

DRST 002: Directed Studies Literature
Professor Joseph North

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Katie Painter

Reclaiming the Fragments of Human Identity:
The Political Project of Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*
by Katie Painter '23

Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* crafts a heart-rending vision of political society amidst the Russian-Chechen conflict in 1851. As Tolstoy builds his narrative around two parallel regimes, he denounces the political order of both the East and the West. At first glance, the novel merely puts forth a critique of autocratic rule. In fact, however, the criticism runs deeper: Tolstoy immerses the reader in a world where social status consumes identity and peril awaits those who resist. Ultimately, *Hadji Murat* asks us to imagine a different world where we need not limit personal identity to the classifications of ruler and ruled, where every individual can inhabit and express multiple aspects of the self, and thus achieve what it is to be fully human.

To begin, Tolstoy critiques tsarist Russia with a dehumanizing portrait of the tsar himself. Our first glimpse of the tsar reads, "Nicholas... looked at the entering men with his immobile, lifeless eyes. His long, white face with its enormous receding brow emerging from the slicked-down hair at his temples, artfully joined to the wig that covered his bald patch, was especially cold and immobile that day" (66). With the repetition of the word "immobile" here, along with the adjectives "cold" and "lifeless," Tolstoy presents Nicholas in a deadened state. The wig, meanwhile, "artfully" concealing the imperfections of the tsar's aging body, serves as an emblem of his vanity and deceit. In a similar vein, Tolstoy adds, "He [Nicholas] recited the usual prayers he had been saying since childhood - the Hail Mary, the Creed, the Our Father - without ascribing any significance to their words" (67). As ritual language loses its meaning for the tsar,

Tolstoy further extricates the ruler from the rhythms of human life. He envelops Nicholas in a kind of spiritual death, reducing him to a vehicle for empty words and appearances alike.

Accordingly, the tsar consumes himself throughout the scene with the frivolous debauchery of the previous night, remembering that “the girl told him how she had fallen in love with him from his portraits, had idolized him, had resolved to win him at any cost... He was left with some sort of unpleasant aftertaste, and, to stifle the feeling, he began thinking about something that always comforted him: what a great man he was” (67). In this moment, Nicholas sees himself becoming an object to “win,” a portrait to “idolize,” an individual fundamentally severed from the bonds of human connection. Dripping with sarcasm, the scene closes in on a picture of the tsar as he draws inward and takes solace in the illusion of his own manufactured greatness. Tolstoy thereby launches an attack on the tsarist regime, condemning a ruler who conceals his blackened soul with the trappings of absolute authority.

But Tolstoy complicates his critique of the tsarist regime with a similarly dehumanized representation of peasant life. Far from championing the virtues of the oppressed, he dwells instead on the grotesque behavior of one Avdeev family. The father of this family, for instance, sends his son Pyotr away to war and, as Tolstoy explains, “The old man was sorry about him, but there was nothing to be done. Soldiering was like death... Only rarely did the old man remember him, like today, in order to needle the elder son” (37). In this way, Pyotr’s father transforms the memory of his son into a tool for the petty quarrels that overwhelm his day to day interactions on the farm. He dismisses without a second thought the value of family ties and of human life altogether. When the family learns that Pyotr has died in battle, his young wife at least appears overcome with grief. Tolstoy reveals, however, that “...deep in her heart Aksinya was glad of Pyotr’s death. She was pregnant again by the salesclerk she lived with, and now no one could

reproach her” (39). Finding herself trapped in a faithless marriage, Aksinya lets self-interest replace any last commitment to her husband. Even “deep in her heart,” she sees Pyotr not as a fellow human being, but only an obstacle in her path to exemption. Pyotr’s mother alone mourns the loss of the fallen soldier, and even then, her grieving falls second to the labors of the peasant world. Tolstoy explains, “The old woman wailed for as long as she had time, then went back to work” (38). And so, wrapped in the misery of their menial lives, the family members find minimal room in their hearts for their own flesh and blood. As Tolstoy combines this account with his scathing portrait of the tsar, he depicts a nation confined to the categories of ruler and ruled, where social status consumes identity, and indeed, where individuals lock into predetermined roles at the expense of living a full human life.

