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**A STUBBORN FIGHTER AGAINST ADVERSITIES: CHARACTER
PORTRAYAL OF KIRA IN AYN RAND'S *WE THE LIVING***

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Abstract:

Russia witnessed turmoil after World War I. We the Living depicts the struggle of common man against state. Its basic theme is the sanctity of human life- using the word "sanctity" not in a mystical sense but in the sense of "supreme value". The novel is about Kira, young woman who for years now has been thrown around like property. She went from living a grand life, to having everything she knew and loved torn from her and her family's hands. This book isn't directly about communism; it's about the horrible struggles that each individual was put through because of the State, and what they had to do just to survive.

Keywords: *Woman as a fighter, Totalitarianism, Dictatorship, Secrete Police, Soviet State, etc.*

It's strange. There's your life. You begin it, feeling that it's something so precious and rare, so beautiful that it's like a sacred treasure. Now it's over, and it doesn't make any difference to anyone, and it isn't that they are indifferent, it's just that they don't know, they don't know what it means, that treasure of mine, and there's something about it that they should understand. I don't understand it myself, but there's something that should be understood by all of us. Only what is it? What?

- Ayn Rand, *We the Living*

Ayn Rand's *We the Living* takes place from 1922 to 1925, in post-revolutionary Russia. Kira Argounova, the protagonist of the story, is the younger daughter of a bourgeois family. She, an independent spirit with a will to match, rejects any attempt by her family or the nascent Soviet state to cast her into a mold. In this novel Kira not only rebels against the state but also against her family and its restrictive conventions. She is an epitome of a stubborn fighter in every woman.

Actually with the rise of Russian Revolution in 1917, Russian people started seeing the dreams of progress and prospectus of improvement on the social, economic, political and moral levels. The Soviet regime that came to power inspired ambitious plans for change. There was the atmosphere of hope among the Russian dreams of justice and equality. However totally contracted with the idealized vision of the state different atmosphere started rising in Russia. Many people were imprisoned, shot dead or purposefully killed by the secret police. The period between 1937 and 1938 came to be referred to as the time of 'Great Terror'. There was the massive use of state violence that includes the great purges of party members and wide raging arrests and executions of many Soviet Citizens. The violence was viewed as a necessary measure to achieve a higher objective. It is supposed that those who do not support the 'Party' do not have the right of survival.



Ayn Rand's book is not a direct commentator about communism but it is about the horrible struggle that each individual was put through due to the State, a struggle just to survive. Ayn Rand's theme in *We the Living* is to make the world aware that an individual life is of the supreme value, and expose the evils of a state that claims the right to take that life. Rand held that each individual has a moral right to live for its own sake and to pursue its own personal happiness. According to Rand "This book is a means of acquiring a voice of making myself heard" (Berliner, 13). She uses writing as an instrument of resistance to the state by which the oppressed are subjected in mortification and degradation.

At the beginning of the novel, Kira age eighteen returns to Petrograd with her family, after a prolonged exile due to the assault of the Bolshevik revolutionaries. Kira's father had been the owner of a textile factory, which was seized and nationalized. Having given up all the hopes of regaining their past possessions after the victories of the Red Army, the family returns to the city in search of livelihood. They find that their home has also been seized and converted to living quarters for several families. Kira's family eventually manages to find living quarters, and Kira's father gets a license to open a textile shop, an establishment that is but a shadow of his old firm. Life is excruciatingly difficult in these times.

Though every character in the novel has its own struggle, this paper aims to portray the struggle of Kira, a brave and strongest woman. Neither hardship nor fighting for her happiness scared her, for she knew that she was right and that she had a right to live as she wished. However, even the strongest ones could be broken placed in such situation where Kira is placed. In this journey of her she loses Andrei, she loses Leo, and she loses her trust in her ability to conquer the state. Kira preserves, the struggle to survive and gives rise to values upon which she bases her life. It constitutes for her "the purpose (to) live for" (Rand, *WTL*, 89). Leo, on another scale, adopts the policy of complicity; the policy of adjustment and reconciliation and proves to be utterly selfish. Andrei who begins the struggle as an adamant believer in enchanted ideals, yet change takes place and his attitude takes a turn. Unlike Leo who has no real values to base his life, and Andrei who is ambivalent about the ethics of his Red Party, "Kira stands as the synthesis of both (Leo and Andrei) because she unites what is right in each, even she transcends the limitations of each", (Rand, *WTL*,105) as Loiret-Prunet puts it. She was *against a hundred and fifty million people* and that was a case when the number really mattered.

