“The Poppy Blossom from My Native Land”
The Married Woman as Exile in Latvian Folk Poetry

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As carriers of an oral tradition, the singers of folk poetry rely on a repertoire of strategies for text generation that are dictated by the particular tradition in question. These include not just surface elements of text, such as ready-made sets of verbal formulae possessing a variety of useful metric patterns (Lord 1964), but also a whole hierarchy of traditional themes, motifs, images, and broad metaphoric systems. Paradoxically, the stereotypy of folk poetry does not exclude the possibility of original expression but only lends it a particular style and mood (Vīķis-Freibergs 1984). The thematic stereotypes of any oral tradition include not just a cognitive repertoire of topics of interest to singers and audiences alike but also a framework of emotional attitudes and prevailing “feeling-tones” which are equally conditioned by the tradition. In the present essay, I will look at one such traditional theme in Latvian folk poetry and show how its emotional treatment is very much a part of the traditional template. The songs I will consider belong to the genre of the Latvian classical folksong, or daina, which is a predominantly trochaic (with two dipodia separated by a caesura), two couplet (quadratic) song presenting a self-contained semantic whole, but such songs are often linked together to form longer compositions which relate to each other in terms of similarity or contrast. The daina is largely an oral poetic form and therefore displays various oral formulaic techniques, as well as being a rich source of ethnographic information, despite its general ahistoricity.¹ The main source for the texts quoted here will be the computer-accessible corpus of the Daina Data Base (*The Latvian Folk Song Data Base* 1982).

The theme of marriage as exile, experienced by every married woman in a virilocal peasant society, marks the dominant mood of these dainas as tragic, for they express the sense of irreplaceable loss that life passage entails. This imagined state however, is not merely symbolic; it is real. The married woman as exile longs for the “homeland” of her premarital state, but it is no longer open to her. Instead she is condemned to live in a foreign land to which she can never feel she fully belongs, and so, as do real and political exiles, she lives in this netherworld of homelessness and longing.
It must be stressed at the outset that this sense of the tragic in the dainas differs markedly from the definition of tragedy as generally accepted and defined in Western philosophical and literary traditions, yet tragedy in its common sense of deep psychological suffering is widely represented and subtly depicted there. The daina sense of the tragic is expressed in isolated lyric miniatures and deals with the everyday-life experiences of ordinary people. These experiences are neither catastrophic nor cataclysmic and not even unusual. Quite the contrary, they are perfectly normal and ordinary experiences, except that they happen to be so deeply painful in their essence that they become overwhelming, albeit not horrifying in the Aristotelian sense. The sense of tragedy in the dainas is linked to the inevitable events of life, those from which there is no escape because they have been decreed by Laima, the goddess of fate. They are woven into the fabric and pattern of life and cause pain that can be neither avoided nor alleviated, that can be only endured.

In the classical conception as formulated by Aristotle, on the other hand, one may speak of tragedy only in a narrowly technical sense, in referring to a very specific type of drama, which must also be a well-developed work of ample scope. Aristotle stressed in his Poetics that tragedy must arouse feelings of both horror and compassion and that either of these alone would not suffice. The tragic complications in Greek drama involve a change for the worse, a fall from grace or fortune, and it is in this sense that the word tragedy enters the English language towards the end of the fourteenth century (Steiner 1980):

Tragedie is to seyn a certain storie,  
As olde bookes maken us memorie,  
Of hym that stooed in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.  
(Geoffrey Chaucer, Prologue to “The Monk’s Tale”).

Traditionally tragedy is not for everyone but only for exalted personages, kings, or heroes, who are punished by the gods for their hubris. The latter has been frequently interpreted as heroes’ arrogant reliance on their own human powers, linked to their insufficient humility and submission to the gods, even though the experts still quarrel over the proper meaning and translation of this as well as the other nine terms in Aristotle’s famous definition (cf. Kaufmann 1969, chapter 2). Nietzsche ([1872] 1972) saw in Greek tragedy a unique blend of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, all true tragic heroes being but a reincarnation and an echo of the eternal tale of the suffering god. When seventeenth-century French dramatists such as Corneille and Racine created what they saw as a revival of the classical canon, however, the gods had completely disappeared from the scene and only a
moral conflict remained as the precondition for tragedy—a conflict between one’s sense of duty and personal emotions, especially the emotions of love. The Shakespearean interpretation of tragedy introduced yet a different slant, by describing the ways in which the fateful flaw in the character of a noble figure unavoidably brings on his destruction, and the debate about the essence of tragedy and the characterization of the tragic hero continues to this day with ramifications that are well beyond the scope of the present essay (Breuer 1988; Krüger 1973; Sander 1971). Reduced to its simplest terms, we may accept tragedy in Western literature as realized mainly in drama, in works of some magnitude and for the most part involving destruction of an uncommon, noble, or powerful person who is felled due to tragic complications arising from either his own mistakes, a misunderstanding, an unavoidable conflict, an unfortunate coincidence, a character flaw, or punishment by the gods. Western literary classicism has no place for ordinary people and events, and simple, ordinary folk may, at best, be viewed with condescending amusement. The very fact that they lack nobility inexorably excludes them from consideration as tragic heroes, for their original status is never high enough in the first place for any fall of theirs to assume tragic dimensions.

