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## A Comparison of Shared Themes in Anna Karenina and Swayamvaram

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### Abstract

This paper intends to focus on the shared themes in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and ONV's long narrative poem *Swayamvaram*.

Leo Tolstoy (9 September 1829 - 20 November 1910) is inarguably one of the most influential Russian writers, best known for his novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* (though in later life, he declared himself embarrassed by the latter). Tolstoy also authored numerous philosophical essays, novellas, short stories and plays, of which the most widely read are his fable-like short stories.

Ottaplackal Neelakandan Velu Kurup (27 May 1931 – 13 February 2016) is one of the foremost Malayalam poets and winner of the Jnanapith Award. He is widely admired for his

ability to paint the grim contemporary realities in beautiful lyrical verse. His works include short lyrical poetry as well as longer narrative poems *Ujjayini* and *Swayamvaram*, both focusing on deconstructions of mythological narratives.

### **Keywords**

Shared themes in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and ONV's *Swayamvaram*, Leo Tolstoy's themes, Ottaplackal Neelakandan Velu Kurup's themes, comparative analysis.

### **Introduction**

Separated by time, language and nationality, the world famous novelist-philosopher and Kerala's beloved poet do have certain areas where their ideals overlap. ONV's admiration towards Tolstoy is expressed both by his poem *Yasnaya Polyona* recounting a visit to the philosopher's resting place and the frequent references to Tolstoy aphorisms in his poetry( 'How much land does a man need').

*Anna Karenina*, often described as two novels in one, centers around the lives of the titular heroine and her cousin Levin. Both impulsive, passionate individuals facing serious complications in their love lives, Anna's story ends in tragedy while Levin manages to achieve domestic happiness after a series of issues of varying intensity. Here, the focus would be on Anna' half of the narrative.

Anna, trapped in a loveless marriage with dull diplomat Karenin, finds herself falling passionately in love with dashing Count Vronsky. Torn between love and duty, she finally ends

up eloping with Vronsky, abandoning her children (including a daughter born to her and Vronsky) in Karenin's hands. This amounts to social suicide as the couple finds themselves boycotted by the society at large. Anna suffers more than Vronsky in this regard, especially as she discovers Vronsky's passions towards her to be cooling. Driven to the edge by shaming and frustration and denied all access to her beloved son, Anna finally commits suicide in a moment of despair.

In *Swayamvaram*, ONV reworks the myth of Madhavi and Galavan to bring out the hypocrisy masked in the official narrative.

The sage Vishwamithra seeks to humble his young disciple Galava by demanding as dakshina 1000 horses created by the sea god Varuna. Galava seeks the help of king Yayati who, having neither the horses or funds to purchase them, tries to ward off the sage's anger by gifting him princess Madhavi.

Galava's initial plan to wed Madhavi to any king who can pay the 1000 horses as dowry goes awry as no king has more than 200 of such horses. As a result, Madhavi gets literally rented out to four kings successively for a year each, and finally given for an year to Vishwamithra in lieu of the remaining 200.

Returning to the palace, Madhavi finds everyone doing their best to pretend nothing had changed, and has a swayamvara arranged for her. The thoroughly disillusioned princess is amused to see in the rows of suitors the kings who had enjoyed her a year each. Refusing to go along with the denial any longer, she says straight out what was done to her, and

declares she has chosen to wed the forest, i.e., chosen a life of asceticism.

The two heroines, Anna and Madhavi, belonging to radically different worlds, are united in their victimization by and defiance to their contemporary societies. Both belonging to the upper strata of their societies, have their lives planned out for them, and at least initially, finds themselves unable to resist. Anna's rebellion comes in her decision to choose love over duty, unintentionally once more binding herself to another's will while Madhavi chooses independence, pledging herself to a simpler life, a life of freedom from all patriarchal norms and values.

### **Hypocrisy of the Society**

Tolstoy, while plainly disapproving of her choices, portrays the plight of Anna after her elopement in touching detail. Her actions naturally ruins her social standing. Vronsky has to face some stigma, but this is minute compared to the leper status assigned to Anna. She finds herself shunned as a fallen woman, by those whose morals are even more contemptible than hers.

Tolstoy makes the hypocrisy of this attitude plain in the narration – the reason Anna is shunned is not because she had a love affair. Almost all of her peers have done the same. What scandalizes them is Anna's refusal to hide it. The society is comfortable with the idea of carefully masked adultery. They accept it as a natural consequence of the arranged aristocratic marriages. But when Anna and Vronsky cast aside the mask, bringing the truth out into the open, it is perceived as an

attack on the very order of the society. That cannot be tolerated.