Revolution, poverty, hunger, had no effect on the flame that burned within Kira, with her passion for truth and life — her own life. Actually, she was going to be an engineer, because "it's the only profession where I don't have to learn a single lie." She was going to build — not for the Red State, but only because she wanted to build. All she asked was to be allowed to study. With some effort, Kira manages to obtain her Labor Book, which permits her to study and work. Kira also manages to enroll in the Technological Institute, where she aspires to fulfill her dream of becoming an engineer. Yet something happened, not to dim, but to divert her purpose. She fell in love with Leo and brought to her love all the ardor and constancy of her spirit. Nothing mattered in the face of the needs of the bitter, imperious man who became for her the center of existence. To him she sacrificed her family, her work, her integrity, and her friend, Andrei Taganov, a far finer person.

Kira's struggle emerges more consistent, and more integrated, and more superior in her quest for survival as free human spirit. As she has no belief in role playing and in the possibility of assimilation to the conformist position imposed on women. In her rebellion and disobedience, she embraces different survival methodologies. Initially Kira's opposition to the social totalitarian encoded concepts and the patricidal society is epitomized in her insistence on being a woman engineer since it is the only appropriate profession that is void of lies, guesses and wishes. It is where "Steel is steel." (Rand, *WTL*, 41) Rand gives a detailed account of Kira's playing with mechanical tools, which were



not intended for girls, and her interest in building of ships, bridges and towers. However she does not intend to contribute to the erection of the Red state and declares, “I’m going to build because I want to build” (Rand, *WTL*, 41). She resists and challenges the totalitarian dictate. Here she very much promotes Rand’s objectivist ethics of material productivity.

Kira, not only rebels against the state, but also against her family’s restrictive conventions. Her family disapproves of her occupation which they describe as “not at all a cultured profession for a woman” (Rand, *WTL*, 42). Victor her cousin believes that “as a woman (she) would be much more useful to society in a more feminine way”. He believes that as men have a duty towards society women also have. Here she mocks his words and cries, “What society?” This masculine perspective is seen again and again through the characters like Victor.

Although she is a strong and unyielding girl, Kira is also presented very differently in her relations with Leo. He is her love and in this relation she is a yielding and faithful. For her, he is “like a drug... inexplicable, unconditional, and consummate like music” (Rand, *WTL*, 365). Kira always looks at him as masterful strong man who deserves worshipping. But his physical appearance is totally against his mind and actions. Kira looks at Leo with supreme value and that is enough to her for her survival. In her journals, Rand states, “He is, to her, the symbol of everything she wants and the meaning of life as she sees it” (Rand, *WTL*, 51). She is so blind in her love with Leo that she rebels against all the social codes her family seeks to inculcate in her. Galina Petrovna, her mother is enraged and says, “How could you? A daughter of mine! How could you stand there and stare at us? Have you no conception of shame, the disgrace, the depraved....? (Rand, *WTL*, 132) Kira’s family regards their compliance with the familial history of their forefathers as moral imperatives, whereas Kira does not place anything before her love for Leo. She is determinant and resolute over her life and will. She chooses Leo rather than her family. She always tells Leo, “We will fight it, Leo together. We will fight all of it. The country, the people, the century, the millions. We can stand it. We can do it. (Rand, *WTL*, 133). In return he only says “We’ll try” (Rand, *WTL*, 133). In spite of his weak character and his defeatist inclinations, Kira remains faithful and consistent in her love to him.

Investigation and observation result in expelling both Kira and Leo from the Technical institute during the student purge due to their anti-revolutionary stance, to their familial bourgeois background and their lack of Communist Party membership. The expulsion jeopardizes Kira’s future for which she struggles and adds to the suffering of her family. For this reason she schemes to hide her true convictions and authentic self as an anti-communist activist and develop a complicit involuntary mimicry of the oppressors’ slogans to go with the system until she is able to acquire enough strength and power to fight. Herein raises her spirit of fighter and war against system, in a guerrilla style. It is a strenuous task for her to preach what she does not believe in. However she unwaveringly reasons with herself; “the harder it gets the happier you should be that you can stand it...The harder the happier. It’s a war. You are a good soldier, Kira Argounova” (Rand, *WTL*, 207).

