

Tolstoy's Anna Karenina: There is no Light at the End of the Tunnel.

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The aim of the artist 'is not to resolve a question irrefutably but to compel one to love life in all its manifestations and these are inexhaustible' so says Tolstoy. And further that "if I were told that I could write a novel in which I could indisputably establish as true my point of view on all social questions, I would not dedicate two hours to such a work; but if I were told that what I wrote would be read twenty years from now by those who are children today and that they would weep and laugh over it and fall in love with the life I would dedicate all my existence and all my power to it"-1. And this is exactly what Tolstoy has done with his great creation called **Anna Karenina**. Almost even after hundred and thirty-five years of its publication it captivates every generation who dares to enter its magnetic field. After coming out of it , after being crushed with Anna and getting wrecked with Vronsky, we emerge with Levin a sad, and even if not wise, then of course sympathetic with those beautiful lives no longer in tune with life.

Anna Karenina is a hymn to life, the Iliad and Odyssey of a woman's heart. Tolstoy is deeply aware of the continuity of life. Life actual, everyday life with its essential concerns of health and sickness, work and recreation and its intellectual preoccupations with philosophy, science, poetry, music, love, friendship, hatred, passion – runs its regular course, independent. **Anna Karenina** stands testimonial to the said belief of Tolstoy.

"However trite it is to say so, there is only one negative quality needed for everything in life, particularly in art—not to lie. In life, lying is nasty but it does not destroy life, it smears it over with its nastiness.....but in

art lying destroys the whole chain and everything crumbles to dust”² Tolstoy’s life was bound up with this anxiety, this search for the ‘inward truthfulness’ which is reality. And truth has appeared in the form of Anna asserting itself and it is only Levin who comes to realize it even after getting bewildered at its first sight.

Anna is nothing if not the sprit of this ‘inward truthfulness’ a truly great figure who could not be cast in the lying mould invented by society. And the moment she represses or tries to repress her inner truth i.e., reality, it erupts into a catastrophe—accuses, judges and annihilates her (self-punitive fantasy of death). Anna’s suicidal instinct is nothing but coming—to—the—surface of her hatred which turns inward and distortedly and exaggeratedly cruel revenge. However, the perspective of punitive fantasies, seeing Anna as the victim of external injustice in the form of outrageous moral or societal law, tends to prevent us from noting the submerged inner force that drives her to the final catastrophe. That inner force may be named as exist- essential angst.

Tolstoy sees the unconscious urges of human being as the only strongest agent of his/her continuity of life, and applies to events the law of necessity that he observes operating in the lives of individuals. It is never events themselves, however important and far—reaching, which interest Tolstoy, but the effect of the event on the individual and the latter’s contribution to the event. This is the perspective he employs while exploring and understanding the life of Anna.

Anna is the most important character not because she is the heroine or the central protagonist of the novel but because of her level of self – awareness and her sense of perspective. Hence, the quality of her suffering also is of different order because of the awareness that goes with it. She is endowed with a much wider consciousness, a much larger

sensitivity that response not only to the external world of fashion and aristocracy but also to the multidimensional aspects of love, hate, morality existential dilemma and their psychic sprigs in the soul. Her sensitiveness, scrupulousness and contentiousness can be illustrated from that very moment she steps on to the Moscow railway station, through her crucial soliloquies and in various interactions between her and other characters of the novel. Moreover, she is so highly imaginative that her experiences are more vivid and yield deeper insight. Add to this list intelligence, vitality, warm—heartedness and an unshakable sense of her own individuality and one can have a rough sketch of what one can call ‘existential virtues’.

The existential struggle to have one’s own identity, to assert one’s individuality and the desperate fight to exist as a separate entity appears in all its intensity in Anna. She is the woman who after a sudden awakening and acute introspection realizes the falsity and hollowness of her position as a wife. She, then, rebels against the existent moral codes and social norms, which denies her the oxygen of freedom that nourishes individual self. The hardship and suffering involved in fighting against an established order, the shattering experience of the loss of identity and the resultant crisis—that makes the hard core of the life of Anna Karenina. Her’s is an existential struggle of an individual who happens to be a woman ---especially a woman –against the hostile environment. Her bruised self in this crusade withdraws into her private world where darkness is the natural element. The depth and power of her feeling incapacitates her to inhabit the normal plain of work—a—day world. And when there comes a choice between death and meaningless existence her decision becomes easy.

In more or less a similar frame of mind Tolstoy spells out his view to escape this terrible sense of meaninglessness thus: “The first method of

escape is that of ignorance...The second method of escape is that of epicurianism...The third method of escape is through strength and energy. It consists of realizing that life is evil and senseless, and of destroying it...using any available means; a noose around the neck, water, a stab in the heart, a train on the railway line...This is what a few consistent people do...”⁻³ And who is more consistent than Anna either in her glory or eclipse.

