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FEMALE IMAGES IN THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF RUSSIAN AND FOREIGN LITERATURE

Khamdamalieva Dilafruz Anvarovna

Lecturer at the Department of Russian Language Teaching Methodology,

Fergana State University.

Abstract. This article examines female images in Russian and foreign literature through a comparative reading of Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, and Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary. Although these texts belong to different national traditions, they reveal a common nineteenth-century problem: woman is represented at the point where desire, morality, social regulation, and narrative power intersect. The study uses comparative-typological analysis, feminist literary criticism, and close reading in order to identify both convergences and national differences in the construction of the heroine. The analysis demonstrates that the female image in all three novels is shaped by tension between inner subjectivity and externally imposed roles. At the same time, the three protagonists embody different models of response to patriarchal order: moral self-determination in Jane Eyre, destructive rebellion in Emma Bovary, and tragic collision between passion and social law in Anna Karenina. The article argues that Russian literature, represented here by Tolstoy, gives the heroine exceptional psychological depth and social embeddedness, whereas the Western European novels of Brontë and Flaubert foreground, in different ways, the struggle for autonomy and the limits placed upon female agency. The comparative perspective makes it possible to see the female image not as a static "type," but as a dynamic artistic form through which literature thinks about freedom, guilt, desire, and social belonging.

Keywords: female image, Russian literature, comparative literature, Anna Karenina, Jane Eyre, Madame Bovary, gender, nineteenth-century novel

Introduction

The representation of women in literature is never limited to description of character alone. It condenses a culture's ideas of morality, family, class, sexuality, education, and power. For that reason, female images often become one of the most revealing points of comparison between national literatures. In Russian literary history, the movement from medieval sanctified or humiliated women toward complex, psychologically elaborated heroines marks a major shift in aesthetic and social consciousness. As Beyhan Asma notes, earlier Russian writing often oscillated between reverence and suspicion, while later prose gradually moved toward fuller and more progressive depictions of women [1, p. 44]. This development becomes especially important in the nineteenth century, when the heroine enters the center of the novel and begins to bear not merely decorative or sentimental meaning, but ethical, ideological, and social significance.

A broader theoretical framework for such a reading is provided by Simone de Beauvoir, who famously writes that woman is historically defined not as an autonomous subject, but as the "Other" in relation to man [2, p. 26]. Her further claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" suggests that femininity is produced by social codes rather than given by nature [2, p. 330]. For literary studies, this means that the heroine should be approached not as a biological fact or fixed psychological essence, but as a cultural construction articulated through plot, voice, and symbol. The novel becomes one of the principal spaces where this construction is tested, destabilized, or reaffirmed.

The nineteenth-century European novel is particularly productive for such inquiry. It brings the woman character into intimate contact with institutions that claim to organize private life: marriage, property, religion, education, and public reputation. Yet those institutions do not merely frame the heroine; they enter her consciousness and shape the forms of her desire. In this sense, the female image is always doubled: it is both personal and social, inward and discursive. The heroine is what she feels, but also what others allow her to be.

This article compares three canonical protagonists from different literary traditions: Anna Karenina, Jane Eyre, and Emma Bovary. The choice is not accidental. Each heroine stands at a decisive threshold between selfhood and role. Each seeks a form of life not fully sanctioned by the dominant order. Yet the outcomes are radically different. Jane attains a conditional but genuine moral subjectivity; Emma destroys herself in the attempt to live beyond provincial emptiness; Anna becomes the tragic figure of a passion that society both produces and condemns. The central research question, then, is the following: how do Russian and foreign nineteenth-century novels construct female images as sites of conflict between inward freedom and external normativity? The hypothesis of the study is that despite clear cultural differences, all three texts organize the female image around the same structural contradiction: the heroine is granted depth of consciousness, but her access to legitimate agency remains restricted.

Materials and Methods

The material of the study consists of three nineteenth-century novels that occupy a central place in the Russian and Western European canons: Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary, and Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina [6; 7; 8]. These texts were selected because each places a woman at the center of narrative development and turns her life into a field where social norm, erotic desire, and ethical self-understanding collide. At the same time, the novels belong to different literary systems and therefore allow a productive comparative reading.

Methodologically, the article combines three approaches. First, it uses comparative-typological analysis. This method makes it possible to identify recurring structures across literatures without reducing them to simple sameness. The aim is not to argue that Jane, Emma, and Anna are interchangeable variants of one model, but to observe which artistic functions recur and which are culturally specific. Second, the article draws on feminist literary criticism, especially on the concepts of woman as "Other" and of the conflict between transcendence and immanence [2, pp. 26, 37]. These concepts are useful because they illuminate how narratives distribute freedom, action, and self-definition. Third, the study employs close reading focused on four analytic parameters: social position, narrative voice, relation to desire, and form of punishment or legitimation within the plot.

