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Tanizaki's Naomi, Nabokov's Lolita, and Naomi's Lolita: Exoticism of a New Era

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ABSTRACT

Exoticism is a recurring motif in Japanese novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's *Naomi* or *Chijin no ai A Fool's Love* (1924), in Russian American writer Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), as well as in the Lolita subculture fashion today. The concept of Exoticism in this article refers to an act of seeking an ideal and otherized figure that is missing in the perceiver's reality. However, such an act is expressed in different forms in these three worlds, revealing their socio-historical contexts and gender relations. The Exoticism presented in *Naomi* and *Lolita* is manipulated through the male gaze and the protagonists' fascination with their otherized and objectified female partners. Meanwhile, the self-performative Exoticism in the Lolita fashion today is an act of resistance against the male gaze, demonstrating autonomous female agency with a wish to escape reality and remain in a romanticized, imagined childhood. The topics examined in this article are limited to 20th-century literatures and to contemporary subculture fashion. From a comparative analysis perspective, it is suggested that there is progress in gender and identity awareness today in the field of humanities.

KEYWORDS

Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, *Naomi*, *A Fool's Love*, Taisho Modernism, Popular Culture, Subculture, Fashion, Girlhood, The Male Gaze, Exoticism, Identity

Introduction

Lolita and Naomi, two exotic feminine names, both have three syllables that contain the vowels of *a*, *i*, and *o*. They are titles of the two notorious novels; *Naomi* by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (originally *Chijin no ai* 痴人の愛, *A Fool's Love*), and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. *Naomi* illustrates the mass culture in Taisho-period Japan (1912-1926), and *Lolita*, first published in 1955, made the name renowned and connotation enriched across multidisciplinary studies. Meanwhile, a subculture fashion called Lolita was born in early 21st-century Japan (fig. 1). The image of a Japanese girl named Naomi and a Westernized illusion of Lolita seems to overlap with each other, but the name Lolita connotes very differently in Japan and the West.

This paper explores cultural critiques in the two novels before examining the Lolita fashion. Exoticism, although expressed in particular forms and contexts, is a similar motif in *Naomi*, *Lolita*, as well as in Lolita fashion. The Exoticism presents a person's search for an ideal and outlandish figure that lacks in one's real life. Meanwhile, the Exoticism in Lolita fashion is different in that it is a self-performative act. It indicates the autonomous female agency emancipated from the male gaze. It is noteworthy that the moral debates related to Lolita in general are not the focus in this paper.



Fig. 1. (Left) A set of Lolita outfit in *Wa-Lolita* 和ロリータ “Japanese Lolita” style, which is a variant in Lolita fashion. *Wa-Lolita* features a fusion of Western and traditional Japanese designs and patterns, reminding of the Taisho modern fashion in Tanizaki’s *Naomi*. Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 2. (Right) A poster of a contemporary fashion exhibition that replicates kimono in Taisho-modern style as described in in Tanizaki’s oeuvre. “*Tanizaki Jun’ichiro bungaku no kimono wo miru* 谷崎潤一郎文学の着物を見る [Tanizaki Jun’ichiro’s. “Kimono.” Literature]” *Yayoi Museum & Takehisa Yumeji Museum*. http://www.yayoi-yumeji-museum.jp/yayoi/exhibition/past_detail.html?id=640. Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.

Tanizaki’s *Naomi* and Nabokov’s *Lolita*: When the Old Meets the New

The novel *Lolita* tells a tragic story in the mid-20th century of a middle-aged European immigrant: Humbert Humbert’s pathological love towards an American teenager Dolores Haze, who is nicknamed Lolita. Similar to *Lolita*, with an translated title coincidentally using the female character’s name, *Naomi* narrates a story in Taisho-period Japan (1912-1926) of a rural-

born white-collar worker Kawai Jōji's obsession with Naomi, the Westernized *moga* モガ (*modan gāru* モダンガール, "modern girl") in the populated and urbanizing Tokyo.

This section compares the two novels by examining authors' biographies and looking into the cultural aspects, conflicts, and gender relations depicted in the stories. Then, the analysis defines and demonstrates the Exoticism revealed through Tanizaki's *Naomi* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. The Exoticism in both works conveys an outsider's interest in possessing an ideal but unreachable figure who owns what the protagonist lacks, as the rural vagabond Jōji to the Taisho *moga* Naomi, and the European immigrant Humbert to the American teenager Lolita.

Synopses

Tanizaki's *Naomi* takes place in the Taisho period Japan, when popular Western culture flourished with cafés, restaurants, dancing halls, and new fashion for *moga* "modern girls" (see fig. 2 for a visualization of the Taisho fashion). Naomi is a typical *moga*, with "definitely something Western about her appearance" (Tanizaki 1), described by the protagonist Kawai Jōji. Jōji is a newly arrived white-collar worker to the city, enjoying the Westernization and urbanization of Tokyo. He encounters the fifteen-year-old Naomi at a café, and he is soon captivated by the beauty of the exotic, Western-looking Naomi. He hopes to further cultivate her into his ideal Western woman, just like Pygmalion in the Greek myth. Jōji provides Naomi a house, as he lives with her and pleases her with exquisite clothes and gourmet meals. Although Naomi later marries Jōji, she does not turn into a housewife, but continues her extravagant lifestyle. Eventually, Naomi deceives Jōji by having affairs with her peers and other Westerners. Though furious at Naomi's dishonesty, Jōji is still obsessed with her. To Jōji, Naomi appears to be a more westernized, deified figure. He gradually comes under Naomi's control, "The more I think of her as fickle and selfish, the more adorable she becomes, and the more deeply I am ensnared by her" (Tanizaki 125). *Naomi* is about a man's obsession with Westernization and modernization of the Taisho Japan. The protagonist Jōji projects his idealized West onto the modern girl Naomi, and he is eventually enslaved by Naomi's exotic "Eurasian" beauty.

