



RESEARCH PAPER

The Tragedy Within the Comedy: The Politics of Narrativizing  
Émigré Crisis in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*

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ABSTRACT

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This research aims to examine the novel *Pnin* by Vladimir Nabokov in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of Minor Literature. This research is a qualitative study of the protagonist Timofey Pnin, an émigré, who demonstrates all the three characteristics of minority literature i.e. "deterritorialization of language", "connection of the individual to political immediacy" and "collective assemblage of enunciation" (18) as delineated by Deleuze and Guattari in their work *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. The importance of this research lies in the fact that it highlights the politicization of the omniscient narrative voice that draws attention to itself, attempting, albeit transparently, to manipulate the understanding of the reader about the other characters in the novel in general and of Pnin in particular. The narrative of the novel, therefore, merits a closer analysis to perceive the émigré crisis couched in the novel's comic episodes associated with the life and personality of Pnin.

Introduction

Minor literature is the literature written by or about a minor (in this case an émigré) in the language and through the agency of the majority. Minority literature therefore is twice removed from the truth. Firstly, in its representation of a minority group of people and secondly in its representation of the interests of the minority that are either contradictory or unacceptable to the view point of the dominant majority. The very choice of language for a minority writer means he needs to draw the attention of the majority by externalizing the torments of the minority. This externalization may result in the omission of minute details of the plight of the minors. The reliability of the writer / narrator becomes questionable in certain deliberate selections on his / her part; such as the choice of language in which to write, or the

selection of genre to narrate their stories. In this novel, Vladimir chooses the form of comedy to narrate Pnin's struggle to live a respectable life in a place where he does not belong.

Writing about the forms of narration, Aristotle exhorts in *Poetics* that in the "difference" that "distinguishes tragedy and comedy from each other; the latter aims to imitate people worse than our contemporaries, the former better" (1996, p.5). The fact that Comedy is a worse imitator is significant to note here. Aristotle also talks about magnitude while giving the essentials of tragedy saying that it "is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude..." (1996, p.10). By magnitude, Aristotle meant the length and intensity of action, which needs to be relatable. For instance, a Promethean suffering loses the readers' interest for being too unjust and eternal and conversely a minor action like Ajax losing a limb in the Trojan war also loses its tragic thrust. In this perspective, the artistic challenge befalling a minority writer is tremendous, as he is supposed to voice an agony of the sufferings of people that has no causal links to the majority. Since the majority is being made to experience the tragedy of another collective group of people, the magnitude of the suffering being portrayed in minority literature becomes daunting enough. Hence the portrayal of Pnin's character as a comic rather grotesquely funny figure. Coupled with the fact that the majority often has no part in creating the suffering of the minority, makes the writer's task doubly challenged. Gunter Grass in *The Tin Drum* refers to this difficulty in empathizing with alien sorrows when he glorifies the onion in exceeding genuine human suffering in generating tears: "What did the onion juice do? It did what the world and the sorrows of the world could not do: it brought forth a round, human tear." (2009, p. 482)

In *Pnin*, Nabokov's narrator manages all the daunting objectives of the émigré literature with aplomb. Honing the interest of the reader in the utterly laughable character of the protagonist, Timophey Pnin, the narrator does not allude directly to the sufferings of the Russian emigrants, simultaneously escaping communist Russia in a direct way or a pedantic tone. The narrator chooses to portray Pnin's various sufferings as pathetic rather than tragic, and in so doing calls into question his own veracity. The reader does not begin to question the intent of the omniscient narrator until at the very last chapter where he is revealed to be a character in the life of Pnin since his childhood. The humour in the novel is very much in accordance with relief theory of comedy, Freud a proponent of the theory maintained that laughter offered "psychic release" as it allowed the conscious mind to articulate the stress of the unconscious (1987, p 111). Lacan concurs with Freud regarding the relief effect of comedy as he says that humour is an "ambiguity conferred ... by language" which provides an emotional release to the individual (, pp 45). The narrator has known Pnin and has known his wife Lisa who was enamored with the narrator to the extent of attempting suicide for him. Lisa married Pnin only after being refused by the narrator, Vladimir Vladimirovich.

