

What Makes A Relationship Impossible?

Leo Tolstoy and Ichiyo Higuchi's Take on Love and Its Sustenance - Two 19th Century Takes from Two Different Parts of The World

What makes a relationship impossible?

Is it a result of social fragmentation? A gender-bound existence? Perhaps a hindered yet all-consuming desire to be loved; a compulsive, jealous streak; or a passionate, burning thirst for revenge?

He is everything for me, and I want him more and more to give himself up to me entirely.

– Anna Karenina [p. Part 7, Chapter 30]

Tolstoy's Gendered Authorship

Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* as a woman who became estranged from her husband and her son due to the daughter she bore her paramour, Alexei Vronsky; because of which she faced immense societal condemnation, became isolated, and ultimately descended into insanity and paranoia, taking her own life. However, the *reason* why Anna jumped onto the railway tracks can be interpreted as not actually being because of Vronsky, but rather, a moral denunciation of a woman who broke the 19th-century Imperial-Russian code of women being completely subservient to their husbands, and responsible for the private sphere of raising “*household virtues*”.¹

Stepan Arkadyevitch, Anna's brother, on the other hand, is a notable foil to consolidate the patriarchal double standards exposed in the novel — he believed that his wife “*ought from a sense of fairness to take*

an indulgent view” of his infidelity since she was “a worn-out woman no longer young or good-looking” [Part I, Chapter 2]. Despite Anna and Alexei Karenin’s marriage being built on a decoy set by the former’s aunt to secure the match, Anna’s infidelity is still taken as more treacherous and blasphemous than her brother’s.^{2 4}

Tolstoy had always upheld this view of women being nothing more than obedient, loyal wives, accepting and understanding of their husbands, as seen from his own relationship with his wife, the sixteen-years-younger Sofia Tolstaya. Widely infamous is his action of forcing his eighteen-year old bride to read detailed diary entries describing his past sexual encounters with female serfs — which notably left Sofia aghast and wounded, but nevertheless lodged in the marriage. The character which is said to echo Tolstoy in his novel, Konstantin Dmitrievich Levin, also makes his wife, Kitty, learn of his previous liaisons, to which Kitty is written to forgive Levin “everything”, while Levin feels validated and loved, regardless of his young, inexperienced wife’s likely perplexity and unsettlement.

Higuchi’s Gendered Authorship

Higuchi writes Midori as a junction between the rapidly modernising, yet traditionally entrenched Meiji-era Japan, where a headstrong, egoistic, intelligent young girl, is constrained in her future by the “tea-house” or prostitution industry in the Yoshiwara pleasure-quarter district. The paradox of the very system which allowed her to purchase small luxuries in her childhood, was actually buying her into its grasp of being a successful courtesan like her fund-providing sister, Omaki.⁵

38 *'What's this, you little whore, running your mouth? Beggar-brat, next in line after your*
39 *sister — this is all a creature like you is fit for!'*— and...*Chokichi snatched up a filthy mud-*
40 *caked sandal and flung it. – Takekurabe [trans. Clayton Maris, Section 4]*

41 Midori, unlike Anna, is entrenched into a role which invites crude affronts, not as a result of
42 something *she* did, but a result of her gender and her heritage. Yet, Midori's character isn't
43 compromised, as she remains the defiant, "willful" girl she always was, and simply redirects it to fit her
44 future better, accept it more gracefully, and forego the life she was never given the opportunity to
45 have. Anna, in this regard, had been forced to follow a similar fate of a girl forced into an economically
46 and politically approved marriage without ever having gotten the chance of being a "*girl in love*"
47 (Raymond Williams).

48 The tragedy comes from this unchosen future's oppressive hold over both Midori, and Nobu — the
49 son of a priest who sought to break the corrupt cycle he saw his father pursue — denying them the
50 right to follow their heart's desires of being in a relationship with each other due to economic
51 disparities and pre-ordained lives.