A similar obsession and projection happen in Nabokov's *Lolita*. The novel is set in 1950s America. The intellectual Humbert Humbert is a new immigrant from Europe to America. He is attracted by girls between nine and fourteen, calling them "nymphets" (Nabokov 16). He meets the twelve-year-old Dolores, whom later he nicknames "Lolita." In order to approach Lolita,

Humbert marries her mother Charlotte, an American woman whom he dislikes for her poor imitation of European manners. Later, Charlotte senses Humbert's illicit passion for Lolita, but she soon dies in a car accident. Humbert picks up Lolita from her summer camp and lies to her that Charlotte is in the hospital. On the way to the hospital, they stop at a hotel where Humbert has a sexual affair with Lolita. Then, Humbert tells the truth and forces her to accept him as her only protector. The second part of the story starts with Humbert and Lolita's journey driving through the States and staying at motels at night. Later, they settle down at a town, and Humbert attempts to control Lolita's activities. Lolita quarrels with Humbert against his restraints. After another argument, Lolita decides to start another journey with Humbert, but she actually holds a secret plan to flee to her favorite celebrity Clare Quilty, who has been contacting Lolita behind Humbert's back. In the second journey, Lolita runs away from Humbert, as she and Quilty have planned. Humbert spends years looking for her. In the end, he finds the seventeen-year-old Lolita. Although now pregnant and living with a lower-class worker in poverty, Lolita refuses to go with Humbert. Her refusal aggravates him to look for the abductor Clare Quilty, who is in fact the evil antagonist, a typical pedophile. Quilty has taken advantage of Lolita by forcing her into pornography. Humbert finally takes revenge by shooting Quilty to death. It is a dramatic death, wrapping up the story with dark humor. The stories end is written in the fictional foreword of the novel, mentioning Humbert's death "in legal captivity of coronary thrombosis" (3) and Lolita's death "in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl" (4).

Jōji and Humbert both end in tragedy due to their wicked passion for their young lovers, Naomi and Lolita. Though portrayed as ignorant by the two unreliable narrators, the two heroines are both nimble in tricking their older lovers, as McCarthy summarizes in his article comparing the two novels (133). In spite of the similarities, the two stories take place in different social and historical settings. What attract the men in both stories are certainly their *femme fatales* or the "disastrous women", Naomi and Lolita. But further, these two girls serve as a metaphor of their culture, which is the Taisho modernism and the postwar America. The two girls are cultivated in a new era: fresh, fascinating, and exotic to the two older protagonists, Jōji and Humbert.

Furthermore, the two novels display different gender relations between the male and female protagonists in their social and historical settings. The older protagonists' doomed infatuation functions as a metaphor for a cultural conflict and transformation from an old era to a

new one. Jōji in *Naomi* is a rural-born exile that faces the Westernizing and modernizing Japan in the early 20th century; Humbert in *Lolita* is an upper-class immigrant from Europe, exposed to the young American culture in the postwar 1950s. Through these two unreliable, enchanted narrators, Tanizaki and Nabokov presented a rich illustration, marking a memorable arrival of a new age in their time.

Tanizaki and Nabokov: Biography of the Two Authors

Naomi was said to be a milestone of Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's early authorhood, while *Lolita* became one of the most renowned works by Vladimir Nabokov. The two novels both had impact on these two authors' careers. The two authors were attentive cultural observers, composing their works based on life experience.

Tanizaki lived in a time of cultural transformations when Japan was faced with Westernization and modernization. Similar to Jōji in *Naomi*, Tanizaki favored Western culture. He was an admirer of the prominent novelist Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), mentioned by Ito in his book on Tanizaki's career (42). Kafū studied abroad and became astounded by the West. An occurring subject in Kafū's work was Exoticism, which might be called Occidentalism in contrast to Orientalism in the West (Ito 42). Likewise, Tanizaki's early works before *Naomi* were also concerned with Occidentalism, but as a novelist who had never been to the West (McCarthy 132), his Exoticism was a distorted and blended one. "His knowledge of those continents was gained from extensive reading, and from those elements of contemporary Western culture that had been exported to and taken root in Japan" (132). Tanizaki perceived the Westernization of Japan as an inner process, and that "cultural aspiration involves obeisance and distant admiration as much as possession and participation" (Ito 63).

Such ideas were prominent in the Taisho-period popular culture (*taishū bunka* 大衆文化), which incorporated Western culture into Japanese mass culture that gave birth to the *mogas*, "modern girls". Tanizaki was a faithful supporter of the Taisho-period popular culture, and he had collaborated with movie producers in Tokyo during the Taisho period.

Just like Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Nabokov himself was an immigrant (precisely, an émigré) coming to the U.S. from Europe. Engaged in various aspects of the Western culture, Nabokov was a polyglot and became a lecturer in literature in universities in the U.S. The New

World, America, was once unfamiliar to Nabokov, but he immersed himself in this new land and soon started writing in English.

Nabokov made an effort to become an American writer when writing *Lolita*. In Nabokov's afterword of the novel, he states that he did "build a number of North American sets", researching about American culture and landscapes for the book (315). The highways and motels that became a symbol of the mid-50s America are prominent in *Lolita*, as Nabokov says, "I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy" (315).

Both authors used their experience to illustrate a cultural landscape in their fictions, including the cultural conflict that is presented through the transform of relationships between the male and female protagonists. Naomi and Lolita, who are cultivated by their time and society, become a personification of the culture exotic to their old lovers.

Illustrating the Culture in Naomi and Lolita

Although Nabokov in his essay has declared that "it is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author" (316), these works still present a facet of a culture and time in which their protagonists live. These cultural settings come from the authors' attentive observation of daily life, as Ito comments on Tanizaki's *Naomi*, "*Chijin no ai (Naomi)* exhibits a peculiar connectedness to a certain social reality, the low *bunka* (culture) of the Taisho period and its fascination with the 'West'. The novel rests upon an incisive understanding of popular culture, and it deserves to be read as the story not only of a personal obsession, but of a societal one" (Ito 78).

