

The Hobo's Vision and the Stalker's Gaze in Anglo-American and Japanese Fiction—a Comparative Study of Nabokov and Kawabata

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Abstract

It is possible to see a connection between the representation of the hobo's vision and the stalker's gaze in some of the novels produced by Anglo-American and Japanese writers in the second half of the twentieth century. Both the groups of writers share the growing prosperity of post-war capitalist societies and present characters that are dispossessed and maladjusted. Pursuing lost 'true love' of adolescence, the protagonists wander throughout adult life seeking epiphanies with images, individuals and ideas, but always failing in their pursuit. The poetic justice of the denouements suggests the didactic purpose of the novels and the demand for a better world. The essay is divided in two parts. The first part discusses the rise of the homeless and maladjusted protagonist in Anglo-American and Japanese literatures. These maladjusted protagonists are male and their lives are symptomatic of a desire to love and belong that often forces them to transgress moral and social boundaries. The use of evocative language creates a dream-like world of moving shadows, epiphanies and

ghosts that blur fantasy and fact compelling the reader to empathize if not endorse the transgressions of the protagonist. The second part analyses two iconic novels of Nabokov and Kawabata—Lolita and The Lake—both written in the second half of the twentieth century. In both these novels an aging protagonist compellingly pursues his desire for a nymphet courting death or disappointment. Nabokov's and Kawabata's linguistic prowess and lyrical prose in the novels stretch the imagination of the reader and push the moral and psychological limits of the modern novel. On another level the novels are an indictment of the capitalist societies and the status quo that allow a dispossessed and maladjusted vision to prosper by its inability to include all its citizens to share economic benefits in society. The didactic purpose of such literature is not lost on the modern reader.

The literature of the hobo and socially maladjusted in American and Japanese fiction often portrays a wandering hero with a want and a desire that is either redemptive or exploitative. When it is presented as redemptive the protagonist becomes a symbol of freedom and bonhomie, but when it turns socially exploitative, the protagonist represents transgression and guilt. In both the competitive representations there is an underlying criticism of society which creates individuals that are either exploited or who exploit others. The celebration of the homeless in search of adventure and freedom and the criticism of society that gives rise to such aberrations are the two contradictory themes in Anglo-American and Japanese literature. Often the romanticization of the homeless frees the protagonist from social and moral responsibilities, allows him to pursue his fantasies and justify them. Some of these fantasies transgress social norms but fall short of infringing the law. The poetic language that represents the perspective of the maladjusted craving for love and belongingness pushes the moral and psychological limits of the novel creating new meanings. It is argued

that the representation of the hobo's vision is often the flipside of a stalker's gaze as both represent a social malaise that the status quo fails to address or addresses through force and incarceration. In a tale of moral transgression both the Anglo-American and Japanese writers often choose poetic justice resulting in the demise of the protagonist.

The 1950s was a period which saw the rise of humanistic and behaviorist psychologies of Rollo May (*The Meaning of Anxiety*, 1950), Carl Rogers (*Client-Centered Therapy*, 1951) and *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, 1952), Alfred Kinsey, (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* 1953), B. F. Skinner (*Walden Two*, 1948) and Abraham Maslow (*A Theory of Human Nature*, 1943). These two psychological theories had a deep impact on the disciplines of literary theory and history. The 1950s humanistic psychology questioned the premises of clinical psychology as being “too confident, too technological, [and] too proud” and criticized the notion of “cure,” “illness,” and “health” as somewhat narrow (Maslow, 1979, 378). The new psychology questioned the belief of fitting individuals into a system and called for the need to understand aberration or deviance in human behavior. Creative writers began to probe the unconscious and reveal its primary organizing force before experience, deduction and collective experiences which Claude Levi-Strauss calls the totemic function in his book *La Pensee Sauvage* (1962).

In the light of the psychological debates of the 1950s between social adjustment and deviance it is possible to see the literary strategies writers like Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) and Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) employ to deal with the themes of obsession and self image. Both humanist and behaviorist psychologies allow writers to deal with social maladjustment and sexual aberration as a function of feeling and self identity or stimulus and response with compassion and grace as if to absolve the ‘unreliable’ protagonists of their

transgressions. But the didactic antecedents of the novelistic tradition prevents an endorsement of deviation. The literary denouement always indict deviance or obsession.

