

# Otherness and Alienation in Jana Egle’s Fiction

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**Abstract.** The Latvian writer and poet Jana Egle devotes special attention in her texts to people who are perceived by society as “others”. Such individuals are frequently regarded as anomalous by those in their immediate vicinity, which often results in a sense of detachment and disconnection. In her short fiction, Egle examines a range of forms of otherness, including individuals from diverse national backgrounds, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and those facing social disadvantage. Adults are frequently influenced by long-standing stereotypes and traumatic experiences, whereas children tend to be more receptive to forming close relationships due to the absence of such biases. This article seeks to examine the manifestations of otherness in Egle’s works through the lens of the self-other binary and the insights gleaned from contemporary researchers on identity issues. Egle adroitly depicts the tenuous and nebulous border between the self and the other by exploring the inner realms and experiences of the marginalised. Through catharsis, she fosters a sense of proximity between these “others” and the reader. Despite portraying tragic scenarios, she maintains a quality of levity that is challenging to articulate but perceptible.

**Keywords:** self-other binary; otherness; alienation; identity; Jana Egle; contemporary Latvian literature.

## Introduction

Every literary work is an expression of the value system of a particular era and a reflection of identity. By creating a unique artistic world in their fiction, writers reproduce their subjective and collective perceptions (Romanovska, 2020, p. 358). Jana Egle’s fiction is no exception as it presents social problems and draws the reader’s attention to current issues. It should be noted that Egle is the only modern Latvian writer who consistently explores the theme of otherness and alienation in her works.

Egle (1963) is a Latvian poet and writer known for her poetry collections *Dzirdēt noklusēto* (Hear the Silent) (2002) and *Ledus debesis* (Ice Sky) (2023), as well as her

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short story collections *Gaismā* (In the Light) (2016), *Svešie jeb Miļenkij ti moj* (Others or Miļenkij ti moj) (2018), *Dzimšanas diena* (Birthday) (2020), and *Latvju pacients* (Latvian Patient) (2023). She has been awarded the Latvian Literature Annual Award (2017), the Liepāja Culture Award (2017, 2019), and the Egon Līvs Krasta ļaudis Award (2020) (Literatura.lv). Egle spent most of her life (1985–2017) as a preschool teacher and director. She acknowledges that she began writing relatively late, during a difficult time when she was left alone to raise two children. Egle began with poetry, noting that this was the only acceptable form of expression in Latvian literature for a long time. She moved on to writing prose by accepting the challenge to participate in a prose reading competition, after which she was offered to publish her work with Mansards Publishing House. After the competition, Egle began her literary career with short forms, as her workload did not allow her to devote herself to longer forms. While writing, Egle becomes fully immersed in the plot but eventually is forced to return to reality. She admits: “Most of my stories are from life, and they all live inside of me” [Translation mine – A. R.] (Liepajniekiem. lv, 2023). Egle’s stories are usually built on a strong system of prototypes, where real-life episodes become the basis of the plot. These episodes may be inspired by her own experiences, other people’s stories, or news material.

The author emphasises the importance of the theme of lost connection and alienation from her point of view. She acknowledges being influenced by Johann Hari’s work, *Lost Connections*, which discusses ten years of research in the field of mental health. This philosophical study makes a compelling case for how disconnection from meaningful social ties and community support contributes to the epidemic of depression and anxiety in modern society (Hari, 2018). Hari argues that societal structures and cultural norms that prioritise individualism and competition over community and cooperation exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation, fostering a sense of otherness among individuals who do not conform to prevailing norms of success and happiness. He concludes that the cause of almost everything we suffer from is a broken connection that is difficult to rebuild on our own.

Similarly, Egle (2018a, fourth cover) reflects, “It is the intimacy that a person needs the most. With another person—mother, child, lover, friend. Real, living, and sensitive bonds that hold each other tightly and give strength to support each other. What happens when one of the bonds suddenly breaks, freezes, or maybe never existed?”

