

The Identity of Exile; An Epiphany of Escape, Endurance and Ecstasy

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Abstract— Whether imposed by self or society displacement, breeds catastrophe including agony, nostalgia and flashback of something or someone indispensable and irrevocable. Nevertheless, the same factor often serves as the touchstone for the writers who touch zenith in the changed environment, indicating that perhaps the same sublimity might have remained unimagined had the shift in any form of exile may have not hovered their lives. John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* writes that exile “is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact”. The same finds expression in many works from Sigmund Freud to Salman Rushdie and from W.H. Auden to Nabokov, of which the last one has revolutionized the ramifications of the term Exile to a great extent. Influence of exile, both shocking and liberating, encompasses the oeuvre as well as the writer and leaves writing as to be the only means to acquire a temporary relief from the continuous haunt of reminiscences, thus resulting in exile literature. Accepting and analyzing many exiles, both internal and external, writers and other artists endure the enigma of self identity in the alien world. Ever struggling and ever loosing either to escape or to endure from the exile these great writers find expression of hope via means of writing that is perhaps the only source replacing the void with ecstasy in their life

Index Terms— Exile, Nabokov, Ecstasy, Displacement, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The literary works of Vladimir Nabokov repeatedly express the pain of his exile from his home country soviet Union (Russia) and reveal a permanent stamp that his involuntary displacement left in his soul. Being an American writer of Russian origin define his role as a bridge, mediator and translator not only between two cultures but also expressing the internal conflict that he underwent when writing in both languages. Imbued between his unparalleled love for pre-revolutionary Russia and his anguish for the soviet regime, Nabokov expresses his agony via the poignant voices of the characters in his work, whose usually unsuccessful attempts to cope with reality result in further anguish. The oeuvre written in Europe under the pseudonym of V. Sirin" his young self, this self-proclaimed tone product of exile Nabokov declared that Sirin's best works are those in which he condemns his people to the solitary confinement of their souls." *Conclusive Evidence* 216-217. It is this condemnation that becomes the author's hallmark, justified as a response to his banishment from Russia. Nabokov expresses that political changes are only part of a larger problem and that "the stress is not on Russian Revolution. It

could have been anything, an earth quake, an illness, an individual departure, prompted by a private disaster. The accent is on the abruptness of the change" (*Strong Opinions* 148).

II. REFLECTIONS OF EXILE IN OEUVRE OF NABOKOV

All his movements' rather reluctant movements from Russia to Europe, from Europe to America, and from the U.S.A. back to Europe claimed serious adaptations but the desired transition- back to Russia- remained a dream forever. Even in his fictional exiles portraying stateless wanderers and nostalgic eccentrics- cannot easily relate to their surroundings and society leading to depression caused by their yearning for something and someone unattainable and unachievable. With this the characters always rely on their memories to seek solace but to no avail.

The in-depth understanding about exile in various aspects of Nabokov a clear definition can be used as criteria. Amongst many definitions one of the definition according to the Oxford English Dictionary defines exile as "a banished person; one compelled to reside away from his native land." The etymology of the word suggests that exile originates from the Latin ex (s) ul where ex is out and sal-the root of the word is to go.

The theme of exile appears frequently and prominently in the works of Nabokov. Once when asked about what his exile from Russia meant to him, he replied: "The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure whom I feel some affinity: but in a straighter sense, exile means to an artist only one thing the banning of his books Its Russia's loss, not mine." (*Strong Opinions* P. 118).

The proximity and sympathy that Nabokov acknowledges with anyone who is tormented over his destiny and must accept the fact that he is no longer wanted at home explains the chaos he feels about his status as a Russian writer, who was denied his deserving audience, during his lifetime. Though Nabokov had been a true victim of exile and has expressed the same directly or indirectly in almost all his novels yet he never begged for any solace for his nostalgia. Grown up in a disturbed environment, further deteriorated by political upheavals, Nabokov maintained a unique perspective on various events. When asked about a sense of national identity, he replied: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature before spending fifteen years in Germany (*Strong opinions* 26). He deliberately avoided a direct reply, rather alluding to his multicultural background that emphasized that he was a citizen of the world.

