

Existential Exile: Identity, Escape and Ecstasy in Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*

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Abstract

According to the existentialist these are the choices which make human beings different from other creatures. Existential dictum existence precedes essence is to make choice and to exist first then create essence or reality. What is perhaps most moving in any individual experience is the recognition of a particular limit beyond which one is unable to pass. Thus the characteristics of the human existence must center on the imposition of limits. From the analysis of novel *Invitation of a Beheading* by Nabokov it becomes evident that exile is the facticity which can't be denied as it according to existentialist is situatedness being is put into but it can be transcended. Present paper tries to analyze the text from the perspective of existential exile and how far individual is able to transcend this.

Keywords: existentialism, exile, individual, facticity.

For existentialist individual ceases to exist when he stops to give meaning to life moreover while providing meaning to his life he is also giving meaning to universe. There is fundamental relationship between man and external world. The whole act of faith to choose for one self constitutes relatedness between man and universe. As Martin Heidegger says man is born with facticity that is characterized by thrownness resulting into being in situation. Being in-situation is ambiguous mixture of the given and the taken, in that manner it, with facticity also consists of 'transcendence' which individual can make use of to go beyond those givens by the manner in which they relate to their facticity. The whole idea of transcendence functions somewhat like the 'intentionality' of consciousness. According to Gabriel Marcel's idea of Being in its ontological situation and its integral is that "my awareness of my own existence, is not first of all a separation of myself as a knowing subject from my body as a known object, because it's the existence of my body in the world that constitutes me a subject before it is given to me as an object to a subject." (68 H.J. Blckham). Thus the meaning is created individually in relation to the world one is part of and the commitment to the relation to the world in creating existence establishes the world as fundamental place and home. Here the question arises what if one is in

doubt taking his relation to the world or misfits in to the place in the world. And if one finds himself alienated and isolated amidst the world. This nature of experience of being out of home elucidates the investigation of being at home or away from home and his subsequent desire to return to his place in the world. There remains the question of the nature of experience which calls the possibility of relation into doubt. This nature of experience is called existential exile which is the focal of the present paper. The matrix of exile encompasses two aspects, one is the physical exile in that one is drifted from his native place, culture, nationality, or the background he belongs to, other is to be exiled ontologically which can either be result of physical exile or the lack of relatedness between individual and the outside world.

As Sophia McClennen contends, "Without the belief that there is a connection between and individual and a place, exile has no meaning." (141) Edward Said calls exile the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home," which entails the "crippling sorrow of estrangement." With the present definition it is clear that exile as an integral to human ontological situation necessitates defining the two elements which establishes the relation and subsequently results into separation of those two elements. Fallen,

inauthentic Dasein ignores temporality (specifically, futurity) whereas authenticity lies in the recognition that the existence of Dasein should point towards the final realization of the Being that Dasein is and its end in death. Without explicitly referring to exile as such, Heidegger's account of Dasein clearly suggests a manner of existence (inauthenticity) which can be interpreted as an **exile experience**.

The condemnation to freedom that Sartre describes is thus akin to condemnation to exile; the individual is permanently exiled and fallen from absolute value, meaning, and direction, and forced through absolute freedom to determine each of these things for oneself. As in Heidegger's conception, the individual is left to determine in and for oneself the ground of Being in hopes of achieving a reconnection with that ground. However, whereas Heidegger found the possibility for such a reconnection through an authentic engagement with death, Sartre opposes that the fact of death only further alienates the individual from the possibility of meaning, thus extending one's state of being in-exile.