52 Tolstoy was inspired by the fate of his neighbour's wife — Anna Stepanovna Pirogova — in writing
53 the tragic end of Anna Karenina, as the former threw herself under a train after uncovering her
54 husband's affair with their governess.⁶ The misogynistic perspective really shines in Tolstoy's
55 depictions of this occurrence in his novel — Dolly, Stepan Arkadyevitch's wife, who actually finds out
56 about her husband's affair with the governess remains with him, discovering a new-found affection for
57 her children after visiting Anna and Vronsky; while Anna, who leaves her husband — who had

58 subjected her to a relationship of constant mockery and lack of affection — to follow her heart, throws
59 herself under a train, exhausted by her lonesome, arduous existence.

60 Higuchi, unlike Tolstoy, writes from first-hand experience, and therefore, as critics such as Hisako
61 Tanaka have argued, portrays Midori's existence as more than simply fatalistic and resigned, and rather
62 as a form of protest.⁷ Higuchi, one of the pioneer female authors of Japanese literature, was forced to
63 struggle and lead a life of poverty and pressure, responsible for funding her mother and sister's
64 livelihoods after the male members of her family died.⁵ Since women's education opportunities were
65 far from being equal to that of men and met with disapproval (even from her own mother), and
66 legitimacy was far from guaranteed to female authors, Higuchi's decision to pursue writing as her final
67 resort for economic stability was turbulent, to say the least. After becoming acquainted with many of
68 the women from the Yoshiwara pleasure-district, where she was forced to move as a result of immense
69 financial issues, this inspiring author imbibed the resilience she saw in the courtesans and immortalized
70 it in her book, *Takekurabe*.⁵

71 As Hisako Tanaka writes of Higuchi,

72 *she possessed a proud heart which yielded to none. – Hisako Tanaka*□

73 In fact, just like Midori, Higuchi too had to curb her own affections towards her mentor Tosui —
74 who had guided her in her journey as an author — all because of malicious gossip that had been
75 spreading about them sharing spousal relations, which had the potential of ruining Higuchi's already
76 detrimental family name, fueled by the Meiji-era taboo of *women asserting love*.⁵⁹

77 **The Sustenance of Love — Anna Karenina and Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky**

78 *My love keeps growing more passionate and selfish, while his is dying, and that's why we're*
79 *drifting apart. – Anna Karenina [p. Part 7, Chapter 30]*

80 This self-censure, uttered by Anna, is essentially Tolstoy's own authorial proxy, where his almost-
81 omniscient moral indoctrination of a "lost woman" is reproduced through the contradictory structure
82 of the novel — as I previously mentioned — where Anna is punished for something her brother treats
83 as a given. However, close reading of the text reveals how it wasn't Anna growing more selfish, but
84 society denying her the privilege that Vronsky was still allowed.

85 In a system where divorce had to be initiated by the "wronged party" Anna still legally belonged to her
86 husband Karenin, constantly waiting for him to pity her into letting go.^{1 2} So, when she travelled to
87 Europe with Vronsky, she was perceived as a dishonourable woman — as honor for a man correlated
88 with the opportunities he was granted, militarily and vocationally, while for a woman, it was associated
89 with protecting her husband's rights of paternity and lineage.² This reputation of being dishonourable
90 came with complete alienation from the society the charming Anna had never been excluded from;
91 when even her dearest friend Betsy Tverskaya - who had, ironically, facilitated Anna's affair with
92 Vronsky and herself was notorious for having an affair with Tushkevitch - refused to acquaint herself
93 with her as long as her "position was irregular" [p.Part 6, Chapter 23], Anna sank to the deepest
94 depths. The crux of this argument is how Anna wasn't alienated because of her affair with Vronsky,

95 but for refusing to deceive her husband, and openly spend her life with the man she actually loved.

96 Anna lived in a dystopian society where deception was awarded while sincerity was scorned.

97 Whereas Vronsky willingly sacrificed his commission, choosing Anna, the latter never gets the choice
98 to retain her sole enjoyment — life in high society, including going to the opera or the theatre (as
99 evidenced by the incident of Princess Kartasova publicly humiliating her, refusing to sit next to, or
100 associate herself with her)¹². Her entire identity was eroded to simply being a sinful mistress.

