

‘Politics of Fear’: An Analysis of the Effects of Divisive Political Propaganda in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America as Reflected in Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” (1958) and Nena’s “99 Red Balloons” (1985)

Naduni Dinesha Thebuwana

Abstract

Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” (1958) is a short story that baffled its readers when it was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1948 and continues to be an enigma to contemporary readers. The compact style and lack of plot and backstories are partially responsible for this enigma, which makes it a writerly text open to multiple interpretations. While the text has been interpreted from multiple perspectives for the past seventy years, its engagement with the ‘politics of fear’ in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America has been overlooked. ‘Politics of fear’ is a term coined by Wodak (2015) to investigate right-wing political discourses and strategies. This paper uses it as a critical perspective to analyse how the protagonist’s mental disorder, ‘referential mania,’ reflects nationalist and divisive right-wing political strategies used by populists in Germany and United States during World War II and the Cold War. It also compares this portrayal with the reflection of ‘politics of fear’ in “99 Red Balloons” (1985), a protest song produced by Nena in Cold-War Germany.

Keywords: 99 red balloons, cold-war, nazi Germany, Nena, politics of fear, signs and symbols

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" (1958), first published in *The New Yorker* as "Symbols and Signs" in Cold-War America in 1948, continues to baffle readers (Parker, 1995; Dolinin, 2012; Drescher, 2012; White, 2012; Richter, 2012; Azizi, 2019) by defying conclusiveness. The sparsity of detail and lack of closure, characteristic of Nabokov's writing, resist the determination of the textual signs and symbols that are trapped in a cycle of perpetual signification. Nabokov's (2012) comment on the short story: "a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent [sic] one" (p. 124) indicates his deliberate violation of unitariness and closure, which establishes the text as an experimental modern short story. Despite Nabokov's editor, Katherine White's (1947) attempts to control the signification of the signs as evident in her comment: "two differing interpretations show that you [Nabokov] have not quite put the story over, either as one thing or the other" (as cited in Leving, 2012, p. 50), the text's "writerliness" (Barthes, 1990), or openness to multiple interpretations, remains.

However, for a writerly text, its critical readership is constricted in perspective. While there is an abundance of semiotic and psychoanalytic readings, there is a dearth of political interpretations. The first approach is inspired by the "semiotic title" (Toker, 2012, p. 214) of the text and its temporal location at the apex of structuralism. The second approach is inspired by "referential mania" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 87), the mental disorder of the protagonist, which Nabokov subjects to mock-clinical scrutiny. Consequently, despite a limited number of studies exploring the references to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust (Drescher, 2012;

Martin, 2012; Leving, 2012; Toker, 2012), in the text, its reflection of the specific political strategy of “politics of fear” (Wodak, 2015) has not been investigated.

Similarly, the reflection of the Cold-War ‘politics of fear’ in “99 Red Balloons,” a German Rock song produced during the Iron Curtain in West Berlin in 1983 (Edwards, 2016) has also escaped critical scrutiny. While both its German and English versions have been interpreted as an anti-nuclear protest song (Tierney, 2007; Hill, 2018; Drake, 2019), the reflection of ‘politics of fear’ as divisive and nationalist political propaganda has not been studied. Therefore, this paper analyses the reflection of ‘politics of fear’ in “Signs and Symbols,” particularly referential mania, and the decision of the rulers to launch war in “99 Red Balloons” and argues that referential mania is not a congenital disorder, but a social construct. The protagonist is the ‘Other’ in Germany as a Jew, and in America, as a Russian. Thus, his racial and national identity that populists construct as the ‘Other,’ exploiting ‘politics of fear,’ constructs his insanity. This is supported by “99 Red Balloons” that also reflects the workings of ‘politics of fear’ in Germany during the Cold War. Hence, the comparison of “Signs and Symbols” and “99 Red Balloons” Both these texts depict ‘politics of fear’ as a divisive political strategy used in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America. As two texts published thirty-five years apart, they also capture the lasting effects of this political strategy.

Ruth Wodak, a linguist and a discourse analyst, coined the term ‘politics of fear’ to refer to nationalist and divisive political strategies that exploit the fear of the ‘Other’ as reflected in the Cold War and current right-wing political discourses. She argues that right-wing populists

or “mainstream [political] parties and movements” (Wodak, 2015, p. 13) that depict characteristics such as “a normalisation of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and antisemitic rhetoric,” work with fear. Wodak analyses this fear as a manifestation of the ‘us/them’ binary that characterises the nation-state, and argues that it is exploited to enforce divisive policies such as those enforced during the Cold War. For example, McCarthyism, a manifestation of an extreme form of ‘The Red Scare’ or fear of socialism, was initially portrayed as a nationalist effort to detect treason (Achter, 2022). It is often dubbed “national hysteria” (Murray, 1955; Dunst, 2017; American Experience, n.d; Ovesny, 2021) as it oppressed both communists and non-communists.