In many of her works, Egle portrays these different situations in which otherness and alienation enter human relationships. Although her style is decidedly neutral and the author’s position is only indirectly implied, the vicissitudes in the lives of the characters she depicts are often emotionally generalised in the reader’s perception. The situations and realities described are so recognisable that the self-other binary, in numerous variations, imperceptibly intersects with the boundaries of the literary work and begins a life of its own in the reader’s consciousness, prompting us to reflect on the self and the other in our own lives. According to the writer D. Rukšane, “as always apt, as always painful, as always darkeningly bright, and this time also disturbing, Egle leads us from the first glance

into everyday situations that turn out to be local human dramas. Stories that fascinate and move” (Diena, 2020).

Egle is also a writer with an active social position. Through her literary works, she skilfully draws the public’s attention to the issues we do not address in our daily lives until they affect us or someone close to us. According to the writer L. Dreiže (2019),

Egle encourages the reader to search for answers to the questions: How do people turn into others? How do family ties break and disappear until only tangled threads remain? And how to find a way back to another person; is this even possible? Although none of these questions is easy to answer or even easy to think about, Egle addresses them masterfully, reaching into the soul of the characters and arranging what is found there on paper in strings of letters and words that are impossible not to follow to the end. Even when the last sentence is read and the book is closed, the lump in the throat and Alka’s song in the ears do not fade away.

This article analyses the manifestations of otherness in the works of the Latvian writer Egle by applying the theory of the self-other binary theory and the insights of modern identity scholarship. The goal is to bring to light the issue of otherness and alienation in modern society through literary analysis. To that end, various complementary methods of modern literary and cultural studies are used: structuralism, imagology, semiotics, poststructuralism, and literary anthropology, as well as insights from identity studies, postcolonialism, and Marxism. The basic methodologies used in the analysis were structuralism and semiotics. The analytical approaches offered by these methodologies provide a possibility to view the text as a structure, focusing on the individual and their relationship with the surrounding space, society, and themselves, as well as to distinguish the most important binary oppositions within it.

## 1. Theoretical framework

In the social sciences and humanities, the concept of “otherness” is a central lens for understanding the dynamics of identity formation, power structures, and societal relations (Said, 1978, p. 3). Rooted in philosophical discourse and elaborated in various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, the notion of otherness encapsulates the complex interplay between self and other, belonging and exclusion, and familiarity and alienation (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). The origins of the concept of otherness can be traced back to philosophical inquiries into the nature of identity and difference, and it is closely related to the self-other binary. The experience of world history shows us the eternal confrontation between self and other, which manifests itself in various forms such as war, ideological struggles, aggression, political campaigns, and migration. The self-other binary is ancient, universal and relevant in different spheres of human existence.

In theoretical literature, various terms are used to describe the binary opposition between self and other, such as “concept”, “archetype”, “opposition”, “juxtaposition”, and

antinomy. This article favours the term “binary” because it signifies opposing phenomena while emphasising their unity. In addition, this term does not exclude the possibility of change and development.

The self-other binary emerged early in human existence and has remained relevant in culture for millennia. The emergence of new aspects and meanings of this binary enables it to regain importance today, as determined by the developmental trends of society. First, the processes of globalisation in the modern world erase differences and particularities, thus blurring the boundary between the self and the other. Consequently, the quest for personal identification and the identity of diverse social groups and communities has become more relevant. Second, the prevailing condition of modern society is the loss of connection and alienation, which often leads to mental discomfort and depression. In order to regain mental balance, the self must be redefined, but self-definition takes place through the demarcation of the boundaries of the other and vice versa.