Naomi's Taisho Modernism

The character of Naomi suggests a strong Western impact and Jōji's fascination with the exotic "Eurasian girl". Naomi first appears as a *kyōkyū* 女給 ("waitress" or "hostess") in a café, which was new to the popular culture in the Taisho era. The novel presents many scenes and elements of Taisho modernism, such as an English lesson in which Naomi "practice[s] English conversation and reading with an American woman" (Tanizaki 9), Naomi's music class, and a social-dance club.

Moreover, Naomi's name itself has been exotic and irresistible to Jōji since the first time they met. He describes Naomi's name [奈緒美 in *kanji* Chinese characters] that "if written in Roman letters [ナオミ] ... could be a Western name" (Tanizaki 4). Jōji repetitively refers to Western actresses when he talks about Naomi. For instance, Mary Pickford is like an alias of Naomi that Jōji keeps bringing up and comparing with Naomi. Locations like movie theatres and Western-style restaurants also keep recurring as places where Jōji and Naomi go on a date. These places consist of a prevalent part of the Taisho culture of the early 20th century. Besides immersing Naomi and himself in the Westernizing and urbanizing Taisho-period Japan, Jōji makes an effort to shape Naomi into a Western woman when he signs her up for English and dance classes.

However, Naomi seems to lack talent in her learning. She socializes well and meets young Japanese and foreign men. As their relationship proceeds, Jōji gradually loses control over Naomi's self-Westernizing. She cheats on Jōji more frequently, yet Jōji, despite his early fury, appears to be rather pleased with it. He once stated:

The greatest weakness of Japanese women is that they lack confidence. As a result, they look timorous compared to Western women. For the modern beauty, an intelligent, quick-witted expression and attitude are more important than lovely features. If she lacks true confidence, simple vanity is enough: to think "I'm smart" or "I'm beautiful," makes a woman beautiful.... I maneuvered her toward ever greater confidence. (Tanizaki 51-52)

Jōji thinks in such way, and he is "willing to endure the humiliation", Toyama says in her essay that analyzes the relationship between Jōji and Naomi (130). It is because he believes that the deceitfulness ensures Naomi's Westernization that shapes her into a more attractive and exotic woman.

In addition to the Westernization in the Taisho mass culture, fashions of Taisho "modern girl" are also depicted through Naomi. She squanders Jōji's money on kimonos of fashionable patterns and accessories of elegant designs. Naomi's outfits are one of the highlights of the novel. She is dressed up in a "dark blue cashmere formal skirt over a silk kimono," with hair styled "in braids, tied with a ribbon," and "she never did her hair in Japanese style anymore" (Tanizaki 9). In a later part, Jōji gives another vivid description on Naomi's adorable fashion as a

Taisho modern girl when he viewed her photographs (which are a new trend entering the Taisho era as well):

... she appeared in a glittering satin kimono and jacket, with a narrow sash high on her torso and a ribbon for a neckpiece. Then followed all sorts of expressions and movements and imitations of movie actresses—Mary Pickford’s smile; Gloria Swason’s eyes; Pola Negri’s wrath; Bebe Daniels’ suave affectation. (Tanizaki 92)

Jōji does not forget to refer to the Western popular actresses. He is bewildered by Naomi, the Taisho modern girl in the new era. Surrounded by the arriving Western culture, Naomi is the very manifestation of an exotic existence to the rural-born Jōji, who longs for modernism and dreams about Westernization.

Lolita’s Postwar America

The story of *Lolita* takes place in postwar America, where Humbert from Europe encounters “Lolita” Dolores Haze in the new world. It is a continent unfamiliar and exotic to this sophisticated scholar, who becomes an equally exotic outsider to the U.S. However, unlike Jōji, Humbert is attracted by Lolita not because of the culture that raised her, but due to his illicit affair resulting from his failed childhood love. Nevertheless, through Humbert’s narrative, readers see an illustration of American teenage culture in the postwar era; and a portraiture of Lolita, who is an American teenager with “lovely, slangy speech, her casual-to-the-point-of-sloppiness dress, and her impudent, wayward manner” (McCarthy 138).

Lolita is a typical American teenage girl. She likes “sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth” (Nabokov 156), and she enjoys roller-skating with friends in her “blue jeans and white high shoes, as most of the other girls did” (Nabokov 169). Besides the teenage culture in America in the 1950s, street views and country roads are also present in the novel. On their journey across the country, Humbert and Lolita pass by motels, inns, gift shops and restaurants. They have been to numerous places of interest across the States, the depiction of which presents a magnificent American landscape. Moreover, the use of language in the novel suggests a cultural characteristic of the post-war America. McCarthy praises that “the interplay between Humbert’s European learned/pedantic, consciously aesthetic

language and the middle-brow-striving-after-high-culture town of Mrs. Charlotte Haze or the vividly vulgar slang of her daughter Lolita is one of the great charms in the novel” (134).

The Enchanted Pygmalions and the Exotic Nymphs: Conflicts and Relations

The two stories both start with men’s obsession with young girls, and they both end with tragic disillusion but when presented with dark humor, results from conflicts between the men’s unrealistic fascination and female protagonists’ transformation and resistance. Jōji’s plan of transforming Naomi into his exotic, Western goddess eventually gets out of his control; Lolita matures, finally escapes from Humbert, and the disillusioned Humbert finishes his revenge and leads to a tragic end.

Metaphor as Cultural Conflicts

The conflicts in the relations between the men and the young girls are metaphors of cultural conflicts. In *Naomi*, it is the conflict of a traditional Japan that is faced with modernity and the rapid Westernization in the Taisho period. In *Lolita*, the conflict is revealed through the old European Humbert’s disdain towards American mundanity that imitates Europe and generates its own teenage popular culture.

Jōji in *Naomi* was born in a rural area, but he receives training and works in Tokyo. He enjoys the modernizing life in the Taisho modern Japan and appreciates the Western-ness of almost everything including the “Eurasian” Naomi. However, the ideal exotic girl Naomi is also influenced by the materialism of the West, as he spends Jōji’s money excessively. Eventually, it falls out of this middle-aged man’s control. Naomi cheats on Jōji and dates with her peers and even Westerners as she finalizes her own Westernization.

