol of the past memories, sensuality, fusion of masculine and feminine energies, as well as a link with Russia and the Russians; the image of the sea that symbolizes not only vastness and cyclic changes and natural rhythms, but also yearnings for adventure and freedom (mother’s passionate meetings with her lover in a cabin not far from the sea), the theme of swimming when “hair like waves, the back like sand, but hands like fishes” (*Krieva āda* 16), also watching Henrik Ibsen’s (1828-1906) symbolic play *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) that stands for the concept of *New Woman*

crucial in *fin-de-siècle* literature; epithets, metaphors and repetitions of lexemes related to horses and horse-riding (rider’s waxed leather boots, a sweaty and foamy horse, a mare with its tail sideways, “mares’ time”<sup>1</sup>).

The daughter, a calm and practical person by her nature, painfully suffers the dearth of mother’s attention and tries to accept the duties assigned to her: she helps her stepfather in building work, brings up her stepbrother and stepsister—mother’s illegitimate children (the fact the elder daughter finds out only several years later), she studies, starts her own family, gives birth and raises children, helps her husband to forget horrors he had experienced in *cheka*<sup>2</sup> cellars, and self-realizes working in a good position.

The differences in world perception between mother and daughter are revealed not only by the lack of a cordial communication between them, but also in priorities of life goals, including spatial priorities. Mother’s dream has always been the life in the urban space—initially in the capital Rīga, then at least in Liepāja, but not in the countryside where consumer goods and food-stuffs are in short supply. The utilitarian aspect is also the reason why she agrees starting a family with a man she does not love. In turn, the daughter from her first marriage, which broke down due to tragedies and deaths experienced during the war, is a child of nature who has always cherished the dream to dedicate her life to exploring the world, animals and birds, around her. In this respect, Meldra’s attempts to observe the life in a white tail eagle’s nest even being far from the countryside is worthwhile mentioning as this strong interest in nature is proven and emphasized again in the end of the novel, when the young woman leaves the city as a place of living for the countryside. This binary opposition “civilization” (urban world as an ideal environment for a mother) vs “nature” (untouched by a human’s hand and the rural environment as an ideal environment for a daughter) is stressed in the novel again by the above image of the eagle, this time made of metal, on the car belonging to mother’s second husband Vilis. Daughter’s attempts to grasp the world around her and mother’s controversial nature are revealed also by their choice of literature. If mother reads *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), one of the most important modernist authors of the twentieth century, then daughter focuses on the work of juvenile literature known for its lofty idealism and vivid imagination *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906; 1907) written by representative of Swedish Romantic revival Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940), the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature (1909). If the character of moth-

1 “Mare’s times” stands for female sexual instinct, the power of sexual desire, impulse and lust.

2 *Cheka* (Russian)—Soviet political secret police organization (officially known as All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Profiteering and Corruption).

er is a version of the *femme fatale* archetype—a feminist ideal of the New Woman that emerged in the late nineteenth century decadence and Modernism literature, then her daughter is portrayed as having more traditional female role than that governed by sexuality: she is concerned with hearth, home, husband, children, and native land, her femininity is the confirmation of her national identity and belonging. According to Jones, appropriate behaviour and “proof of patriotism” are defined by woman’s gender performance and feminine qualities that include “‘softer charms’ and ‘modest virtue’ of sensibility” (Jones 299).

### **The Cultural-Historical Background of the Depicted Events**

The strained relationships between mother and daughter as well as differences in their world perception and characters allow the author of this novel to describe the most essential events of the middle and the second half of the twentieth century in Latvia, showing their complex, controversial and unpredictable nature: “This war and chaos have ruined so much—people without the past, only with their destinies” (*Laimes kods* 40). Similarly, the writer ironically indicates that today the past of the Latvian nation has already become a myth, which requires reassessing: “This [French] perfume has become a legend. A unicorn. A total myth, like the whole past of our ancestors” (*Krieva āda* 221). Alexander Etkind, historian and cultural scientist, focussing on the impact of Soviet terror on cultural memory, emphasizes that either the true or the mythical prevails in human’s consciousness depending on a specific historic situation and the ideology of ruling power and power of ideology, thus “[b]orders between myths and truths tend to shift and curve from one political position to another and from one generation to another. These movements of truth in the space of memory comprise, in their own turn, an important part of cultural history” (Etkind 189-190).

