

# Pedophilia: a Psychiatric Disorder or a Perverse Sexual Orientation? A Critical Study of Vladimir Nobokov's Lolita

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## Abstract

There are debates whether Pedophilia, a universal psycho-social problem, is a psychiatric disorder or a perverse sexual orientation. Though a few number of pedophilia supporting groups argue that having sexual interests in children is merely a sexual orientation or fantasy; but this paper explores further in analyzing different psychological insights of pedophiles, especially in the contexts of Vladimir Nobokov's novel Lolita (1955) and its film adaptation of 1962. This paper gives a critical analysis of the views and practices of pedophilia in the contemporary world. In addition to that, this paper explores the binary opposite characters of Humbert and Clare Quilty to determine whether pedophilia is their sexual orientation or they are perverts who are only sexually attracted to young girls. Apart from analyzing this perverse sexual practice, this paper also discusses the established notions of pedophilia, re/de-constructs them and gives an elaborate discussion on this taboo topic from theoretical points of view. In doing so, this paper employs critical commentaries based on a number of established theories like Michel Foucault's theories on Sexuality, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Laura Mulvey's envision of scopophilia.

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**Index terms**— pedophilia; psychiatric disorder; lolita; child sex.

## 1 I. Introduction

This paper is divided into five major chapters with supporting discussions in each of the sections. The first section addresses the scenario, research problems and objectives of this paper. The second chapter discusses the research methodology. The third chapter employs the main discussions of the paper along with subsequent supposing details. The fourth chapter demonstrates the research findings, and the final chapter makes recommendations and leaves scopes for further studies.

Author: Lecturer in English at United International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. e-mail: sabuj.si@gmail.com a) Scenario the Abrahamic religions, the practice of sex dates back to the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve's fall. But, there are no direct biblical references to pedophilia. However, since pedophilia, a perverse practice of sex, is persistent in different cultures across the world, the depiction of this abnormal sex practice, therefore, is found in literary texts as well. Although pedophilia is considered by many to be the most perverse form of sexual behavior, but some people argue that pedophilia is a very common sexual orientation like homosexuality and bisexuality. It is even argued by some scholars that it needs a cultural standpoint to call pedophilia 'a perverse practice' or 'a crime'. However, Vladimir Nobokov's Lolita, set in the 1950s America, deals with two pedophiles -Humbert and Quilty. Though it apparently seems that they have different sexual orientations unlike the rest of the characters in the novel, but Nobokov does not verify the acclamation.

On the other hand, the practice of pedophilic sex is still very common in different parts of the globe. Different groups advocate against terming consensual sex with prepubescent boys/girls and teenagers as 'pedophilia'

because they believe "eighteen is just a number". (Breure, Are All Men Pedophiles?) But, there are others who hold strong positions against this notion. They argue that if someone engages in sex with a prepubescent boy or girl, s/he should be called a 'perverse' regardless of the consent of the minor. This paper therefore intends to explore whether pedophilia Pedophilia: Psychiatric Disorder or a Perverse Sexual Orientation? Critical Study of Vladimir Nobokov's *Lolita*

Sex is a normative human behavior that has as ancient a past as the human being. From point of view can be termed as a sexual orientation or if it is just an extreme form of perversity.

While conducting the research, a number of behind-the-closet striking questions came forth. As the research title suggests, this study involves two different intense normative human behavioral acts - 'psychiatric disorder' and 'sexual orientation'. The first one apparently seems strictly a medical term whereas the second one involves concepts surrounding gender studies. Though this research is based primarily on Vladimir Nobokov's novel of 1955, but it also further explores the recent phenomenon of pedophilia. edophilia simply refers to the sexual interest of adults towards prepubescent children. This paper provides an insightful and analytical view of the practice of pedophilia based on Vladimir Nobokov's novel *Lolita* (1955). This library-based research opens an argument on whether pedophilia should be seen as a perverse psychiatric disorder, or it is just the sexual orientation of a person. Nobokov's introduction of two binary opposite characters of Humbert and Quilty demonstrates the utmost level of intensity regarding the issue of pedophilia in the novel. Chapter Three

## 2 III. Discussion

In the context of the novel of *Lolita*, Humbert the protagonist apparently has a psychiatric disorder, and he had been admitted to mental hospitals twice. The novel, narrated from Humbert's point of view, never includes any hints of any wrong doings of the protagonist. The narrator rather defends himself by using *Lolita* as a shield. But, a critical view of the character gives a detailed understanding of his pedophilic origin. It is notable that his mother had died when he was only five years old. Being a member of a well-to-do lone family in a suburban area, Humbert developed an 'everlasting feeling of loneliness', which might have made him psychologically imbalanced. Sigmund Freud, in his popular essay "Mourning and Melancholia", terms this everlasting pain as 'melancholia'. His mother's death, which is logically supposed to make him sad, turns out to be an ongoing pain in him that traumatizes him and leaves him emotionally vacant throughout his childhood. A psychoanalytic study of this incident would end up with the Freudian concept of 'Oedipal Complex'. At the age of 5, Humbert fails to bear the pain of his mother's death, and it leaves him traumatized. This trauma is seen further tormenting him when he fails to consummate his love affair with Annabel Leigh, his teenage love interest.

Annabel and Humbert fall in love in their teenage years. This affair works as a turn on in Humbert's life. But, things get disastrous when Humbert finds that he cannot make love with Annabel Leigh. If analyzed from Freudian point of view, it becomes apparent that Humbert's failure roots back to his mother's demise and the Oedipal Complex follows. It is quite ambiguous if Humbert finds any similarity between Annabel Leigh and his mother, but there are hints that he thinks likewise. However, the second most vulnerability in his life comes following the death of Therefore, the problem that comes into focus is the integration of this medical term and analyzing it in the perspective of gender studied. attraction towards children as perversion or to give it the recognition, which is campaigned by many groups.

International Classification of Diseases (ICD) defines pedophilia as a psychological disorder of adult men or women who feel sexual attraction particularly towards children of pre-pubertal or early-pubertal age. A similar definition has been given by American Heritage Stedman's Medical Dictionary. According to them, "Pedophilia is the act or fantasy on the part of an adult of engaging in sexual activity with a child or children." (Stedman's Medical Dictionary) But, there are rather dissimilar thoughts on it as well. Dr. James Cantor of Center for Addiction and Mental health has found that pedophilia is a "biologically rooted condition that does not change -like a sexual orientation." (The Star) A similar talk is found in Krafft-Ebing's book named *Psychopathia Sexualis*. The author argues that pedophilia is nothing but a sexual practice, such as homosexuality and bisexuality.

i. Finding out the medical and cultural meanings of the term 'pedophilia' by examining the clinical definitions and meanings; and whether it is seen as a disease or not

ii. Finding out the etymological meaning of 'pedophilia' by incorporating the preexisting meanings and external references of the term. iii. Analyzing whether to term 'pedophilia' as a curable sickness or just a category of unrecognized sexual orientation.

This study, aimed at analyzing Nobokov's *Lolita* from the point of view of the act of pedophilia, draws the contemporary critical, cultural and gender theories. Pedophilia, a broader term that covers up different aspects and perspectives, has been elaborated from the points of views victims of both the victim and the pedophiles.

Annabel Leigh. Firstly, he is traumatized by his mother's death; and then Leigh's death doubles the trauma. If the pain, which he gets after his mother's death, is the beginning of his 'melancholia' then that multiplies the pain following Annabel's death.

Popular Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987) deals with a similar female character named Naoko. She gets traumatized following her elder sister's death, becomes even more traumatized after the death of her love interest. As an effect of melancholia, she fails to consummate her love with Kizuki. Her inertia causes her melancholia that later persuades her to ultimately commit suicide. Like Humbert, Naoko

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has to consult with psychiatrists. But, the major difference between these two characters is that Naoko never appears to be attracted to any prepubescent boys or girls, whereas Humbert does.

However, Humbert's feelings seem to retrieve when he meets Lolita years later. For him, Lolita and Annabel resemble with each other. As the narrative suggests, the narrator is unwilling to call Lolita 'beautiful'; rather, Humbert thinks she is more like an 'average nymphet'. Humbert's attraction does not simply vanish after he finds Lolita; he rather seeks for scopophilic pleasure of seeing other girls at school. He terms the young school girls 'nymphets'. (Nobokov, 127) Laura Mulvey's concepts of 'scopophilia' and 'voyeuristic pleasure' can be incorporated here. As the objects (the nymphets at school) are unreachable for him, he seeks pleasure only by seeing them. Stanley Kubrik, when adapting this novel into a film, uses interesting camera angles to give the viewers the same kind of scopophilic pleasure as Humbert has got as in the novel. Stanley's works with Humbert's 'gaze mechanism' takes Lolita (1962) to a new height.

Humbert's perverse psyche is revealed when he decides to marry Charlotte Haze, Lolita's biological mother, so that he can stay around Lolita. This action is surely a perverse practice because it involves both pedophilia and incest to the first degree. As he later engages in sexual acts with his step-daughter and twelve-years-old Lolita, he proves himself nothing but a 'pervert'. Humbert's desperation in finding Lolita, when she is lost, further attributes him of his pervert psychiatric disorder. And finally when he kills Quilty over forcing Lolita to join an even perverse act of pedophilic orgy, he seems not feeling guilty of either for i) making love with Lolita or ii) killing Quilty.

Lolita, the most ambiguous character of the novel, is the object of pedophilia in the novel. If the narrative style of the novel is taken into consideration, it is found that the narrator uses interesting phrases to hide any of his own guilt. He rather blames Lolita for persuading him to feel attracted towards her. As the novel is a meta-narrative narrated from the point of view of Humbert, it seems natural that he would not confess of his guilt.

A study, conducted by Dr. James Cantor, has found that only 1-5% of males find it intriguing to make love with children. If the statistical flaw is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that this ratio would further decrease. It is reasonable to think that many a number of the survey participants would hide their fantasies of engaging in sex with minors in fear of getting revealed. Anyway, in that case, it is quite difficult to term this psychological condition a 'sexual orientation'; rather, it sounds more appropriate if it is seen as 'perversion'. The twelve-years-old Dolores Haze aka Lolita has been overtly presented as a sexual object rather than simply as a teenage girl. A girl of her age would find sex interesting by nature. But, her lack of knowledge of sex triggers interesting questions. For her, sex is more of a 'game' than a medium of 'generating pleasure'. She admits of having carnal love with one of her scout-mates named Charlie. He tells this exactly after she has sex with Humbert for the first time. Her mental immaturity definitely is a contributing factor, but that is nothing exceptional because girls of her age might naturally feel interested towards exploring the taboo world of sexuality. In addition, Lolita's close female friends also appear to be attracted towards Humbert, or vice versa that also supports this argument. Additionally, it is not quite clear up to the end of the novel who Lolita's biological father is. As she is devoid of a father during her childhood years, it seems natural that her mother's affair with a man of her father's age would trigger jealousy in her. This 'Electra Complex' seems interesting when she finds her mother attracted towards Humbert. This jealousy or 'Electra Complex' guides her towards acting stubborn.

Another interesting yet important character of the novel is Clare Quilty. Quilty, who is the alter ego of Humbert is too a pedophile. Quilty, a prominent writer in disguise, follows Lolita and Humbert throughout the novel, and ends up 'stealing' her from the hospital. His immoral perversion comes under the limelight at the end of the novel when it is found that Lolita had left Quilty on the grounds of her hatred for him as he forced her to engage in perverse sexual acts. This perversion is expressive even in Humbert.