101 Furthermore, since Anna wasn't legally separated from Karenin, she relied upon him monetarily, and
102 was forced to accept whatever funds he chose to send to her. This acceptance, incidentally, sealed
103 Anna's loyalty and dependency on Karenin since Vronsky's wealth could not be recognized as hers
104 unless they were married. On the other hand, it wasn't impossible to ask Vronsky for funds, but doing
105 so would seal her image as a mistress, a degradation she could never fully accept, though in the public
106 eye, she had already sunk to those depths.

107 Ultimately, one of the main factors which made Anna take the drastic decision to take her own life was
108 her guilt, her regret, and her longing for her son Seryozha. As she said, nearing her end,

109 *Well, I'm divorced, and become Vronsky's wife...will Seryozha leave off asking and*
110 *wondering about my two husbands? – Anna Karenina [p. Part 5, Chapter 32]*

111 The burden of being compelled to give up her son, and confronted with the choice of either being
112 forever tarnished or simply gone from her son's life convinced her all the more of the purposelessness

113 her life had come to be defined by, with even the traditional responsibilities of womanhood snatched
114 away from her.

115 And finally, the one damning piece of evidence proving how Anna was not “selfish”, but simply
116 overly-dependent on Vronsky, having been forcibly untethered from the beau monde, is when
117 Vronsky says,

118 *He saw all the beauty of her face and full dress, always so becoming to her. But now her*
119 *beauty and elegance were just what irritated him. – Anna Karenina, from Vronsky's*
120 *perspective [p. Part 5, Chapter 32]*

121 It isn't as if the qualities which once made Anna so winsome diminished, but they transformed into a
122 constant reminder to Vronsky about the smothering absolutism of Anna's affections, centred around
123 him, leading to dubiously jealous accusations, and a simultaneously whiplashing anger and desperation
124 vying for his attention and love, which our protagonist was only convinced of in Vronsky's physical
125 presence. This, along with his subconscious grief over the commission he resigned for Anna's sake,
126 made Vronsky grow distant. Anna, however, didn't have a choice but to rely upon a man for support,
127 shelter, and purpose, while Vronsky could divert his attention to provincial nobility elections, business
128 surrounding his mother's estate, and so forth — everything permanently closed off to Anna.¹²

129

130 **The Sustenance of Love — Midori and Nobuyuki**

131 Midori and Nobu's love was never truly about *sustenance*, since it was crushed in its formation itself.
132 The Betsy Tverskaya plot can be seen as running parallel to the inception of Takekurabe's near-
133 budding romance, wherein a simple offer to wipe himself with Midori's handkerchief when Nobu had
134 fallen was manipulated into a salacious innuendo which their envious classmates promulgated:

135 *I daresay Midori-san means to become Fujimoto's wife. And a temple wife, why, she'd be*
136 *called the Daikoku of the house! — Takekurabe [trans. Clayton Maris, Section 8]*

137 To understand the full intent behind this jab, and the reason as to why this one singular taunt became
138 the turning point of Nobu and Midori's unexpressed affection, the dissection of the word "*Daikoku*"
139 is necessary.

140 Literally, Daikoku had two meanings: first and foremost, the name of Midori's family business, their
141 brothel, was *Daikokuya*; in fact, the whole neighbourhood recognized Midori as *Midori of*
142 *Daikokuya*. Secondly, the term was often used as a Meiji-era slang to refer to a wife, originating from
143 the name *Daikokuten* — the God symbolising household abundance, food and the kitchen in Japanese
144 folklore.¹³

145 A wife of a Buddhist priest, specifically, would often be referred to as *Daikoku*, to reframe her role as
146 more of a divine chatelaine as well as subtly remove any romantic implications from her title, since
147 priests were meant to be symbols of celibacy and asceticism.¹³

148 So, what their classmates intended to convey through the pun was a mocking jeer at Midori's lewd
149 future in contrast with Nobu's highly austere one, satirizing the term "Daikoku" into reminding the