Latvian author in her novel expresses the historical aspects through the feeling of loss, through the loss of freedom and destruction of the foundations of national culture:

[...] in a comparatively recent past we experienced the Second World War as well as more than 50-year-long occupation and the life in a totalitarian and communist state. During these years we had to live through the loss of almost all our freedoms and through an intensive and targeted destruction of the Latvian nation and culture. The Latvians were murdered, exiled to Siberia, and in turn, great masses of people from other republics of the USSR were settled in Latvia, and they enjoyed here economically and culturally more privileged

life than the local population (*Laimes kods* 16).

In *Russian Skin*, the life of both mother and daughter is determined to a great extent by the historical and political events in the country—WW2, post-wars years, life in Soviet Latvia (the date of the epilogue is 1983). The narrative offered to the readers is a peculiar return in the past which is compared by the author with Emīlija’s looking into the mirror: “This is only a moment. A moment of honour to the past [...]. She glances into the mirror and sees herself young. [...] Mother does not hear this, she is overtaken by mares’ time [the passionate past]” (*Krieva āda* 7-8).

The description of the plot is given as a sequence of two narratives written in the first person, when a flow of events is provided as a fragmented string from different—mother’s and daughter’s—perspectives. This allows the reader to look at one and the same events from different standpoints and, by relating them to one’s own experience, assess them more objectively. Mother’s and daughter’s life stories re-echo in destinies of other Latvian inhabitants (the Latvians, Jews, Russians mentioned in the novel) and are oriented towards having a resonance among the people belonging to the state and historical reality of that time. The author managed to achieve this aim by studying archive materials and periodicals, and via a survey conducted among the Liepāja people, including her own mother (Pusnakts šovs septiņos). The novel is dedicated to her parents and grand-parents, emphasizing the significance and influence of history upon destinies of three generations of Latvian families.

The many historical events made an impact on Emīlija’s life: the disappearance of her first husband Peter in the war, birth of a child, threats of being exiled to Siberia (“[people] were taken away, even children suffering from pneumonia” (*Krieva āda* 11)), burning down of her house, death of her mother and brother, moving “from one house to another, from one neighbour to the next, often having only a small place on the floor to sleep on” (*Krieva āda* 9-10), hard physical work “in the mire of the collective farm” (*Krieva āda* 16), as well as the job in the canteen and laying the table for banquets in Soviet Liepāja. Due to the impact of these events, a woman has to give up her great dream—to become a perfume master-chemist, because the immediate need to earn means to live on makes her choose a different (cook’s) profession.

Her elder daughter’s first knowledge about the past is based on the experience of her mother and her aunt: “[...] I know that there was war when I was very small, that people were shot dead like roebucks, that we have luckily escaped [...]” (*Krieva āda* 26). Though the consciousness of the naïve child still has fear of being sent to



Siberia, “[...] where bears and wolves live and eat people” (*Krieva āda* 19), mother’s stories about that time have not always been open and expanded enough, and therefore the daughter often feels confused—she is not even sure whether her father has indeed died and whether her mother has ever loved him. The girl lives in the idealized world to escape the duties imposed by her mother. Though she had not yet been able to systematize the information obtained independently, and in her mind characters from myths (Romulus, Rem, Apollo, Artemis) coexist with those encountered in life or seen in the neighbourhood (Spridzānu Sandris and Raimonds), as well as with famous political figures (Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev), nevertheless she gradually arrives at the understanding of the causal relationships and the fate of Latvia and its population. In her early childhood, she is influenced by the Soviet education system and for a while believes in the bright future of communism: “[...] all would smile and laugh—would run to work with joy, goods in shops would be free of charge. Wow—that would be life! [...] I am happy, I, too, am building communism. I am the future of our country. A Soviet child” (*Krieva āda* 59-60). The novel, in retrospective, reveals transformations and the development of self-identity of young people of that time. Daughter’s perceptions about the Russian nation in the novel are shaped mainly by listening to hostile stories of her friends and other persons who shared their views. The protagonist starts to participate in an illegal artist group, and they secretly meet to read and discuss literary works under the ban (for instance, they read prohibited in the USSR romantic novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1958)<sup>1</sup> by Boris Pasternak’s (1890-1960) published in the US). This is the way how the young girl shapes her perceptions about a family life and about the past of Latvia which has made a significant impact on many people’s destinies (including her own). Later, when she already is a wife and mother, she is full of hate for the Soviet system. A major factor for that—in KGB<sup>2</sup> cellars her arrested husband is tortured and his political position is influenced. She is also filled with hate for her mother who has 2 children from her Russian lover, and who starts a new family with another Russian after the first one has died in a tragic road accident. Unlike her mother, who has lost her way in the labyrinth of life, Meldra is able to cherish her dreams and, adhering to her own principles, she strives for fulfilling them.

