WHAT IS THE ROLE OF WOMEN? L. N. TOLSTOY'S AND M. DE UNAMUNO'S VIEWS ON MARRIAGE, MATERNITY AND SEX

ANNA HAMLING*

Summary

This paper introduces, examines, and compares affinities and divergences of L. N. Tolstoy’s (1828–1910) and Miguel de Unamuno’s (1864-1936) views on the role of women in Kreutzer Sonata (1889) and La Tia Tula (1921) in the nineteenth century Russia and Spain. The focus of this paper is to explore both writers’ attitudes towards women in their novels. Tolstoy's and Unamuno’s views on marriage, sex and maternity will also be examined.

Key Words: Women, Sex, Marriage, Maternity, Tolstoy, Unamuno.

Radical feminism

According to Holly Graff, works of radical feminist theorists (such as Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, Catherine MacKinnon's, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* Marilyn French’s *The Women's Room* (novel), Audre Lord’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name – A Biomythography* (autobiographical fiction), Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and *The Dream of a Common Language*) contain at least several of the following claims:

1. The oppression of women is based on the model underling other forms of oppression based on class and race. 2. The oppression of women by men is a system called patriarchy. This is an almost universal system existing in every known society. 3. Patriarchy is based in an oppressive
family structure within which women's sexuality and reproductive capacities are controlled. It supports violence against women and threats of violence against women - particularly if women step outside the roles assigned to them in the family. 4. Organized religion and language support patriarchy. 5. Given the deep roots of the oppression of women, the liberation of women requires revolutionary change that challenges a full range of patriarchal institutions including the family (Graff, 2012, p.1). As Graff explains, contemporary radical feminism arose in the late 1960's and was associated with the consciousness-raising groups of this period. Many of the "classic" radical feminist articles such as The Politics of Housework were produced by these groups. Many women believed that they had suffered oppression within the other progressive movements of the 50's and 60's (civil rights movement, anti-war movement, new left, etc.).

The accepted framework of thought that prevailed at that time was that “men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest. Women inhabited a separate, private sphere, one suitable for the so called inherent qualities of femininity: emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness, all derived from women’s sexual and reproductive organization” (Dworkin, 1974, p. 30). Following such principles allowed men, who were controlled by their mind or intellectual strength, to dominate society, to be the governing sex, given that they were viewed as rational, brave, and independent. Women, on the other hand, were dominated by their sexuality and were regarded as irrational, sensitive, and dutiful. As Dworkin observes: “Women were so exclusively identified by their sexual functions that nineteenth-century society came to regard them as ‘the Sex’” (Dworkin, 1974, p.32).

Institutions of Marriage

This paper examines the Russian and Spanish social institutions of marriage, motherhood, and conventional sexual values in the framework of the oppression of women outlined by radical feminists as outlined above. In this period both in Russia and Spain, marriage was possibly one of the most significant points in a woman’s life. The majority of women did not have the option not to marry: it was simply a necessity for survival. Because society prevented women from making their own living, there was an inescapable dependence upon men’s income. “Barred by law and custom from entering trades and professions by which they could support themselves, and restricted in the possession of property, woman had only one means of livelihood, that of marriage” (Mandalkier, 1993, p. 86). Therefore, no matter what the women desired, most were predestined to become wives due to their economic reliance on men. Secondly, to be even considered as a potential wife, women had to be not only virgins, but were expected to remain innocent and “free from any thought of love or sexuality” until after they had received a proposal (Mandalkier, 1993, p. 87). This requirement of chastity and absolute purity was not expected of men, as the potential husband had the freedom to participate in premarital and extramarital sexual relationships. Such a biased idea was one of many double standards in Russian and Spanish society which demanded unquestionable compliance from women and none from men, since the women were thought to be controlled by their sexuality and were thus in need of regulation. After a woman married, her rights, her property, and even her identity almost ceased to exist. By law she was under the complete and total supervision of her husband through marriage, husband and wife became one person; whatever view the husband presented was the unquestionable truth (Mandalkier, 1993, p. 87).
Miguel de Unamuno, a well-known Spanish writer, poet and philosopher considered Lev Nikolaevicz Tolstoy to be one of his mejores maestros (best teachers) (Benítez, 1960, p. 73), teachers who played a decisive role in his formation as a thinker, poet, and writer.