The passive interpretation of tragedy found in the dainas is in total contrast to Ortega y Gasset’s ideas ([1914] 1966) that it is necessary for a tragic hero to want and freely choose his own tragic path and that predestination by fate alone is not particularly tragic. It is also in contrast to the view that suffering caused by external events is only melodrama, as opposed to the truly tragic which must come from within (Breuer 1988, 50). The closest to the daina sense of the tragic can perhaps be found in James Joyce’s ([1916] 1977) perception of pity and horror roused by “everything that is serious and constant in the suffering of man.”

The fate of the married woman as exile best displays the sense of tragedy characteristic of the dainas. In the largely patriarchal, virilocal peasant society which is the source of the dainas, the fate of every woman predestines her to leave her native home upon marriage and move to her husband’s home, which is frequently far away and totally strange to her. This move is every bit as much of an exile as the fate of a noble Roman condemned to leave his beloved city for some remote, isolated island. The theme of the woman as exile is expressed in Latvian folk poetry in wedding and post-wedding songs sung from the perspective of the bride, and is treated largely in a tragic vein, with only occasional traces of humor and satire. Similar strains may be found in the traditions of other peoples, especially the neighboring Slavic and Finno-Ugric peoples, where ritual weeping by the bride and loud lamentations on her fate were not uncommon. In the Finnish Kalevala, for example, the whole twenty-second rune consists of wedding lamentations which have so many equivalents in the Latvian dainas that a quite similar canto could be constructed with the daina
materials. In spite of the widespread fashion of ritual lamentations in traditional wedding ceremonies, the tragic elements in the marriage and wedding dainas go well beyond superficial ritualistic gestures carried out for the mere sake of appearances. This state of exile, that is, is neither merely formulaic nor imagined, but a dreaded state that becomes each Latvian peasant woman’s fate. These dainas, therefore, seem rooted in genuine experience and present a remarkably convincing portrayal of a wide range of emotional states.

The motif of exile forms part of a general song cycle in which the life of a woman before and after her wedding is juxtaposed: the carefree and easy days of her childhood and youth are placed in sharp contrast to the heavy responsibilities and the onerous duties of her wifehood. This is the case in the following dactylic song, which condenses this conception of a woman’s fate in vivid, wonderfully exaggerated poetic imagery, involving a paradox and the inversion of a double set of contrasts (on the complex play of contrasts in the dainas, see also Viķe-Freiberga, forthcoming). In her early youth, while wearing her elaborately beaded maiden coronet, made of heavy metal, a girl feels so paradoxically light and carefree that she could cross the largest river in Latvia in one single leap. (Note that the text alliteratively speaks of a copper coronet, while archaeological excavations reveal mostly bronze). Later, although now wearing the light linen head-scarf of a married woman, she is so weighed down by the burdens of adult life that any leaping about is the farthest thing from her mind:

Ai manas zīlotas  
Liegās dienas!  
Es lēķus pārlēcu  
Pār Daugaviņu  
Ar savu zīlotu  
Vaŗ’ vainadziņu;  
Ar tautu līnātu  
Vairs nevare ļju. (24740)²

Oh my glistening days of lightness!
In a single leap
I could cross the Daugava,
With my beaded copper crown;
With a wife’s scarf,
I could leap no more.

The division of a woman’s life into two sharply contrasting time-spans carries with it the inevitable change from one place of residence to another. The rigidity of the forever-exiled woman’s fate, therefore, is quite accurate. Such a move was imposed by the existing social order and followed a regularity as fixed and immutable as the movements of the celestial bodies, each in its appointed place and season:

Kur vasaru saule tek,  
Tur tek ziemu mēnesnīca;  
Where the sun rolls in summer,  
There rolls the winter moon;
Where we grew up, dear sister,
There a stranger makes her home.

Very much the same idea may be expressed by reversing the elements in the
two pairs of contrasts. The observation, by the way, happens to be astronomi-
cally quite correct: the path traced by the summer sun across the vault of heav-
en is very similar to that traced by the winter moon. The reverse is equally true
for the other half of the year: the path of the winter sun is indeed similar to that
of the summer moon:

Where the sun rolls in winter,
There rolls the summer moon;
Where our sister grew up,
There she now visits her brothers.

The first half of each text thus describes a correctly observed phenomenon
in nature; the second half gives an accurate analog from the realm of culture. In
the same physical space of a given homestead, women exchange places, just as
the sun and the moon exchange their places in the same locations in the sky.
Those females who are born to any given home are destined to leave it and to
move away once they are grown up. Those females who will spend the rest of
their lives there must come from somewhere else. Girls are aware of this world
order from a very young age. As a result, a woman’s emotional attachment to
her father’s home, to her social surroundings, to her whole physical environ-
ment is, from the very beginning, veiled by the shadow of the forthcoming
unavoidable loss, a preenactment, so to speak, of the state of perpetual exile and
of a state of longing:

I’m in the fields at sunrise,
I’m in the fields at sunset:
I had hoped through hard work
To keep my father’s land.

According to a legal code set down in writing just after the conquest of
Latvian tribes in the thirteenth century, a father’s land could be inherited only
by his sons. A daughter—no matter how precious the land may be to her and no
matter how hard she has worked to till it in her youth—will have to leave it
behind on marrying.

Walking through the flax field,
I ever wished it God’s grace;
That was my fatherland, That was my dower share.