### “One’s Own” and the “Alien” in the Novel

In the publicistic book *Laimes kods* [Code of Happiness], Rukšāne maintains that

1 The novel won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958.

2 KGB (Russian)—*Komitet gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti* or Committee for State Security was the main security agency for the Soviet Union from 1954 until 1991.

the Latvians are united “not only by a common geography, but also by traditions, history and mentality.” In author’s opinion, the dismal and reserved nature of the nation has been shaped by “the ruthless history of occupation years, and by the changeable and often severe weather” (*Laimes kods* 6-7).

The novel *Russian Skin* deals with the issues of national identity and holds a debate on “one’s own” and the “alien.” These problems become obvious through the nuances of relationships between the Latvians, Germans, Russians and representatives of other ethnic groups fixed by Rukšāne. The novel is permeated by the theme of Latvia’s occupation, stressing the disaster brought by both the German and the Russian army and political leaders. As the author comments in one of her interviews, the novel shows mainly one city (Liepāja) “where those army units came in, which extremely degraded that environment around themselves and were not the best example to show what the representatives of other nations should be” (Kušķe).

Worth mentioning is the fact that German soldiers, sometimes called “fritzs,” (*Krieva āda* 14) are those who during WW2 gave food to a young mother, who had given birth to a child in the city cellar and whose husband had got lost in the war while serving in the Soviet army, so that she could survive. The author sketches also a shocking example of Germans’ violence while she describes finding the Jews’ scalps hidden in the seat of the main heroine’s family car of the post-war period, which makes them immediately drown the car in the lake. At the same time, she reveals complicated and very painful aspects of Latvia’s history when Latvian men were forced to serve in the SS<sup>1</sup> units—Latvian legion and which they did in the hope to restore Latvia’s independence, similarly as the heroine’s second husband did. By looking back to the segment of Germans’ rule and actions in Latvia, the author depicts complicated individual’s and nation’s state of being “in-between” two powers. Delving into the process of self-analysis, the heroine questions herself if having a sexual relationship with Latvia’s invader (the Russian) equals to that with another invader (the German) and if that “treason” can and will ever be accepted, justified, and forgiven: “in German times we [women] hated those who [began intimate relationships] with ‘fritzs’” (*Krieva āda* 57).

The Russian aspect (as emphasized in the title) dominates in the novel and is highlighted in many and different variations—mentioning the historical personalia (grand duke Dimitriy Paulovich Romanov), the Soviet realia and trade marks (Moscvitch, Volga, New Year, Father Frost and Snow-White) and locations (Moscow, Leningrad), and on the level of characters (Emīlija’s first lover—a party member

1 SS units—German army divisions that were built up from non-German peoples. Latvian SS Volunteer Legion was formed in 1943 by Hitler’s order.

and communist Vitaliy, the second lover—gentle and silent Sergey, her friend Valya and others).

Benedikts Kalnačs maintains that “on a psychological level, disagreement with Soviet power always remained in place and generated feelings that can be attributed to colonial sensibilities” (Kalnačs 261). Throughout the whole novel, the Russians are referred to “state leaders” (*Krieva āda* 11), “communists” (49) and “occupants” (29), since they make people live in the “confounded Soviet Union” (55) and “under the Russians’ thumb” (66). In the war time, the Russians are described as “loudly bawling and laughing” (13), but under the Soviet power they are defined “the plague” of Latvian nation (49). Rukšāne lists several Soviet time realia outlined in the background of mother’s and daughter’s love stories—grown-ups’ and schoolchildren’s work on the collective farm, political propaganda to educate the Soviet youth, censorship and counteraction by literati-dissidents, arrests and harsh interrogations in the KGB cellars, replacement of religious holidays with secular celebrations, string-pulling, queues and the like.

