

Subjugating Female Voice in Nabokov's Lolita

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, often criticized for its controversial themes, offers a critical perspective on the ways in which patriarchal social norms perpetuate gender inequality and constrain women's agency. This qualitative study examines the concept of "manterruption", the practice of men interrupting or dominating women in discourse; through first-wave feminist literary criticism, it becomes clear that the work is expressing the unequal power relations between men and women that exist in the wider world. Focusing on Humbert Humbert's narrative dominance and his interactions with female characters, the analysis explores how patriarchal authority is constructed and sustained within the novel. Using secondary sources, the study investigates themes of female subjugation, objectification, and gendered communication patterns, situating the text within its social and cultural contexts. The findings reveal that *Lolita* reflects systemic oppression embedded in patriarchal structures while simultaneously exposing the mechanisms through which male authority marginalizes female voices. By foregrounding issues of power, discourse, and gender inequality, the study underscores the importance of challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for women's agency as represented in literary narratives. Thus, the novel is a manifestation of the unfulfilled desire of an adult man towards the girl for his personal pleasure, i. e., sexual object as in the first wave of feminism.

Keywords: male gaze, manipulate, manterruption, oppression, power dynamics

Silenced Voices: Interruption and Patriarchal Narrative in Lolita

Literature is studied for various tastes, and it affects its readers differently. It is always in the center of criticism in its readers' eyes. Literature serves as a mirror reflecting the social, cultural, and gender dynamics of its time.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) is a literary masterpiece often praised for its linguistic brilliance and controversial themes. The novel, presented as the memoir of Humbert Humbert, a European intellectual and pedophile, examines complex issues such as obsession, manipulation, and the objectification of women (McGladrey, 2024). The very first line of the novel, where the narrator describes her as "fire of my loins," is an objectification of women. This masterpiece engages with feminism requires examining the novel through a critical lens that focuses on how it portrays power, agency, and gender dynamics.

Humbert manipulates not only the events of the story but also the reader's perception of Dolores Haze, whom he dehumanizes as "Lolita" and reduces to an asexualized object. Dolores's voice, autonomy, and perspective are conspicuously absent, as Humbert's narrative interruptions overwrite her experiences and identity. This deliberate narrative choice by Nabokov raises questions about the power dynamics embedded within the text and serves as a chilling reflection of real-world patterns of male dominance in discourse and storytelling.

The phenomenon of "interruption", the term first used by Jessica Bennett in an article in 2015, a term popularized in feminist discourse, refers to the frequent interruption of women by men in conversations, often as a reflection of power dynamics and systemic patriarchy. While the term is commonly associated with contemporary gender studies, its implications can be traced across literature, where male narratives dominate and overshadow female voices. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is a striking example of the silencing of the female perspective, as the novel is entirely filtered through the controlling, self-serving lens of Humbert Humbert, the unreliable male narrator.

This article examines the concept of interruption in *Lolita* by analyzing the ways in which Humbert Humbert suppresses and reframes Dolores Haze's story to serve his desires. Through feminist and narratological frameworks, it explores how Humbert's self-justifying interruptions mirror societal mechanisms that marginalize and silence women's voices. By positioning Dolores as the focal point of analysis rather than Humbert, this study seeks to reclaim her lost narrative and challenge the patriarchal structures inherent in the text.

Humbert's domination over Lolita is central in his narrative, relegating her voice to the periphery. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of "manterruption," wherein male figures assert control over female narratives, reflecting systemic gender inequalities. In doing so, this article contributes to ongoing discussions about gender, voice, and power in literature, offering new insights into how Lolita exemplifies the broader phenomenon of manterruption in both fictional and real-world contexts.

Nabokov's *Lolita*, a controversial yet iconic novel, offers deep insights into the complexities of gendered power relations. While the text is often overshadowed by its themes of abuse and exploitation, this analysis aims to foreground the feminist dimensions embedded within the narrative. So that it helps novice scholars understand the novel through a new paradigm. Feminist literary criticism provides a framework to explore how patriarchal systems shed light on the systemic subjugation of women (Pratami et al., 2024). Feminists analyze *Lolita* by uncovering how patriarchal power structures influence character interactions and narrative control. This study aims to dissect these dynamics by examining Humbert's interruptions, which symbolize broader societal patterns of female silencing.