The distinction between the self and the other is based on the level of shared perceptions, referred to as the “generalised other”. This sociological term, coined by Mead (1934), describes the internalised sense of the collective expectations and attitudes of society as a whole. According to Mead (1934), the self develops through social interaction and the internalisation of societal norms and values. The “generalised other” represents an individual’s understanding of shared behavioural expectations and norms within their community that guide their behaviour and self-concept. This concept is central to Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, in which the self emerges from social interactions and adapts to the perspectives of others. By imagining how they are seen by the generalised other, individuals can anticipate social reactions to their actions and shape their behaviour in accordance with social norms and expectations.

The idea of the other in European philosophical discourse became particularly relevant in the 20th century when the concepts of the stranger/alien were developed within the framework of phenomenology and existentialism. However, even the ancient Greeks were interested in this idea, as seen in the works of Plato and Aristotle. In more recent times, this interest has been expressed in the writings of Rousseau, Kant, and Fichte. This was related to the need to develop an attitude towards representatives of foreign religions, other nations, and cultures.

The concept of self/other is originally attributed to Hegel (1793) in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), where he emphasises the dialectical process of recognition, in which the self attains self-consciousness through its encounter with the other. This binary was later explored by Berdyaev, Waldenfels, Husserl, Buber, Simmel, Ortega y Gasset, and Sartre. Various theoretical frameworks have been developed by building on these philosophical foundations to explore the dynamics of otherness.

The binary of self and other is a fundamental concept in structuralism and semiotics, underpinning how meaning is constructed in language and culture. Structuralist theorists, particularly Saussure (1916), emphasised that meaning is derived from the relationships between elements in a system rather than from the elements themselves. This relational aspect is evident in the self-other binary, where the identity of the self is defined in contrast

to the other. This binary is crucial in semiotics, as it reflects how cultural codes and signs function by categorising and differentiating elements – a process highlighted by Lévi-Strauss (1963) in his analysis of myths and social structures.

Poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault (1978, p. 22) and Derrida (1978, p. 27) critique essentialist notions of self and other, deconstructing binary oppositions and emphasising the fluidity and contingency of identity categories. Foucault's concept of "biopower" illustrates how regimes of power produce and regulate the other through mechanisms of discipline and normalisation. At the same time, Derrida's notion of "difference" underlines the inherent instability and indeterminacy of meaning, complicating attempts to fix and essentialise identities.

In addition to cultural and geopolitical contexts, social differences such as class, caste, and socioeconomic status represent another dimension of otherness (Marx, Engels, 1848, p. 32). These social hierarchies and divisions shape individuals' access to resources, opportunities, and social recognition, perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing power asymmetries. The works of Marx and Engels, for example, explain how capitalism generates and perpetuates class-based otherness by bringing the bourgeoisie and the proletariat into antagonistic relationships, with the former dominating and exploiting the latter.

Said's (1978, p. 37) groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, illuminates how Western representations of the Orient constructed the other as exotic, inferior, and subjugated, reinforcing colonial power dynamics. Bhabha's (1994, p. 115) concept of "hybridity" further complicates the notion of otherness by highlighting the interplay of difference and similarity, underscoring the agency of marginalised subjects in negotiating their identities within dominant discourses.

In today's globalised world, characterised by unprecedented mobility, migration, and interconnectivity, the concept of otherness has taken on renewed significance. Issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, and social class continue to shape individual and collective identities, often leading to processes of "othering" that marginalise, stigmatise, or exclude certain groups (Butler, 1990, p. 45).

Research on the self-other binary in fiction has a rich history, with scholars exploring how this dichotomy shapes narratives and character identities. One of the earliest significant studies in this area was conducted by Girard (1965) in his work *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, where he examined how characters in novels define themselves in opposition to others, creating a cycle of mimetic desire. Girard's analysis of self-other dynamics laid the groundwork for subsequent literary studies focusing on the role of identity and difference in fiction.

Many extensive, in-depth studies in different countries and languages have been developed using feminist and post-colonial approaches. Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex* critically examined how women have been historically positioned as the other in relation to the male self. This concept was later expanded by literary critics like Gilbert and Gubar (1979) in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where they analysed how female characters in 19th-century literature were often portrayed as either angels or monsters – extremes that defined them as other in a patriarchal society.

