

Unmasking the Alternative Micro Feminist Narratives in *Anna Karenina*: A Postmodernist-Deconstructive Perspective

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Abstract

The present study means to investigate Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy in the light of eclectic theoretical framework consisting of Feminism, Postmodernism, and Deconstruction. The overt dominant patriarchal metanarrative is to be shown as problematized by the existence of the alternative micro feminist narrative strands. These alternative strands challenge and subvert the absolutist patriarchal narrative. The transcendental position of patriarchy as an absolute stands deconstructed by the play of alternative micro-narrative strands of feminist resistance. The study also means to show that subjectivities of major characters are self-differentiated, fractured and fragmented. This also implies that patriarchal metanarrative and alternative feminist narrative strands continually displace each other, instead of going for mutual synthesis. Seen through the lens of chosen theoretical framework, Anna Karenina becomes a site of pluralism and multiplicity, a story of resistance to the transcendental patriarchal presence.

Key Words

Suppression, Patriarchy,
Ideology, Schizophrenia,
Resistance

Introduction

The novel *Anna Karenina* “overtly” depicts the dominant patriarchal culture and society in 19th century Russia through the dominant patriarchal narrative strand. The study means to show that there are alternative micro feminist narrative strands that challenge and undermine the apparent dominant narrative as suggested by Derrida (1976).Patriarchy means the position of power and control for men, where women exist as marginalized beings (Millett, 1977). Women are expected to keep themselves to their allotted subordinate space of femininity, excelling only in feminine subjects. Their sexuality is regulated and controlled by patriarchy (Friedan, 1982). The violation of patriarchal norms is to be repaid in the form of vengeance by God himself (Millett, 1977). This also involves stereotyping of women by the dominant patriarchal narrative (Greer, 1971). In patriarchal world women cannot have any rights and responsibilities that can bring money, honor and power. Deviation from the path of patriarchal normalized truth on the part of women cannot be tolerated (Millett, 1977). Shcherbatsky’s reference to Russian proverb in the novel that “women have long hair but short wits” is reflective of “the obliteration of Other’s viewpoints and displacements of meanings through figures of speech” (Spivak,1987).

Literature Review

Olga’s (2001) reading of *Anna Karenina* is very conventional and takes place through a patriarchal lens. His reading reinforces patriarchal norms and values in the novel, with emphasis on proper well-defined family-oriented feminine role performance by women and masculine role performance of the bread-earner, the upholder of the family name and honor, by husbands and fathers, for the larger cause of family and dynasty. His reading highlights the status quo and the continuity of class and hierarchal system. Motherhood and fatherhood are stressed upon for the larger good of society and civilization. This is directly linked to the happiness or otherwise of the household. Olga has made Tolstoy look like a very conservative man on the side of status quo.

Priscilla (2007) has examined *Anna Karenina* as Tolstoy’s response to the French novel of adultery in the light of Rousseau’s ideals. He goes to the extent of calling the novel as a materialist Gospel. For Priscilla the two plots of the novel, the main plot consisting of Karenin-Anna-Vronski triangle and the subplot based upon the story of Levin-Kitty, afford an opportunity to the reader to gather the true moral understanding for a happy, fulfilled life. The novel is seen as a blend of reformed Gospels and the ideals of Rousseau on family, the place of women and the courage to forgive people.

Orwin (2003) has critiqued *Anna Karenina* in the context of the role of philosophy in the novel and Tolstoy's attitude towards philosophy. Orwin highlights Tolstoy's preference for life experiences over abstract philosophy in the novel. The learned critic focuses upon the importance given to the idea of love, along with its multiple definitions, by Tolstoy. Tolstoy's indebtedness to Rousseau and the reflection of his philosophy in the novel is stressed upon.

Christian (1969) has critiqued Tolstoy's works, including *Anna Karenina*, in a book form. It is a very serious work of criticism. In his critique of *Anna Karenina*, the theme of the sanctity of marriage and the centrality of the idea of family is the main focus. He also takes into account the factors and circumstances responsible for the tragic death of the heroine. The artistic accomplishments of Tolstoy as a writer are celebrated. Tolstoy's use of symbols especially that of snowstorms and railways, are dwelt upon. Novelist's craftsmanship with reference to the structure of the novel, technique of anticipation is taken account of. Tolstoy's art of characterization is discussed in detail. The critic also refers to the representation of Tolstoy's ideas on art in the novel. Reference is also made to some of the supposed weaknesses of the novel for being tendentious and the manipulation of characters on the part of the writer.