In the post 1950s the search for beauty or ‘true love’, free from moral responsibility and social duties, became a romantic ideal for some writers and poets. The incorrigible stalker looking for potential victims to admire or devour was seen as another aspect of the wanderer seeking freedom and ungraspable beauty. A hankering for the beautiful and erotic verged on transgression and when transgression took place it was elided through a play of lyrical vocabulary to exonerate the stalker and create the victim as the victimizer or enticer. The intricate play of intention and enticement in Nabokov and Kawabata appeals to a middle class reader seeking titillation in minor transgressions yet fearing reprisals or retribution from law and society at large. Often the heated minds of the protagonists create a surreal world where a stream of consciousness plays one event against another in an act of forgetting and yet chaining the object of desire to memory.

Both Nabokov and Kawabata show the obsession of their unreliable protagonists with nymphets as a function of losing their ‘true love’ when young. Humbert Humbert is obsessed with the death of his childhood love Annabel Leigh who dies of “typhus in Corfu (*Lolita*, 15). Since then he pursues those “miserable memories and begins his nymphet adventure with Lolita—“I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel” (*Lolita*, 15-16). Annabel becomes a “permanent obstacle” to any future “romance until he breaks her “spell” by “incarnating her in another” (*The Lake*, 17). Gimpei Momoi also pursues the image of his childhood “first love” Yayoi that can last forever like their moving figures on the lake. But she marries a naval officer and

is widowed during the war (*The Lake*, 27-28). Gimpei acquires a compulsive desire to follow women and it becomes a disease—“The need to follow women is as persistent as athlete’s foot; it doesn’t clear up, it spreads” (*The Lake*, 35).

The Anglo-American Tradition of Hobo Novels

The theme of the itinerant’s vision in Anglo-American and Japanese traditions reflects the inability of capitalist societies to provide a better standard of living to all citizens in a welfare state. Invariably writers empathize with the miseries of homeless existence or glorify the freedom such life entails. Often the American writers portrays the homeless character from “above” as someone “distant and separate” from him (Allen, 2004 4). The representation of the wholes also becomes a site for ideological conflict where issues connected to “home, work, charity, and American identity” are often debated (Allen, 2005 4). It is an undeniable fact that the representation of the homeless character in literature is always conditioned by the “social context” that gives rise to him (Tomkins, 1985 200).

The end of European feudalism and the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth century promised abundance and prosperity to all but this promise was short-lived. There was a rise of the dispossessed that underscored the inability of modern capitalistic societies to provide for the welfare and support of the deprived either through the institutions of a welfare state or kinship networks. Often the homeless wanderer was romanticized or criminalized in society and became a fascinating subject to both sociologists and novelists. Today the institutions of governance in the developed world are under strain and the benefits of civil society do not cover everyone. The return of the homeless wanderer has renewed an interest in the hobo literary tradition.

The great appeal of the homeless traveler, sojourner and nomadic wanderer continues to play a significant role in American literature. Kingsley Widmer explains how the homeless, the, “wandering blind Homers, peripatetic Cynics, homeless rhapsodists, drifting jongleurs, mendicant goliards, rhyming beggars, fluent picaros, itinerant preachers, imitating Christ, literary students on a *wanderjahr*, restless romantic poets, footloose folk singers, exiled revolutionary memorialists, artistic mariners, professional literary hobos and aspiring hitchhiker novelists-among others!-large parts of our significant literature have found the muse on the road, if not down-and-out in the streets” (Allen, 2004 77). The romanticization of the homeless wanderer celebrates the freedom of the road—finding “the muse on the road”—but often ignores the harsh realities of hunger and want. Obviously the nomadic wanderer had a strong appeal for Anglo-American writers of the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

A sizeable body of American and English literature deals with the homeless, tramp and street poor. It is possible to see the twin themes of homelessness and domesticity in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) which paved the way for the Civil War. In Horatio Alger Jr. (1832-1899) the life of the tramp on the road becomes a symbol of a dispossessed freedom that is romanticized with the accompanying discomforts of dispossession. In Alger’s *The Store Boy* (1887) we come to meet the “hard-looking” and “unsavory” tramp taking a ride with the youthful Ben Barclay. In *Tony the Tramp; Or, Right is Might* (1896) Alger tells the story of a dispossessed boy Tony Rugg who is cheated out of his inheritance of a large estate by his uncle. The stories of Alger brings home the dangers and vicissitudes of life in the nineteenth century for the unprotected and weak.