In the 1970s and 1980s, postcolonial scholars such as Said and Bhabha began exploring the self-other binary in the context of colonial and postcolonial literature. Said's (1978) *Orientalism* was instrumental in showing how literature not only reflects but also reinforces cultural and political hierarchies. In recent years, scholars have expanded the examination of the self-other binary to include intersectional perspectives. For example, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison (1992) explored how African American characters are often othered in American literature, revealing how racial identity is constructed through binary oppositions. Morrison's work has been crucial in highlighting how the self-other binary operates across multiple axes of identity, including race, gender, and class.

These studies collectively underscore the importance of the self-other binary in understanding how fiction constructs and challenges identities, offering insights into the broader cultural and social implications of literary narratives.

In Latvian literary studies, research on the manifestations of the self-other binary in fiction has primarily been conducted using insights from structuralism and semiotics, as well as feminist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives. The development of structuralism and semiotics in Latvian literary studies was significantly influenced by the active work of two structuralist schools in the Soviet Union during the 1960s – one in Moscow and the other in Tartu. The active exchange of scientific ideas facilitated the spread of structuralist and semiotic theories in Latvia. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Daugavpils University had become a significant centre for this type of research, where studies on models of worldviews in fiction were carried out under the initiative of Professor Fjodorovs. Alongside the studies of time and space as part of the universal structure of literary texts, research was also conducted on human relationships, including the self-other binary. Most often, those studies focused on the relationships between different nationalities and the stereotypes of perception. For example, innovative research in this area was carried out by Burima, who employed the concept of mental map (see: *Karostas ģeopolitiskās konstelācijas Andras Manfeldes romānā "Virsnieku sievas"* (*Geopolitical Constellations of the Naval Port in Andra Manfelde's Novel "Officers' Wives"*)), Eļīna Vasiļjeva (2018), who specialises in the analysis of the representation of Jewishness (see: *Ebreju teksts latviešu literatūrā (Jewish text in Latvian Literature)*), Rudīte Rinkeviča, who explores the semiotics of childhood (see: *Bērnības semiotika 20.gs.20.-30. gadu latviešu prozā Eiropas literatūras kontekstā, (Semiotics of Childhood in Latvian Prose of the 1920s and 1930s in the Context of European Literature)*), and Romanovska (2021), who studies the portrayal of Latgalians in Latvian literature and the depiction of Baltic Germans in Latgalian literature (see: *Regional Identity and Multiculturalism: the Baltic Germans of Latgale in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Latvian Literature*).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist theories entered Latvian literary studies, bringing with them the often-inherent binary thinking and revealing the complexity of such concepts as gender, woman, and equality. Feminist insights were applied to the interpretation of literary texts. One of the first monographic studies that highlights the concept of otherness

from a feminist perspective is the book *Feminisms un literatūra (Feminism and Literature)* (1997), in which the collective of authors introduces the Latvian readership to the concept of feminism and the possibilities of applying feminist theory to the interpretation of fiction texts. Even though by this time the concept of binary opposition in feminist philosophy was being sharply criticised globally, in Latvia, as feminism was just beginning to take hold, feminist theories highlighted women as the other.

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research on the self-other binary was further facilitated by the growing interest in Latvia's and Latvian national identity and its components. One of the first studies of this kind on Latgalian regional identity, literature, and language is the book *Nomales identitātei (For Regional Identity)* (Paklone, 2005), in which Janīna Kursīte emphasises issues related to the identities of the periphery and the centre, as well as the stereotypes of Latvian and Latgalian perceptions. These studies highlight the important idea of the diverse nuances in the relationships between the self and the other and the notion that such juxtaposition is not absolute.