In spite of his mania for the Western modernization, Jōji remains distant from the real West, as if the Exotic needs to be kept unreachable. When he encounters an actual Western woman, Madame Shlemskaya the Russian countess, he is thrilled and overwhelmed by her complete Western-ness, as the lady “fulfills all Jōji’s fantasies about the beauty, sexuality, power, and size of the white race” (Ito 87). Jōji is already engulfed when he first meets Madam Shlemskaya. He associates her odor with “unknown lands across the sea” and “exquisite, exotic flower gardens” (Tanizaki 69). And later, she is described as “sublime”, “elusive”, and

“dreamlike”, as if a goddess from an exotic land, far beyond reach (Tanizaki 99). Jōji only wants to “look at her quietly, from a distance, without touching her” (Tanizaki 99). He needs a distance between the Western lady and himself. Distance implies a kind of taboo that defines both beauty, eroticism, as well as exoticism (Ito 87-89). The Exoticism in *Madam Shlemskaya* urges him to access this “another world, separate from one’s own mundane reality” (Ito 89-90).

From Jōji’s point of view, facing the exotic, somewhat superior West, he seems to have an inferiority complex regarding his nation and culture. He admires the West, but he wishes to keep it at a distance. Consequently, the Japanese girl Naomi becomes a substitute for the authentic Western image, a Japanized West. Jōji becomes the “Japanese Pygmalion” who longs to transform Naomi into his idealized, exotic “Western Vamp” (Toyama). He does so by first naming Naomi—not her name *Naomi* 奈緒美 written in *kanji* Chinese character, but *Naomi* ナオミ in katakana—that represents imported, Japanized Western words. Yet, as Toyama observes, Naomi’s original name suggests her position as Jōji’s *femme fatale*:

The first character, “na” [奈], can indicate the question, “what?” The character for “o” [緒], “cord”, and “mi” [美], “beauty.” Could the *kanji* for the name “Naomi” have suggested the danger of beauty becoming a kind of strangling cord? Perhaps her given name written this way was too much of a prophetic warning for Jōji (129). Jōji projects his desire of Westernization and his fetish of Exoticism, which is the hope to escape from mundanity and inferiority, onto Naomi. In the end, Jōji does successfully transform Naomi into his exotic goddess. She turns into Jōji’s Westernized ideal, but the distance between the couple is elongated. There is a reversal in their relationship, in which Jōji is a masochist and obeys whatever Naomi commands. The more Naomi demands and betrays Jōji, the more he finds her charming and irresistible, because now Naomi has gained confidence like a Western woman, as Jōji has wished.

As in *Lolita*, the conservative European man, Humbert, gives a rather disdainful attitude towards the American culture. For instance, Humbert has implied his dislike towards the poor Charlotte Haze, the American woman who tries to imitate European etiquettes. He cynically mentions the premature “heterosexual experience” between Lolita and other American teens (Nabokov 133). Humbert is tired of superficial popular songs that Lolita likes, “all of them as similar to my ear as her various candies were to my palate” (Nabokov 156).

Throughout the story, the European elite Humbert maintains a feeling of superiority over this new land and the American culture. According to Ahlberg in his article on representations of

American girls in European literature in the 20th century, the conflict between the European man Humbert and the young American girl Lolita is like a metaphor that she “challenges her European ‘benefactor’ through her New World independence and expressivity,” and Lolita “becomes the embodiment of everything Europe does not, cannot, understand about America, her femininity a marker of the unattainable, the obscure and the attractive” (64).

Nonetheless, Humbert also adores the American girl Lolita, Dolores Haze, the girl onto whom he projects his idealized Nymphet. Just like the Japanese Pygmalion Jōji in *Naomi*, Humbert tries to pursue his Nymphet Lolita, hoping to shape her into an elegant, knowledgeable young lady by cultivating her through literature and signing her up for dance class. Again, similar to Jōji, Humbert pursues the girl-child Dolores as he objectifies her with the enchanting name Lolita, a three-syllable name which is the first and the last word in the novel.

But what Humbert chases after is not an actual girl. Instead, it is an illusion born of his childhood trauma; the prematurely dead Annabel Leigh, who is the “precursor” of Lolita and the prototype of Humbert’s Nymphet that never ages (Nabokov 9). Humbert hopes for an illusion that does not belong to reality. Apparently, Humbert fails as a lover and guardian. He does not realize that his step-daughter is not an idealized, outlandish Nymphet or the sculpture by Pygmalion. Lolita is not his object, but a teenager named Dolores and who shall have her own life and autonomy in control. Not until the last moment that Humbert acknowledges such a fact, though it is too late. The girl’s faded teenage years are impossible to be compensated.

The concept of distance that defines both beauty and taboo is present in *Naomi* and *Lolita*. The elimination of distance brings disillusion and tragic endings to the two men. In *Naomi*, Jōji’s contact with the Western woman Madame Shlemskaya intimidates him, as the actual West becomes too powerful and beautiful to approach beyond his fascination. In the end, his Westernized goddess Naomi induces a seeming power reversal in their relationship. In *Lolita*, after Humbert has possessed Lolita, the relationship changes; Lolita’s enigma fades away from Humbert, who gradually loses control of Lolita.

To the two men, Naomi and Lolita are the exotic nymphs from a new era that is once unfamiliar and distant. Both Jōji and Humbert are disillusioned by the new era and new environment, caused by their ill-fated affairs with their lovers and their hyper-confidence in what they could control as outsiders who came into a time and culture change.

The Male Dominance and Power Imbalance in Gender Relations

The two novels have similar themes about obsession with teenage girls, the unreachable distance, and the possession and disillusion of the *femme fatales* that act as a metaphor of an unfamiliar culture and time to the narrators. Moreover, the stories are narrated through patriarchal dominance and the male gaze. Jōji and Humbert are two unreliable narrators driven by their obsessions, with an imbalance of power involved. *Naomi* is a confession narrated by the protagonist based on his misperception; the novel sets itself as a didactic and voyeuristic story, and Jōji believes his readers “will find it instructive, too” (Tanizaki 4). Meanwhile, *Lolita* is also identified as “the Confession of a White Widowed Male” stated in the fictitious preface by Dr. John Ray, Jr. (Nabokov 3).