Jacob A. Riis’s two works *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *Children of the*

Poor (1892) Riis reveals the misery and squalor of the urban poor and brings it to the attention of the political leaders and town planners. In the Introduction to *How the Other Half Lives* Riis explains how the poor of New York live in tenements thus:

LONG ago it was said that ‘one half of the world does not know how the other half lives.’ That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat. There came a time when the discomfort and crowding below were so great, and the consequent upheavals so violent, that it was no longer an easy thing to do, and then the upper half fell to inquiring what the matter was. Information on the subject has been accumulating rapidly since, and the whole world has had its hands full answering for its old ignorance (Alger, 1890 1).

The highly critical and emotive prose of Riis reveals his disappointment with America and its inability to take care of the poor and the disposed. In *Children of the Poor* Riis dedicates the book to the warm-hearted love of poor children and indicts the state for not taking care; he writes,

THE problem of the children is the problem of the State. As we mould the children of the toiling masses in our cities, so we shape the destiny of the State which they will rule in their turn, taking the reins from our hands. In proportion as we neglect or pass them by, the blame for bad government to come rests upon us. The cities long since held the balance of power; their dominion will be absolute soon unless the near future finds some way of scattering the population which the era of steam-power and industrial

development has crowded together in the great centres of that energy (Riis, 1892 2).

Riis's argues that if we neglect the "children of the toiling masses" who together with the urban populace also "shape the destiny of the State" then a power imbalance would emerge in industrial countries where cities would prosper at the expense of the countryside.

Similarly Stephen Crane (1871-1900) wrote about the plight of the homeless during the period of 19th century transition in America where society shifted from agricultural production to industrial manufacture. The influx of immigrants, consumer society and dysfunctional families placed a heavy burden on individuals finding economic stability. In *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) Crane narrates the story of an unfortunate Bowery Manhattan girl whose economic and social condition deteriorates progressively till she becomes a derelict prostitute and dies. Her fate belies the promises of a consumer society to raise the living standards of the American population by linking it to the global economy. The naturalistic portrayal of American underclass reveals the talent of Crane as a sharp and perceptive writer undaunted by criticism.

In his autobiographical work *The Road* (1907) Jack London wrote about the difficult life of the 1890s American economic depression when many poor lost work and became hoboes begging for food and shelter. He sees the life of a hobo as one of "consummate artfulness" which allows him to spin yarns and get a "story." London believed that to be a "successful hobo" one must become "an artist" (London, 1906 Confessions). But all is not hunky dory for the hobo in a big city. In *The Girl* (1939), a bildungsroman. Meridel Le Sueur (1900-1996) tells the story of a farm girl who moves to a big city of St. Paul Minnesota during the

Great Depression and suffers both in love and childbirth. There are scenes of women waiting at bus stations, queuing at food stores, crowding storehouses in which Le Sueur builds upon the proletariat novel and the suffering of the countless proletariat women. Though Anglo-American writers may romanticize the wanderer and the homeless, the miseries of such an existence is not lost on them.

Japanese Tradition of the Homeless Novels

The miseries and travails of western itinerant life style represented in Anglo American fiction also had a deep impact on Japanese writers. The writings of Edgar Allen Poe, Arthur Canon Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Raymond Chandler and Franz Kafka were read quite enthusiastically in Japan. The post-war decades of 1960s and 1970s in Japan were driven by industrialization and economic progress. But not all could enjoy the benefits of industrial progress. Fast cars, new homes and company jobs were not for all. Many people were left out of the economic boom. Japanese writers took note of the increasing economic divide and the miseries it entailed amongst the masses. Kobe Abe's novel *The Box Man* (1973) narrates the story of the homeless in Tokyo and the government's complicity and apathy towards him. Living by the dirty canal along the Prefectural Highway 3 the homeless watches the new cars whizzing by above while hiding in his cardboard box. The box becomes symbolic of the failed capitalist dream of economic progress and acquiring a house.