Kreutzer Sonata was published when Unamuno was in his preliminary stages of writing Paz en la Guerra (Peace in War). In a letter to his friend Mugica, written on May 17, 1892, Unamuno expressed admiration for Tolstoy’s novel and indicated that he had read the Kreutzer Sonata a few years ago Unamuno). According to Manuel Garcia Blanco (Benítez, 1960, p. 67) Unamuno had already started writing La Tia Tula in 1902, at that time with a simple title La tia. In a letter to a poet, Juan Maragall, on November 3, 1902, Unamuno wrote that he was “composing” a narration about a spinster called La tia (Aunt) (Unamuno, 1966-72, vol. 2, p. 34). Unamuno’s fascination with Tolstoy’s novels, as well as his admiration for Russian writers’ religious ideology, might have inspired him to write La Tia Tula (Aunt Tula).

Kreutzer Sonata

After his religious conversion in 1894, Tolstoy accepted the philosophy of “an ideal of goodness attained by chastity,” and he wrote Kreutzer Sonata in 1889 with this ideology in mind. However, this ideal “of goodness” was impossible to achieve because, according to Tolstoy, man’s life was controlled by institutions. Unamuno shared Tolstoy’s views on the importance of spiritual communion within marriage. For him, it was a prerequisite for true love; for Tolstoy, however, the institution of marriage destroyed true spiritual relations.

Unamuno had been happily married to Concha for over fifty years, his “costumbre” (habit) as he used to call her. The Spanish writer’s marriage with Concha was based on mutual respect and deep friendship. Unamuno went through three religious crises in his life, but he never rejected marriage. His experiences only strengthened the spiritual bond between him and his wife.

Tolstoy wrote Kreutzer Sonata when he himself was living a personal drama almost as complicated and debilitating as the novel itself. He and his wife Sofya, at the respective ages of sixty-one and forty-five, quarrelled bitterly about their views on life, the education of their children, where they should live, and the moral values in their lives. Ironically, Sofya Andreyevna acted as her own pale version of the Kreutzer Sonata in an infatuation with Sergey Ivanovich Taneyev, a concert pianist and family acquaintance.

Though there was no sexual infidelity involved, the indiscretion of her desperate flirtation disgusted her husband. The fact that he could be so deeply upset about this “affair” indicated how closely they were emotionally entangled with each other. This chaotic story was to invoke chaotic context in which Tolstoy wrote the disturbing tale of Pozdnyszev and his wife. Tolstoy could still envision love as agape built on spiritual bond and deep friendship. On one occasion, eighteen years after writing Kreutzer Sonata, Tolstoy said to his friend N. N. Gusev: “I ought to have gone into a monastery. And I would have, if I hadn’t had a wife” (Maude, 1920, p.15). Secular celibacy is an equally possible solution for the male, as for a female, as Pozdnyszev implies at the end of Kreutzer Sonata. The reader is surprised that after stabbing his wife, Pozdnyszev suddenly becomes aware of her as a human being and the atrocity of his act. Then he concludes that he should never have
married! According to him, only his celibacy could have prevented him from murdering his wife.

La Tía Tula

Getrudis, the unmarried protagonist of La Tía Tula, mirrors Pozdnyszew’s opinion. She, too, believes in celibacy, although for different reasons than the protagonist of Kreutzer Sonata. She rejects domination of any man because of his position of superiority. In the second supplement of the Kreutzer Sonata, Tolstoy argues that, the man who has led a debauched life passes on moral corruption to the woman, infects her with his own sensuality (Unamuno, 1988, p.67). Tolstoy, in fact, rejects the most fundamental human institutions and commitments. He denies practical possibility or the value of marriage, sexuality, and fidelity.

