Book review of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*

By
Omer Sultan Sayad

Research Associate CMJ University

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**Introduction**

Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, known in Anglosphere as Leo Tolstoy, is one of the original moral-thinkers of nineteenth centuries. Born in Russia in 1828, Tolstoy was primarily a novelist and short story writer. Through his novels, he juxtaposed the crisis of family life with the aim to find an answer for the meaning of the life. Tolstoy was a preacher of non-violence and peace and his works directly influenced Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King – the two great non-violence preachers of the twentieth century.

Leo Tolstoy’s life went through different phases, as can be seen vividly in his autobiography trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*. Tolstoy was always in search of the meaning of life. In one his of the last novels *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the main character is desperate to find and comprehend the real meaning and purpose of life and only does so at the end of his life, thereby realizing it too late. The Ivan of the novel was the depiction of the novelist himself, who was always trying to ascend to the higher levels of meaning of life.

Tolstoy was so absorbed in mystifying the real meaning of life that he often tried to end his life by committing suicide. His ethical quest began in his childhood
and ended only on his deathbed. At last, he came to the conclusion that life must be spent in "developing a living relationship with the loving God".

In the words of Ernest J Simmons, "To put his conclusion (on the meaning of life) in very simple form: the purpose of life on earth is to serve not our lower animal nature but the power to which our higher nature recognizes its kinship. There is a power in each of us, he asserted, enabling us to discern what is good, and we are in touch with that power. Our reason and conscience flow from it, and the purpose of our conscious life is to do its will, that is, to do good. This is the purpose of life which Tolstoy finally accepted."

_Didactic_ is the word that sums up Tolstoy’s writings. The more he realized the truth about his existence, the more didactic he became. In his writings, especially those he wrote at the end of his life, he shared his experience with his readers about the meaning of life. What should one do with the life?, he answers it, "(Man's) life does not belong to himself or his family or the State but to Him who sent him into the world, and that he must therefore fulfil not the law of his personality or family or State, but the infinite law of Him from Whom he has come — and he will feel himself absolutely free from all human authorities and will even cease to regard them as able to trammel anyone." Quoted by Ernest J Simmons in Introduction to Tolstoy’s writing.

His other famous novels include _War and Peace, Resurrection, Hadji Murad, Family Happiness_ and the _The Forged Coupon_. Among these, _War and Peace_ is highly acclaimed and is considered till date one of the finest novels in the history of world literature. The author, however, considers _Anna Karenina, the one under review here_, his first true novel, which was written after _War and Peace_.

**A WORD ON TOLSTOY’S STYLE OF WRITING IN ANNA KARENINA**

James Meek, a well known writer and reporter, comments on the writing style of Tolstoy in _Anna Karenina_ in Guardian Newspaper:

“What is it about _Anna Karenina_ that gives it special status among the great novels? How is it that a sensational romantic tragedy of tsarist high society, interspersed with digressions into 19th-century Russian agricultural policy, written in a seemingly plain, straightforward style across 900 pages, still provokes both excitement and respect from readers as diverse as JM Coetzee, Jonathan Franzen and Oprah Winfrey, and lures Tom Stoppard to write the script for the latest of a dozen film adaptations? The book floats in some charmed section of the lake of literary opinion where the ripples from modernism and the ripples from Hollywood overlap without merging.”

Meek continues and says that the novel should be understood in metaphors, “It is more admired than learned from. _Anna Karenina_ couldn't be less like a conventional modern novel. Instead of a barrage of metaphors describing things in terms of other things that they resemble, Lev Tolstoy seeks the precise word for the thing itself. Instead of the solipsistic modern mode of events being experienced from the point of view of a single character, Tolstoy slips in and out of the consciousness of dozens of characters, major and minor. At one point he tells us what a character's dog is thinking.

