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## A Psychological Perspective on Infidelity in the Context of a Literary Work: Anna Karenina-Lev Tolstoy

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### Abstract

Literature and psychology, which have different characteristics from each other, often try to study common issues. Both fields benefit from each other in terms of subject analysis. Just like in this regard, studies on the subject of deception, which are studied in both areas, are not considered sufficient in the literature. Studies in the field on the subject of infidelity are not considered sufficient and more factors that may be effective in infidelity are discoursed. The main purpose of this study is to examine the infidelity behaviors in the novel Anna Karenina written by Lev Tolstoy within the framework of psychoanalytic, attachment, schema theories, and risk factors. As a result, it was seen that risk factors such as attachment, psychoanalytic perspective, schema concepts, and gender corresponded to the examples of infidelity in the book. A similar result could not be reached with the duration of the marriage and the number of children, which are among the risk factors.

### Key Words

Anna Karenina • Infidelity • Tolstoy

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The concept of infidelity or cheating on, which has become a part of human life from past to present, is defined as having a close relationship with another person other than one's present partner in romantic relationships (Hendrick, 2016). In order for the definition of infidelity to be valid, it is not necessary for the couples to be bound to each other by marriage. Infidelity, which can be experienced in any bilateral relationship (Drigotas & Barta, 2001), is defined as a breach of the agreed trust (Blow & Harnett, 2005). Infidelity (Kelly & Conley, 1987), which is the biggest factor in the dissolution of marriages, is not welcomed in couple relationships such as dating and cohabitation (Hendrick, 2016). As infidelity, which causes great destruction in the relationship (Aliabadi & Shareh, 2021), has a multidimensional and complex structure (Thomson, 1982), environmental events, some sensitivities that individuals experience in their relationships, and their upbringing (Weeks, et al., 2003) will be taken into account to be examined in this study.

Although there are studies on infidelity when the literature is reviewed, they are not sufficient. The concept of infidelity, which is thought to have not been studied enough, attracts the attention of not only the field of psychology but also of literature, and the subject is frequently mentioned in the works. For example, in the novel "Anna Karenina" written by the Russian writer Lev Tolstoy between the years of 1873-1879, the theme of infidelity was worked on. This theme has remained up to date due to its subject and many factors. Although the subject of infidelity is included in research within psychology, which explains human emotions, behaviors, and mental processes by taking it into a scientific framework, it is observed that the place of literature is undeniable even in the birth of psychology, especially in Freud's thoughts and theories (Korkut-Nayki, 2012). For this reason, the novel "Anna Karenina", which is a literary work, has been examined based on the perspective of infidelity.

When the subject of infidelity is examined, the individual is advised that sex is bad, negative, or a thing not to be talked about at a young age, while the opposite is remarked to the individual when he/she becomes an adult, and it is thought that this situation causes people to call their sexual partners bad (Weil, 1975). The perception of the sanctity of the family, which hinders sexual pleasure due to the Oedipus and Electra complex, can be an obstacle for the individual to center their desires around a single object (Freud, 1938). In other words, it has been revealed that while individuals are less satisfied with their married partners, their satisfaction from extramarital affairs is higher (Weil, 1975). Horney in her explanation, which supports Freud, stated that the man's relationship with the woman he admires may be sexually deprived and that in this deprivation, he may be drawn to another woman with a lower socioeconomic level (Horney, 1937). Situations similar to the definition are encountered in the novel as well. Anna Karenina and her husband Aleksey Karenin define the marriage which lasted for eight or nine years as the sanctity of the marriage bond, the sanctity of being a mother, and obeying the monotonous social rules. Even when Anna Karenina was in the process of breakup, she stated that she was not a good woman, but that she was a mother, and for this, she had to take her son. While Anna Karenina states this, her husband Aleksey Karenin thinks that a child cannot be entrusted to such a woman because the situation may bring a disgrace to the sanctity of the family and states that his child should stay with him. On the other hand, Anna Karenina's older brother Oblonski, after cheating on his wife, whom he has been married to for nine years, thinks that his wife is a pure and clean housewife and that she will not leave the house because of their five children, even if it is not for himself. As the reason for cheating on his wife, he states that he has not lost his ability to love, but now he prefers younger and more loving women. It is

mentioned that Oblonski, who is observed to have no regrets about his cheating behavior for a long time, found another lover for himself in the future, and this new lover is described as young and beautiful. In a study conducted by [Glass & Wright in 1985](#), it was determined that men were more motivated to repeat their cheating behavior., Anna, who was called by Oblonski to save his marriage after being caught cheating, talks about the sanctity of the family and the woman while trying to console her brother's wife. We can observe a similar situation when Kity, who will marry Levin in the future, dreams of marrying Vronski during the dating process and Vronski states that he likes that Kity is attached to him. Vronski described his behavior as a harmless method of seduction, not pursuing marriage.

Babies show some reactions to the disappearance of attachment objects according to their attachment style ([Bowlby, 1980](#)). It is stated that the attachment styles developed during infancy and the reactions exhibited directly affect romantic relationships and friendship relationships in the future ([Hazan & Shaver, 1987](#)). Attachment styles developed in adulthood have been shown to be a factor in determining the motivation for cheating ([Allen & Baucom, 2004](#)). The relationship between individuals' attachment styles and cheating is frequently investigated. In studies conducted to determine the relationships between individuals' attachment attitudes and their cheating behavior, it was revealed that anxious or avoidant attachment style has a positive and significant effect on exhibiting cheating behavior ([Bogaert & Sadava 2002](#); [Gentzler & Kerns, 2004](#); [Hatamy, et al, 2011](#); [Treas & Giesan, 2000](#)). It is also among the findings of the study that individuals with different attachment styles have difficulties in meeting each other's needs ([Colin & Read, 1990](#)). Although it is not possible to obtain complete information about the attachment styles of the characters in the book, some clues can be detected. For example, the fact that the aunt is the most influential family member in the marriage process of Anna Karenina raises questions about who is the caregiver and has a close relationship with her. No positive information was given about the attachment status of the husband and wife to one another before marriage. Similarly, Aleksey Karenin, who stayed with his uncle from the age of ten with his brother, grew up mostly with academic goals. It was not mentioned that there was a special bond between him and his uncle during the process of growing up and getting a job. In addition, his brother, whom he saw as the closest to him and said that he could open his heart to, died of disease while he was on duty abroad. Vronski, another novel character, stated that after his parents separated, his mother met with other people in high society, and because of this attitude, he did not trust his mother, he never respected her sincerely, and he only acted respectfully because of the society's expectations. This allows us to make some comments about the attachment styles of the novel characters.

Based on early maladaptive schemas conceptualized on the basis of attachment ([Young et al., 2003](#); [Young & Klosko, 1994](#)), research findings in the literature often assume that there may be a positive and significant relationship between cheating and attachment, as well as a relationship between schemas and cheating on ([Çavuşoğlu, 2011](#); [Güler, 2022](#)). Among the schemas that predict the tendency to cheat in women rejection, disconnection, and inability to establish close relationships include the belief that stability, trust, care, empathy, and feelings of love will not be met ([Martin & Young, 2010](#)). The emotional bonding needs of these individuals are not adequately met, and as a result, they believe that they will never be understood and will be alone forever ([Young, et al., 2003](#); [Young & Klosko, 1994](#)). Among the partners whose needs are not met emotionally, Aleksey Karenin, who lost a parent at a young age, and Anna Karenina, where her aunt is more active even in the marriage process, can be

given as examples. It is also noticed that Vronski could not develop enough emotional bonds with his caregiver. These situations were effective in the formation of the schemas of the characters.

It is observed that individuals who have abandonment and instability in their schemas and try to cope with it with over-compensation method tend to see infidelity as more reasonable because of the fear of being abandoned as a result of being cheated on and being alone (Young & Klosko, 1994). Both Alexi Karenin and Dolly, who are cheated on in the novel, have agreed to forgive their cheating partners and get back to their lives after many internal arguments. From this point of view, it can be thought that there is abandonment/instability in the schemas of individuals. There are findings that there is a direct correlation between the increase in sacrifice and the increase in investment in the relationship (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). In addition, individuals with the abandonment/ instability schema always try to keep a partner in reserve in case the key person in their lives leaves them (Young & Klosko, 1994) and they constantly believe that they will be manipulated, cheated on, and lied to (Young et al., 2003). Similarly, Anna Karenine did not separate from her husband while she had a lover, as long as she did not have to. While she was separated from her husband and lived with her lover for a certain period of time, she tried to attract her husband again after the difficulties she experienced during the birth process. Toward the end of her relationship, she made everything more complicated by thinking that her lover Vronski would lie to her all the time and that he would no longer love her as before, and that he would leave her. In the following processes, with the support of the idea that "I am different and no one understands me" (Loose, et al., 2018), the social isolation scheme may have started to be triggered in Anna Karenina, who is not wanted by the society and is openly excluded from meetings because she cheated on her husband.

According to evolutionary psychology, men consciously or unconsciously aim to get as many women pregnant as possible and reach the best partner (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Women, on the other hand, prefer people who they believe can offer better quality of life by providing the best care for themselves and their children (Hendrick, 2016; Sargın, 2008). Although the French governess did not become pregnant as a result of Oblonski's cheating behavior, Oblonski continued to befriend other women and cheat on his wife. Anna Karenina also often tried to replace her husband, whom she thought was not taking care of herself and her son enough, with Vronski. Together with Vronski, Anna took care of his son and tried to offer him the life that she believed was the best.

As a result of the reward cost analysis, it is stated that individuals show stability in the case of cheating or not cheating, based on the evaluation of their relationships, the investment they make in their relationships, and the satisfaction they get from the relationship (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Rusbult et al., 1998; Seal et al., 1994; Weil, et al., 1975). If the individual's gain is more than his loss, it is accepted that he has not achieved satisfaction from his current relationship. This criterion is effective in whether or not individuals continue their relationships (Terzi İlhan & Işık, 2017). Although Oblonski was sad after his wife learned that she had been cheated on and asked for help from his sister, after the situation improved, he pointed out the old assistant while talking to his friend Levin and stated that the human eye would want to see a young beautiful person and he continued to cheat on his wife with a new lover in the process. This enables us to conclude that when Oblonski evaluates his relationship, he thinks that he is insufficient in reaching the desired satisfaction and exhibits these behaviors. In the novel "Dolly" the wife of

Oblonski, who claims that as a result of her husband cheating on her, does not love him as much as before, decides to continue the relationship for reasons such as her children being able to prepare for life in a healthy way, having order at home, and thinking about how her life will be in the future. Here, the effective factor in Dolly's continuation of the relationship is observed as the investment made in the relationship. Anna Karenina, on the other hand, initially wanted to both live with her son in her husband's house and be with Vronski, but she had to leave her house as a result of her pregnancy and the disturbing behavior of her husband and society towards her, although she could not completely end her relationship with her husband. The factor that is effective in Anna Karenina's not wanting to leave the house at all and having to leave the house can be interpreted as the higher prices she pays as a result of the award-cost analysis. According to the investment theory, for novel characters the satisfaction that provides the continuation of the relationship is valid for Oblonski's wife, but not for Anna Karenina, who decided to end the relationship.

In the study conducted by (Boon, et al., 2014), they found that individuals do not exhibit cheating behavior due to social support. Another finding is that the dating of rich married men and young women in Nigeria is accepted even if it is not tolerated by society (Smith, 2010). In the novel, this situation emerges as two different social reactions for two different genders. For Anna, the situation is a deterrent attitude with reactions such as the exclusion from society and even the absence of any woman in her side, while in Russian culture, it is accepted that men who make married women cheat on their spouses are more successful in society, and it is considered more normal and a sign of success for men to do this behavior. Dolly, who was cheated on by her husband, was given advice for her family and children to ignore this and forgive her husband, that is, to accept the situation as normal. While Vronski states that he does not respect his mother, who cheated on his father and took other people into her life after separation, he still accepts this situation as normal for himself. As a result of cheating in the novel, both Anna Karenina's husband and Oblonski's wife have chosen to forgive their partners. Studies on interventions in cases of infidelity in marriage have often concluded that partners forgive each other (Askari & Bajlan, 2014).

Gender, which is considered as a risk factor in studies on cheating, is often the subject of research. In studies conducted in different cultures, it has been determined that the number of men who state that they have cheated on their female partners at least once while in an emotional or physical relationship is higher than women in every society, although their rates are different. (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000; Hatipoğlu, 1993; Marin, et al., 2014; Weil, 1975; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). As a result of the analysis of the novel characters, basically, Anna Karenina cheats on her partner, as well as Oblonski cheats on her partner. It is also stated that there is a similar situation between Count Vronski's mother and her partners, although it is less mentioned in the book. The fact that Levin, who married Oblonski's sister-in-law, had siblings from the same mother and different father, gives information about the fact that there were more male partners who were cheated on in the past. According to a study conducted by Friker, which supports the novel, the number of cheating by women was found to be higher than that of men (Çıktı, 2017). Although different findings are obtained in different studies, the numerical difference between men and women regarding cheating also differs in exhibiting cheating behavior and questioning the causes of cheating behavior. According to this, men tend to cheat on their partners more sexually (Blow & Hernet, 2005; Atkins et al., 2001) because their relationships do not go as in their dreams, they seek instant pleasure, seek novelty, and take revenge on

their partner (Norment, 1998). While Anna Karenina's older brother Oblonski was trying to express his sincerity about his remorse and ask for forgiveness, he excused himself by stating that cheating was a momentary whim. When women's cheating is examined, it is seen that the reasons are the effort to increase self-confidence, the desire to compensate for emotional neglect, the desire to find unmet romance from the partner, the search for new excitements, the desire to be with someone who is in a better position financially, insufficient sexual satisfaction and excess household responsibility. As a result of these, it was found that women primarily cheat emotionally and hurt their partners. (Norment, 1998) (Atkins et al., 2001; Blow & Hernet, 2005;

Glass & Wright, 1992). In the novel, Anna Karenina, who cheated on her husband, blames her husband for emotionally neglecting her, always being involved with his work, and on top of that by bringing work to the house. Anna Karenina, who cheated on her husband with Vronski, started to cheat on her husband emotionally at the outset, just as in the findings. In cheating, sexual satisfaction is also one of the effective risk factors, especially for male partners (Dollahite and Lambert, 2007; Liu, 2000).

According to the research conducted between the number of children in marriage and cheating, no significant finding was found (Blow & Harnett, 2005). When the heroes in the novel are examined, it is stated that Anna Karenina and Aleksey Karenin have one child, Oblonski and Dolly have five children, Vronski has two siblings and Levin has three siblings. Although there are different numbers of children, it was observed that the partners cheated on each other in the families of the given characters. Based on the finding, no connection could be found between the number of children and cheating in the novel. Regarding the effect of having a child on marriage, there is a finding that it positively increases the intimacy in marriage (Callan, 1983; Sprecher, et al., 1998), as well a finding that not having a child negatively affects the intimacy and the absence of a child affects the intimacy positively (Fıfılođlu, 1992; Pletchaty et al., 1996). In addition to the findings related to the increase in infidelity as the duration of marriage increases (Seal, et al., 1994), there are also findings related to the decrease in infidelity and increase in marital satisfaction as the duration of marriage increases (Aktürk, 2006; Dökmen & Tokgöz, 2002; Grandon et al., 2004). Another finding is that there is no significant relationship between the time spent in marriage and cheating (Acar, 1998; Patrick, 2002). In the novel, Anna Karenina has been married to her husband for about eight years, and Oblonski to his wife for nine years. According to the research findings, both marriages are not included in the long marriage period.

In many religions, cheating is a religiously forbidden phenomenon. This phenomenon aims to keep partners away from cheating and prevent individuals from hurting each other (Zink, 2008). In the religion of Christianity, which is professed by the majority of Russians, regarding the infidelity it is stated that individuals should be content with the woman the creator gave them and forget about other women (Bible, 2012). While the Qur'an states that there is a heavy penalty for cheating on one's spouse (Kuran, 2010), the penalty for cheating in Judaism varies depending on whether the individual is married or not, as in Islam, but there are sanctions for both partners (Güngören & Turan, 2018). Although there are prohibitions on cheating in religions, the fact that it is given to the individual under the pressure of society is a risk factor in cheating (Yenicer and Kökdemir, 2004). In the book, it is often talked about the wrongness of this in religion and the punishment of the individual in the face of cheating. When Anna Karenina first

told her husband her that she cheated on him, he stated that they were bonded by God and that she needed to find the right way. When divorce is required, it is accepted as a social rule that it can only be accepted as a result of physical inadequacy and infidelity. In addition, it is known that the remarriage of a woman who divorced her husband, in terms of religion and society, is not accepted in Russian laws. Although Anna Karenina's husband often pays attention to behaving in accordance with religion and society, he thinks that she does not behave in accordance with religion and society, and he often expresses this.

Of the evaluated risk factors, the age status of individuals does not differ significantly according to studies (Acar, 1998; Günay, 2007; Güven, 2005). In the book, there is more of an age gap between Anna Karenina and her husband, who cheated on her partner, while the age gap between Oblonski and Dolly is one.

Whether or not the partners separate as a result of cheating, the process is completed with difficulty (Blow, 2005). As a result of their sexual cheating, it is seen that male partners often exhibit behaviors such as sexual coercion and violence against their partner (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009; Levine, 2005), and this situation also triggers uncomfortable sensations such as emotional hurt, shame, sadness, anxiety, anger, jealousy, and revenge and causes permanent wounds in individuals (Blow, 2005; Levine, 2005). It is observed that men are more influenced than women in this process and blame themselves (Boukheut, et al., 2003). After learning that Anna Karenina was cheating on her, her husband did not show great reactions, thinking that the situation would be temporary, but acted by considering possible social behaviors. But in the process, when he saw that Anna Karenina was serious and did not follow the rules he set, he started to exhibit more aggressive attitudes. While going to file a divorce case to take revenge on his wife, she assaulted Anna Karenina in order to get the letters from her lover. Although the revenge reaction against cheating is cheating from time to time (Kesici, et al., 2019), none of the injured novel heroes preferred this method for revenge. The way in which cheating is learned determines how much the individual will be affected by cheating (Afifi et al., 2001). It was concluded that in cheating situations, the least destructive way is learning by the individual himself, and the most destructive way is learning from someone else that he/ has been cheated on (Blow, 2005). In the book, Anna Karenina told her husband that she was cheating on him. In another instance, his wife caught Oblonski's letter for the governess. In both cheatings, the injured individual learns the situation himself. For this reason, it may be that as a result, both individuals could not decide to leave their partner. As a result of cheating, it is normal for children to feel a lot of tension, even if they do not fully comprehend what is happening at home (Levine, 2005). In the novel, the children of both families are negatively affected by the tension between the partners. While the little children of Dolly and Oblonski were getting sick, Anna and Aleksey Karenin's son tried to show his reaction by saying that he wanted his mother by crying and keeping to himself more. To be told that his mother is dead in order to affect the child less, and later to learn that his mother is not dead, may cause bigger problems for the child. It has been determined that individuals who are not happy in their marriages exhibit cheating behavior twenty-five percent more than those who are happy (Atkins et al., 2001). For Aleksey Karenin, the family seems to be more important and supportive for issues such as professional advancement, while Anna Karenina is unhappy, bored, and depressed in this marriage. Since women's infidelity has higher costs than men's (Daly & Wilson, 1988), the price to pay as a result of infidelity is different. While paying different prices, Anna Karenina's state of unhappiness and depression will ultimately claim her life.

## **Discussion**

In this study, Anna Karenina novel written by Lev Tolstoy was analyzed according to theories, risk factors, and results. The results are that they match in terms of the research findings made about the heroes in the book. In general, Anna Karenina's character and some side characters cheat on their partners. The basis of the behavior of individuals who cheat on their partners is examined within the framework of theories such as psychoanalysis, evolution, schema, and attachment. It has been determined that there are similarities between the findings and the cheating behaviors of the heroes. When cheating is considered in terms of risk factors, although it has been determined that the cheating behavior of individuals is affected by environmental factors such as gender, and duration of marriage, there are similarities in cheating behaviors according to studies, but similar results have not been reached regarding the effects of the number of children on cheating.

It is thought that the use of books and movies with the psychology literature can contribute more positively to the understanding of the subjects by using them in the education process. Especially when the incidence of infidelity is high in societies (Atkins et al., 2001; Kantarci, 2009), studies conducted in places where studies on this subject are scarce are important in terms of providing the opportunity to examine multiple theories and environmental factors in a single study. The study may provide a stimulating opportunity for examining different books in the future.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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