

Female Rebellion Bound by Culture: A Comparative Study of Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina's Struggles Against Societal Expectations

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Abstract:

Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina are female protagonists in Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, two masterpieces of world literature. Despite their geographical and cultural differences, both characters engage in acts of defiance against social norms that reflect their desires for autonomy, love, and self-expression. This paper explores the similarities and differences of their rebellions, including their driving force, detailed rebellious acts, the ending of their rebellions, and the cultural elements involved. By analyzing their gender roles under different cultural contexts, this paper seeks to uncover the universal social constraints carried upon women, and their different embodiment because of cultural and social structure demonstrated in the literature. The comparative study sheds light on the broader implications of female resistance in literature and how these narratives contribute to the discourse on gender and societal changes. This research applies gynocriticism in feminist criticism to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's internal consciousness embodied in literature across cultures.

Keywords: Female rebellion; comparative study; social norms, *Dream of the Red Chamber*; *Anna Karenina*.

1. Introduction

The rebellion of female characters in Western literature has long been a focal point of academic inquiry, particularly in many classic works like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. While these texts have been extensively

analyzed through feminist and cultural lenses, the focus has often been on the tragic outcomes for the female protagonists and their roles as victims of patriarchal societies, rather than their deeper motivations. Whereas for Chinese literature, rebellion is less discussed, even in studies of Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which scholars zoom in on gender

roles and patriarchy as how the female characters navigate the strict Confucian social order in the Qing dynasty.

Apart from the noticeable difference in the research field, much of the research has treated these works separately, without exploring the potential insights gained from a comparative analysis. Both works center female characters as main storylines, who experience love that defies societal norms, leading to their tragic ends. The protagonists, Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina are portrayed as rebels against societal expectations. Their rebellions both lead to their downfall, showcasing the harsh consequences of challenging societal norms. While set in different cultural and historical contexts—18th-century China for *Dream of the Red Chamber* and 19th-century Russia for *Anna Karenina*—both novels serve as windows into their respective societies, allowing for a rich comparative analysis of Eastern and Western perspectives.

Additionally, the focus on the tragic consequences of rebellion often overshadows an exploration of the personal motivations behind these acts of defiance and how they are intricately connected to the character's internal struggles and desires. This paper aims to fill these gaps by conducting a cross-cultural comparative study of *Anna Karenina* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, with a particular emphasis on the motivations behind their acts of rebellion intertwined with cultural elements and social factors. This study adopts an approach of comparative literature, analyzing how Tolstoy and Cao Xueqin construct these female characters and their acts of rebellion, seeking to uncover the underlying motivations for these rebellions and their significance within the broader literary and social canon. The analysis is grounded in Gynocriticism, the feminist criticism that goes beyond women's conventional roles to a focus on women's internal experiences and their subculture [1]. Though primarily focusing on women as writers, the methodology can be extended to the study of female characters and women's experiences in literature written by men as well. Elaine Showalter, who developed this concept, stated in 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' that gynocritics is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the "occupations, interactions, and consciousness" of the female, comprising recognition of a distinct female canon where a female identity is sought free from the masculine definitions and oppositions [2, 3]. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender and female resistance, offering new insights into the role of literature in shaping and reflecting the complexities of female experience. By bringing these two works into dialogue, this study not only offers a fresh perspective on the complexities of female rebellion in Western and Chinese literature but also allows for a more nuanced understanding of how personal desires, societal

pressures, and cultural contexts shape the rebellious actions of these characters. The comparative approach highlights the similarities and differences between the characters' rebellions and reveals how these narratives contribute to broader discussions on gender, power, and resistance. This paper builds on existing research while offering new perspectives that challenge existing interpretations and expand the scope of feminist literary analysis related to culture and social background.

2. Similarities of the Rebellions of the Two Female Characters

Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina are iconic literary figures whose rebellions against societal norms are central to their stories. Despite their salient differences rooted in culture, both characters embody the struggle against the rigid gender roles and expectations imposed upon women of their time.

2.1 Culture-Based Social Expectations for Women

Both Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina were born into an aristocratic family, placing them at the top of the social hierarchy in their respective societies. This status comes with significant privileges, but also with rigid expectations and responsibilities.

