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ON THE RECEPTION OF VLADİMİR NABOKOV'S WORKS IN AZERBAIJAN**(BASED ON THE RESEARCH OF AZERBAIJANI LITERARY SCHOLARS)****Keywords:** *The works of Vladimir Nabokov, Nabokov in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani literary criticism, Russian studies, émigré literature.***ABSTRACT:**

The article examines the genesis of the reception of the prominent Russian émigré writer Vladimir Nabokov's works in Azerbaijan and analyzes the studies of Azerbaijani researchers on his literary legacy. Nabokov, who did not accept the Bolshevik revolution and communist ideology, spent most of his life in exile, with a significant period in the United States. Despite writing his works in English while in exile and gaining considerable recognition in English-language literature, his deep connection to Russia, Russian culture, and especially the "Silver Age" of Russian literature remains evident in his writings.

During the Soviet era, Azerbaijani literary studies did not focus on Nabokov's works. However, in the post-Soviet period, Azerbaijani scholars have produced academic works dedicated to his literary legacy. These studies have particularly examined Nabokov's connections with the poets and writers of the "Silver Age," analyzing the presence of "Silver Age" elements in his works. Later, Azerbaijani literary scholars such as S. Gafarova, Ch. Ibrahimova, S. Jabrayilova, F. Rzayev, and A. Mammadzadeh have explored Nabokov's works, conducting in-depth analyses.

By reviewing these studies, the article highlights that Azerbaijani researchers mainly reference European literary scholars and adopt their methodologies in their analyses. Their works address Nabokov's writing style, his interactions with Russian symbolism, the occasional nature of his language, and the functional role of wordplay. Researchers have primarily attempted to define the concept of Nabokov's émigré text. Scholars such as Ch. Ibrahimova, S. Gafarova, and S. Jabrayilova have focused on readers' and critics' reactions, providing detailed analyses of Nabokov's wordplay and offering a functional classification of his puns. Additionally, they have attempted to define the syntactic and rhythmic characteristics of Nabokov's texts.

The analysis of Azerbaijani scholars' research indicates that their focus has been on how literary criticism perceives the works of Russian émigré writers. However, the article notes that these studies are not sufficient to provide a complete picture of Nabokov's reception in Azerbaijan. A more comprehensive examination is required to fully understand how Nabokov's works are perceived in Azerbaijan.

INTRODUCTION

Due to spending most of his life in exile, the American period holds a central place in Vladimir Nabokov's literary career. His attitude towards the socio-political developments in the new Russia was ambiguous. The Bolshevik revolution and communist ideology were fundamentally opposed to his spirit and worldview. However, Nabokov did not sever his ties with Russia entirely and maintained close connections with his fellow writers, particularly the poets of the "Silver Age." The nostalgia for his homeland and its people is frequently reflected in his works.

Literary scholar Y. Melnikova states that reception is "the genesis of acceptance," meaning that a work is not studied as a precisely defined fact but rather from the perspective of another individual [12, pp. 237-238]. In this article, instead of analyzing Nabokov's works through the lens of Russian or Western European researchers, we aim to examine the main plot conflicts of some of his works from the perspective of Azerbaijani scholars who have studied Nabokov's literary heritage. Based on this approach, we will attempt to provide a general assessment of Nabokov's reception in Azerbaijan.

Main Topic

First, it should be noted that Nabokov's historical-literary connections with the "Silver Age" are not a new topic in Azerbaijani literary studies. Azerbaijani scholars have periodically addressed this aspect from various perspectives, attempting to describe the relationship between Nabokov's life in exile and the "Silver Age." Initially, Nabokov's early stylistic approach in exile and his writing manner were indeed compared to those of A. Blok and I. Bunin. His first prose works, written in a foreign language—English—were seen as a translation-like resemblance to the discourse of prominent poets of that era. This argument can be supported by referring to Nabokov's early works. For example, certain sentences in *The Wood Sprite* appear, according to studies, as if they were taken from M. Kuzmin's *Conditions* essay [18]. Here, the discussion revolves not around historical factors but rather linguistic-cultural or linguistic-ethnographic aspects. The essence of the issue lies in the fact that the tradition of referring to the turn of the 19th-20th centuries as the "Silver Age" in Russia actually emerged in Russian émigré circles. It is believed that this historical-cultural metaphor was first proposed by the poet N. A. Otsup in 1933 [15]. This idea is also reiterated in V. Pyast's **Meetings** and is fully confirmed in N. A. Berdyaev's works [1].

According to the approach put forward by literary scholars and philosopher N. Berdyaev, Nabokov was perceived in literary history as an aesthete detached from real life. Most likely, this perception stems from a misinterpretation of the roots and reasons behind Nabokov's distinctive style. These reasons are generally sought in what is commonly referred to as "intertextuality"—in Nabokov's artistic "glass bead game" and his endless journeys through "worlds of art."

Nabokov's literary influences stem more from Western European sources than from Russian ones. In **The Decay of Lying**, Oscar Wilde presents an original thesis: "It seems that Nabokov's writing style is influenced by modern Impressionists, especially when he writes about the brown

haze surrounding our streets in America" [17, p. 101]. However, in our opinion, the more accurate approach is not to view Russian authors as mere imitators of foreign influences but rather to recognize their deliberate distancing from such influences. Nabokov himself opposed the trend of "such mixing," which resurfaced by the early 20th century. His openly negative attitude towards Oscar Wilde also makes this clear.

"Western influences" have affected Nabokov's work almost always indirectly, through Russian influences. At the same time, some Azerbaijani researchers raise the following question in their studies: is there a connection between the writer's ancestry and mysticism? This is because Nabokov enjoys surrounding his creative "origins" with ambiguity. It is no coincidence that the main character of his first novel, *Ganin*, was provided with two passports: one real and the other foreign, more precisely, a Polish passport. It seems that the author was identifying himself in this way as well. This is not accidental. In the early 1960s, during the publication of his famous novel *Lolita*, Nabokov gave an interview to a foreign publication. In that interview, he specifically stated: "A writer's true art is his real passport" [13, p.11].

However, by the early 1950s, already well-known for *Lolita* and other works, the writer was forced to abandon mystical games with readers and meaningless wordplay. He began to directly reveal his aesthetic origins and mention the names of his literary "teachers." Among them were figures who had shaped Nabokov's "good reputation." In studies dedicated to Nabokov's creative path, E. Field particularly linked Nabokov's stylistic parallels to the directing techniques of A. Bely and V. Meyerhold, emphasizing the role of symbolism in Nabokov's works.

Some Azerbaijani researchers, especially Nabokov scholars analyzing his correspondence with Wilson, have paid attention to the research traditions of D. Johnson and V. Alexandrov. One of them, in a 1981 article titled *Nabokov and Bely*, connected Nabokov's writing style to the technical innovations of Petersburg and Kotik Letaev, particularly bringing together the epistemological views of both writers and highlighting the "real" and "true realist" approaches in the art of Bely and Nabokov.

In Nabokov's works, elements of realism and symbolism merge with modernism, seemingly pointing towards the postmodern playfulness of the future. Interestingly, the more intimately and realistically Nabokov depicts his characters—making them the most "real" for the writer—the more the "verbal flexibility" in his text decreases. More importantly, such texts increasingly lean toward poetic minimalism and original realism, drawing closer to the "silence in the orchestra" of some of his literary mentors, such as V. Zhukovsky, F. Tyutchev, and O. Mandelstam.

V. Alexandrov's monograph *Nabokov's Otherworld* is of particular importance in the study of Nabokov's work. First published in 1999, the book is considered one of the most influential and comprehensive interpretative models in modern Nabokov studies. It became so well-known in literary scholarship that it was republished in 2022 with additions and commentary.

This work is of interest for several reasons. Azerbaijani literary scholars have also referenced it. The literary scholar S. Gafarova, in her article *The Main Trends in the Development of Genre*,

expresses the main purpose of the book as follows: "The main goal of V. Alexandrov's monograph is to present Nabokov as a harbinger of contemporary meta-literature and to reshape the perception of Nabokov formed by influential critics of the past" [2, p.359].

V. Alexandrov's Nabokov's Otherworld has served as a source for Azerbaijani literary scholars such as Ch. Ibrahimova, S. Jabrayilova, and others in deriving logical conclusions regarding the correct interpretation of some of Nabokov's works. The clarity and specificity of the book's original purpose have allowed literary scholars to gain intriguing insights into many "obscure" and semantically opaque aspects of Nabokov's legacy.

Literary scholar S. Jabrayilova has determined that Nabokov's writing style, surprisingly, aligns with the theme of "mystical love" in Blok's poetry. Furthermore, the main "point of contact" in Nabokov's aesthetic views is based on Andrei Bely's aesthetics, as Bely also spent some time in exile. Regarding Nabokov's connection to Acmeism, the Azerbaijani researcher notes the significance of "details reflecting emotions and the sharpness of perception" for the writer. S. Jabrayilova also interprets Nabokov's literary relationship with N. Gumilyov—whom Nabokov frequently corresponded with—through the concept of the "heroic personality." According to the researcher, the writer's prototype or example was the poet executed by the Bolsheviks. The literary parallel between Nabokov and Gumilyov, in her view, is linked to the Symbolists' "faith in transcendence."

The most fitting representation of Nabokov's interaction with Russian symbolism is offered by S. Gafarova. She summarizes the evolution of Nabokov's relationship with Blok, analyzing Blok's influence in *The Gift* and *Lolita*. She points out that while Nabokov gradually freed himself from the direct influence of his earlier mentor, he never completely abandoned a dialogue with Blok's poetic heritage. However, in the writer's mature works, this dialogue took the form of rewriting Blok's depictions through parody and irony. S. Gafarova highlights that in Nabokov's novels, the fundamental metaphysical basis of Symbolism, particularly its "life-building" direction, is analyzed with irony. Consequently, parody becomes the most significant aspect of Nabokov's relationship with Symbolist texts, especially those of A. Bely, F. Sologub, and M. Kuzmin.

In our opinion, Azerbaijani literary scholar S. Gafarova's observations and conclusions are almost always carefully argued, relying on extensive preparation such as multiple readings of Nabokov's texts, considering his sketches, analyzing his interactions with other Russian émigrés, and contextualizing various aspects of his works.

Of course, Azerbaijani scholars' research alone is not sufficient to create a complete picture of the reception of Nabokov's works in Azerbaijan. These studies have not set out to specifically address how Nabokov is perceived in Azerbaijan. Rather, they have presented reflections on the uniqueness of his language and his "micro-poetry" (or, more precisely, "micro-stylistics"). The aim has been not merely to provide brief annotations of his works but to engage in a thorough analysis of his creative legacy.

Ç. Ibrahimova has touched upon Nabokov's genre system while also addressing the confessional aspect of *Lolita* and the chronicle of family life in *Ada*. However, she has brought into discussion the complete rejection of the realist tradition. As the scholar herself notes, this is "only the appearance of a traditional perspective because Nabokov's genre parameters are inevitably disrupted by a provocative move" [6, p.16].

While working in archives, Ç. Ibrahimova discovered a letter dated March 6, 1956, written in English and addressed to Morris Bishop. In this letter, Nabokov highly praises *Lolita*, writing: "*Lolita* is perhaps the best work I have created in recent years. I am calm because it is a very serious work of art. No court can prove it to be flawed or unethical" [14, pp.161-162]. Even in didactic comedy (probably referring to Molière), various unethical elements may exist. But my *Lolita* is, at its core, a drama—perhaps even a tragedy.

In research conducted by Azerbaijani literary scholars such as S. Gafarova, Ç. Ibrahimova, S.A. Jabrayilova, and others, the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan has been examined through the prism of Nabokov's work.

Scholars, in our opinion, have aimed to determine the concept of the émigré text in their studies, and they "hit the mark" because this approach brings them closer to the essence of interpretation. Ç. Ibrahimova, S. Gafarova, S. Jabrayilova, and others primarily focus on readers' and critics' reactions. To achieve this, they conduct a detailed analysis of Nabokov's wordplay, present its functional classification, examine his word-formation techniques and the role of accidental structures in playfulness, and identify syntactic and rhythmic features of his texts—essentially attempting to explain forms traditionally studied within poetic structures. All of these accumulated studies help to understand the critical echoes reflecting readers' and critics' responses to Nabokov's literary world.

It is necessary to emphasize the game principle in this field. This "principle of play" in Nabokov's literary texts can be traced back genetically to Plato's reflections on the structure of an ideal state. The idealist philosopher was the first to indicate that the principle of play is fundamental to the functioning of all aspects of civilization.

The author considers two concepts of play: aesthetic (play as an ideal state for achieving human freedom) and social (play as a dependence on the role performed by an individual). He also distinguishes between two aspects of play: play (improvisation, where the process is essential) and game (organized play, where the result is paramount). From a critical standpoint, it is necessary to consider any classification that separates unrelated modifications of play. This is because such a division does not exist in Nabokov's worldview. The most accurate way to approach this issue is to view Nabokov's perspective on art—his self-irony and the manifestations emerging from his works—as a form of "play."

For example, the play principles in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the chess motifs in *The Defense*, the cinematic elements in *Camera Obscura*, the mirror symbolism in *Pnin* and *Lolita*, and

other works reveal that this principle underlies Nabokov's artistic approach and aims to engage the reader in a "game" with the text.

The elaboration of such a stylistic principle led Nabokov not to perceive the playful style as a mere means to achieve an aesthetic goal but as an actual artistic problem requiring systematic classification. For this reason, the aforementioned Azerbaijani scholars pay special attention in their research to the puns (wordplay), which are an essential component of the game-like movement in Nabokov's prose. However, it is crucial to consider that the theoretical aspect of wordplay should be analyzed not only based on Nabokov's works but also within the broader European tradition—ranging from Cicero and Quintilian's reflections on wit to Freud's cosmic classifications and the theoretical studies of Russian scholars A. Shcherbin and academician V. Vinogradov on the semantic and phonetic nature of puns.

For many years, the American way of life exerted a unique influence on Nabokov's entire body of work, effectively distancing him from his native homeland. In this context, it is impossible not to recall B. Pasternak's famous poem on the "price of play" (for example, "If I had known it would be like this..."). He later classifies his own wordplay based on Nabokov's works.

In the second chapter of her dissertation, "V. Nabokov's Creativity and the 20th-Century American Modernist Novel" [6], Ç. Ibrahimova identifies the following functions of Nabokov's highly original puns:

- Structural-forming (e.g., the list of Lolita's classmates)
- Allusion-based evaluation ("libido belibarda")
- Ironic ("He was blind like Milton, deaf like Beethoven, and dumb as concrete")
- Creating an atmosphere of absurdity ("Kill, kill—then it will be too late")
- Intellectual play with the reader (the notes written by Clare Quilty in hotel and motel registries)
- Characterizing a character's personality (e.g., the grammatically incorrect riddle in *Laughter in the Dark*)
- Evaluative and attitudinal, where wordplay expresses a character's emotions.

To this unusual list of "playful components," S. Jabrayilova also contributes. She titles one of her articles with a remarkably transparent name: "Postmodernism – Romanticism. V. Nabokov and E.T.A. Hoffmann"* [4, pp.55-62]. In our opinion, this "speaking title" requires no further explanation. It is clear that the first term characterizes Nabokov's creative method, while the second describes Hoffmann. Through antithesis, the two writers are positioned as opposites. Scholars no longer debate whether the famous German writer was a "transparent water" romantic. However, S. Jabrayilova proposes a hypothesis about Nabokov as a postmodernist. This is a bold stance,

considering that postmodernism in Russian literature was scarcely discussed at the time. Specialists had written significantly more about modernism, the early stage of postmodernism. To be fair, even in the 21st century, the landscape of Russian postmodernism appears quite chaotic compared to Europe. What can be said about the mid-20th century, when Nabokov was in the U.S.? Nonetheless, S. Jabrayilova substantiates her claim with facts. In any case, this theory can be accepted as a working hypothesis, requiring further research.

Returning to play techniques, Ç. Ibrahimova provides accompanying commentary on each play function mentioned earlier. This is undoubtedly commendable. However, we believe it is appropriate to point out some shortcomings in this approach. The overly expanded functional classification, despite its systematic structure and linguistic-stylistic precision, is ultimately just a list of techniques used by Nabokov. It does not provide fundamental insights into the study of his works' underlying ideas.

Ç. Ibrahimova builds her classification based on the English researcher C. Lokrantz's system. Lokrantz categorizes Nabokov's wordplay into connective, thematic, ironic, and patterned types. The Azerbaijani scholar's attempt at such an analysis is a noteworthy event in national literary studies. However, scholars hold differing opinions on the appropriateness of such an evaluation system. For example, in an article from 1973, G. Leviton noted that this approach was inadequate, calling Lokrantz's "useful" classification an "uninteresting" method that does not fully explain Nabokov's style.

At the same time, it should be noted that Ç. Ibrahimova does not stop here. In the continuation of her dissertation, she clarifies the essence of Nabokov's techniques. Specifically, she attempts to correlate her classification with the concept of the playful style, linking it to the constructive principle of Nabokov's prose and the simultaneous perception of style. However, the researcher views Nabokov's style not as an integrated structure but as a collection of separate techniques.

The classification of occasionalisms and their game functions is structured similarly to the classification of word games presented in the analysis of both scholars. However, this time, the typology is adapted to Nabokov's concept of the game text and reveals the features of occasional innovations that clearly demonstrate the author's style. The following types of occasional innovations are considered: rethinking the derivational structure of a word, fragmentation of word forms ("eks-taz" in *The Gift*), attributing anthropomorphic qualities to inanimate objects ("the smug lizard on the grave" in *Other Shores*), newly coined words borrowed from different languages (e.g., the French "fou rire"—mad laughter in *Despair*), word calques ("krestoslovitsa"), affixation ("the house was still undecorated," "floating doll," "cold"), contamination ("Vrublyov's frescoes" in *The Gift*), repetition and return, sound imitation, word clusters, palindromes ("olakrez"), conversions, etc.

Azerbaijani researchers following Russian and European literary scholars have attempted to thoroughly analyze these special linguistic tools. The characteristics presented by S. Gafarova, S.

Jabrayilova, and Ch. Ibrahimova encompass Nabokov's meta-textual features, including lexical, phonetic, and graphic elements.

However, it should be noted that these linguistic and stylistic analyses deliberately focus on the principle of play, as this principle is dominant in Nabokov's work. In our opinion, for modern researchers studying V. Nabokov's artistic legacy, the main issue should not only be the classification of individual artistic techniques used by the author but also attention to the interpretation and perception of his works.

In 2013, the journal *Russian Language and Literature in Azerbaijan* published an article by the renowned professor of Russian philology at Moscow State University, A.V. Ledenyov, titled *Russian Prose at the Beginning of the 21st Century and the Legacy of V. Nabokov*. In this article, the author rejected the previously mentioned approach and provided a more precise analysis of the historical and linguistic aspects of Nabokov's prose. Additionally, he highly appreciated the works of Azerbaijani literary scholars and noted that leading professors at Slavic University had included some of Nabokov's works in their university curricula [10, p. 35]. As seen, the researchers' studies were recognized as contributing to the perception of Nabokov's legacy in Azerbaijan.

Another researcher, A. Mammadzade, in his article *On the Poetry of the Symbolists and the Poetics of Symbolism*, more broadly demonstrated Nabokov's sphere of influence, noting his impact on other émigré writers, especially symbolist poets. The researcher, first, based his views on A.V. Ledenyov's axiomatic statement that Nabokov had a strong interest in Russian symbolists in exile. Second, like A. Ledenyov, the author referred to the thoughts of philosopher A. Berdyaev as a socio-political foundation for V. Nabokov's work. Third, he linked Nabokov's legacy with the symbolist K. Balmont [11, p. 18].

These ideas about Nabokov's creative work were perfectly summarized by Professor F. Rzayev. He did not limit V. Nabokov solely to symbolism and works written in that style but also encouraged interest in many other aspects of the literary process. He emphasized the importance of Nabokov's familiarity with the works of classical world literature alongside other émigré writers such as I. Brodsky, F. Sologub, K. Balmont, I. Bunin, and M. Tsvetaeva. By studying V. Nabokov's close circle, F. Rzayev precisely determined that the optimal way to achieve a deeper understanding would be to organize a series of lectures on Russian and American literature [16, p. 13].

Conclusion

Although Russian and Western European scholars have dedicated numerous studies to the analysis and perception of V. Nabokov's legacy, such research remains scarce in Azerbaijan. Despite a few articles and dissertations analyzing the writer's works and their reception in Azerbaijan, there are no dedicated monographs on this subject.

Just like Russian and Western European scholars, Azerbaijani literary critics who analyze monographs and dissertations dedicated to V. Nabokov's émigré period generally aim to objectively

evaluate Nabokov's legacy, presenting him as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century and substantiating this claim.

The analysis of these studies shows that literary scholars attempting to systematically examine Nabokov's legacy, its main themes, and plot developments primarily focus on how Russian émigré writers were perceived by literary criticism. The breadth of V. Nabokov's émigré period work reaches such a wide readership that most studies concentrate on this period. Special attention is given to the key aspects of Nabokov's historical-literary connections with the "Silver Age." Another crucial focus for Azerbaijani philologists is the vast cascade of game techniques skillfully applied in V. Nabokov's works.

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