

**RUSSIAN EMIGRANT WRITING AND MARITAL MALADJUSTMENT: AN
ASSESSMENT OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *PNIN***

Tanaji S. Kamble
Shahajiraje Mahavidyalaya, Khatav
Dist-Satara (MS)

tanaji431981@gmail.com

&

Tripti K. Karekatti
Department of English,
Shivaji University, Kolhapur

triptikarekatti@gmail.com

Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the prominent Russian émigré authors of the first wave of Russian emigration. His Pnin is the fourth novel written in English that chronicles the lives of Russian émigré community in European and American exile. The present research paper attempts to analyse how Nabokov depicts marital life of the Russian émigré community in America. It also attempts to analyse the impact social-political events and cultural upheavals have on marital life of both Russian emigrant and American characters in the novel. To gauge this impact, major events that took place in the Soviet Union and as well as in America are scrutinised.

Key Words: Marital and extra-marital issues, family disintegration, The Russian Revolution, the Civil War, the Second World War, Nazism, consumerism.

Russian emigrant writing is a rich and vast body of writing. The October Revolution of 1917 has been a critical event in the history of Russian literature. This gave rise to the bifurcation of the Russian literature into two currents: Russian emigrant writing or Russian literature abroad and domestic literature produced in the Russian homeland. Russian emigrant writers have enriched and embellished the rich Russian literary tradition abroad.

The post-revolutionary Russia witnessed three great waves of emigration: 1917-23, 1941-05 and the 1970s. According to Ronald Hingley, the first wave of Russian emigration is the most important from a literary point of view because outstanding literary personalities were

driven out by the Revolution. The Russian authorities expelled in 1922 over a hundred and sixty intellectuals as they were hostile to the new regime. Paris was the main political and cultural centre during the two world wars. Berlin was culturally pre-eminent in 1921-1923. These intellectuals settled down, worked in these places and got involved in political and literary controversies. As mentioned by Hingley, Gleb Struve, a well-known literary historian, considers these non-returners including Vladimir Nabokov, Ivan Bunin, Mark Aldanov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Aleksey Remizov, Ivan Shmelyon and Boris Zaytsev as 'the best in post-revolutionary prose that left the country'(60).

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is one of the foremost contributors of Russian émigré literary tradition. His reputation as a novelist is deep rooted in both Russian and American literary traditions. He is a fine poet, excellent short story writer and experimentative and innovative novelist. He was born in St. Petersburg in a Russian aristocratic family in the year 1899. On the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and after his father's assassination, his family left St. Petersburg and immigrated to Crimea where they stayed for eighteen months. In 1919, they left Crimea to lead exilic life in Western Europe. As an émigré writer, Nabokov spent his life in Germany (1919-1939), the United States (1940-1960) and Switzerland (1960-1977). He wrote and published nine Russian novels during 1925 to 1940 which were regarded as the most original and brilliant product of émigré literature. His career as a writer really flourished in America and his *Lolita* (1955) gave him both financial as well as literary success and recognition. He is also an eminent postmodern writer who always experimented with narrative techniques, style and language.

The present research paper will discuss Nabokov's approach towards man-woman relationship in *Pnin* and the impact of the Russian Revolution and then socio-political events in Russia and America on it.

Pnin is Nabokov's fourth novel written in English which was published serially in the *New Yorker* and appeared in book form in 1957. It is a complex novel with typical Nabokovian experiments with narrative strategies and techniques and lends itself to varied readings. As it depicts the life of Russian emigrants in an American society, the characters can be grouped into two classes- American and Russian. Secondly, the major and minor characters can also be grouped into the older and younger generation. While analyzing depiction of man-woman relationships in the novel, these two dimensions have to be kept in mind

Through the various American characters, Nabokov touches many issues of the time like casual sexual relationships, the problem of unwed mothers, increasing number of divorces, crumbling family structure, deteriorating involvement of the student in the educational set up, increasing generation gap, loss of traditional values and increasing consumerism.

In case of the Russian emigrant characters, in addition to the culture shock on arriving in America, there are problems faced before emigration in the Soviet Union and the experiences of the Second World War and Nazism. The man-woman relationship in the novel is influenced

by all these issues. The married and unmarried couples in the novel have to be analyzed keeping in mind their respective problems.