The novel's cultural and historical context mirrors and critiques the societal norms of the mid-20th century. By delving into Nabokov's portrayal of gender roles, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature reflects and perpetuates power dynamics. Nabokov intentionally implicates the reader by making Humbert's narrative captivating, forcing them to question their own complicity in excusing or ignoring abuse. Feminist readings suggest that *Lolita* exposes how easily society can overlook or glamorize the suffering of women and girls if it is presented through an artistic lens.

This study examines the social, cultural, and gender dimensions of feminism within Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, focusing on how the novel portrays patriarchal structures and their impact on women. Specifically, it investigates whether the text ultimately functions as a critique of female subjugation or, conversely, reinforces and perpetuates it.

Literature Review

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* has long been analyzed for its stylistic brilliance and the unreliable narration of its protagonist, Humbert Humbert. However, a significant shift in scholarship has occurred in recent decades. Moving beyond Humbert's self-justifying perspective, feminist critics have increasingly centered their analysis on Dolores Haze, reclaiming her narrative from the margins of his obsession.

Nabokov's *Lolita* is often critiqued as a representation of the male gaze in literature. Humbert Humbert's narrative voice objectifies Dolores Haze, reducing her to a "nymphet" (Nabokov, 1955, Chapter 29, part 1, p. 145) and stripping her of personhood. As Kumari's (2023) concept of the male gaze highlights, Humbert's descriptions frame Dolores as an object of desire rather than as an autonomous individual. The author discusses how Humbert's objectification of *Lolita* shows that he treats her as a possession rather than a person. Scholars like Kauffman (1992) have critiqued how *Lolita* reflects patriarchal power dynamics, showcasing the destructive effects of viewing women and girls through a hypersexualized lens.

In the same way, critics such as Pifer (2003) have examined the erasure of Dolores' voice in the narrative. Humbert's control over the story denies Dolores her agency, making her a symbol of feminist critique. This absence of her perspective has spurred feminist scholars to recover Dolores' voice, analyzing how her fragmented identity reflects the broader marginalization of women in patriarchal societies.

Azar Nafisi is well-known for her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which connects *Lolita* to themes of oppression, power, and freedom, particularly in the context of feminist resistance in Iran. Feminist re-readings of the text have sought to reframe Dolores Haze as a victim of systemic patriarchal oppression rather than a willing participant in Humbert's fantasies. Also, works like *Lolita Unclothed* by Sarah Weinman (2014) and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi (2003) explore how the novel's feminist interpretations challenge the reader to see beyond Humbert's manipulative narrative. This memoir explores the experience of teaching *Lolita* and other Western literature under an oppressive regime, highlighting the novel's themes of control and the silencing of voices.

A central focus of modern feminist analysis of *Lolita* is the ethical problem posed by its narrative voice. Critics examine how Humbert Humbert's eloquent and manipulative prose shapes and often distorts the reader's understanding of Dolores Haze, arguing that the novel's enduring power and discomfort arise from the necessity to actively dismantle his self-serving account. This critical stance directly challenges earlier, more provocative readings, such as Leslie Fiedler's infamous description of the plot as "the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl, a formulation that has been widely contested for inverting the novel's clear dynamics of predation and victimhood". (Fiedler, 1997, p. 31).

Finally, *Lolita* has been used as a case study for broader feminist discussions about power, agency, and consent. In Renold and Ringrose's (2015) article, the authors analyze

how the novel parallels real-world dynamics of sexualization and objectification, especially in media representations of young girls. This situates *Lolita* within larger feminist debates on the portrayal of women and girls in literature and culture.

Feminist literary criticism, as defined by Tyson (2006), focuses on uncovering power imbalances rooted in gender and how these are represented in literature. On the other hand, Scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter have emphasized the need to analyze texts for their portrayal of women's experiences and contributions to literature.

Failing to recognize this scientific view of *Lolita*, clearly represented in the novel, critics sometimes see *Lolita* exclusively from Humbert's perspective as an archetypal temptress, a modern-day femme fatale. (Yang, 2025)

The novel meticulously documents extreme power imbalances, with Humbert exerting psychological, emotional, and sexual control over Dolores. Contemporary feminist analyses emphasize how these intimate dynamics symbolize and critique broader societal structures that enable the subjugation and exploitation of women and girls, framing Humbert's predation not as an isolated deviance but as an extension of patriarchal norms (Pifer, 2021, p. 117).