The refusal of the narrator to appreciate the finer qualities of Pnin makes the reader doubt the impartiality of his voice. For instance, his willingness to accept his errant wife back, even after suffering worst sexual betrayals at her hands, and his

alacrity in giving financial support for Victor are remarkable acts of large heartedness that in the hands of another narrator would have granted Pnin heroic grandeur. In the novel, the description of Pnin moves from his blunders of sitting in the wrong train and requesting the library for a book he himself has already issued, to the cruel infidelities of his ex-wife and his being dismissed from the faculty of the college in which he teaches. The reader grows wary of the comic portrayal of Pnin by the narrator as the misfortunes in his life escalate. Eventually, in the last chapter, as the narrator of the novel is revealed to be Vladimir Vladimirovich, the former love interest of Pnin's wife, the reader begins to revise his opinion on the character of Pnin. The reader, in revising his understanding of Pnin, realizes that tragedies being masked as comic incongruities in the text are essentially the cultural shock and identity crisis of a refugee. This ploy of the omniscient narrator who becomes a character only in the climax, cleverly involves the reader in a truth puzzle. The novel poses interesting questions regarding the authority of the narrator on the meaning making process and the ability of the reader to accept or override this authority of the narrator. Given the scope of this paper the study exclusively seeks to explore the comic effect of narrator's voice in portraying the character of Pnin as an emblem of refugee identity crisis.

The role of Language is significant in de-coding the narrator's tone / voice. While defining the domain of minority literature, Deleuze and Guattari say that it is literature: "which a minority constructs within a major language" and that in such literature: "language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (1986, p.16). (With reference to Kafka, deterritorialization meant that he could not write in his own language while in Prague, Germany.) Deleuze and Guattari maintain that the impossibility of writing in a native language is to be deprived of their origin as: "national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature" (1986, p.16). The authors then proceed to identify the potentials of minority literature in being able to reterritorialize the people displaced in language. Deleuze and Guattari say:

"... language exists through the distinction and the complementarity of a subject of enunciation, who is in connection with sense, and a subject of statement, who is in connection, directly or metaphorically, with the designated thing. This sort of ordinary use of language can be called extensive or representative-the reterritorializing function of language." (1986, p.20)

In *Pnin*, the protagonist is "a subject of enunciation" whose erudition in Russian etymology is not impressive for a narrator who has an anglicized "sense". Instead of complimenting the facility Pnin has in Russian culture and language, the narrator glosses over the research of Pnin into his Russian heritage, mentioning it only twice in the novel. Moreover, he dubs Pnin metaphorically as a squirrel while describing his activity of sitting in the quiet corner of the library to mull over his research. The "designated thing", Pnin's research into his cultural heritage is mocked when it is compared with a 'nut' being cracked by a 'squirrel' aka Pnin. The above analysis is the template for the narrator's discourse and rhetoric throughout the novel

as a representative of the ways in which he belittles the character and the crisis of the Russian refugee, Pnin, in the novel.

The minority writer, according to Deleuze and Guattari, does not only use the majority language, rather he inhabits the language and makes it representative of the deterritorialized minority by articulating their experiences. The expression and content of such writing is therefore radically different in terms of the signifiers and figures of speech it employs from other writings in the majority language. This difference, in terms of both expression and content, enables the minority writer to reterritorialize the consciousness of his deterritorialized people through language.