Yuko Tsushima born in 1947 and daughter of Osamu Dazai also wrote a fantasy-based story about homeless and orphaned children, Mitsuo Nishida and Yukiko, called *Laughing Wolf* (2000) which deals with postwar ennui and the frenetic activity of Tokyo's urban jungle. The book also deals with time travel and traversing the margins of life and death. Tsushima was deeply influenced by the

Anglo American literary tradition especially by the works of Christopher Marlowe, Edgar Allen Poe and William Faulkner.

Background to the Nymphet Novels

The desire of a middle-aged hero enamored or enticed by an underage girl is part of a great literary tradition that can be traced back to the Greek myths. Direct references of the Hylas-nymphs myth can be found in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* and Oscar Wilde *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the Greek myth the water nymphs entice the youthful Hylas in search for water and do not allow him to return home. The themes of enticement and homelessness and the inherent tensions in both are important themes in both Anglo-American and Japanese literatures. From the sixteenth century the tension between unconsummated love between the nymphet and an older man becomes the motif for many poems and literary works in England. The theme finds its way in the writings of American and Japanese writers such as William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Nabokov and Kawabata, Edogawa Ranpo or Taro Hirai (1894-1965). Writers create a make belief, shadowy and dream-like world through a subtle interplay of images that often blur the margin between fantasy and fact making transgression more palatable to the protagonist and the reader. The tantalizing attempt to transgress the forbidden, often failing but at times succeeding, hides a self-annihilating destiny both for the stalker and the nymphet.

In Sir Walter Raleigh's poem "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" (1596) in response to Christopher Marlowe's posthumous poem "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love" (1599) the nymph complains of the passage of time corroding youth and pleasure but more importantly a sweet language and an obsession leads to unhappiness. The nymph therefore rejects the invitation of an idyllic life.

A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall,

The etymology of the word nymph can be traced to the word nympe which implies 'bride,' or "young wife" and gets connected to the Latin nubere "to marry." The tension between lust and love are clearly demonstrated here. The woman rejects the promise of marriage as it is based on lust, not genuine love. According to the nymph an impure heart often leads to tragedy—"sorrow's fall."

Nabokov had been building up on the idea of marrying the mother to be near the daughter story in *The Enchanter*. The hero of *The Enchanter*, written in 1939, is also middle-aged nympholeptic who gets obsessed with a 12-year-old girl. His desire for her consumes him but he never fails to pay attention to the gossamer and pure beauty of other nubile nymphs.

Sometime a pretty one would catch his eye; but what the eye perceived was the senselessly smooth movement of slow-motion film, and he himself marveled at how unresponsive and occupied he was, how specifically the sensations recruited from every side—melancholy, avidity, tenderness, madness—were now concentrated upon the image of that absolutely unique and irreplaceable being (Nabokov, 1986 26, 61)

But the hero is smitten by the beauty of a single nymphet and only admires other pretty girls without emotion like the "smooth movement of a slow-motion film."

The 1950s in America and Japan

The 1950s were troubling times in the United States as modernity coupled with

technology and mass culture eroded American moral values. The liberal elites could not give direction to society as they themselves were swept away by the changing tide. George Marsden describes the 1950s thus,

The overall cultural arrangements thus remained in continuity with the American enlightenment, particularly in the hope that a coalition of cultural leaders, including some religious leaders, despite their differences, could somehow guide the society toward a progressive, enlightened, and humane cultural consensus. Nobody thought that it would be an easy project. The founding fathers had realized that building a coherent voluntary civilization out of many competing subgroups would involve a tremendous balancing act. Mid-twentieth-century leaders wrestled with American ethnic, religious, and racial diversity, the disruptions of modernity and mass culture. The immensely precarious world scene increased the difficulties and raised the stakes. Extreme McCarthyite anticommunism, anti-intellectualism, populist racism, fundamentalist religion and just the sheer shallowness of American commercialism and popular culture made it evident that the challenges were formidable. America had been thrust into world leadership, and this role accentuated the urgency of articulating ideals that would not only help bring unity out of diversity at home, but prove worthy of respect abroad. (Marsden, 2014 xxiv-xxv).

