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The Madonna-Seductress Binary: Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity and Leo Tolstoy's Women

Dr. Jay Prakash Tiwari
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Kisan P.G. College,
Bahraich, U.P., India

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Abstract: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" is the first line of Anna Karenina (1878) by Leo Tolstoy. The two families at the center of the novel are Levin's and Karenin's. Kitty (the wife of Levin), the Madonna, in the Madonna-Seductress binary, is portrayed as the virtuous, respectable young woman who transits from innocent girlhood to devoted wife and mother. Her adherence to traditional gender roles, as discussed by Judith Butler in her theory of performativity, is rewarded with love, happiness, and social approval, whereas Anna (the wife of Karenin), the seductress in the above binary, defies gender norms by pursuing passion and autonomy outside of marriage. Her affair with Vronsky challenges the constraints placed on women, but she is punished severely—ostracized, emotionally isolated, and ultimately doomed. Society frames her as the destructive seductress, marking her as a cautionary example of what happens when women reject prescribed roles. The present paper deals in detail with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which elaborates that gender is not inherent but a repeated social performance. The Madonna-Seductress binary, in this context, serves as a constructed division rather than an essential truth about women. Kitty and Anna do not naturally fit their roles; they are conditioned into them. Kitty performs submission and obedience, while Anna attempts to resist but is ultimately forced into a narrative of punishment.

Key Words: The Madonna-Seductress Binary, Anna Karenina, Judith Butler, Theory of Performativity, Kitty, Vronsky, Levin, Karenin.

Introduction:

The *Madonna-Seductress Binary* is a deeply ingrained societal and literary construct that categorizes women into two opposing archetypes:

1. **The Madonna**—Pure, virtuous, submissive, and nurturing. She is the idealized woman, often represented as a mother or wife devoted to self-sacrifice.



2. **The Seductress**—Passionate, independent, and sexually empowered. She challenges social norms, often depicted as dangerous, manipulative, or immoral.

This binary has existed for centuries, originating in religious and patriarchal traditions. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary symbolizes the Madonna, while Eve, who introduces sin into the world, is cast as a seductress. In literature, Shakespeare's Desdemona is the Madonna, whereas Lady Macbeth is the Seductress.

The plot of *Anna Karenina* revolves around *Anna* and cavalry officer Vronsky's extramarital romance, which causes scandal in Saint Petersburg's elite circles and leads the young couple to flee to Italy in pursuit of happiness. However, once they return to Russia, their lives continue to fall apart. Konstantin Levin, a wealthy country landowner who aspires to wed *Kitty*, Dolly's sister and Anna's brother Stepan Oblonsky's sister-in-law, is a parallel plotline in the novel.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* challenges the idea that gender is innate, instead arguing it is *performed* through societal repetition and norms. Butler says women do not "naturally" fit into these categories; they are socially conditioned into them. Anna's breakdown demonstrates that gender roles are restrictive, unstable, and punishing to those who attempt to break them.

Established Gender Norms and Expectations

The *Madonna-Seductress Binary* functions as a tool for reinforcing patriarchal control over female autonomy by dictating how women should behave and punishing those who step outside these predefined roles. By defining women as pure Madonnas or dangerous seductresses, the binary controls female sexuality in the way that either women seen as too independent or too sexually expressive are labeled as "fallen" or immoral, or women who conform to expectations of modesty and submission are praised and protected. This framework limits women's freedom over their bodies and choices, discouraging behaviors that challenge patriarchal authority. The binary ensures that men remain in positions of control, and Madonnas need men, and they are dependent on husbands or fathers for protection and status. On the other side, seductresses threaten male control, so they are punished, often through societal exclusion or tragedy.

By keeping women confined within strict roles, patriarchy ensures that male authority remains unquestioned. Even today, this binary persists in various forms. Women in media, politics, and everyday life are still judged

by these outdated standards. The idea that *“respectable women don’t behave a certain way”* continues to restrict female autonomy.

By analyzing *Anna Karenina* through this lens, we can see that Tolstoy’s work is not just about romance—it exposes how society controls women’s identities and freedoms.

Judith Butler’s theory of Performativity

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* challenges the traditional notion that gender is an innate, biological identity. Instead, Butler argues that gender is a social performance, constructed through repeated behaviors, cultural norms, and societal expectations. Key concepts in Butler’s theory are

1. **Gender is Not Natural, But Constructed**—Butler critiques the idea that gender is an inherent trait tied to biological sex. She states, *“If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender.”* This suggests that even biological sex is shaped by cultural discourse rather than being a purely natural category.
2. **Gender is Performed, Not Possessed**—Butler argues that gender is not something one *is*, but something one *does* through repeated actions: *“The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”* This means that gender identity is reinforced through everyday behaviors—how people dress, speak, and act—rather than being an intrinsic quality.
3. **The Binary Gender System is a Social Construct**—Butler challenges the assumption that gender must exist in a binary (male/female): *“There is no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two.”* This critique opens the possibility for fluid and non-binary gender identities, rejecting the idea that gender must strictly align with biological sex.
4. **Gender Norms Are Enforced Through Power Structures**—Butler explains that gender roles are maintained through societal expectations and institutions: *“To operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination.”* This means that individuals may



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conform to gender norms due to societal pressure, but they also have the ability to challenge and subvert them.

