

UDC 82

**DISPERSED FROM RUSSIA TO ZEMBLA:  
NABOKOV'S LITERARY WORLD**

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***Abstract.** This article discusses the literary images in Nabokov's novels (focusing on *Pale Fire*) as representatives of certain diasporas, investigates the generalized characteristics of protagonists that are extrapolated to the author's personality. It is noted that living away from his motherland, Nabokov created his own original literary world of transnational culture and cultural mixing. In exile, the writer thought about his homeland all his life. However, Nabokov was able to go beyond national territories and find his home in the created literary space. The conclusions drawn are important for understanding the characteristics of the Russian diasporic community.*

***Keywords:** the literary world of Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, diaspora, the theme of "exile", cultural mixing, motherland.*

Vladimir Nabokov is the greatest bilingual writer of the century. He is not only a star of Russian diasporic literature, but also a master of English literature. His "unique identity of cross-cultural writing" determines the cross-cultural characteristics of his literary works. Nabokov was born in 1899 into an old Russian aristocratic family. In 1917, after the outbreak of the "October Revolution" in Russia, he and his family went into exile in Western Europe, drifting successively in London, Berlin and Paris. In Western Europe, he was active in the Russian literature of exile under the pen name V. Sirin. Due to the unique style of his works, the Russian critics questioned the "Russianness" in his works. After he moved to the United States with his family in 1940 and began writing in English, the idea that he was a "non-Russian" writer became more mainstream. While Nabokov readily acknowledged that he was an "American writer", flatly refused to acknowledge the influence of other writers, including Russian ones, and repeatedly insisted that he had nothing to do with writers of other cultural traditions. He rose to global literary fame in 1955 with his controversial novel *Lolita*. Nabokov moved to Switzerland in 1960 and died there in 1977 at the age of 78. Throughout his life, Nabokov lived far from his motherland, without any fixed residence and was always in diaspora.

**The Diasporic Nabokov**

Diaspora is an old word that has acquired many new meanings since the 1970s. The word has been used in the *Old Testament* as a metaphor for God's intention to disperse Israel into all parts of the world. Until a few decades ago, the word "diaspora" was mainly associated with Jewish history. Because of this connection, "diaspora" has acquired the meaning that people of a certain nation leave their motherland to live in a foreign land, but always maintain the characteristics of their native culture. Referring to "diaspora" today includes transnationalism, cultural translation, traveling culture, hybridity, etc. From the new perspective of diaspora, "home" is not only the

actual location, but also the imaginary space. “Home” doesn’t mean fallen leaves have to return to their roots, but also a station on the journey of life. But what “diaspora” is? It must consist of two or more places, connecting here and now with there and then; diasporic thinking must be cross-ethnic, transactional, mixed.

Nabokov was one of those who left Russia as a young man to live in various countries following the Revolution. His novels span more than 40 years from the early 1920s to the late 1970s, written in Germany, France, the United States and other places, with the life of the Russian diaspora as the main theme. The characters in the novel are cut off from their original lives, estranged from the past of their motherland, interwoven or conflicted with reality and dreams. The novel is a sobbing story, and the self-dislocation feeling of love, which gradually deepens into the emotional theme of rich philosophical thinking: the poet has great contempt for the cruelty of human beings, the cruelty of despotism and the cruelty of fate. Thus art is constantly moved by the omnipresent kindness of life and forms a powerful vitality. With such vitality, Nabokov re-invented the Europe he experienced with his Russian diaspora [3]. Nabokov's emotional structure is clearly not unique to Nabokov.

Nabokov's life-long exploration of creation not only shows the interactive perspective of the exile community, but also reflects the spiritual track of a generation of Russian expatriate writers.

### **The self-diaspora projection in the works**

Nabokov lived in exile throughout his life, which objectively created opportunities for him to experience and recognize the cultures of other countries. His understanding of American culture and French culture is no less than his familiarity with the culture of his own country. Therefore, in his works, he can freely mix elements of different cultures, either replacing, juxtaposition, or mixing them together, which makes the different cultures shown in his original text and translation full of hybridity.