“Tolstoy doesn't believe in "show, don't tell". He likes to show and tell. The teller, the
narrator of the book, is a formless, omniscient voice with no elaborate Rothian construct to justify his role. No first-person or free-indirect speech here. Even while we're in a character's head, it's the narrator who recounts the character's experiences through liberal use of such unfashionable phrases as "she thought", "he felt" and "it seemed to him that".

Tolstoy creates a space for the narrator's independence – the narrator is close enough to the characters to rely on them for his existence, but free enough to pass unchallenged judgment on their actions, and to tell us things about them that they don't know about themselves. The most powerful passages are those where Tolstoy slows time down to note each thought, gesture and feeling of Anna and her lover Vronsky, with a third entity present – the narrator – not only lodged deep in the two psyches, but standing back to tell us the ways in which one is misunderstanding the other.”

Regarding the finer details of the novel, Meek has this to say, “Each time I reread Anna Karenina, picking my way past the attics and cellars and rusting machinery of Tolstoy's obsessions and prejudices, a new layer of his craft emerges, to the point where, for all my admiration of Joyce, Beckett and Kelman, I begin to question whether the novel form isn't too artisanal a medium for the surface experimentation of the modernist project ever to transcend the flexing of space and time that apparently conventional language can achieve in the hands of a master.

“I'd noticed before that Tolstoy, whose characters spend so much time in Moscow and St Petersburg, barely describes these cities. Reading Anna Karenina again, I see that it's more extreme than that; urban buildings and landscapes are practically invisible, whereas the countryside is described in exquisite detail.

“To Tolstoy the city is a static, artificial place. It is as if he does not believe cities are permanent, as though he feels that if he ignores them, they'll go away. It turns out that everything Tolstoy cares about, everything he describes taking place outside the character's heads, is alive and moving, in the non-human world of dogs and horses and leaves as in the human world. No human action is too small to be recorded: Karenin's knuckle-cracking, Anna screwing up her eyes, Vronsky touching the ends of his moustache. The characters are always smiling, frowning, blushing, twitching, fidgeting, touching, kissing, bowing, sobbing, and deconstructing these signs in each other. They come to us alive with intentionality, describing themselves in movement, waltzing through the ballroom, trudging through the marsh after wildfowl, racing horses, cutting hay.

“As busily as Tolstoy's creations move through space, so plausibly they move through time. How hard it is in narrative fiction, be it novel or film, to represent the chaotic reality of the passage of time, when the way a person acts or thinks one moment doesn't necessarily have a direct connection to the way that person acts or thinks 10 minutes later, or the next day, or for the rest of their life. No other novelist I can think of takes the risks Tolstoy does with the readers' understanding of what his characters are by allowing the characters to be so true to the emotions of each particular moment, even when those emotions contradict the overall portrait. The most odious characters are never beyond momentary redemption, and the most admirable characters must endure patches of vileness.”
TOLSTOY’S MASTERY OF UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

There is something called universal language in the dictionary of literature, where the author wants to tell his or her story in his or her language and yet the whole world, without knowing that language, understands and binds with it emotionally. Such is the case with Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. Meek’s analysis about its language are worth reading:

“All Tolstoy's mastery of time, space and language come together in a single moment in the middle of the book, when Anna's estranged husband Alexei Karenin, a dry, stiff government minister, and her lover Vronsky, a handsome young cavalry officer, meet beside the bed where Anna lies gravely ill after giving birth to Vronsky's child. Grief-stricken and ashamed, Vronsky is covering his face with his hands; Anna orders her husband, who is also weeping, to pull the hands away and expose her lover's face. With that gesture, Anna effects a reversal in the status of the two men. Vronsky, who had despised Karenin because he wouldn't fight a duel, is now humiliated and dishonoured; Karenin, flooded with forgiveness for everyone, wins back Anna's respect. In that moment of time, with Anna seemingly dying, the transformation is quite real. But time shifts, and the old reality comes back. Anna gets better and hates Karenin more than ever for his forgiveness. Vronsky restores his honour by shooting himself (he misses). The arc of Anna's destruction resumes. In the novel there are no turning points, only points, and characters travelling through them.