The acts of looking and possessing consist of the two stories. Jōji likes to take photographs for Naomi, keeping a journal entitled “Naomi Grows Up” (Tanizaki 175), just as Humbert does, as if the girls are powerless animals under surveillance. The male gaze possesses the girls. Jōji’s metaphorical cannibalism, refers to Naomi not only as “a maid”, “a bird”, or “a rare, precious doll”, but even food. Eating is an act of possession, as Ito articulates that “the only way one can be sure of anything is to possess it, and the ultimate form of possession is consumption” (100). It is coincidental to Humbert’s gorgeous yet grotesque and notorious exclamation about how he desires Lolita, “my only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (Nabokov 165). Humbert’s monstrous desire of objectifying, controlling, and possessing the powerless Lolita is poetically expressed by Nabokov.

Although it appears that both Naomi and Lolita have gained their autonomy in the end and escaped from the men’s restraint, the two girls are in a passive position, economically inferior to their partners. Jōji seems to be enslaved under Naomi’s Westernized beauty, but he still has economic control over Naomi. Because of Jōji’s financial support, Naomi is able to purchase fashionable clothes and accessories, go to theatres and restaurants, take expensive English and dance classes, and meet with foreigners.

Naomi was born in a lower-class family, with a potential destiny of ending up in a brothel. Her job as a hostess in a café in Tokyo offers her the opportunity to work “at a new occupation in a new recreation facility that participated in the Japanese “West,”” hence a hope

of upward mobility (Ito 81-82). The financial support from Jōji, who is a white-collar worker with stable income, will further ensure Naomi a secured life. Without Jōji's economic power, Naomi, who has quit her job after she meets Jōji, does not depend on anybody. She has to come back to Jōji, in spite of her betrayal in dating other young men. In one scene, Jōji discovers Naomi's deception, and he asks her to leave the house. Naomi begs, leaves, but then comes back again. Naomi could not enjoy her extravagant Taisho modern life without Jōji, just as the obsessed Jōji could not live on without his crafted Western goddess Naomi. Nevertheless, Jōji is the one who has the material control over her, whereas Naomi "never has much choice", as Slade points out in an article regarding the power relation between Jōji and Naomi (93). Naomi can only become the Westernized object shaped by Jōji the Pygmalion as he wishes. A power and economic disparity between their relationship is apparent.

The same relationship takes place in *Lolita*, which is a more unequal case. Lolita is a passive minority, unable to work or support herself. She could only be protected by Humbert, who is now her sole guardian. Humbert has complete patriarchal power control over Lolita, trying to "instruct" his step-daughter like a traditional European upper-class father. Lolita is inevitably a feminine, powerless character designed in representation of "the virgin land" of America (Ahlberg 65). She is hence the metaphorically vulnerable, feminine rendition of the new world—the progressive America in the postwar era, while Humbert is the dogmatic, patriarchal European lover who tries to govern her with prejudice and superiority. Such relation is structured to "compensate for the inadequacies (real and imagined) felt by many Europeans during and after the World Wars" (Ahlberg 68).

Both Humbert and Jōji are searching for their lack in their female victims. Humbert misses his youthful, immortal girl-child nymph, envious of the progressive new world of postwar America. Jōji is obsessed with young women with Western features, coveting the modernity in Japan brought by urbanization and Westernization. As a solution, the old European Humbert attempts to seek for the outlandish and immortal nymph in the youthful American Lolita. Meanwhile, the rural-born vagabond Jōji endeavors to shape the modern girl Naomi into his ideal, Japanized Western goddess. Through the relationships with their young lovers who belong to a different time and culture, Jōji and Humbert are searching for something exotic that is lacking in their mundane everyday life.

Exoticism in *Naomi* and *Lolita*

Naomi and *Lolita* are the vehicles of their partners' desire for compensation and possession. What Jōji and Humbert are lacking lies in the Exoticism they have found in the two girls. Yet, the connotations of Exoticism are slightly different in these two novels.

In Western literature, Exoticism is connected to Colonialism and Orientalism in late 19th-century Europe. An early philosophical discourse on Exoticism appeared in Victor Segalen's "Essay on Exoticism", based on colonialism theories. Kuehn, in her article "Exoticism in 19th-Century Literature", further discusses Exoticism. She explains that Exoticism is concerned with the perception and description of difference or "otherness". According to Kuehn, in 19th-century literature, Exoticism "was primarily understood through geographic remoteness and Europe's (scholarly and political) interests in foreign nations".

If Exoticism means the perception and description of difference, the Exoticism in *Naomi* comes from Jōji's fascination with the Western culture, as well as the Westernizing Tokyo in the Taisho period. Naomi, the *moga* and the *femme fatale*, is the manifestation of this Exoticism. Towards the end of the story, Jōji's shaping of such Western illusion is completed through turning Naomi into a Westernized figure that he could no longer approach with intimacy. The Exoticism is alluring to Jōji, with an unreachable distance that remains.

In *Lolita*, the Exoticism is illustrated from the protagonist Humbert's point of view, about his disinterest and remoteness from the American culture. The Exoticism is the uneasiness to Humbert the Outsider. The postwar, flourishing America in the mid-20th century would have been a refreshing land filled with hope and potential to European immigrants. Yet Humbert is not in favor of this young American culture. He does not like this land of difference and otherness that are also visible in Lolita, who is a child cultivated in the youthful American culture. He tries to "instruct" Lolita in his European manner as a way to compensate for what his culture might have lost in the postwar era—progression and youthfulness. Lolita is the "American femininity", perceived by Humbert as "dysfunctional, and culturally and intellectually immature", in order to ensure "the resurrection of a functioning and sophisticated Europe" (Ahlberg 68). Consequently, Humbert hopes to possess and transform Lolita into his everlasting Nymphet that transcends an ordinary girl-child. The Exoticism finally leads to disillusion for Humbert.