The ban on holidays, and consequently on Latvian culture and Latvianness, during the Soviet period, and people’s resistance to this ban and attempts to secretly celebrate religious (e.g. Christmas) and national (e.g. November 18—Proclamation Day of the Republic of Latvia) holidays are essential aspects in the characteristics of this period: “Nobody says anything about holidays, but everybody knows all the same” (*Krieva āda* 75). It seems quite interesting that a Latvian woman Emīlija does not tell anything about celebrating religious holidays to her Russian lover, member of the Communist Party, who occasionally visits Soviet Latvia and whom she otherwise adores. Keeping silence about this is provoked for fear of being punished and publicly condemned, thus “other” is not domesticated:

I did not tell Vitaliy that our family celebrated Christmas—silently, with the dark curtains drawn, so that nobody could see the lighted candles. A girl, Meldra’s classmate, had revealed that their family attend church and celebrate [Christmas]. Meldra was really upset and told at home that the director had sent for the poor girl and her parents were asked to school, and then the girl was pushed in front of the classroom and deeply humiliated, and other children were sternly told to avoid getting involved in the matters of these religion obsessed people. Soviet people have the New Year and that’s that. No Christmas Old Man, there is Father Frost and Snow-White. (*Krieva āda* 73)

Under the Soviet conditions, the celebration of St. John’s Day/ Līgo also was pro-

hibited, but that day was used for the propaganda of international ideas: “We mingle among the celebrants of St. John’s Day—they are the Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarussians. All celebrate, all together” (*Krieva āda* 120).

It has been argued that identity is essentially not static but “dynamic construction of the self as a mental construct” (Oyserman et al. 69-70), thus “self-identity is a never-ending process” (Zenelaga and Goga 140). While discursively approaching literary works, it is important to take into consideration “self-perceptions of identity change” (Carter and Marony 256), the same as “the feeling of knowing oneself” (Oyserman et al. 70). The modifications of identity is the result of changes in the social and political environment, as well as various conflict situations (Todd). Consequently, the reasons for such change are often to be found “on macro-level contexts”—in the past, specific historical eras and events (Oyserman et al. 69; Sharma) and in impressions that store autobiographical memories (Verplanken and Sui 1504). In this context, identity, the same as cultural memory, may be interpreted as “a living realm which changes with history” (Etkind 189). Therefore, it is of great significance to record and analyse both the reasons for such a change and its consequences (including those depicted in literary works reconsidering the past events).

The events unfolding in the novel lead to gradual transformations in Emīlija’s identity and attitude toward others: from a deep hatred against the Russian “occupants” who had done great harm to her, her family and Latvian nation and had made a disastrous impact on Latvia’s identity, culture and character (“There was nothing in that shit-Russia, when he was a small boy, but we had our own state. With butter, caviar, salmon and lampreys, damn it!”) (*Krieva āda* 57) to the understanding that she not only accepts “otherness” (although instinctively determined by her vital necessity to give birth to a child from her “own” Russian<sup>1</sup>), but also expects some acceptance and understanding from the representatives of “one’s own,” i.e. the Latvian folk:

He is a party member, communist. [...] I want him. He wants me. He is a Russian. (*Krieva āda* 33)

#### HATRED, LUST, REFUSAL

[...] I hate myself. I am not able to resist you, you damned skin of the Russian!

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1 The theme of a forbidden love, betrayal and love triangle is developed in one more novel by Rukšāne – *Kāpēc tu raudāji?* [Why did you Cry?] (2003), where the Soviet ideological and social life context is offered (memories about deportations to Siberia, cult of leaders, ban on using the national symbols, shortage of food stuffs, and the like), though not to such extent and in so many details as in *Russian Skin*.

(57)

## SELF-HATRED, PASSION, REFUSAL

I wish that the Russian soul would pour into me, that the Russian blood would course in my child, that I would be the mother who allows the wonder of great love to come into the world. Of such great love that I don't give a damn that Vitaliy is a Russian! Such love that is above the plague of 'vankas' and 'dunkas.'

(86)

## ACCEPTANCE, LOVE, PROMINENCE

[...] I have two small Russians at home. Only I don't know why they are babbling in Latvian, and why they don't have horns and tails, why they are quite normal children, and they even don't kick a dog. (156)

## SUCCESSION, MATERNITY, "OTHERNESS" WITHIN ONE'S OWN

I wish Meldra would understand one day that the Russians are not only the evil, they, just like us, are extremely different—along with merciless chekists, communists, along with such beasts as Stalin and such idiots as the husband of Vilis' sister Zaporin, there exist also Vitaliys, Sergeys, Valyas—absolutely normal, nice people having the same dreams, hopes and attitude to life like us. (198)

## PLEA FOR ACCEPTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

The change in Emīlija's attitude results from her physiological instincts rather than from mind, and even the painful memories cannot stop it, on the contrary, by time this grows even stronger. Her lover attracts her by his beautifully smooth skin which is fragrant, with waxed boots, horse's neck and tobacco (a reference to the exclusive Chanel perfume *Cuir de Russie* used as leitmotif in the narrative) while that of her husband's—skin of a Latvian—seems disgusting and unacceptable for the woman (refusal of Latvianness).