David H. Stewart (1964) has examined *Anna Karenina* from a number of perspectives. He has paid attention to Tolstoy's moral vision and the formal aspects of the novel. He compares the novel for its structure, characterization and other formal aspects to many classics like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *Vanity Fair* and of course to all the major plays of Shakespeare. Milton and Sophocles are also fondly remembered in this context. This establishes the status and ranking of *Anna Karenina*. Themes of marriage, life, death, adultery find a place in this study. The respective place of passion and reason in the context of Anna's fall is dwelt upon.

Whitcomb (1995) has critiqued *Anna Karenina* in the context of the use of Russian word prelest (charm, enchanting) in the novel, in a wide variety of senses. The learned critic emphasizes that the word has been used by different characters in different situations and contexts eighty-seven times. Some of the uses of the word carry positive sense and levels of meanings, while others have diabolical implications. This is a very interesting study undertaken from a particular angle.

Manning (1927) has critiqued *Anna Karenina* from the perspective of Christian and patriarchal values of love, family, marriage, and forgiveness. He has highlighted many similarities between Levin and Tolstoy himself. Manning holds Anna herself responsible for her tragedy. Manning himself, quite understandably, is a patriarch. He also partly blames Karenin responsible for the tragedy. The bottom-line of his critique is that one cannot build one's happiness upon the unhappiness of another.

Nathaniel Goodman (1958) has investigated *Anna Karenina* from the perspective of family life and conjugal happiness. He compares the successful and happy life of Levin and the unhappy life and failure of Vronsky-Anna. Levin welcomes the obligations as a family man. Anna and Vronsky reject the social, cultural obligations for hedonism and personal happiness. Goodman is of the view that this kind of attitude can lead to the decline of civilizations. It remains a masked patriarchal critique of the novel. He believes that a re-visit to *Anna Karenina* can impart modern civilization a much needed right orientation. At least this point of view opens a space for the present and future readings of the novel. Spivak's (2016) contention that all conclusions/readings are genuinely provisional and inconclusive, has eternally opened a window for readings and re-readings, including the present one.

The above given brief review has established the context and the justification for the present reading. It also has confirmed patriarchy as the apparent dominant narrative strand of the novel. The study also means to re-tell the story of a woman as desired by Spivak (1987).

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The present study is to be undertaken in the context of a multi generic theoretical framework consisting of Postmodernism, Feminism, and Deconstruction. The study means to undertake the de-sedimentation process and means to reveal, as its first proposition, the existence of the alternative micro feminist narratives alongside hegemonic patriarchal narrative. The second proposition of the study is that the apparent absolute position of the dominant patriarchal metanarrative is questioned and undermined by the alternative narrative strands of feminism and patriarchy stands problematized and deconstructed. The third proposition of the study is that the subjectivities of the main characters are fragmented and fractured due to the existence of multiple alternative strands. The fourth proposition of the study is that *Anna Karenina* projects perspectivism, pluralism, schizophrenia and postmodernist undecidability in the face of multiple options and perspectives, suggesting the inapplicability of either/or binary division. Simone de Beauvoir, (2011), Millett (1977), Fredric Jameson (1984) and Derrida (1976) are the major theorists for the provision of theoretical framework. A few subordinate research questions are designed in the light of suggestions by Lois Tyson (2006) on the format, for the thorough examination of all the hypotheses:

1. Does the dominant patriarchal metanarrative of the novel foreground patriarchy as the normalized common sense with the status of a given truth?
2. Do the alternative feminist micro-narrative strands question and resist patriarchy, thereby undermining it in the process?
3. Does the novel depict the major characters with fragmented and fractured subjectivities?
4. Do the alternative micro feminist narrative strands represent Anna Karenina as a metaphor of resistance and postmodernist schizophrēnia?
5. Does the hegemonic metanarrative project Anna as deviant from the truth and therefore, herself responsible for her tragedy?
6. Does the presence of alternative narrative strands and fragmented subjectivities make *Anna Karenina* a site of pluralism and multiplicity, where the binary division of either/or is subverted?