Lolita has been a subject of diverse interpretations, from its critique of Western morality to its treatment of power and obsession. However, feminist readings have predominantly focused on how the novel illustrates patriarchal domination. As Madsen (2000) notes, patriarchy manifests in both overt and covert ways, often normalizing exploitation and silencing women's voices. This perspective forms the foundation of this article's analysis:

a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony [...] helping a callypygean slave child to climb a column of onyx [...] There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. (152)

Here, the "tiger pursuing a bird of paradise" and the "choking snake sheathing the flayed trunk of a shoat" suggest power imbalances and violence. These images could represent the predatory nature of patriarchal systems, where women (symbolized by the delicate "bird of paradise") are pursued, controlled, or consumed by dominant, aggressive forces (the tiger or snake). This aligns with feminist critiques of male dominance and the objectification of women.

Similarly, the mention of the "callypygean slave child" (Nabakov, 1955, Chapter 30, part 1, p. 152) introduces themes of exploitation, sexualization, and the disturbing intersection of power and desire. Feminist perspectives would critique this as an example of the male gaze, reducing women—especially young, vulnerable girls—to objects of sexual desire while simultaneously dehumanizing them (as indicated by the term "slave child").

Then, the "sultan"(Nabakov, 1955, Chapter 30, part 1, p. 152) is depicted as a figure of power, but his "great agony" while helping the slave child could suggest complicity in systems of oppression or the moral cost of exploitation. Feminist critiques often highlight how eroticized portrayals of the "other" (e.g., the sultan) reflect Western colonial and patriarchal fantasies, further dehumanizing women of non-Western cultures.

In part two, chapter 1, the passage ends with "poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday," juxtaposing the earlier violence and exploitation with serene, almost idyllic imagery. Feminists might interpret this as a critique of the facade of domestic harmony often upheld in patriarchal societies, where underlying systems of oppression remain hidden beneath a veneer of normalcy. A critique of patriarchy's intersection with power, violence, and the commodification of women, highlighting both the overt and subtle ways in which women and girls are subjugated within societal systems.

The themes regarding the male gaze and objectification in *Lolita* have been widely discussed in academic literature. Several scholarly works explore these concepts. This work examines how Humbert's objectification of Lolita impacts her identity, highlighting the detrimental effects of viewing women and girls as mere objects of desire. Lameiras-Fernández discusses how societal structures, including the male gaze, shape women's identities and perpetuate patriarchal power, often to their detriment.

Viewing women and girls as "mere objects of desire" perpetuates harm, both emotionally and socially. In *Lolita*'s case, this manifests as a loss of selfhood and a narrative dominated by Humbert's perspective, which denies her a voice or complexity. (Lameiras-Fernández, M., Rodríguez Castro, Y., & Martínez-Román, R. (2021).)

Humbert's obsession with Dolores is described in lush, poetic language, contrasting with the grim reality of her exploitation. This stylistic choice forces readers to confront how aesthetics can obscure abuse. *Lolita* showcases the male gaze in its most extreme form: Humbert reduces Dolores to a sexualized object, referring to her as a "nymphet" rather than acknowledging her as a person. The novel demonstrates the destructive consequences of viewing women and girls as objects of desire rather than autonomous

individuals. "Lolita Is in the Eye of the Beholder: Amplifying Preadolescent Girls' Voices in Conversations about Sexualization, Objectification, and Performativity" addresses the theoretical and methodological limitations of conflating sexualization with objectification in the context of preadolescent girls, using Lolita as a reference point. (Renold, 2015)

"Lolita has also been analyzed as a cultural critique of how young girls are sexualized and commoditized in Western culture. This interpretation positions the novel as a commentary on societal failings, even as it implicates readers in the uncomfortable act of voyeurism." (Liu, 2024)

These sources collectively discuss how Lolita exemplifies the male gaze and the objectification of female characters, aligning with the themes on new horizon.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs feminist literary criticism as its primary analytical framework. Using document analysis, the novel was read and re-read to identify themes related to gender, power, and societal norms. Key extracts illustrating feminist concerns, such as domination, women's rights, and cultural restrictions, were purposively sampled and analyzed from the Academia.

The primary source is Nabokov's Lolita, supplemented by scholarly critiques and feminist theoretical frameworks. Key concepts such as the male gaze, gendered communication, and female agency are analyzed to contextualize Humbert's narrative dominance and its implications.

