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Comparative Study of *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*: Two Postmodern Women and Their Quest for Happiness

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, focusing on the psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions of their protagonists' pursuits of happiness. Despite the novels being 19th-century works, both Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina can be read through a postmodern lens, as women navigating rigid social norms, romantic illusions, and personal crises. Drawing from primary texts and diverse scholarly sources, the paper argues that both characters embody the contradictions of desire and societal expectations, making them timeless figures of feminine struggle and existential yearning.

Keywords: World Literature, Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, Romanticism, Realism, Suicide, Pursuit of happiness.

Introduction

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) are often paired in comparative literary studies for their shared thematic core: adultery, despair, and the disillusionment of women trapped in patriarchal societies. Both protagonists engage in extramarital affairs in their desperate quests for emotional and existential fulfillment. Their stories, though set in distinct cultural and social landscapes—provincial France and imperial Russia—echo each other in their tragic outcomes and internal struggles. Aswathy Cheriyan (2016) highlights that the depiction of suicide in both novels is not merely a plot device but a profound commentary on female agency and societal entrapment.

Emma Bovary's life is marked by a persistent dissatisfaction that leads her to seek meaning beyond the boundaries of her marriage. Her romantic expectations, shaped by literature, leave her ill-equipped for the realities of domestic life. Flaubert captures this duality when he writes, "*She wanted to die, and she wanted to live in Paris*" (Flaubert, 2010, p. 72). This yearning encapsulates her inner conflict between fantasy and disillusionment. Anna Karenina, likewise, experiences a profound emotional and existential crisis as she challenges the moral conventions of her time. Tolstoy presents this complexity with sensitivity, writing, "*All the diversity, all the charm, all the beauty of life is made up of light and shadow*"

(Tolstoy, 2002, p. 80), a reflection of Anna's internal duality and the tragic beauty of her emotional world.

This paper explores how Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, through their personal journeys and ultimate downfalls, reflect early expressions of postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives of romance, morality, and happiness. In reading these two novels through the lens of postmodern literary theory, particularly drawing on Toril Moi's *Revolution of the Ordinary*, we shift focus from deterministic readings to more nuanced explorations of language, identity, and social construction. What does happiness mean to Emma and Anna? How do they articulate and live their desires within the constraints of their social realities? By integrating historical, psychological, and philosophical perspectives, this comparative study reveals the enduring relevance of these two women's stories and the tragic grandeur of their longing for a better life.

Contextual Framework: 19th-Century Women, Postmodern Reading

Set in the 19th century, both *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* emerge from deeply patriarchal societies where women's roles were confined to marriage, motherhood, and social obedience. Within these constraints, both Emma and Anna pursue personal freedom and romantic idealism—acts that ultimately lead to their downfall. Their narratives, shaped by bourgeois French values and Russian aristocratic codes respectively, reflect broader societal expectations that equated female virtue with silence and sacrifice.

Emma Bovary's dissatisfaction with her mundane provincial life is intensified by her exposure to romantic novels, which feed her illusions about love and grandeur. As Flaubert writes, "*Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken*" (Flaubert, 2010, p. 32). Emma's crisis is not just emotional, but ontological—she does not know how to live meaningfully within the limitations prescribed to her. Similarly, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, though initially secure in her social position, becomes alienated once she pursues love outside the bounds of her marriage. In one of the most telling reflections, Anna observes: "*I'm not the same woman... I am afraid of myself*" (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 471), revealing her growing dissonance between internal desire and external identity.

A postmodern reading of these texts invites us to question the reliability of grand narratives—romantic, moral, or social. Toril Moi's *Revolution of the Ordinary* encourages literary analysis rooted in ordinary language philosophy, challenging us to see meaning as emerging from context and use, rather than from abstract universals. According to Moi, "*What matters is not that we interpret the world correctly, but that we learn how to live in it meaningfully*" (Moi, 2017, p. 12). This framework is particularly illuminating when applied to Emma and Anna, as both women fail to reconcile their internal languages of desire with the social scripts imposed upon them. Their tragic ends are not simply failures of morality, but the collapse of meaning in a world that offers no space for alternative subjectivities.