Several secondary studies guide this analysis. Asma's overview of Russian literary tradition is used to contextualize the historical evolution of female representation [1, pp. 44-45]. Gayle Greene's reading of Anna Karenina is important for understanding Tolstoy's simultaneous insight into and limitation of women's experience [4, pp. 106-111]. Daria Cecchinato's study of female madness and self-determination in Jane Eyre helps clarify the connection between Victorian propriety and the policing of female subjectivity [3, pp. 8, 57-62]. Serap Sarıbaş's article on Madame Bovary is employed to trace the relationship between Emma's desires and the sharply limited roles available to women in nineteenth-century France [5, pp. 5057-5060].

Results

The comparative reading produced four major results.

1. The female image in all three novels is constructed through conflict rather than harmony. None of the three heroines is presented as a stable embodiment of an ideal feminine essence. Their identities emerge in tension with institutions and expectations. Beauvoir's notion that

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woman is formed socially rather than naturally helps explain why each heroine appears as a contested figure [2, p. 330]. Jane Eyre is pressured to become obedient, useful, and emotionally disciplined; Emma Bovary is expected to remain wife and mother within a narrow domestic script; Anna Karenina is required to preserve social decorum even when male infidelity is treated more leniently. The female image, therefore, is not a calm portrait but a dramatic process.

2. Jane Eyre represents the model of moral self-determination under pressure.
Among the three heroines, Jane is the one who most clearly develops an articulated inner ethic. Cecchinato emphasizes that male attempts to define and label women in Victorian culture are closely linked to the threat of madness and to the model of the "angel in the house"; in this field Jane's struggle is specifically a struggle for self-determination [3, p. 8]. What makes Jane distinctive is not the absence of passion, but her refusal to surrender the core of selfhood either to social humiliation or to erotic absorption. As a child, her anger is read as deviance; as an adult, even passionate attachment threatens to be interpreted as loss of self-command [3, pp. 57-58]. Yet the novel does not reduce her to disorder. On the contrary, Jane survives by converting inner intensity into moral agency. She is not socially triumphant in a simple sense, but she does become a subject who can speak, judge, and choose.

3. Emma Bovary represents rebellion without a durable language of autonomy.
Emma's image is built from dissatisfaction, fantasy, and hunger for another life. Sarıbaş remarks that Emma's downfall is inseparable from the condition of being a woman in a society where gender roles are limited and any transgression is severely sanctioned [5, p. 5059]. This is an essential point. Emma desires intensity, distinction, and emotional grandeur, yet the world available to her offers only repetition, provincial routine, and derivative romance. Unlike Jane, Emma does not develop a moral vocabulary strong enough to transform desire into self-grounding action. She seeks escape through adultery, consumption, and theatrical self-fashioning. Her protest is real, but it remains mediated by borrowed fantasies. As a result, rebellion turns inward and becomes self-destructive. The novel thereby produces a female image that is neither merely guilty nor simply emancipatory. Emma is tragic precisely because she senses the poverty of her role but lacks material, intellectual, and ethical instruments to construct an alternative [5, pp. 5058-5060].

4. Anna Karenina represents the most socially embedded and psychologically expansive female image, but also the most tragic collision between person and order.
Russian literary development, as Asma notes, moves toward increasingly realistic and socially complex female characters [1, p. 45]. Anna is one of the fullest expressions of that movement. Greene argues that Tolstoy understands with unusual force the relation between character and society, and that the novel gives abundant evidence of the double standard under which women are judged more harshly for sexual transgression than men [4, pp. 108-111]. Anna is not simply a "fallen woman" figure. She is intelligent, socially perceptive, emotionally intense, and deeply responsive to both love and humiliation. What distinguishes her from Emma is the density of the world around her. Anna's tragedy is not private fantasy alone; it is produced through the direct pressure of family law, social surveillance, public ritual, and moral discourse. Her passion is experienced as authentic, yet there is no institutional form within which it can become legitimate. In that sense, Anna becomes the point where the ethical richness of human feeling collides with the rigidity of social order.

Discussion

The results suggest that the comparison of Russian and foreign literature should not be reduced to a contrast between "strong" and "weak" heroines, or between "progressive" and "traditional" cultures. The more useful distinction lies in how each literary system organizes the relation between female inwardness and social legibility.

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A further result worth stressing concerns narrative perspective itself. The female image is shaped not only by what the heroine does, but by how the narrative permits her to be known. Jane Eyre, narrated in the first person, builds subjectivity through self-articulation; the heroine becomes authoritative because she speaks her own formation. Madame Bovary grants Emma intense visibility, but that visibility is filtered through an ironic narrative intelligence that repeatedly reveals the gap between her longing and the language through which she imagines it. Anna Karenina occupies an intermediate position: Tolstoy's third-person narration moves with extraordinary sympathy into Anna's consciousness, yet it also places her under the gaze of a wider social world that never stops judging her. This difference is crucial. In comparative terms, Russian and foreign literature differ not only in the moral fate of the heroine, but in the degree to which her inward life is narratively ratified, questioned, or surrounded by competing interpretive frames. Female images therefore emerge as products of both plot and perspective.