Document analysis forms the backbone of this research. The study also integrates insights from feminist theorists, providing a comprehensive theoretical foundation. Scholarly articles, critical essays, and comparative studies on gender and literature further enrich the analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

Nabokov's Portrayal of Societal Norms

In Lolita, societal expectations reinforce the suppression of women's autonomy, reflecting the deeply ingrained gender inequalities of mid-20th-century Western culture. Through Humbert's treatment of Dolores, Nabokov critiques how patriarchal norms commodify and control women, reducing them to objects devoid of agency. Humbert's objectification of Lolita serves as a metaphor for the broader societal commodification of women, where their worth is often tied to their physical appearance and compliance with male desires. Dolores's lack of agency mirrors the traditional gender roles imposed on

women in patriarchal societies, where autonomy is systematically denied. For instance, cultural norms depicted in *Lolita* dictate that women conform to predefined roles, such as obedient daughters, devoted mothers, or alluring objects of desire. These expectations limit their ability to assert independence or challenge male authority.

Humbert's narrative amplifies this dynamic by framing Dolores's resistance as insignificant, portraying her emotions and choices as either trivial or manipulative. This mirrors real-world dynamics where women's voices are marginalized or dismissed.

Additionally, Dolores's constrained identity reflects how patriarchal societies normalize female subjugation. Her transformation into "Lolita" symbolizes the erasure of her individuality, as she becomes a construct shaped entirely by Humbert's desires and narrative control. Nabokov's portrayal serves as both a critique of these norms and a commentary on how societal structures perpetuate cycles of domination. By exposing these dynamics, *Lolita* invites readers to question the cultural and institutional mechanisms that sustain gender inequality.

Gender Inequality

The language used to describe *Lolita* underscores her subjugation. Humbert's narration reduces her to an object of desire, erasing her identity and voice. The assertion that language reflects and perpetuates gender hierarchies. (Lakoff, 1975) *Lolita*'s lack of narrative voice symbolizes the silencing of women in patriarchal discourse.

Patriarchal Power Dynamics

Humbert embodies patriarchal dominance, using his authority as an adult and stepfather to manipulate and control Dolores. This dynamic reflects real-world patterns of abuse, where societal structures enable male power and female subjugation. Humbert's self-justifications, such as blaming Dolores for "provoking" him, mirror victim-blaming rhetoric prevalent in patriarchal societies.

Leboeuf (2016), in his book "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," asserts that a woman is nurtured, not born, which resonates here, as Dolores's identity is shaped and controlled by the men around her. This manipulation underscores the systemic oppression faced by young girls and women.

The novel can be read as a critique of how men like Humbert rationalize their abusive behavior, a pattern that reflects real-world misogynistic narratives. Humbert frequently diminishes Dolores's agency by infantilizing her and framing her as a seductress, a tactic

used to shift blame onto victims of abuse. This manipulation highlights the systemic oppression faced by young girls and women.

Patriarchy in *Lolita* is not confined to Humbert alone but is embedded in the societal structures that enable his actions. The legal and cultural norms depicted in the novel allow men to exploit their power while vilifying women who deviate from societal expectations.

Mythological Symbols

Humbert imagines what kind of scene he could paint to express his ecstasy, again transforming the experience into myth. A tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shot, a sultan (134), etc., are the mythological references to intimidate Lolita for his purpose.

The Silencing of Dolores Haze

Dolores Haze, the central female figure, is denied her voice throughout the novel. Her inner thoughts and feelings are rarely expressed directly; instead, they are filtered through Humbert's self-serving narrative. Feminist analysis highlights that the novel reflects a broader societal trend of silencing women and girls, making their experiences secondary to male perspectives. Humbert describes Dolores's reactions to his abuse in ways that minimize her pain, framing her tears and resistance as "childish whims" rather than valid expressions of suffering. This erasure invites readers to question the power dynamics at play.

The Sentimental Portrayal of Abuse as a Societal Problem

Nabokov deliberately crafts a narrator whose charisma and intelligence seduce the reader into empathizing with him, only to reveal the full horror of his actions. Feminist scholars argue that this technique highlights how society often romanticizes or excuses male predatory behavior, a pattern still relevant in contemporary discussions about power and abuse. Humbert's self-justifications, such as blaming Dolores for "provoking" him, mirror real-world victim-blaming rhetoric. The novel exposes these justifications as morally bankrupt.

Feminist critics and authors have revisited *Lolita* to focus on Dolores as a victim rather than Humbert's "Lolita." This shift reframes the story as one about a girl trapped in a system of male dominance. These interpretations argue that Nabokov subtly critiques Humbert by showing the devastating impact of his actions on Dolores's life. Sarah Weinman's *The Real Lolita* examines the true story of Sally Horner, a young girl whose abduction inspired Nabokov. This context highlights the importance of centering the victim's perspective rather than glorifying the abuser.