The old code of inheritance allowed a daughter only moveable chattels as her dower share. So long as she had any brothers, a girl could never have her father’s land, only the linen from the flax grown on it, that is, the linen garments in her dowry chest, woven from the flax allotted her from her father’s fields.

The foreboding of the expected moment of change and parting introduces a sad and resigned mood even in courting songs, but only those presented from the viewpoint of the woman. These are in total contrast to the courting songs which depict the young man’s viewpoint and which are often playful, jaunty and gay, and full of bravado and sung to sprightly, rhythmical melodies. The girl who is ready for marriage experiences mixed feelings: there is pride about attracting stately suitors, there is the anticipated joy of gaining the status of a well-married woman, but these pleasant feelings are clouded by an awareness of forthcoming departure to her life-long exile:

Es gan redzu, es gan redzu: I see it now, I see it now:
Vairs pie mātes nepalikšu: I’ll stay with my mother no longer:
Saņēm brāļi kumeliņus,
Saņēm brāļi kumeliņus,
Laiņ avota lejīnā. Leading them to the low-lying spring.
Es ieteku istabā
Pie māmiņas raudādama. Weeping, I run into the house,
—Ai māmiņa, mīļa, balta, —Oh mother, my dear white mother,
Vai es tevim apnikuse? Have you become tired of me?
—Ai meitiņa mīļa, zelta, —Oh daughter, my dear golden daughter,
Vai es tautas aicināju?
To dar’ tevis graznis pūrs,
Tavs ražens augumiņš. (14538 var. 2) Your lovely looks and fine figure.

While she may well be pleased and excited about the suitors’ arrival, the girl is already crying at the thought of separation from her mother. The paradox here, as the mother points out, is that the girl herself is responsible for this turn of events: her own feminine maturity and charm, not to mention the dowry as part of her birthright, have brought on this inevitable, if potentially painful, turning point in her life.

A striking feature of Latvian marriage and wedding songs is the almost total absence of any form of romance. The mere mention of liking a prospective
marriage partner, never mind loving him, is extraordinarily infrequent. The expression of deeper feelings or any mention of love are found only in a few isolated songs. One might attempt to explain this silence by the vaunted emotional restraint of Latvians or by a culturally conditioned reluctance to reveal deep and intimate feelings in public. This will not do as an answer, however, since women singers are not the least bit restrained in expressing affection for their mothers or brothers, nor the young men in singing songs of extravagant praise and fondness about their steeds! One of the reasons that romantic feelings were not expressed was the long-standing custom of open ridicule and savage chaffing at any visible signs of attraction between the sexes. But it is also possible that romantic feelings were not much felt in the first place, since for centuries marriage was seen as mainly an arrangement based on economic and practical considerations, having little to do with personal feelings in the modern sense. This type of attitude is evident in a string of sharply practical, if not cynical, dainas, such as the following:

Es neraugu, tautu dēls, What I look at, young man,
Tava dālja augumiņa; Is not your beautiful body;
Es skatos laucinā, I look at your fields to see
Vaj maizite tīrumā. (25912) Whether bread will grow there.

The absence of personal feelings toward the future husband could only exacerbate the pain of moving away from home after the marriage. In her new surroundings, the new bride would then have to contend not only with a strange and unloved location but also with strange and unloved people. In such a case, the absence of enthusiasm and of romantic feelings would become more than a mere literary mannerism: it would stem from the observation of genuine life experiences involving emotional coldness, therefore becoming a partly constructed and hence symbolic, but also real, state of exile:

Sasaluši dūnu purvi, Frozen are the oozy marshes,
Sasaluši ezerini, Frozen are the open lakes,
Sasalušu sirdi gāju Frozen was my heart on going
Tautiešam roku dot. (15458 var. 2) To put my hand in a stranger’s hand.

This is a chilling text indeed, where a woman starts the rest of her life with a frozen heart, devoid of the least bit of warm feeling toward her partner. The cold desolation of the frozen wintry landscape here becomes an echo of a woman’s emptiness and despair. The specific daina name for both a suitor and a new husband, tautietis (the one belonging to the people) or tautu dēls (the son of the people, or the son of strangers) is frequently used in direct opposition to
brother or brethren. The emphasis is clearly on someone belonging to an exogamous group of strangers, as opposed to true brothers and other kinsmen, who would have been ineligible as marriage partners. For this reason the term *tauti-etis* carries a semantic nuance of “alienness” which is similar (if not identical) to that implied in the English word for a stranger.

The fateful moment when the bride leaves the home of her birth for the last time is etched in a particularly vivid manner. The pain of the mother who sees her daughter departing to her own new life is depicted indirectly (as the French put it—*à la diagonale*—“on the diagonal”) through the bride’s request that her aunt and godmother perform the ceremonial braiding of her hair. Her own mother, too overcome by emotion, is simply not up to it:

| Krustu māte, mātes māsa,             | Godmother of mine, mother’s sister of mine,                      |
| Man galvinu saglaudat.               | Would you, please, smooth my hair.                               |
| Manas pašas māmuliņa                 | My own mother is unable to do it                                 |
| Asarām nevarēja. (16915)             | Blinded by her tears.                                            |

The reason the mother is crying is that she realizes this is the very last time she will be performing this small intimate gesture for her daughter. The normally insignificant everyday gesture thus takes on a tremendous emotional charge through its specific context. Indeed, in other texts, the daughter talks of not combing her hair for days after the wedding, so as not to undo the plaits braided for the last time by her mother. The consciousness that certain things, no matter how trivial, are now happening for the last time in her life, sharply focuses attention on the irrevocable changes that are currently unfolding.