The problem of divorce and frequent breaking off of relations looms large over the novel. In the second chapter, the possibility that Isabel (daughter of Clements who has recently married) may in fact be coming back because of marriage problem is indirectly referred to. The third chapter which describes Pnin at work in Waindell College, describes his attempts at remembering some lines haunting him: “...*plila i pela, pela i plila* ...she floated and she sang, she sang and floated...” (353). He suddenly remembers that the lines are from *Hamlet* about Ophelia’s death. Ironically, at the end of the novel, Pnin, who feels he has found a house as per his liking with the Clements’s, becomes homeless again because Clements’ daughter, Isabel, returns to her parent’s home after her marriage breaks off. This event underlines the importance Nabokov gives to man- woman relationship in this novel and that this theme is as important, if not more than the other things like the problem of adjusting with geographical, linguistic and cultural dislocation. The failure of man-woman relationship does not remain limited to the individuals involved in the relationship but affects the whole society, sooner or later, just as disruption in Isabel’s marriage makes Pnin homeless. In the sixth chapter, we come to know that Betty has been jilted by her lover for a tramp. We also learn that Betty had an affair with a disabled man but the man married a nurse. In the sixth chapter, her engagement to a biochemist is mentioned and one wonders if this relationship will have the same fate as the earlier two. Pnin used to like Betty but has never developed any intimate relationship with her as he thinks his heart is with Liza, his ex-wife.

There are numerous male-female relationships of Russian characters depicted in the novel. Most important of these are those of Pnin and Liza—with each other and with others. She is a striking female protagonist who doesn’t show any traditional ‘feminine’ traits. She is selfish, decisive and remorseless. She marries four times. Moreover, at least three of her affairs are mentioned in the novel—that with the narrator, with a painter and with Dr. Baracan, a neurologist. These numerous affairs and marriages reflect her search for the ideal man and happiness. This search continues until the end of the novel.

Through Liza’s relationship with numerous men, the author tries to focus on the basic problem created in the life of emigrants in the America, especially because of the culture difference and changing values. Family disintegration caused by frequent divorces and remarriages and irresponsible parenthood is much responsible to make Eric– Liza relationship the way it is. Liza is unable to adjust with Dr. Wind and abandons him once for Pnin and again for Church, an Italian art dealer.

These two protagonists represent two different facets of human nature, making the possibility of achieving an ideal man-woman relationship very difficult. Pnin is meek and mild, passive, unassertive, absent minded, and comic yet he is sympathetic, helpful, sincere, and very loyal. On the contrary, Liza Wind, Pnin’s ex-wife, is a selfish woman, but is a loving and caring mother.

Pnin–Liza relationship is doomed because of the deception, selfishness of Liza and because of the inability and absence of any wish on Pnin’s part to stop Liza from using him for her gains. Pnin and Liza met around 1925 in Paris in literary soirees of émigré poets and got married. Earlier she had an affair with a litterateur and had made an attempt at suicide when the relationship failed. Later she abandoned Pnin for Dr. Eric Wind. On arriving in America, she left Pnin completely for Dr. Eric Wind. She came back again to Pnin, or rather acted to do so, so that she could migrate to America. This was a plan hatched by Eric and Liza and unwittingly Pnin succumbed to it.

Liza’s four marriages indicate her independence as well as her dissatisfaction with the men in her life. She is trying to lead a happy, peaceful life and does not care about others’ needs and happiness. Liza exploits Pnin economically and emotionally. The author shows through Liza that one cannot achieve happiness at the cost of other people’s happiness.

However, she is a loving mother and this fact makes one rethink if the cause of the failed relationship is actually the disparate nature of the two beings involved or if it is the time and the experiences that they have gone through. Liza was ditched by the person she loved. Even if Pnin married her for love, the same is not true of her. Forced by the need to migrate to America, she went back to him for help. Worried about Victor’s future, she goes back again to Pnin for help. It is true that she cruelly uses the soft-hearted Pnin several times and is completely ungrateful to Pnin’s love and help, but to some extent, her situation and her experiences are responsible for this. It is not that she has ditched only Pnin. She has had four marriages. The shift from the traditional gender roles and the sudden rights and freedom found in America must have also had an impact and helped to bring out her original characteristics to a large extent. Searching for one’s own happiness is no crime in the modern capitalist society of America which values individualism very much.

Pnin–Liza relationship is a disturbed one and slowly disintegrates. In this context, the author is trying to show how the problem of family disintegration is at the centre of American society. The author makes use of Dr. Eric Wind and Liza Wood who try to cure the same problem of patients through psychotherapeutic treatment. But they fail to develop a satisfactory relationship in their own house.

