ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Natasha Rostova and the Spirit of Russian Motherhood

Madeleine O'Shea

August 2025

'Slender, graceful countess, reared [….] in another world [….] was yet able to understand all that was in […] every Russian man and woman' (Rostova 604)

The character of Natasha Rostova, taken from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), represents one of the most compelling and vividly realised depictions of Russian womanhood present within the canon. The novel's narrative breadth and span, covering the years 1805 to 1820, allows readers the textual space to organically follow Natasha's moral, spiritual and social development. John Hagan argues that this breadth bears witness to Natasha's moral evolution as she develops from a precocious child to wife and 'prolific mother' allowing her to achieve 'fulfilment in an exemplary Tolstoyan way' and ultimately 'achieving a transcendence of self by discovering the […] Tolstoyan virtues of love, humility and self-sacrifice' (241). This essay argues that John Hagan's emphasis on Natasha's fulfilment as wife and mother and his framing of her transcendence of self as an incidental 'discovery' achieved tangentially to her central character progression results from an incomplete interpretation of her character. I will instead argue that Natasha's arc consists of her essential rejection of the westernising influence of society and a return to the Russian spirit which she had embodied in childhood. This results in the character serving as both a textual symbol for, and a living embodiment of, Russia herself, with her assumption of a matriarchal role serving as a natural and inevitable expression of the 'Mother Russia' figure present in Russian national identity. The essay will redefine Hagan's concept of fulfilment, interpreted to mean in his context the achievement of a desired result, instead to mean the completion of an essential condition or requirement. Furthermore, it will reconceptualise Hagan's 'exemplary Tolstoyan way' by highlighting Tolstoy's belief in simple living, connection with music and culture, rejection of wider society and valuing wisdom of the peasantry as being essential to spiritual and moral development. Crucially, this essay will not employ 'Tolstoyan' to refer to the philosophical movement which emerged following the 1880s both domestically and internationally as this post-dates the publication of *War and Peace* and is thus outside the essay's scope.

Central to Tolstoy's framing of Natasha as a textual embodiment of the Russian spirit is the prominence of music and dance within her depiction and within the characterisation of the Russian soul more broadly. Virginia Woolf argues in 'The Russian Point of View' that 'it is the soul that is the chief character in Russian fiction' (1925), but I argue that this is also applicable specifically to textual discussion of *War and Peace*. The image of the 'Russian soul' is collated with the experience and act of performance at several critical moments in Natasha's development, with Book Two, Part Four offering one of the clearest and most vivid realisations of this theme. The chapter follows Natasha and Nikolai through their experience of an evening at the home of 'Uncle' a 'distant relative of the Rostov's' (583) listening to and reveling in traditional Russian music and song. Moved by the 'wonder of it all' (604), Natasha instinctively performs a dance that so perfectly embodies the 'inimitable, unteachable, Russian' (604) spirit that those around her are moved to tears. The power of Natasha's capacity to 'breath[e] the spirit of that dance' (604) transcends the limitations of the self and society to such a degree that the 'slender, graceful countess, reared [….] in another world [….] was yet able to understand all that was in […] every Russian man and woman' (604). Natasha's performance is defined by its unconscious nature, cultivating a spontaneous and authentic vision of the Russian soul that contrasts starkly with the artificiality of the performance described only a short while later at the opera wherein Natasha meets Anatole for the first time. Initially, Natasha describes the scene as 'grotesquely artificial' (663) and is unable even to 'listen to the music' (663). The dichotomy present between the two performances' highlights the incompatibility between the Russian soul and Western modernity, with the former linked to 'self-expression, art, music (especially Russian music)' and opposed to 'hierarchy, the West, modernity' (Brown 136). It is only later, having met Anatole, that Natasha begins to understand and enjoy this artifice. As she is seduced by him she finds herself unconsciously seduced by the world he inhabits, she is 'completely under the

spell' (669) of both Anatole and the modernised, artificial world he exists in and is consequently heedless to the danger that either poses. The transformation of Natasha's feeling of horror at the opera to her belief that '[a]ll that was happening now seemed perfectly natural' (669) shows her losing connection to her Russian soul and morality, thus beginning her near descent into ruin. This spiritual decline catalyses the moral development Hagan references, essential not in order to facilitate her domestic role as he argues, but rather to return to the authenticity that she had rejected and fulfil her spiritual obligation as a textual vessel for the Russian soul.