Each of Nabokov's novels focuses on depicting one or a group of related characters. Therefore, Nabokov's novels become typical character novels -- diaspora novels. Nabokov's characters have a lot of similarities, and these novel characters have different degrees of Nabokov's “autobiographical facts”. Updike argues that Nabokov used “autobiographical elements... Skillfully rearranged and even completely transformed by means of fiction” [7, p. 320].

Nabokov was an diasporic writer and a professor of literature, so he tended to choose literary workers as the main characters in his novels. These characters share many of Nabokov's identifications: literature professors, writers, or both, and mostly emigrated to the United States with a different attachment to the European continent. For example, Krug, the hero of *Bend Sinister*, is a professor of literature; Humbert in *Lolita* is also a professor of literature; Pnin, who fled from Russia to the United States, also taught literature in American university. Similarly, there are striking similarities in Shade (a famous writer and university professor) and Kinbote (a European aristocrat exiled to America), the two protagonists of *Pale Fire*. Nabokov not only puts his own experiences on his protagonists, but also cleverly expresses his own views on the matter through these literary agents. For example, Humbert's familiarity with tennis and American road culture in the novel reminds people of Nabokov's experience as a tennis coach and his tour around the United States to collect butterflies. In *Pnin*, Nabokov arranged life for the “little man” with reference to his own resume; In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote is not only a diasporic writer and a literature professor, but also shares Nabokov's hatred of bullfights, shareholders, music in supermarkets, swimming pools and so on. Meanwhile, the plot of Gradus' manslaughter of Shade is more reminiscent of the manslaughter of Nabokov's father.

At the same time, in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov tries to dissolve two kinds of grief through his life: the loss of his motherland and the loss of the loved ones. In the narrator Kinbote, there is an obvious shadow of Nabokov's exile, showing that he is unfamiliar with and alienated from the new environment and becomes “the marginal” who lacks a sense of belonging and self-identity. Kinbote claimed to be the former king of the distant kingdom of Zembla, and the revolution had cost him his

throne and everything else. He made his way to the United States, where he changed his name to teach literature at university. Incognito meant the loss of identity, and being gay reinforced his marginalization in American culture. In Zembla he was the king of all voices, while in America he was just a stranger. From the central position in the motherland to the marginal in a foreign land, from the loss of the original identity to the reconstruction of another identity, Kinbote has experienced all the spiritual pain of a cultural diaspora.

However, Kinbote is positive, and Nabokov is not depressed too. They are not willing to give up everything in the past and trying to make the “lost heaven” in the flash of art eternal. After arriving in the United States, Kinbote tried his best to blend into the mainstream society of the United States. The person he chose to communicate with was Shade, a famous poet who represented the mainstream culture of the United States. When Kinbote knew that Shade was writing a long poem, he immediately had the idea that Shade should include the history of Zembla in it. He wanted the real Zembla to be immortalized in the great poem.

The word “Zembla” means “land” in Russian. The land also has strong ties to Russia, As Kinbote wrote in Commentary: “When I was a child, Russia enjoyed quite a vogue at the court of Zembla but that was a different Russia – A Russia that fans tyrants and team Philistines, Injustice and Cruelty, the Russia of Ladies and Gentlemen and liberal aspirations” [5, p. 227]. Nabokov's deep affection for Russia is clearly reflected in Zembla's world.

Because of this, many literary reviews and interviews have sought to find a connection between Nabokov and the his protagonists. These figures are like mirrors, reflecting different images of the author from different angles. Nabokov also admits to incorporating his own past into his protagonists' life. He pointed out: “The more words a character has, the more talented he is, and the more likely he is to be close to the author...But I was really not aware of this particular similarity, just like one is not aware of the same behavioural characteristics of an odious relative” [4, p. 276]. Nabokov's diasporic state has been deeply integrated into his unconscious, and in the process of exploration and creation, he endowed this consciousness with a concrete form and constructed his own literary kingdom of diaspora.