150 pair how an aspiring courtesan could never be the Daikoku of a monasterial household. Considering
151 Nobu's immense pride in his desire for abstinence and reprobation of his capitalist, mercenary father
152 (who had also married without adherence to strict priestly norms), such invectives, associating him
153 with a prospective courtesan were to him, embarrassing and shameful. He henceforth made the
154 decision to avoid Midori and consciously refuse to let the doors to their relationship budge, even when
155 Midori tried to rekindle their friendship. The main difference between Midori and Anna lies in the
156 simple fact that while Anna found herself entrapped in the relationship she and Vronsky allowed to
157 blossom, thwarted by the censure and malignations of Russian aristocratic society; Nobu anticipated
158 such repercussions and cut the bud before it could wither.

159 This blatant rejection that Midori faced at her young age altered her, as critic C.M.Millet put,

160 *The child Midori has died and has been 'reborn' as the courtesan Midori. — C.M. Millet*□

161 The *paper narcissus* that Nobu left at Midori's door the morning of his departure plays a role far more
162 significant than simply acting as a parting gift for Midori, and a subtle, unspoken recognition of the
163 compassion they shared. In fact, it can be interpreted as an allusion to Shinto purification ceremonies
164 or *harae* □ □ □ where people would rub against an *onusa* (a branch of the *sakaki* tree with strips of
165 paper attached to it) to rid themselves of all their sins and defilements, after which the branch would
166 be discarded.¹⁴ Not only does the role of an *onusa* mirror the role of a courtesan, who is paid to caress,
167 to be kept, only to be abandoned the next morning like an *onusa* contaminated by crude male
168 beneficiaries, but it also symbolises the relinquishing of Midori's innocent, lively childhood self,

169 assuming the new concubinage she realised she was headed towards. A tragic epiphany for a fourteen-
170 year-old.

171

172 **What Makes A Relationship Impossible — Anna Karenina and Takekurabe**

173 Let me revert to something I stated previously,

174 *The main difference between Midori and Anna lies in the simple fact that while Anna*
175 *found herself entrapped in the relationship she and Vronsky allowed to blossom, thwarted*
176 *by the censure and malignations of Russian aristocratic society; Nobu anticipated such*
177 *repercussions and cut the bud before it could wither.*

178 A New Historicist reading would answer this question taking into account the texts' individual
179 politics- and culture-specific backdrops — so, while Anna Karenina would be read against the Imperial
180 divorce and marital laws under Tsarist Russia^{1 2}; Takekurabe would be read against the Yoshiwara
181 tradition of profiteering off women, where the *tea-house* culture was usual, if not expected.^{5 15} A
182 courtesan's only source of freedom was to have a wealthy man purchase her out of her contract,
183 because, though widely prevalent, sex-workers were placed out of the strict class-structure and were
184 considered social outcasts — a structural stigma.¹⁵ Something ironic though, is how Buddhist monks
185 were also losing their power in the mid-Meiji era, being *modernized* by the State to be allowed to marry
186 and have children.¹⁶ After the wave of anti-Buddhist violence that took place in the 1870s, many critics
187 of Buddhism emerged trying to prove how Buddhist monks were no different than secular, money-

188 minded capitalists, and such attempts to “modernize” the religion was done with the ulterior motive of
189 exposing them.¹⁶ Since Nobu’s father was one such example of a mercenary priest, playing into the
190 hands of Anti-Buddhist critics, Nobu wanted to follow the rightful path and sought disciplined,
191 conservative asceticism, which would have been tarnished in a single sweep had he been associated
192 with Midori - essentially, a prospective courtesan.