The two men acknowledge the alluring Exoticism in their young lovers, and they have tried to resolve the urge by possessing the girls. In both novels, such attempts turn out as

disillusions in black humor, and both novels feign themselves as voyeuristic memoirs with instructive advice for readers. At the same time, the stories reveal the Exoticism as a developing, progressing culture of a new era that brings the exotic girls to the men. Through Naomi the charming Taisho modern girl under Jōji's narration, Tanizaki presents readers with a fascinating view of the Taisho period in Japan. In *Lolita*, narrated by Humbert the enchanted hunter, Nabokov illustrates the leisure life and grandiose landscapes in the flourishing, postwar America.

The two novels, as satirical they are, do not intend to be any kind of moral lessons but pure fictions that present unique aspects of the culture and society of their time. It is with the two fascinating female protagonists, as well as the detailed cultural depictions in their works, that Tanizaki and Nabokov have marked the memorable arrival of a new era.

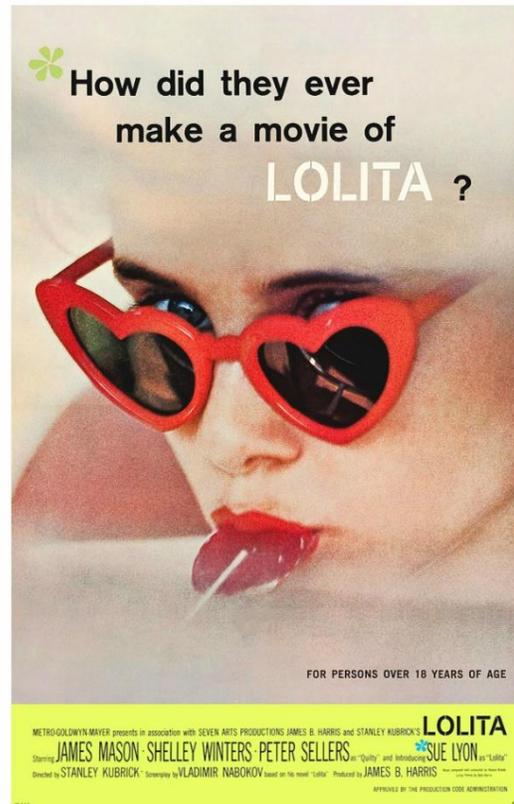
Naomi's Lolita: The Lolita Fashion in Japanese Visual Culture

The Spanish diminutive name "Lolita" became known through Nabokov's virtuosic masterpiece. Meanwhile, the name is accompanied with several controversies, not to mention stigmas, which resulted from countless misinterpretations and misusages associated with pedophilia. Yet, a few decades after the birth of *Lolita*, a subculture fashion also named Lolita was born in Japan. Now, what "Lolita" connotes in this Japanese fashion is quite different from the one interpreted by Western popular culture. This section will trace the interpretations of Lolita in the West and in Japan, and more specifically in the Lolita fashion today. The Lolita subculture fashion and its Exoticism will be examined in comparison to the Exoticism revealed in *Naomi* and *Lolita*. The Exoticism in Lolita fashion today is a self-performative, ritualistic act carried out by female audiences, indicating an autonomous agency to define one's identity that wishes to detach itself from the quotidian.

Connotations of Lolita in the West and in Japan; Stigmas: Lolita as a Western Vamp, Lolicon as a Pedophile

The connotation of Lolita in the West was provided with a historical setting of the mid-20th century, when social movements started to sprout; For example, the Sexual Liberation in the 1960s. Lolita as a seductive teenage girl was gradually formed through its movie adaptations (1962 and 1997) of Nabokov's 1955 *Lolita*. In these movies, Lolita is portrayed not as a girl-

child but as a sexually-maturing, manipulative teenager, “flirting with and kissing the buttoned-up Humbert”, as described by Hinton in an article that analyzes the different receptions of *Lolita* in Japan and the West (1585). The poster for the movie adaptation in 1962 even made the heart-shaped sunglasses and lollipop-sucking symbolic to *Lolita*, suggesting a sexy and seducing



teenage vamp (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. The 1962 movie adaptation of Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), directed by Stanley Kubrick. The heart-shaped sunglasses and lollipop-sucking became an iconic symbol defining *Lolita* in Western popular culture. *Lolita*, 1962, *IMDb*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056193/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2018.

Earlier in Simone de Beauvoir’s 1959 essay, “Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome”, Beauvoir further emphasized the image of *Lolita* as a half-matured, half-adolescent woman-child (instead of a “girl-child” in *Lolita* to suggest her sexual capability). As an advocate of sexual equality and autonomy, Beauvoir seemed to appreciate the attentive Nymphet traits seen in the French actress Brigitte Bardot. She is “interested in the disruptive power of Bardot as a combination of ‘femme fatale’ and ‘nymphette’” (qtd. in Hinton 1586).

Note that in the novel, it is the ill-minded Humbert who strongly believes Lolita to initiate seduction. Furthermore, the sexual awakening of schoolgirls is among a few cynical critiques by Humbert regarding American youth culture (the contraceptives that Lolita and her fellow girls take at the summer camp!). There were hints told by the unreliable narrator in the novel, and there were media distortions in movie adaptations and cover designs for the novel in association with popular culture since the 1960s. In such a context, Lolita is inexorably aligned with a lively, deteriorative, and seductive teenage vamp.

Later terms associated with Lolita seem to worsen the reputation: such as the Lolita Complex, or *rorikon/lolicon* in Japanese *otaku* subculture, which is related to anime, manga, and game fictions. Although Humbert's standard age of Nymphet ranges between 12 to 14, in the *lolicon* subgenre in erotic comics (*eromanga* in Japanese), the highly manga-stylized female characters are often portrayed as more child-like figures with obedience. Such depictions further suggest a desire of fulfilling one's fantasy of a sole control over an objectified subject. To the *otaku* readers, these fantasies are detached from reality, but serve as a means to escape from responsibilities in the adult world (Hinton). Nonetheless, viewed by the Western media, the *lolicon* subgenre is often considered to be a synonym of pedophile, associated with "transgressive male sexual imagery aligned to Humbert Humbert", although the image of Lolita has already been driven too far away from the original in Nabokov's artistic novel (qtd. in Hinton 1594).