In the novel *Pnin*, the content is the story of a hare brained academic intellectual while the expression is that of the author who introduces the comic incongruities in the said academic inducing laughter by the reader. The impurity of the intentions of the narrator may be gauged through its comparisons with other such narratives where both the narrator and the narrated one belong to the same culture. For instance, the narrator's expression in the portrayal of the foibles and eccentricities of Pnin is very different from James Hamilton's portrayal of Mr. Chips in *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, where the narrator regards everything ranging from Chip's discipline problems, shabby gown, mediocre knowledge to funny speech pauses as utterly endearing and innocent. The bereavement of Chips' young wife too is described in a sublime and tragic tone which is different from Pnin's plight who on the loss of his wife yells: "I haf nofing I haf nofing" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 56). James Hamilton portrays a similar loss of his protagonist Chips that the memories of his cherished wife Katherine were like "a warm and vivid patch in his life, casting a radiance that glowed in a thousand recollections" (2018, p.16) The failure to grasp the complete magnitude of Pnin's devastation owes also to the alienation from language and culture other than the narrator's intent. The narrator seems persistent at scouring away the reader's possible sympathy to Pnin's tragedy. This technique of Nabokov means that his narrator does not expect any solace from the people in his life. This technique is in contrast to Franz Kafka's in *The Metamorphosis* as Gregor Samsa exits his room believing "that the final amelioration of all his suffering was immediately at hand", however, at that moment his mother shuns him screaming: "Help, for God's sake, help!" (1999, p.23). But at the very moment the controlling discourse of the narrator, once deciphered by the reader, leads him to a finer understanding of the tragic within the comic in the novel. It is in this tragic element disguised in comic buffoonery and slapstick of the narrative that the plight of refugees in the novel is couched. A closer reading of the narrator's speech is essential to arrive at the refugee crisis demonstrated by the character of Pnin.

The narrator proceeds to dissect the character of Pnin taking a malicious delight in his unattractive form; " apish upper lip, thick neck, strong-man torso...spindly legs and feminine feet" and in his inability to articulate himself well in English as: "a special area of danger in Pnin's case was the English language" (1989, p.54). Foucault says in his book *Punishment and Discipline* that public executions and tortures exemplified "spectacle" that resulted from the control achieved on the body of the convict (1977, pp 14). In *Pnin*, this torture and discipline is emotional and not

physical yet it turns the life of Pnin a spectacle for the reader in the same way as the body of the convict was for the general public.

Articulation is a central concern in the novel. The facility with which the narrator articulates gives him an authority in the narrative. The narrator is omniscient and seems to control the very consciousness of Pnin by virtue of his being able to narrate in English, the majority's language. As in the novel, the narrator while informing the reader that Pnin is sitting in the wrong train says: "Now a secret must be imparted. Professor Pnin was on the wrong train. He was unaware of it, and so was the conductor, already threading his way through the train to Pnin's coach" (1989, p.23). The fact that only the narrator knows what every other character is unaware of and that he is sharing this secret with the reader, awards him a totalitarian control further reinforced when he later says: "Had I been reading about this old man, instead of writing about him, I would have preferred him to discover upon his arrival to Cremona, that his lecture was not this Friday but the next. (1989, p.114). The narrator seems to suggest that he is being more generous in his portrayal of Pnin than his readers would have been. However, by assuming the role of a generous writer he asserts his narrative power to control the actions of Pnin. In chapter five, while going to visit his Russian friends, Pnin loses his way again. The narrator comments on his struggle to find his way: "His various indecisions and groping took those bizarre visual forms that an observer on the lookout tower might have followed with a compassionate eye; but there was no living creature in that forlorn and listless upper region except for an ant who had his own troubles" (1989, p.62). J. H. Garrett-Goodyear says in an article about this passage of the novel: "The observer on the tower is only a narrative hypothesis, a roundabout assertion that the narrator can invent whatever perspective he pleases" (1984, pp 194). This belittling of Pnin by comparisons to the antics of an ant expresses narrator's maliciousness regarding Pnin. The depreciation of Pnin's dexterity invites analysis: "He was inept with his hands to a rare degree; but because he could manufacture in a twinkle a one-note mouth organ out of a pea pod, make a flat pebble skip ten times on the surface of a pond, shadow-graph with his knuckles a rabbit (complete with blinking eye) and perform a number of other tame tricks that Russians have up their sleeves, he believed himself endowed with considerable manual and mechanical skill" (my italics 1989, p.51). The dexterity of Pnin is challenged on the basis of the very skills that should have affirmed it. The use of the collective "Russians have up their sleeves" is a negatively associated identity for Pnin. The lack of the majority language makes a person i.e. Pnin and a people i.e. Russians clumsy and inept is asserted by the language of the narrator.

