

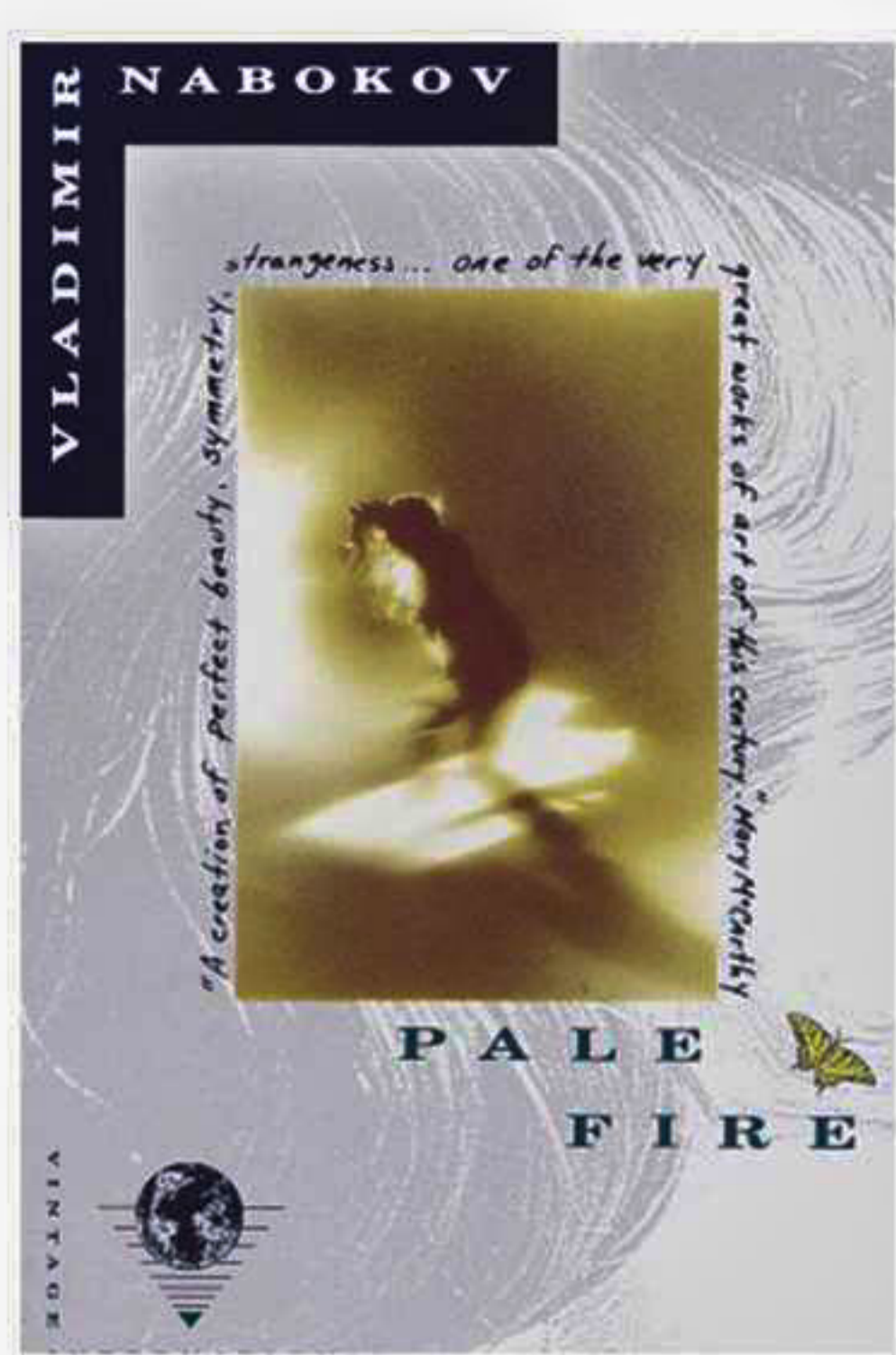
# A POEM ANNOTATED BY THE POET

AUTHOR: VLADIMIR NABOKOV

REVIEWED BY DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

VLADIMIR Nabokov, the Russian novelist and poet, is known around the world for his novel "Lolita", the story of a sordid affair between a middle-aged college professor and a 14 year old nymphet. However, not many know of his other masterpiece, "Pale Fire" which frequently makes the list of 20th century's most original piece of novel. And there is a reason for that. The novel is a mix of poetry, commentaries on the fictional poet who wrote the poem, and the very mysterious 999-line poetry which has references to time, place and people that is only understood when it is read after one goes over the commentary and then-read along with it.

The novel has four segments: 1) The foreword was written by Dr. Charles Kinbote who we learn was a neighbor and colleague of a celebrated poet John Shade, a college professor; 2) The poet's last work, entitled "Pale Fire", which is organized in "couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos"; 3) a commentary on "Pale Fire" by Dr. Kinbote which gives detailed explanation on the poem itself; and 4) an equally fascinating index.



The format of the poem "Pale Fire" is that of a heroic couplet, a "stanza consisting of two rhyming lines in iambic pentameter", which was used by Chaucer and 17th and 18th century poets such as Alexander Pope.

After the "Foreword", we move to the Canto One which begins with one of the most quoted lines in modern literary history.

"I was the shadow of the waxing slain By the false azure in the windowpane I was the smudge of ashen fluff--and I Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky"

The waxwing is a bird, and the opening line alludes to a dead bird beneath a window. The bird flew into the window having become a victim of the allure of the reflection of the sky on the glass and then after it fell, it rises like a phoenix. To pursue life after death in the "reflected sky," the mirrored afterworld of art, and the next cantos take us into John Shade's thoughts on life and death.