A significant study on the formation and reflection of Latvian national identity in fiction is the collective monograph *Latvia and Latvians. A People and a State in Ideas, Images and Symbols* (Cimdiņa, Hanovs, 2010), published in both English and Latvian as part of the programme *The national identity: the language, history of Latvia, culture and safety of people*. The research articles compiled in this volume examine various aspects of the formation of Latvian national identity and its reflection in Latvian literature, including relationships with other nations from both historical and contemporary perspectives, with particular attention to Latvian-Russian relations and an exploration of the concept of otherness in one of the chapters.

The postcolonial perspective in Latvian literary studies on the relationships between the self and the other in fiction texts was introduced through Kalnačs' (2011) foundational monograph *Baltijas postkoloniālā drāma (Baltic Postcolonial Drama)*. In this work, the author aims to trace the complex dynamics of Latvian and Baltic-German relations over several centuries and their reflection in Latvian and Estonian postcolonial drama.

It should be noted that the research on the representation of the self and the other in Latvian literature has a relatively short history; therefore, many aspects are still unexplored. The mentioned monographic studies provide an initial overview of how the relationships between the self and the other are depicted in fiction texts, employing various methodologies and approaches. The existing studies have primarily focused on the relationships between different ethnic groups using structuralist and semiotic approaches, postcolonial theory, and imagology. However, the representation of sexual minorities and socially disadvantaged groups, as well as their relationships, remains underexplored in Latvian literary studies and requires special attention, with a focus on selecting appropriate research methodologies. Therefore, the study of otherness and alienation in Egle's fiction employs several methods, including both well-established and less commonly used approaches.

## 2. Modifications of otherness in Jana Egle's works

Hari (2018) points out that humans have basic physical needs: food, water, safety, and clean air. But people also have basic psychological needs. We need to feel valued, part of something bigger, and confident in our future. This leads to the conclusion that a sense of belonging strengthens a person's self-confidence and gives them security. Egle examines this thesis from different angles and shows that although belonging is crucial for every person, it is not clearly defined and is often contradictory. The author describes and reflects on situations in which a person simultaneously belongs and does not belong to a community.

In the collection of stories *Svešie jeb Miļeņkij ti moj*, Egle writes:

Bēmībā, guļot zālē pievērtiem plakstiem, ļaujot skudrām ielīst aiz bikšu starām un spārei iesēsties kuplo matu cekulā, Sandris vairāk nekā citkārt jutās iederīgs šai pasaulē. Saauga ar visu, kas viņam pieskarās, un nekas no tā pat netīši neizcēla viņa citādību. Viņam šķita, ka daba pieņem viņu tādu, kāds viņš ir, ka daba ir līdzcietīgāka un smalkjūtīgāka par cilvēku pasauli. Taču tie bija maldi. Jo pati savus vārgākos tāpat izgrūda no ligzdas, bezradžus nobakstīja līdz nāvei, un albīnos atstūma, nolemjot bieži vien bezcerīgai cīņai par izdzīvošanu ārpus bara. Vientulībā. Taču tie bija savējie. Jo atstumt var tikai savējo, svešam ir vienalga, viņam tas nesāp, viņš var pat nepamanīt.<sup>1</sup> (Egle, 2018a, p. 91)

An important feature of the self-other binary is its ability to form evaluative values in the text. There are two approaches to interpreting the axiological potential of the self-other binary. The first approach is based on the fact that this opposition is an antonymous pair in which the other is endowed with a negative evaluation and the self with a positive one. Within the second approach, in addition to the concepts of self and other, the intermediate concept of other-self has emerged, in which a person is both self and other. This category is highly complex (Kenny, West, 2008; Chen, 2009; Anzaldúa, 1999).

