

# Political Conflicts: A Critical Analysis of Individual Vs Government in Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*

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## **Abstract:**

The main goal of this novel is to examine how power has affected and destroyed people's personal lives in a nation. An authoritative society's ultimate purpose is to have everyone follow its rigid rules and norms. The dominants employ social hierarchy as one of their tactics. However, it is ironic that society is under the power of a deeply corrupt political administration that gradually restricts people's freedoms. There, the government's repression begins to subtly damage their lives. The protagonists' lives are constrained in every way by the system's doctrine. In the past two centuries, writers in literature have been illustrated in their works. This paper attempts to disclose the bureaucratic control that the protagonist faced in Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*.

**Keywords:** Prejudice, repression, binary opposition, social hierarchy, and political cruelty.

The concept of resistance and the idea of power have an unbreakable connection. In the social environment, these concepts are highly symbolic and contentious. The entire world, which holds the power, has accepted the privileges that are specific to a given social group with high respect in the contemporary era. The language of power dynamics and its hierarchy encompass all kinds of manipulation. Global politics have several roles in this totalitarian supremacy. The notion of power upholds dominance and authority in a totalitarian, oppressive society. One of the

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pioneers, George Orwell, wrote the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1949. In it, he clarifies political embodiments and their dispute. Murphy notes, "Many authors have chosen the 1984 device of hugging close to the shore of present time" (Murphy 27). His novel reveals that he was one of the rebellious writers of the twentieth century and this novel helps to open up the significant divisions in the political system. Sovereignty is a big subject in politics which contains many controversial views. It makes sense when several accusations are given by people against the authorities. Conversely, resistance works by progressively extending its roots in as many ways as it can be. The readers know the impact of power on daily life through the pseudo-egalitarian society created by the ruling elite in the works of Nabokov:

The reading process, this singular narrative activity itself, is further stressed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* since this social act is the specific requirement necessary for membership in the Brotherhood. Indeed, this narrative rite of passage may be the only way in which membership in the secret, supposedly oppositional organisation is gained or proven. Reading here has explicitly extra-textual significance: it is not an innocent pastime-it is not a pastime at all but a deeply subversive act. (Mckay 308)

Vladimir Nabokov is a famous twentieth-century writer. He is a prolific novelist and short-story writer. The majority of his well-known pieces include *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1972). "The novel tends to be rational in foundation, real in emphasis, and social in thrust; the short story tends to be irrational in foundation, surreal in emphasis, and psychological in thrust" (Burns 508). It is well-recognized that fiction serves as a representation of reality. Nabokov is known for his complicated narratives and controversial difficulties. Nabokov employs literary tools such as metaphor and parody in his works, which heightens the thought-provoking nature of the novel. He uses standard language while illustrating the incidents in the novel. His skillful synthesis on each line leaves everyone in surprise. "The enduring memory of violence, war and mass extermination in the twentieth century has contributed to a considerable extent to the decay of Enlightenment values and attitudes and has undermined the belief in political ideals informed by a high valuation of theory, uniformity and solidity" (Pordizk76).

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*Bend Sinister* is a psychological and dystopian novel written in the late twentieth century. Dystopian literature typically falls into the category of speculative fiction, which studies futuristic environments. “*Bend Sinister* was Nabokov’s second novel in English, written by a man who had experienced both Nazi and Communist regimes” (Lee 193). Lee points out that Vladimir lived when Nazi Germany and the two World Wars turned the world entirely upside down.

*Bend Sinister*’s title alludes to how making the wrong choice can put a person in a terrible situation. Primarily, the title refers to Adam Krug, the main character. “*Bend Sinister* is far more than a satirical work attacking the evils of tyranny” (Schaeffer115). There is an omniscient narrator in the novel. Nabokov imagines a dystopian city called “Padugrad” where the government has elevated the philosophy known as “Ekwilism” in this novel. One-party politics are well-known in the city of Padugrad. A person by the name of Paduk represents the city. He serves as the antagonist of this novel. He is the city’s dictator and the head. He was once Adam Krug’s opponent in school. When he was little, Krug used to refer to him as “Toad.” Toad symbolically refers to an idiot or tyrant. Totalitarian novels typically feature the following ideological and hegemonic tenets, which persistently prevent and silence people’s rational questions:

The decline of hegemony is much more than a diminishing of one country's economic and military superiority. It involves the breakdown of a qualitatively specific world order, including economic arrangements, relations between states and economic actors, and ideological justifications. (Drass 425)

Adam Krug, the main character, is an esteemed university professor, writer, and philosopher. Olga Krug, his wife, passed away from kidney failure. David Krug is the couple’s eight-year-old child. Adam Krug has a close friend, Ember, who supports him in every circumstance. Adam Krug is introduced by the writer as “He was a big heavy man of the hairy sort with a somewhat Beethoven-like face. He had lost his wife in November. He had taught philosophy. He was exceedingly virile. His name was Adam Krug” (Nabokov142). Ember is an “obscure scholar and a translator of Shakespeare” (Nabokov 21). He enjoys reading Hamlet, among other Shakespearean works. He is very depressed after his wife's death. At the university, Adam Krug has a good reputation. His friend, Ember, frequently compares him to Beethoven due to his appearance. Adam

