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IDEOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AND INTELLECTUAL RESISTANCE IN THE DYSTOPIAN NOVEL "BEND SINISTER" BY V. NABOKOV

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Abstract: This article examines the artistic depiction of social relations in Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Bend Sinister", focusing on the conflict between intellectual freedom and totalitarian power. Through the character of Adam Krug, Nabokov portrays the resistance of reason, individuality, and moral integrity against ideological coercion and political violence. The analysis highlights how the narrative uses allegory, satire, and retrospective episodes to critique the artificiality and dehumanization inherent in totalitarian systems.
Key words: "Bend Sinister", social relations, totalitarianism, intellectual freedom, individuality, Nabokov, ideological coercion.
Annotatsiya: Maqola Vladimir Nabokovning "Bend Sinister" romanida ijtimoiy munosabatlarning badiiy tasvirini, ayniqsa, intellektual erkinlik va totalitar hokimiyat o'rtasidagi ziddiyatni tahlil qiladi. Adam Krug obrazi orqali yozuvchi aql, individuallik va axloqiy mustaqillikning mafkuraviy tazyiq hamda siyosiy zo'ravonlikka qarshi kurashini ko'rsatadi. Tahlilda romandagi allegorik, satirik va retrospektiv tasvirlar totalitar tuzumning sun'iylik va insoniylikdan yiroqligini tanqid qilish uchun xizmat qilishi ta'kidlanadi.
Kalit so'zlar: "Bend Sinister", ijtimoiy munosabatlar, totalitarizm, intellektual erkinlik, individuallik, Nabokov, mafkuraviy tazyiq.
Аннотация: В статье рассматривается художественное изображение социальных отношений в романе Владимира Набокова "Bend Sinister", с акцентом на конфликт между интеллектуальной свободой и тоталитарной властью. Через образ Адама Круга писатель показывает сопротивление разума, индивидуальности и нравственной целостности идеологическому давлению и политическому насилию. Анализ подчеркивает, как с помощью аллегории, сатиры и ретроспективных эпизодов роман критикует искусственность и дегуманизацию, присущие тоталитарным системам.
Ключевые слова: "Bend Sinister", социальные отношения, тоталитаризм, интеллектуальная свобода, индивидуальность, Набоков, идеологическое давление.

Introduction. The twentieth century stands out in human history as a period marked by radical transformations, profound tragedies, and tremendous progress. Events such as the First World War, the collapse of the Russian Empire, the 1917 Revolution, the Second World War, and the establishment of the Soviet Union shaped the socio-psychological landscape of the entire century. Literary scholar N. Karimov, evaluating the twentieth century as one of the most significant stages in human history, notes: "The twentieth century is among the greatest epochs in human history. Despite the rivers of blood spilled, despite the injustices and atrocities committed, humanity in this century made a great leap towards the future." [4.2] This perspective emphasizes that, alongside the social and political catastrophes of the century, there were unparalleled advancements in science and intellectual thought.

Literature, as an artistic reflection of life, portrayed the spiritual state of humanity, shifts in social consciousness, and the crisis of values through distinctive artistic forms against the backdrop of the dramatic upheavals, wars, and ideological clashes of the twentieth century.

Revolutionary upheavals, political repression, and the plight of exile, in particular, became an inexhaustible source of anguish for writers. Naturally, these events had a profound impact on the lives and creative paths of authors who experienced the complex fate of this turbulent era.

This challenging historical period radically transformed the life and creative career of Vladimir Nabokov, who was born in Russia, emigrated to the West after the 1917 Revolution, and later, on the eve of the Second World War, was forced to leave Europe for America. The renowned scholar Brian Boyd writes: "Vladimir Nabokov, uprooted by both the Russian Revolution and World War II, could hardly ignore the cataclysms of modern history that so skewed his life." [1.3] In other words, Nabokov's personal life and creative work were shaped against the backdrop of historical upheavals, and the cataclysmic events of modern history left a profound imprint on his literary and aesthetic worldview.