Egle reflects this idea in a multifaceted way in the title of the collection of stories *Svešie jeb Miļeņkij ti moj*, highlighting various intertextual connections. The second part of the title contains a line from a well-known Russian song, in which the idea of the desire to be loved and needed and the ambiguous perception of otherness are actualised in an ironically dramatic tone. In the context of Latvian history, the lines of the Russian song and the actualisation of Russian culture vividly symbolise the ambiguous relationships between the self and the other over several decades. The two parts of the title – *Svešie* and *Miļeņkij ti moj* – are joined by the conjunction *jeb* (or), which metaphorically reflects the idea of the importance of the category of the other-self in the concept of the collection.

<sup>1</sup> *As a child, lying in the grass with his eyelids closed, letting ants crawl behind the legs of his pants and a dragonfly sit on the top of his thick hair, Sandris felt, more than ever, that he fit into this world. He grew up with everything that touched him, and none of it even accentuated his differences. He believed that nature was accepting him as he was, that nature was more compassionate than the human world. However, it was a delusion. Nature pushed out her weakest, poked the hornless to death, and cast away the albinos, forcing them into an often hopeless struggle for survival outside the herd, in solitude. But they were his own. Because you can only push away your own – the others don't care, it doesn't hurt them, they may not even notice.*



This idea becomes a recurring motif in various stories whose heroine is a Russian woman, Alevtina. She is the unifying character in the collection and appears directly or indirectly in several stories. As literary critic Simsone (2018) points out, “Alevtina is also the image in which the title of the collection can be read most accurately. She is the most distinct stranger among other strangers, so different that even those who have nothing else can unite against her”. In the first half of her life, Alevtina, also known as Alka, is an ordinary woman with a tragic fate. This type of character is quite common in society but often goes unnoticed. Towards the end of her life, she begins to dress in extremely bright, inappropriate clothes for her age. Alevtina performs on the street and sings the song “Miļenkij ti moj” (My Darling) to earn a living. As a result, she is forced to live in the attic above the theatre. Despite her strange appearance and behaviour, Alevtina continues to be perceived as a stranger, just as in the first part of her life. She lives among us and is a part of society, but she remains an alien, the other.

When analysing the selected works, attention was paid to the mechanisms of forming the self and the other. The identification of an object as the self or as the other takes place on two levels: the generally accepted (objectified) level and the subjective level of perception. These levels interact, influence each other, and change the definition of the self and the evaluative connotation of the other. On the generally accepted (objectified) level of perception, the self and the other are differentiated on the basis of the generally accepted views of a particular society, with certain criteria being given priority. In Egle's prose, such criteria as social status, ethnicity, gender, physical condition, appearance, and age can be defined as the most important. All these criteria are interrelated.

Regarding socioeconomic status, some of Egle's characters live below the poverty line. The author succeeds in vividly depicting both their exclusion from society and their rich inner world, outlining the difficult life path that led to their marginalisation. Examples of such characters are Alevtina (in the short story collection *Svešie jeb Miļenkij ti moj*) and Jūrnieks (in the short story collection *In the Light*). Each of these characters has their own tragic life story, and their marginalisation is a complex phenomenon that they themselves experience.

Alevtina, a respectable housewife, wife, and mother, first experiences the loss of her husband and then that of her son. Her mother-in-law Veronika despises her because she is Russian, which fundamentally alters Alevtina's life. But she is not completely alone. When she falls seriously ill, she seeks and finds intimacy. Her friend is willing to spend the last of her money, borrow money, and work to help Alevtina heal. A little girl becomes her last ray of hope when she senses Alevtina's kindness. She contacts Alevtina without prejudice, as the social model of perceiving people who live below the poverty line and homeless people as others has not yet formed in her consciousness.

In addition to social status, ethnicity is an important differentiator between the self and the other. This is especially evident in the fates of Alevtina and Veronika. For Veronika, the representatives of another nation incarnate absolute evil because she has experienced the Second World War and the Soviet occupation. Veronika is deeply disturbed when she sees a soldier exposing his penis while masturbating and staring at the girl. Later in her

youth, Veronika is raped by two Russian men. This traumatic experience serves as the basis for her hatred of all Russians. Alevtina and, as a result, her son, who is separated from his mother and lives in an orphanage, also become the victims of Veronika's hatred. Thus, the effects of Veronika's traumatic experience continue to be felt in the third and fourth generations. Egle shows how the lack of parental love contributes to an alienation that future generations cannot overcome.