Her absolute faith in life and right to survive for values and principles impels her to play a dual role. It is her unlimited pure love for Leo which makes her to be Andrei’s mistress. She becomes Andrei’s mistress to save Leo from tuberculosis. She obtains money from Andrei, calming that her family is starving, and succeeds in convincing Leo that the money has come from her uncle in Budapest. To play such a double role needs noteworthy strength and courage. Before getting help from Andrei, Kira tries to get help from every possible source but she fails. Once she is convinced that the door of the State sanatoriums was locked to Leo and that she could not unlock it, she decides to approach the private sanatorium in the Crimea. Private sanatorium costs money and Kira and Leo don’t have that much of money. Now Kira decides to seek money from Andrei. All she wanted was Leo to survive from tuberculosis but she faces even more difficult task of keeping both the men unaware and ignorant of her dual relations. In a pitiable scene, Kira begs the officials to admit Leo in



the State's hospital. He is even denied a place in the sanatorium in the Crimea on the ground that he is not "a member of the party! And he is not a member of a trade union? And he's not a State employee?" (Rand, *WTL*, 221) The Second official refuses to even register Leo's name due to the hundreds of Trade Union members' waiting list. She makes one last Plea to Petrograd's most powerful official. She says, "Comrade Commissar....do you know what death is? Do you know that death is nothing at all, not at all, never again, never, no matter what we do? Don't you know why can't he die? I love him. We all have to suffer. We all have things we want, which are taken away from us. It's all right. But because we are living beings- there is something in each of us, something like the very heart of life condensed-and that should not be touched" (Rand, *WTL*, 227).

It all rises from love and her affection to Leo and her strong belief in the individual's right to survive. Her begging does not persuade the comrade commissar to sign the paper. His reply to her plea is, "One hundred thousand workers died in the Civil-war. Why in the face of the Union of Socialist Republics can't one aristocrat die" (Rand, *WTL*, 228).

The state is persistent in denying its citizens their most fundamental right to survive. Maris Petrovna who suffered very poor health is denied a doctor's visit. Vasili Ivanovitch, Kira's uncle says, "The hospital won't send anyone because they are not Trade Union members" (Rand, *WTL*, 187).

In her comparison Leo stands spiritually defeated and choked. Still because of her love for him, Kira endeavors all along to stand as his sentinel between him and his apathy and unresponsiveness to the exigent urge to fight for the values she upholds and their survival. She tries to convince Leo to cling to live for. Leo is indifferent to her enthusiasm about elevated principles of resistance and struggle for better life. His attachment to her doesn't energize and mobilize his capacities. Her vehement pleas to value his life are meaningless to him. Leo seems to be content with his submissiveness and obedience and his will is broken by despair. He believes that nothing in life is worth fighting for under the Soviet dictatorship so he allows the communist system to chock the life from him. He is overwhelmed by the desolation of the status-quo and such negative reaction paralyzes his power of thinking positively. Thus he suffers from disintegration and steps helplessly in the path of spiritual suicide. He prefers blindness and escapism to sight. This way he can evade perceiving the gloomy truth about living in Soviet Russia. The quest for freedom, success and happiness is beyond his surrounding life. But the fighter in Kira doesn't allow any of his negative thinking overpowers her wish to save him despite of adversities.

In the meanwhile Leo's life takes new turn when he indulges in black market activities. He makes the best use of black market dealings through his connection with Antonina Pavlovna, a wealthy woman whom he met in the sanatorium, and Karpovitch Morozov, who works in the State Food Trust. Antonina and Karpovitch tell Leo that he will be the sole owner of the store. Karpovitch explains to him the project, "With our little, we'll sweep in the rubbles, easy as picking 'em off the street...A few hundred slipped where necessary and we can fly to Paris,... or any of the foreign places...(Rand, *WTL*, 282).

Leo embodies a new strategy of survival through personal connections, he changes into a villain and his attitude towards Kira who still faithfully loves him, becomes venomous. Henceforth Leo becomes indifferent to all the efforts Kira exerts to call his attention to the viciousness of Karpovitch and Antonina, and their exploitation of his dire need for money. She relentlessly warns him against both of them. As a result, he is caught by the G. P. U. and thrown into a high security prison. Nevertheless, Kira does not desert him nor ceases her endeavors to save him as he is the supreme reverence of her life. She begins one more time to take advantage of her connections with Andrei and manages to obtain a release for Leo. Despite all the sacrifices Kira makes to inject Leo with morality and hope, his corruption demoralization are irreversible. His attractive exterior is a mere façade she refuses to see through it his real self. His depravations are foreshowed in his first meeting with Andrei



at a party; he says, “Maybe I’ll escape abroad, and sell my services to the biggest exploiter of a millionaire-and have an affair with a beautiful wife” (Rand, *WTL*, 155). Finally he deserts Kira for Antonina, a much older but wealthy woman. Leo’s moral decadence is clearly delineated in Merrill’s depiction,

Leo maintains handsome exterior while his character gradually corrodes. From an aristocrat he descends to being an ordinary student; from that to a black market operator; from that to a gigolo. Kira fights in vain to save him from corruption.” (36) Leo is actually incapable of noble love and appreciation of Kira’s emotion. He easily collapses under the prolonged pressure of the State. He only lived as a parasite on Kira’s sustainment. She always advises him, “don’t give up... You must take care of yourself, Leo... You must spare yourself.” To this he replies indifferently, “For what” (Rand, *WTL*, 213).