The rise of Hitler to power in Germany and the subsequent expansion of his political influence during the Second World War, in particular, resonated deeply in V. Nabokov's creative output. During these years, the author produced works imbued with political content. On the one hand, they expressed his opposition to the fascist regime and Hitler's persona; on the other, they reflected a critical attitude toward communist ideology, which was seen by many Western intellectuals as a counterforce to fascism. Among these works, the most overtly political is Nabokov's second English novel, "Bend Sinister" (1947), in which the writer's political stance and historical anguish find their most vivid artistic expression.

The study is devoted to analyzing how the novel "Bend Sinister" artistically interprets social relations. It is well known that every literary work, whether it captures the entirety of life's panorama or conveys a fleeting emotion, represents a unique, self-contained world. [3.57] A literary work is, therefore, an inimitable phenomenon shaped by specific historical and social conditions, encapsulating the author's worldview, the spirit of the age, and the socio-historical realities of the time.

Each social relation depicted in the novel — such as the timeless conflicts between freedom and oppression, justice and injustice — reflects the author's stance toward society through artistic means. Through such artistic representations, the writer reveals real social contradictions and conveys societal truths to the reader in a vivid and evocative manner.

The notion of social relations in the context of the novel encompasses the portrayal and artistic examination of interpersonal connections, class disparities, the distribution of labor and wealth, and the relationship between the state and the individual. Through characters, events, and stylistic devices, the author exposes existing social tensions and prompts the reader to reflect on the pressing issues of society.

Literature review: "Bend Sinister" possesses a distinctly dystopian character, presenting a fictional society built upon brutal oppression, where personal freedom and individual thought are systematically suppressed. The Macmillan English Dictionary defines "dystopia" as "an imaginary place or situation in which everything in society is extremely bad," [6.463] which underscores this interpretation. By depicting such a society, Nabokov not only critiques existing political systems but also compels the reader to contemplate fundamental questions about humanity, morality, and freedom.

The English title of the novel — "Bend Sinister" — is a heraldic term, denoting a diagonal band running from the upper right to the lower left corner of a shield. Its Russian equivalent is "a band to the left" ("перевязь влево"). Such a band often appears on the coats of arms of aristocrats' illegitimate offspring. Perhaps for this reason, the novel was translated into Russian as "Под знаком незаконнорожденных", though Nabokov himself disapproved of this title. Additionally, Bend Sinister, as an idiom, conveys meanings such as "mark of imperfection" or "stamp of flaw," which we consider closer to the essence of the work, as the novel exposes the

flaws of a defective political system established in an imperfect state. [8.105] In the preface to the 1963 edition, V. Nabokov explained his choice of title as follows: "This choice of title was an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong taken by life, a sinistral and sinister world," [7.3] which substantiates our interpretation.

Analysis: The novel, consisting of 18 chapters, portrays the tragic fate of Adam Krug, one of the most distinguished philosophers and thinkers of his time, against the backdrop of a newly established dictatorial regime.

The events of the novel unfold in a fictional state that exhibits characteristics of twentieth-century European dictatorships, particularly reflecting certain aspects of Hitler's Germany and the Soviet regime. The core ideology of this regime, called Ekwilism, seeks to ensure the absolute uniformity of all citizens and denies any form of individuality or difference. At the head of the state stands the dictator Paduk. His name evokes associations with the Russian word "падение" ("fall"), as well as "паук" ("spider") and "падонок" ("scoundrel"). Paduk's "Party of the Average Man" is a clear allusion to the Soviet political climate. As Nabokov himself remarked, Paduk's speeches and actions contain "with the bits of Lenin's speeches, and a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and the gobs of Nazist pseudo-efficiency." [7.108-110]