Wodak (2015) emphasises that ‘politics of fear’ is still used by right-wing populists to instil a sense of fear of another country/group being a “threat” (p. 6) to the nation state:

all right-wing populist parties instrumentalize some kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority as a scapegoat for most if not all current woes and subsequently construe the respective group as dangerous and a threat ‘to us’, to ‘our’ nation; this phenomenon manifests itself as a ‘politics of fear’ (p. 23).

Thus, ‘politics of fear’ is analogous to a socially and politically induced fear of the ‘Other,’ which can be a minority group within the nation-state or an ethnic or religious group outside of it. The confluence of the nation-state and ‘politics of fear’ is nowhere more apparent than in the two world wars where the participant countries strived to defeat the ‘Other’ or the enemy state and establish its superiority, which is also reflected in the Cold War that utilised subtler forms such as espionage for the same intention.

The ‘Other’ is a Lacanian psychoanalytic concept that has been adopted and adapted by feminists and cultural theorists to conceptualise identity. For example, conceptualising the woman as the ‘Other’ (de Beauvoir, 2012), feminine language as the ‘Other’ of the Symbolic Order (Kristeva, 1984), and more recently, black identity as the ‘Other’ (Hall, 2018). Lacan (1997) conceptualises the Real or the unconscious as the ‘Other’ of the self (pp. 37-38). However, in cultural theory, the ‘Other’ is often perceived as the ‘other’ of the norm in the norm/other binary. For example, ghettoising black immigrants in the United Kingdom depicts how the racial identity of the black minority was constructed as the ‘Other’ to the white majority (Hall, 2018, p. 107). The protagonist is the ‘Other’ in Germany as a Jew and in America as a Russian, which indicates how ‘politics of fear,’ which is reproduced in the institution of psychiatry, categorises him as mentally-ill and segregates him from the allegedly ‘normal’ members of society.

‘Politics of fear’ is not limited to Cold-War policies as it is reflected in contemporary policies such as the USA Patriot Acts of 2001 and 2006 (Thorne & Kouzmin, 2010). While the study of Thorne and Kouzmin predates Wodak’s (2015) theory, their arguments regarding ‘politics of fear’ reinforces those of Wodak. They emphasise that ‘politics of fear’ enables the simulation of a “democratic crisis” (Thorne & Kouzmin, 2010, p. 899) and the enforcement of policies that conceal America’s hidden agenda of maintaining its dominance as a global superpower. This affirms Wodak’s (2015) claims regarding the portrayal of a minority as the enemy of the nation-state. Kundnani (2004)’s analysis of Cold War politics also concurs that it reflects “fear of the unknown” (p. 118), which is explicit in the former US Defense Secretary, Rumsfeld’s (2002) definition of the enemy: “the unknown,

the uncertain, the unseen, and the unexpected” (as cited in Kundnani, 2004, p. 118).

‘Politics of fear’ is also conspicuous in the post-9/11 national address by George W. Bush (2001): “Today, *our* fellow citizens, *our* way of life, *our* very freedom came under attack [...]. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten *our* nation into chaos and retreat. But *they* have failed; *our* country is strong” [my emphasis]. It exploits the us/them binary and proleptically justifies “Operation Infinite Justice” (Becker, 2001) (later renamed “Operation Enduring Freedom” due to Islamic connotations) or America’s wars against the rest of the world, particularly the Middle East. In the above quote, the word ‘our’ is repeated five times, highlighting the workings of us/them and fear of the ‘Other’ in ‘politics of fear.’ In addition, Bush, as a right-wing populist, appeals to ethno-nationalist sentiments through “our nation” and “our country,” thereby differentiating Americans from the rest of the world. Had he used a more multicultural approach, his speech would have been less dichotomous and more inclusive. Wodak (2015) emphasises that multiculturalism is perceived as a threat by right-wing populists as it is at variance with the divisive, exclusionary, and xenophobic (pp. 23-25) leanings of ‘politics of fear.’

Using Wodak’s (2015) theory as a critical lens to analyse “Signs and Symbols” and “99 Red Balloons” provides a broader perspective on the workings of Nazi and Cold War politics, current populist propaganda, and the resultant crises such as warfare, xenophobia, and racism, which affect many countries in the world. I will examine ‘politics of fear’ and its effects on the individual, society, and nature as reflected in “Signs and Symbols” and “99 Red Balloons” and how they resonate with the current political crisis in Ukraine.