The elaborate charade of Vladimir Vladimirovich in acting as the omniscient narrator as well as the character of the novel muddles the conventional clarity of the narrative. This is quite unlike of one authorial figure who, by virtue of his separation from the character's action, represents reality and truth in a more objective way. The novel seems to be a deliberately constructed myth of Pnin's comic absurdism by the narrator as well as the antagonist Vladimir Vladimirovich. The unmasking of the narrator as one of the characters makes the reader re-analyze the victim of the

narrator's language. The reterritorialization, an effect and method of minority literature comes helps the reader to analyse better when he sees Pnin as a genuine intellectual instead of a caricature.

Pnin's true character may be studied once the reader examines his character with unbiased attention. Pnin's actions are those of a cautious man, his constant vigilance of his luggage and the loss of his vital lecture notes hint at a comic yet inevitable crisis. He fails to function in his alien language and culture while trying very hard not to fail. The narrator describes Pnin's precociousness that he was in a "Pninian quandary" and couldn't decide between two alternatives: "If he kept the Cremona manuscript... on his person, in the security of his body warmth, the chances were, theoretically, that he would forget to transfer it from the coat he was wearing to the one he would wear" (my italics 1989, p. 65). The attempts of the character at successfully integrating himself are highlighted and mocked by the narrator for adopting modern mannerism: "Nowadays, at fifty-two, he was crazy about sun-bathing, wore sport shirts and slacks, and when crossing his legs would carefully, deliberately, brazenly display a tremendous stretch of bare shin" (1989, p.23). Pnin's incredulity about certain etiquette of the American culture and its clash with Russian culture is also told comically:

"In the beginning Pnin was greatly embarrassed by the ease with which first names were bandied about in America; after a single party, with an iceberg in a drop of whisky to start and with a lot of whisky in a little tap water to finish, you were supposed to call a gray-templed stranger "Jim" while he called you "Tim" for ever and ever. If you forgot and called him next morning Professor Everett (his real name to you) it was (for him) a horrible insult" (1989, p.11)

Pnin's acquisition and articulation of English is a recurrent source of comedy in the text. He "pronounced the word "family" as if the first syllable were the French for "woman" (1989, p. 13). Pnin is also in the habit of appropriating words from his original Russian into English as he appropriates Russian word for receipt in his exchange with the employee: "Quittance?" Queried Pnin, Englishing the Russian for "receipt" (kvitantsiya)" (1989, p.74). The elements of slapstick comedy emerge in the text where Pnin falls down a staircase with a "terrible clatter and crash" (1989, p.25) after bringing Victor to his house.

The language of the majority English therefore deterritorializes the character of Pnin until he learns to use it to articulate his roots and experience. Pnin "laboriously translated his own Russian verbal flow, teeming with idiomatic proverbs, into patchy English. This was revised by young Miller. Then Dr. Hagen's secretary, a Miss Eisenbohr, typed it out. Then Pnin deleted passages he could not understand. Then he read it to his weekly audience" (1989, p.60). The narrator purposefully presents such instances of Pnin's ineptitude at English as his idiocy.

Pnin's continual references to Pushkin, Dostoeviski, Gogol, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina suggest his attempts at resolving his identity crisis. The profusion of these Russian authors in the speech of the protagonist is an instance of fun for a

contemporary American readership precisely because they are unfamiliar. When Pnin talks about the glass slippers of Cinderella saying that it was an error of scholarship and that the actual slippers were made of fur: "Cendrillon's shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur-vair, in French. It was, he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, verre being more evocative than vair which, he submitted came not from varius, variegated, but from veverista, a Slavic for a certain beautiful, pale, winter-squirrel ..." (1989, p. 84). The way Pnin locates the etymology of a word and the way a word may be engaged in a battle of survival of the fittest by being more musical evocative ushers in his experiences of language deterritorialization.