The protagonist of the novel — the renowned philosopher Adam Krug — is a former classmate of the dictator Paduk. During their school years, Krug mocked Paduk, calling him "Toad" (a term often used in a derogatory sense, meaning "repulsive" or "despicable person"). Now in power, Paduk attempts to coerce Krug into serving the interests of the state. Initially, Krug's acquaintances are arrested, and later, he himself is deprived of freedom. Paduk demands that Krug defend the state ideology. Krug agrees on only one condition: his son David must not be harmed. The authorities appear to accept this condition and send David to the "State Rest House." However, when Krug arrives, he discovers that his son has mistakenly been sent to the "Institute for Abnormal Children," where he has tragically died. Following this, the government offers Krug the chance to execute those responsible with his own hands. Krug refuses this demand and hurls curses at the officials, for which he is thrown into solitary confinement. Later, he is given the option to punish the "guilty" in exchange for the release of 24 individuals who oppose Ekwilism. By this point, however, Krug has lost his sanity entirely, and in the final scene of the novel, he attacks Paduk in an attempt to kill him, but the soldiers shoot Krug dead with two bullets.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the plot, the novel provides a profound artistic interpretation of social relations and issues that were highly relevant to its time. One of the central themes is the rejection of individual freedom by totalitarian regimes, reducing the individual to a mere instrument for serving collective interests. The ideology of Ekwilism, depicted in the novel, is dedicated to eradicating differences among citizens and shaping every individual into a uniform, manageable "average" person. Any form of individuality or uniqueness is viewed as a dangerous anomaly.

Discussion: The psychological impact of such ideological pressure is revealed through V. Nabokov's distinctive artistic techniques. For example, Krug's conversation with a grocer — an ordinary representative of society — serves as a vivid illustration of how totalitarian propaganda infiltrates and controls human thought. The grocer declares:

"People are made to live together, to meet in clubs and stores, and at street corners—and in churches and stadiums on Sundays—and not sit alone, thinking dangerous thoughts… We all belong to one happy community. It is all in the family now—one huge family, all linked up, all snug and no questions asked… What I say is the sooner we shoot the smart fellows who raise hell because a few dirty anti-Ekwilists at last got what was coming to them—"[7.19]

In this passage, the notion of "sitting alone, thinking dangerous thoughts" is portrayed as a threat to society, while collective, controlled, and submissive social behavior is promoted instead of independent thinking. Moreover, the reference to the need to "shoot the smart fellows" who oppose the ideology of Ekwilism reflects ideological violence and the explicit suppression of individual freedom. This vividly demonstrates the very nature of a totalitarian regime, which refuses to acknowledge individuality.

At the core of this issue lies the devaluation of intellectual values in a totalitarian society, where reason and critical thinking are relegated to secondary importance. In the novel, this phenomenon is illustrated through Krug's personal experience. After the death of his wife, when Krug crosses a city bridge in the evening on his way home located across the river, soldiers stop him and demand to see his permit. Upon reading the word "university" on the permit, one of the soldiers, unfamiliar with its meaning, reads it aloud in a mocking tone. Krug attempts to explain the term in simple words:

"University," he said, "place where things are taught—nothing important."

"Oh, philosophy," said the soldier. "You know, when you try to imagine a mirok (small pink potato) without the least reference to any you have eaten or will eat." [7.11-12]

This response encapsulates open mockery, ignorance, and contempt toward philosophy. Frustrated by their incomprehension and scorn, Krug remarks:

"Dear, dear, this is a singular position," he said. "For now there is not much to choose between my physical illiteracy and your mental one." [7.12]

Through these lines, the author highlights the clash between intellect and brute force, thought and violence, ignorance and intellectualism. Intellectual superiority is neither valued nor respected in this society; instead, it is ridiculed, rejected, and even deemed dangerous.

In subsequent scenes, this dismissive attitude escalates into overt aggression. The soldiers intimidate, insult, and threaten Krug:

"We are going to arrest you," said the fat soldier. "It will put an end to your clowning, you old drunkard. And when we are fed up with guarding you, we'll check you into the water and shoot at you while you drown." [7.13]

Additionally, the third soldier's comment — "I want some fun too" — reveals a mentality where mockery, sadism, and the humiliation of an individual in the name of state power are treated as a form of "entertainment."

Through this episode, Nabokov exposes how thinkers — philosophers, professors, and intellectuals — are marginalized, humiliated, and stripped of their dignity in a totalitarian society. What is expected of them is not thought or critique but blind obedience. In this social environment, where personal freedom, thought, and moral values are devalued, a thinking individual is turned into an enemy of the state.