The title of the book has brought about a flurry of speculations in the literary world. The two words "pale fire" have been traced to the poem "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats and more often found in Shakespeare's plays. Pale Fire features a two-word title that consists of an adjective followed by a noun which taken literally means light that is waning or a borrowed light. Many have found Keat's Ode as an inspiration for the imagery found in Nabokov's "Pale Fire".

Shakespeare's plays "Timon of Athens" and "Hamlet" have had influence on the title and the theme of Nabokov's poem. In "Timon of Athens", Shakespeare wrote,

I'll example you with thievery:  
The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;

The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears.

In "Hamlet", the ghost tells Hamlet why he wants to return to the underworld at dawn in the following terms:

"Fare thee well at once!  
The glow worm shows the matin to be near,  
And gins to pale his uneffectual fire ..."

Vladimir V. Nabokov (1899-1977) was born into a rich aristocratic Russian family in St. Petersburg during the fading years of Tsar Nicholas' rule. His family escaped Russian after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Nabokov arrived in the United States in 1942. He was a prolific writer and equally competent in Russian, English, and French. Although he started out as a poet writing in Russian, he wrote in multiple genres and even published scientific studies of butterflies and chess problems. Nabokov taught at various American universities, and became a professor of Russian and European Literature at Cornell University (1949-1958). "Pale Fire" came out while he was living in Switzerland until his death.

In December 1999, in the London newspaper "The Observer" critic and writer Ron Rosenbaum proclaimed Pale Fire as the greatest novel of the 20th Century. I pulled out a passage from the article so you'll have an idea of the high esteem in which Rosenbaum regards Pale Fire.

"Before venturing further into the depths and delights of Pale Fire theories, I want to pause here for the benefit of those who have not yet tasted the pleasures of 'Pale Fire'. Pause to emphasize just how much pure reading pleasure it offers despite its apparently unconventional form... Please don't be intimidated by the poem's length or formality; it's a pleasure to read: sad, funny, thoughtful, digressive, discursive, filled with heart-stopping moments of tenderness and beauty."