It is important to note that the pencilling *cuir de russie*<sup>1</sup> by Līga Ķempe (b. 1975) on the book cover of the novel effectively supplements the narrative. It represents a pale female in the Latvian national dress and "jewelled" crown of Bārta district (Kurzeme region in the western part of Latvia) (the national code of Latvia/ "one's own"). Although she is looking straight forward into the distance and has only placed her palm onto the mirror glass, her profile picture is depicted as her reflection in the mirror with such striking differences as a flushed face, a tear dropping from her eye (a physical response to the extreme emotional state – anxiety, perplexity, embarrassment, anger, disappointment, fear etc.), and an element of Russian

1 See the pencilling on wood (2019) and the book cover in color in the artist's personal webpage: <http://ligakempe.lv>.

national dress *the kokoshnik*<sup>1</sup>—a halo shaped female headwear on her head (Russian code/ “the alien” that has become a part of one’s own). “National costume is one of the symbols closely connected with national cultural heritage and ethnic consciousness” (Karlsone 134). The headwear, both in Latvian and Russian cultures, is the cornerstone of the female folk costumes that originally symbolized the marital status: a crown in Latvia was worn by young single women, whereas *kokoshnik* in Russia—by those having entering into the marriage, i.e. on the one hand, they reveal a woman’s life cycle and the change of her status, a transition from maidenhood to motherhood, from innocence to maturity, on the other hand, the symbolic change of the headdress from that belonging to the Latvian to that also belonging to the Russian in the general framework of the double which involves mirror symbolism points out to revisiting and re-evaluation of the past that has irreversibly influenced the self and provoked transformations of self-identification. If Emīlija’s Russian lover as the representative of the “other” is not domesticated, the woman does surrender to some type of foreignization.

Thus, having once been born and belonged to the category of “one’s own” (Latvian), the mother’s figure emphasizes a human existence outside a single identity frame and eventually poses as the one including “otherness” within “self.” A wholeness embodying apparently incompatible opposites is presented as an example of inclusive identity and cultural fusion. Although the modified identity was perceived as a potential threat to “one’s own” and risk for the preservation of Latvian-ness in the circumstances affected by Soviet ideology and Russification, nowadays this complementary and non-exclusionary phenomenon (termed as “hybrid identity,” “double identity,” “multiple identity,” “hyphenated identity,” “shared identity,” “glocal identity”) is a typical feature of in-betweenness of a modern human (Kacane et al.; Kacane and Romanovska).

## Conclusion

The narratives of contemporary Latvian writers about the Soviet era in the history of Latvia are attempts to reconstruct the social reality and interpret collective traumatic experience and memories. In order to recover from trauma and the feeling of guilt that are based on memory, “looking back” on the dramatic events of the past and on everyday life in general, as well as resolving of disputable problem issues (also in relation to national identity, multiple/ inclusive identity, belonging a. o.) are

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1 *Kokoshnik* is one of the most iconic and intricately decorated items of Russian national costume that is associated with holiness of a woman who overcomes many life difficulties, her piety, and diligence (Thu 208).

promoted. By focusing on the individual dimension within the frame of the context of trauma and love (sexuality) and by reflecting historical events through a specific image, use of metaphors and symbols, in the novel *Russian Skin*, Rukšāne projects the dimension of collective memory and identity, which impacted by the external events (occupation, events of WW2, ethnic contacts etc.), undergoes significant transformations. Bearing in mind the fact that individual's world perception and socialization are to a great extent determined by such factors as the objective social structure, emotional identification with "others" important for "one's self," and self-identification (Šūpule), the writer enters into discussion on the changeability of identities and reveals reasons for and types of the appearance of inclusive identity in Soviet Latvia's everyday life. The novel belongs to the range of those literary works and conceptions of literary theories which define identity as a socially constructed phenomenon and which is liable to undergo modifications, resulting from multiform everyday interactions and individual's experience. The construction of individual's identity occurs in a constant correlation with the identity of other individuals. Regarding a narrative as a socially cultural phenomenon and tool through which structuring of human's relationships with the world around him and specificity of individual's thinking are revealed, the novel does not reproduce the past, but sooner interprets it by synthesizing crucial categories of time—the past, present and future, as well as by relying on such sciences as history, literary theory and psychology.

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