Unamuno also wanted to be a priest. In a letter to Jiménez Ilundáin in 1901, he related an episode of his youth when he was already in love with Concha. Yet, he opened a Bible by chance to the verse that said: “Id y predicad el Evangelio” (Go and preach the Bible) (Unamuno, 1966-72, vol. 2, p. 67). Unamuno interpreted this as a mandate to become a priest. He also wondered whether the duties of a husband and father would interfere with his efforts to be a writer. Yet Concha saved her husband from “soledad” (solitude), while Tolstoy was convinced that Sofya was the reason for his solitude. The poem, written by Unamuno to Concha after her death, explained everything about their simple yet very deep relationship. It expressed the physical aspect of their love that was believed to be completely pure; the same applied to their spiritual love. Tolstoy, on the other hand, did not believe in purity within marriage; after his religious conversion, he considered marriage to be an obstacle to chastity and spirituality (Gifford, 1982, p.34).

Tolstoy’s and Unamuno’s Views on the Roles of Women

Both writers agreed that civilization favored domination of a man. Unamuno indicated that the woman had to face the disadvantages imposed on her by the patriarchal society. It was civilization that limited her opportunities and horizons. It was not her biological structure, but the norms of the society imposed on her and her identity shaped by men in the marriage. When the old merchant in Kreutzer Sonata condemns civilization and so-called progress, we detect similarities with La Tía Tula in which urban life is also considered to be the evil of civilization. Unamuno refers to a man as “animal civil urbano” (the civil urban animal) (Unamuno, 1966-72, vol. 4, p.14).

The central argument in Kreutzer Sonata and in La Tía Tula is that a woman can be truly emancipated “when she thinks the highest position she, as a woman can reach, that of maidenhood” (Tolstoy, 1989, p. 20). By avoiding marriage, women can avoid oppression and exploitation within the damaging institution. According to Tolstoy, the institution of marriage has different moral standards for women and men. Pozdnyszew, the central character of Tolstoy’s novel, narrates his “crime of passion” to the passengers on the train as it moves for several days across Russia. We are immediately faced with two different opinions about the position of women in society. One of the passengers, the old merchant, suggests that women should be tamed; a lady sitting near him opposes his point of view. She states that women should have a right to choose their husband and also the right to divorce them if necessary. The old merchant replies with stern platitudes “Human beings have a law given to them; the first thing that should be required of a woman is fear (of her husband of course) the “female sex must be curbed in time or else all is lost” (Tolstoy, 1989, p. 54). When the narrator reminds the old man how he was boasting about his own sexual exploits at a fair, the old
merchant replies that this “is a special case” (Tolstoy, 1989, p. 82).

Pozdnyszev apparently suffers agony in marriage, and his attitude toward the institution of marriage changes. He says, “It is only since I have learned what ought to be that I realized so completely the foulness of what is” (Tolstoy, 1989, p.90). Just as Tolstoy in his youth, Pozdnyszev led an immoral life, having a number of affairs. In fact, he was encouraged by society to have such relations; it was healthy for a man to have many sexual encounters. Yet, he decided to choose a pure and chaste woman for his wife. Pozdnyszev considers women as “objects of pleasure.” Women in marriage are dehumanized beings who are brought to the level of prostitutes. For Pozdnyszev, without spiritual love, a woman used for procreation purposes by her husband becomes a fallen woman.

Yet Pozdnyszev feels trapped by his wife, by her physical appearance. There is no spiritual unity, but it was the physical attractiveness of his wife that seduced him. Pozdnyszev justifies such attitudes toward women. It is the man who has the upper hand in choosing his wife. A woman does not have the power to choose her husband; the only power she has is to seduce him, but she still has to wait to be selected by him. She is inferior to men in all social acts and functions that are founded on the relations between men and women.

Based on the idea of exploitation, marriages must end in tragedy. In one of the conversations with Gorky, Tolstoy remarks that “men must suffer earthquakes, epidemics, dreadful diseases and all the torments of the soul but the worst tragedy in life was at all times, is now and ever will be the tragedy of the bedroom” (Greenwood, 1977, p.156). Tolstoy interprets sensuality as a whim and revenge of the enslaved women. In his judgement, the woman is enslaved because “people want to use her as a means of getting pleasure.” Thus sexual, carnal love hampers the achievement of the goal of human history, which is to “create a unity of people in benevolence, love and kindness” (Greenwood, 1977, p.156).