For a spacious novel so concerned with families there's a mysterious absence at the heart of *Anna Karenina*. The heroine has no childhood. She comes equipped with a son, a dull older husband, a brother, friends, a place in high society, but no past, no younger self. There is no description of how she came to be married. Her parents are, presumably, dead, and are never mentioned. She is fully formed, ready to fall in love with the dashing Vronsky.

It's not just Anna. Most of the other principal characters have no forebears on the scene. Levin was, like Tolstoy, orphaned at an early age. Vronsky's mother is occasionally present but when we first encounter him Tolstoy quickly tells us: "Vronsky never knew family life."

THE MESSAGE OF THE NOVEL

James Meek has a unique take on Anna Karenina when it comes to the underlying message it presents to the readers. Meek warns us not to compare it with Romeo-Juliet stuff, rather wants us to ponder on the deep meaning of family life. He says, “The tragic consequences of the pursuit of love for love's sake, in defiance of the rules laid down by one's peers and one's family, is an eternal story, and that story is in *Anna Karenina*, but that story is not, by itself, the book Tolstoy wrote. *Anna Karenina* is no *Romeo and Juliet* story of star-crossed teenagers unjustly destroyed by their elders' cruel laws, but a story of adults vexed by boundaries. It is the portrayal of a clash between an old world of rigid religious codes, duels, fixed gender roles and strict class division and a new world of divorce, separation, custody battles, women's self-determination and uncertain moral rules.

It's not that Tolstoy sympathizes with high society's mixture of moral outrage and
gladiatorial blood lust over Anna and Vronsky's affair. While it's true he allows Anna not a moment of sexual pleasure, he had censors to contend with, and makes it clear how unsuitable a partner for Anna her husband is. As the book goes on, in step with Tolstoy's increasing religiosity and his disenchantment with the project, he does put an increasing and sometimes oppressive emphasis on women's role as mothers. But none of this means he ever loses compassion for or patience with the painful, intricate detail of Anna's dilemmas.

Anna's love for Vronsky is a nobler affair than the infantile sexual consumerism embodied in Stiva Oblonsky, the emblem of modernity. Yet for Tolstoy the line between sexual freedom and sexual greed is not a clear one. He looks ahead to the era we live in now, where the dragon of sexual repression has been slain and sexual freedom prevails, and where, better as life is, we haven't rid ourselves of the reasons Anna throws herself under a train. A woman may still marry a man she doesn't love, still feel shame and guilt for having an affair with someone else, still hate him for forgiving her, still (more rarely, certainly) lose custody of her son, still find that people she thought were her friends side with the husband, and still find that the man for whom she left the husband, the man she loves sincerely and passionately, doesn't understand her at all.”

James Meek concludes his analysis by commenting about Tolstoy’s feeling of love and desire. “I'm not sure Tolstoy ever worked out how he actually felt about love and desire, or how he should feel about it. He was torn between compassion and moral rigour, between lust and self-denial, between loving his wife and being bored by her. His uncertainty is reflected in the dual portrayal of his wife in Anna Karenina – as the virtuous, somewhat frumpy Dolly, worn out by childbearing, like the woman his wife was when he was writing the book, and as the feisty, pretty teenager Kitty, like the woman his wife was when he married her. They must have seemed to contradict each other, yet each was true to her time; and Tolstoy, for all that he was a master of time, was only a slave to truth.”

**SUMMARY**

The novel Anna Karenina is the blueprint of Leo Tolstoy’s life, personified through the character of Konstantin Levin. As goes the saying that you should write what you know, same holds good for Anna Karenina.

The novel revolves two characters: Anna Karenina, the titular character, and Konstantin Levin, who is largely based on the real life of Tolstoy himself. The two storylines run parallel to each other and Tolstoy juxtaposes them elegantly to show the two different lifestyles, two different families with their joys and sorrows – the pastoral living and urban living.