Here one many get intrigued by the question as to why Tolstoy selects a being of fair sex for projecting truth of life? The very fact of creating a woman as the central protagonist betrays his intention to heighten the poignancy of life experienced by him. Further, women serve to reflect the writer’s sense of isolation, fear, bewilderment and emotional vulnerability as a symbol not only of growth, life and fertility but also of withdrawal, regression, decay and death.

We experience a sense of the tragic when we witness something fine being broken or bruised. And who would go smiling without being depressed after having a close look at the dark recesses of Anna’s heart. We cannot perceive her true self with the hackneyed eyes of custom and habit. When we see her through the hundreds of pairs of eyes we see nothing but a glorious ablazing soul breathing life into all those who simply behold her. One of the admirers of Tolstoy, John Forest (1887) wrote to him: “Anna Karenina—alas, poor, brilliant, desperate Anna, what a wreck she made of life! And what a wreck she could have left me...”⁻⁴. Tragedy is ‘a state of thing in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in catastrophe when carried out’ says Hardy, the great explorer of human soul. In the case of Anna ‘the state of things’ is the societal code of conduct meant only for woman and her natural aim or desire’ is to achieve fulfillment as a woman but more so as an individual which the

society will not allow her at any cost. In this confrontation between her 'self' with what is not self she comes across the existential question which when faced threatens either sanity or life.

At the very outset of the novel Tolstoy has created an ambience of disorder and before we hardly recover from it when we are struck by a sense of fatality. The novel begins with "the Oblonsky home was in turmoil". It is a brief sentence full of foreboding. Anna Karenina comes to Moscow to reconcile the Oblonskeys, but at the very same time her own life is shattered.

Anna is an 'exceptional woman' even in the eyes of the stern and diehard moralist like Levin. She captivates all. One of the socialites and admirers of Anna, Princess Myakaya rightly observes that "is it her fault that everyone falls in love with her and follows her about like her shadow?"⁵. Her whatness, her soul leaps to embrace all those present to her from the vestment of her appearance. A mere girl like Dolly can comprehend that, "all the outward manifestation of her personality were merely frame; she herself—simple, unaffected, exquisite and at the same time gay and vivacious—was the only thing to be seen."⁶. And anyone who merely beholds Anna is sucked into her orbit of all pervading warmth and tenderness. Such is the magnetism of her personality. It is said that character or personality is that essence in wo/man which besieges one at the very first glance.

Anna married (arranged by her aunt) a man twenty years her elder and that without love, without even knowing what love was, and this proves to be a 'dreadful mistake' , when she grows as a woman capable of realizing her own inner urges.

Anna's husband Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin is the perfect type of the big official, a mixture of dignity and cowardice, who distrusts his heart and hides his feelings under a layer of perpetual irony. After eight years of married life Anna becomes painfully conscious of the deprivation her woman—self has suffered, because Karenin never considered her as a warm human being yearning for love and appreciating love. When she retrospects her past she cries out in bitterness that—"for eight years he has stifled me, has stifled everything that was alive in me, not once has he looked upon me as a live women in need of love. They (people) do not know that at every step he has humiliated me and been highly pleased with himself. Did I not try to love him, to love my son when I could no longer love my husband? But the time came when I could deceive myself no longer: I was alive and it was not my fault if God has made me a woman who had to love and live."⁷

Anna's marriage with Alexei Alexandrovich is a misfortune but an unaccomplished fact, but she is no less unfortunate in falling in love with Vronsky. Anna and Vronsky are drawn to each other by the sheer force of their emotion. The bond that binds them is a complicated one that has all the colors of love, anguish and pathos. Yet there world proved to be nothing but a half-lit world of silhouettes and dreams, with the leitmotif of pain, unreason and all consuming love running through in unmitigated terms. But all along Anna is plagued by a crisis of identity, an existential angst that defies easy solutions and answers. Towards the end she acts as a shadowy figure that moves in a seared landscape, desperately trying to hold on to reason, sanity and love.

Before her meeting with Vronsky Anna is but vaguely aware of her deprived womanhood, which now she realizes with all her might. After returning to Petersburg from Moscow when she meets her husband "an unpleasant feeling gripped, her heart when she saw those steady, tired

eyes--- But most of all she felt dissatisfaction with herself when she met him. It was an old familiar feeling, like a consciousness of playing false; she always had it when with her husband, but formerly she had disregarded it, now she was only too sharply and painfully aware of it.”⁸

Anna’s surrender to the all claiming love is not easy. Tolstoy has shown a fierce conflict raging between the conscious and unconscious self of Anna. Many a time we argue with our own unconscious self to arrive at a conclusion that must be acceptable to our conscious (social) self. This is what we find Anna doing after her meeting with Vronsky. “Why do I feel ashamed? She asked herself with indignant surprise...There was nothing to be ashamed of. And yet at just this point in her recollections her sense of shame increased as if on thinking of Vronsky an inner voice said to her, “warm, very warm hot.” What of it? What does it mean... Is it possible that my relations with that officer, a mere boy, are or could be anything more than my relations with any other acquaintance?”⁻⁹ In course of this silent discussion between her divided selves, she begins to doubt her very own being—Is it me or somebody else?...