Nabokov scholar Brian Boyd in his book "Nabokov's 'Pale Fire': The Magic of Artistic Discovery" wrote ,  
"As we learn more about Shade's lifelong

attempt to understand a world where life is surrounded by death, we realize the full resonance of these opening lines: that he is projecting himself in imagination into the waxing, as if it were somehow still flying beyond death, and into the reflected azure of the window, as if that were the cloudlessness of some hereafter, even as he stands looking at "the smudge of ashen fluff" of the dead bird's little body."

His critics everywhere are in awe as they unravel the mysteries and beauty of "Pale Fire". However, he has managed to keep both his critics and his admirers in the dark. It is reflected in their ambivalence towards "Pale Fire" which might at one level be considered a poem annotated by the poet. But it is also a novel in the form of a literary jigsaw puzzle about art, afterlife, and existence. At a different level, "Pale Fire" could be considered "a parodistic novel written in the form of a 999-line poem, with a lengthy commentary by a demented New England scholar who turns out to be an exiled king of a mythical country."

Nabokov passed away on July 2, 1977. The irony is that "Pale Fire" was referenced only obliquely in the obituary written by Alden Whitman in the New York Times after his death on July 5, 1977. The headline announced, "Vladimir Nabokov, Author of 'Lolita' and 'Ada', Is Dead". Fortunately, the Times made amends for this omission. On the occasion of the publication of the poem Pale Fire in the form of a stand-alone book in 2012, David Orr wrote in New York Times' Sunday Book Review,  
"Is 'Pale Fire' a poem or can it stand as a poem? 'Pale Fire' is a voice within a voice — a mirrored and thoroughly modern sensibility. And that sensibility, whatever name we give it, is one hell of a poet."

The reviewer is an economist and writer living in Boston, USA.

The narrative begins with a Foreword by Charles Kinbote who offers the background to the poem, the life of the poet, and the reason Kinbote decided to undertake the effort to publish the poem and annotate it. In the foreword we learn that Shades' widow gave him the right to publish and provide commentary on the last poem by John Shade immediately after his death. Kinbote starts the Foreword as follows:  
"Pale Fire, a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade (born July 5, 1898, died July 21, 1959) during the last twenty days of his life, at his residence in New Wye, Appalachia, U.S.A."  
Kinbote then undertook the task of writing annotated background of Shade's poem and

as a devoted admirer and commentator offers advice, at times self-serving, on how to study the poem, and knowing that it was written by Nabokov himself, gives the readers a fascinating clue to the sense of humor or parody of the real-life poet-novelist.

He writes, "Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture."

A word or two about the form of the poem itself is in order. A canto is a subdivision or part in a narrative or epic poem, an Italian term, derived from the Latin cantus or "song".

## Seeing femme fatale with a humane lens

AUTHOR: PAULO COELHO

REVIEWED BY ARPEETA SHAMS MIZAN

Publisher: Penguin Random House, November 2016  
Price: 22 USD/299 Indian Rupee

PAULO Coelho's latest bestseller 'The Spy' is different from his characteristic genre of spiritual quests and journeys. In a sense, 'The Spy' is the story of a woman's journey, but more than that, it is the story of legendary Mata Hari retold as "history told from below", by a woman with a feminist voice.

Published by Penguin Random House in 2016, this Coelho novel is unlike his other books in many ways. First and foremost, Coelho returns to non-fiction after quite some time. In fact, after 'The Valkyris' in 1997, Coelho writes a real story of a real person based on real facts in 'The Spy.' Secondly, in this book Coelho moves away quite noticeably from his sùjet passionnel - spirituality. This is one of those rare Coelho books which are not shrouded in the mystery of mysticism, esoteric quest, or magic of the extraordinary that touches the ordinary life. But mostly, this book is different because this is perhaps one Coelho book that becomes a counter narrative to mainstream history.