Lin Daiyu lives in the Jia's household with a wealthy family and is cared for by maids, which puts her within the upper echelons of society, needless to worry about starvation that many people suffered from at that time. As a member of a noble family in feudal China, Lin Daiyu is raised in an environment that values tradition, family honor, and social propriety. We can see that clearly in their priority over positions and privileges, from how honorable they felt when Yuanchun married to the court, to their education for Baoyu. Similarly, Anna Karenina is part of the Russian aristocracy, a class characterized by immense wealth, privilege, and influence. Her husband, Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, is a high-ranking government official, which places Anna at the center of the elite social circles in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

However, from a familial perspective to a broader one, both characters are subject to strict gender roles that define their value and purpose within their society. These roles are deeply entrenched in the patriarchal structures of their respective cultures, limiting their autonomy and personal fulfillment.

Lin Daiyu is a character depicted by Cao Xueqin during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). This period was marked by a highly stratified and hierarchical society, where Con-

fucian values dominated social life. Confucianism, with its emphasis on filial piety, loyalty, and social harmony, dictated strict gender roles. Women were expected to be obedient, chaste, subservient to male authority, and devoted to their family, whether as daughters, wives, or mothers, with little autonomy or opportunity for self-expression.

Anna Karenina lived in Russian society during the 19th century which was deemed as “caught up in vanity and lying for the sake of achieving orders within the upper class” [4]. Russian society at that time was deeply influenced by Orthodox Christianity and a patriarchal system that dictated strict moral codes, especially for women [5]. Marriage was considered a sacred institution, and women were expected to maintain the honor of their families through their conduct. Infidelity, particularly by women, was harshly condemned, while men enjoyed greater social freedom. According to Forrester’s *Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Lives and Culture*, the society tended to approach women in two ways: they either treated women as conniving beings in pursuit of superficial goals and villainized them, or they treated women as unambitious creatures confined to small domestic societies and patronized them [6].

2.2 Similar Tragic Fate Resulted from Rebellion against Social Norms

Lin Daiyu’s death is one tragic consequence caused by both personal and social factors. As a physically delicate and emotionally sensitive character, she is often depicted as being on the verge of illness. Her love for Jia Baoyu and her awareness of her precarious position within the Jia family weigh heavily on her. Towards the end of the story, her love with Jia Baoyu is thwarted by the family’s decision to arrange Baoyu’s marriage to Xue Baochai, a match that is more suitable in terms of social and familial expectations. In Qing Dynasty China, Lin Daiyu’s death is a sacrifice for social and political benefits under such familial and societal status, with no autonomy to choose her own love and marriage.

While Daiyu died of her torture for not being obedient to China’s social norms in the Qing dynasty, Anna Karenina’s tragic end, similar to Daiyu, is the end of extreme mental struggle and pressure weighed on her for going against Russia’s rigid structure and norms.

Anna Karenina died by throwing herself under a moving train. After leaving her husband, Anna becomes increasingly isolated from the society that once embraced her. Her affair, which defies the moral codes of her time, leads to her ostracism and alienation. Gradually, she spirals into paranoia and despair as she begins to suspect Vronsky

of infidelity, and her insecurity grows as she realizes that her rebellion has left her with very few options. Her once passionate relationship with Vronsky becomes a source of anxiety and fear rather than comfort. In the book, Anna’s inner monologue serves as a good demonstration: “I, too, am suffering and I shall go on suffering: I am losing what I most cherished, my good name, my son”, and “she was afraid of nothing more now...than to forfeit his love” [7]. In this sense, Anna’s internal conflict between her desires and sense of duty becomes increasingly unbearable. She is torn between her love for Vronsky and her guilt over abandoning her son and her role as a wife [8]. Finally, unable to reconcile these opposing forces, Anna becomes overwhelmed by her situation, eventually committing suicide.

2.3 Rebellious Actions against Gender Stereotypes

As ladies of aristocratic families with high moral requests, Daiyu and Anna fail to conform to the gender stereotypes of their respective societies, not meeting familial or social expectations. Instead, they rebel bravely. For them, rebellion is like a weapon, helping them voice their own minds and pursue the limited freedom that women barely have under such a patriarchal society where they have little actual power.