Dr. Eric Wind–Liza relationship is marked by family disintegration. Dr. Eric Wind is a Russian refugee doctor and the second husband of Liza. She has abandoned Pnin for Dr. Eric Wind as she thinks he has understood her ‘organic ego’. Eric is not ready to bear all the expenses of their son Victor’s education. And so Liza once again approaches Pnin with the expectation that he share the expenses. This reveals a lot about Wind as well as about Wind – Liza relationship. Liza–Dr. Eric Wind relationship lacks proper balance and mutual understanding. Liza’s visit to Pnin reveals her dissatisfaction with Dr. Eric Wind for whom she had abandoned Pnin. She frankly confesses her dissatisfaction: “... but I must tell you I don’t love Eric any more. Our relations have disintegrated...” (336). Overtly, the reason of Liza’s

dissatisfaction is that Eric Wind is an irresponsible father who wants Victor to study in a public school but also wants Pnin to save some money to bear the cost of Victor's education.

Liza-Dr. Wind relationship exposes some of the problems of marital life in American society. Both of them work as psychotherapists in America. With Dr. Albino Dunkelberg, they have written an article entitled 'Group Psychotherapy Applied to Marriage Counselling'. They work under Bernard Maywood, a psychotherapist of Research Bureau. They are trying to find out a solution to the problem of marital maladjustment at Research Bureau. As a part of their research, they allow women to discuss the problems in their married life frankly. The secretary notes down the problems of these married women. Later on, their husband will be interviewed and finally, the solution will be provided to the married couple. Wind's work on marital maladjustment is one of the most ridiculous aspects of their research work. They have a lot of problems in their married life but are trying to cure the problems of others. They are also unsatisfied with Victor for they can't find any behavioral disorder in him. The ridiculous tests used on him declare him once a genius and once a mentally retarded child. In fact, Victor is a very normal child. Nabokov's disdain and hostility with Sigmund Freud is obvious in this context. Nabokov in his *Strong Opinions* describes Sigmund Freud as "the Viennese quack" (47). Similarly, Pnin regards psychiatry as a kind of "microcosmos of communism" (333). Pnin expects Winds to leave personal sorrows of people to themselves as he thinks the sorrows are the only possession people have in the world.

Dr. Eric-Wind-Liza relationship and their research work reveal the problem of marital maladjustment and of irresponsible parenthood which are deep rooted in American society. These are the major problems of American family life. Victor is the only child of Winds and is a member of the second generation of Russian emigrant community residing in America. Dr. Eric Wind hesitates to accept his responsibility as a father. He has no love for his son and the son also hates the father. They lack a healthy relationship and this is another major problem of American family life. This detachment in human relationship might be the result of socio-political-economic changes of the period.

Wind-Liza-Victor relationship throws much light on the problem of irresponsible parenthood which is deep rooted in American modern family structure. On the contrary, Pnin-Liza-Victor relationship serves as an exact antithesis to Wind-Liza-Victor relationship. Even if Pnin is not Victor's biological father, he is ready to save for Victor's education. Both Victor and Pnin possess love and admiration for one another. Pnin is well aware of Liza's selfishness still he is ready to help her.

Pnin-Mira relationship is very crucial for understanding not only Nabokov's perception of good relationship but also to understand Pnin. Mira was Pnin's childhood mate and sweetheart. Their engagement and romantic life was destroyed by the Russian Civil War of 1918-22. Mira was of Jewish origin and had to flee from Russia. Pnin seems yet to love Mira passionately even if there are several mentions of his 'decision' to forget her and his claims that his heart belongs to Liza. The memory of Mira once gives him a mild heart attack. He fondly

remembers “the amateur theatricals, the gypsy ballads, the passion she had for photography” (393). He still remembers “the tears, and the stars, and the warm rose-red silk lining of her karakul muff” (393). On the last day of their meeting, Mira’s family had to escape from the Bolsheviks to Sweden and then to Germany and Pnin had to join Denikin’s army. In Germany, Mira married Samuil Lvovich, a fur dealer of Russian origin. After many years, Pnin met Mira in Berlin. By this time, he was also married to Liza. Even if they exchanged a few words, the effect on Pnin was deep: “but the pangs of tenderness remained, akin to the vibrating outline of verses you know you know but cannot recall” (394). His chance meeting with Madam Shpolyanski, a relative of Mira, much later in the story has a very disturbing effect on him because it “...had conjured up Mira’s image with unusual force” (394). The intensity of his involvement in Mira can be understood through his feelings at that time: “Only in detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could one cope with this for a moment. In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Bolochkin” (394).