In this novel Andrei emerges as a counter part of Kira, in her adamant determination to pursue her aspirations, advocate her convictions and retain in the resuscitation of Leo’s energy. Andrei has a value to pursue: communism. He has maintained his insistence on his supreme reverence to the ideal of the Party. Regardless of how adversative they are he is a loyal servant who preserves in upholding his supreme values. However, he also undergoes a transformation as the true face of communism appears before his eyes. Until he meets Kira, communism has represented to him the highest ideals of mankind, true liberty, social justice, the creation of a higher man. Andrei’s philosophical conviction of collectivism is rooted in his belief that communal disposition embraces and values human life and has the potential to improve people’s lives. When Andrei comes to realize that collectivism does not value human life and in fact, it crushes the future prospects of people he rejects its slogans such as “good of the majority”. In moments of revelations, Andrei grasps how he is disillusioned by the party members and in the later part of the novels we see his ideals crumbling. In all these situations his only solace is Kira. He says, “You Kira are my highest reverence” (Rand, *WTL*, 335). Then he adds, “No matter what happens, I still have you. Because no matter what human wreckage I see around me, I still have you....in you- I still know what a human being can be” (Rand, *WTL*, 335) He does not care about the outcomes of his break with communism; what really matters him is his bond with Kira. He states, “Say I’m a traitor. Maybe I am. And maybe I’ve just stopped being one. May I’ve been a traitor all these years-to something greater than what the Party ever offered the world....I feel certain of nothing in that involved mess they call existence, of nothing but you? (Rand, *WTL*, 358)

It is ironical that Kira refuses to accept the new Andrei, who breaks with his past principles regardless the consequences and makes her the substitute. Andrei tries to sway Kira and convince himself that there is a possibility of happier life in the accomplishment of a counter revolution and finding an adamant believer, like him, in the true tenets of the revolution. He tells her “I joined the party because I know I was right. I love you because I know I’m right. In a way, you and my work are the same” (Rand, *WTL*, 278). He attempts again to convince Kira that they have a lot in common that is forceful enough to turn such all better possibilities in life into reality. He states, “You said once that we had the same root somewhere in both of us, because we both believed in life” (Rand, *WTL*, 278). His connection with the communist ideals reaches a breaking point with his attempts to persuade Kira to escape “Abroad forever”. Andrei’s love for Kira conjured up new directions in his life. He declares, “I want to escape before I see too much of what I see around us. To break with all of it at once. It would be like starting again, from the beginning, from a total void” (Rand, *WTL*, 358). Unfortunately on her part Kira shuns his proposal to go abroad with Andrei, yet she is persistent in her urge to Leo to accompany her in her escape to another country. She assumes that there is much in common between them with respect to their beliefs in life.



In their respective struggle, Kira and Andrei meet the anticipated physical death. Andrei commits suicide as the noble decision of a man who recognizes the evil of the system he has served yet refuses to let it poison his soul, and Kira dies shot by the State's representative when she tries desperately to escape and cross the Siberian borders to freedom. Rand portrays her death in stirring details, "She had known something which no human words could ever tell and she knew it now. She had been awaiting it and she felt it, as if it had been, as if she had lived it. Life had been, if only because she had known it could be....A moment or an eternity- did it matter? Life undefeated, existed and could exist" (Rand, *WTL*, 464).

Kira is resolved on her escape as the last attempt to reach the utopian world she can find in revolutionary Russia. Kira breathes her last where Rand begins anew. Kira doesn't survive to fulfill what she as longed for, while Rand was able to accomplish the dream and her success is embodied in the composition and wide circulation of "We the Living". In spite of her tragic ending, Kira remains strong, consistent in her beliefs and loyal to the supreme value of life and survival. After being shot, she whispers to herself, "You're a good soldier, Kira Argounova, You're a good soldier and now it's time to prove it....Now... Just one effort.....One last effortIt's not so very bad yet, is it?...You can make it....Just walk....Please, walk....You have to get out...get out... get out" (Rand, *WTL*, 461).

She is broken but not conquered; she falls in the battlefield, but remains the same individual, unscathed by her enemy. She remains spiritually unconquered never surrendering. She till the end survives as dignified human being. Unlike Kira, Leo, disintegrates and is spiritually crushed. Kira sought to save his life but could not save his spirit. She refers to Andrei's as the one who helped in his own destruction by committing to the corrupt ideology of collectivism. This conflict of the triangular relationship is resolved with the spiritual triumph and physical death of Kira and Andrei respectively and Leo's spiritual defeat.

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