Madhavi, on the other hand, is troubled by the society's lack of reaction. She is no maiden, having borne five children to as many different men, but she is not considered as 'fallen' or impure as she did it at the command of her father, i.e, the person with complete power over her at the time. The society deals with this contradiction by simply ignoring it. As far as they are concerned, Madhavi is as suitable a bride as ever, nothing has changed. The psychological and emotional trauma the once so sheltered girl underwent is swept under the carpet, and she is expected to behave as she did before her ordeal.

In the course of the poem, it's remarkable that no one takes offense at the idea of trading Madhavi like gold. She is completely objectified, described as "gold that her father gifted the sage to buy some horses."(ONV, 990) The only protest comes in the internal monologue of her step mother Devayani, but even she does not voice any opposition, despite having the influence to check the king's plans. The sage Galavan is a bit disturbed at the idea of incurring Madhavi's curse, but that doesn't stop him from going through with his design.

The sage Viswamithra who set the entire plot in motion is also used to demonstrate the prevalence of hypocrisy. The sage who is sworn to abandon all worldly desires and pleasures is overcome by Madhavi's beauty and does not hesitate to enjoy her, as passionately as the worldly monarchs did.

## **Casting Aside of the Mask**

Both Anna and Madhavi are given the choice of going along with the society's fiction. Anna has the option of continuing as Karenin's wife in name only, while possibly carrying on a clandestine relationship with Vronsky. Madhavi can go along with the swayamvara, choosing any of the assembled kings as her husband, securing for herself the position and power of a queen. Both opt for the harsher, more honest path.

However, this moment of 'coming out' is portrayed in radically opposite manners. Anna's fleeing of the Karenin household is an affair of secrecy and shame (Tolstoy 429). She dares not face her husband once more and opts to escape in frantic haste. There is something sordid and desperate about it, and even Anna feels that later.

Madhavi's moment is, on the other hand, one of almost mystic glory. She stands before her tormentors with blazing eyes, calling them out in public, walking away from them in plain sight of the world which she has just renounced. She is clothed in an aura of divinity by her final image - walking away into the deep forest, clad in white, surrounded by thousands of butterflies which form a halo around her (ONV 997). How different from Anna's final image as a broken, defeated corpse in the train tracks!

Both Anna and Madhavi leave their worlds which have become intolerable to them, finally abandoning all the masks, forever. However, Anna's escape is into death, with the final desperate plea "*God, forgive me everything!*"(Tolstoy 757)

Madhavi is more fortunate, and hers is the escape of the phoenix, burning only to be reborn in glory.

## **The Urban vs the Rural**

Tolstoy has a keen appreciation for the unpolluted rural life, reminiscent of the Romantic Age's idealization of nature. In *Anna Karenina* it is to his rural refuge that Levin flees after his rejection by Kitty, it is to the countryside that Anna and Vronsky escape to avoid the society's shaming. Throughout, the rural landscape is portrayed as a place of refuge, of healing. A place where one can go to be free of the futile madness and masquerade of the urban elite.

Moreover, it is plain from the narrative structure itself which of the two worlds the author admires. Though much of the plot takes place in the city and other centers of civilization, none of the cityscapes are described. The focus is always on the characters and their internal worlds. But the author does lavish descriptions on the countryside - all of its myriad aspects. It is notable that everything allowed a descriptive portrayal is living – people, animals, plants. Tolstoy does not intend to waste descriptions on what he feels to be transient, man-made structures of the urban world.

Levin, who acts as Tolstoy's author avatar in the novel, evinces clear preference to the rural world of uncomplicated nature. A scene of his brother's visit reveals the difference between Levin's and the standard city dweller's attitude towards the rural world

*“To Konstantin Levin the country was the background of life, that is of pleasures, endeavors, labor. To Sergey Ivanovitch the country meant on one hand rest from work, on the other*

*a valuable antidote to the corrupt influences of town, which he took with satisfaction and a sense of its utility. To Konstantin Levin the country was good first because it afforded a field for labor, of the usefulness of which there could be no doubt. To Sergey Ivanovitch the country was particularly good, because there it was possible and fitting to do nothing.”(Tolstoy, 234)*

In *Swayamvaram*, a similar preference is clear. The cities, especially the royal palaces, are portrayed as gilded cages, filled with the frustration and tears of the occupants - especially the women. The kings' approach to Madhavi, except Useenara's, are described as the attack of a predator upon a fawn. The emptiness of the elite lives is something that becomes more and more apparent to Madhavi as the narrative progresses.