Analysis and Interpretation

Apparent Hegemonic Patriarchal Metanarrative

Apparently, *Anna Karenina* is for absolute conformity to the patriarchal laws and norms, which apparently are represented as the normalized universal truth, demanding from women their total allegiance and absolute loyalty to it. The dominant strand of the novel projects the 19th-century Russian society, culture, and family as impacted by masculine and feminine binaries. The violation of patriarchal laws is presented as crime and sin.

Oblonsky represents the apparent patriarchal strand. Patriarchy has shaped his consciousness. He regards women merely as commodities (Beauvoir, 2011). His conviction that he is justified to have a liaison with the French governess, with his wife no longer young and pretty, shows the commodification of women under patriarchy. The whole household and the society, interpellated by the dominant patriarchal ideology, endorses Oblonsky's "putting a few dents in the contract" (Beauvoir, 2011). In spite of being married he thinks "stealing an extra roll", as he calls his habit of extra-marital affairs, is alright because he is a man (rpt. Tolstoy, 1999). The hegemonic patriarchal ideology decides to apply different moral standards to the masculine and feminine worlds (Millet, 1977). Oblonsky even defends and justifies his affairs in the name of the needs of men. The double patriarchal standards place the full burden of the family and marriage as social institutions on the shoulders of women. Liaison with women is supposed to give "a finishing touch" (rpt. Tolstoy, 1999) to a man's education, adding to his personal glory and sense of accomplishment. Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997) represents similar discrimination against women. The patriarchal society invests them with glamour for being the conquerors of enchanting women. This reduces the women to the level of objects devoid of any agency or an opportunity to choose (Humm, 1994).

Shcherbatsky is the strongest believer in the binary division of masculinity and femininity (Friedan, 1982). His quotation of a Russian proverb that women have long hair but short wits is a classic example of the sexiest and essentialist construction of femininity as stereotypical other. He is similar to Bolkonsky in *War and Peace* (rpt. Tolstoy, 1957) He does not accept men or women trespassing into each other's well marked and separated territory. He takes it for granted that handsome rich gentlemen must have known countless women. He regards women as distraction and stumbling blocks in the path of men. He believes women to be responsible for the ruin of countless men. Millett (1977) labels such mind set as misogynist. It reflects the dominance and hegemony of patriarchy in society and culture.

Karenin, the husband of Anna Karenina is a patriarch, with his stress upon proper and transcendental masculine role performance. His conviction that sin has a price, makes him an "Oedipal man", implying the suppression of desire on the part of women for the stability of the status quo (Lucy, 1997). He reminds Anna that her failure to conform to patriarchy is a crime against God. Through him patriarchy is presented as a natural and universal truth. It serves as the main reference point. That is a typical way for any ideology to operate and seep to the very grain of individual and collective psyche (Eagleton, 1991). In spite of his occasional "ethical" (Lucy, 1997) stance, he remains a patriarch, though not without the alternative feminist perspective present in him. He Judges Anna for her deviation from patriarchy as the most depraved woman, a woman without religion, honor, and without heart. Anna's relationship with Vronsky makes her husband remember all the men betrayed by their wives; Menalaus, Daryalove, Poltavsky. This is how women are constructed as negative stereotypes and the image is perpetuated. He is not different from Hamlet, when he imagines women reductively and stereotypically by his declaration, "Frailty thy name is woman" (Shakespeare, 1982). He cannot see things from the perspective of his wife (Beauvoir, 2011). He grows anxious and decides to confront Anna in the name of patriarchal constructs of family, propriety, and sanctity of marriage and the future wellbeing of their son (Millet, 1977).