Nevertheless, the poignant Nabokov felt the utter pain and frustration of exile in his personal life also. When Nabokov had to leave for United States in 1940, he was married and a father who again had to face severe challenges not only to escape from the Nazi regime but also to establish himself as a writer in another country. Nostalgia and pain of exile is expressed in all the novels written during this period like *Bend sinister* (1947); *Invitation of a Beheading* (1951); *Lolita* (1955); and *Invitation of a Beheading* (1957). Though these all works reflect nostalgia for his Russian past but are yet are "marked by two equally strong propensities: the reluctance to judge and the passion to describe" (Morton 9).

The exile of Nabokov has an specific optimistic aura of confidence and intellect unlike most of other writers who faced same fate. Exiled from Russia, Nabokov, echoes the obscure vanished world as a means to calm the agony of his unwilling and unplanned departure from Russia. Usually the term exile is associated with pessimism, pain and negative attitude - sadness- denial, hardships, refusal, reluctance and other ideas of the type but rarest of the rare, as in the case of Nabokov, it can be freedom and liberation. Nabokov serves as a unique example of the writers of exile who enjoyed having a complete new world before him awaiting exploration to be used as a mirror to reflect the old and the past world. His fiction in general appears to bear this out. He acknowledges and relishes the unique atmosphere of exile

Nabokov underwent two exiles one after the other and here lies an important difference between the two. The most important one between his European and American exile is the absence of hope of returning to Russia which is very much evident in his works after he left Europe. In most of Nabokov's works exile is a predominant theme. For instance in *Invitation of a Beheading* the protagonist are depicted with no hope to return to their native place. Through the trials of protagonists Nabokov conveys the sense of prolonged isolation and loneliness that is in the foreground of any exile experience.

The years spent in America certainly have a great significance for Nabokov because he achieved worldwide fame as a novelist; America became, as he would someday say, his second home in the true sense of the word" (Strong Opinions, p.10) This sense of belonging is confirmed by the fact that even after his departure from America to Montevideo, he was regarded as an American expatriate living abroad. This directly reflects his command and impact English language that his novels had in the United States.

An extremely notable impact of exile on the language employed by Nabokov in all his novels is worth mentioning. While earning the name and fame in composing novels in his mother tongue Russian Nabokov rose even to a more prominent name in his adopted language English. It is almost impossible to discover his command on any of the language in that Nabokov read and wrote

"My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not be, anybody's concern is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses the baffling mirror, the black velvet

backdrop, the implied associations and traditions which the native implied associations and traditions which the native illusionist, fractals flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way." (*Lolita* p. 316 -317)

The above statement reveals frustration of Nabokov in his approach to maintain a satisfactory balance while writing in English and Russian. Though Nabokov claims that he "had spoken English with the same ease as Russian since (his) earliest infancy", he is either overly critical or implausibly modest when referring to his English as "this second instrument ... a stiffish, artificial thing, which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction" (Strong opinions p.189, 106) Here the dissatisfaction with his English is expressed clearly by Nabokov and it is this dissatisfaction that his characters express in his works.

This emptiness has been an integral part of both Nabokov and Pnin who faced exile in many ways. Both gave a vent to their feelings of agony via language acquired and language as mother tongue. Nabokov when once asked to select the most beautiful language among those he spoke fluently preferred to be objective: My head says English, My heart Russian, My ear French" (Strong Opinions p.49). This approach of Nabokov proves that for him that language is not only a communication tool but something like an exquisite painting or a beautiful piece of music. Contrastingly, Pnin's head, heart and ear would have unanimously declared Russian.

In *Lolita*, the most famous or infamous work of Nabokov both protagonist Humbert Humbert and Lolita are victims of exile and are literally alienated from their societies. Humbert, Humbert and Lolita differed in the cause of exile. While exile of Humbert was his own because he himself left for Europe, the death of her mother led Lolita to exile leaving the territory of Ramsdale. She joins Humbert for an apparent unending journey. Both kept moving on the roads from one place to another and belonged to no fixed place. Here it is noteworthy that the impact of exile on both is severe as their amorous journey with erotic undertones leads both completely severed from any society. Consequently both fail to accept their depraved and amoral course of actions during exiled journey with Humbert leaving a blind eye on his monstrosity and lechery while Lolita hardly showing any signs of acceptance and awareness of being a victim of both exile and prey of Humbert.

To find freedom and mirth Humbert sweeps Lolita with her consent but to no avail as both are finally trapped by exile. With no choice to go anywhere Lolita is forced to stay with Humbert despite of her pseudo liking or disliking of him. Though Humbert aspires to be with Lolita forever yet he eventually decides to stay in America till his death.