On the other hand, rural landscapes are described in loving detail, in soft and harmonious verse – Madhavi feels that the rural paths she travels through are the pulsing heart of nature (ONV 947). The rural folk Madhavi and Galavan encounters are portrayed as far more noble than the actual 'nobles.' Tribal hunter women standing guard over Madhavi, the hospitality of the indigents, and the kindness of the ascetic women in Viswamithra's ashram prove counter weights to the urban wilderness.

But this world is not safe, either – it is here that Viswamithra, the old ascetic who has renounced the world, decides to take Madhavi for himself. However, this is tempered by the mention that Viswamithra was once a king – a kshatriya expected to follow the ways of the world- before choosing this life. It is the embers of his past that flares into life and pollutes the purity of the forest.

Madhavi's deep attachment to the forest that develops over the year spent in the ashram is what drives her ultimate escape from the world that bound her. In the climax of the poem, in the swayamvara hall set in the wilderness, Madhavi declares her intention to become bride to none but the forest. She, like Levin, chooses to find her refuge in the heart of nature, a place where she can be free of the complicated web of ties that bind her. A place where she can be useful while still being herself.

### **Parental Abandonment**

This is another key theme in both works. Anna, in choosing her love for Vronsky, has to abandon not only Karenin, but her child as well- her eight year old son Seryosha. While Anna cannot feel anything towards her daughter she took with her, (the situation suggests post-partum depression to a modern reader, complete perversity to a contemporary reader), the separation from her son does give her pain. She sneaks in to see him against Karenin's wishes and is shown lavishing maternal love on an unrelated girl, Hannah, for she is forever forbidden from her own children.

*She laments that* "she was forever separated from him (Seryosha), not only physically but also spiritually, and it was impossible to remedy." Seryosha's own feelings are confused. He is, at the beginning, too young to understand what is going on, though he instinctually feels that there is something different about his mother, and acts "cold and shy"(Tolstoy, 183) towards Vronsky even before the affair is acknowledged by the adults. When she sneaks in to see him, he "understood that she (Anna) was unhappy and that she loved him."(Tolstoy, 532)

As the novel progresses and he grows older, the boy is shown suppressing memories of Anna and evincing clear admiration

towards Karenin, the parent he does have. However, after Anna's suicide, he is deeply affected and is shown weeping over her.

In *Swayamvaram*, Madhavi bears five sons to as many different fathers, and is forced to abandon them after her year is up. Though she feels nothing other than fear and disgust towards the kings, she is clearly pained at parting from the infants. At one point her internal monologue notes that "her heart is a cradle where four infants weep." (ONV, 992). At the *swayamvara* stage, she has the option to re unite with one of her children if she chooses the father as husband. However, the idea of life with one of them is too much of a price to pay, especially as she would have to choose just one of her children as well.

Madhavi herself experiences parental abandonment when her father hands her over to Galava. Madhavi's pain, disillusionment and bewilderment here is plain. On her first night with the sadistic Haryaswa, she reflects on her dreams of marriage, and the unquestioned faith she had in her father's love and protection. (ONV, 958). Haryaswa's actions are easier for her to tolerate than her father's and step mother's betrayal – at least the lustful king is a stranger and not one who was honor bound to keep her safe.

## **Conclusion**

A great writer does not emerge in isolation. They are the products of their society. Their works are shaped by the age they live in, their nation, and their backgrounds. As such, comparing a modern South Indian poet and a 19<sup>th</sup> century

Russian philosopher-novelist, it initially seems difficult to find common ground. Especially as one is a poet- lyricist and the other's opinion on poetry is "It is like dancing while ploughing." However, examining the works of each, it is possible to find some themes both authors choose to tackle:

- a) Hypocrisy of the society - What the society, especially the 'elites' perceive as right is not necessarily, or even often, right in a moral sense.
- b) Casting aside of the mask - the heroines opt to face the world as they are, no longer playing the role expected of them.
- c) The Rural vs Urban debate – Idealization of the rural (landscape and people) stand out in marked contrast to the unnatural urban world.
- d) Parental abandonment.- Whether voluntary/forced/both, this can only lead to pain, for the one acting and/or the one abandoned.

There are marked differences in the treatment of the theme, which owe their development to the temporal and cultural gap between the writers. The more modern ONV's outlook is likelier to coincide with our own. But in essence, the authors' philosophies seem to overlap in these themes, as the characters of the oppressed heroines desperate for freedom do.

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