Though Lin Daiyu is not always considered a typical rebellious character in Chinese literature, she does enjoy many rebellious acts if you put yourself in her shoes. In the context of feudal China, marriage is often a matter of family alliances rather than personal choice. In Jia’s household, “golden lock and jade make a good fate” which implies that Xue Baochai’s “Golden Lock” and Jia Baoyu’s “Tongling Jade” make them a perfect marriage match, is so well supported and publicized. However, Daiyu does not bow to traditional views of marriage under such an aristocratic feudal system. She holds onto her love for Baoyu, even though it is clear that their relationship is not favored by the family and their union might not be possible.

Also, Lin Daiyu refuses to conform blindly to the accepted customs and is not considered an ideal daughter or niece within the Jia family. She often isolates herself, engages in melancholic reflection, and is critical of the world around her. At times, Lin Daiyu withdraws from social interactions, choosing solitude over participation in family gatherings, which marks her as different from her peers. This withdrawal can be seen as her rebellion in a world where she has little actual power, so she retreats to her garden frequently, where she immerses herself in poetry and reflection, wanting to escape from the suffocat-

ing constraints of her social environment. While women of her time like Xue Baochai were demure and agreeable, Lin Daiyu is known for her sharp wit and occasionally sarcastic remarks as she does not compromise her feelings or her sense of self, even when it would be easier to do so to gain favor with her family [9]. She not only does not conform to the typical Confucius woman as Baochai but also does not fall in the flow of going after authorities and rights like most people do at that time. Especially in comparison with Wang Xifeng, who thirsts for power and is so ambitious that she is willing to go to great lengths to secure her power and maintain control, though using underhanded tactics, Daiyu does not even bother to navigate the complex web of relationships within the Jia family [10].

Anna's rebellion against gender roles and social norms on women is so recognizable that she chooses to have an affair with Vronsky, to leave her husband, giving up her duty as a wife and mother for an affair against social and moral norms. After abandoning her easy life as an aristocratic lady with a prominent husband over her "freedom" with Vronsky, she was refused and cursed by her surroundings and society. In a moment of intense desperation, she does not go back and ask for forgiveness, to turn over a new leaf, but ends her life under a train, under the relentless, crushing force of societal judgment.

3. Differences in the Rebellions of the Two Female Figures

3.1 Different Degrees of Rebellion through Different Approaches

Lin Daiyu and Anna are two very different representatives of different personalities, under different phases of life, and thus naturally rebel differently. Daiyu as a highly sensitive, poetic, and intelligent young girl who is acutely aware of the constraints placed on her by her family and society, rebels more passively and introspectively. Whereas Anna, an elegant and charming lady of noble birth, a famous beauty in Petersburg society, rebels more overtly for her desire for personal happiness and fulfillment.

Daiyu is a very tortured character hesitating to cross the line while still obeying certain social rules. Educated under traditional norms, her every word and action conforms with the rituals of the time. She does not openly challenge the norms but rather expresses her resistance through imperceptible behavior and hidden emotions, except only once when she reads *The Romance of The West Chamber* with Baoyu. She frequently weeps, writes melancholic poetry alone, and isolates herself when she feels the pres-

ures of her environment. Her rebellion is more of a quiet refusal to conform rather than an active defiance. Even when she realizes that her love for Jia Baoyu may never be fulfilled, she suffers silently rather than taking drastic actions to alter her fate. Hence, we can say Daiyu's rebellion is subtle and internal.

Anna's rebellion is much more direct and confrontational. She openly defies societal expectations by leaving her husband and living with Vronsky, a scandalous move in her society. Anna's actions are public and irreversible, and she is fully aware of the consequences, including social ostracism. Her rebellion is so bold, particularly at that time, under such a rigid societal structure, in an aristocratic class that values morality. She goes against all of the conventional norms and gives up her family, identity, class, society, and almost everything, just for personal desires and self-expression and freedom at last. This makes her rebellion much more radical and visible compared to Lin Daiyu's.

3.2 The Ways of Death and the Driving Force Behind Their Tragic Ends

Daiyu and Anna's deaths, though both tragically heart-breaking and inevitable, are portrayed quite differently in terms of methods and reasons. While Anna's story is one of public disgrace and moral downfall, where her rebellion leads to a dramatic and violent end, Daiyu's suffering is more internal and tied to personal and familial circumstances rather than a public scandal.

Lin Daiyu's death is portrayed as a gradual decline rather than a sudden end - a slow, inevitable demise brought on by her sensitivity, emotional fragility, and the oppressive environment that suffocates her spirit. She slowly wastes away, succumbing to illness and utter heartbreak. Her death is quiet, taking place in her bed, with her tears and poetry being the final expressions of her sorrow. This method of death emphasizes her frailty and the passive nature of her rebellion. Unlike Anna who rebels against social norms directly and openly, Daiyu does not take any direct actions because of her timidity and cowardice to fight against societal constraints.

In comparison, Anna Karenina's death is sudden, violent, and public, a result of profound inner conflict and societal pressure. She commits suicide by throwing herself under a train, a dramatic and shocking method that reflects the intensity of her inner turmoil, to escape the unbearable pain and isolation she experiences. Towards the end, when she was alienated and rejected by society, and as she started to doubt and feel anxious about her affair, she couldn't live with her situation. At the end of her rope, she can do nothing but commit suicide. Tolstoy does not depict Anna as

one in pursuit of her values despite societal expectations but is influenced by the far-reaching hand of that fickle society where judgments can perish human values [11]. Anna's choice of death is a final act of defiance, but also one of desperation, marking her complete alienation from the world around her.

3.3 Differences in Cultural Elements Delivered

The rebellions of Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina are deeply influenced by the cultural contexts of Qing Dynasty China and 19th-century Russia, respectively. These cultural elements shape how their rebellions are conveyed and understood within their narratives.

Confucianism, which dominated Chinese society during the Qing Dynasty, emphasized harmony, hierarchy, filial piety, and stoicism. Family harmony, as a critical nature of Confucianism, advocates maintaining peace and avoiding conflict, which is paramount, especially for women. Daiyu's passive suffering reflects her awareness that open rebellion would not just disturb the family's harmony but also disgrace herself and her loved ones. By choosing to suffer quietly, she adheres to the Confucian values that prioritize collective well-being over individual expression. Confucianism also promotes emotional restraint and stoicism, especially in public life. Individuals are expected to manage their emotions to maintain social order and personal dignity. The ability to endure hardship without complaint is seen as a virtue. Lin Daiyu's quiet suffering is consistent with this Confucian ideal, as she always suppresses her feelings rather than expressing them openly. She does not actively seek to overthrow the societal norms. Instead, her tears and melancholy are private, conforming to the Confucian expectation of emotional control, endurance, and family harmony while grappling with deep personal pain.

Unlike Lin Daiyu, whose passive suffering reflects a cultural emphasis on endurance, Anna's violent end is a projection of the intense social judgment and rigorous religion that crushes her spirit and sense of self. In Russian high society, maintaining appearances and social respectability was crucial for survival. In "Treacherous 'Charm' in *Anna Karenina*", Curt Whitcomb states that the members of 19th-century Russian society "become watchers rather than doers" [12]. Anna's violation of societal norms leads to her expulsion from respectable society, leaving her with few options for redemption. Additionally, the Russian Orthodox Church played a significant role in shaping the moral values of 19th-century Russia. The Church upheld strict moral standards regarding marriage and fidelity, viewing adultery as a grave sin, which deepened her sense of guilt and inner conflict.

4. Summary

This research paper has explored the theme of female rebellion in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, revealing the complex interplay between the two characters' individual desires and societal constraints. Through a comparative analysis, the study discovers how Lin Daiyu and Anna Karenina, despite being situated in vastly different cultural contexts, embody a shared struggle against the oppressive norms of their respective societies. Both characters, in their quest for love, autonomy, and self-expression, challenge the rigid expectations imposed on them as women, ultimately leading to their tragic downfalls, though their rebellions differ in degrees, motivations, way of death, and cultural elements intertwined. The examination of these two characters has highlighted the universality of female rebellion in literature, transcending cultural and regional boundaries. Yet, the consequences faced by these characters underscore the harsh realities of their rebellion, reflecting the severe limitations imposed on women who dare to challenge societal norms.

Ultimately, this research adds to the broader discourse on the different embodiment of female rebellions in literature, emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural analysis in uncovering the shared struggles of women across different societies and times, as well as the significant influence that culture can exert. Further study can be done on female rebellion in literature from other cultures, such as *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert under the French context, which could provide a more comprehensive analysis of female rebellions across cultural boundaries. Detailed research can also be made on a close reading of how the authors use literary techniques, such as symbolism, narrative structure, or characterization, to portray rebellion. For instance, future studies can focus on analyzing how the different or similar use of imagery and tones indicates the internal struggles of the protagonists.

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