193 Hence, a Structuralist approach is required to actually answer the question. To do that, let me first
194 display the binary, patriarchal structure followed by both texts:

195 From Anna Karenina,

196 *He has everything, and I have nothing. He is free to go where he likes, to do what he*
197 *likes...and I am tied hand and foot by my shame and my love for him. [p. Part 7, Chapter*
198 *29]*

199 From Takekurabe,

200 *Yet to have a temple's daughter tuck up her skirts as a woman of pleasure...they fitted out a*
201 *tidy tea-shop...and set the girl within the latticed counter to sell her charms. [trans. Clayton*
202 *Maris, Section 1]*

203 Both the quotes refer to different forms of restrictions placed on women by patriarchal societies —
204 coverture, and sexual objectification. The man courting a married woman, impregnating her, faced
205 little - chosen and reversible - consequences; a man using his *charming* daughter to lure wealthy

parishioners faced no consequences whatsoever. A woman's decision — to love, to defy, to *choose*, was the ultimate framework of society-repulsing conduct.

Upon taking away these patriarchal restrictions — allowing a woman to choose her own profession despite her heritage and financial disparity, allowing a woman equal rights of custody, recognizing a woman's right to love, to study, to regain her freedom from a forcible situation *without appraising her* — the possibility of love being sustainable through balance, mutual respect, and independence emerges.

Had Sofia Tolstaya been given the opportunity to leave a marriage haunted by her husband's past sexual transgressions, had Anna Stepanovna Pirogova been able to leave a *husband* who had an affair with her governess - obstructed by Synod divorce customs¹⁶ - had Higuchi been able to pursue her affections towards Tosui - repudiated by stigmatizing gossip spread about her relationship with him and the disdain looked upon a woman's declaration of love⁹ - the lives of these women might have been significantly different.

In fact, had all these women simply been given a choice in their lives, the relationships *they* chose to pursue might actually have sustained.

Have These Patriarchal Restrictions Been Taken Away Now?

In 1918, Russia saw the removal of fault-based divorce laws, and it was only in 1969 that shared *legal* custody was established²¹ — the key loophole here being that shared *legal* custody was not the same as shared *physical* custody. In fact, the mother's role became inverted — as they became the default

225 custodian of the child, with Russian courts ruling that a child could not be successfully raised without
226 maternal nurture^{22 23}, though evidence of unfitness (which could include abuse, addiction, inability to
227 provide for the child, for instance) would deny the mother custody²⁴. If such evidence wasn't
228 discovered, and the child was younger than 10 years of age (which would make them unable to voice
229 out their preference, according to Russian courts²⁵) - as Seryozha was - they would be the *physical*
230 responsibility of the mother, or, in Seryozha's case, Anna. Would this rule out the possibility of
231 Vronsky and Anna's relationship fracturing? Well, I would be lying if I said yes. However, it would
232 hold higher chances of survival, since Anna's desolation, guilt and regret over parting with her son
233 would not weigh her down, and, since Alexei Karenin would share *legal* custody, she wouldn't have to
234 worry about meeting his education costs either. However, the hypothetical rightfully doubted by
235 Anna, "*Well, I'm divorced, and become Vronsky's wife...will Seryozha leave off asking and wondering*
236 *about my two husbands?*" complicates the situation. Recently conducted surveys prove how, though
237 infidelity - specifically, *female* infidelity - still faces immense moral criticism^{26 27}, the public
238 ostracization is directed towards another aspect — not adultery, *childlessness*²⁸. In my opinion Anna,
239 today, probably would not have faced the social censure she faced in Tolstoy's era, since she bore
240 Karenin a child, and secured his lineage. Though this does not ascertain Seryozha's opinion of his
241 mother, it does better the chances for Anna and Vronsky.

242 Midori was a *courtesan*, not a prostitute. Today, the *Fūeiho* (Shorthand for the Japanese Law: *Act*
243 *Regulating Adult Entertainment Businesses*) prohibits paid sexual intercourse, *however*, a second law
244 under this act exempts bathing and massage parlors from this ban^{29 30}. Furthermore, if the woman is

said to get *acquainted* with the man - say, during the massage - any intercourse that follows is completely legal³¹. The similarity here lies in the euphemism — Midori was a courtesan, today, she might have been a professional *masseuse* or provided *bathing assistance*. The difference is in the fact that Midori would have had the choice to pursue other professions, or exit from such a profession since she wouldn't have been familially bound or indebted to it and would have had (even if nominal) legal support.

If only.

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