Thus, through a postmodern lens, both novels serve as early critiques of ideological rigidity. They do not simply recount the fall of adulterous women, but rather expose the structural impossibility of female self-realization within oppressive cultural frameworks. Emma and Anna become not only victims of their own illusions, but also of a linguistic and social order that cannot accommodate their longing for something more.

Character Study: Emma Bovary vs. Anna Karenina

Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina are separated by culture and geography, yet share a profound dissatisfaction with the lives prescribed to them by their societies. Their characters are constructed as both victims and agents—women who seek love and meaning in a world that equates female virtue with submission and domesticity.

Emma is introduced as a woman whose ideals are shaped by sentimental novels: *"She confused, in her desire, the sensualities of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners with delicacy of feeling"* (Flaubert, 2010, p. 52). Her longing for grand passion leads to a series of affairs and financial ruin, all of which expose the dissonance between her fantasies and the mundane bourgeois world she inhabits. As Harold Bloom (2006) observes, Emma is "a woman for whom the imaginary overwhelms the real," and her tragedy lies in her inability to reconcile those realms.

Anna, in contrast, is not naïve but intellectually and emotionally mature. Her affair with Vronsky is neither impulsive nor romanticized in the same way Emma's are. Still, her pursuit of passion leads to social exile and mental fragmentation. Tolstoy writes, *"She felt that she had now no longer any relations with anything in the world... she was altogether alone"* (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 742). While Emma yearns for a romantic ideal, Anna struggles with existential despair, aware of the moral and social consequences of her choices. As Aswathy Cheriyan (2016) notes, Anna's downfall is "marked by emotional and moral complexity," making her a more psychologically intricate character than Emma.

Both women reflect postmodern concerns with fractured identity and the instability of meaning. Their narratives subvert the traditional "fallen woman" trope by exposing the hypocrisies and limits of their societies rather than simply moralizing their choices.

The Marital Bind: Charles and Karenin

A key difference between the two novels lies in the depiction of the husbands—Charles Bovary and Alexei Karenin—who reflect the respective social systems that entrap the protagonists.

Charles is portrayed as a simple, kind, but dull provincial doctor. He is incapable of understanding or meeting Emma's emotional and intellectual needs. His passivity becomes unbearable for Emma, who internally laments: *"Why, dear God, did I marry him?"* (Flaubert, 2010, p. 36). Bloom (2006) argues that Charles represents "the mediocrity of bourgeois values," and serves as a symbol of everything Emma wishes to escape. Yet Flaubert does not demonize Charles—his ignorance makes him pitiable rather than villainous.

Karenin, on the other hand, is a respected government official who embodies rationality, duty, and public morality. He is emotionally cold and driven by reputation rather than intimacy. After learning of Anna's affair, he insists on maintaining appearances rather than confronting the emotional reality: *"There is no possibility of our relations ever being what they have been. But I demand that you preserve outward appearances"* (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 356). As Briggs (1991) notes, Karenin's character is deeply embedded in the "moral bureaucracy of Russian high society," where personal pain is suppressed in favour of public propriety.

The difference in the husbands' characterization influences the readers' judgment of Emma and Anna. While Charles's simplicity magnifies Emma's internal conflict, Karenin's coldness compounds Anna's isolation. Both marriages reveal the limited emotional space available to women within the structures of 19th-century matrimony—rendering love, as Toril Moi (2017) suggests, "a negotiation of social codes more than a spontaneous expression of self" (p. 78).

Romanticism vs. Reality: Their Affairs

The affairs that both Emma and Anna engage in are crucial to understanding the conflict between romantic idealism and the crushing weight of social and emotional reality.

Emma's relationships with Rodolphe and Léon reflect her continual attempts to recreate the stories she has read. With Rodolphe, she envisions an escape: *"He would carry her away with him, far away, to lands of enchantment, where she would be his queen"* (Flaubert, 2010, p. 133). But Rodolphe ultimately abandons her, leaving her disillusioned and desperate. Léon, though more sincere, also fails

to fulfill Emma's lofty expectations. Her affairs are not just emotional escapades—they are symptoms of her need to escape an unlivable life.