Egle's work also devotes significant attention to gender as a criterion of differentiation between the self and the other. Violence and its consequences seem to have the most significant impact on the reader in this respect. Many of Egle's characters become victims of physical, sexual, and emotional violence by the opposite sex. The relevance of this theme in her work is also confirmed by the story "Pīle" (Duck) (Egle, 2018) in the "Māksla pret vardarbību" (Art Against Violence) series, which can be considered someone of an exception, as the woman is able to defend herself by turning to the police for help. In Egle's other works, violence, in many cases against women, becomes the cause of serious psychological problems for several generations.

Gender also serves as a criterion for distinguishing between the self and the other in the formation of family relationships, demonstrating gradual alienation. The story "Aiziet jūriņā" (Going to Sea) (story collection *Svešie jeb Miļeņkij ti moj*) is dedicated to a transgender sailor who, during his life in the Soviet Union, is forced to hide his real social gender and is unable to come to terms with his physical body. Therefore, he experiences both a personal and societal otherisation of his body.

People who differ from others due to certain physical characteristics also perceive and experience this difference. For example, the protagonist of the story, "Lūdzu, lūdzu, lūdzu" (Please, Please, Please), loses her hearing after a serious illness. However, it is not the loss of hearing that she experiences but rather the attitude of society, which she perceives as an imperceptible psychological pressure.

Klusās publiskās telpās Ināra nesarunājās. Kurla kopš piecu gadu vecumā pārslimotā meningīta, viņa tomēr zināja, ka runājot viņas balss skan īpatnēji, un mazliet kautrējās no tā. Kad Ināra runāja, svešinieki ziņkārīgi nopētīja meiteni ar dīvaino balsi. Tas satrauca un mulšināja. Inārai nepatika vārds – nedzirdīga, kā tagad bija pieņemts teikt. Tas uzsvēra to, kā viņai pietrūkst. Tajā ietvertā norāde – "Tu nedzirdi! Tev nav dzirdes!" – šķita krietni vien aizskarošāka nekā par nepieklājīgu atzītais vārds "kurla". Ināra bija izņēmums – gan viņas nedzirdīgie paziņas, gan Nedzirdīgo savienības pārstāvji cīnījās par vārda "kurlis" izskaušanu. Bet Ināra palika pie sava.<sup>2</sup> (Egle, 2016, p. 88)

<sup>2</sup> *Inara did not talk in quiet public spaces. Deaf since she contracted meningitis at the age of five, she was still aware that her voice sounded peculiar when she spoke and was a little shy about it. When Inara spoke, strangers would gaze at the girl with the strange voice with curiosity, which was both disturbing and confusing for her. Inara did not like the word "deaf" as it was now customary to say. It emphasized how much she felt lost. The instruction included in it – "You don't hear! You have no hearing!" – seemed much more offensive than the word "deaf," which was recognized as impolite. Inara was an exception – both her deaf friends and representatives of the Deaf Union fought for the eradication of the word "deaf". But Inara stuck with hers.*

Furthermore, a specific model of the relationship between the self and the other emerges in the communication of people of different ages. Against the background of general estrangement, the attachment of children and adolescents to older people facilitates the potential formation of a close bond. A stranger, who usually has a negative connotation, is, in this case, perceived as the other, who is different but whose otherness is binding. For children and young people, communication with others is an essential way of developing their personalities and value systems, while for adults, it is the last or even the only opportunity to build harmonious relationships and feel the closeness of another person. This is how the relationship between Babalia and Keria is formed in the short story collection *Svešie jeb Miļeņķij ti moj*, and the relationship between Jūrnieks and Agate in the short story collection *In the Light*.