In other words, Tolstoy interprets sex as a sign of imperfection of humankind. In his opinion, the objective of human life is to overcome sex, while eradication of sex through chastity would manifest the triumph of overwhelming human harmony and love. We also can assume that sexual interaction for a woman has a damaging influence on her in Tolstoy’s eyes.

For example, Pozdnyszev characterizes his wedding night as a horror as his wife loses blood. Women also get pregnant, and they nurse their children. Getrudis, in La Tia Tula, believe that nursing is undesirable because it damages the physical and emotional strength of a woman (Unamuno, 1988, p.12). “What other word can there be for it but crime, when she, poor creature, became pregnant in the very first month, and yet our pig-like relationship (that is sexual intercourse) continued” (Unamuno, 1988, p.14). When Ramiro, Tula’s brother in-law, wants to have sexual relation with his wife when she is pregnant, Gerturis advises him to abstain. Such a sacrifice will add the other dimension to their love, the true spiritual love. Pozdnyszev also says that a pregnant woman should not have sex with her husband.

Tolstoy applies the notion of sex only to women and interprets it not merely in the biological sense but rather as a moral or amoral notion (Maude, 1920, pp. 230–31). Pozdnyszev states that a woman does not have the right to initiate sexual relationships. Women lack the freedom either to start or to reject sex. Pozdnyszev never refers to his wife by name. She is neither personalized nor distinguished from any other women. Her husband describes her as a “fresh, well fed harness horse, whose bridle has been removed” (Tolstoy, 1989, p 32).

Even though Unamuno believed that marriage had a stabilizing influence on people, he also disapproved of sexuality merely for the sake of sexual pleasure; one of the many good aspects about marriage is that it regulates one’s carnal appetite. Unamuno believed in true spiritual love from
which sexual love might emerge. Tolstoy believed in the destructive force of sex. Bondage in the service of sensuality seems to go along with social and political liberation. In the words of Tolstoy’s narrator, acerbically commenting on female emancipation in *Kreutzer Sonata*:

> At bottom feminine servitude consist entirely in her assimilation with a means of pleasure. They excite woman, they give her all sorts of rights equal to those of men, but they continue to look at her as an object of sensual desire, and thus they bring her up from infancy and in public opinion. She is always humiliated and corrupt serf and man remains always the debauched Master. (Tolstoy, 1989, p. 45)

For Unamuno, the woman is first and foremost the mother, even though she dies a virgin. In his diary, Unamuno (1902) mentioned the anguish of his religious crisis and the attitude of Concha: “Al verme llorar se le escapó a mi mujer esta exclamación viniendo a mí: “Hijo mío”. Entonces me llamó hijo, hijo” (When she saw me crying she called me ‘My son’) (Benítez, 1949, p.14). Unamuno even claimed: “Aunque muera virgen siempre es madre” (even if woman dies as a virgin she will still be a mother). La mujer es, ante todo y sobre todo, madre. El instinto de maternidad es en ella mucho más fuerte que el de sexualidad … quiere al amante o al marido con amor maternal, y su amor crece cuando le siente debil, cuando siente que es preciso defenderle por muy fuerte que en otros aspectos aparezca” (A woman is always a mother ... the maternal instinct is much stronger in her that sexual instinct ... she loves her husband or a partner with motherly love and her love becomes stronger when she feels she needs to defend her husband) (Unamuno, 1966-72, vol. 4, p.145).