Anna's affair with Vronsky, by contrast, begins as a genuine emotional connection but gradually deteriorates as Anna becomes increasingly consumed by jealousy, paranoia, and guilt. Tolstoy writes: "*She knew that he was tired of her, and she could not keep from watching and testing him in every word and movement*" (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 677). The love that once liberated her becomes a source of torment. Unlike Emma's romanticized affairs, Anna's relationship is more grounded—and therefore more tragic.

From a postmodern perspective, both women's affairs expose the failure of love as a stable signifier. In Moi's (2017) terms, their desires are "trapped in the gap between the language available to them and the life they wish to express" (p. 103). Emma speaks the language of fiction, while Anna struggles to speak at all—both are caught in linguistic systems that limit their agency and authenticity.

Societal Judgment and Isolation

Social judgment plays a critical role in the trajectories of both Emma and Anna, ultimately shaping their sense of identity and pushing them toward isolation and death. The societies depicted in both novels uphold a rigid moral code, particularly for women, whose value is tethered to fidelity, motherhood, and public virtue. Once Emma and Anna transgress these expectations, they are subjected to intense scrutiny and exclusion, even as their male counterparts—like Rodolphe and Vronsky—escape similar condemnation.

Emma's transgressions remain hidden for much of the novel, but her social decline is accelerated by her mounting debts and deteriorating emotional state. She eventually becomes a figure of scandal and pity. After her suicide, her body becomes an object of judgment and decay: "*They found her lying on her back, her mouth open as if she were smiling*" (Flaubert, 2010, p. 276). The grotesque image reflects not only her tragic end but society's cold detachment. As Pauline Melville (2021) notes, Emma is "punished not for adultery alone, but for daring to desire more than what society allotted her."

Anna, by contrast, is immediately ostracized after leaving her husband. While she initially enjoys public life with Vronsky, she is soon cut off from polite society, forbidden even from seeing her son. This rejection deeply wounds her, exacerbating her emotional instability. Tolstoy writes: "*She could not deceive herself any longer: he loved another woman, that was clear... and she was utterly alone*" (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 785). Her final moments on the train platform are consumed by an overwhelming sense of social and spiritual abandonment.

Both novels thus reveal how public morality enforces its norms through exclusion and humiliation. In the words of the *International Journal of English Literature* article (2024), "societal structures in both novels operate not through law alone, but through the gaze—ever watchful, ever condemning." Emma and Anna are not merely punished by fate, but by the societies that refuse to make space for their agency.

Narrative Style and Authorial Intent

The narrative techniques employed by Flaubert and Tolstoy profoundly influence how readers interpret Emma and Anna. Flaubert's **free indirect discourse**—his blending of character thought with third-person narration—creates a distancing effect. This style allows readers to inhabit Emma's fantasies while also observing her self-deception. As Toril Moi (2017) argues, Flaubert's prose reflects "a language haunted by irony, where meaning is always on the verge of collapse" (p. 89). His famous dictum—"*The author should be in his work like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere*"—reinforces this idea of stylistic detachment.

This detachment often alienates the reader from Emma. While we understand her desires, Flaubert offers no overt sympathy, allowing her choices and their consequences to speak for themselves. As Bloom (2006) notes, the novel "resists sentimentality," exposing Emma's self-destruction with clinical precision.

Tolstoy's narrative, in contrast, is **omniscient and morally engaged**. He probes the inner lives of his characters with psychological nuance, allowing readers to feel Anna's torment and Karenin's cold rationality. Tolstoy is particularly invested in the spiritual dimension of Anna's journey. Her crisis is rendered with emotional depth and existential weight: *"Everything in the world was going on as usual, only she, crushed by her own heart, had lost all relation to it"* (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 774). As noted by the *Proceedings of the IRCHSS Conference* (2021), Tolstoy's narration "offers not judgment, but immersion—Anna's decline becomes ours to feel."

Thus, while both novels depict similar arcs, their stylistic approaches yield different emotional effects. Flaubert invites critical reflection; Tolstoy evokes empathetic immersion. These differences help explain why readers often sympathize more with Anna than with Emma—Anna is seen from the inside out, while Emma is often viewed from the outside in.