One of the fundamental attractions of a wedding ceremony is that the whole wedding party acts as a sympathetic supporting cast in the private drama being played out in the bride’s life. The entire household of the bride shares in the preparations and in the pain of leave-taking. The dressing of the bride before her setting forth is performed as a solemn, public ritual, with the closest female relatives attending her, very much like acolytes in a religious service:

| Ai mana māsina,                      | Oh my dear little sister,                                       |
| Auj baltas kājīnas!                  | Pull on your stockings so white!                                |
| Pilna sēta svešu ūaužu,              | A crowd of strangers has filled our courtyard,                  |
| Vedīs tevi projām:                   | They have come to take you away:                                |
| Dzīs tavas gosūnīnas,                | They will drive away your cattle,                               |
| Vedīs tavu pūrīnu,                   | They will carry your dowry away,                                |
| Birs man gaužas                      | My tears                                                        |
Asarīnas
[Tautiņās ejot]. (16940) Will flow freely
[With your going away].

We have echoes here of the noble ladies of the Homeric epics, who never showed up in public without being framed by a female attendant at either side (see Nagler 1974). The bridesmaids of modern weddings also hark back to this very ancient and emotionally meaningful motif, even if their role has by now been reduced to its most superficially decorative aspects.

Over the five days or more of ancient Latvian wedding celebrations, the tragic and melodramatic moments are naturally only parts of a much larger whole. Gaiety and amusement must after all play the main role at a wedding, and satire becomes a major pastime. Even as the bride is being dressed in a noble and stately ceremony, her husband and his companions (the equivalent of modern ushers) urge her to hurry up, without a trace of sentimentality and without the least pity for her sorrow in leave-taking. “Gather up, oh young bride, all your junk and garbage,” calls out the groom’s party, and the groom urges his bride to hurry up so that his horse doesn’t catch cold while waiting for her to get ready! The groom and his party certainly don’t see anything sad about the wedding and may well feel some impatience at the bride’s emotional self-indulgence. In a traditional society, a young man loses nothing by getting married; he only gains a wife and a mistress for his household. His closest relatives as well have everything to gain: each will receive a wedding gift from the bride, their clan will be enriched by the bride’s dowry, and—to top it all off—an extra pair of free working hands will be added to their household. They have nothing to cry about.

The sad, elegiac songs come mainly from the bride and her relatives, even though they too are quite capable of switching over to a satiric tone whenever appropriate. An apt moment for satire comes when the whole wedding party moves from the bride’s parents’ home to the home of her husband, where the celebrations will continue for several more days. It was then a custom to mock and deride the new husband’s homestead and relatives in a ritualistic manner, using hyperboles which are integral to the chaffing songs, as in the following example:

Slaveni ļaudis, So famous a clan,
Plakana sēta, Such a flat set of buildings:
Tupu ļidu namā, I stoop through the door,
Rāpu īstāba; I crawl into the room,
Maizīti mīcīju, While kneading dough,
Ceļos metos; I crouch on my knees,
Jau govju kūtē To enter the cow-byre,
Uz vēderiņa. (25826) I creep on my stomach.
This song, with its interesting three-fold hyperbole, depicts with scathing mockery a homestead quite literally not lofty enough for the bride. The imputed flatness of all the farm buildings, one lower than another, would be of course a sign of poverty, implying a whole farmstead built with an absolute minimum of building materials. The hyperbolic crescendo of ever more undignified positions of stooping, crouching, crawling on all fours, and creeping flat on one’s stomach is a devastating way of “cutting down to size” the pretensions of the inhabitants of such buildings. While the wedding itself would offer many such moments of comic relief, once it was over, the bride would be on her own in a new and alien place, emotionally alone among virtual strangers. Not surprisingly, therefore, the most keenly felt sense of loss and exile shows up in the songs dealing with the bride’s first contacts with her new dwelling place. The feelings of alienation form a thematic motif which is expressed in a wide range of poetic images, each touching on some different aspect of the situation and revealing some added nuance with remarkable psychological precision. This whole subcorpus offers proof in flagrant contradiction to the gratuitous assumptions expressed in a textbook of modern psychiatry: “Where there is little or no choice of action in relationships, there is also a restriction on the possibilities of consciously experiencing a variety of emotions. In traditional societies, where relationships are more or less stereotyped, emotions remain unexplored and undifferentiated” (Leff 1981, 72). This supercilious attitude towards traditional societies harks back to the fashionable disparagement of folk poetry as “rude peasant strophes” by “learned” men in the seventeenth century (for examples, see Viķis-Freibergs 1988). Nothing could be more absurd than this naive condescension, which presumes that people in traditional societies must simply have had fewer and cruder emotions than ourselves.