Tolstoy’s political commentary transcends national borders, however, as he renders a striking parallelism between the tsar and Shamil. When the Chechen imam processes into the fortress, Tolstoy writes, “His tall, straight, powerful figure, in unadorned clothes, surrounded by murids with gold and silver ornaments on their clothes and weapons, produced the very impression of grandeur that he wanted and knew how to produce in his people. His pale face, framed by a trimmed red beard, was perfectly immobile” (84). Tolstoy’s use of the word “immobile” in this passage echoes the precise language that he uses to deaden and dehumanize the appearance of the tsar. The mere “impression” of grandeur here further suggests that this spectacle, much like the tsar’s wig, only serves to stroke Shamil’s vanity and conceal his damning imperfections. Shamil too recites an absent-minded prayer in this scene, resigning himself to the fact that “... it was necessary before all to perform the midday *nadaz*, for which he now had not the slightest inclination” (86). Thus we see spirituality molded once again into an outlet for self-fashioning, laden with the same sense of deceit and moral emptiness that Nicholas

exudes. Finally, as the scene comes to a close, Shamil plots to lure Hadji Murat back from the Russians, thinking, “It was necessary to make him come back, and once back, to kill him... there was one means for doing that — his family, and above all his son, whom Shamil knew Hadji Murat loved passionately” (87). Just like Pyotr Avdeev’s father, Shamil sees the family unit as a tool, as the means to a perverse end, and human life itself as fundamentally expendable. Tolstoy therefore shows the corrupt Chechen leader mirroring his vision of the Russian state and so advances his critique beyond the scope of a single regime.

Drawing another parallel between Chechnya and tsarist Russia, Tolstoy demonstrates that social status also consumes the individual identities of the Chechen people. He describes the crowds at Shamil’s arrival, saying, “The wives of Hadji Murat and their children, together with all the inhabitants of the *saklya*, also came out to the gallery to watch the imam’s entrance” (85). With the people gathered as one under Shamil’s steely gaze, the family units fuse into a cohesive whole. Every name, every face, every beating heart feeds into a stark dichotomy between ruler and ruled. Even Hadji Murat’s son blends into the hordes of the subjugated. Tolstoy explains, “To him, who wanted only one thing - to go on with that easy, dissipated life he had led in *Kunzakh* as the *naib*’s son - it seemed totally unnecessary to be hostile to Shamil. In resistance and opposition to his father, he especially admired Shamil and felt the ecstatic veneration so widespread in the mountains” (88). Losing sight of any loyalty to his father or any ambition of his own, he only longs for his place in the fabric of society. He vacates his responsibilities as a son and sees himself only in connection to the far-reaching dominion of the imam. In this bleak world, Hadji Murat alone dares to embrace the multiplicity of his human identity. He lies awake all night in the Russian camp, for instance, and puzzles over his return to Chechnya, asking himself, “Stay here? Subjugate the Caucasus for the Russian tsar, earn glory, rank, wealth? It’s

possible... but I must decide at once, otherwise he [Shamil] will destroy my family.”” (101). In this way, he alone maintains his capacity for questioning and inner dialogue. He alone holds onto the disparate pieces of his identity as a soldier and a father, a Chechen and a rebel, a public figure and a private man. And as Hadji Murat meets his tragic end, trying in vain to straddle these multiple aspects of himself, Tolstoy laments a world that relegates identity to social status and quashes the kaleidoscope of the human experience.

And so, tracing a narrative arc that culminates in the violent death of Hadji Murat, Tolstoy recognizes the woes of the political structures around him. Casting his gaze east and west, he sees authority figures clinging to the ornaments of power and their subjects languishing in the despondency of the downtrodden. He sees a world where social status consumes personal identity, where people find themselves reduced to roles assigned at birth. And in the midst of it all, he imagines a lone rebel who emerges from the squalor to reclaim the scattered fragments of his humanity and winds up cut down like the thistle that sparks our narrator’s recollection. But though it tells a tragic tale, Tolstoy’s final work leaves us nonetheless with the rousing message of its hero. Hadji Murat’s story challenges us to strive for a world where we can see ourselves beyond the social categories we inhabit, embrace the fluidity of man, travel between the ever-shifting array of identities and experiences that make up a single life. It challenges us to claim for ourselves the vigor and resilience of that mown-down thistle, even as corrupt regimes threaten to destroy the self as we know it.

Works Cited

Tolstoy, Leo. *Hadji Murat*. [1912] New York: Vintage, 2012.