Suicide, Agency, and Feminine Subjectivity

The suicides of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina mark the culmination of their inner conflict and societal marginalization. Yet, these deaths are not simply the consequences of romantic despair—they are complex acts that reveal the limits of female agency within oppressive cultural frameworks.

Emma's suicide by arsenic is both impulsive and theatrical, echoing the dramatic gestures of the romantic heroines she idealizes. Her final act is described with disturbing detail: *"Her whole body was convulsed; she uttered a long, long sigh and her head fell back"* (Flaubert, 2010, p. 276). As Pauline Melville (2021) suggests, Emma's death is not redemptive; it is the ultimate manifestation of her inability to reconcile fantasy with reality. It reflects a cultural failure—a system that offers women no meaningful options beyond marriage or ruin.

Anna's suicide, by contrast, is portrayed with somber introspection. Her descent into paranoia, jealousy, and alienation culminates on the railway platform—a site of profound existential symbolism in the novel. Tolstoy writes: *"And the candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil, flared up more brightly than ever, lit up for her all that had before been in darkness, sputtered, grew dim, and went out forever"* (Tolstoy, 2002, p. 773). Her suicide is neither theatrical nor impulsive; it is deliberate, and hauntingly calm.

From a feminist perspective, both deaths point to the impossibility of female self-realization in patriarchal societies. Toril Moi (2017) argues that subjectivity is constructed through ordinary language and context, and when women are denied access to meaningful expression within that language system, their very subjecthood collapses. Emma and Anna both fail to find linguistic or social spaces to articulate their desires—suicide becomes the only available "statement," a silence that resists misinterpretation.

Postmodern Readings and Contemporary Relevance

Although *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* are 19th-century texts, they anticipate key postmodern concerns: the instability of meaning, the inadequacy of language, and the fragmentation of identity. The protagonists' internal struggles reflect the breakdown of traditional narratives that once defined femininity, love, and morality.

Emma attempts to live according to the scripts of romance novels, but these scripts are inadequate to the lived reality of provincial life. As Moi (2017) notes, "The language of high

romanticism falters when it confronts the needs of the everyday" (p. 94). Emma's speech, thoughts, and dreams are all borrowed—her tragedy lies in her inability to construct an authentic self.

Anna, while more self-aware, is also caught between competing discourses: the moral absolutism of Russian society, the shallowness of high society, and her own emotional truth. Her gradual descent into isolation mirrors the postmodern subject's alienation in a world stripped of coherent meaning. The train becomes a metaphor not only for fate, but for the speed and violence of modern life, where personal authenticity is crushed by public performance.

Contemporary feminist and literary theory allow us to see both Emma and Anna as more than adulterous women—they are proto-postmodern subjects navigating a hostile semiotic landscape. Their deaths, read through this lens, are not just personal failures but social indictments. As the *Naipunnya College Research Paper* (2024) notes, "Both novels critique the structural silencing of women who refuse to conform."

Even today, Emma and Anna resonate with readers because their crises—emotional, social, and existential—are still familiar. They remain timeless figures not because of their choices alone, but because of what their stories reveal about the worlds that shape and destroy them.

Conclusion

Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina are literary mirrors of each other—distinct in cultural setting and authorial tone, but united by a common thematic concern: the quest for happiness in a world that offers women only limited scripts. Their stories, though shaped by 19th-century values, anticipate postmodern questions about identity, language, agency, and authenticity.

Through a comparative reading that integrates feminist and postmodern theory, we see that neither woman is simply a victim nor solely to blame for her fate. Instead, each becomes a site of narrative, cultural, and philosophical tension—her downfall revealing the tragic costs of emotional sincerity in a hypocritical world. Their suicides are not mere narrative closures but powerful, if silent, critiques of the systems that failed them.

Flaubert's ironic detachment and Tolstoy's moral empathy offer contrasting yet equally poignant portrayals of women in crisis. But it is precisely through these contrasts that readers can appreciate the universality and depth of their longing—Emma's for passion, Anna's for truth. In the end, both novels remain enduring testaments to the complexities of feminine subjectivity and the often elusive nature of happiness.

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