Whilst Hagan frames motherhood as a personal achievement or reward for Natasha herself, I counter-argue that the assumption of the maternal role is yet further evidence of Natasha's presentation as an embodied symbol of the nation. Central to Russian national identity is the conception of the nation as maternal and feminine in nature, particularly through the recurrent use of the anthropomorphic term 'Mother Russia'. Whilst this became especially prevalent during the Soviet era, the personification of the Russian nation in maternal terms has much older historic precedents dating to the Middle Ages. This feminine interpretation is both a grammatical necessity, as 'Россия' is feminine gendered, and also culturally important as it encourages connection with a form of Mother Earth unique to Russia and her vast landmass (Haarmann 6). This gives unity to the many disparate communities throughout Russia's territories as they are bound in familial terms by their shared 'Mother'. This image is directly recalled in Tolstoy's Epilogue through the description of Natasha as mother to her brood of children, and most crucially in her decision to breastfeed her children despite the 'vigorous opposition' (1373) of society and her immediate family who consider the practice 'something unheard of and pernicious' (1373). By rejecting the societal norms of her heavily westernised peers, Natasha embodies a version of motherhood which allows no restrictions between mother and child. In doing so she evokes

the image of ‘Mother Russia’ and the instinctive connection that the Russian people (in particular the peasantry) have with the land that similarity feeds and nurtures them. This is further legitimised through religious iconography and the image of ‘Mlekopitatel’nitsa’, meaning 'the Mother of God who nourishes with milk' which depicts Madonna feeding the babe Jesus from her own breast (Maguire 487). By embracing a version of motherhood which privileges natural instinct above Westernised societal and cultural norms, Natasha has achieved maternal fulfilment not only, as Hagan argues, in a ‘Tolstoyan’ way, but crucially in an essentially Russian way.

Furthermore, I argue that Hagan’s interpretation of Natasha’s fulfilment as being extrinsic in nature and rooted in her assumption of a domestic role does not represent an ‘exemplary Tolstoyan way’ as he suggests. Instead, it serves as a direct rejection of Tolstoy’s belief in the importance of self-initiated and internally derived fulfilment. As Hagan argues in the scholarship from which this essay’s central critical perspective derives, '[a]t the Heart of *War and Peace* is the conception of the spiritual pilgrimage' (1969, 235). I argue that, for Natasha specifically, this pilgrimage is not a journey away from, but rather a return towards her interior world. This interior world should not be taken to mean the petty and inconsequential human concerns that had suffused her with a feeling of self-loathing and depression following her moral fall under Anatole. Instead, I am referring to it as a vision of the self that acknowledges the human soul as also being part of God’s domain. Tolstoy himself would give power to this reading through his post-conversion text ‘*The Kingdom of God Is Within You*’ (1896). Therein, he argued that in order to best follow the ethos and teachings of Christ, Christians should forsake the heretical human power structures of organised religion or government. Whilst this text post-dates the publication of *War and Peace* by nearly forty years, I suggest that is within the character of Natasha that the genesis of Tolstoy’s own as yet unrealised religious and moral philosophy emerges. It is through her

acceptance of the unknowability of God and her subsequent submission to the will of the divine that Natasha is able to reconcile her moral fall under Anatole and begin her journey towards the fulfilment of her soul's purpose. Standing before 'the icon of the Mother of God' (781), an image that I have argued will become synonymous with and embodied by the character herself, Natasha finds herself overcome by its power in a way that transcends human language. Unable to give voice to the feeling that envelops her in the presence of the divine, Natasha describes her burgeoning spiritual awakening as 'something sublime and incomprehensible' (781). We see this when she prostrates herself before the mercy of God with full acceptance of her own limited understanding: 'When she did not understand, it was sweeter still to think […] that it was impossible to comprehend everything, that all she had to do was to have faith' (781). In doing so, Natasha finds both spiritual and physical healing to the point where she is 'very much better' (782). This relinquishing of control over her own destiny and the desire to achieve mastery over the self frees Natasha from her prison of self-induced misery. She is thus able to forge a path of return which empowers her to resume her position as vessel for the divine Russian soul, itself a vast and unknowable force beyond the realm of human understanding.

The vast scale of this divine realisation thematically mirrors the scale of Tolstoy's narrative as Natasha's spiritual conflict echoes Russia's own struggle with Napoleon and the French. By collating the struggle for moral and religious fulfilment with the struggle for national liberation 'personal and national calamities each become metaphors of the other' (Hagan 1969: 241). In doing so, Tolstoy argues that the same unifying principles that saved the individual, Natasha, must also be employed for the purpose of the salvation of the Nation of Russia as a whole. When applied to a national context, this necessary unity is best summarised through the term 'Sobornost', referring to 'the community, a real unity, brotherhood of people' (Parilov 756). As a fundamentally Russian ideology, the term is often

claimed to be best realised within the peasant class, as the nobility can be seen to have taken the principle of individualism so worshipped in the West to such an extreme that they reject the principles of community and unification that had formerly stood as the bedrock for national identity. Within the text, this principle is most clearly observed in the actions and ideology of Platon Karatayev, the peasant prisoner responsible for Pierre's own moral realisations. Pierre's description of Platon as being the 'very personification of all that was Russian' (1150) bears striking resemblance to the characterisation of Natasha herself, suggesting that whilst both may inhabit different social worlds, the principles of Russian identity that they embody are reflections of each other. Following Platon's death as a prisoner of war under Napoleon, his influence on Pierre is given new life through Natasha who is shown to invoke his name and memory in moments of ideological or moral confusion for her husband: 'Do you know what I'm thinking about?' […] 'Platon Karatyev. What would he have said?'' (1396). The kinship that both characters share displays that the spiritual essence of the Russian people is one defined and legitimised not by an individual's class background but by the merit of their soul.

The final phase of Natasha's journey towards full realisation of her power as national conduit comes in her absolute rejection of westernized societal influence, shown through her radical physical transformation. The Natasha introduced in the Epilogue is one who has 'let herself go' (1370), or more accurately one who has 'let herself be', and she is shown to care little for her appearance or standing in a society that she 'did not care for' (1372). In rejecting the social norms preached by 'the French' (1370), Natasha has freed herself from the last ideological shackles of Western individualism that would place her worth in the opinions of others. Two of the most divisive elements of this liberation are her abandonment of the practice of singing, and her refusal to engage with or even comprehend the 'arguments and discussions on the rights of women' (1371) implied to be circulating in societal discussion.

The latter is often interpreted as representative not of Natasha's voice, but of the author himself, projected by Tolstoy out of an anxiety to distance himself from the 'Woman Question' so prominent in the reformatory debates of the 1860s. Whilst this reading is credible, and supported by Tolstoy's own words, I suggest that Natasha's disinterest in female emancipation is yet further evidence of her rejection of self-interest and society. She does not need to be emancipated by a society whose views she does not subscribe to, nor does she need to entangle herself within the debates surrounding women's liberation because she has already found freedom outside the self. Regarding her abandonment of singing, Laura J. Olson criticises Tolstoy's decision to rob Natasha of her principal hobby as being hypocritical in nature, suggesting that what had formerly been a symbol of the character's 'Russianness, is discarded as belonging to the evil, rational West' due to the author's desire to remove Natasha's personhood (527). Admittedly, the text itself legitimises the decision in a similar manner, claiming that Natasha had abandoned the practice 'just because it was such a great attraction' (1370). I propound, however, that there is an entirely separate interpretation of this behaviour, perhaps unintended by Tolstoy. Natasha herself no longer needs to sing to facilitate her connection with her interior world or national identity: she is no longer a child channeling a force she cannot understand though the power of music and is instead a fully realised women, a 'Mother Russia' incarnate without need for such conduits.

In conclusion, I disagree with Hagan's assertion that Natasha has achieved fulfilment through motherhood on the grounds that it represents a fundamental misinterpretation of her character and narrative arc, and a denunciation of Tolstoy's own prioritisation of spiritual development as the principle and absolute goal for all his characters. Natasha is not 'fulfilled' by marriage or motherhood. Instead, her moral evolution throughout the novel empowers her to reject the influence of society and the restrictions of the human self in order to passionately and limitlessly embody a vision of Russia as the nation made flesh. Whilst motherhood and

the family are essential to Tolstoy's conception of ideal society, her assumption of these domestic duties is not made essential to the narrative out of the mere fact that they fulfil her. Instead, the Russian soul she serves as textual conduit for is inherently framed in maternal terms, whilst the divine spirit she submits to offers nurture and motherly guidance for a nation consumed by individualism and foreign influence. Through Natasha's journey towards spiritual liberation, Tolstoy gives voice to his hope for a future in which all of Russia reconnects with the values of community and simplicity that underpin their national identity. To define Natasha's narrative purpose by her domestic role is to reduce her character to a more simplistic stock figure, that of the high society woman whose only identity is her children. The Natasha found in the Epilogue is a far more interesting creation; unpolished, imperfect and exemplary in a way that is fundamentally and undeniably Russian.

Works Cited

Brown, Catherine. “The Russian Soul Englished.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 36, no.1, 2012, pp. 132-49.

Haarmann, Harald. “The soul of Mother Russia: Russian Symbols and Pre-Russian Cultural Identity.” *ReVision,* vol. 23, no.1, 2000, pp.6-16.

Hagan, John. “Patterns of Character Development in Tolsoty’s '*War and Peace*': Nicholas, Natasha, and Mary.” *PMLA*, vol. 84, no.2, 1969, pp. 235-44.

Maguire, Muireann. “’A hitherto unheard-of and harmful thing': Breastfeeding and Violence in Russian Literature.” *The Russian Review,* vol. 82, no.3, 2023, pp. 486-507.

Olson, Laura J., “Russianness, Femininity, and Romantic Aesthetics in *War and Peace*.” *The Russian Review*, vol. 56, no.4, 1997, pp. 515-531.

Parilov, Oleg V., “Sobornost As The Basis of Russian Identity: History and Current State.” *International Scientific Forum*, vol.102, no.1, 2021 pp.754-60.

Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace.* Translated by Rosemary Edmonds, Penguin Classics, 1982.

Tolstoy, Leo. *The Kingdom of God Is Within You: Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion but as a New Theory of Life.* Translated by Constance Garnett, Cassell Publishing Company, 1893. https://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/kingdom-god-tolstoy.pdf. Accessed 4 December 2024.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Russian Point of View.* 1925. https://www.readandcobooks.co.uk/blog/virginia-woolf-essay-dostoevsky-checkov-tolstoy/. Accessed 1 December 2024.