The poetic imagery present in the songs of alienation and exile covers a spectrum of nuances that has nothing to envy the range of emotions presented by modern man (on the latter, see Oatley 1992). Furthermore, the dainas do not just paint static word pictures, but offer a dynamic, even cinematographic, juxtaposition of contrasts between the unlovable, strange, and alien land on the one hand and the beloved but lost fatherland on the other. Significantly, in the women’s dainas, the childhood home never is called by the patriarchal name of fatherland, but rather by matriarchal phrases which attribute the native homestead to a girl’s brothers, such as “in my brothers’ homestead” and “while living among [my] brothers”:

Zied brājos sētas mieti,  The fence posts bloom in my
brothers’ land,
Zied pelēki akmentini;  The grey stones are in blossom;
Tautiņš neziedēja  Nothing blooms in my husband’s home,
Ij sarkans rozū dārzs. (24008)  Not even the red rose garden.
It is a measure of the new bride’s sense of emotional alienation that even a bright red rose garden fails to arouse any joyous feelings in her. It cannot do so, for it blooms in the wrong place. The blooms of the alien place are unable to win a place in the exiled woman’s heart. The most insignificant stone or fence post, on the other hand, acquires a halo of beauty and blooms with the warm feelings it evokes, only because it is located in the right place, the one that had been home. During the worst part of the early exile period, the thoughts of the exile keep returning obsessively to the familiar, beloved place, to the childhood surroundings on which she had become imprinted. Behind a veil of longing and nostalgia, even the most ordinary details of the old home become exalted and glorified, and everything about it seems more lovable and beautiful only because it is now lost. In contrast, the new place is emotionally rejected only because it is unfamiliar; it is unloved because it is strange. The exile deliberately builds mental barriers within herself against any charm the new place may have. The past becomes, therefore, an imagined state of bliss, while the present offers only an unremitting sense of loss:

Gana augsti šie kalnini,  High enough are these hills,  
Gana zaļas šās birztiņas, Green enough are these groves,  
Vēl i tad nemīlēj Regardless—they can’t be loved  
Kā savā dzimtenē. (25914) As the ones in my native land.

The rejection of anything attractive about the place of exile is more than a passively negative reflex against new and unfamiliar impressions. The emotion is deliberately cultivated and nourished just as, after the death of someone close, everything is done at first to keep the pain of the loss alive. The very fact that the exile will not allow herself to be tempted and seduced by the beauty and loveliness of the alien land, is a major component of her tragedy. The forced exile thereby constructs her coping strategies to deal with personal loss. For a person who has defined her entire being as connected to her former environment, any attraction to her new environment would be an emotional betrayal, a betrayal of her own past, of her earlier self. Unfortunately, the attempt to strengthen one’s sense of identity by emotionally clinging to the past leads to a deadening of the emotions evoked by the current environment. This causes a deliberate withdrawal from many things that otherwise could have been a source of joy. If kept up too rigorously and for too long, such an attitude may create a chronic sense of anhedonia, the inability to experience joy or pleasure, which eventually may turn into real clinical depression.

The feeling of betrayal occasioned by any positive feelings towards one’s new surroundings becomes especially acute in political exiles who, having been forced to leave their homeland, feel it as their moral obligation to remain loyal
to it. In his novel *The Fog Rises over the Trent* (*Pār Trentu kāpj migla* 1966), the expatriate Latvian author Guna ārs Janovskis gives a splendid description of the long lasting irreconcilability of an exile, his categorical rejection of the local environment, raised to the point of pathology. The novel focuses on two Second World War refugees from Latvia who, just like the author, have gone to England in the late forties. In the final pages of the novel, the protagonist Arturs has just gone mad out of sheer despair and begins to howl like a wolf on the shore of the river Trent near Nottingham. A police ambulance arrives to pick him up, and the following dialogue takes place between Arturs and the local policeman:

—How long have you lived in England?
—I haven’t lived here. I’ve only been here.
—That’s the same.
—Eighteen years.

Herein lies the exile’s paradox: to seek his homeland, but to be condemned to the netherworld of homelessness, to have no place or time which is familiar, but to wander from place to place harboring an ideal and progressively mythologized place in his imagination. The married woman as exile suffers a similar fate: her brother’s home becomes the mythic homeland from which she is forever barred, made to live among strangers.

The policeman merely asks a routine question about place and duration of residence. But the exile objects to the word “live” precisely because he feels he has not lived while in exile, he has only existed or vegetated. It is only for the local man that being in the place and living there are one and the same. By stubbornly refusing to live fully anywhere but in his native land, the exile has cut himself off from every possible source of psychological nourishment, until nothing is left for him but the flight into madness. We may be very far here from the tragedies of kings who have lost their crowns or of classical heroes who have lost their battles, yet the sheer intensity of loss and pain is no smaller for the ordinary man who has lost everything that held any meaning for him. The transition from a familiar environment to a strange and alien one is described in the dainas through a wide array of poetic metaphors which are frequently traditional ones, forming modular units of text that are widely distributed in the corpus as a whole and may be found in a variety of distributional contexts. One such core metaphor is that of a flower or of a blooming tree, which is exploited within a wide range of poetic expression, either as a metaphor or as a metonym (see also song 24008, quoted above).