Tula stated that she never got married because she did not want to be a victim of a patriarchal society. Tula does not believe that a woman can impose her sexual needs on men: “Pero you no puedo buscarlos. No soy hombre, y la mujer tiene que esperar a ser elegida. Y yo, la verdad, me gusta elegir, pero no ser elegida” (I can’t look for them. I am not a man; a woman has to wait to be chosen. And I like to choose, not to be chosen) (Unamuno, 1988, p.45). The other form of slavery, she claims, is in a convent. Men detest women with the will to be free. Gertrudis says “Libre estaba, libre estoy, libre pienso morirme” (I have been free, I am free, and I intend to die free) (Unamuno, 1988, p.47). “No me gusta que me manden” (I don’t like to be bossed around) (Unamuno, 1988, p.48). Such an attitude is a defense in the masculine, patriarchal world. Gertrudis does not want to marry Juan to become a housewife: “Cuando una no es remedio es animal doméstico y la mayor parte de las veces ambas cosas a la vez! Estos hombres” (If she is not a remedy for a man, she is a domesticated animal and most of the time, both things! These men!) (Unamuno, 1988, p.51). Therefore, women are not free to seek their own identity; they must conform to the identity imposed on them by men.

Pozdnyszew admits that passion and procreation were the reasons for his marriage. Passion soon becomes hatred; children only add to Pozdnyszew’s confusion. Husband and wife become distant and drift apart. Hate leads to jealousy, and Pozdnyszew believes that his wife’s relationship with the musician becomes adultery. Eventually he feels alienated, while his wife now has the opportunity to shine and attract the interest of a musician. Relationships based merely on passion and desire for procreation are doomed to fail. It is the spiritual union that is the foundation of the relationship. Pozdnyszew also declares: “Of the passions the strongest and the most evil is sexual carnal love” (Tolstoy, 1989, p. 67).

In the letter to Chertkov on November 6, 1888, Tolstoy states that he admires complete abstinence (Maude, 1920, p.45). The best solution is to love and help one’s wife but never have a physical relationship with her. That can be achieved in self-realization without being committed to...
the institution of marriage. Marina Warner (Warner, 1983, p. 58) explains that Eve, the sinner, is generally identified with nature and that sexual awareness of Eve caused the fall of humanity.

**Tula’s Rebellion**

Gertrudis mirrors such an attitude and rejects the knowledge of a fallen woman. “Quiero irme de este mundo sin saber muchas cosas … Porque hay cosas que el saberlas mancha. … Eso es el pecado original” (I want to die without knowing many things. Because at times, knowing things, leaves stains on you. This is the original sin) (Unamuno, 1988, p.60). For her, “La Virgen es la Gracia” (Virgin is Grace). Nature is Eve. *La Tia Tula* reflects the values of Pozdnyszev. Getrudis believes that spiritual love is the most important in marriage, the deep love that married people can only experience when they have gone through many sacrifices. For her, this type of love has nothing to do with sexual attraction, which is only experienced in the time of suffering. While her sister, Rosa, is still alive, Gertrudis points out to her that women have only two choices in life regarding which institution to choose: marriage or the convent. “Parezcanos bien o mal nuestra carrera es el matrimonio o el convent” (Our career is either marriage or a convent) (Unamuno, 1988, p.67). Tula further states that the two roles that society forces upon women are subject to patriarchal domination.

Tula wants to control her life; she is very aware that she would not be able to do so if she got married. She says to her brother-in-law that she intends to die free “libre pienso morirme.” She believes then that she can enjoy freedom being a spinster; being married would make her a slave to a man. Tula is not willing to commit herself to marriage or a convent. She states that Christianity is the religion of men. (El Cristianismo es la religión de los hombres) (Unamuno, 1988, p. 70). Tula has found a practical solution for the problematic ideology of Tolstoy. Instead of passively escaping the institution of marriage and the institution of a convent—instead of being victimized by society—she decides to act. She introduces a woman-centred religion with Virgin Mary being herself. Tula regards Mary as the second Eve who redeemed humanity because she gave us salvation through the birth of Jesus Christ. Mary managed to be a mother without engaging in sexual relationships with men, thus escaping the original sin. Tula does not believe that biological mothers are the best suited to raise children. After her sister’s death, she looks after her nephew and niece as if they were her own children. She also confesses to her brother-in-law that “el hombre hasta tú, Ramiro, me ha dado miedo siempre, no he podido ver en el sino el bruto. He huido del hombre” (Men, even you, Ramiro have always frightened me, I could not see in them more than being brutes. I have escaped men) (Unamuno, 1988, p. 77). Tula might be frightened of men because they imply the institutions of marriage and domestic slavery. She is aware of their power over women.