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Krug possesses kindness and sincerity at the university as well as in society. Nabokov illustrates:

Ekwilism transformed (while retaining its name) into a violent and virulent political doctrine, a doctrine that proposed to enforce spiritual uniformity upon his native land through the medium of the most standardized section of the inhabitants, namely the Army, under the supervision of a bloated and dangerously divine State. (Nabokov 56)

In *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov divides eighteen chapters. Every chapter deepens the narrative methods used in each narration. The novel's opening gives readers a sense of the modernist attempts to understand the totalitarian setup. Pessimistic rudiments impact much on Nabokov and other contemporary writers. Norman states, "The most important element of this modernist trace in *Bend Sinister* is the introduction of conflict into an otherwise unchallenged discourse; in other words, a particular form of modernist difficulty" (Norman 57). The antagonist, Paduk sees this as an opportunity to take advantage of Krug's influence to promote his philosophy among other people. He therefore expects that Krug will comply with his requests, but Krug objects. In addition, Paduk pushes everyone to adhere to the limited ekwilist viewpoint. In addition, Paduk pushes everyone to adhere to the limited ekwilist viewpoint. Like Nabokov, Octavia Butler is a writer who cautions about reality in her novels. "Butler's dystopian images or maps serve as a warning to the present because she ties her images to existing problems and ideologies" (Stillman 15).

*Bend Sinister* imagines a distant kind of political manipulation. A person's existence would be problematic, and their identity would be gradually erased if they opposed the government. Edmon Beuret and Dr. Alexander are Adam's coworkers. They provide constant alerts to him regarding the government. However, he firmly declines. Thus, Paduk's operatives abduct his companions and imprison them. Mariette is Krug's family servant. She visits his family on Paduk's orders to spy on his potential. She attempts to seduce Krug most of the time, and eventually, she is successful. She compiles all of Krug's data and secretly transmits it to Paduk. The sole child of Krug and Olga Krug is named David. David is looked after by Mariette. She sends him to the kindergarten every day, which is run by Clara Zerkalsky and her brother Miron.

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Eventually, Paduk's supporters kidnap David. David, in their opinion, is their best chance of persuading Krug to follow them.

Paduk intends for Krug to comply with all of his requests. However, Krug is stuck with no other choice but to protect his child and his coworkers from the despotic regime. Finally, he decides to accept ekwilism for the betterment of those around him. According to Nabokov's statement in *Bend Sinister*, this novel is the greatest one for illuminating ideological repression. "As dream, *Bend Sinister* is not meant to be realistic, despite its very real indictment of Paduk's regime" (Begna 25). Regretfully, David is put in an orphanage where the kids receive cruel treatment. It is like a rehabilitation clinic where David murders mistakenly. On hearing this, Krug loses his mind and vows to exact revenge on the authorities. Paduk's supporters kill Krug when he tries to kill Paduk, as he has lost all patience. In the end, he was killed. Nabokov tackles the perils of bureaucratic leadership in this novel. Many readers and authors find this novel to be eye-opening in that it exposes the cruelty of a totalitarian government.

"The world we are presented with is disturbingly similar to our own, and crucially, the practice of harvesting has become a largely unspoken but widely recognized fact of life, drawing parallels with the everyday human injustices witnessed in contemporary culture" (McDonald 76). If the authority expands its power over people, then their identity will be called into doubt. Power has distinct functions in many domains. In particular, the so-called political sector uses the caste system and its prejudices to discriminate against innocents like Adam Krug, and a leader like Paduk establishes their dominance most terribly. However, resistance comes up. "In both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, totalitarian domination is premised on the control of the experience of temporality" (Finigan 436). In the current era, power emerges as the primary subject of discourse. In the modern world, technological superiority has an unbreakable connection to competence. Technologies allow a government to allocate authority indirectly through monitoring. In many ways, resistance is destroyed by the exercise of power. The rise of political forces can be used in a variety of ways to undermine public confidence in the bureaucratic establishment:

For Foucault, power in its micro-dissemination is to be found, like background noise in the cosmos, equally distributed through all societies, not simply in

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capitalist formations. Power may ultimately trace its origins back to some head of government or sovereign entity, but power has a life of its own. (Davis 319)

*Bend Sinister* elaborates on the crisis of the protagonist, Krug, who is unable to resist the government's demands. But he is the one who values him and his friends the most. As a result, he lets the people know about the tyranny of the government. Throughout this novel, he is tortured emotionally and mentally. Hence, Nabokov seems to suggest the plight of the protagonists, who are trapped under the bureaucratic leadership. Krug and his son are the victims of the pseudo-egalitarian society. Though every country in the current era proudly says that their country got freedom from the dominant countries, people still suffer from their own country's governance, which causes agonies more than the other dominant countries did in the past eras.

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