Veža lauzta ābelite
Ne ziedēja, ne lapoja;
As a metaphor for a woman, the formulaic image of the wind-broken apple tree can take on many nuances of meaning. Applied to a maiden, it can stand for the damage done to her reputation by malicious gossip (Viķis-Freibergs 1997). In the song just quoted, the newly married sister is belittled and criticized by her new in-laws to the point that she withdraws into mutism. This is a vivid, poetically effective detail which, moreover, corresponds to the symptoms of a clinically depressed person. Significantly, these poetic images, sanctioned by tradition and used creatively in different variations, lose neither their expressiveness nor their poetic impact through being repeated but rather acquire some new nuance of meaning in each new context. Especially effective is the moving detail of the blossom, gripped in the palm of the hand and carried along after leaving one’s native land. This technique, an indirect and subdued manner for expressing a deeply tragic and painful experience, is characteristic of the metonymic style of expression of the dainas (Viķis-Freibergs 1973):

*Kas šī zeme par zemīti,*  
*Ka ziedīpi neziedēja?*  
*Es atnesu saujiņā*  
*Savas zemes pureniņu. (25923)*  
——Sveši ļaudis, sveša zeme,*  
*Kur bij man ziedu raut?*  
*Savas zemes magoniņu*  
*Saujā nesu salocitu. (2592 var. 3)*

*What kind of land is this*  
*Where the blossoms don’t bloom?*  
*I brought clutched in the palm of my hand*  
*A marsh marigold from my own country.*  
*An alien people, an alien land,*  
*Where am I to pick blossoms?*  
*A tiny poppy from my native land*  
*I carry folded in the palm of my hand.*

Emotional attachment to the most minute details of one’s physical setting is very characteristic of traditional Latvian culture in general. One would not expect to find the same intensity of attachment in the folklore of hunters or shepherds. For nomadic tribes who move around constantly while tracking game or seeking new pastures for their flocks, attachment to a particular landscape—this or that kind of tree, let alone a specific, concrete tree, bush, or flower bed—would not be as likely. If one lives on a farm, however, every detail of the familiar landscape becomes integrated into the personality; it becomes just as significant a part of the conscious “self” experience as the awareness of one’s clothing, body movements, or thoughts and feelings. Torn away from her habitual environment, a sedentary person experiences a severe
mental amputation, quite unknown to a nomad, or indeed to the modern city dweller, who can carry with him much of what is constant in his material environment or for whom one city street is very much like any other. For a nomad, home is where the tents are pitched at that particular moment; for the modern suburbanite, a move might become the excuse to upgrade the furniture and do some redecorating. But a farm girl, on having to leave her home, would like to take along even the birch groves which were such a striking component of her native landscape. Indeed, it is hardly a coincidence that birches were also the first trees which the Second World War Latvian refugees tried to plant in front of their new homes in the New World:

Priedes vien, egles vien, Nought but pine trees, nought but fir trees,
Kur tautiņas mani veda; There, where my in-laws are taking me;
Brāļi dotu bērzu birzi, My brothers would give me a birch grove,
Kaut varētu līdzi vest. (25934) Would that I could bring it along.

The pain of losing her native home is intensified by the married sister’s resentment of her brother’s wife, a newcomer who has taken her original place, and is presumably enjoying all that was desirable and beautiful there:

Staigā mārša, zied rozītes The roses bloom, my sister-in-law walks
Pa bāliņa pagāmiņu; In the yard of my brother’s homestead;
Es staigāju raudādamā I walk crying bitter tears
Pa tautieša purmalām. (25947) Along my husband’s swamplands.

Besides her longing for the familiar landscape, and for everything in it to which she has been emotionally attached, the sense of exile of the new bride is intensified by longing for her relatives, always contrasted with the strangers of the new place. In her efforts to get used to her new environment, she has to learn to get along with its permanent inhabitants—those who have always cared for it and loved it, and who will receive the newcomer with more or less covert hostility:

Kas tā tāda tautu meita Who is this strangers’ daughter,
Mūs’ maizišes nesējiņa? Bringing us our bread?
Ne tā plāva, ne tā kūla, She neither reaped nor threshed,
Ne likuse klētiņā; Nor brought it to the granary;
Cits plāvējs, cits kūlējs, Others reaped, others threshed it,
Šī maizīti iznēsā. (25085) Now she’s the one to hand it out.
As seen in the dainas, it isn’t always easy for the in-laws to accept the stranger, and in their dislike and surliness they may become sharp-tongued or even cruel. For that reason, the sister longs for contact with her own to such a degree that a visit by her brother arouses a touchingly childish joy and is described in terms of naive exaltation:

Tiltinš ribėja, The bridge is rumbling,
Podziņas skanēja: The buttons are tinkling:
Jāj mans brālītis My brother is riding
Māsiņas raudzīt; To visit his sister;
Viksēti zābaki, His boots are polished,
Rīņķoti kažoki His fur coat is adorned,
Misiņa podziņas Little brass buttons
Cepures galā. (26732) Embellish his hat.

Finding oneself alone among strangers produces a sense of vulnerability, of being subject to the will of others. But if the in-laws are so hostile that they scare away any visitors, the sister’s relatives may not come even when their presence would be needed the most:

Aiz ziemelā auksta vēja Because of the cold northern wind
Ozoliņi nezāloja; The oak trees don’t sprout any leaves;
Aiz tautieša bārgumiņa Because of my husband’s sternness
Nenāk mani bālelini. (26677) My brothers don’t come to visit me.

