

The Illusion of Fulfilment: *Objet Petit a* and Romantic Desire in *Anna Karenina* and *Salt and Saffron*

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Abstract

This research positions Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* within Lacan's theoretical framework to analyze the interplay of desire and subjectivity. Through the lens of the *objet petit a*, the unattainable object-cause of longing, both works depict protagonists—Anna and Aliya—whose desires for love and belonging expose deeper psychic and cultural fractures. Anna's fixation on Vronsky and Aliya's negotiation of diasporic displacement exemplify Lacan's claim that desire is structured by absence and perpetuated through deferral. In each narrative, the beloved serves as the *objet petit a*, the residue of an impossible plenitude that drives the subject toward self-dissolution. Tolstoy and Shamsie thus reimagine romance not as fulfillment but as a dialectic of loss, where the Real of desire intrudes upon the Symbolic order, revealing the enduring impossibility of psychic or cultural wholeness.

Introduction

Leo Tolstoy, towering in the canon of world literature, is renowned for his penetrating insight into the human condition and the moral quandaries of life. Born in Russia in 1828, he first experimented with plays and short fiction, yet his genius reached its fullest expression in the epic novels *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, works that continue to define his stature as a master of narrative depth. Kamila Shamsie, by contrast, is a contemporary author whose voice resonates across South Asian and global literary spheres. Born in Pakistan and later educated in the United States and United Kingdom, Shamsie crafts narratives that weave together themes of cultural identity, displacement, and historical memory. Her novels often explore the weight of family inheritance, the collision of political and personal struggles, and the transformative impact of history on intimate human lives.

Desire, Division and Split Subject

The psychoanalytic exploration of selfhood provides a profound lens for understanding the intricacies of desire and identity. In Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the dialectic between the ego-ideal and the ideal ego emerges as a key framework for analyzing character motivations and conflicts. Lacan's concept of the split subject and the persistence of fragmented desires illuminate these struggles, revealing the perpetual disjunction at the heart of human subjectivity. Anna's tragic pursuit of love and acceptance dramatizes the rift between ego and ego-

ideal, leaving her alienated and despondent (Dendy 993). Similarly, in *Salt and Saffron*, the protagonist's search for belonging within a multicultural context demonstrates that "the idealized self can clash with lived reality, resulting in a fragmented sense of self" (Gunder 45). Lacan situates this fracture within the fundamental opposition between conscious ego and unconscious desire, insisting that subjectivity itself rests on a constitutive lack. As he explains, "Man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, *The Subject and the Other: Alienation* 235). Thus, identity is never whole but perpetually displaced within a chain of signification, where "splitting generates both lack and desire" (Heath-Kelly 88).

The Desire of the Woman: Psychoanalytic Tension between the Self and Other

This chapter situates Lacan's distinction between the ego-ideal and the ideal ego within a feminist framework that interrogates the gendered mediation of desire. As Grosz (1990) asserts, "Women's desires are often mediated through the lens of patriarchy, which positions them as objects of desire rather than subjects with agency" (71). It is within this patriarchal horizon that Anna in *Anna Karenina* and Aliya in *Salt and Saffron* negotiate their subjectivities. Their desires clash with social expectations, resulting in fractured identities. Material culture further complicates this negotiation: Anna's fascination with luxury becomes symptomatic of her attempt to stabilize a fragile self-image, while Aliya's negotiation of goods dramatizes her oscillation between tradition and modernity. These entanglements underscore the commodified texture of female desire under patriarchy.

Lacan's notion of *objet petit a* deepens this inquiry by locating desire in the structural gap of subjectivity itself. *Objet petit a* is not the object of desire but the cause of desire, a residue that ensures desire's persistence through its unattainability (Dean 160). As Kirshner (83) observes, it propels desire beyond the pleasure principle toward the impossible *jouissance* that borders on fatality. The gaze, another form of *objet petit a*, illustrates this dynamic: McGowan emphasizes that "the loss of the gaze as an object is at once the moment of its emergence" (29), confirming that desire is predicated on absence, not possession.