Postcolonial literature is replete with subaltern and counter-narrative oeuvres. With 'The Spy', Coelho secures his place very strongly amidst the authors of historical narrative. Coelho has always upheld the voice of the unheard (Eleven Minutes), the tormented (Veronika Decides to Die) or the lost (Adultery). Coelho brought to the forefront those who are somehow victims of the hegemonic power structure that holds our world and society captive. 'The Spy' is the story of Mata Hari, told by Mata Hari, through the perspectives of a woman who throughout her life had been a victim of both dominance and hegemony that had contaminated the social norms and justice system of the early twentieth century Europe.

Mata Hari has been made famous as a notorious spy, a toxic woman. History did not care about her version of the trial, for she did not care about the trial much. As her lawyer points out, the Prosecution simply did not have adequate evidence to prove her guilty beyond reasonable doubt. But guilty she was nonetheless, because she was not tried by the War Council as a spy only, but as a spy who was an unconventional woman who threatened both men and women equally in the recently emancipating European society.

The story begins with Mata Hari writing to her lawyer, Mr. Clunet, in her last letter from the prison before her death sentence, the story of her identity. Throughout the book, we find her asking, "Who am I? The dancer who took Europe by storm? The housewife who humiliated herself in the Dutch East Indies? The woman the press called a vulgar artiste despite admiring and idolizing her a short time before?" Or was she the infamous, notorious spy who got hold of war secrets of both Germany and France during the Great War? The quest for identity is Coelho's forte, and it seems Mata Hari or Margaretha's

identity lay in finding out how much innocent she was of her sins. Sins, according to Coelho, she incurred to survive in a world of money, greed and men, but rarely humans: "Innocent? Perhaps that is not the right word. I was never innocent, not since I first set foot in this city... the crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men."

Margaretha Zelle, an ordinary small town girl from Holland who discovered the cost of being beautiful by being raped at sixteen by her Principal, and later physically abused by her husband and ultimately losing her child, sought independence after the suspicious murder of their son put the final peck on their crumbling marriage. She learned at a young age that her beauty could both be her destruction and salvation. She chose the latter, entering the aristocratic Parisienne world with her exotic Brahmanic dances from orient, adopting the stage name Mata Hari, meaning the sun. Few had the knowledge to see through her fraud: her dance was a mockery to the original Javanese dance, her moves were a suigeneris strip dance style, and her audience was also her clients, for "love and power were the same thing". Coelho gives us an intriguing idea of her extravaganza through the list of her belongings in the prison of saint Lazare which adds up to three trunks containing nearly 170 items of clothing and toiletries. The reader finds Mata Hari reveling in her success so much that she mocked Picasso and treated intelligence officers as her fans. She was more interested in showing she had powerful friends in the trial when she should have been defending herself as a scapegoat victim. Her narcissism led her to believe till the last moment that her clients would petition for her clemency, but not a single of them acknowledged to have known her. What led her to making wrong friends? Coelho tries to give the answer in the voice

of her lawyer: "You wanted to create fantastical stories about yourself, either out of insecurity or your almost visible desire to be loved at any cost."

Having praised the strengths of the book, one must also be cautious of the weaknesses: Coelho tries to tell a real story, but Mata Hari's voice is unmistakably Coelho's. He cannot refrain from inserting his common musings on paradise, hell, sin and blessings. Coelho acknowledges to have borrowed the opening pages verbatim from the news report for the International News Services in October 1917, but the rest is a blur, leaving the reader to ponder how much of Mata Hari's musings are her own and how much is she just Coelho's character.

However, at the end, "The Spy" passes as a book of identity, introducing Mata Hari to those who never knew of her, and guiding the reader to a new perspective with more dimensions to explore.

The reviewer teaches Human Rights and Law at the University of Dhaka.



## Passion for Bengali, admiration for a father!

AUTHOR: DITIO SYED HAQ

REVIEWED BY TOWHEED FEROZE

Publisher: Kathaprokash, Pages: 95, Price: Tk150, Available at the Ekushey Book Fair

A collection of essays where a son recollects the impact of his father on his life, thought, ideology and vision in life - *Megh o Babar Kichu Kotha* may appear to be just that at a cursory look. In fact, this is far more than a few essays written by a son trying to come to terms with the approaching end of his terminally ill father, who happens to be a renowned writer.