The intentional scaring away of the young wife’s relatives does not happen without a deeper reason: oppressors, big or small, whether mere bullies or entire repressive regimes, are wary of observers or witnesses to their actions. When the oppressed realize that nobody knows nor cares about their plight, that they have been forgotten by man and God alike, they become the perfect victims. There is nothing like a sense of abandonment to make a person all the more pliable and passively accepting of tyranny.

Šķiet saulīte netekot The sun seems unmoving
Miglajā rītiņā; On a foggy morning;
Šķiet Dievinīs neredzot, God seems unseeing
Ko man dara sveši ļaudis. (9130) Of what these strangers do to me.

Yet sometimes it is enough for the oppressor to become aware that a person has a protector, that somewhere there are people who care about her fate and well-being, even while she remains totally dependent and helpless in her current
situation. This may be sufficient to restore some degree of restraint in those who had become carried away by their sense of unbridled power. One is reminded here of the political dissidents in Soviet labor camps who found themselves treated just a little better if they started receiving a steady stream of letters and cards from abroad. In former times, brothers were a married sister’s only possible protectors; in the worst-case scenario, they had to teach a lesson to their abusing brother-in-law at the point of a sword:

Ieblakām bēри tek, The bays trot side by side,
Dusmām jāja bālenipherició, The brothers ride in anger;
Lai sargās tās tautīnas, Let those in-laws beware
Kas māsių niecināja. (26200) Who are slighting their sister.

Of course, trying to solve their sister’s difficulties through a bloody confrontation solves nothing for, as a song puts it so cogently: who will feed the sister, and who will feed her children? Nonetheless, a reminder that the sister is not alone in the world, that her relations are ready to defend her, may elicit a little more respect toward the sister and a little more caution in attacking her. Where nothing is done to stop aggression against married women, violence may escalate to the point of burning a woman alive in patently rigged kitchen “accidents,” as in contemporary India where such holocausts have become endemic. Where the threat of retaliation exists, the victim gains solace from this knowledge, and this would probably contribute to her psychological resilience:

Klusu mani tautas rāja, My in-laws scold me very quietly
Lai nejuta bālenipherició; So that my brothers won’t hear;
Vai zemīte vāku vāzta, The earth isn’t covered with a lid,
Jutīs mani bālenipherició. (13725) My brothers will find out anyway.

Among the metonymic details which put the new husband’s household in a negative light, there is the telling motif about the lack of food to be put before guests. The image is that of a sister who is deeply distressed at being unable to put any food on the table when her own family come to visit her. In the following text, the reason seems to be extreme poverty—there simply is no food—while in others there is a hint that the mother-in-law, in her meanness, won’t allow her daughter-in-law access to the larder. In either case, being unable to fulfill the most elementary laws of hospitality (which require serving food to a guest), would be a situation of extreme shame for the sister, in addition to her sorrow at not being able to show her affection and appreciation for her brothers’ visit:
Atsėžos raudūdama I sit down weeping
Tautu galda galiņā: At the end of my husband’s table:
Atįį mani div’ bāliņi, My two brothers had ridden over,
Aizįį abi nemieloti; And left without being served;
Nava tautu klētiņā In the granary of this place
Vienas auzu senalinā. (16681) There isn’t even a single oat husk.

While the sister becomes an exile through her marriage, to the relatives who remain behind she becomes the departed one, both in the literal and in the euphemistic sense. As the French put it: “Partir, c’est mourir un peu” (to leave means to die a little). Upon her marriage, the sister enters a new phase of life from which there is no return, just as there is no return from death.

Aiziedami bālelini, Upon leaving, oh brothers,
Māsai acis aizsieniet, Put a blindfold over your sister’s eyes,
Lai celinā tā neredz, So that she doesn’t see her way back,
Pakaļ skriet bāļiem. (26179) So that she can’t follow you home.

The blindfold would be a dramatic way of impressing upon the sister that running back home to mother was simply not an option in this society. In some wedding rituals the footprints of the sister are trampled out, just as was done at funerals after the deceased had been brought to the graveyard:

Nēnac vair, tu māesi Don’t come any more, dear sister
Uz maņiem ciemoties; To visit me here;
Lai aizuoga taevi celi Let the paths that you followed
Ar sorkonu abuolien. (27518 var. 1) Grow over with red clover.

While there is still the possibility of seeing each other occasionally, there is no real possibility of return. The married woman is definitely out of the house and on her own. One can no more return to a past state from the present than one can return from the dead. Even visiting is not always a simple matter, for many obstacles, physical or psychological, can stand in the way:

Brauc, brālīti, tu pie manis, Come, dear brother, to visit me,
Es pie tevis nevarēju; I cannot go to you;
Tev priekša ledus kalni, Hills of ice lie between us,
Man nav kalta kumeliņa. (26688) I have no steed that’s shod.

Even when the sister does come back to visit her brother’s homestead, everyone knows that it is for a short while only. Although this is her native land, this is
no longer her place and there is no way she can remain there. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the place of the one who has left has been filled long since. Just like the shades of departed ancestors (velļi) during their allotted visiting time during the mists of autumn, she may come for a short visit and even share a meal with the members of her former household. But soon it is time for her to return to her exile, which has now become her permanent home. No one understands better than the exile Heraclitus’s statement that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. Returning to one’s former dwelling place, one discovers that during one’s absence the homeland also has changed, that time hasn’t stood still there either. And through change it has become different and strange. It is no longer the same, familiar, beloved landscape for which one had sorrowed so painfully and so long:

Maldīties maldījos I lost my way over and over
Sava tēva tīrumā; In my father’s fields—
Kur atstāju tīrumiņu, Where I once left an open field,
Tur atradu bērzu birzi. (26513) There I now found a grove of birches.