Within this paradigm, Anna's attachment to Vronsky becomes legible not as love in the conventional sense, but as the inscription of lack. Vronsky functions as her *objet petit a*—an empty signifier upon which she projects fantasies of liberation and wholeness. Yet this fantasy inevitably collapses under the Symbolic weight of Karenin, society, and the "Big Other." Similarly, Aliya's romantic encounters in Shamsie's novel operate as displaced enactments of diasporic lack. Her lovers embody the fantasy of reconciliation—between heritage and individuality, past and present—but this reconciliation is never realizable. As Riaz (163) observes, Aliya's "inner-alienation," grounded in generational displacement, ensures the perpetual circulation of desire without resolution. In both novels, therefore, love emerges as a symptomatic performance of lack, a site where subjectivity confronts its structural impossibility rather than its fulfillment.

Literature Review

Unmasking the Masquerade, Fetishism and Femininity

In *Unmasking the Masquerade, Fetishism and Femininity* from the Goncourt Brothers to Joan Riviere, Apter Emily draws on Lacanian theory to argue that women's identities are constituted not only through their desires but also through their positioning as objects of the Other's desire. This formulation places femininity and desire in a particularly intricate relation. Building on Lacan's assertion that "In order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade" (Apter 94), Apter posits that femininity often emerges as a rejection of authentic subjectivity. Through this masquerade, women perform an identity that conceals their inner conflicts while simultaneously meeting social expectations. Such a position resonates with Lacan's concept of the split subject, wherein the subject's genuine interests are eclipsed by the demands of the Other.

This dynamic is exemplified in *Anna Karenina*, whose beauty, charm, and grace function less as inherent traits than as external performances of ideal femininity. These external manifestations mask

the dissonance between her desires and the social obligations she feels compelled to satisfy, ultimately contributing to her tragic dissolution. Similarly, in *Salt and Saffron*, Aliya navigates the divide between familial traditions of womanhood and modern imperatives for autonomy. Her oscillation between these worlds illustrates femininity as masquerade, where shifting contexts demand constant recalibration of self-presentation. In both cases, femininity becomes a performed identity rather than an authentic one, producing a persistent schism between the ego-ideal—the externalized cultural model—and the ideal ego—the subject’s aspirational self.

The Self and its Pleasures

In *The Self and Its Pleasures*, Carolyn J. Dean advances the argument that unconscious desire is fundamentally shaped by patriarchal culture. She contends that psychoanalysis reveals the deep interdependence of unconscious drives and social authority, remarking that “the unconscious is at once continuous with and ‘beyond’ culture... its drives are always already expressed as cultural norms, primarily patriarchal ones” (Dean 112). Her claim mirrors Lacan’s emphasis on the symbolic order—the system of language and cultural law—as the perpetual mediator of desire. Within this framework, Dean shows that subjects may outwardly conform to social rules while inwardly sustaining subversive desires, thus reflecting Lacan’s insistence on the duplicity of the split subject.

Dean stresses that the symbolic simultaneously structures and destabilizes the ego: “entry into the symbolic facilitates the acceptance of the otherness of the other: It splits the ego, resolves discord by developing it” (96). Desire is therefore both a product of culture and a force that destabilizes cultural stability. In Lacanian terms, sexuality underwrites the subject’s fragmentation, rendering identity permanently incomplete. Dean echoes this view when she writes that “the split subject is the product of a link between sexuality and the self” (247). Such insights prove particularly illuminating for the study of feminine subjectivity in patriarchal settings, where desire is persistently overdetermined by cultural codes.

Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* offers a literary manifestation of these dynamics. Anna’s love for Vronsky represents a profound challenge to the symbolic order of nineteenth-century Russian aristocracy, which strictly defines a woman’s value as wife and mother. Her passion, while authentic, transgresses the moral law of her society, situating her as both subject of desire and object of patriarchal judgment. The tragic collapse of her life underscores Lacan’s claim that desire is structurally unattainable and that the subject’s identity remains fractured by the dissonance between inner longings and external imperatives.