Her love for Vronsky is passionate not in the traditional sense. It is the intensity of love in her heart for one whom she considers her soul’s mate that makes it genuinely passionate. Two souls coming closer cannot be set apart by man made norms and canons of morality. Soul defies barriers—earthly, social, and imaginary. The story of Heathcliff and Catherine proves it to the letters. All along we find in Anna the tension between love of death and resistance to it, between all absorbing love and the desire to retain one’s identity. Such maintenances are little short of miraculous. But the moment it gets unbalanced, results in disaster.

Anna the woman, celebrates her womanliness with Vronsky, yet she is unable to realize herself in totality. The sense of dependence first on

Karenin and then on Vronsky always blurs her self-identity which she desperately tries to visualize in her mind's eye. When faced with the question of her 'self', the anguished Anna has, precisely no certainty of anything, either love or religion. Tolstoy says: "Faith is the force of life. If a man lives then he must believe in something...Without faith it is impossible to live"⁻¹⁰.

In one of the letters to his friend N.N.Strakhov, Tolstoy wrote that, "You'll see that of Kant's three questions, what can I know? What ought I do? And what may I hope for? (in the **Critique of Pure Reason**) only the last one interests me—what can we hope for?...For every thinking man all three questions are inseparably joined into one—"what is my life, what am I?" And further, "my reason says nothing to me on three questions which can easily be expressed by one, what am I?...I call them questions of the heart".⁻¹¹

Faced with these questions of the heart Anna finds nothing but bleakness before and after yawning its dark fissure to engulf her. And she cries out desperately, "If I were able to be anything but his mistress..." Anna lives intensely and watches herself and the person who is now the pivot of her conscious and unconscious self intensely—the corollary is that she is forced to see everything in uncanny close-up. Suddenly, for her, the world appears as without meaning or coherence. She suffers jealousy, hatred, passion and love all in its extremity because she is so uncertain about herself, and there is no getting away from her 'self'. She thinks that "it would be impossible to conceive a situation in which life was not torture, that all people are born to suffer...And why not snuff out the candle when there is no longer anything to look at, when everything is hateful?"⁻¹² "Life is that which it should not be: evil. The transition into nothingness is the only thing sacred in life" says Schopenhauer and Socrates that, "the life of the body is evil and a lie.

And since the annihilation of the life of the body is a blessing we must long for it.” And it is this blessing Anna longs for.

Tolstoy unfolds the story of the restless heart of Anna Karenina, whom neither Karenin could save nor Vronsky could make happy, and she sped ‘like a lawless comet’ through a world sinking ever deeper into chaos. Here the simile is used to reflect the poignant beauty of Anna.

Anna ceased loving or had never loved Karenin but Vronsky too ceased loving or had never appreciated Anna and her truthful, freedom loving and fair-minded nature. This was something only Levin understood and it came to him as an amazing revelation. The soul of Anna is too mighty to be accommodated by the shallow heart of a Karenin or a Vronsky. Such a big heart is an appropriate habitation for itself. Alas! The vastness of soul has seldom been realized and accommodated on the earth.

At one place Tolstoy writes that ‘the only fundamental obligation of a human being is to be in tune with life.’⁻¹³ Before her meeting with Vronsky Anna was not happy, was incomplete but was in harmony with herself with the feeling of security and uprightness. The love of Vronsky brings happiness and fulfillment but she experiences the greater and greater lack of harmony with her ‘self’. The time comes when harmony with oneself is the most precious thing of all. And the happy or desperate Anna finds everything but this. The result is the final crisis.

Only the single chord is missing and all the orchestration of life of Anna is lying scattered and that single chord is an independent, objective self which in the long run, Rosie(The Guide), a miniature of Anna was able to achieve and was thus saved. It is not that Anna does not fight and struggle but fights in vain. At last she feels the necessity of resignation:

“Heart renounce yourself
We have fought for too long
Let my life end
We were never cowards
What could be done we did”.⁻¹⁴

In the words of John Forest **Anna Karenina** is a “free and far ranging novel” which embraced everything the author himself understood and observed “from a new, unusual and worthwhile aspect”. And this worthwhile aspect is to answer the question what is good—the essence of life? Tolstoy writes, “man cannot understand and express the objective essence of life—that’s the first thing. The essence of life—what makes us live—is the need for what we wrongly call good. Good is only the opposite of evil, as light is of darkness, and there is no absolute light and darkness, so is there no absolute good and evil. Good and evil are only materials out of which beauty is made-i.e. what we love without reason, without profit and without need.”⁻¹⁵ Perhaps Keats realized this when he says “Beauty is truth and truth beauty”.

Out of the continuity of life, out of the grey materials of life Tolstoy has created a splendid beauty called Anna that lingers on in our mind like the sweetest song that tells of saddest thought

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