Heidegger and Sartre both therefore characterize the origin of human existence as an **exilic event**, while maintaining that the whole of existence is undertaken as a form of being-in-exile. However, whereas Heidegger's conception seems to suggest that a 'finite return' from exile is possible, Sartre's position does not seem to allow for such a possibility. The character of Sisyphus, as Camus understands him, is reflective of the exile experience on several levels. Sisyphus earns his legendary punishment of eternal toil at the same task without hope of success or completion. This condemnation may, too, be seen as an exile experience, as Sisyphus is placed in an in-between state of exile in the world, neither truly in life nor in death, wholly alienated from the aspects of each that he had known. He is hopelessly stuck in-between the illusion of success getting meaning. Further, and perhaps most importantly, in this permanent condition of futile labor, Sisyphus is an exile from hope; it is this aspect of his exile that constitutes the depth of his punishment and which characterizes his position as Absurd. Exile is a fundamental condition of human existence, just as there are competing accounts which suitably engage the ontological situation with no reference to exile at all.

Therefore, for man's condition Camus says: "...in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land...freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, what counts is not the best living but the most living." (The Myth of Sisyphus 5)

The 'whole' from which the individual is exiled is nothing more nor less than a ground of Being: it is the possibility for order, unity, and meaning for the individual in the world as that world is experienced through individual consciousness. Neither the individual (as 'part') nor the whole can be completely understood without also understanding their manner of relatedness, as it is precisely this relatedness as/in exile which ultimately defines both. Implicit in the name 'exile,' as has been suggested throughout the preceding discussion, is the existence of a part that has been separated from a whole; the condition of exile thereby arises through the separation of part from whole. Therefore, 'existential exile' is the failure to recognize the possibility of meaningful relation between the self (as part) and the whole; to be in exile existentially is to be alienated from a ground of Being. Exile is thus a way of being-in-the-world that arises not from the loss of home per se but rather from the loss of being-at-home in the world. As Said notes, the period of exile is essentially a period of homelessness; the exile is forced from home yet wholly unable to discover a new home in the 'elsewhere. Yet in the case of existential exile, it is not a return home physically that is sought, but rather a return to a feeling of being-at-home in the world. However, as was noted above, because existential exile is a failure to recognize the relatedness between oneself and the whole as a ground of Being, being-at-home in the world does not entail a change to one's being-in-the-world but rather a change in how one understands and experiences the one's being-in-the-world.

The gulf between the individual and ground/whole that arises in existential exile, as the recognition of groundlessness, thus provides the space within which the relatedness between self and ground may be realized. Existential exile is thus precisely the absence of this realization; while it was suggested that the individual (as part) and the whole to which the individual is related could

not exist independently of their relatedness, this does not indicate that the recognition and responsible affirmation of that relatedness is implicit or inherent. Existential exile is thus not merely a misunderstanding of the relatedness between individual and ground but rather a failure to realize that relatedness. It must be emphatically noted here that this strangeness and unintelligibility is, precisely, the experience of existential exile; it is the failure to realize a capacity for relation which renders the experience of not being-at-home in the world. Precisely because human existence is taken up in exile, such an existence must be described as absurd. At the same time, if it can be concluded that the absurd arises within the position in exile, it must likewise be noted that, once recognized, the absurd only further emphasizes and exacerbates the human position in/as exile. Camus notes that the human inclination is to seek clarity and understanding with respect to the world; connections must be established and maintained, and meaning must be unearthed and cultivated. The individual who realizes the absurdity of existence, however, knows that these connections and meanings do not inherently exist and that such clarity is an illusion. All that is left, the only certainty that the world will concede, is that of death

Yet to distinguish between home as a physical entity and a cultural or 'spiritual' entity is in some sense to miss the underlying point; exile is fundamentally a break, and the element from which the break is felt is less essential than the experience of the break itself. As Said concludes, exile "is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being." (134). Regardless of the original etymological intention of the term, 'exile' cannot be limited to reference to the purely physical and immediate separation of an individual from one's home. It may be concluded the *solum* of exile refers not to the physical ground of one's homeland but instead to relation as a more fundamental ground of being. In this sense, to be in exile may mean far more than mere physical separation from a particular place by signifying an existential separation from what is original and thus constitutive of existence itself. Edward Said in his essay "Reflections on Exile" states Said states, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its

true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (179).

However all meaning existentially originates in experience and each experience provide individual choices to make depending upon the individual either to stuck in to circumstances to transcend the boundaries making choices. To not make choice is also a choice. Vladimir Nabokov in his novels does not use existential characters in his novels but the situations and circumstances he puts characters in make them the real existential heroes. The present paper tries to identify the existential characteristics of characters in the novel. The common selected themes in his novels provide the series of characters struggling and suffering in exiled situations and works like a common thread in all of his novels. On the other hand it also shows the undying spirit of characters who are not ready to surrender to those situations. In those circumstances they somehow succeed to maintain the individuality and authenticity of their existence. Nabokov's characters become stronger facing the harsh realities of emigration and exile. This existential spirit of life and choice reflects Nabokov's own orientation towards life. Coming from the Russian community, he emerged as most eminent writer of English world. Nabokov in his life emerged as a true existential hero. Rather being a victim of exile situations he acknowledges the fact of life and relishes the new environment and unique atmosphere of exile. He created his own new world, exploring his past as a mirror to reflect his experiences. Thus merging the two worlds, Nabokov serves as a unique example of writer of being the victim of situations emerges as hero. And that only makes his a true existentialist in nature.

Firstly his characters are uprooted from their motherland which evokes the feeling of meaninglessness as for them their native land provide them the sense of authenticity, meaning, and true existence. but once the source is lost they find themselves lost in new kind of environment where they are enclosed in alienated world and are trying to with unhomely feeling and inability to fit themselves in alien country. He depicts the people as is shown in novel *Pnin*, who came to "promised land" with aspirations but got stuck in ceaseless moving from one place to another in search of the feeling of meaning, stability and home. But the feeling of home is denied as it

is lost. Pnin is shown in the novel changing apartments to settle down but he does not get the one.

Secondly the Nabokovian characters recollects the reminiscence of their motherland .the feeling of nostalgia creates void and ontological insecurity. Ontological insecurity comes from the loss of roots, and home. Nabokov brings the parallel issues in focus that is related to the motive of emigration such as the theme of the lost home. it is same as Adam and Eve lost their paradise and since then hunting for the home and security, stability Nabokov's characters directly or indirectly project the same trauma of exile, Nabokov faced during the exile. However he never seeks for any solace for his nostalgia. Nabokov's distinctive perspective of characters in their relation to outside world and their absurd life is the result of the disturbed environment and disorder he was grown into. When Nabokov was asked about a sense of national identity, he responded: "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 intentionally evaded a direct reply, rather indicating to his multicultural background that stressed that he was a citizen of the world. In normal parlance the term exile denotes undesirable pessimism, pain and negative attitude: sadness- denial, adversities, rejection, difficulties, reluctance, unwillingness and much more negative aspect of life. In most of Nabokov's works exile and individual as exiled beings are seen as a dominant theme. For example in his novels *Pnin* and *Palefire* the protagonist are exiled individual away from home. Their depiction with no hope to return to native land evokes the feeling of nothingness and meaninglessness. These individuals are struggling to regain their lost existence. Uprooted from the culture to assimilate the new one protagonist are lost and confused. That loss is also reflects in their actions and behavior. Nabokov, through the characters of his novels who are apparently not well versed with native language find difficulties to converse, reflects the common problems of emigrants who fail to assimilate new cultural values and find themselves outsiders. He makes readers to sympathize with these individuals. By portraying the dilemmas and inner struggle of these emigrants, Nabokov becomes the mouthpiece of all individuals who undergo with exile crisis and which can

never be understood by those who have never encountered exile.

Pnin Analysis: Vladimir Nabokov's novel Pnin's focal is the central character Timofey Pnin who is a 53 year old; "poor Pnin" (44); "old fashioned, humorless Pnin" (80). When taking the national framework into account, readers can see how Pnin is actually ontologically secure (Laing 39). He sees his life as being "differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question" (41). To Pnin the Clements are "real people--not like most of the campus dummies" (146). This admission demonstrates how Pnin is aware of those who accept him in his world, for they are the real people. The others are labeled "dummies," suggesting his recognition of their way of viewing Pnin, and his realization that those views are incorrect. He also realizes how the rest of his dinner guests are "nothing extraordinary, nothing original," showing lack of respect for their presence, and thus, opinions. He secures residence at a rental home, instead of merely a room, where "The sense of living in a discrete building all by himself was to Pnin something singularly delightful and amazingly satisfying to a weary old man of his innermost self, battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness" (Pnin144). In breaking away from dependence of others' homes, Pnin begins to revitalize an awareness of his true Self. It seems all along Pnin was described according to someone casting Pnin in a slanted role, placing a mask onto his self so that the initial evaluation of Pnin is as an ontologically insecure person. Laing, here, could consider Pnin having reached a goal. He achieves a sort of "Personal unity ... a prerequisite of reflective awareness, that is the ability to be aware of one's own self acting relatively unselfconsciously, or with the simple primary non-reflective awareness" (Laing 197).

The concept of responsibility is a derivative of the existential concept of 'thrownness'. Man is literally thrown into the world, as he has no control over our gender, culture, nationality, race, and family conditions. Pnin takes responsibility of his existence individually. This makes him unique uncorrupt being who is being authentic to his individuality. The responsibility is existential which encompasses awareness of one's own being. So, Responsibility means "that one is responsible for

developing one's own unique individuality and not being a phony but being oneself the awareness of the concept of Responsibility makes one to become an individual, who makes his own decisions and is aware that his decisions ultimately direct the meaning of his life." (58 Frankl) .at the end of the novel Pnin realizing the boundaries and levels others have imposed upon him new country, Pnin transcend all of them by leaving the college. At the end of the novel readers also come to know that Pnin till now presented by narrator's perspective. But ultimately leaving the context of the text Pnin throws masks society has put on him, while this does not indicate a full sense of ontological security. He realizes that he is living in an alternate world, but his fleeing from the alternate world shows his inability to reconcile its place within shared reality.

Timofey Pnin exemplifies all the features of a genuinely exiled person who is at one glance lost in the new place and environment. Despite the bizarre descriptions and jokes of him, Nabokov never limits him to a comic clown or sympathized caricature. Rather he presents Pnin unstably witty on a purpose to distinguish him from the normal crowd who is not bothered for their individuality and existence. Pnin as an exiled individual fails to assimilate and adapt into the foreign culture, which is the foremost cause of his alienation and depression. As the novel shows the basic barrier is the language and communication which becomes the main source of the anguish of Pnin. Pnin only knows Russian language and therefore fails to converse with the local People from German and English background, as he does not speak or understand English well. Nabokov characterizes Pnin with traits of exiled individual, as shown at the beginning of the novel, he leaves for an event to speak at an event but he takes the wrong bus and finds that he has taken the wrong file of the papers that were necessary for the event. we find him in a totally confused state of mind till the last of the novel, which is usual for an emigrated individual. As in the novel: "Pnin, his head on his arm, started to beat the table with his loosely clenched fist; I had noting; I had noting, noting, noting!" (23). Pnin does not have a house he can solely belong to. He is unable to create his own particular identity in the alien land. He could not get rid of his culture and adopt a new one as he was very Russian in his culture

and spirit.. His inability to converse with people shows that he is an alienated and aloof individual in an alien land. Pnin has very few friends. Dr. Hegan is the only well-wisher of him in the entire department. Slowly, it leads to his destruction and he loses everything. This novel is an ostensible example of the kind of life émigrés lead abroad. It shows their alienation, how they are marginalized and there are treated as others in another land. Throughout the novel, neither Pnin find himself fit for American culture nor does he want to compromise with his Russian creed. He is treated as the "Other". The novel is a complete account of the life of Pnin. He was forced to leave Russia because of the Russian Revolution and teaches the Russian language in America.

All of the above descriptions of Pnin's state puts him in to the alienated state, the state which is cogent to existentialist for defining the meaning of life. One of most true defining trait which becomes Pnin a true exiled individual is his lack of permanent and stable home in America. Nabokov also uses this as an satirical element in the novel that is the longing of Pnin to own a house in host country. Pnin unendingly search for the permanent house in the foreign land but he does not get the one as an exiled one it is difficult for him to assimilate to new culture. Symbolically if this is seen longing for a physical house describes his longing for stable self which is lost with the loss of his cultural and emotional connections. Pnin keeps on changing houses throughout the novel. But none becomes his stable house. 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). Pnin's search of permanence and stability in the form of a house he can call solely his own remains ongoing till the end of the novel. Pnin realizes at the end of the novel that his search for permanent house is not finished yet. He realizes that he must once again leave to search for a comparatively satisfactory new lodging. According to McCarthy "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 justifies his fondness 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 signing a contract and therefore exercises a "habit of freedom" but as the plot advances Pnin's personality transforms amazingly. As the time passes Pnin, like his creator successfully adapts the foreign language and become well versed in this. He not only gets command over languages but also adopt its execution in relation to the native language.

Pnin is living in darkness and chaos, being marginalized in the alien society. He recollects the days when he left Russia and of the chaos of the transatlantic crossing "that dreamlike, complex day of the departure, the pain stricken, gaping suitcases and the whirlwind of old newspapers" (33). Pnin's mission is to teach his country's history and traditions and tries to connect to his country through the use of Russian. His otherness is reported thus by Nabokov: "If his Russian was music, his English was murder. He had enormous difficulty in understanding and speaking real English" (66). Nabokov registers the experiences of homelessness of Pnin. He shows his traumatic experiences and the problems of marginalization and displacement of the émigrés living in an alien land. Pnin's personal anguish is depicted in a simple and racy style by Nabokov. He longs to go back to his home in Russia. He also describes his longing of the Russian environment in these lines: "Lilacs — those Russian garden graces, to whose springtime splendour, all honey and hum, my poor Pnin greatly looked forward — crowded in sapless ranks along one wall. ... And a tall deciduous tree, which Pnin, a birch-lime-willow-aspen-poplar-oak man, was unable to identify, cast its large, heart-shaped, rust-colored leaves and Indian summer shadows upon the wooden steps of the open porch." (Nabokov 145)

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)

Pnin being –in- situation transcend the facticity he is thrown into both physically and ontologically. Frankl believes the attainment of self-actualization is also possible through self –transcendence but self-actualization should not be attainable aim at all because more one strive for it , the more he would miss it. For transcending the facticity of human life he says "it denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself- be it a meaning to fulfill or other human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself-by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love –the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself." (115 Frankl)

Moreover the Nabokov's novel *Pnin* also equates struggle of Pnin with Nabokov's life itself. Exile as a dominant theme is present in many important works of Nabokov. Through the lives of characters that are just like Nabokov himself, forced to relocate, acculturate, and adapt in different countries Nabokov expresses his own experience. His characters are seen with the same existential spirit to not to surrender to external circumstances as Nabokov himself. From the above discussion it becomes evident that Pnin as an individual being despite of the facticity and absurdity of life he is thrown into maintain his existence in the world. For mere existing physically is not the purpose individual seek rather it's in the relation to the world one should able to be aware of being. The process of the becoming simultaneously encompasses the various traumas and tribulations which Pnin has gone through and without which authentic existence is not possible. The power of existence lies in the power to not surrendering to the facticity and to transcend it through self-actualization and self-awareness. The energy deriving from this awareness makes one to

drag him out of mud, and enable one to begin to exist. Thus in brief, the human being is obliged to make himself what he is, and has to be what he is.

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