The research of desire: A Lacanian perspective

Shideh Ahmadzadeh, in *The Research of Desire: A Lacanian Perspective*, frames Lacan’s psychology of desire through the principle of lack, which she identifies as central to the subject’s constitution. For Lacan, desire emerges not as instinct but as the result of absence, since “being arises as presence from a background of absence” (Ahmadzadeh 136). The unconscious is organized around this void, which compels the subject to enter language—the system of signification that sustains existence. Within this system, the signifier stands in for the subject, ensuring that subjectivity itself is inseparable from signification. As Ahmadzadeh explains, “lack is the void or the gap that precedes the instinct and also the desire expressed in a signifier” (137).

The subject is therefore inherently incomplete, marked by a constitutive split. This split manifests in the dual orientation of desire: “Desire itself is split between the quest for satisfaction in the real... and the desire for the other” (Belsey, qtd. in Ahmadzadeh 140). Language deepens this paradox, simultaneously offering a framework of meaning and reinforcing the subject’s alienation, for language can never capture the real. “Desire yearns for something that is denied” (Ahmadzadeh 141), underscoring that the self is always organized around the unattainable.

This framework illuminates the trajectories of Anna in *Anna Karenina* and Aliya in *Salt and Saffron*. Anna’s passion for Vronsky reflects more than personal longing; it is an attempt to reconcile an existential lack, a desire for affirmation and wholeness within the patriarchal codes that confine her.

Aliya's shifting negotiations between tradition and modernity similarly reveal the mediation of her subjectivity by cultural signifiers. Both characters illustrate Lacan's contention that desire is inseparable from lack and that identity is perpetually split between social determination and the impossible pursuit of fulfillment.

The Dis-Appearance of Desire

In *The Dis-Appearance of Desire: Nancy and Lacan, the Exscribed and the Sublime*, Haensler examines Lacan's principle that "Jouissance is impossible" (413), which asserts the inherent incompleteness of human desire. The Lacanian axiom that "there is no sexual relation" (Haensler 413) underscores that satisfaction in human relationships is structurally unattainable. Desire, rather than an instinctual pursuit of pleasure, is mediated through the symbolic and social order, producing a split subject caught between internal drives and external constraints.

Nancy's reflections extend this framework, highlighting the existential and relational gaps that define being. Haensler observes, "Nancy's meditations confront us with a 'lack' or 'absence' of 'connection'" (144), emphasizing that human relationality is perennially fragmented and incomplete. This perspective illustrates the paradoxical nature of desire: it propels the subject toward engagement while simultaneously ensuring that complete fulfillment remains impossible.

In literary narratives, Anna Karenina and Aliya in *Salt and Saffron* exemplify the consequences of this structural lack. Anna's romantic pursuit of Vronsky emerges from her struggle against the restrictive patriarchal codes of Russian aristocracy; however, social judgment and institutional constraints prevent the consummation of her desires. Aliya faces similar tensions, negotiating personal ambition against entrenched cultural and familial expectations. Both characters' experiences embody Lacan's assertion that desire is fundamentally unfulfillable and socially mediated, producing alienation and an enduring sense of incompleteness within the frameworks that define identity.

Analysis

In *Anna Karenina* and *Salt and Saffron*, romantic desire is consistently mediated through structural lack, revealing the split subjectivity of women under social and cultural constraints. Lacan's theory emphasizes that desire is structured by the *objet petit a*, which instigates longing beyond any attainable object. Anna's attachment to Vronsky functions as a projection of her aspiration for freedom from societal and marital limitations, whereas Aliya's romantic engagements symbolize her negotiation of diasporic familial and cultural dislocations. Consequently, love becomes a site of recurrent frustration, reflecting structural absence rather than individual failure.