However, we understand that more than recollections of her beauty, it is the difficulty of accepting the fact that this lovely young woman could be cruelly killed by the Nazis, threatens his peace of mind. He cannot live with the thought that this graceful tender woman had been killed in a Nazi camp. He had to force himself to forget it but found it impossible:

“And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood” (394-395).

The political events in USSR separated them initially and then the holocaust killed her. So, this relationship which could have become an ideal one is nipped in the bud by the Civil War and by the European Nazis. The dead Mira is continuously present moment in the novel and this relationship between the dead Mira and the Pnin haunted by her memories becomes a very significant relationship in the novel. Pnin loves Mira so much that he has to ‘decide’ to be loyal and to love only Liza once she enters his life. So this relationship which exists much in imagination of Pnin could have become an ideal man-woman relationship if social and political problems had not changed the course of the events.

The world depicted by Nabokov in *Pnin* lacks heroic, assertive male as well as ‘ideal’ female protagonists. Nabokovian characters represent positive as well as negative traits of personality. They are virtuous as well as vicious; good and bad; moral and immoral; human and inhuman. He goes beyond the gender differences and limitations and wants his characters to show human qualities. As a result, his characters appear to be real people. Even if there are many pairs, no relationship can be called ideal.

In case of American pairs, the major upheavals of the century that changed the structure of the family and gender roles is responsible, to large extent, for the failed man-woman relationships. In case of emigrant couples, the Civil War in the Soviet Union, atrocities of the Nazis, the Second World War, emigration to America and the impact of adjusting to a new culture are more responsible for unsuccessful man-woman relationships. Liza personifies a typical case of problems faced by the emigrants: the displacement from the native country, the need to migrate to America anyhow, the readiness to deceive even the trusted close friends and family members to do this, the changing American family structure and gender roles: all these issues seem to be weighting very heavily on man–woman relationships in the novel.

However, this does not mean that every man-woman relationship is unsuccessful and destroyed. There are a number of elderly Russian couples who are leading a fairly satisfactory married life. For example, Count Fyodor Nikitich Poroshin and Countess Poroshin; Philosopher Bolotov and his buxom wife, Varvara; Shpolyanski and his wife Rosa are all leading a happy married life. In fact, Nabokov seems to be pointing at the possibilities of having a satisfactory relationship in spite of these chaotic social, political upheavals and of adjusting with two languages, two cultures and two life styles through the marriage of Alekandr Kukolnikov and Susan Marshall. The fact that they are childless does not matter, because we come to know that they “...loved each other with a sort of old-world simplicity and integrity very soothing to observe...” (381).

The fifth chapter of the novel deals with the attempts of emigrants to maintain a link with the past, with the Russian soil and culture and while adjusting with the American life and the growing gap between the first generation emigrants and their children. There are many brief references to the second generation, the Diaspora, and Americanization. The problems that these Diasporic couples face are almost the same as those faced by American couples. However, the chapter ends on a positive note when Pnin sees a couple

“...silhouetted against the ember-sky. They stood there closely, facing each other. One could not make out from the road whether it was the Poroshin girl and her beau, or Nina Bolotov and young Poroshin, or merely an emblematic couple placed with easy art on the last page of Pnin’s fading day” (395).

Nabokov’s characters do not stick to the traditional characteristics of femininity, masculinity and hence make one think afresh about human relationships. Many of the expectations (based on conventions) are shattered. Nabokov’s Liza has no scruples in using Pnin to migrate to America nor any pride to make her rethink before asking Pnin to take care of Victor’s educational expenses. His male protagonist is very easily fooled by almost all and is not even competent enough to save his marriage. Contrary to the expectations, this comic figure is liked and respected by adolescent Victor. The loving relationship between Pnin and Victor is another surprise Nabokov throws at us.

Nabokov rejected the mythical method that some high modernists espoused. He favoured parody and cultural multiplicity to counter any movement that would reduce individual

to the level of stereotype. His antipathy with fixed stereotypes is at the root of absence of perfect man, perfect woman or perfect man-woman relationship in his novels. Hence, unlike D.H. Lawrence or Tennyson or Hardy, or A.S. Byatt, he makes no statements on ideal nature of this relationship.

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