Erasure of Lolita's Voice

Feminist scholars have noted how Lolita's own voice is largely absent from the narrative. Despite being the central figure, her thoughts, feelings, and perspective are overshadowed by Humbert's obsessive and controlling narration. This absence emphasizes the silencing of women and girls in patriarchal structures.

Feminist readings of *Lolita* have sought to reclaim Dolores as a victim rather than Humbert's "Lolita." By centering her perspective, these critiques challenge

interpretations that perpetuate victim-blaming. Weinman's *The Real Lolita* and Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* exemplify efforts to foreground Dolores's experiences and critique the societal structures that enable her exploitation.

From a postmodern feminist perspective, *Lolita* blurs the line between art and morality. It raises questions about whether literature should be judged through an ethical lens or appreciated for its aesthetic value. Feminist critics argue that Nabokov's stylistic brilliance risks overshadowing the violence and trauma central to Dolores's story.

Film Adaptations and the Male Gaze

Film adaptations of *Lolita* further highlight the influence of the male gaze. Directors such as Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997) visually frame Dolores in ways that emphasize her sexualization, reinforcing Humbert's narrative dominance. Feminist critiques of these adaptations argue that they perpetuate the objectification of Dolores rather than challenging it. Kubrick's adaptation, in particular, uses strategic

cinematography and costuming to depict Dolores in a manner that aligns with Humbert's predatory gaze. Similarly, Lyne's version amplifies Dolores's perceived desirability, obscuring her victimhood and reducing her to a figure of male fantasy.

These portrayals often fail to address the deeper feminist critique embedded within Nabokov's text, instead reinforcing patriarchal norms. By centering Humbert's

perspective visually and narratively, the adaptations risk normalizing or romanticizing his exploitation of Dolores. Feminist scholars argue that this underscores the persistent challenge of deconstructing the male gaze in visual storytelling, where women are often framed as objects of desire rather than autonomous individuals.

The Male Gaze and Objectification

The language used to describe Dolores underscores her subjugation. Humbert's narration reduces her to an object of desire, erasing her identity and voice. This aligns with Lakoff's (1975) assertion that language reflects and perpetuates gender hierarchies.

By referring to Dolores as a “nymphet,” Humbert creates a hypersexualized image that denies her humanity, turning her into a symbol of his desires rather than an autonomous individual. Such language not only silences Dolores but also reinforces patriarchal discourse, which prioritizes male perspectives and marginalizes women.

Lolita's lack of narrative voice symbolizes the broader silencing of women in patriarchal societies. Feminist scholars argue that this absence mirrors real-world dynamics where women's contributions, experiences, and autonomy are overshadowed by male-dominated narratives. Humbert's poetic and manipulative descriptions of Dolores invite readers to empathize with him, making it imperative to critique how language serves as a tool for both seduction and oppression. Nabokov's deliberate use of Humbert's unreliable narration forces readers to confront the power of language in shaping societal norms and gender hierarchies.

Conclusion

The novel underscores the denial of women's rights and agency reflecting broader societal trends that silence and commoditize women. By analyzing the novel through a feminist lens, this study finds the systemic oppression of women and the need to address patriarchal power structures. Nabokov's genius lies in exposing the mechanisms of male control while leaving room for readers to see through Humbert's lies.

Feminist interpretations of *Lolita* reclaim Dolores Haze's narrative, challenging patriarchal readings that romanticize her exploitation. This analysis contributes to ongoing discussions about gender, voice, and power in literature, emphasizing the importance of advocating for women's rights and autonomy in both fictional and real-world contexts. Lolita's experiences reflect broader societal trends where women are denied autonomy over their bodies and lives. Her struggle to assert her individuality highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchal oppression.

While *Lolita* remains a contentious text, its feminist critique offers valuable insights into the systemic oppression of women. The novel serves as both a reflection and a critique of societal norms, encouraging readers to question the structures that perpetuate gender inequality. By analyzing *Lolita* through a feminist lens, this study highlights the ongoing need to address patriarchal systems and advocate for gender equality in literature and society.

Lolita is not explicitly feminist, its themes and narrative structure invite a feminist reading that critiques patriarchal power, the objectification of women, and the silencing of female voices. Nabokov's genius lies in exposing the mechanisms of male control and

manipulation while leaving room for readers to see through Humbert's lies. By centering Dolores Haze's victimization and questioning societal complicity, feminist interpretations reveal *Lolita* as a profound commentary on gender inequality and abuse.

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