Lolita as a Romanticized Shōjo

Such type of child-like character design has actually been prevalent in Japanese anime and manga industries as a stylistic choice, whereas the *lolicon* subgenre in *eromanga* only takes a minor part compared to the whole industry. The childlike style might appear to be infantile to the West, but it goes to the Japanese *kawaii* "cute" culture, which embodies a wider meaning of designs and elements that are soft, colorful, gentle, round, and cuddly (Hinton). The *kawaii* culture is particularly popular among *shōjo* 少女 "teen girls" (right about Lolita and Naomi's age range), as well as young women who now have to face the real world with stress and challenges. Consequently, the *kawaii* culture acts like "a vehicle for expressing a romanticized imaginary childhood that influenced toys, art, fashion", a solution to a nostalgia for the present and the past

(qtd. in Hinton 1592). The word *Shōjo* also becomes a romantic symbol filled with fantasy and wish of youthfulness, carefreeness, and elegance.

Furthermore, the Western stigma of the Lolita- or Naomi-type story of old man meeting young girl does not seem too controversial in Japan. The combination is more reminiscent of a story in *Tale of Genji*, which is an 11th-century classic by Murasaki Shikibu. One story included in the literature is about the protagonist Prince Genji's affair with Murasaki no Ue, who is taken to Genji's household as a child and trained to become Genji's ideal wife. A similar relation is apparent in *Naomi* between Naomi and Jōji, who fanatically wants to shape Naomi into his Western goddess. A term called *Hikarugenji Keikaku* (光源氏計画 “The Hikarugenji Plan”) is used to describe the “Naomi-Jōji” or “Murasaki no Ue-Genji” kind of relation, in which an older man raises up a girl with education and financial support to shape her into his ideal wife. With this mindset, Japanese audiences of *Lolita* would have seen a parallel between Humbert and Jōji, who are similar in that they both search for a nostalgic or ideal woman in their young lovers. In Humbert's case, the nostalgic ghost lies in his Nymphet and prematurely dead childhood lover Annabel. For Jōji, the ideal is born of his obsession and fetishism with the imagined West. This is a romanticized interpretation of a power-imbalanced relationship. Also, with such a mindset, the two men's failure becomes ironic.

The image of Lolita, combined with the *shōjo* and *kawaii* culture, is interpreted as a positive and romantic one in Japan. Rather than the teenage vamp image of Lolita in Western media, the Lolita interpreted in Japan “bears a closer resemblance to the Lolita in the book—a girl who wishes to enjoy her girlhood pleasures of celebrities, magazines, soda fountains, and tennis” (qtd. in Hinton 1598). The concept of Lolita in Japan is closer to a resisting attitude towards reality and mundanity, and it “positively represents the young *shōjo* dealing with, or attempting to escape from, an unpleasant adult world” (qtd. in 1598).

The Lolita Fashion: Lolita becomes a Naomi-like “Modern Girl”

The romantic reading of *Lolita* and the idea about searching for the ideal and resisting against the mundane would certainly be appealing to *shōjo* audiences today. The Lolita fashion manifested in this interpretation is presenting a romantic, dreamy, and juvenile style of clothes and accessories, particularly known for its Sweet Lolita, or *Ama-Loli* subcategory (fig. 4).

Meanwhile, as a fashion originating in Japan, Lolita fashion seems somewhat parallel with the

Taisho-modern fashion that it is a Japanized style of designs based on Western fashion. The *Wa-Lolita* (fig. 1) features a fusion of Western and traditional Japanese designs and patterns, reminding of Naomi's fancy kimono, Western-style dress, and funky accessories described in Tanizaki's *Naomi*.

Bernal did an attentive study of the Gothic and Lolita subculture in 2011, in which she defines the Lolita culture, or Gothic Lolita in general, as a Neo-Gothic subculture originating in Japan, with multiple variants. The Lolita subculture is a demonstration of “a reluctance to move into the uncertain adult world, a wish to escape reality, and a subconscious desire to remain in, or return to, the security of childhood”, and hence “symbolized in the impulse to dress as a child” (Bernal 51).



Fig. 4. (Left) A set of Lolita outfit in *Ama-loli* 甘ロリ “Sweet Lolita” style, which is a variant in Lolita fashion. (Right) Another set of the Sweet Lolita style that looks more quotidian without ruffle or petticoat under the dress. Sweets, fruits, and cakes are typical design elements for a Sweet Lolita dress, often with *Alice*/fairytale references and in pastel tone (Bernal 64). Photo courtesy of the author.

Lolita fashion “taps into the Japanese *shōjo* fantasy of an idyllic childhood” (qtd. in Hinton 1596). In contrast to the Western-vamp reading of Lolita, Lolita fashion displays

modesty, purity, and innocence of an idealized, carefree child, eliminating any sexually suggestive elements in design. Lolita dresses associate itself with dolls and children’s clothes in European Rococo and Victorian styles. The most representative design is the Classic Lolita (an example in fig. 5), which has “specific rules and regulations... in regard to authenticity” with “high neckline, a hemline no shorter than just below knee-length, layers and layers of petticoats, long sleeves and very long socks or full tights” (Bernal 55).

The Classic Lolita, as well as the Country Lolita (fig. 6), are much inspired by doll and children’s dresses seen in Victorian-style costumes (fig. 7) and storybooks. An example would be Alice’s dress in the popular story *Alice in Wonderland*. The story of Alice as well as Alice herself also has become a symbol of a *shōjo* and her fantasy world, “where such a childhood exists” (qtd. in Hinton 1596).