### **Nabokov's literary world**

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote attempts to reconstruct his identity through artistic creation. While in real life, Nabokov also completed his identity reconstruction in the history of world literature by creating a number of magnificent literary works and shaping individual characters. Towards the end of the novel, he says, materially, through Kinbote's pen, “I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” [5, p. 283]. That is to say, no matter how cruel the reality is, Nabokov will reconstruct his identity from the edge to the center and create his own literary world through the way of art.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym discussed the imagined home of three Russian-American artists, Nabokov, Brodsky, and Kabakov. The three artists offered alternative perspectives not only on Russia but also on the United States, defending the traumatization of immigration stories and the commercialization of nostalgia. Combining tenderness and alienation, insisting on the distinction between reason and emotion, they developed a kind of ethics of memory [1, p. 288]. In short, the literary world created in Nabokov's works is a whole closely connected with the themes of memory, time, diaspora, homecoming narrative, ethnic identity and so on.

Said once wrote: “Exile is a life outside the normal order of things. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; But as soon as get used to it, its shaking power comes out again” [6, p. 1]. As for Nabokov, Russia – his motherland, had been sublimated into a real artistic imagination, which the author may be haunted by, but was doomed to never return. After years of diaspora, America gave him a spiritual and emotional sense of belonging. Therefore, Nabokov was more creative and transcendental than other exiled Russian intellectuals. He took the irreparable loss

of exile as an artistic inspiration, fed it into his works, and created a literary style out of the pain and loss. “It's not simply an aesthetic or a meta-literary game, but a clever mechanism for survival” [1, p. 292-293]. As the scholar Liu poetically sums it up: For Nabokov, exile was a painful, lifelong injury, but it is the exile, the loss of his home and its time and space that facilitated his maturation, making him grow into a poetic wise man, thus entering his poetic art world [2, p. 78].

We can say that Nabokov's literary world is precisely derived from the fact of Nabokov's exile and cultural conflict: he was always been at odds between Russian culture and foreign culture, in the confrontation between history and reality, past and present memory and oblivion, as well as in the rupture of identity and self-realization [8, p. 160]. In such a confrontation and clash, Nabokov has always been in an “outsider” state, while striving for coexistence and constantly creating literary world for his own.

### Conclusion

The image of diasporic intellectuals in Nabokov's works is gradually getting rid of the pain of exile in reality and moving towards the spiritual diaspora. “While constructing the spiritual diaspora world described by Nabokov, he was also trying to expand human consciousness and approach various limits of the human world. What he longed for was not only to exist forever in the spiritual world constructed by himself, but to break through the boundary between himself and the world and enter a more profound and broad realm” [2, p. 52]. In a sense, Nabokov represents the image of an independent intellectual, he innovates, experiments and progresses in the edge, finally reaching the center of the world and found his own home.

People who take the diasporic perspective will not be homeless. In diaspora, “home” and the world become united, and the concept of “home” expands. To use the metaphor suggested by the etymology of “diaspora”, “diaspora” propagates the motherland of the heart by the formation of cross-ethnic and cultural translation. Diaspora like Nabokov left his motherland, traveling with roots or carrying seeds, in order to propagate his culture in a new environment. To be precise, the true value of the diasporic experience is that the diaspora finds home in the world, or finds the world in his home.

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## ИЗГНАЛИ ИЗ РОССИИ В ЗЕМБЛЮ: ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЙ МИР НАБОКОВА

Чжао Хунцзюнь, аспирант  
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*Аннотация.* В статье рассматриваются литературные образы героев романа В. Набокова «Бледный огонь» как представителей определённых диаспор, исследуются обобщённые характеристики персонажей, которые экстраполируются на личность автора. Отмечается, что, живя вдали от родины, Набоков создает собственный самобытный литературный мир транснациональной культуры и культурного смешения. В изгнании писатель всю жизнь думал о Родине. Однако Набоков смог выйти за рамки национальных территорий и найти свой дом в созданном литературном пространстве. Сделанные выводы имеют важное значение для понимания своеобразия русского Зарубежья.

*Ключевые слова:* литературный мир Набокова, роман «Бледный огонь», диаспора, тема «изгнания», культурное смешение, Родина.