Kitty and Anna as embodiments of the Madonna - Seductress binary

Kitty's character aligns with the traditional expectations for women in Russian high society: purity, devotion, and family-oriented life. Tolstoy presents her as a contrast to Anna, reinforcing the idea that adherence to expected gender roles ensures security and happiness. Kitty's journey begins with heartbreak when Vronsky chooses Anna over her, but she eventually fulfills societal expectations by marrying Levin. In this moment, Tolstoy describes her transformation: *"Now she saw that what had seemed to her before as the best in the world was only childishness; that the life which she was entering upon now was her real life."* Tolstoy idealizes Kitty's role as a wife and mother, contrasting her peaceful domestic existence with Anna's turbulent downfall. When Levin expresses doubts about his purpose, Kitty reassures him with quiet devotion: *"I am content with my life and with what God has given us."* Her ability to find fulfillment in traditional gender roles reinforces the patriarchal idea that happiness is found in submission and family life.

Anna defies gender expectations by pursuing love outside of marriage, seeking passion over duty. While Tolstoy paints her with depth and sympathy, he also shows how society punishes women who break the mold. When Anna first embraces her love for Vronsky, she believes in her own agency: *"I am his mistress; I cannot bear deceit. I cannot endure a life in which I must hide what I feel. I want freedom."* This desire for freedom is unacceptable to society, which expects women to prioritize duty over personal happiness. Unlike Vronsky, who faces little repercussion, Anna is ostracized. As Anna's affair continues, she experiences paranoia and desperation, realizing that she has lost her place in respectable society: *"He loves me as much as he loves his horse—he loves me with his eyes."* This moment reflects her growing awareness that her value has diminished, and her rejection of societal norms leads to deep internal suffering. The novel's climax—Anna's suicide—solidifies the consequences of rejecting gender expectations. Her final thoughts reflect her deep alienation: *"All was confusion in her soul. She felt that everything was closing in upon her."*

While Tolstoy does not outright condemn Anna, the novel reinforces the societal belief that women who obey are rewarded, while those who seek autonomy are punished. Kitty thrives in marriage, while Anna suffers outside it. This dichotomy reflects how patriarchal norms dictate women's value, happiness, and fate.



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Anna Karenina as a Case Study for Gender Performativity

Butler's concept of gender as a social performance is evident in *Anna Karenina*. Women in Tolstoy's world do not simply exist as "naturally" submissive or rebellious—they are shaped by societal expectations.

Kitty as the Madonna (Performing Virtuous Femininity) adheres to traditional ideals. She is pure, nurturing, and finds fulfillment in marriage. Her acceptance of prescribed gender roles ensures her happiness. When she marries Levin, Tolstoy reinforces the idea that women should aspire to domestic life: "She saw that this was her real life, and all that had seemed to her before as the best was only childishness." Butler's theory suggests that Kitty is not inherently maternal or submissive—she is taught to perform these behaviors.

Anna as the Seductress (Performing Rebellion) rejects societal norms by seeking love outside marriage, but she cannot sustain her defiance, as gender roles are socially enforced. Her realization that she is being cast as the "fallen woman" leads to her paranoia. This reflects Butler's idea that gender identity is unstable—Anna's rejection of societal expectations makes her feel alienated and destroyed.

Conclusion

Feminist critics argue that Tolstoy's novel demonstrates how gender roles are maintained through social rewards and punishments. Levin insists on Kitty's devotion and purity, reflecting how marriage regulates women's behaviour. Butler's theory argues that institutions like marriage create and sustain gender roles. Anna's downfall illustrates Butler's theory that gender categories are oppressive—when Anna resists them, she experiences emotional turmoil. Her tragic fate serves to reinforce patriarchal values by implying that women who seek autonomy will suffer. Tolstoy's portrayal of Kitty and Anna reflects the rigid expectations imposed on women in 19th-century Russian society—where submission is rewarded, and defiance is punished. Yet, modern feminist criticism and Butler's theories continue to challenge these binaries, advocating for fluid, complex representations of gender in literature, media, and real life. The rigid categorization of women as either virtuous or rebellious remains relevant today, but contemporary perspectives encourage narratives that blur these boundaries, allowing female characters to exist beyond traditional roles.



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