In Egle's prose, the creation of the self and other relations is a complex and intricate process in which the objective criteria (social status, ethnicity, gender, physical condition, external appearance, and age) and the subjective criteria (individual life experience resulting in the formation of a value system and a world view) interact. An important component of many Egle's stories is the temporal dimension. Using fragmentary retrospective insights, the author gradually presents the past events that led to the situation in question and shaped the characters' value system. Egle shows that individual traumatic experiences have a devastating effect on human relationships and create estrangement across multiple generations.

The estrangement between loved ones also causes estrangement from the motherland:

Lidmašīna nosēdās tieši paredzētajā laikā. Izgājis no lidostas, Sandis aizsmēķēja. Dzimtās zemes gaiss, sajaucies ar cigaretes dūmiem, ne ar ko neatšķīrās no gaisa jebkurā citā pasaules malā, pa kurām viņš kūlās jau divdesmit gadus. Sandris neilgojās pēc Latvijas. Ja kāds jautāja, no kurienes viņš nācis, vai nu strupi nosaucis savu tēvzemi, vai arī uzsvērti paziņoja, ka ir pasaules pilsonis.<sup>3</sup> (Egle, 2018a, p. 89)

Confrontation with others leads to conflict, which plays a vital role in the acquisition of individual experience. The peculiarities of perception that characterise an encounter with the other can be of different types: indifference, interest, carelessness, fear, or hatred. Perception also depends on the individual experience, the social value system, and the criteria of differentiation between the self and the other. Emotionally, a particularly strong model of the relationship between the self and the other is a conflict, which becomes a form of confrontation, discovery, and a possible resolution of contradictions.

At the subjective representation level, identifying an object with either the self or the other depends on a personal attitude shaped by individual and social values. Several factors determine this subjective attitude: first, the subjective interpretation of an object's

<sup>3</sup> *The plane landed exactly at the scheduled time. After leaving the airport, Sandis lit a cigarette. The air of his native land, mixed with cigarette smoke, was no different from the air in any other part of the world through which he had been wandering for twenty years. Sandris did not long for Latvia. If someone asked where he came from, he either bluntly named his homeland, or emphatically declared that he was a man of the world.*

properties or actions; second, the correlation of these properties or actions with the subject's value orientations; third, their correlation with the values and norms existing in the environment, which can be determined by the narrower community (friends, family) and by the broader context (age group, social class, nationality). Especially at the subjective level, changing attitudes towards the same object is possible; sometimes, the same object appears as the self, while at other times, it appears as the other. Such a changing attitude is particularly evident in relations between genders when a person of the opposite sex is perceived as the self under the influence of one characteristic, while when another characteristic is revealed, they become the other.

## Conclusion

The concept of otherness serves as a critical tool for analysing the complexities of identity, power, and otherness in contemporary societies. In her literary work, Egle portrays different types of otherness – others who are representatives of different nationalities, sexual minorities, and socially disadvantaged people. Egle shows that the boundary between self and other is fluid and fragile. The ambiguity of the relationship between the self and the other is explored in her works in various ways, both as estrangement between loved ones (e.g. relatives) and as intimacy between complete strangers. A single event can influence the development of this duality over many years. All individuals who appear different or unacceptable according to certain objective or subjective criteria are at the same time our own – close people. These fellow human beings are an integral part of our society. However, their differences have become slightly more pronounced than the boundaries drawn in the receiver's consciousness.

The author demonstrates that there are stereotypical images in the adult world that have developed over time within social groups such as the way Latvians see Russians, the way Russians see Latvians, and the way the rich see the poor. In contrast to the stigmatised perception of adults, Egle's works give voice to a child's consciousness. Children can see the inner world behind unusual appearances or behaviours, recognise what is important, and build relationships based on feelings rather than prejudices. While often revealing complicated and tragic life episodes, Egle still maintains a lightness that is often difficult to explain but is imperceptibly captured.

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