As time goes on and the separated family members each lead different lives, their former feelings of closeness may slowly fade and possibly disappear altogether. All that remains might be the nominal family ties, possibly recognized at a formal level, but no longer felt with any degree of true emotion of closeness:

Vai tādēļ zema saule, Is the sun no longer a sun
Kad aiz kupļa ozoliņa? When hid by a wide oak-tree?
Vai tādēļ ne māsiņa, Is a sister no longer a sister
Kad aizveda tautiņās? (23886) When she’s been married away?

It is painful to realize that relations have changed with those who have remained in the old homestead, even the closest among them. A girl who has been used to being her mother’s little sweetheart now finds herself treated like any other guest, even if it is with the symbolic gesture of hospitality of raising a chair for her:

Māte mani mazas sauca: When I was small, my mother called me:
Meitenīte, meitenīte; My little girl, my little girl;
Neilgami laicināmi: Not long afterward:
Celiet krēslu, vieša nāk. (26549) Set out the chair, here comes a guest.

Nothing could be more painful than for the insider to become an outsider, whether it be for the daughter of the house to be called a stranger, or for the
political exile to be treated quite literally as a revenant ("one who returns," but also, of course, French for "ghost"), a visitor, or "a tourist" when returning to her native home. An already painful situation then becomes particularly galling if the speaker turns out to be someone who has come there from outside, as is the case with a brother’s wife:

Mārsā man krēslu cēla: My brother’s wife lifts a chair for me:
—atse¯dies, ciema sieva; —Do sit down, guest woman;
Te piedzimu, te pieaugu, Here I was born, here I grew up,
Nu māršiņas ciema sieva. (26593) Now to this woman I’m stranger and guest.

Returning to one’s former dwelling place is painful for any number of other reasons, for example, seeing that work which you would have done well has remained undone or is being done poorly:

Ne runā ¯t nerunāju I spoke not a word
Ar bra¯l/iundotted sˇa liundotted gavin¸u: To my brother’s wife:
Bij manam bra¯l/iundotted tim My brother was wearing
Melns kreklīņš mugurā. (26646) An unwashed shirt.

Another cause of pain is the inability to help the relatives who have stayed behind, the impossibility of doing anything permanent to change their circumstances. Any number of chores and duties, which would have been the daughter’s responsibility had she stayed on in the household, may either remain undone, or place an undue burden on her mother:

Žēlumā nevarēju I can’t bear the pain
Gar māmiņas sētu iet: Of passing my mother’s home:
Mauj gosnin ¸as nedżerušas, Unwatered, the cows moo,
Maļ māmiña raudādama. (26656) Weeping, mother turns the hand-mill.

The concentrated pain and even the bitterness evinced in the dainas about the married woman as exile offer a dramatic counterexample to the frequent misconception about lyrical folk poetry like the dainas as a sort of poetic luth moncorde—innocuous little verses chirping prettily on a single, naive note of unrelieved optimism. The dainas actually sing about the full range of human experience in all its various shades and nuances. They explore the full range of emotions, including the negative ones: pain, longing, disappointment, resentment, anger, rage. Negative emotions are neither bowdlerized nor euphemised, but are described with a faithfulness bordering on clinical precision. To a certain
degree, folk wisdom even allows the sufferer to deliberately pick at emotional scars and to poke at open psychological wounds, so that emotional catharsis may take place. By allowing the emotions to be freely expressed and vented, the pain they cause slowly subsides and fades out in due time.

In lyrical folk poetry, individual experience is never presented as unique or isolated in existential solitude. Everything that happens is part of a larger lawful system where individuals conform to the rules that govern society, just as in nature everything follows the rules of the physical universe. Certain experiences, happy as well as sad, are inevitable constituents of human existence. Certain others, equally inevitable, pertain more specifically to the female role. Inasmuch as it is a cause of pain, this inevitability may confer a tragic dimension to ordinary human experience. Yet inasmuch as it has been shared by countless others over the centuries, that same inevitability may also become a source of comfort and solace and start the process of healing whereby grief is overcome and loss accepted.

Although the content of the dainas is inseparably linked to the conditions, processes, rituals, and material objects typical of their time and place, human emotions and experiences are depicted so convincingly and vividly in them that they can be transferred with surprising ease to quite different contexts many centuries later. Thus the songs about the married woman as exile describe many nuances of feeling which the descendants of these women, the Latvian political exiles of World War II, would readily recognize as precisely their own. Folk poetry, to the extent that it is good poetry, is able to confer symbolic force to even the most stereotyped of traditional images so that, reaching beyond their anchoring in the time and space of their creation, traditional oral texts may become timeless and universal.

NOTES

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1. For a fuller discussion of daina poetics and the daina’s place in Latvian culture: Vīķis-Freibergs 1981.

2. The numbers given in parentheses after each text are the identifying classification numbers which they bear in the original volumes of Švābe, Straubers, and Hauzenberga-Šturma (1952–56).

WORKS CITED