Jane Eyre offers perhaps the clearest instance of inward subjectivity claiming moral authority. The novel remains within the Victorian order, but it pushes that order from within. Jane does not overthrow the symbolic structures around her; she negotiates them, resists their most violent forms, and compels recognition of her personhood. The female image here is grounded in voice. Jane narrates herself into legitimacy. She refuses to be fully objectified because narration itself becomes an act of self-possession. Cecchinato's analysis of the thin line between female propriety and insanity is especially helpful here: Jane survives because she neither entirely represses nor blindly abandons her passions [3, pp. 60-62]. The novel imagines a difficult equilibrium.

Madame Bovary imagines no such equilibrium. Emma's interiority is rich, but it is saturated with ready-made images. That is why the novel's irony is so severe. Emma wants transcendence, but her idea of transcendence has already been colonized by sentimental discourse, commodity fantasy, and patriarchal scripts of desire. In Beauvoir's terms, she struggles against immanence but cannot securely transform herself into a subject of action [2, p. 37]. What appears as freedom repeatedly returns as dependence. Her body and emotions become the available means of protest, yet those are the very domains most exposed to judgment and exploitation. Emma's image is therefore modern in a painful way: she recognizes the falsity of prescribed femininity, but recognition alone does not generate liberation.

Anna Karenina occupies a third position. If Jane embodies moral resistance and Emma ungrounded rebellion, Anna embodies tragic contradiction. Greene is persuasive when she notes that Tolstoy both understands women with unusual depth and yet withdraws sympathy at crucial moments [4, pp. 106-112]. This doubleness is visible in Anna's artistic construction. She is rendered with tenderness, complexity, and psychological amplitude, but the novel cannot finally imagine a world in which her desire and dignity coexist without destruction. At the same time, Tolstoy's treatment of women is broader than Anna alone. The novel contains multiple female lives—Dolly, Kitty, older princesses—and through them exposes how social pressure forms women differently depending on age, function, and sexual status [4, p. 107]. The female image in Russian literature here becomes a way of thinking historically, not merely personally.

A further distinction also emerges. In Brontë and Flaubert, the heroine's struggle is strongly tied to private aspiration and intimate dissatisfaction. In Tolstoy, the heroine is inseparable from the social totality. Anna is always being read by others, and the novel itself repeatedly places her within networks of law, gossip, kinship, and ritual. This does not make the Russian text "more feminist" in any straightforward sense. It does, however, give the female image a wider historical resonance. The heroine is not just a woman in love; she is a node where an entire civilization reveals its contradictions.

At the same time, the three novels converge on one decisive point: female subjectivity becomes legible only through conflict. Literature does not grant the heroine freedom as a neutral possession. Freedom appears as refusal, scandal, speech, risk, and sometimes ruin. The woman character is allowed depth, but that depth remains difficult to institutionalize. Here Beauvoir's distinction between transcendence and immanence remains remarkably productive: each heroine attempts, in her own way, to exceed a role assigned to her, and each encounters mechanisms designed to return her to passivity or punishment [2, p. 37].

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Anna Karenina, Jane Eyre, and Madame Bovary shows that female images in Russian and foreign literature are built around a common structural tension between inward selfhood and external prescription. Yet the artistic solutions differ significantly. Jane Eyre articulates a model of female dignity based on moral self-determination and narrative voice. Emma Bovary reveals the destructive consequences of desire when social restriction is combined with imaginative illusion and lack of viable autonomy. Anna Karenina embodies the most expansive and socially saturated version of the female image, in which personal passion confronts the full weight of public order.

From the Russian side, the comparison confirms that the female image is not marginal but central to the novel's capacity to represent society historically and ethically. From the Western European side, it becomes clear that the heroine often serves as the privileged site where modern questions of freedom, respectability, and identity are dramatized with particular sharpness. The comparative perspective therefore does more than juxtapose three famous women characters. It reveals that female images function as condensed models of cultural crisis. Through them literature asks what kind of life a woman may claim as her own, what language she may use to justify it, and what price she must pay when culture refuses to recognize that claim.

At the same time, the present study has clear limits. It focuses on three canonical texts and on a single historical period; for that reason, it cannot capture the full diversity of women's representation either in Russian literature or in the broader field of foreign literature. Future research may widen the corpus by including women writers, non-realist forms, and twentieth-century reinterpretations of the heroine. Even so, the selected comparison remains analytically productive, because these three novels established durable narrative models through which later literature continued to imagine female desire, dignity, social vulnerability, and the right to self-definition.

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