Unamuno, just like Tolstoy, stated that man’s longing centres on physical desires; a woman denies her sexuality or sometimes uses it as a source of power. The attitude of a woman’s sexual relationships puts woman as the source of the evil. Both Tolstoy and Unamuno modify that attitude by cantering their philosophy of an ideal woman, Virgin Mary: Tolstoy in his theory, Unamuno by applying the Russian writer’s theory to practice. A woman in his novel sprang out of the myth of Virgin Mary, a woman in *Kreutzer Sonata* out of the unredeemed sinner, Eva. Two sides of the same coin, two labels identifying so simplistically a woman.

Unamuno’s *La Tia Tula* maybe in fact be viewed as an extension of Pozdnyszev’s philosophy regarding marriage. Unamuno might be using Virgin Mary as a literary device to make his readers realize that Tolstoy’s theory cannot be conceived in practice. In fact, Pozdnyszev, after killing his wife, realizes that she is a human being.
Pozdnyshev’s Remorse?

Pozdnyshev confesses that, for himself, “debauchery does not lie in anything physical-no kind of physical misconduct is debauchery; real debauchery lies precisely in freeing oneself from moral relations with a woman with whom you have physical intimacy” (Gustafson, 1986, p.44). In Tolstoy’s view, this continued the real double standard, and the only significant one. It was not only a double standard applied in relation to other persons but was the aim of an interior division between act, feeling, and moral responsibility. It dehumanizes woman. Sex for health implies that the body is somewhat sick. A man uses a woman’s body to keep himself functioning properly. In his earlier fiction, marriage could organize and focus the sex drive, and it could provide justification for sex. In Kreutzer Sonata, marriage is no longer a solution to man’s sexual problems. Pozdnyszew agrees that there are some spiritual marriages left: “something mysterious, a sacrament binding (the partners) in the sight of God” (Tolstoy, 1989, p.56). This kind of marriage is very rare; according to Pozdnyszev, “ninety-nine percent of married people live in a similar hell” to the one that he had experienced in his own marriage (Tolstoy 1989, p. 20). Marriage is a deception that knows neither the friendship nor fidelity, only an ever-increasing hatred, relieved by periods of sexual activity, which in turn breed more hatred. Such marriage is “not a joy but a torture” (Tolstoy, 1898, p.23). What Pozdnyszew says repels readers, and what he does to his wife evokes repulsion. Yet, as Aylmer Maude observes, “Tolstoy’s craftsmanship did not fail him” (Maude, 1920, p. 98). Even though at times it is interwoven with simplistic generalizations, it is handled superbly. Unamused expresses his wish about tomorrow’s woman: “sienta que su único modo reina bien estriba en la íntima convivencia espiritual con el hombre, en comunión de libertad, de igualdad y de fraternidad con él, en fe, esperanza y amor mutuos” (hopefully she might feel that her only way lies in the intimate spiritual communication with a male, in freedom, equality, fraternity with him, in faith, hope and mutual love) (Unamuno, 1966-72, vol.2, p 143). Unamuno does not see a woman in terms of a biological instrument of reproduction; his view on the role of women is more oriented toward the social sentiment of maternity in terms of her duties to be fulfilled. He suggests that men and women alike understand that their destiny is connected with the community in which they live and to the world to which they belong.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the nineteenth century version of the double standard has always plagued men and women in Russia and Spain. Tula’s and Pozdnyszev’s opinions on love, sex, and marriage are the motives for presenting the desired ideological position of Tolstoy and Unamuno that are relevant for the time and space of their lives. However, they are never simply right or wrong opinions. Both writers engage the reader in a process of his/her own analysis of the behaviours and motives of two characters and force him/her to go beyond the simplistic interpretation presented to the reader.

All the translations are by the author.

Bibliography

Benítez, Hernán. (July-September 1948). "Unamuno y la existencia auténtica." Revista de la
Universidad de Buenos Aires, pp 8-11.

*Anna Hamling* - She currently teaches in the Department of Culture and Language Studies at the University of New Brunswick email: ahamling@unb.ca

© 2010, IJORS - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES