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**Trauma and Intertextuality in Kate  
Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*  
and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita***

At the peak of the #MeToo movement, women across the globe shared their experiences of sexual abuse and exposed men who misused their positions of power to abuse and silence women. *My Dark Vanessa*, a novel published in 2020 by American author Kate Elizabeth Russell, tells the story of Vanessa Wye, whose high school professor, Jacob Strane, sexually abuses her and is accused of sexual assault by a former student of his. The novel was written for her creative writing PhD degree and examines the concept of consent, memory, and victimhood (Sturges). However, these topics have already been tackled in the past in works of fiction such as Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*, which served as an inspiration for Russell's novel. This paper explores the intertextuality between Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*, focusing on their approaches to trauma and sexual abuse. Through an analysis of narrative techniques and parallels, it argues that while both novels address similar themes, they diverge significantly in their portrayal of trauma, with *My Dark Vanessa* favouring a psychological approach to this topic. The analysis begins with a brief outline of Nabokov's *Lolita* and its cultural context. Next, the #MeToo movement is examined, and *My Dark Vanessa* is analysed through the lens of these events. Afterwards, Russell's novel is examined as an intertextual work of fiction, by presenting examples of intertextuality that are present in the novel, focusing on the usage of *Lolita* as a plot device. Furthermore, the employment of non-linear storytelling to depict trauma is presented as the most significant divergence of *My Dark Vanessa* from *Lolita* and trauma theory is applied to Russell's novel on the chapters set in 2017.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* tells the story of a middle-aged literature professor's obsession with Lolita, a 12-year-old girl named Dolores Haze. The novel begins with a preface written by Doctor John Ray Junior who presents the story as a memoir written by the late pseudonymous Humbert Humbert, who is imprisoned and awaiting trial for murder (Nabokov 79–81). It is assumed that the text of *Lolita* is written as a defence-speech he plans to read during trial, which he addresses to the trial's jury (Tamir-Ghez 71). In 1998, Random House's Modern Library division listed *Lolita* as the 4<sup>th</sup> most important novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Connolly "Lolita's Afterlife" 141). However, the popularization of the concept of the "nymphet" and the change of meaning of the name "Lolita" bear witness to the transcendence of Lolita from the literary world to mass culture (168). "Nymphets" is Humbert Humbert's elevated denotation of "occurring" maidens aged between nine and fourteen "who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they are, reveal their true nature, which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)" (Nabokov 91). In view of this, "nymphet" signifies female children who paedophiles such as Humbert himself are infatuated with. Moreover, Connolly alludes to the dictionary definitions of "Lolita", which define the term as "a sexually precocious" or "precociously seductive young girl", and state Nabokov's *Lolita* as the origin of such meaning ("Lolita's Afterlife" 168). Journalists use the term "Lolita" to denote any young female who might be involved with an older man. In Japan, the term "Lolita" signifies a fashion style and "lolicon" signifies an attraction to young girls ("Lolita's Afterlife" 168–189). Patnoe highlights a lack of

recognition among critics of the harm inflicted upon the character of Lolita, which corresponds with the prevalent issue of an excessively sexualized portrayal of the character in the media. Most critics do not discuss trauma in *Lolita*, but if they do, it is a discussion focused on Humbert's trauma, instead on trauma inflicted on Lolita or on the reader by Humbert Humbert (Patnoe 87).

Russell's exploration of a sexual relationship between an English literature professor and his underage pupil in her 2020 debut novel *My Dark Vanessa* is presented from the point of view of a survivor of child sexual abuse, the titular Vanessa Wye. The book portrays the abusive acts committed by Professor Strane and the resulting trauma experienced by Vanessa, while also highlighting the significance of the #MeToo movement for survivors of sexual abuse. To achieve this, Russell's novel utilizes a fragmented timeline, purposefully rejecting chronological linearity. Non-linearity in literature refers to the use of non-linear narrative structures or storytelling techniques where the events of the story are not presented in chronological order. Instead, the narrative may employ analepses and prolepses, feature multiple perspectives, or employ other unconventional methods to convey the story (Herman 57). By interweaving Vanessa's high school experiences from 2000 and 2001 with the events at the height of the #MeToo movement in 2017, Russell compels readers to confront the lasting effects of trauma and the intricate nature of memory.

In an article for *The Guardian*, Zinovieff argues that the movement was caused by a change in attitudes to the meaning of sexual consent. Formerly, sexual abuse of children would often be overlooked, but the movement caused victims to recognise themselves in stories of sexual abuse and offered a platform for their experiences to finally be heard (Zinovieff). This atmosphere of the #MeToo movement is intricately captured in *My Dark Vanessa* in the chapters that are set in 2017. Russell sets the tone of her novel by focusing the opening chapter with a fictional Facebook post written by Taylor Birch, another survivor of Professor Strane's sexual abuse. This Facebook post, in which Taylor recounts her experiences at Browick, causes a chain reaction which ends in Strane's suicide and Vanessa's re-evaluation of her past with Professor Strane. In the novel, Russell comments on the seemingly never-ending number of exposés that were emerging at the height of the movement:

"Let me guess," she says, "another abuser exposed."

I look up from my phone, my limbs cold.

"It's just so endless, isn't it?" She gives a sad smile. "There is no escape."  
(Russell 16)

This conversation between Vanessa and her psychiatrist Ruby calls attention to the "endless" victims of sexual abuse who are at that moment shar-

ing their stories through social media. These victims remind us of the magnitude of this problem and call attention to how widespread it is. According to Tambe, the initial wave of the #MeToo movement was, in fact a viral phenomenon, with over half a million retweets of the hashtag within the first twenty-four hours, and reached the Facebook and Twitter feeds of people in Sweden, India, Japan, and other areas of the globe. Ultimately, it led to resignations of influential cis-men held responsible for such sexual misconduct. The public opinion of such allegations shifted from disbelief to the support of survivors (Tambe 197–198).

The similarities between *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa* are not coincidental but are of intertextual nature – in the disclaimer of her novel, Russell states that woven into the novel are her “own complicated feelings towards *Lolita*” (Russell 6). According to Landwehr, the term intertextuality was coined by Kristeva in 1966 and serves “as an alternative strategy to studying literary texts that would serve as an antidote to historically oriented approaches” (2). It generally connotes the structural relations between two or more texts, and assumes that by studying intertextuality, one “can uncover an author’s intentions, the sources of his/her ideas, and responses of contemporary readers” (2). Both novels explore themes of inappropriate relations, manipulation, and power dynamics between an older man and a younger girl. Moreover, the most prominent instance of intertextuality between the two novels is the usage of Nabokov’s *Lolita* as a plot device to manipulate young Vanessa. To establish a connection with Vanessa, who aspires to become an author, Professor Strane uses his literary knowledge. He assigns her books by authors he considers relevant to Vanessa: Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay (Russell 40–41). Vanessa understands that Strane’s gesture of giving her books was a ploy to show interest: “I start to realize the point isn’t really whether I like the books; it’s more about him giving me different lenses to see myself through. The poems are clues to help me understand why he’s so interested, what is it that he sees in me” (Russell 41). In this quote, Vanessa reflects upon the books Professor Strane assigned her to read and realizes that each of them shares a woman with red hair: Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”, the red hair of Dickinson and Millay. Professor Strane does not shy away from this as he points out that “Lady Lazarus” reminded him of Vanessa, and that Millay “was a red-haired girl from Maine” (Russell 41), exactly as Vanessa. This act of exchanging literature becomes a form of intimacy between them and culminates as Professor Strane lends her his copy of Nabokov’s *Lolita* (Russell 69). Vanessa soon realises that this story of “a seemingly ordinary girl who is really a deadly demon in disguise” (Russell 70) signifies Strane’s wish to advance their relationship from platonic to sexual – that he is Humbert, and she is his Dolores (Russell 71).