Fig. 5. (Left) A set of Classic Lolita outfit that makes the person appear to be a vintage Victorian doll or child in storybook. “The bodice should finish at the natural waist or just above it, exaggerating the impression of the Child’s physique, and the skirt of the dress will be full-circled or bell-shaped. A headdress is expected and may be in the form of a Victorian-style band, bonnet, or bow headband” (Bernal 55). Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 6. (Right) A set of Country Lolita outfit, such design is generally inspired by the countryside and Victorian farms, marked by floral pattern, frill, sometimes an apron, and with accessories such as a straw hat, as shown in the figure. Photo courtesy of the author.



Fig. 7. “Illustration depicting fashions throughout the 19th century” in “Victorian Fashion”.

Detail. *Wikimedia Commons*. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fashions.jpg>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.

To consumers of Lolita fashion today, the Lolita fashion is like the voguish outfits to the *mogas* like Naomi in the Taisho period. In particular, the Lolita style is neither traditionally Japanese nor authentically Western; rather, it is a Japanized West, an imagined Victorian childhood romance in an exotic land, keeping a distance from reality. This aspect is also resembles the Taisho modernism presented in *Naomi*. The adapted, synthesized, and distanced Exotic West makes the style more appealing, as Tanizaki at the time would have appraised. The Tanizaki-type relationship of the Taisho modernism is marked by the attempt to call into being culture itself and to possess an alternative world that satisfies fantasy, as Ito critiques regarding Tanizaki’s work that *Naomi* is “the story of a ‘West’ that can be manipulated, objectified, and even consumed” (100). Similarly, the Lolita fashion creates a different identity for its consumers and brings them into an outlandish, fantastical space, with a sense of non-everydayness that distinguishes from the real world. But now, the Exotic is driven by its female audiences.

The Resisting Lolita in Subculture Fashion: Exoticism of a New Era

As one of the earliest scholars to write about fashion, Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System* has offered an analysis of fashion regarding its linguistic structure. Fashion is a functional language, “a system of signs”, assigning an identity and signifying a social position of a person (qtd. in Frykhamn “Fashion Grammar: Making a Case for Re-reading Barthes”). In a sense, the Lolita fashion also becomes an identifier for a group of consumers. By providing a persona and presenting an idealized self, the Lolita dress compensates for what the user is lacking in the everyday life, guiding them into an alternative reality.

It is clear that there is also a type of Exoticism in Lolita fashion, similar to the Exoticism in *Naomi* and *Lolita* in which a seeker searches for the ideal and the eternal in something as a means to make up what he/she is missing and losing in reality. However, the Exoticism in Lolita fashion conveys a transformation in the agency. The *shōjo* and young women around Lolita and Naomi’s age range are the main consumer force. The Lolita fashion consumers perform the Exoticism out of their free will. This is in contrast to the passive subjects of Naomi and Lolita in the two novels that are narrated by the didactic and patriarchal men through the male gaze, who are like Pygmalion in hopes of transforming the girls into an idealized figure that meets their standards.

Lolita fashion becomes an agent for consumers in this subculture to resist against social norms and fight for their own identity in the mundane. Hinton describes how a Lolita fashion consumer would feel, ...in that space where a real girl puts on her Lolita clothes, she is able to take on the identity of an imaginary resourceful *shōjo* in her cosplay until she is required to make her inevitable return to the ordinary, responsible life dictated by her role in the culture (1597). But furthermore, most of the Lolita fashion consumers would not agree that Lolita is merely a costume or a kind of role play. In Bernal’s interviews with these consumers and many Lolita designers, a fashion designer states that Lolita is “never costume but his ‘day-to-day clothes’” (71). In my personal experience also as a Lolita fashion consumer, a Lolita friend once claimed that Lolita was her “daily combat suit” that she would put on to face the mundane everyday: “it is a lifestyle.” Lolita fashion is not merely about the pastel-toned, doll-like dress and accessories, but such fashion also requires one to put themselves into the persona of a Lolita *shōjo* with elegant etiquettes in a romantic, idealistic world detached from reality.

A person can identify themselves through fashion, specifically, by what a person wears and how a person looks in a particular time and space. The act of wearing is self-performative and ritualistic, for it delivers a visual message to convey meaning and describe oneself within a social and cultural norm. Likewise, the Lolita fashion, with the subculture it contains, has such power to alienate its user from the everyday outfit. It provides a temporary relief from reality that is overloaded with problems and stress. The self-performative act provides the Lolita fashion consumers with confidence and courage to enter a fantastical world and to become an imagined, eternal *shōjo* with a wish of staying young and carefree. In this way, the Exoticism in Lolita fashion today turns into an autonomous act of alienation to escape from mundanity and chase after eternity, conveying a timeless pursuit of beauty and vitality.

Conclusion

By examining Tanizaki's *Naomi*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, and the Lolita fashion today, we have built a connection among the three topics with the concept of Exoticism. The Exoticism of a new era is therefore explained in these three contexts. In similarity, the Exoticism stands for the interest in the ideal and outlandish, driving one to seek the unattainable figure that is missing in reality. The three topics are all provided with a transformation that occurs in culture and society. In *Naomi*, it is the rural bumpkin Jōji facing the Westernizing urban Japan in the 1920s in search of his Japanized Western goddess Naomi. In *Lolita*, it is the arrogant immigrant Humbert pursuing an illusion of his immortal Nymphet in Lolita, who is simply an American teenager cultivated in the progressing postwar popular culture. In Lolita fashion today, it is the young woman who are confronted with a stressful reality, resisting mundanity by putting up the Lolita *shōjo* persona to enter an imagined, dream-like Neverland.

Furthermore, through the literary analysis of *Naomi* and *Lolita*, it is clear that the relationship between male and female protagonists is a manipulative and power-imbalanced one. The two stories are told through dominating, patriarchal narrators who scrutinize their partners with an objectifying male gaze. However, the narrative that Lolita fashion has developed is much different. Lolita fashion is a romantic fantasy constructed by *shōjo* instead of men. Driven by female audiences, Lolita fashion becomes a self-performative act that indicates autonomy and identity.

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