Anna Karenina is married to Alexei Karenin, a statesman, happily and both have a young son, Seryozha. She enjoys her life with her small family and had no thought of leaving them until she meets dashing Count Vronsky, who gets infatuated with her at the very first sight. Though Anna tries to resist the temptation of having extra marital relations with Vronsky, succumbs to her desires and ultimately leaves her first husband and then eventually committing suicide.
The second storyline of Konstantin Levin is connected with that of Anna’s, though remotely. Levin is refused by Kitty, the sister of Stephan’s wife, whom he loves very much. Stephan is Anna’s brother. Kitty is in courtship of Vronsky and both are about to get married before Vronsky meets Anna. Thus the relation between Anna and Alexie, Vronsky and Kitty, Levin and Kitty get spoiled all due to one man.

Ironically, Anna convinces Darya, Stephan’s wife and Kitty’s older sister, to forgive Stephan who has been unfaithful to her by flirting with his French maid. As the story unfolds, Anna herself gets smitten with Vronsky and had a relation with him that ends in adultery. Thereafter, a destructive chain of affairs sets in motion in her life which culminates with her suicide.

The parallel story of Levin goes like this. He withdrew to his country estate and is surrounded with melancholy. The wounds that sprung at the very thought of Kitty keep chasing him. He tries hard to forget in the soothing and serene atmosphere of pastoral living and ultimately realizes and appreciates the peace of country living.

The juxtaposing of life style of the Karenins and the Levins is to bring home the point that how different families live with their joys and sorrows. The idyllic, pastoral living of the Levins is at each step contrasted with the indolent, corrosive miser of the Karenins.

Though the length of the novel is questioned by many readers, however, it needs to be considered with the dull, monotonous and meaninglessness of life and is deliberately done to accentuated it.

THE BEGINNING, THE CLIMAX AND THE END

The novel opens at the Oblonsky household in Moscow. Dolly has caught Stephen, her husband and Anna Karenina’s brother flirting with his French maid, and now she's planning to leave his home, as she “can’t tolerated all this”. She has come to know that the affair has been going on for the past some time. She now doubts very much, the character of Steva, Stephen’s nickname, and can’t reconcile living with a person who has flirting character.

At this troubling juncture of Stephen’s life, his sister Anna Karenina, wife of Alexis takes a train from Petersburg to Moscow in order to reconcile between his brother Steva and his wife Dolly. Stephen is very optimistic that her sister, as a good counselor, will reconcile him with his wife.

Anna arrives at the train station with Countess Vronsky, an elderly woman. The Countess is accompanied with his son Alexis Vronsky, who immediately gets infatuated with Anna Karenina. Interestingly, Anna’s husband is too named Alexie in the novel. The author at the very beginning gives a slight hint: a drunken guard is crushed to death underneath. Here the guard has lost his senses by drinking and getting killed, however, at the end of the novel, Anna has lost her senses by leaving her first husband and her near-worship to the second one and ultimately drunken by
the wine of her youth and beauty, she kills herself by coming in front of a running train.

The reader is left in a lurch at the very thought of courtship between Vronsky and Anna. There are few reasons for that. First of all, Anna is a married woman and living happily with her husband. Secondly, she has a son whom she loves dearly and seems that she won’t leave her to follow her passion and desire. Add to this that Vronsky is already in a relation with Kitty, Dolly’s sister, and are about to get married. It also needs to be kept in mind that it was Anna who assured Dolly about end of Stephan’s relation with his maid.

As it is rightly said and worth repeating cliché that Love is blind, and both Vronsky and Anna turn blind and throwing morality and family relations to winds marry each other. The parallel story of Levin is full of melancholy. After being rejected by Kitty, he lives in a pastoral setting, peacefully, though languishing for her.

After saving her brother’s marriage, Anna heads back to Petersburg. On the way, when she takes a break, Vronsky bums into her. He has been pursuing her from Moscow. On seeing Vronsky’s obsession with Anna, Kitty falls ill. At first Anna tries to make Vronsky understand that Kitty is a good lady and he should marry her. But Vronsky was hell bent and was so obsessed by Anna’s charm that he would except no life partner other than her.