Literature Review

This chapter reviews the existing scholarship on “Signs and Symbols” and “99 Red Balloons.” The critical scholarship on Nabokov’s text can be classified into two main categories: semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretations. The semiotic approach mainly focuses on textual signs, particularly the mystic telephone call (Nabokov, 1958, p. 94), with which the story ends. One of the common strands of semiotic interpretation is the assumption that Nabokov has deliberately placed signs/references for the reader to decipher what happens at the end (Parker, 1995; Dolinin, 2012; Drescher, 2012; White, 2012; Richter, 2012; Azizi, 2019). The main focus of psychoanalytic readings is the mental disorder Nabokov calls “referential mania” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 87), from which the protagonist allegedly suffers. It has been interpreted as a form of paranoia (Goodman, n.d. as cited in Leving, 2012; Wood, 2012) and a jab at Freud (White, 2012; Jöttkandt, 2020). However, both semiotic and psychoanalytic perspectives are solipsistic and metafictional, as they turn inward into the text without reaching its socio-political context. Consequently, its reflection of Nazi and Cold War political propaganda has been overlooked.

However, Toker (2012), Drescher (2012), and Stadlen (n.d., as cited in Drescher, 2012) locate the text in its socio-historical context and explore the possible Jewish ethnic identity of the main characters. Out of these studies, Drescher’s study is the only one that locates the “Revolution” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 90) on a specific date. This date is significant as it helps locate the origins of the protagonist’s mental disorder in a specific socio-political context and identify its causes. Drescher argues that the revolution is the 1917 revolution (p. 86).

However, the location of the revolution in 1917 is problematic as it makes the protagonist at least forty years old, which hardly fits his description as “a young man” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 85) and a “boy” (p. 86). Therefore, this paper argues that the revolution Nabokov refers to is the 1933 National Soviet Revolution of the Third Reich that saw Hitler becoming the chancellor (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022) of Germany. This locates the protagonist’s age between twenty and thirty, which is more fitting to his description. It also connects the narrative to the Jewish pogrom and implies that the protagonist and his family left Europe (Nabokov, 1958, p. 90) to evade execution.

As solipsistic analyses, most of the semiotic interpretations focus on textual signs and symbols such as “photographs” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 90), “cards” (p. 89), “the telephone” (p. 92), and the labels of jelly jars. These are interpreted as hidden signs that signify the last call as a message from the sanatorium regarding the protagonist’s suicide (Parker, 1995; Dolinin, 2012; Dole, 2012). Semiotic interpretations analyse the text’s elusive nature as an outcome of the signs and symbols. For example, the text is interpreted as a bait that catches the reader and plunges them into a form of referential mania (Parker, 1995; Dolinin, 2012; Drescher, 2012; White, 2012). The reader becomes the victim of referential mania if they over-analyze the textual signs and symbols. In White’s (2012) words, Nabokov would be entertained by the thought of “a bunch of educated individuals” (p. 35) overreading his diagnosis of “referential mania” and succumbing to a similar mania.

However, Toker’s (2012) semiotic analysis deviates from the two popular trajectories and explores the possible Jewish identity of the three main characters. Toker is the “first” (Leving, 2012, p. 165)

critic to approach the text as a narrative about the Jewish plight. She contends that “Isaac” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 86), the Jewish name of the protagonist’s uncle, and Aunt Rosa’s assassination by “the Germans” (p. 90) are indicators of the Jewish ancestry of the central characters. She also interprets referential mania as a reflection of the “Jewish experience in Europe at the time of the Holocaust” (Toker, 2012, p. 196). Thus, she identifies the text’s socio-historical location as Nazi Germany and the significance of 1947, an important finding reinforced by Stadlen (n.d., as cited in Drescher, 2012) and Drescher (2012).

Stadlen (n.d.) analyses the section divisions of the short story (original version) and argues that the number of paragraphs in each section corresponds to “19-4-7” (as cited in Drescher, 2012, p. 84) or 1947. Drescher (2012) cites Nabokov’s act of restoring the text to its original section divisions, which were altered by White, as a reflection of the significance of this date. He further adduces this claim by citing Nabokov’s insertion of this date in “Pnin’s Day” (p. 85). He interprets it as Nabokov’s effort at prodding readers to locate the text in 1947. In contrast to earlier semiotic analyses, Drescher (2012) analyses the labels of the jelly jars as indicators of the narrative location in Nazi Germany. Thus, he associates them with German place names. For example, “plum” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 94) is associated with “*Pflaume*” (Drescher, 2012, p. 92) and “*Pflaumenbaum*,” which respectively mean the “*flame*” and “*burning tree*.” He associates “beech” in “beech plum,” a deliberately misspelt word, with “*Buchen*, beech trees,” or “*Buchenwald*,” a German city where a concentration camp was situated. Thus, Toker and Drescher locate the text in Nazi Germany, but they fail to identify the political propaganda it reflects through referential mania.

Stadlen (n.d., as cited in Leving, 2012) also explores the Jewish ethnic identity of the main characters. However, his focus is on interpreting the ambiguous ending of the story: the last telephone call. He argues that the caller has to dial the number six three times to reach the tenement flat of the protagonist's parents. He interprets "666" (as cited in Leving, 2012, p. 166) as a Jewish symbol: " $6 + 6 + 6 = 18 = Chaim$," which means life in Hebrew. Thus, he counters former semiotic analyses that interpret the last call as a message regarding the protagonist's death. However, Stadlen also fails to identify the textual references to 'politics of fear' in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America.

The other dominant critical perspective used to interpret "Signs and Symbols" is psychoanalysis. This could have been inspired by the author's claim that referential mania is the name he is giving an existing "special form of persecution mania" (Nabokov, 1947, as cited in Leving, 2012, p. 28). This implies that either Nabokov attempted to reflect a real mental disorder or that he was ironic in his communication with Katherine White. The latter makes his claim unreliable.

The psychoanalysis by Jöttkandt (2020, as cited in Rabaté, 2020) also assumes that Nabokov was being ironic. Thus, he interprets the text as a jab at Freud. Jöttkandt argues that Nabokov's literary work, particularly *Lolita* (1955), is deliberately anti-Freud. For example, textual signs, such as jelly jars and the telephone, parody Freud's "dream symbols" (Jöttkandt, 2020, p. 181): the fruits refer to breasts, which does not constitute any palimpsestic/underlying meanings.

In contrast, Goodman (n.d. as cited in Leving, 2012) analyses referential mania as a mental disorder analogous to schizophrenia. He focuses on

the textual references to symptoms of paranoia and suicidal tendencies (p. 27) and argues that the disorder overlaps with schizophrenia. Another analyst who assumes the possible psychological accuracy of Nabokov's diagnosis is Wood (2012). He analyses referential mania as a form of paranoia (p. 77). His analysis also considers the world external to referential mania and contends that the protagonist and his parents are trapped in the "ordered but unsympathetic" (p. 80) world, which implies their 'Otherness.'

Wood (2012) interprets the three telephone calls as 'Otherness' "speaking" (p. 78) and the juncture where the referential mania joins the real. He goes on to challenge the sanity/insanity binary and argues that referential mania could be "hereditary" (p. 79) in the generation reflected in the text as it explains the "so-called accidents" (p. 79) that kill the "tenderness" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 91) in the world. Thus, Wood treats referential mania as an epistemology that explains seemingly irrational and unjust phenomena in the world.

Goodman's (n.d.) study also explores referential mania's link to the real world. He associates the term, 'referential mania' with two terms in current use: "ideas of reference" and "delusions of reference" (as cited in Leving, 2012, p. 28). Ideas of reference are misconstruing harmless comments as criticism. Delusions of reference allude to "flagrantly false and persistent conspiracy theories." The latter resonates with 'politics of fear' as right-wing populists who exploit it construct/manipulate conspiracy theories to instil a fear of the 'Other' and an alleged urgency to protect the nation-state. However, neither of the analyses by Wood and Goodman links referential mania to the political propaganda of Nazi Germany and Cold War America.

Another critic to connect referential mania to the real world is Grishakova (2006). She compares it with Uexküll's "umwelten" (p. 138) theory, which emphasises that the mind and the world are inseparable. This affirms Wood's argument that referential mania is the juncture where insanity meets the real. Grishakova emphasises that the protagonist's feelings are laid "transparent" and that his "subjective-self-world" is expanded to the "limits of the physical world." This affirms Toker's (2012) claim that referential mania is a reflection of the times in which the protagonist lives.

While the selected semiotic and psychoanalytic readings have discovered the larger socio-political context of the text and analysed referential mania as a mental disorder that reflects/connects with the real world, they have failed to discover the 'politics of fear' reflected in it. In addition, the semiotic analyses delimit the text to a solipsistic word puzzle. Thus, a more overtly political approach is required to investigate how the text reflects 'politics of fear' as a strategy used in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America.

In contrast to *Signs and Symbols*, the critical scholarship on "99 Red Balloons" is more limited and constricted in perspective. The dearth of studies is probably due to its rock genre, which did not warrant scholarly inquiry until the latter part of the 1960s (Astor, 2010, p. 143). Consequently, it has only been analysed as an anti-nuclear protest song (Tierney, 2007; Edwards, 2016; Hill, 2018; Drake, 2019). Thus, its reflection of 'politics of fear' as a cold-war political strategy has been overlooked.

The interpretation of "99 Red Balloons" as an anti-nuclear song reflects the influence of the apprehension of nuclear war that marked

the Cold War era when it was published. Hence, it is “the ultimate 80s Cold War jam” (Partridge, 2016). Its reflection of Cold-War society is evident in the English translation and the original German lyrics that engage with the fear of the ‘Other,’ which causes the nuclear war that destroys the world (Nena, 1985/n.d., lines 36–37). Despite this overt connection, the influence of Cold-War politics on the lyrics, other than the fear of a potential nuclear war, has not been explored.

Nena (2016 as cited in Partridge, 2016), the lead singer and leader of the band ‘Nena,’ argues that the song concerns general situations that lead to misunderstandings that culminate in destruction. However, the lyrics signify more political and militarist connotations. For example, both the German and English versions refer to weapons used in war: “super high-tech jet fighters” (Nena, 1985/n.d., line 26); “Streichholz und Benzinkanister” (Nena, 1983/n.d., line 26), which highlights the destruction reflected in the song as the result of war and not the result of mundane misunderstandings.

Hill’s (2018) argument that the song addresses the “specific issue of nuclear war” (p. 23) also underscores the political nature of the conflict between the two countries (Nena, 1985/n.d., line 12) reflected in the song. Hill (2018) emphasises that the song makes a “political statement” which enabled it to become a “‘protest-light,’ pre-dating the ‘Like’ of Facebook” (p. 148). Hill’s comment underscores the song’s global status as an anti-nuclear political statement. Further, Tierney (2007) underscores its strengths as a song on “nuclear deterrence” (p. 1).

Drake (2019) also interprets “99 Red Balloons” as an anti-nuclear/war song, but emphasises that the fear of war is “imagined.”

He cites the references to balloons imagining themselves to be Captain Kirk and “99 Düsenflieger” (Nena, 1983/n.d., line 17) or ninety-nine fictitious jet fighters as indicators of an imagined fear. Despite undermining the power of the song by highlighting the imaginary nature of fear, this analysis focuses on rhetorical devices that underscore “the absurdity” of war, such as the juxtaposition of the benign balloons with the “violence” caused by misconstruing them. He also interprets the song’s portrayal of politicians who “advocate” war as “small-minded” and “irrational” as a deconstruction of the ethos of war. Further, the song deconstructs the logos and pathos of war by highlighting it as harmful. This study also underscores its portrayal of miscommunication and hastiness as “cause[s] of war,” which can be prevented with empathy and patience. However, interpreting the song as an anti-nuclear protest song is a limiting approach because it fails to address other political motifs, such as the ‘politics of fear’ reflected in it.

Thus, the critical readership of both texts fails to investigate the ‘politics of fear’ that populists exploited to evoke fear of the ‘Other,’ such as anti-semitism and the Red Scare. Therefore, this paper investigates their engagement with ‘politics of fear’ in Nazi Germany, Cold-War Germany, and Cold-War America.

Analysis and Discussion

Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” and Nena’s “99 Red Balloons” reflect ‘politics of fear’ as a form of paranoia characterised by the fear of the ‘Other.’ The ‘Other’ in Nabokov’s text is the protagonist and his family since they belong to the Russian émigré community in America. The Russian national identity of the protagonist is evident in the references

to his parents' first language (Nabokov, 1958, p. 89) and his father's favourite "collar" (p. 91). In the song, the 'Other' is West Germany from the perspective of East Germany and vice versa. East Germany was segregated from West Germany during the Iron Curtain when the song was produced. It was a satellite state of the Soviet Union, while West Germany was divided among the Allied States: England, France, and the United States. The suspicious treatment (Nena, 1985/n.d., line 12) of the balloons: "There's something here from somewhere else!" and the launching of war to fight them indicates the fear of the 'Other' characteristic of this political segregation.

The origin of the song also reflects the fear of the 'Other' (West Germany) in the Soviet Union that ruled East Germany. Karges, the songwriter and the guitarist of Nena, who was performing in a concert with Rolling Stones in West Berlin in 1982, witnessed "thousands of helium balloons, the wind blew [...] toward East Berlin, and [...] speculated about what could happen as a result (Edwards, 2016). The song emphasises that even nuclear war is possible due to the fear of the balloons that is a symbol for the 'Other.' Thus, 'politics of fear' is a strategy both the Allies and Axis camps exploited to justify divisive policies by portraying them as measures taken to protect the nation-state.

The referential mania from which the protagonist allegedly suffers reflects how 'politics of fear' was used in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America. The text implies that the protagonist spent his childhood in Nazi Germany as a Jew. For example, having a "German maid" (p. 90) and the names of the German cities: "[...] Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig again [...]" indicate that he spent his childhood

in Germany. Since these cities were the loci of political unrest, the “Revolution” could be the 1933 National Socialist Revolution or the Third Reich, which enabled Hitler to become the chancellor of Germany (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). The reference to the assassination of Aunt Rosa by “the Germans” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 90) emphasises the Jewish ancestry of the protagonist. Nabokov’s (n.d.) reference to his parents as “the old Jewish couple” (as cited in Wood, 2012, p. 76) in his personal correspondence also depicts that he intended the central characters of the short story to be Jews. Irrespective of his race, it is inevitable that the protagonist’s childhood is affected by the ‘politics of fear’ practised by the Germans. Thus, the reference to the Third Reich interconnects his life history and the history of his mental disorder with Hitler’s ethno-nationalism.

Hitler’s ethno-nationalism exploited ‘politics of fear’ to justify the pogrom of Jews (Hitler, 1925/n.d.). This is reflected in his policies that discriminated against Jews by constructing them as the ‘Other’ or the enemy of Aryan Germans, which validated their genocide. Thus, migration to America, which enables the central characters to evade execution, is propelled by the anti-semitic and divisive political climate of Germany. Therefore, the mental disorder, which manifests during the protagonist’s formative years spent in Germany and America, where he experiences ‘Otherness’ as well as how ‘Otherness’ is persecuted, can be interpreted as a socio-political construct. In Toker’s (2012) words: “[t]he specific mental malady [of the protagonist] is a morbidly condensed expression of the Jewish experience in Europe at the time of the Holocaust” (p. 211). Toker’s observation highlights that referential mania is not a congenital disease but a socio-political construct.

The protagonist's growing strangeness and irrational fear becomes apparent by the time his family leaves Europe:

He again, aged about eight, already difficult to understand, afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe. (Nabokov, 1958, p. 90)

The above excerpt captures how the profound sense of 'Otherness' the protagonist experiences as a Jew in Germany causes referential mania. Nabokov's predecessor, Kierkegaard (n.d; as cited in Toker, 2012), also treated insanity as "a transparent medium for seeing the confusion of [a given] age" (p. 211). Thus, the protagonist's traumatic childhood in Germany and being the 'Other' in America as a Russian émigré indicate the constructed-ness of referential mania.

Immigration to America scarcely improves the protagonist's psychological condition due to "[...] the shame, the pity, the humiliating difficulties of the journey [...]" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 90) that further traumatise him. Therefore, his irrational fear can be interpreted as an exaggerated version of the fear of potential harm to his life and the emotional strain caused by his 'Otherness' in Nazi Germany and Cold-War America. Hence, divisive policies such as Nazism and McCarthyism, which instilled an irrational fear of the 'Other,' are responsible for his mental illness. As Parker (1995) argues, "Signs and Symbols" is "a story bemoaning the waste of [tenderness]" (p. 111). Nabokov symbolises the waste of tenderness in the avian imagery of the "half-dead unfledged bird" (Nobokov, 1958, p. 87), which

reflects the helplessness of the protagonist, who tries to “fly” (p. 93) but is stopped. ‘Otherness,’ which threatens him with persecution in Germany, thus results in segregation in America.

Furthermore, the protagonist’s fear of the natural world and spies signifies ‘politics of fear’ that characterised World War II, Germany, and Cold-War America. For example, “Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 88) can be interpreted as a metaphor for Russian and American espionage (Sulick, 2013). In addition, his apprehension of “gadget[s]” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 85) and other objects can be construed as an amplified version of the fear caused by scientific innovations such as nuclear weapons and gas chambers that were used in World War II. Thus, as the title of the short story implies, referential mania symbolises and is a sign of real-world fears, which highlights its socio-political constructed-ness. “99 Red Balloons” also captures the debilitating effects of military technologies such as “high-tech jet fighters” (Nena, 1985/n.d., line 26) and “software” (line 5), which misidentifies the balloons as a threat. This is visually represented in the music video through the explosions that momentarily interrupt the band’s performance (Nena, 2021, 02:39). Thus, referential mania is the protagonist’s exaggerated pathological reaction to espionage, military technologies, and other political strategies exploited against the ‘Other.’

While “99 Red Balloons” lacks overt portrayals of insanity, its characterisation of the “General” (Nena, 1983/n.d., line 12) and “ministers” (Nena, 1985/n.d., line 18) symbolises irrational fear, which is analogous to paranoia, a disorder that has parallels with

referential mania (Goodman, n.d. as cited in Leving, 2012). Paranoia is “the irrational and persistent feeling that people are ‘out to get you’ or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others” (Better Health, n.d.). The lines: “Ninety-nine ministers meet / To worry, worry, super-scurry” (Nena, 1985/n.d., lines 18–19) capture the ministers’ paranoid reaction to the balloons. It propels a nuclear war that annihilates the world (line 36). Thus, both texts capture the effects of political decisions/policies influenced by ‘politics of fear.’

In addition, “Signs and Symbols” and “99 Red Balloons” explore how populists exploit discourses for political purposes. Nabokov engages with how the institution of psychiatry serves the “political use” (Foucault, 1984, p. 51) of “social regulation” by validating the segregation of the ‘Other’ from mainstream society. For example, “the [scientific] paper” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 87), which defines referential mania as a “rare” (p. 88) disease, justifies the segregation of the protagonist, who “[e]ven at his worst [...] present[s] no danger to other people” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 93), from mainstream anti-Communist America. According to White (2012), this segregation is analogous to “incarceration” (White, 2012, p. 31). I argue that the protagonist is incarcerated both within and without the sanatorium because of his ‘Otherness.’ His mental disorder makes him the ‘Other’ of people considered normal; his marginal position as a Russian émigré when the Red Scare was at its peak makes him the ‘Other’ of mainstream society. Thus, the definition and treatment of referential mania ignore its socio-political causes and the fact that the protagonist “is painfully separate from us, but also painfully like us; inaccessible but not beyond our imagination; other but not an alien” (Wood, 2012, p. 78). Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of the treatment is evident in the

protagonist's father emphasising the importance of "get[ting] him out of [the sanatorium] quick[ly]" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 92) to prevent his death. Thus, the short story reflects how the discourse of psychiatry is politicised and unempathetic towards the sufferings of the patient and his family.

"99 Red Balloons" also depicts scientific and military discourses as tools of populists that exploit 'politics of fear.' For example, the military software "[...] identify / [...] clarify and classify" (Nena, 1985/n.d., lines 29–30) the balloons but fail to comprehend their benignness (line 2) and the "dreams" (line 34) they symbolise. Nena also depicts how the war separates the speaker from their loved one (line 41). Thus, the selected texts address the destructive effects of discursively-practised 'politics of fear.'

Nabokov and Nena also explore how 'politics of fear' jeopardise interpersonal relationships by promoting divisiveness. Both texts use physical distance as a metaphor for the mutual suspicion, fear, and mistrust caused by divisive political strategies. For example, the physical distance between the protagonist and the objects of fear causes him greater agony: "With distance the torrents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 88). "99 Red Balloons" emphasises the distant origins of the balloons as the primary cause of the fear and suspicion of the ministers (Nena, 1985/n.d.). These spatial metaphors signify the politically-created social distance between groups/nations. For example, the lack of communal support from the host culture isolates the protagonist and his parents in "Signs and Symbols." This is implicit in their only source of support being his estranged uncle (Nabokov, 1958). In addition, the lack of a dialogue

between Americans and Russians indicates their cultural and linguistic divide. For example, the two telephone calls the protagonist's parents anxiously answer after visiting the sanatorium are for "Charlie" (Nabokov, 1958, p. 100), presumably an American, and not for them. This illustrates the lack of a dialogue and mutual support between the host culture and the Russian minority. In "99 Red Balloons," divisive politics that divided Germany into two countries and two political camps during the Iron Curtain are the source of the misunderstanding behind the war. Thus, distance metaphorically indicates the negative repercussions of the social distance created by separatist policies and political decisions that exploit 'politics of fear.'

The selected texts also portray the negative results of 'politics of fear' on society and nature. For example, the perturbation of the senile parents of the protagonist, who spend a sleepless night after visiting the sanatorium (Nabokov, 1958), which resonates with the isolation and emptiness of the speaker in "99 Red Balloons": "It's all over and I'm standin' pretty / In this dust that was a city" (Nena, 1985/n.d., lines 36-37), highlights the damage caused by divisive political strategies. The desolate landscape of the music video (Nena, 2021, 00:37) also highlights the damage the war has caused to civilization and nature. The decision to launch this war mirrors Truman's conviction to attack Japan with nuclear bombs during World War II (Harry S. Truman Library, n.d.), which caused lasting destruction to the Japanese people and nature. In addition, the text captures the megalomaniac tendencies of the nation-state that instigates a war to parade its military power (Nena, 1985/n.d., line 27). This reflects the Cold-War tactic of building and testing nuclear weapons (CTBTO, n.d.) undertaken by Russia and America to surpass each other in military power. Thus,

the selected texts, published thirty-five years apart, capture the lasting consequences of ‘politics of fear.’

Conclusion

“Signs and Symbols” and Nena’s “99 Red Balloons” capture Cold-War ‘politics of fear’ as reflected in referential mania and the political decisions of the rulers, respectively. The analysis demonstrated ‘politics of fear’ as fear of the ‘Other’ promoted by populists to justify divisive and destructive political decisions and acts. The ‘Otherness’ projected onto the protagonist in Germany and America exposes how right-wing populists exploited this strategy to justify anti-semitism and McCarthyism, citing them as measures taken to protect the nation-state. It also emphasises that the protagonist’s mental disorder is a social construct. In addition, the selected texts explore the effects of ‘politics of fear’ on the individual, interpersonal relationships, society, and nature. The metaphor of distance used in both texts captures how the social, physical, and emotional distance imposed on politically divided groups/nations by divisive political propaganda aggravates mutual fear and mistrust. Thus, the representations of ‘politics of fear’ in the selected texts highlight the importance of healthy international relations, an empathic attitude, and a dialogue between the rulers and people of divided countries/groups.

Furthermore, the reflection of ‘politics of fear’ in the selected texts provide a fresh perspective on the workings of nationalist and populist politics in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. For example, Russia citing the potential impact of NATO (if Ukraine joins it) on its domestic affairs (Guardian News, 2022) signifies the exploitation of fear of the ‘Other’

to validate the war. This indicates that ‘politics of fear’ continues to be exploited as a populist and nationalist strategy. The fear of Russian spies and saboteurs (Sky News, 2022) among Ukrainian forces, which is analogous to a milder form of referential mania, depicts the consequences of fear of the ‘Other’ caused by the political division of the two countries. The damage caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict underscores ‘politics of fear’ as destructive propaganda. For example, the mortality rate (The World Bank, 2020) and the number of casualties (United Nations, 2022) highlight its drastic impact on human life. Russia’s exploitation of ‘politics of fear’ also indicates that it is no longer right-wing propaganda but a strategy also used by leftists. However, ‘politics of fear’ as exploited by left-wing politicians is a sign/symbol yet to be decoded in the Nabokovian oeuvre.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Lyrics of “99 Red Balloons”

by Nena

1. You and I in a little toy shop
2. Buy a bag of balloons with the money we've got
3. Set them free at the break of dawn
4. 'Til one by one, they were gone
5. Back at base, bugs in the software
6. Flash the message, “Something's out there!”
7. Floating in the summer sky
8. Ninety-nine red balloons go by
9. Ninety-nine red balloons
10. Floating in the summer sky
11. Panic bells, it's red alert!
12. There's something here from somewhere else!
13. The war machine springs to life
14. Opens up one eager eye
15. Focusing it on the sky
16. When ninety-nine red balloons go by
17. 99 Decision Street
18. Ninety-nine ministers meet
19. To worry, worry, super-scurry
20. Call the troops out in a hurry
21. This is what we've waited for
22. This is it, boys, this is war
23. The president is on the line
24. As ninety-nine red balloons go by
25. Ninety-nine knights of the air
26. Ride super high-tech jet fighters

27. Everyone's a superhero
28. Everyone's a "Captain Kirk"
29. With orders to identify
30. To clarify and classify
31. Scramble in the summer sky
32. Ninety-nine red balloons go by
33. As ninety-nine red balloons go by
34. Ninety-nine dreams I have had
35. In every one, a red balloon
36. It's all over and I'm standin' pretty
37. In this dust that was a city
38. If I could find a souvenir
39. Just to prove the world was here
40. And here is a red balloon
41. I think of you, and let it go...

Link to the webpage: <https://genius.com/Nena-99-red-balloons-lyrics>

Appendix B: The official music video of "99 red balloons"

This song is written by J. Fahrenkrog-Petersen, C. Karges, and K. McAlea, members of the band, Nena. It is the title song of their 1983 album, *99 Red Balloons*, released under the record label of Epic.

Link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiwgOWo7mDc>

**Appendix C: Original German lyrics of “99 Red Balloons”
released in 1983 in West Berlin**

1. Hast du etwas Zeit für mich?
2. Dann singe ich ein Lied für dich
3. Von 99 Luftballons
4. Auf ihrem Weg zum Horizont
5. Denkst du vielleicht grad an mich?
6. Dann singe ich ein Lied für dich
7. Von 99 Luftballons
8. Und, dass sowas von sowas kommt
9. 99 Luftballons
10. Auf ihrem Weg zum Horizont
11. Hielt man für Ufos aus dem All
12. Darum schickte ein General
13. ‘ne Fliegerstaffel hinterher
14. Alarm zu geben, wenn’s so wär
15. Dabei war’n dort am Horizont
16. Nur 99 Luftballons
17. 99 Düsenflieger
18. Jeder war ein großer Krieger
19. Hielten sich für Captain Kirk
20. Es gab ein großes Feuerwerk
21. Die Nachbarn haben nichts gerafft
22. Und fühlten sich gleich angemacht
23. Dabei schoss man am Horizont
24. Auf 99 Luftballons
25. 99 Kriegsminister
26. Streichholz und Benzinkanister
27. Hielten sich für schlaue Leute
28. Witterten schon fette Beute

29. “Riefen, Krieg!”, und wollten Macht
30. Mann, wer hätte das gedacht?
31. Dass es einmal so weit kommt
32. Wegen 99 Luftballons
33. Wegen 99 Luftballons
34. 99 Luftballons
35. 99 Jahre Krieg
36. Ließen keinen Platz für Sieger
37. Kriegsminister gibt’s nicht mehr
38. Und auch keine Düsenflieger
39. Heute zieh’ ich meine Runden
40. Seh’ die Welt in Trümmern liegen
41. Hab’ ‘n Luftballon gefunden
42. Denk’ an dich und lass’ ihn fliegen

Link to the webpage: <https://genius.com/Nena-99-luftballons-lyrics>

Biographical Note

Naduni Dinesha Thebuwana is a visiting lecturer in English Language and Literature at the Buddhist and Pali University. She graduated with a B.A. (Hon) Degree in English from the University of Kelaniya in 2018. She is currently reading for an MPhil in transferable skills. Her research interests include comparative linguistics, literary theory, and the production of literary texts.