The final exile to both Lolita and Humbert comes when Lolita leaves with Dick Schiller and Humbert lands in prison to face trial. Further, both Lolita and Humbert before facing territorial exile are already exiled from their own selves, an exile so severe that they fail to return to their native places. Like the exile of Nabokov the exile in *Lolita* is tragic and permanent.

Nabokov, through the characters of his novels; who are apparently unclear in communication, reflects the common problems of an unsuccessful and reluctant emigration. He

expresses sympathy for his countrymen by portraying their inner struggle which can never be understood by those who have never faced exile.

Nabokov, for whom language always remained an obsession, passes the same quality to many of his characters like Pnin and Kinbote. The famous rants of Humbert in *Lolita* are quite worthy. When Humbert loses his nymphet he mourns: oh, my *Lolita*, I have only words to play with (*Lolita* 32). Likewise both Kinbote and Pnin are also left to play with words. In his study of exiled writers, Tucker suggests that:

When a writer begins to write in the adopted language of his new country, he may be stating that he has reached the end of his exile, that he is now associating himself with a new identity, a word no longer foreign to him. In this sense a writer transcends exile once he adopts the home of a new language (Tucker, Martin) 1991 print.

Despite of the pain that Nabokov felt for Russia and Russian language and comfort he became accustomed with in his adopted home America, he never replied the language of his choice. In one interview, Nabokov commented on the subject of the language: 'I don't think in any language. I think in images'. (Strong Opinions p.14) Each letter of the alphabet has a particular colour and shade - the components that help create images in his mind. This connection between imaginations, letters, language and his own self is the key concept of the works of Nabokov that helps to reassess the troubled moments of his character's lives before setting them off on the journey, where they must reach into the past in order to make sense of the present.

"I keep the tools of my trade, memories, experiences, sharp shining things, constantly around me, upon me, within me, the way instruments we stuck into the loops and flags of a mathematician's magnificent elaborate overalls ." (Strong Opinions, p.155)

An excellent example of such collaboration is *Speak, Memory*- the memoir by Nabokov, rich with poignant imagery. Nabokov is the "perfect dictator in that private (Fiction) world" in which he and alone he responsible for its stability and truth" (Strong Opinions,p 69) He maneuvers and orchestrates the characters in such a way that their memories reveal their true identity and coerces to face their pasts while ensuring the reader that he and only he is the charge of the fictional world. The central voice is the voice of the author, and within each novel, his conscious devices- the intrusive authorial voice, allusions, verbal games and reflexive patterns- call attention to the circumscribed realm of the novelist's authority (Pifer 56).

The dictatorship of Nabokov is extreme in *Pnin* where the protagonist continues to resist the never ending disasters. According to Stregner, Pnin's inner strength is what keeps the novel from "turning into nothing more than sentimental bathos", presenting instead "a moving portrait of an unself-pitying victim whose victimization matters" (97). Pnin with his "nostalgic excursions in broken English and pear shaped tears" trickling down his cheeks, must overcome the senselessness of political upheavals in his country which forever altered the course of his life (*Pnin* p.11, 12). With the help of memories Pnin visits non-existing places with people

who are not alive and off-course the dreams that would never be accomplished. The place he recalls is of only shadows and faces once known to him but with no reality. At times like this, Pnin is most vulnerable: And suddenly Pnin (was he dying) found himself sliding back into his own childhood. This sensation had the sharpness of retrospective detail that is said to be the dramatic privilege of drowning individuals (*Pnin* 21).

Strong emotions lead to seizure and after a short reprieve, return with vengeance. When he is getting ready to present his lecture, Pnin recognizes faces of his dead relatives and friends in the audience. This vision ,fueled by the knowledge of injustice ,done to these people re-opens old wounds: Murdered, forgotten, un- revenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people" (*Pnin* 27)

Clancy suggests that, just as with Nabokov, imagination is the key concept in understanding Pnin's interpretation of the world: "For Pnin imagination is almost inseparable from the real life which surrounds him; it is the narrator who coldly discriminates between them for us. Time for Pnin is not linear; the past can coexist with the present" (117) (Clancy, Laurie. *The novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. The New York: St. Martin's, 1984. Print.

One of most defining and ironical element in the novels is the dream of Pnin to own a house in America. In a number of houses he rents throughout the novel, becomes his permanent house despite of his very much longing of the same. Boyd accurately defines Pnin's American exile as a "Series of rented rooms in other people's homes" (*The American Years*,p.275) when Pnin rents out a room at the Clements house, he is described as "more of a poltergeist than a lodger" (*Pnin* 39). The arrival of Pnin to the United States began with somewhat harsh discussion with the immigration authorities on the topic of anarchism ,and the same discussion further paved the mindset of Pnin to continue his non-permanent loadings. This incident finally led Pnin to realize at the end of the novel that he must once again leave to search for a comparatively satisfactory new lodging. According to Mc Carthy, having a permanent residence in any foreign country might stop one from becoming a true exile-someone who prefers "transient accommodations..... like Nabokov at the Hotel Montreux- palace in montreux. If an exile buys a house or takes a long lease on a flat, it's a sign that he's no longer a true exile" (*Prose* 72). Nabokov justified his preference of hotels: "It simplifies postal matters, it eliminates the nuisance of private ownership, it confirms me in my favorite habit- the habit of freedom (Strong Opinions 149) Nabokov transfers the same traits to Pnin who denies to sign a lease and hence exercise a "habit of freedom" but as the plot progresses these is an amazing transformation in the personality of Pnin.

As the time passes Pnin, like his creator Nabokov, becomes a successfully adapted émigré who impresses by his command over languages both adopted and its execution in relation to the native language. Boyd remarks about the change in the professor's conduct... Among those who share his background, his precise knowledge of Russian culture suddenly seems of highest value. His language becomes graceful, dignified, and witty, and the plenty he shares here

with his peers no longer seems misplaced fussiness but rather the index of a well-stocked mind with a passion for accuracy (The American Years 275).

Going through the novels of Nabokov it becomes clear that coping with exile is one of the central themes. Nabokov considers exile as either a capital punishment or an opportunity to let his audience decide if his characters are victims or winners. Stegner claims that the fact that Pnin "never wallows in self-pity or adopts self-conscious postures and poses" is the reason he succeeds, the reason we perceive him as "more than a pathetic victim of the ambitious, self-centered, self-inflated culture to which he is exiled and in which he will always be an exile.

The prolific roles of Nabokov as a poet, novelist in two languages, naturalist and language instructor crowned him with extraordinary insights into the experiences of those exiled who by no reason and choice of their own become unwanted and unwelcome in their native countries. Looking back at his Russian childhood, the author remarked at how during his family's trips to western Europe, he imagined, in bedtime reveries, what it would be like to become an exile who longed for a remote, sad, and (right epithet coming) unquenchable Russia, under the eucalypti of exotic resorts. (Strong Opinions p.178). This fantasy becomes a nightmare in his life. Nabokov becomes the exile longing for that remote unquenchable Russia, and any country he visits is destined to be compared with Russia:

"America is the only country where I feel mentally and emotionally at home: My admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the slots and flaws that, indeed, are nothing in comparison to the abyss of evil in the history of Russia, not to speak of other, more exotic countries." (Strong Opinions p.131)

CONCLUSION

The theme of exile is present in many important works of Nabokov, told through the lives of characters that are forced to relocate, acculturate, and adapt in different countries. Escaping two totalitarian regimes Nabokov was able to adopt on foreign soil with far greater success than most immigrant writers, not without the help of his excellent knowledge of the English language and the western literary traditions. His departure from Russia was a loss equaled by the loss of his father. This expression of pain is a unique characteristic of Nabokov. For him only the writer who experiences passion has the right to create, passion that ushered him throughout his literary career in both languages.

Exiled from the homeland, Nabokov uses language to subvert stereotypes and express disillusionment. He equates "the solution of the riddle theme" created by his passion for chess problems-with the solution of the theme of exile, of the intrinsic loss' (Conclusive Evidence p.250). Nabokov challenges and also agrees to Said, who refers to exile as "death but without death's ultimate mercy (174). He recalls the nightmares of exile that he had as a young boy, which later materialized without the romanticism that his youth embedded in them:" in my early childhood, long before the tremendously dull peripatetic of Revolution and civil war set in, I suffered from nightmares full of wanderings and escapes and desolate platforms" (Strong Opinions p. 132). The

emotional defect and disillusionment of the past are continuously confronted with every new story, every new novel, every new character and every unknown place.

Nabokov expresses the emotions of his own self in his works by showing that how the characters, forced into exile, always strive to reclaim their faith in life. He turns the tragedy of his own exile into what Humbert Humbert calls the "durable pigments of art (Lolita 309) Nabokov's achievement in Lolita, Pnin and Pale Fire, is that the condition of exile becomes the human condition writ large.

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