I would say that despite the major themes being death and the preparation of a man in accepting the life sapping illness of a closed one, there is a potent undercurrent of patriotism - love for one's country, language and culture.

Curiously, it's the constant allusion to the grim end which only reinforces the writer's resolve to adore his country more, and strive to write in his mother tongue.

These two opposite forces, one of death and the other of defying death by carrying on the literary crusade launched by his poet, writer father, permeate the whole book.

Ditio is the son of late Syed Shamsul Haque, and yes, the name of the father will come up from time to time when Ditio's works or his writings are critiqued.

That cannot be helped and here, in his first book in Bengali, released at the ongoing *Ekushey Boi Mela*, Ditio writes how the recognition of his father's illness made him take a pivotal decision in life.

Staying in the UK, faced with the prospect of losing his dad in a short while, Ditio decided to leave a life of routine in the West and come back home to pick up the pen and write.

And, write in Bangla!  
At the intro, he admits to brushing up on his language by picking up the 'abidhan' or dictionary, and then, debunking the oft held erroneous belief: to appear cosmopolitan, one should not appear to be adept in one's own mother tongue.



Ditio hits right at the heart of a rising social anomaly, where speaking Bangla with a stilted western accent is deemed smart.

*Ami Banglae bhalona* (my Bengali is weak) - a line used to create an aura of pseudo social sophistication is something the writer, having spent more than 30 years in the UK, finds hard to approve and digest.

While writing in Bengali fluidly he goes back to the precious moments he spent with his father, learning about our history and the unparalleled beauty of rural Bangladesh. Kurigram and its tranquility come up regularly and so do the vivid memories of a boy - the elections in Bangladesh, countless electoral symbols, the simple aspirations of the people and, of course, the inexorable presence of romanticism which is quintessentially Bengali in flavour.

Here, reference to love is slow paced, the prelude is languorous, enriched by poetry, butterflies during twilight and topped by spellbinding rural fantasy.

There are two ways of looking at this collection of essays that narrate a

son basking in the pleasure of writing and looking after a dying father - one which is somber and sad, the other, filled with the tenacity to reinvent oneself.

Death often triggers a new awakening and the leitmotif is the rediscovery of a London based IT Specialist.

Just like Ditio, who took the landmark decision to come back to Bangladesh to write, long ago, his grand- father, a doctor by profession in Calcutta, faced the same question: "what am I doing here!" Which, eventually drove him to do some soul searching and come to Bangladesh and settle here to serve the rural people.

While all throughout the work we move closer and closer to the end of a life, there is also an unmistakable force of re-birth.

Ditio writes poignantly about a son and father bond and of the feeling of emptiness when someone places a close relative in a grave.

Yet, I take away the positive spirit of the work - the impact of a man leaving us, triggering a new understanding in another.

In the end, we are not plunged into a sepulchral mood, but refreshed with the scene of countless golden grass-hoppers, which seem to have appeared to wipe away the grimness of burial.

An end here but perhaps a start somewhere else - Ditio leaves us to interpret death as we want to.

As for the writer who has decided to stay in Bangladesh and carry on with the pen, death opened a door, a path to literary adventure.

Ditio Syed Haq writes well, and surely his journey in this new role will be more rewarding. A must read for those who crave literary profundity, not frivolity.

The reviewer is an occasional contributor.

### NEW BOOK

## "DIRGHOSTHAYEE SOKSOVA"

Author: Emran Mahfuz

Publisher: Oitijjhya, February 2017

"Dirghosthayee Soksova" is a book of poetry of Emran Mahfuz (Journalist, writer and researcher), published by Oitijjhya Publication. This book is available now at the *Ekushe Book Fair-2017* (stall no. 430, Oitijjhya). The poet depicts his experiences of life he has gone through. His motherland, its tradition, society, politics etc. have been portrayed in this book. Love and nature have also become the subject matter of it.