The split subject emerges as a crucial analytic lens. Lacan's distinctions between the ideal ego and ego-ideal clarify the conflict between the internalized social model and the aspirational self. Anna's ideal ego pursues autonomy and passion, but her ego-ideal demands conformity to 19th-century Russian expectations of wifedom and motherhood, culminating in alienation and emotional collapse. Tolstoy remarks, "She was especially struck by the feeling of dissatisfaction with herself that she experienced on meeting him" (97), emphasizing the internalization of social pressures. Aliya mirrors this tension in microcosm: her reflection on the airport hug—"What would my grandmother say if she knew I'd been hugging strange men in airports?" (Shamsie 8)—demonstrates the pervasive influence of familial and cultural norms on female autonomy.

The gendered structuring of desire is further elucidated by Irigaray, who contends, "Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (25). In Tolstoy, Anna's life exemplifies the consequences of this dynamic, as her agency is subordinated to the symbolic and sexual economy dominated by male desire. Aliya's romantic and personal autonomy similarly collides with cultural prescriptions, reflecting the universality of patriarchal influence on women's subjective experiences. The interplay of ego-ideal, ideal ego, and socialized desire thus elucidates the psychological and cultural fragmentation experienced by these female protagonists (Barnard-Naudé 5; Lismalinda 64).

Becoming the Subject: Desire, Identity and Autonomy

To understand Anna's and Aliya's desires, Lacan's concept of the ego-ideal is pivotal. The ego-ideal represents the internalized standards imposed by culture and family, mediating the tension between personal aspiration and social expectation. In *Anna Karenina*, Anna's roles as wife and mother constitute her ego-ideal, yet her pursuit of romantic love with Vronsky challenges these roles, producing psychological paradox. Her lament, "I have no right to be happy" (Tolstoy 300), reveals the internalized moral injunctions that constrain her desire, consistent with Jacobson's observation that the superego frequently imposes unattainable demands, generating feelings of inadequacy (12).

Aliya's experience in *Salt and Saffron* mirrors this tension: her cultural and familial obligations shape her ego-ideal, compelling her to navigate between tradition and autonomy. She reflects, "I am torn between two worlds" (Shamsie 78), highlighting the persistent negotiation of desire and duty. The pressure of the superego is further emphasized when Aliya observes, "Every choice I make feels like a betrayal" (Shamsie 102), underscoring the internal conflict inherent in asserting individuality against external expectations. Both protagonists exemplify Lacan's notion of the split subject, as their personal desires are perpetually at odds with the symbolic order of their respective societies.

Tolstoy amplifies the stakes of this conflict, portraying Anna's transgression as a symbolic rupture that destabilizes not only her identity but also the social and familial institutions around her. As he notes, "The inequality in marriage lay in the fact that the infidelity of the wife and the infidelity of the husband are punished unequally, both by the law and by public opinion" (689), which Stewart interprets as illustrating that "not only personality but the social organism is terribly at stake in the love-marriage relationship" (273). Lacanian theory illuminates this as a consequence of Anna's defiance of the ego-ideal: her quest for love and autonomy undermines both her psychological equilibrium and the symbolic structures sustaining her social world. The collapse of her identity and desire thus operates as a critique of patriarchal norms and the fragility of cultural institutions.

Conclusion

Lacan's concept of the objet petit a illuminates the fundamental incompleteness that characterises human desire, revealing that longing transcends the mere satisfaction of corporeal needs. In *Anna Karenina* and *Salt and Saffron*, Anna and Aliya exemplify the erratic pursuit of idealised fulfilment through romantic attachment, a pursuit that ultimately exposes the fragility of desires grounded in projections of the Other. As Kirshner observes, the pursuit of jouissance entails a fantasy of desubjectification and merger (101), which the symbolic order inherently frustrates. Both Tolstoy and Shamsie thus depict desire as inseparable from lack: the heroines' quests for love are inextricably entwined with the existential imperative to reconcile an irreducible internal void with the impossibility of total fulfilment.

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