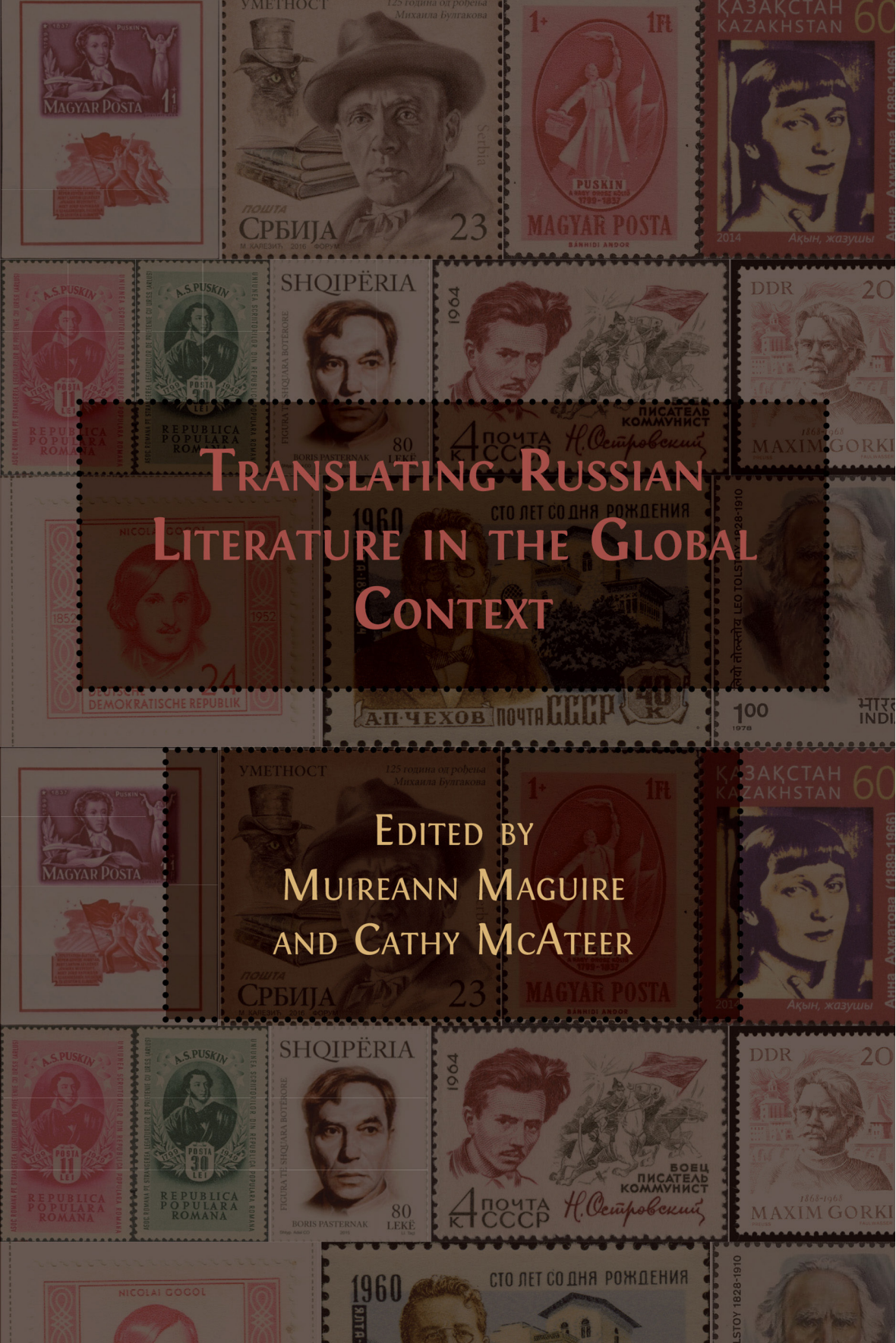

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

Edited by
Muireann Maguire
and Cathy McAteer

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Tolstoy in India: Translating Aspirations across Continents

Ayesha Suhail

In the second half of the twentieth century, Soviet Russia found adherents to its anti-capitalist values within the Communist Party of India (CPI), founded in 1925. It became the third largest party in government by the 1952 elections.[1] While all members of the CPI supported the original vision of an international working-class movement, divisions emerged over support for the Soviet Union. In 1964, the party split into two factions, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Shortly after this rift, a shop was established in Kolkata by the Communist Party of India (Marxist).[2] The venture was assisted by India's National Book Agency, popularly known as the NBA, a Marxist publisher established in 1939 in Kolkata and still active today.[3] Until 1991, the shop was directly supplied with books printed in Moscow by Progress Publishers. Progress was previously known as the Publishing Cooperative of Foreign Workers, which was established in 1931, and whose literature section became Raduga Publishers in 1982.[4] These Russian books ranged from

1 For an overview of the history of the Indian Communist Party, see Valerian Rodrigues, 'The Communist Parties in India', in *India's Political Parties*, ed. by Peter Ronald deSouza and E. Sridharan (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), pp. 199–252 (esp. pp. 211–17).

2 Manisha Granthalaya is the name of the shop which still exists today in Kolkata's College Square near Gorky Sadan. For details regarding the books it sells, see *LBB*'s online article 'These Out-of-Print Books Came to India in 1982, All The Way From the USSR', lbb.in/Kolkata/books-russia.

3 The NBA was established on 26 June 1939 by the Communist leader Muzaffar Ahmad and his associates. They make Marxist publications accessible to the common reader. See www.nationalbookagency.com.

4 The literature section was one of four thematic series at Progress Publishers; it became the largest, and in 1982 evolved into the independent Raduga Publishers.

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children's literature and beautifully illustrated folk tales, to novels by Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gorky, and Soviet-era revolutionary writings. Today, the store still sells these books, but second-hand and at lower prices. They are remnants of a time when the newly realised dream of Socialism in Russia acted as a beacon to colonial India. Indian intellectuals, freedom fighters and the reading public were enthused by Vladimir Lenin's acknowledgement of the absolute injustice of British Imperialism in his article 'Inflammable Material in World Politics', published in August 1908.[5] However, within the movement for Indian independence, a large, pacifist faction responded to the writings of Lev Tolstoy.[6] This essay will consider Tolstoy's novels and their immediate resonance with Indian writers' styles and themes. This shared feeling is indicated by the many translations of Tolstoy's novels by leading Indian authors and translators, and their manifold references to Tolstoy's characters and works in their own dramas, short stories, and novels. I will also argue, with reference to György Lukács and Pierre Macherey, among others, that literature can transcend cultural and national borders by appealing to universal values of freedom and justice.

A vast ideological distance existed between Tolstoy's Russia, which was tsarist, and the Communist USSR, and a similar gap separated colonial India from independent India. However, the writings of the 'sage of Iasnaia Poliana' remained meaningful in both nations, under both circumstances. Tolstoy's most famous literary follower in India is probably Dhanpat Rai Srivastava (1880–1936), who wrote social fiction under the pen name of Munshi Premchand. His short stories, novels and plays written in the Hindustani language (i.e. Hindi-Urdu), dealt with the themes of caste hierarchies, the plight of women, and labourers in late nineteenth-century India. He was both influenced and impressed by Russian literature, particularly by Count Tolstoy's works. In a scene from his drama *The Struggle* (*Sangram*), written in 1923 and published in 1933, police search the house of a Swaraj landowner and arrest him for possessing a copy of Tolstoy's tales. A century later, in 2019, eerily similar events played out in the Bombay High Court when Indian human rights activist Vernon Gonsalves was asked to explain why he kept "objectionable material", including a copy of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, at his home.[7] The Pune Police, who were probing the case, claimed

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To find out more about the history of Progress Publishers see Rossen Djagalov, 'Progress Publishers: A Short History', *Leftword*, https://web.archive.org/web/20200410005445/https://mayday.leftword.com/blog/post/progress-publishers-a-short-history/.

5 Vladimir Lenin, 'Inflammable Material in World Politics', in *Lenin Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 15 (1908–09), pp. 182–88.

6 Tolstoy wrote his 'Letter to a Hindu: The Subjection of India—Its Cause and Cure' to Tarak Nath Das, editor of *Free Hindustan* on 14 December 1908. The letter was published in the Indian newspaper *Free Hindustan* and then reprinted in Mahatma Gandhi's South African newspaper *Indian Opinion* in 1909.

7 The incident is covered in the article by PTI (Press Trust of India), 'War and Peace at Home? "Explain", says Bombay High Court', *The Telegraph*, https://www.

that the book was part of the "highly incriminating evidence" it had seized from Mr. Gonsalves' house. The situation grew still more intriguing when, days later, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, addressing an economic forum in Russia, said that Lev Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi had an "indelible effect" on each other and that India and Russia must take inspiration from them to strengthen bilateral ties.[8] Such contradictions and anxieties continue to manifest in the political imagination of the governments of both nations. Leaders often struggle to balance party politics with public veneration of these cultural and political giants. Tolstoy's and Gandhi's messages of non-violence and *ahimsa* ('noninjury', the ethical principle of not causing harm to any living thing), have been revered internationally. Moreover, Tolstoy's towering stature as a writer remains undisputed. Consequently, the conflict between the individual and the state, which celebrates these figures but does not always respect their non-violent convictions, continues to exist.

Writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), Jainendra Kumar (1905–88), and others welcomed Tolstoy's work when it began to appear in translation at the turn of the twentieth century. There were two primary reasons for the natural affinity the Indian public felt towards Tolstoy. First was his endorsement by Gandhi, who had publicly acknowledged Tolstoy as his spiritual master or guru. Gandhi claimed that Tolstoy's writings awakened within him the principles of the faiths of his own land, meaning Hinduism and Buddhism.[9] As a result, Gandhi's many followers were predisposed to trust Tolstoy. The second reason for Tolstoy's popularity was his literary aesthetic in *War and Peace, Anna Karenina, Resurrection* and the many short stories and novellas he wrote. The form and content evoked experiences familiar to the Indian sensibility. Tolstoy's realist style, along with the ideological image he chose to project, ranging from the agrarian and bucolic to his authoritative grasp

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telegraphindia.com/india/war-and-peace-at-home-explain-says-bombay-high-court/cid/1701007. The statements made by Pune police can be found in the article by Vidya, 'Bhima Koregaon Case: Bombay High Court Questions Accused on Why He Read War and Peace', *India Today*, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bhima-koregaon-case-bombay-high-court-questions-accused-on-why-he-read-war-and-peace-1592826–2019–08–28, para 4.

8 Translation of Prime Minister's speech in Plenary Session of 5th Eastern Economic Forum (5 September 2019), *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31798/translation+of+prime+ministers+speech+in+plenary+session+of+5th+eastern+economic+forum+september+05+2019, para. 11 of 11.

9 Tolstoy's reply to a letter from one of the editors of *Free Hindustan* was published in India with an introduction by Mahatma Gandhi wherein he said, "To me, as a humble follower of that great teacher whom I have long looked upon as one of my guides, it is a matter of honour to be connected with the publication of his letter, such especially as the one which is now being given to the world." Leo Tolstoy, 'A Letter to a Hindu: The Subjection of India—Its Cause and Cure', Introduction by M. K. Gandhi, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7176/7176-h/7176-h.htm.

of war and the historical process, struck a chord with Indian readers. In fact, Tolstoy derived the themes of twenty-one of his *Twenty-Three Tales* written at Iasnaia Poliana from Indian mythology. As a youth, he took courses in Oriental Languages at Kazan University's Department of Oriental Studies in 1844. This piqued his interest in teachings of Moses, Mohammad, Socrates, Zoroaster, and Christ; and particularly in Buddhism and Hinduism. He read the Vedas and Upanishads and the two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Extracts from these teachings were included by him in his *Circle of Reading*.[10] In his later writings, Tolstoy adapted material from the *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, *Puranas*, *Kurals,* and the book of Buddhist ethics *Dhammapada,* the influence of these Hindu and Buddhist texts is visible in both his fictional and non-fictional writings—especially in stories where animals are the main characters—moral tales, and in his philosophy of passive resistance.[11] This process of adaptation came full circle when Premchand, as early as 1916, re-adapted and transposed Tolstoy's work, *Twenty-Three Tales*, into Hindi as *Talstāy kī kahāniyāṃ* (*The Tales of Tolstoy*).[12] Tolstoy's works have been translated into most Indian languages. Arun Som, a contemporary Russian-to-Bengali translator with forty years' experience, completed a four-volume translation of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* titled *Juddho aar Shanti*, and published by the Sahitya Akademi. Noni Bhoumik (1921–66), another Russian-to-Bengali translator, worked on *Anna Karenina* (as well as various works by Dostoevsky) for Progress. Mahatma Gandhi himself translated some of Tolstoy's short stories into Gujarati, including 'Ivan the Fool' (titled 'Moorakh Raja Ane Tena Be Bhaio') and 'How Much Land Does a Man Need', among many others. They were published in his South African newspaper *Indian Opinion* between 1911 and 1914. The Hindu novelist Jainendra Kumar (1905–88) translated Tolstoy's stories into Hindi in a 1961 collection, *Prem Mein Bhagwaan*.

Lukács claimed that a literary work of international influence can exist simultaneously as a stranger and as a native within a foreign culture.[13] Its acceptance is grounded in common qualities between the interacting cultures,

10 Around 1847, Tolstoy was admitted to a university hospital where he shared a ward with a Buddhist monk being treated for injuries received after refusing to retaliate during an assault. The encounter set Tolstoy on the path of discovering what the Indian religions of Buddhism and Hinduism said about nonviolence and passive resistance. Ajay Kamalakaran, 'The Influence of Buddhism and Hinduism on Leo Tolstoy's Life', https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/10/14/the_influence_of_buddhism_and_hinduism_on_leo_tolstoys_life_39017.

11 Salahuddin Mohd Shamsuddin, 'Place of "Panchatantra" in the World of Literatures', *British Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, (Dec., 2013), https://www.academia.edu/6977957/Place_of_Panchatantra_in_the_World_of_Literatures, p.7.

12 John Burt Foster Jr., 'From Tolstoy to Premchand: Fractured Narratives and the Paradox of Gandhi's Militant Non Violence', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10, https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/ccs.2013.0113.

13 György Lukács, 'Leo Tolstoy and Western European Literature', *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), p. 242.

besides any influences the author may have drawn from the receiving culture. Both these factors facilitated the popularity of Tolstoy's writings in India. For European audiences, Tolstoy's realism may have felt dated by the mid-twentieth century; but in India, where Victorian novels had flooded school and college curriculums under colonial rule, his style was both familiar and welcome.[14] In this context, Tolstoy's form-defying style even appeared liberating.[15] It was proof that alternative expression within the realist novel was possible, that vast nations with scattered ethnicities and deep-rooted political and social problems (like both Russia and India) could find authentic representation within the form of the novel. It also helped that Tolstoy did not assume that capitalism was the only reality. Moreover, his attacks on the Greek Orthodox Church, and on the Church as an establishment in general, appealed to Indians who had been subjugated by the Empire in the name of Faith, the Crown, and Civilisation; three concepts which had become interchangeable under imperialism. As such, the spiritual values that Tolstoy offered, which drew nourishment from Eastern religions, resonated with the Indian temperament. Another point of similarity between Russia and India was the stratification of society in both nations into rigidly separated classes, accompanied by widespread injustice, inequity, and repression. When Tolstoy described social interactions, he insisted that empathetic mutual understanding between classes and change was possible. Tolstoy's characters modelled a way of being, often painfully achieved, where individualism was rejected in favour of duty towards others and society in general. This movement away from solipsism to resignation was expressed by characters like Konstantin Levin (*Anna Karenina*), or Nikolai Rostov and Natasha Rostova in *War and Peace,* or Katiusha Maslova and Prince Nekhliudov from *Resurrection.* Their sublimation of personal ambition was a potent means to negate the cycle of violence. In India, a very similar philosophy became the basis of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, which began on 4 September 1920.[16] The movement baffled the British establishment and shamed them

14 According to Priya Joshi, "The British novel of 'serious standards' was introduced in India in the nineteenth century as a means of propagating and legitimating Englishness in the colony", in 'Culture and Consumption: Fiction, the Reading Public, and the British Novel in Colonial India', *Book History,* I (1998), 196–220.

15 Tolstoy is quoted as saying, "*War and Peace* is 'not a novel, still less an epic poem, still less a historical chronicle'". See Courtney C. W. Guerra, 'Why Read War and Peace?', *Tableau* (Spring 2023), https://tableau.uchicago.edu/articles/2013/04/why-read-war-and-peace.

16 Gandhi's first reference to Tolstoy occurs in 1889 when, as a student in London, Gandhi visited Paris and reiterated Tolstoy's sentiments regarding the Eiffel Tower: that it was a "monument of man's folly". In another essay, 'Guide to London', Gandhi quoted from Tolstoy's *Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?*. Gandhi's 'Satyagraha' movement (meaning 'truth force') was drawn from Tolstoy's 'soul force' or 'love force'. He also established a Tolstoy-inspired farm in 1910 in South Africa; the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, India was based on the same model. Gandhi never denied the debt he owed to Tolstoyan thought and gave

simply by never retaliating against the state's brute force. In his 1908 'A Letter to a Hindu: The Subjection of India—Its Cause and Cure', Tolstoy advised the Indian nation against resorting to violence as a means to end the British rule. He argued that although violence might seem favourable from a short-term perspective, in hindsight, it was sure to beget further violence. Decades have passed since this opinion was brushed off by certain sections of Indian society as naïve. Indian Nationalism of the time was informed by many strains; some were unconvinced of non-violence as an effective political strategy. Revolutionaries, including readers of leftist thought, rejected Tolstoyan pacifism. Violence against the colonial establishment reached a peak during the early 1900s and the small group of activists who carried out these attacks was executed. They are revered as martyrs in independent India.[17] Tolstoy's fiction continued to inspire ordinary Indians, as well as writers like the Hindi novelist Amritlal Nagar, characters in whose 1964 novel *The Drop and the Ocean* (*Boond Aur Samudra*) responded directly to Tolstoyan inventions like Platon Karataev or Pierre Bezukhov from *War and Peace*, and *Resurrection*'s Dmitrii Nekhliudov.[18] These characters represented epochal and social struggles without losing their sense of optimistic innocence. Tolstoy's focus on Russian peasants earned him the title of "Mirror of the Russian Revolution" from Lenin and "Poet of the Russian Peasantry" from Lukács.[19] This focus was reflected partly in his portrayal of the naïve, patriarchal,

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a memorable speech on the centenary of Tolstoy's birth (9 September 1928), in Gujarati at Sabarmati Ashram. The English version of his speech was published in *Young India* on 20 September 1928. See Y. P. Anand, 'The Relationship between Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi—A Historical Review', *Dialogue*, 12:2 (2010), http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_Oct%20010/y.p..htm.

17 The revolutionaries were Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar, and Shivram Rajguru. They vowed to avenge the assassination of Lala Rajpat Rai, who had succumbed to a lathi charge by the British Raj Police while carrying out a non-violent protest against the Simon Commission on 17 November 1928. The trio was hanged in Lahore Jail on 23 March 1931. Singh and Thapar were twenty-three while Rajguru was only twenty-two years old at the time of their hanging. For more on this, read Part One of Kama Maclean's *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).

18 On how Tolstoy influenced Amritlal Nagar, see Salim Arif's, 'Amritlal Nagar at 100: How a Simple Man Used Simple Language to Create Extraordinary Literature', *Swarajya,* 17 August 2016, https://swarajyamag.com/culture/amritlal-nagar-at-100-how-a-simple-man-used-simple-language-to-produce-great-literature. For how the characters of *The Drop and The Ocean* were inspired by Tolstoy, see Charumati Ramdas, 'Tolstoy and India: A Beautiful Bond', *Story Mirror*, https://storymirror.com/read/english/story/tolstoy-and-india-a-beautiful-bond/7nbtitpq?ref=/read/english/story/tolstoy-and-india-a-beautiful-bond/7nbtitpq, para 20 of 23.

19 Lenin wrote articles on Tolstoy's art between 1908 and 1911. These were grouped under the title *Leo Tolstoy: Mirror of Russian Literature*. See Vladimir Lenin's *Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963–80), 15 (1973), pp. 202–09. For Lukács's view, see György Lukács, 'Tolstoy and The Development of

and superstitious beliefs prevalent in the Russian countryside, which had their counterpart in the prejudices of Indian rural populations. Whether his characters were low- or high-status, domestic servants or libertines, serfs or masters, they embodied beliefs and values recognisable in Indian society just as well as in Russian Orthodox culture. Indian readers could readily relate to Tolstoy's portraits from feudal life, as conducted under an unpopular monarchy, with revolution impending. Tolstoy's fiction always centred the depiction of wars, romances and revolutions around Russia's perennial agrarian and economic problems. The betterment of the lives of the Russian peasants remained a primary theme. His heroes embodied these aspirations: consider Levin, Andrei Bolkonskii, Bezukhov, and Nekhliudov. All these fictional landowners were inspired by conscience to abandon their unethical and exploitative privileges and work instead to uplift the newly emancipated serfs. The abject poverty of the Russian serf was echoed in the condition of the Indian-bonded labourers, Harijans, and secluded tribes. Premchand, for one, was greatly moved by this mirroring of the common man in both the nations, emphasising that "[Tolstoy's tales are] written for ordinary people, who have neither money nor time".[20] Premchand felt Tolstoy had captured a universal pathos, transcending national and cultural conventions. In his third and last play *Prem Ki Vedi* (1933), the female protagonist, Jenny, is caught in an interfaith romantic dilemma with a Hindu man, Yograj.[21] Her inner turmoil makes her think of Anna Karenina. Premchand carried out a clever gender subversion in his play. When Jenny thinks of Anna, she is not worried that society's rejection of her and Yograj's love will push her to suicide; instead, she frets that it may push Yograj to that despair, since he, as a gentleman, a wealthy man, and an upper-caste Hindu, has more to lose. Thus, Jenny transcends the notion that harsher judgement of a woman in an interfaith affair is the major impediment.[22] At the end of the play, religious hypocrisies prevail over the lovers and they part ways.[23] Tolstoy may have rejected aggressive reactions to the injustices committed against the peasant class, but his realistic representation of their sentiments became a critique in itself of the social problems of the age. His ideology of resistance was

Realism', *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), p. 139.

20 Donatella Dolcini, 'Premchand's Enounter with Tolstoy', *Cracow Indological Studies*, 10:17 (2015), pp. 159–68 (p. 164).

21 Pushpal Singh, 'Upekshit Raha Premchand Ka Natya–Karm', *The Tribune*, 25 July 2010, https://www.dainiktribuneonline.com/news/archive/features/उपेक्षित-रहा-प्रेमचंद-का-नाट्य-कर्म-127359.

22 Munshi Premchand, *Prem Ki Vedi* (1933), *Hindi Kahani*, https://www.hindikahani.hindi-kavita.com/Prem-Ki-Vedi-Premchand.php (Act VI).

23 Madan Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1943).

implicit in the text; it influenced Indian readers unconsciously.[24] Tolstoy's works contained their message of revolution, of impetus to change, in their careful silence, often misrepresented as negligent absences.[25] Macherey has called this dependence on the unspoken the unique characteristic of novelistic language.[26] The profound, often revolutionary impact of well-placed silence reminds one of Maksim Gorky's remarks on Tolstoy in his 1920 volume *Reminiscences of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy*, "I am deeply convinced that beyond all that he [Tolstoy] speaks of, there is much which he is silent about, even in his diary; he is silent and probably will never tell it to anyone".[27]

24 Pierre Macherey,'The Two Questions', *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 92, para 2.

25 For critiques of Tolstoy's passive resistance and rejection of revolutionary reactionism, see Roland Boer's, 'Lenin on Tolstoy: Between Imaginary Resolution and Revolutionary Christian Communism', *Science and Society,* 78 (January 2014), 41–60.

26 Pierre Macherey, 'Implicit and Explicit', in *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 91–94.

27 Pierre Macherey, 'The Spoken and the Unspoken', in *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 95–100. For the quote by Gorky, see Maksim Gorky, *Reminiscences of Leo Nikolaevitch Tolstoy,* trans. by S.S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (Folcroft: Folcroft Publishers, 1977), p. 19.