Marsden's detailed description of the 1950s reveals the problems America faced as a multicultural nation and global leader to articulate its "ideals" that would unite diverse peoples and win "respect" abroad. At the same time the freedom of expression that America permitted and the liberal values it espoused allowed writers to express their ethical positions without fear or favor.

Nabokov and Kawabata

Both *Lolita* (1955) and *The Lake* (1954) were novels of the mid-1950s when modernity coupled with technology and mass culture were undermining moral values. Through their characters both Nabokov and Kawabata explore the changing values of the middle class home and the concept of love and pop culture of the 1950s. Humbert Humbert's fixation with nymphets reveals his obsession with young girls so does Gimpei Momoi's obsession with unattainable beauty and perfection of young girls. The 36-year old European man Humbert is out to realize his "perilous magic with nymphets" while he yearns for the "musical and apple sweet[ness]" of 12-year old girl American girl Dolores Haze called Lolita (*Lolita*, 61). Both men are middle aged, intellectual and flirting with an obsession. Momoi is 34-year old and seeks the girl's "angel's voice" in the Turkish bath. Humbert flirts with Dolores and writes about his obsession. After the death of Lolita's mother Charlotte in a road accident his obsession becomes a reality. He finds a job at Beardsley College where Lolita enrolls. But jealous of male attention, he pulls her out of college and travels by car all over America. When she vanishes from a hospital he begins his quest to find her. He discovers her married and living with Clara Quilty but she needs money. He gives her money but shoots Quilty, goes to prison and writes his memoirs. When Lolita dies in childbirth at the age of 17 he dies of a heart attack. Momoi too is a Japanese school teacher but is forced to resign because of his romantic involvement with his student Hisako Tamaki. He wanders in Karuizawa fetishizing the soft knees of young girls always concerned about his deformed ugly feet (*The Lake*, 15, 132). The obsession with unconsummated love seems to preoccupy the male protagonists of these two novels.

Both Nabokov and Kawabata were born in 1899 at the very end of the nineteenth century and wrote their novels when they were just past middle age. Nabokov

was born in St. Petersburg in a rich and learned family while Kawabata was born in Osaka. Kawabata went through the pain of two broken love affairs early in life especially with Hatsuyo Ito (1906-1954). He wrote letters to her that he never posted and now they are discovered from his residence in Kamakura. In one of his unsent letters Kawabata writes “I cannot sleep at night out of fear that you may be sick. I am so worried that I am starting to cry.” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2014). She never told him why the engagement broke— “You will probably ask me to tell you about this emergency, but I would rather die than tell you,” she writes. “This is goodbye,” Kaori Kawabata stated in *Bungei Shunju*. Seemingly she was “violated by a monk” in Saihoji temple where she was living and felt having lost her virginity she could not marry in the reputed Kawabata family (Fujii 2014). Later at 65 Kawabata wrote of his pain of breaking up thus “I was a 20-year-old man, and I promised marriage to a 14-year-old,” he wrote. “Everything was broken senselessly, and I was left deeply wounded. After the Kanto Earthquake [in 1923], I wandered the burned fields of Tokyo, because I wanted to make sure she was safe... But that girl no longer exists in this world” (Fujii, 2014).

Though Nabokov coined the word nymphet in the novel *Lolita* perhaps a throwback upon the myth of Hylas in Apollonius *Rhodius's Argonautica* where the handsome young man is entrapped by the beauty of the water nymphs and never returns to Argonauts. In *Lolita* Nabokov defined her as a young girl who is more of a nymph and less of a human and exists in a bewitching relationship with older men, he writes:

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitches travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac) and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’ (*Lolita*, 18).