One night, Karenin, Anna’s husband, suspects that her wife is having an affair with Vronsky. He asks a number of questions to Anna, which she dodged tactfully. Since that night the happy family life of Karenins was irrevocably altered.

The news of Anna-Vronsky affair spread in whole Petersburg. It became the talk of the town and most of the people considered it an extra-marital affair, as Anna was still in the marriage contract of Karenin and he was deliberately delaying to give her divorce. During a horse race, which was attended by Anna and Karenin, Vronsky made an error, which results in breaking his horse’s back. At this juncture, Anna freaks out at this, which irritated Karenin a lot and all his suspicions turned correct when heading towards the home Anna blurts out the truth of the whole matter. To save his face, Karenin asks Anna to maintain her appearance with him in the society.

Here, Kitty meets Levin’s brother Nicholas, a drunkard, and there she befriends a young woman named Varenka, who is very generous and is taking good care of Nicholas. Kitty is very much impressed by her character and morals and decides to emulate her. However, this plan didn’t work for Kitty as an impoverished painter falls in love with her.

Kozyshev, Levin’s half brother visits him for the summer. He is an intellectual, a writer who criticizes Levin for shirking his administrative duties. Levin is sick of bureaucracy of the local council and wants to push agricultural innovations on his own estate. Dolly, Stephan’s wife, and her children also went to the country and are residing close to Levins’. Dolly pays a visit to Levin during her stay in the country and asks Levin to propose Kitty, her stay. But Levin keeps himself busy, both physically and mentally with the farm work.

In Petersburg, Karenin makes it a point that he makes life difficult for Anna and Karenin and therefore refuses Anna’s request for a divorce. He writes to Anna, who had been living separately, to return to Petersburg and to repent for her misdoings.

Anna is very confused with her life and is at her wits end as to what to do. She is in a big fix for Karenin is refusing to give her divorce and Vronsky is pressing her to ask for a divorce so that the society may accept them as a couple. As all the three
characters: Anna, Karenin and Vronsky live separately, Anna manages to arrange a meeting with Vronsky to discuss her problem. Both can’t make it out what to do. In this desperate situation, Anna decides to go to her family’s country estate. Both Vronsky and Anna continue their affair their.

The story turns more ugly and complicated when Anna reveals to Karenin that she is pregnant. One fine morning, Karenin catches Vronsky in the hallway of their country home. Karenin searches Anna’s desk only to find Vronsky’s letters to her. At this particular point of time, Karenin consults a lawyer and decides to give Anna a divorce.

As Karenin is preparing for a business trip, Oblonskys invite him to their dinner party. The dinner was fabulous but turns sour at the end, for Dolly asks Karenin not to divorce Anna, as it will make her a social outcast. This only rose bitterness in Karenin and he became determined to end his marriage with Anna.

While this is the state of affairs in Karenins’ family, Levin and Kitty, during their stay in the country, came closer to each other. The relationship between the two deepened by each passing day and eventually Levin proposes Kitty for marriage. She accepts and proposal.

Here Anna gives birth to a baby girls and insists deliriously to come to see her. Karenin finally comes to see her only to forgive both her and Vronsky and agrees to give her a divorce. But now Anna and Vronsky decides not to take the divorce and they dropped everything and head to Europe, leaving Karenin in the lurch.

Levin marries Kitty. Within months Levin realizes what family life is all about. Gradually both started loving each other dearly and developing a deep relationship of a married couple. The two together took good care of Nicholas, Levin’s brother, at his deathbed. Kitty becomes pregnant and comes to know it at the end of their stay with Nicholas.