Patnoe suggests that “the source of misreadings of *Lolita* is the reader, who is extratextual because he or she is outside the text of *Lolita*, intertextual because he or she lives between the narratives and images that bolster the misreadings of *Lolita*, and intratextual as he or she, submerged in these larger influences of cultures and intertextuality, brings them to *Lolita* so thoroughly that they

become, for that reader, a real part of the *Lolita* text" (Patnoe 84). When applied to Vanessa's misreading of *Lolita*, it provides insight into why Vanessa, rather than perceiving the book as a cautionary tale, interprets it as a declaration of love. Before receiving *Lolita*, Vanessa already develops feelings towards Strane, a notion she brings into the novel as she reads it for the first time. One can also argue that through the act of child grooming, Strane influenced Vanessa to be susceptible to misinterpreting *Lolita*. It's worth noting that both *Lolita* and *Vanessa* are manipulated through the power dynamic inherent in teaching, where the abusers find themselves in positions of authority. This is a pattern the #MeToo movement acknowledges and fights against – it gave victims a way to better communicate this type of abuse, whereas before the movement, in case an individual in a position of authority touched their assistant in an inappropriate manner, this type of behaviour would often be brushed off as merely a "mistake" (Arjun et al. 37).

The first act of sexual intercourse in the novels can also be read as intertextual, as both acts are feature a dynamic wherein the minor is tricked that they are in control, despite asymmetrical power balances. According to Patnoe, Humbert's account of their first sexual intercourse can be interpreted in two ways: one can accept Humbert's claim that *Lolita* seduced him and initiated the intercourse, or one can challenge this perspective by imagining the act from *Lolita*'s viewpoint. Humbert strives to portray *Lolita* as knowledgeable and experienced, making presumptions with him and directing the intercourse. However, this is his attempt to justify and convince "the jury" that what he did was acceptable, even though he was in a position of power and committed an act of sexual misconduct (Patnoe 90–92). In a similar vein, as their relationship becomes sexual, Strane swiftly convinces Vanessa that she is in control. Yet, Vanessa questions this notion, as she is aware that being in control does not necessarily mean that she is not forced and that she can say no. She wonders whether he genuinely believes that she is controlling the situation, as thus far, he has been the one making advances on her (Russell 84–85). This lack of control is visible in their first night together:

For everything he does, he asks permission. "Can I?" before pulling the pajama top all the way over my head. "Is this ok?" before pushing my underwear over, slipping a finger inside so quickly that, for a moment, I'm stunned and my body plays dead. After a while he starts asking permission after he's already done the thing he's asking about. "Can I?" he asks, meaning can he tug the pajama shorts down, but they're already off. (Russell 91)

This excerpt exemplifies that Strane is the person in power in every given circumstance: initially he asks Vanessa to consent, but he never waits for a confirmation. His questions appear more as announcements, rather than inquiries. Later, the questions do not serve any purpose, as the acts in question have already been executed. After this, Vanessa falls asleep and when she wakes,

Strane assaults her. Similarly to the previously mentioned case, he asks for her consent, but does not necessitate a reply, and despite her tears, thrusts himself against her (Russell 93–94). As she is leaving his house, he asks whether she's overwhelmed, but she is apprehensive to admit her negative feelings about what transpired and that the act felt forced (Russell 95). This illustrates that Vanessa is subconsciously aware that she was sexually assaulted, but she is not mature enough to fully comprehend what transpired.

Furthermore, the title *My Dark Vanessa* is a reference to Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*: "Come and be worshiped, come and be caressed, / My dark Vanessa" (Russell 112). Strane presents Vanessa with *Pale Fire* after they start having sexual relations. According to McHale, *Pale Fire* is "a text of absolute epistemological uncertainty" (18) and likewise features narratorial unreliability, but pushes the boundaries established in the tradition of radically unreliable modernist narrators, to which *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert belongs, by not being able to determine exactly how or to what extent the narrator is radically unreliable. Strane openly comments on the "uncanny" similarity between Vanessa Wye and the fictitious Vanessa from *Pale Fire*. She describes seeing her name in the novel as "a loss of control" (Russell 112), an element she never had in their relationship.

Moreover, noteworthy similarity can be discerned between Humbert's nymphet theory and Strane's perspective regarding girls aged fourteen to sixteen. In a conversation with Vanessa, Strane remarks: "Girls become real so early. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. That's when your minds turn on. It's a gorgeous thing to witness" (Russell 123). Strane's view of adolescent girls alludes to Humbert's theory of nymphets, which suggests that certain "chosen" girls aged nine to fourteen of "nymphic" origin, seduce significantly older men (Nabokov 91), but it is merely an excuse for Humbert's paedophilic behaviour. Vanessa points out the striking resemblance between Strane's words and Humbert's, but Strane denies any wrongdoing and insists that he no paedophile. He accuses Vanessa of understanding the book too literally and insists that he is not her Humbert from *Lolita*. Additionally, Strane stipulates his point by commenting on Vanessa's appearance and insisting that she is "fairly developed" (Russell 124), implying that she has already begun to mature physically and is more of a woman than a child. This comment strikes Vanessa as both flattering and uncomfortable, as it underscores the fact that Strane regards her through a sexual lens.

The parallels between Vanessa's life and the life of *Lolita* in Nabokov's novel are so striking that the lines between the narratives of *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita* are blurred. In a chapter that takes place in 2006, while discussing her capstone literature project with her professor, Henry, Vanessa proposes a paper on the topic of Shakespeare's influence on *Lolita*. She lists specific examples, such as "the virginal symbolism of Othello's strawberry handkerchief and the strawberry-print pajamas Humbert gives Lo" (Russell 251). What Vanessa does not realise immediately is that she herself is the receiver of those strawberry pyjamas, not

Lolita. This mix-up puts an emphasis on the degree to which Vanessa has internalized the narrative of *Lolita* and made it a part of her own story. Professor Henry points out that such an event does not happen in *Lolita*. This causes Vanessa to re-evaluate her own life, as she begins to see her experiences as if they were scenes from a movie she watched long ago (Russell 252).

An additional way to understand *My Dark Vanessa* is by viewing the novel through the perspective of Taylor Birch's character. During a conversation about Taylor and Strane's relationship, Taylor admits that Strane made her read *Lolita* at the beginning of their involvement. She acknowledges that she viewed Vanessa as the "precursor" of herself, as though Vanessa is the one who made him what he is – a child molester (Russell 268–269). In a similar fashion, Humbert describes his brief relationship with Annabel Leigh, who acts like a "precursor" of Lolita and is presented as the one to blame for his longing of nymphets ("The Precursors of Lolita" 11). There are several other instances of intertextuality throughout the novel that are worth a brief mention: Strane and Vanessa watching Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita* (Russell 137), Vanessa's reaction to Strane's touch after she finds out he had her expelled from high school – "I'll die if you touch me" (Russell 212, 217). In Nabokov's novel, Humbert utters these exact words as a reaction to Lolita's touch after several years (346).

*Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa* diverge in their portrayal of the trauma that sexual abuse inflicts on a child. While Russell emphasizes the psychological state of her protagonist, the unreliable narrator of *Lolita* glosses over the true mental state of Dolores. As Tamir-Ghez points out, indications of Dolores Haze's fragile state are scattered throughout the story, and it should be evident that Dolores operates out of fear and desperation. The readers know that "Lolita has no place to go, that she cries every night, that Humbert terrorizes her in different ways to keep her submissive" (Tamir-Ghez 82).

In contrast, *My Dark Vanessa* employs a non-linear structure to delve deeper into the psychological aftermath of such experiences. In this way, *My Dark Vanessa* can be viewed as what Balaev describes as a trauma novel – "a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels" (150). As noted by Zinovieff, Russell's depiction of the teenage mindset is particularly distinctive, as she captures the complex hormonal turmoil that is puberty – fixating on sex, the need for intimacy and first love, defying rules (Zinovieff). Balaev describes the employment of non-linear plot structures "as a way of emphasising mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience". This creates a gap in time which allows the reader to imagine possible scenarios of what might have happened to main character. (160) In the chapters set in 2017, the readers witness the damage their relationship caused as Vanessa has become a disillusioned individual working a dead-end job at the front desk of a hotel, who spends all her free time smoking marijuana or engaging in casual sex. She sees a therapist to deal with the emotional impact of her father's passing,



but she refrains from discussing Strane because she still believes that he didn't mistreat her. In their paper about the impacts of child sexual abuse Briere and Elliott state that forms of sexual molestation are shown to be a major risk factor that lead "to subsequent psychological difficulties in the short and longer term" (55). They list cognitive distortions, emotional distress, depression, anger, anxiety, an impaired sense of self, avoidance and interpersonal difficulties as possible psychological consequences of sexual abuse. In *My Dark Vanessa*, none of these are explicitly stated, but Vanessa exhibits worrisome patterns of behaviour such as the inability to confront the reality of Strane's mistreatment of her, a loss of interests, and her inability to remain sober. Briere and Elliott state that sexually abused women are ten times more likely than non-abused women to become alcoholics. According to their research, substance abuse is a way of dissociating psychologically, easing internal psychological damage and troubling memories (Briere and Elliot 61). A pattern of abusing marijuana, alcohol and other substances as a way of coping with strong feelings can be spotted through the novel, but it is most prominent in the chapters set in 2017 when she is dealing with Strane's suicide:

It's fine. The drinking, the pot, the Ativan, even Strane—it's perfectly fine. It's nothing. It's normal. All interesting women had older lovers when they were young. It's a rite of passage. You go in a girl and come out not quite a woman but closer, a girl more conscious of herself and her own power. Self-awareness is a good thing. It leads to confidence, knowing one's place in the world. He made me see myself in a way a boy my own age never could. (Russell 168)

This passage depicts Vanessa's turn to substances such as alcohol, weed, and prescription drugs to numb intense emotions caused by Strane's suicide. She convinces herself that neither her substance abuse nor her involvement with Strane is problematic, rationalizing her behaviour by portraying it as a rite of passage that all interesting girls must go through in order to mature into womanhood. Thus, she is a self-deceiving first-person narrator, and as a result, her credibility can also be brought into question. Whilst her portrayal of events appears more authentic than Humbert's, given that her language is less ornate and the implied reader is not a jury, the narration of *My Dark Vanessa* is subjective and therefore some events are portrayed in a heightened, emotionally charged manner, which could be linked to the experience of trauma.

Vanessa resorts to substance abuse as a way of dealing with trauma, which Balaev describes as an overwhelming experience that shatters an individual's sense of self and understanding of societal norms (150). In Russell's novel, the traumatic event can be linked to Strane's abuse which causes the character to lose her sense of self and view society through a distorted lens that normalizes abuse. This is evidenced by loss of interest in writing, which was previously Vanessa's passion and motivation for pursuing an English degree. As Strane puts it:



"You were brilliant. I thought you were going to publish a novel at twenty" (Russell 56). Her loss of interest in writing can be traced back to her university days, when Professor Henry insists she apply to grad school in the field of English literature. However, after a confrontation with Professor Henry, who she finds is making similar inappropriate advances towards her, reminiscent of Strane's, Vanessa loses her interest in pursuing further education. This can be seen as a breaking point, after which her life becomes a series of dead-end jobs and chasing the next high.

At last, with the help of her therapist Ruby, Vanessa begins to unravel the power dynamics between her and Strane. She encourages Vanessa to think of the first instance that can be considered intimate, which helps Vanessa to realize that he was the one who initiated it (Russell 274–275). As Vanessa continues therapy, she gradually moves away from mourning Strane and towards mourning herself. She grapples with the fact that she has no recollection of anything that happened in her life before meeting Strane and begins to work through the trauma that resulted from their relationship. To the reader, therapy appears to be the light at the end of the tunnel in Vanessa's journey. Despite there being a long way to go in terms of her healing, Vanessa senses that she has already begun to experience positive changes. Moreover, the death of Strane symbolises the disappearance of a looming shadow from her life, and she is relieved to know that she will never have to encounter him again (Russell 316).

To conclude, *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell examines complex themes of consent, memory, victimhood, and power dynamics through the lens of the #MeToo movement. It was heavily inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, which likewise deals with the topic of child sexual abuse. By employing a non-linear narrative, the novel exposes the devastating lifelong effects of child grooming and manipulation. Russell's portrayal of Vanessa's teenage mindset and the subsequent substance abuse of her adulthood as a means to cope with trauma provides a powerful insight into the emotional turmoil experienced by survivors of sexual abuse. Nabokov's *Lolita* is not only mentioned in *My Dark Vanessa*, but it is rather a constant entity present through intertextuality. As a plot device, *Lolita* is used to show Strane's intentions and is internalized by Vanessa, at times confusing her life with Dolores Haze's. The novel's exploration of topics of sexual abuse is particularly relevant in the context of the #MeToo movement, which has led to a change in attitudes towards the meaning of sexual consent, with a greater emphasis on the importance of respecting boundaries and acknowledging power dynamics in relationships. Its portrayal of the trauma that such experiences can cause is a poignant reminder of the devastating effects of sexual abuse on survivors and therefore is highly relevant to the present moment.

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