Nymphs do not possess innocence and exploit the love of men who become obsessed with them (Margesson, 2012 1). The obsession of men often termed nympholepsy pursues them as a shadow until it destroys them. In *The Enchanter* Nabokov shows that nymphet must respond in some manner to a man’s obsession to validate his perception of her. But nymphets are free spirits contingent on the perceptions of men and cannot be totally possessed. In Faulkner’s “Nympholepsy” (1973) an ordinary farmer reaches after an indeterminate sinister shadow of a nymph-like creature, a “troubling Presence,” and nearly drowns (Faulkner, 1990 1398-1426). The evocative prose turns sinister. Faulkner writes,

The moon swam up, the moon sailed up like a fat laden ship to be unconscious of his entity save as a trespasser where he had and pushing it like a snake before him, he saw it gradually becoming nothing. Away like water; his eyes saw the shadow of the church spire. Among tree trunks, he saw a single star. It was a though amid as low commotion of disturbed water he saw death like a woman shining and drowned and waiting, saw a flashing body, he saw her swing herself, dripping up the bank. Like importunate sirens, like women, he saw the broken water of his endeavor ere he reached it. He saw, beyond the spreading ripple of her passage like a match flame; then he saw her no more. He felt the dust stirring to his passage and he saw silver corn in fields. (Faulkner, 1990 1417).

She is like a snake standing before him deathlike “shining and drowned and waiting” like a “match flame” vanishing. It is an eerie moment of confronting both desire and death. A normal world of a simple farmer is attacked by a nightmare of a nymphet which promises pleasure but hides danger. There is a dreamlike quality to the narrative which allows the story to escape the criticism that is heaped on *Lolita* with its starkly real name and place. Matthews argues

that the most “iconic representations” of the nymphet in Faulkner’s fiction is found in the portrayal of Linda Snopes in the Snopes trilogy. Linda is “fetishized” as a nymphet and represents “a national psychosis: the transgressive consumption of unspoiled goods” (Matthews, 2011 262). In Edgar Allen Poe’s 1849 poem “Annabel Lee” the narrator falls in love with a childhood nymphet Annabel. He continues to love her even after her death by illness. In Nabokov’s *Lolita* Humbert’s first love is also called Annabel. In “The Hamlet” William Faulkner creates the perfect nymphet in an eight year old Eula who entices the school teacher Labove and manipulates his desire to her advantage. He weaves a poetic language around his desire and justly meets his downfall.

Nabokov’s nymphet novels *Laughter in the Dark* (1936), *The Enchanter* (1939) and *Lolita* (1954) depend on an obsessive relationship between 12 to 16 years old girls and a middle aged man. The girls are opportunistic and exploit obsessive and lustful men to gain financial favors. The desire for the unobtainable creates a fantasy world that ultimately destroys everything. In *Laughter in the Dark* middle-aged Albinus is mesmerized by the beauty of the 16-year old Margot who in turn exploits him financially. Finally the relationship destroys him.

Nabokov lived in Ashland Oregon when he completed the writing of *Lolita*. During this time he roamed the mountains collecting butterflies. In the same year he returned to Ithaca New York. Nabokov introduces the Crater Lake Oregon in Humbert’s narrative in *Lolita*. He wrote a poem here called “Lines Written in Oregon” where he describes the mountains as an abode of fairies, where the elusive Esmeralda wanders forever—*immer, immer* (Nabokov, 2012 145). However the poem is also about the way the Old European world—German and French—and the New World—American, interact (Orr, 1 2012). Most of the novel *Lolita* was completed at 163 Mead in July-August 1953 and may be the

inspiration for the Lawn Street in the novel (Boyd 1991).

In Part One Chapter 10 Humbert finds an uncanny resemblance between Dolores and his childhood sweet heart Annabel twenty-five years ago (*Lolita*, 41-42). Both Humbert and Mrs. Haze represent the decadence of Europe and the pretentiousness of America. But Humbert chases the pure and vulgar American dream embodied in the nymphet Dolores whom he objectifies and fantasizes. Dolores develops a crush for this well-mannered European Humbert while he manipulates her school girlish crush. Humbert sees the repeated pattern in his life specially his fatal attraction to a nymphet as part of his American fate which he calls McFate. Both the protagonist and writer use the agency of McFate to develop theme and hide their intentions and clues as “McFate’s inept secretary” (*Lolita*, 118). Nabokov is critical of American bourgeois values of home, marriage and morality which hide the darker passions of selfishness, inane sitcoms and mediocrity. Humbert is a liar inventing stories for those around him to justify his obsession and criminality. But he too is hunted by Lolita—“the cheapest of cheap cuties,” mesmerized by her spellbinding, magical powers and mythical cunning (*Lolita*, 122). He is an enchanted hunter—he hunts nymphets and finally their lovers (*Lolita*, 95).

He lies to the reader whom he calls his “jury” and tries to justify his actions. He shifts the blame from himself to Dolores and casts himself as a victim and Dolores as a victimizer (*Lolita*, 71-72). He attempts to distance himself from his actions by separating his identity as a man and writer—“And now take down the following important remark: the artist in me has been given the upper hand over the gentleman” (*Lolita*, 73). In a “Foreword” written by a fictional character called Doctor John Ray the author makes him provide a learned commentary on the intentions of Herbert. Dr. Ray opines that he has “no intention to glorify H.

H” but he as an author is par excellence conjuring up both a tenderness and “compassion” for Lolita (*Lolita*, 7). This is an excellent technique of commenting on the life of Humbert. The author wants us to condemn his behavior and the illegality of his actions but still appreciate his literary imagination. The psychological endorsement of the book by the fictional authority Dr. Ray as a “case history” that has become a “classic in psychiatric circles” that underscores the “ethical impact” of the “wayward child, the egoistic mother, the panting maniac” and calls for “greater vigilance” on the part of society to create a “safer world” (*Lolita*, 7-8).

The Moral Position in Literature

Though both Nabokov and Kawabata wrote sensitive and detailed accounts of incidents in the life of their protagonists, the moral position of the writer must be separated from that of the protagonists. A writer is invariably true to his literary vision and need not reflect or endorse the moral concerns of his heroes. Both Nabokov and Kawabata distance themselves from the obsession and guilt of their protagonists. But the distinction between the artist and his work is often blurred. Nabokov does not endorse the actions of Humbert seeing his protagonist’s psychosis as a disease,

John Gordon called the book the “filthiest book” representing “unrestrained pornography” (Boyd, 1991 295). Initially banned in the United States and Europe *Lolita* returned to the US in 1958 after getting translated and came to be praised more for its evocative language than for its perverse morality (Boyd, 1991 364). In an interview with Herbert Gold in 1967 Nabokov responds to the charge that his “sense of immorality” depicting the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita is “very strong:”

No, it is not my sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong; it is Humbert’s sense. He cares, I do not. I do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere. And, anyway, cases of men in their forties marrying girls in their teens or early twenties have no bearing on Lolita whatever. Humbert was fond of “little girls”—not simply “young girls.” Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and “sex kittens.” Lolita was twelve, not eighteen, when Humbert met her. You may remember that by the time she is fourteen, he refers to her as his “aging mistress” (Nabokov, 1967 1).

Nabokov is separating himself and his values from that of his protagonist, Humbert Humbert—“*He* cares, I do not. I do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere” (Nabokov, 1969 1).

Though Kawabata’s *The Lake* did not share the controversy that *Lolita* is heir to, Kawabata nonetheless shunned morality and sentimentalism in favor of ‘art for art’s sake’ and forbidden love in novels such as *Thousand Cranes* and *The Sound of the Mountain*. Kawabata forces the reader to enter the over-heated consciousness of the protagonist who yearns for love and beauty as he confronts his shadowy past. As Gimpei enters the “perfumed bath” he finds the smell of flowers a happy change to the cheap hotels he had lived in Shinano (*The Lake*, 6). Though he appreciates the youthful erotic beauty of the girl attendant in the Turkish bath he is fascinated by her “lovely voice” which “lingers on” like an “angel’s” (*The Lake*, 7-8). To him her voice was that of the “eternal woman,” a “compassionate mother” (*The Lake*, 8). She is from Nigata and has a “clear and beautiful” skin. He hallucinates as he lies soaking in the hot bath looking at the elm tree outside. He then fantasizes about his native village and chases a girl with “sweet voice along a street in Tokyo” (*The Lake*, 11). He tells the Turkish

bath girl he is 34 but she finds him younger. He admits his feet are ugly and claims it could be because of walking barefoot. He tells her he does not have a “home anymore” (*The Lake*, 15).

The Stalker’s Vision

The stalker’s vision is that of a madman fired by his overheated imagination pursuing a melancholic world of dark shadows pulling the reader into his dark “infernal world” (*The Lake* 21). To present the unconscious world of the stalker through the medium of language is to reveal the structure of the unconscious, for as Jacques Lacan points out “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan, 1998 20). Humbert confesses that a stalker of nymphets has to be both mad and melancholic and the power of the nymphet unconscious:

You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your lions and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!). in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the little deadly demon among the wholesome children’ she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power (*Lolita*, 19).

Such a person Kawabata admits must possess a “masochistic self-disgust” and be “crushed” by the “awful mystery of nature [and] the agony of time” (*The Lake*, 117). The nymphet Machie’s “pure and radiant” beauty may seem perfect now but “such perfection doesn’t last after the age of sixteen or seventeen” (*The Lake*, 133).

Language and Imagery

The evocative prose of both Kawabata and Nabokov reflects their romance with language. In an afterword to *Lolita* Nabokov admits that the novel does record his “love affair” with the “English language” though he complains that abandoning the richness of the Russian tongue” for a “second-rate brand of English” was a “private tragedy” (*Lolita* 318-9). In the mid-1920s Kawabata was also involved with literary aesthetics working assiduously to move away from proletarian writing and create a literary era called Bungei jidai. More concerned with art for art’s sake Kawabata focused attention on the aesthetic aspect of writing especially rhythm, diction and lyricism that the neo-perceptionists were making popular. Kawabata’s novels such as *The Izu Dancer* (1926), *House of Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories* (1953) and *The Lake* reflect his romance with the Japanese language.

The romance with language continues to be reflected in the use of evocative imagery. Gimpei goes to watch the Tokyo fireflies’ event in the hope of meeting Machie. He buys a cage full of fireflies and when he finds Machie he secretly hooks the cage to her belt imagining that he had “hung up his own glowing heart on the girl’s body” (*The Lake*, 143). In *Lolita* images of butterflies and moths abound and Humbert draws similarities between the fragile insect and Lolita. He adores the elusive butterflies but captures and destroys them. In the story *Lolita* changes from an innocent girl, to a harassed wife and a would-be mother. The whole business of being a lepidopterist, catching butterflies or watching fireflies can be symptomatic of a deeper malaise of attraction to the femme fatale.

Conclusion

The literature of the hobo and the stalker gains renewed importance in the twenty-first century when economic and social inequalities have become more

pronounced. Though the guilt of the iconic protagonist of Nabokov or Kawabata might belong to another era their repression and transgression is still ours. The decade of the 1950s was a paradigm shift both in psychology and creative writing that allowed for a reinterpretation of human obsession and abnormality in a clinical and humanistic manner. The new psychology fired the imagination of writers not only in America and the Continent but also in Asia. Though Anglo-American writers dabbled in stories about abnormality and obsession even before the 1950s, such stories did not attract enough attention. The post-1950s decades brought in novels that squarely addressed social maladjustment and psychological abnormality. Both Nabokov and Kawabata chose themes of psychological and sexual disorder in an adult male after the destruction of childhood 'true love. Using evocative language to represent the structure of abnormal consciousness, both Nabokov and Kawabata treat the obsessions of a dysfunctional protagonist in their novels which lead to disastrous consequences. Though Nabokov wrote in an acquired second language English and Kawabata in Japanese they share the same theme and reveal the same self-depreciating personality of the protagonist.

NOTES

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