In Petersburg, Karenin is finding it very difficult how to deal with the situation. He is finding it very difficult to answer his son Soryozha about her mother’s extra marital affair. Fortunately, he came across Countess Lydia, who is in love with Karenin and is willing to help him out of this quagmire. She tells Seryozha, eight year of age, that his mother is dead and he should forget her. Seryozha is shocked by this news but doesn’t believe Lydia. She further takes Seryozha apart from Anna when Anna writes to Karenin to see her son. However, Anna shows up at Seryozha’s birthday and spent some joyous moments with her son. But this didn’t go well with Vronsky. He is upset with Anna for missing her son. This creates a tension between the two. Anna blames Vronsky for letting her suffer alone while he is enjoying the same social status that he enjoyed before the affair. For Anna, she had turned a social outcast after news spread that she is asking a divorce from her husband, Karenin.

Gradually the wedge between Anna and Vronsky deepens and both are upset with the outsider status that they head back to the countryside. At this moment, Levin’s house is full of guests. Dolly, Anna’s sister-in-law, her children, Varenka (lady who met Kitty in a German spa), Kitty’s mother and Koznyshev (Levin’s intellectual brother). After some days, Oblonsky pays a visit to Levin and bring along a man named Veslovsky, who narrates the story of Anna and Vronsky affair, who are at that time just fifty miles away from the Levins’. Dolly on hearing this intends to visit Anna. Veslovsky, who stays with Levins’ flirts with Kitty and in a jealous rage, Levin kicks him out of his house.

Meanwhile, Dolly visits Anna and feels very uncomfortable throughout her stay. The house is full of expensive and luxurious items. Vronsky asks Dolly to talk
with Anna about asking divorce from Karenin. This will formalize their position in
the society and will give their children some kind of legitimacy.

Dolly is very much relived when she leaves Anna and Vronsky and heads
towards her home. She realized that more Anna clings to Vronsky, more he feels
chocked. Vronsky is busy with public affairs and has an important role to play in
Kashin Province elections. Levin too attends the same elections. Young liberals win
the elections.

As the elections end, Anna writes to Vronsky to see her immediately. Vronsky
complies with her wish and comes hurriedly. At this point Anna is quite sure that
Vronsky is getting tired of her and and writes to Karenin in desperation for a divorce.
Finally, Anna and Vronsky move to Moscow and settle down as a married couple,
though Karenin is slow with the divorce. Simultaneously, Levin too has moved to
Moscow and their stay extended due to the pregnancy of Kitty. Levin succumbs to the
luxurious living of the big city and gets sucked into drinking, squandering and
gambling.

What happens next is twist in the tale. Oblonsky asks Levin to meet Anna and
gets smitten to her straightaway. At this point Anna wonders why Vronsky is paying
no attention to her while an upright man like Levin gets easily trapped in her charm.
She is very angry with Vronsky for not caring for her as he used to. She laments that
to get Vronsky she left her son, social status and what not – but all in vain. Kitty is
very upset on knowing all this and gives birth to a healthy baby boy. Dmitri
(nicknamed Mitya), the family gave him the name immediately.

Meanwhile, Oblonsky heads towards Petersberg for two things: to find a job
and to meet with Karenin so as to speak about Anna’s divorce. There he sees Anna’s
son who has grown into a young handsome boy who has forgot the memories of her
estranged mother. Asking to have pity on his ‘former’ wife by giving her divorce,
Karenin decides not to. Thus the Anna-Vronsky relathionship is again caught in a
downward spiral.

Anna’s behavior is now very clingy. She is very anxious all the time and is
preoccupied the very thought that Vronsky is delaying to visit her because he is fed of
her. In desperation he commits suicide.

Then after two months, Koznyshev visits Levin via a train in which Vrosnky
is travelling to Serbia to fight in the Serbian Wars against Ottoman Empire. This is
Vrosnky own style of committing suicide for her life too has become meaningless
after the death of Anna.

Levin on the other hand, is spending a lot of time to solve philosophical
questions of ultimate reality and the real meaning of life. His quest comes to an end
when a peasant tells him that the purpose of life is “to live not for one’s own needs
but for God.” Thus he finally finds peace in her life and embraces his family
wholeheartedly.