The fragmented and fractured subjectivity of Karenin is revealed when he forgives Anna at her illness. His subjectivity is marked by the presence of alternative micro-strands. His fractured subjectivity makes him occupy the third position where different strands co-inhabit horizontally without hierarchy. It is difficult to describe his

subjectivity under the either/or binary divide. He condemns his wife but forgives her when she seems closer to her death and looks after her daughter from Vronsky as if she were her own daughter. He means to control the sexuality of Anna in the name of the sanctity of family and her financial dependence upon him. However, he does not have the singular, unified patriarchal subjectivity of the duke in Browning's poem *My Last Duchess* (rpt.2001), who has his wife murdered for a far lesser lapse.

The dominant patriarchal ideology demands drastic actions from him in the face of this impossible situation. His fragmented self is in the way. It has the potential to reduce everything to the level of language games and play of words. All this shows subversion of the metanarrative by alternative micro-narrative strands and the subjectivity of Karenin to be fractured and fragmented.

Darya plays a feminine role as a married woman in a patriarchal society and culture. She believes in the binaries of masculinity and femininity and feminine role performance. She confines herself to her household duties and social obligations as dictated by the dominant patriarchal ideology (Greer, 1971). She has no desire to resist her placement. However, she is conscious of the double social and moral standards under patriarchy and knows that in a patriarchal culture, women have extremely limited options as suggested by Beauvoir (2011).

The discovery of Oblonsky's affair by Dolly is a moment of crisis for her. Her spontaneous surge of resistance to the dominant ideology is reflective of her pluralistic subjectivity. Though this aspect of her subjectivity remains suppressed as dictated by the dominant ideology. The alternative strand of feminist resistance comes to the surface and creates a crisis. She needs to be re-inscribed by the dominant ideology through persuasion and veiled threats (Eagleton, 1991). Ironically, Anna does this job of inscription of dominant ideology by reminding Dolly of the importance of family and love. Her modest strand of resistance is easily subdued and suppressed in the face of her realization of her own vulnerability and impotence. She is disgusted at her own humiliation, but she is aware of the power of status quo and the dominant ideology. She resigns herself to abject subjugation and accepts "the crumbs the male is willing to throw her" (Beauvoir, 2011).

Countess Lydia is the symbol of patriarchal normativity. She has a deep interest in national and religious activities and all their attendant constructs. She regards Karenin as a saint and a true patriot. She conforms to patriarchal laws and strictly believes in respective gender role performance. She does not approve, what she terms as Karenin's too tolerant attitude towards Anna. She wants him to make use of his prerogative as a husband and to control Anna

Vronsky, by default, shows the double standards of patriarchy. His initial involvement with Kitty is not more than flirtation, which is a normal thing in a patriarchal culture. Since laws are framed by fathers and sons, (Beauvoir, 2011) Vronsky knows that he can get away with anything. Patriarchy does not find his conduct morally culpable. A woman would have been condemned for a lesser lapse. The patriarchal society rather admires a man for such manly adventures. Vronsky is the most "anti-Oedipal" (Lucy, 1997) person in the novel and also becomes the cause of its revelation of double standards, one for the men and another for the women. Anna also confronts him on his reference to the honor code which is not compromised for sharing whores with his colonel. His deep sense of degradation and guilt is the result of the residual impact of the dominant social and cultural ideologies. With the reassertion of the dominant patriarchal ideology, he finds himself dwarfed and humiliated by the greatness of Karenin. Karenin emerges as the arch symbol of the dominant ideology and Vronsky, like Anna, is guilty of trying to undermine the "true" ideology. Like Lady Macbeth, (Shakespeare, 1984b) he grows schizophrenic and almost kills himself. This reveals his fragmented and fractured subjectivity.

The Alternative Micro Feminist Narratives of Resistance and Schizophrenic Subjectivities

This section means to identify the submerged alternative micro feminist narratives of resistance. In the start, Anna is a patriarchal woman, interpellated by the dominant ideology, with singular, fixed subjectivity of a patriarchal woman. She performs her prescribed role and duties as a wife and mother, confining herself to the feminine side of the divide (Millett, 1977). As a patriarchal woman, she has no scope for choice or agency. She wants Dolly to accept Stiva's extra-marital liaisons in silence in deference to the main fixed reference points and constructs of patriarchy (Friedan, 1982). Her suppressed feminist core is brought to the surface with her meeting with Vronsky in the absence of her husband. The absence of husband tends to uncover "unsuspected possibilities" (Beauvoir, 2011). The assertion of her alternative self represents an opportunity to make a choice and have agency. This brings out her submerged alternative feminist strand of subjectivity. Her deep and prolonged implication into dominant ideology produces in her the sense of guilt and shame due to the dissonance between her inner voice and the implicated patriarchal self. (Lucy, 1997).

Her defiance of patriarchy and implication into it makes her schizophrenic. Her fragmented self is the cause of her lies and deception and the resultant sense of shame and guilt. She inhabits two worlds. She is married to Alexis, but she is carrying the child of her lover Vronsky. She lives with marriage and also rejects it by going for

sexual freedom and revolt as described by Greer (1971). She no more performs her prescribed role as a patriarchal woman. She resorts to lies and deception because of her ambivalent position. She is schizophrenic and is both Oedipal and anti-Oedipal (Lucy, 1997). She wants to suppress her desire but also wants to affirm it. She wants to live with her husband and son like a conventional wife but also wants to break away from oppressive patriarchy and have her life of choice with Vronsky. Patriarchal oppression does not give her an opportunity to choose. Her husband and her lover become the two metaphors of the hegemony of dominant ideology and choice respectively. This reveals her multiple and fluid subjectivity. Like a truly oppressed woman she is required to confirm or face exclusion and rejection.

She thinks and speaks like a woman with a double vision, reflecting the pervasiveness of patriarchal totality (Derrida, 1976). She blames her husband for smothering and stifling her true self. She calls patriarchal laws as stupid laws. Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1982) like, she is torn between “to be or not to be”. She becomes the ultimate metaphor of undecidability in the face of multiple pulls of her rhizomatic and schizophrenic subjectivity. As an Other she cannot express her point of view or reject the society and its ideological institutions. The overwhelming power of the hegemonic ideology makes it impossible for her to express her suppressed unconscious (Spivak, 1987). At one moment she decides to break away from patriarchal shackles, the very next moment she breaks into tears to realize her shame and despair in a patriarchal society and culture. She is torn into two halves in the face of either/or situation. Her realization of the power of status quo and dominant ideology (Eagleton, 1991) makes her think of her own death. Overarching schizophrenia and dissonance make her think of death as a solution. The power of dominant patriarchal ideology does not leave divorce an option because of its attendant implications.

Portia like (Shakespeare, 1984a), Anna is conscious of the fact that laws are made by the husbands and the sons (Beauvoir, 2011). The laws of divorce operate against women. The impact of dominant ideology creates in her a sense of guilt and sin and she is afraid of being thrown out of her husband's house and disgraced (Friedan, 1982). According to patriarchal laws, a proven guilty woman cannot remarry even after divorce. In the face of the impossibility of getting a divorce, she is forced to go into self-imposed exile. She is rejected by the 19th-century Russian society, which represents the dominant ideology. She has been completely Othered (Beauvoir, 2011). In open defiance to the patriarchal norms and values she goes to the theatre, a symbol of dominant culture and an enforcement organ. She thinks she can take on the society singlehandedly. She underestimates the hegemonic power and absolute control of the dominant ideology. She is marginalized, Othered and humiliated by everyone at the theatre. Patriarchy is in absolute control of social and cultural spectrum. She stands rejected by patriarchal society. The same thing happens to Helene in *War and Peace* and she kills herself (Tolstoy, rpt. 1957). This shows that the ideological institutions are as much effective as the state power apparatus. She can neither resign nor combat against patriarchy (Woolf, 1975). Excluded and marginalized, she throws herself before a moving train and finishes her life. The hegemonic patriarchal narrative holds Anna herself responsible for her tragedy. The hegemonic patriarchal narrative presents her as evil and devilish for her non-conformity. It presents her tragedy as the retribution from God. Interestingly, all men continue to have fun with women and participation in society without any problem or discrimination (Beauvoir, 2011). The alternative feminist micro-narratives hold repressive patriarchy responsible for her tragic death and the silencing of her voice. The exclusive, discriminatory double moral standards of patriarchy push her towards her death. Seen from this perspective, the tragic death of Anna becomes the metonymy of eternal repression of women, “the cutting attacks” and also the ultimate resistance to patriarchal ideology (Spivak, 1987). A husbandless woman has to immolate herself. However, it unhinges patriarchy's embodied power and stable position by its mere challenge and defiance. She ceases to be a “woman” and “exits from patriarchy” becoming the first martyr of feminism (Humm, 1994).

Also, Vronskaya does not subscribe to patriarchy and its norms. The death of her husband has given her a bit of freedom and choice. She is quite into expression of women's body experiences (Irigaray, 1985). She is for the absolute affirmation of desire, which she labels as love. Her “anti-Oedipal” (Lucy, 1997) conduct leaves her patriarchal sons ashamed and embarrassed of their mother. She is a woman of agency and does not perform her proper role as prescribed by dominant patriarchal ideology. However, her long immersion into dominant ideology stops her from open defiance of the patriarchal ideology as hinted by Morey & Yaqin (2011). She has the same advice of “burdensome hypocrisy” (Beauvoir, 2011) for Anna.

Kitty, though consciously a patriarchal lady, has a feminist unconscious streak of resistance. She feels disgusted and ashamed to see that women are not more than commodities in a patriarchal world. She resolves to extricate herself from the dominant world of men. Vronsky's betrayal of Kitty puts her on the path of resistance towards patriarchy. She even thinks of rejecting marriage and love. She finds the notion of female social and economic dependence oppressive. She is miserable that the dominant patriarchal ideology pushes single women towards humiliation and shame because of their dependent status. This only confirms her fluid identity and fragmented self. Her implication into the dominant patriarchal ideology makes her realize the centrality of marriage and family. Many female characters in the novels of Woolf do the same because of immense social and cultural pressures.

Woolf has also represented *Mrs. Dalloway* as a similar suppression of women (2013). Kitty learns her lesson and undergoes a transformation and becomes more of an “ethical woman” (Lucy, 1997) than a patriarchal one.

Chilton lives in an open defiance of patriarchy. She does not perform her proper role as dictated by patriarchy. She is in control of her sexuality and has liaisons outside marriage. She openly defies patriarchy and wants a divorce from her husband to live with her lover Pierre. She is a person with agency, defends her conduct and questions patriarchy and its laws, which in her opinion, are discriminatory and operate against women.

Betsy is a married “society” woman. She is for freedom and an opportunity for free choice even for women. She is not for arranged marriages in the name of reason or social considerations. All these female characters stand for the alternative voices which subvert the dominant ideology and mean to challenge and undermine patriarchy.

Conclusion

The exhaustive analysis of *Anna Karenina* in the light of the selected theoretical framework has shown that though apparently the novel projects patriarchy as the normalized truth, it is not the only one overarching metanarrative or “totality”. The analysis has shown that the text has multiple alternative micro feminist narrative voices which challenge and undermine the dominant narrative, without blending with each other. The study has also shown that the subjectivities of people are multiple, pluralistic and self-differentiated. The study has also shown that the novel projects perspectivism and pluralism (Derrida, 1976).

The apparent dominant patriarchal perspective holds Anna herself responsible for her tragedy due to her deviation from the patriarchal normativity. Anna’s refusal to confine herself to the stereotypical frame and ghetto, manufactured by the dominant patriarchal ideology pushes her towards agony and schizophrenia, resulting in Anna’s tragic death. From the alternative feminist perspective of resistance, the patriarchal repressive and discriminatory laws, become the cause of the tragic death of Anna. The suicide of Anna emerges as the ultimate metaphor of postmodernist schizophrenia and feminist resistance and has shattered faith in the stable and fixed subjectivities. It has questioned and subverted the absolutist position of patriarchy. In the face of the presence of multiple alternative micro-narratives, it is difficult to term the novel as patriarchal or feminist. The text is shown to be marked by rhizome, multiplicity, pluralism, undecidability, and schizophrenia. The text is open to multiple interpretations. Finally, the study has also shown that the idea of a unified, centered and fixed subjectivity/identity is a myth. The existence of multiple narrative strands makes the otherwise “classic realist” novel as a split, dispersed herald of postmodernist pluralism and multiplicity and deconstructionist play, “subverting the proffered hierarchies” (Barry, 1987).

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