

Female Characters And The Question Of Moral–Spiritual Freedom In The Works Of Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy

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Abstract: This article offers a comprehensive analysis of the ethical-aesthetic, axiological, and psychopoetic layers of the female characters created by Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy. In the novels *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Resurrection*, the spiritual quests of the female subject, her inner psychological dynamics, and her socio-moral position in society are elucidated from the standpoint of the dialectic of freedom and conscience. The study employs a comparative-narratological approach and a hermeneutic interpretation grounded in the analysis of interior monologue and subtext; it identifies the moral content of female images, the discursive expression of their spiritual experiences, and their aesthetic synthesis in artistic perception. As a result, the normative, moral, and humanistic functions of the female concept in Tolstoy's poetics are conceptualized on a scholarly basis.

Keywords: Tolstoy, female characters, freedom, morality, spiritual awakening, realism, spirituality, society, psychologism, balance.

Introduction: Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy's oeuvre represents the pinnacle of nineteenth-century Russian literary thought. His works are devoted to exploring the human psyche, moral choice, and the complex relationships between society and the individual. In Tolstoy's artistic thinking, the striving of the human being toward moral and spiritual perfection occupies a central place. The female characters he created, in particular, embody some of the most delicate artistic and philosophical manifestations of this process. In Tolstoy's works, women set the deepest measure of humanity. For the writer, woman is life itself, a symbol of affection, devotion, conscience, and suffering. In his works he portrays woman not as a mere victim of her social role but as an independent person standing at the center of moral awakening. For this reason, female characters in Tolstoy's oeuvre become an artistic mirror reflecting the conscience of society and of humankind.

For Tolstoy, woman is a metaphysical center that signifies human spiritual awakening. In his aesthetic-philosophical views, woman embodies spiritual purity, moral renewal, and freedom. As Berdyaev emphasized, "Tolstoy saw in woman the spiritual meaning of life,

and in man its external essence" [4]. Thus, through female characters the writer reads the entire moral history of humankind.

In Tolstoy's novels, women confront social inequality through the destinies they live out. Their tragedy lies not only in love but also in society's refusal to recognize their personal choice. For Tolstoy, a woman's suffering is a necessary stage in humanity's spiritual awakening. His protagonists grasp the truth through their mistakes and are purified through anguish.

Natasha Rostova in *War and Peace* — an emblem of spiritual awakening

The image of Natasha Rostova expresses the natural beauty of the human soul. She symbolizes devotion not only to love, but also to life, to people, and to the creative force. For Tolstoy, Natasha is "a woman who comprehends moral truth through a pure heart." The writer depicts her maturation not only through psychological but also through philosophical analysis. "The beauty of Natasha's life lies in the fact that she does not lose the clarity of her nature" [2]. Through this character, Tolstoy interprets woman as a source of ideal moral harmony. Natasha rises to the level of a strong personality who preserves human values while

passing through the trials of society. Through her, the author shows how a woman's spiritual purity becomes the measure of humanity's morality.

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In one of the novel's famous scenes, Natasha dances for the first time at the "White Night." In this episode Tolstoy depicts her natural beauty, her folk-like simple heart, and her pure joy: "While Natasha was dancing, no one had taught her this dance, yet without realizing it she passed through her heart the ancient movements of the people, their spirit and their music. It was as if she were expressing the beauty of her people, life itself."

This scene is interpreted as the beginning of Natasha's spiritual awakening. In the moment when she harmonizes with art, nature, and the spirit of the people, she discovers her "inner self." In this way, the writer conveys how a woman's heart rises to a level of moral awakening through naturalness.

Later, as Natasha passes through the trials of war, loss, and suffering, she comes to grasp the true essence of human values. The line "All at once everything became clear to her: the only truth in the world is love" becomes Natasha's philosophy of life. Through this, Tolstoy shows that a woman's spiritual purity, loyalty, and conscience are the highest measure of human morality.

"Anna Karenina" — a tragedy between freedom and conscience

In the novel *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy reveals, through artistic means, the dramatic clash between a woman, society, and conscience. As Anna struggles for personal freedom, she collides with the rigid rules of social morality. She chooses love, but this choice separates her from society. The idea that "in society it is not a woman's heart that is judged, but her appearance" [3] determines the moral center of the work.

Chicherin calls Anna's tragedy "a violation of the metaphysics of morality" [5]. Anna accepts love as the highest truth of the human being, yet society's pseudo-moral norms drive her toward ruin. As Rozhdestvensky notes, "Through Anna's death, Tolstoy exposed society's conscienceless morality" [6]. Thus, Anna Karenina becomes a symbol of the eternal conflict between women's freedom and social morality.

Katerina Maslova in *Resurrection* — moral salvation

and spiritual renewal

The image of Katerina Maslova represents the culmination of Tolstoy's moral-philosophical views. Although she is condemned by society as a "sinner," in fact she embodies a stage in the awakening of human conscience. "The resurrection of the human heart is the greatest victory" [7], says Tolstoy. Through her sufferings, Maslova comes to understand human dignity, and her relationship with Nekhlyudov is interpreted as a force that morally renews the person.

Gromov calls this image "a psychological model of moral rebirth" [9]. Maslova's life demonstrates the possibility of spiritual renewal independent of social environment. Through this work, Tolstoy urges the human being toward elevation by means of conscience, compassion, and forgiveness.

Tolstoy's approach to depicting women moves beyond classical realism into the stage of psychological realism. He analyzes the inner world of the person and the processes of the subconscious in depth. This level of psychologism allows the reader to feel spiritual transformations together with the protagonist. Kolesov calls this process "the inner metaphysical ascent of realism" [10]. For this reason, Tolstoy's female characters are not merely social types but complex constructions of the human spirit.

In Tolstoy's works, woman is not only a part of society but also a symbol that reveals the divine essence of the human being. The manifestation of woman through compassion, devotion, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness accords with the concept of Christian ethics. As Berdyaev wrote, "For Tolstoy, morality is the process of a person's self-understanding, and woman is the subtlest symbol of this process" [4]. Thus, for Tolstoy, female images serve as a spiritual link between the human being and the Creator.

Although a woman's social role was limited in Tolstoy's time, the writer portrayed them as individuals who think independently and make their own decisions. From the perspective of contemporary gender theory, this approach is also advanced. Tolstoy's women are not passive—they decide, choose a path, and listen to the voice of conscience. It is precisely this feature that distinguishes them from other female images in Russian realism.

Tolstoy places female images above the boundaries of nation, religion, or class. His women express the collective conscience of humankind. Therefore, in Tolstoy's oeuvre, female characters become a universal humanistic value that breaks through national borders. In Eikhenbaum's words, "Tolstoy's women are living mirrors of the human spirit" [8].

In Lev Tolstoy's work, female images are symbols of human conscience, moral awakening, and freedom. Natasha Rostova, Anna Karenina, and Katerina Maslova each embody different levels of human experience, social justice, and spiritual renewal. In Tolstoy's realism, woman is not a passive being but a force that spiritually awakens society, the aesthetic emblem of humanity's conscience.

Tolstoy interprets women not as standing in the shadow of men but as the moral heart of humankind. For this reason, in his oeuvre female images acquire universal significance from philosophical, religious, and humanistic perspectives.

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