The term 'nymphet' is believed to have been coined by Vladimir Nobokov. Humbert, the narrator, describes prepubescent girls as nymphets. As for him, "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens?. I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'" ??Nobokov, ??) In a following chapter, the narrator states that he fantasizes of living in "the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks-of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea." (Nobokov, 9) This sexual fantasy is the result of his obsession with the image of Annabel. But, that is not the case in all the pedophiles of the world. The idea of 'compulsory heterosexuality' is quite absent here because even if pedophilia is consensual, the question remains on whether anyone at the age of twelve can give consent or not. Though there are groups who call for the reformation of the 'age of consent' stating that 'eighteen is just a number', but debates remain on whether to follow this notion as for granted or not. On the contrary to the stance of these groups, there are other activists who think that children should be given mandatory sex education to prevent pedophilia and other child molestation incidents.

Child pornography, which is the bi-product of pedophilia, is another discernible example of sexual perversion. As Humbert did, pedophiles want to remain anonymous, yet they want to speak up for their sexual preferences. This proves that pedophilia is an example of perversion that needs psychiatric treatments to get the pedophiles cured. A recent example of pedophilia is the cyber girl named Sweety. This 10-years-old-looking computer-generated-image (CGI) of a Pilipino girl was created by a group of Swedish computer experts using 3D computer graphics imagery. She was used for catching 1000 pedophiles from across the world. Initiatives like this can be taken more frequently to minimize the incidents of child molestation and pedophilia.

Sigmund Freud talks about the sexuality of children in his book titled Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.

Their sex formation is quite natural which is also present in the character of Lolita. In Michel Foucault's History of Sexuality, the development of sexuality in children has been further discussed. It describes that since the notion of sex is kept hidden from children, it is inevitable that teens would feel especially interested in sex if they are given the space. The same thing happens when Lolita's sexual drives are controlled and influenced by Humbert. She rejects any further manipulation of Quilty when she starts realizing that the reality is quite the opposite.

### 3 Chapter Four

#### 4 IV. Major Findings

Based on the discussion stated above, this research comes up with the following major findings: i Dissimilar to non-straight sexual acts like homosexuality and bi-sexuality, pedophilia is not a sexual orientation; rather it is a psychological disorder that is curable by treatment. A number of factors can play roles in making someone a pedophile; but working on those factors can ease things up. ii People with 'Lolita Complex' can be cured with Cognitive Therapy. As it has a clinical solution, this perverse sickness can be cured.

iii Pedophilia is a universal phenomenon persisting worldwide. Though the definition and acceptability of pedophilia varies depending on cultural differences across nations, but it is a crime against humanity. Examples of child sex tourism in countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico etc can be cited. Chapter Five

#### 5 V. Recommendations and Conclusion

This research has identified the psychological stances of Humbert, Quilty and Lolita, and related it to the statistical findings of the recent past. It also has also given a theoretical reading of how pedophilia is related to sexuality but yet it is unacceptable. The study therefore comes with the following recommendations and conclusions. a) Recommendation i) Childhood sex education is important to avoid children from being victims of pedophilia. The same goes for the pedophiles. If proper and timed education can be ensured, any psychological disorder can be prevented. ii) Openness towards sex can be a vital factor in tackling pedophilia. Other than presenting sex as a taboo topic, parents as well as adults, should be educative towards children when it comes to sex education.

#### 6 b) Conclusion and Scope for Further Study

In concluding this paper, a number of possible areas can be talked about where further study is possible. As the researcher is a Bangladeshi national, he recommends that a further study can be carried out on the practices of pedophilia in different Bangladeshi cultural contexts. Another interesting area to browse is child marriage in Bangladesh. As the pedophiles are fetishistic, studies can be carried out on the visual discourses where children are used as sex objects. Interested parties might also carry out research works on child pornography, its sub-genres of lolicon manga or lolicon anime, child sexual abuse and related subject areas. <sup>1</sup>



Figure 1:

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<sup>1</sup>Pedophilia: A Psychiatric Disorder or a Perverse Sexual Orientation? a Critical Study of Vladimir Nobokov's Lolita

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