The comic episodes of heart palpitations that Pnin experiences twice in the text are interesting with respect to the fact that he does not experience these angina like pain in his chest during moments of personal emotional turmoil. He is not besieged by a pain in his heart during the worst of his times e.g., when Lisa leaves him, when Dr. Wind forces his company on Pnin, when Pnin meets Victor or when Pnin is going to be fired from his job. Pnin experiences this heart pain only during moments where he feels himself, alien to the people around him. This dissociation between self and others that the protagonist feels is expressed as a heart trouble. After catching the wrong train and then boarding the bus without his luggage, Pnin is forced to get off the bus upon realizing that his typed speech is in his luggage. Pnin feels a crippling pain in his heart and sits on a bench. The narrator for maximum comic effect painstakingly describes Pnin's fear of death and his panic.

However, the remarkable thing about these chest pains was their retrospective nature as they propelled Pnin into his earliest memories: "And suddenly Pnin (was he dying?) found himself sliding back into his own childhood." (1989, p. 90). Even in this retrospective, the narrator makes sure to reiterate his identity as a Russian. He writes, "This sensation had the sharpness of retrospective detail that is said to be the dramatic privilege of drowning individuals, especially in the former Russian Navy-" (1989, p.90). It is significant to note that, according to the narrator, the privilege is dramatic in nature.

He further writes about this as "- a phenomenon of suffocation that a veteran psychoanalyst, whose name, has escaped as being the sub consciously evoked shock of one's baptism which causes an explosion of intervening recollections between the first immersion and the last. It all happened in a flash but there is no way of rendering it in less than so many consecutive words" (1989, p.90). In the above quote not only is Pnin's episode of experiencing pain is mocked but the entire race "Russian Navy" is lampooned alongside Pnin. Arguably the experience of drowning should be the same for any Navy of the world. For the narrator, to hitch this reference to a forgotten Russian psychoanalyst and his religious zest in believing baptism to be responsible for the onrush of past memories upon drowning is part of the rhetoric of rendering Pnin, and by extension everything Russian, ridiculous. As Felix and Guattari say: "in it everything takes on a collective value" and that "there are no possibilities for an

individuated enunciation" (1989, p.48). Pnin here, become a representative of his race/culture.

This impossibility of individual utterance is also expressed in instances where characters remember and know the persecuted persons from their homeland. "In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin [...] because if one were quite sincere with one-self, no conscience, and hence no consciousness could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible." (1989, p. 666). Mira's death is a painful memory and more than anything else, it reminds him of the violence which she had to face just because of his identity. "One had to forget because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart" (1989, p.666). The grace, the fragility, the tenderness, the beauty of the memories associated with Mira are muddled up with the brutality with which she was brought to and killed in a concentration camp.

The quoted lines are possibly the only instance from the text where the tone of the author is earnest and serious. The death of Pnin's childhood sweetheart is explained in excruciating detail. The fact that the manner of her death is not known conclusively further traumatizes Pnin's mind who, if he thinks about Mira, finds himself involved in the painful recreation of various ways and methods of death as the text says: "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..." (1989, p.32). It is interesting to note that the narrator in the description of Mira's death uses the third person neutral pronouns such as "one" and "one-self" as if he means to declare Mira's death a terrible trauma not only for the protagonist Pnin, but also for any empathetic reader.

Pnin, appears to be the prototype of the displaced refugee in the novel; during his eight year stay at Waindell College had to change his room almost every semester. "The accumulation of consecutive rooms in his memory now resembled those displays [...] of a furniture store" (84). For Pnin who, in his ninth year at Waindell, finally finds a home the "sweetest thing about the place was silence" after suffering the "cocophonies that had surrounded him from six sides in his rented rooms" he found this silence "angelic, rural and perfectly secure" (1989, p.74). When Pnin finds out he will be displaced from this small haven too: "He looked very old, with his toothless mouth half open and a film of tear dimming his blank unblinking eyes" (1989, p.81). His exhaustion, bewilderment, blankness, and his helpless tears qualify his position as a man of no land.

The novel makes several references to politics going on in the Waindell University. The result is that a Professor who has won the college more financial grants, despite his lack of erudition, is tolerated rather celebrated. Whereas some capable academic like Pnin is ousted from the department because: "Political trends in America, as we all know, discourage interest in things Russian" (1989, p.95). Pnin's



status as a refugee earns him the entity of a non-existent being. Homeless, jobless, betrayed by his wife, Pnin is even taken away the privilege of voicing his true dilemma.

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