The conflict between power and intellect emerges as one of the novel's central social problems, rendered with particular skill in Chapter IV. At the heart of this tension lies the relationship between Adam Krug, a professor of philosophy, and Paduk, the leader of the new totalitarian regime. Krug embodies thought, intellect, scholarship, and freedom of mind; Paduk, by contrast, symbolizes coercive political authority, ideological control, and repressive governance. The dictator seeks to enlist Krug as an instrument for broadcasting state doctrine to the public, yet Krug resists this ideological pressure and remains true to his principles.

In this chapter, University President Azureus convenes a meeting of leading professors. The purpose: to demonstrate the university's loyalty to the Paduk regime—under threat that the institution will otherwise be shut down and replaced. As Azureus warns:

"I have now been given to understand that unless our intentions, our programme and conduct are made clear to the Ruler, this organism, this old and beloved organism, will cease to function altogether, and some other institution with some other staff be established in its stead..." [7.36]

Through allegorical touches, V. Nabokov satirizes the encroachment of political power on academic life. While departments such as Economics, Theology, Drama, and History debate the national situation, Political Science is conspicuously absent—signaling the exclusion of political inquiry and the suppression of open debate:

"What about Rufel?" (Political Science) asked the President. "Could you not get him?"

"Not available," replied Dr. Alexander. "Apparently arrested. For his own safety I am told." [7.33]

The exchange, steeped in irony, exposes the erosion of political freedoms and the silencing of critical voices under the guise of "protection." During the meeting, further reports surface: civil disorder spreads, core legal institutions — Parliament and the Court of Justice (the Zud) — are being destroyed, and former government officials are executed or imprisoned:

"I hear that the Parliament and the Zud (Court of Justice) are still burning..."

"...One of the Cabinet Ministers... was executed on the spot, but... (the former President of the State) was brought back and imprisoned." [7.36]

These details lay bare the collapse of democratic norms and the violent seizure (and maintenance) of power. Especially telling is Krug's refusal to sign the political manifesto—a principled assertion of intellect against ideological coercion. Most of his colleagues, however, sign under pressure, with varying degrees of resignation and self-awareness:

"The rest sighed and signed, or did not sigh and signed, or signed—and sighed afterwards..." [7.40]

Krug is the only one who notices a missing comma in the document and declares that he cannot sign it without correction. He explains his firm stance by stating that he cannot endorse a text he did not write himself. Through this episode, V. Nabokov simultaneously critiques collective obedience and praises Krug's intellectual independence and moral courage.

The primary reason for Krug's protest lies in the new government's demand to include ideologically "suitable" subjects in the university curriculum. This is interpreted not only as a rejection of the scientific heritage cultivated over centuries but also as a suppression of free thought. The imposition of ideological control on the university symbolizes the replacement of scholarship, reason, and intellectual freedom with the dictates of state policy. Consequently, these scenes highlight one of the central social conflicts of the novel—the irreconcilable tension between power and intellect—and reveal how intellectual values are placed under threat within a totalitarian regime.

Conclusion: In "Bend Sinister", Nabokov masterfully explores the conflict between individual intellect and oppressive political power, revealing the destructive nature of totalitarian regimes. Through the character of Adam Krug, the novel portrays the resilience of free thought and moral integrity in the face of ideological coercion. The narrative illustrates how totalitarian systems attempt to erase individuality, reduce human beings to obedient instruments, and devalue intellectual and cultural heritage. By juxtaposing Krug's philosophical independence with Paduk's brutal regime, V. Nabokov underscores the profound moral and social consequences of suppressing reason and freedom. The dream sequences, allegorical elements, and satirical episodes further emphasize the artificiality and dehumanizing nature of the totalitarian order. Krug's resistance, even when it leads to his downfall, symbolizes the enduring power of thought and personal conviction against tyranny. Ultimately, the novel serves as both a warning and a tribute to intellectual courage, highlighting the timeless struggle between reason and the forces that seek to silence it.

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