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AN ANALYSIS OF LOVE AND WAR IN ASYA (1991) BY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

- Autor/a – MARINA ASIÁN CAPARRÓS

- Tutor/a – JOSÉ CARLOS REDONDO OLMEDILLA

Summary

This work is dedicated to a great contemporary Canadian author, Michael Ignatieff, and more especially, to the analysis of his work *Asya* regarding two of its key themes: love and war. Throughout this project, different aspects related to Ignatieff's various facets shall be studied, since he has worked also as a journalist, offering us a valuable perspective of the most relevant and current issues. I will also analyze the relationship between his diverse journal articles, including the ideas he puts forwards on them, and the work of *Asya*, evaluating the influence that his familiar inheritance has also had upon his work. Later on, I shall provide a study of two of the most universal themes discussed in literature, love and war, through numerous theories and considering the value they have been gaining along history. The original text will be the base for the most significant quotations to exemplify what has been said previously. Finally, some conclusions are set out to finish with this work in order to synthesise the main ideas developed aforesaid and, above all, exalting this peculiar author.

Resumen

Este trabajo de investigación está dedicado a un gran autor contemporáneo canadiense, Michael Ignatieff, y en especial, al análisis de su obra *Asya* en relación con dos de sus temas clave: el amor y la guerra. A través del proyecto, se estudiarán diversos aspectos relacionados con las distintas facetas de Ignatieff, ya que también se ha dedicado al periodismo y nos ofrece una interesante y valiosa visión de los temas más importantes de la actualidad. Se analizará la relación que existe entre sus variados artículos periodísticos, y las ideas que en ellos expone, con la obra de *Asya*, valorando la influencia también que su herencia familiar ha tenido sobre su trabajo. Más adelante se procede a un estudio sobre dos de los temas más universales que se han tratado en la literatura, el amor y la guerra, mediante diversas teorías y considerando el valor que han ido adquiriendo a través de la historia. Esto se hace teniendo como base el texto original y además citando aquellas partes más significativas para ejemplificar lo dicho. Por último, se exponen unas conclusiones para finalizar con este proyecto que sintetizan las ideas más principales desarrolladas anteriormente y exaltando, sobre todo, la figura de este peculiar autor.

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Introduction

This work is about the novel *Asya*, written by Michael Ignatieff. In addition to devoting himself to politics and journalism, he has been developing his career as a writer with enthusiasm and providing a very interesting perspective about some of the most discussed topics nowadays.

From the very beginning of time people have been portraying their stories in literature through varied ways and dealing with issues that have been recurrent in the course of literary history. In *Asya*, Ignatieff is going to examine the two most dominant topics that are intrinsic to the human being: love and war. Considering that his grandfather had suffered the harshness of war and that he came from the old Russia, Ignatieff is a great example of an author whose own personal experience serves as a faithful and worthwhile view of a historical era.

Apart from his heritage, his constant concern with this new contemporary world we live in has led him to write many articles investigating philosophical matters about the human condition. Many of them are really significant regarding his literary works, which are the greatest exponent of his own ideas and thoughts.

Ignatieff's narrative is completely transparent, denoting his broad culture and a great handling of the diction. Thus in *Asya* we have a travelogue that takes us to another historical period narrated by a Russian girl who is going to make us experience the struggle and passion lived during the most terrible wars that this world has suffered.

Michael Ignatieff, the man

Michael Ignatieff is an amazing author to analyze since he represents the mixture of European and Canadian culture due to his racial origin. He was born in Toronto, Ontario (Canada), in 1947. His father, George Ignatieff, was a diplomat born in Canada with Russian heritage who married a Canadian woman, Jessie Alison. On his paternal side of the family, his grandfather was the Russian Minister of Education during the First World War. This Russian and European culture will eventually influence on his way of thinking and perspective towards the world.

He studied History at the University of Toronto and got his PhD at Harvard University. After working as an assistant professor of history at the University of British Columbia, he moved to London and started to write. Although he was a lecturer at many universities, he never stopped travelling and getting experiences that would help him through his career as a writer and a journalist. He also took part on television and radio as a broadcaster and as a critic, and also, he worked for the newspaper *The Observer* as a columnist.

Later on, he returned to Canada. As people started to see him as a possible candidate for the Liberal Party, he decided to consider about the possibility of entering politics. It was in this way how his political career started. He became the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada finally in 2009. Around this time he also wrote many articles related to human rights and to the recent Iraq's war, firstly supporting the American intervention in it and denouncing this participation afterwards. Some of this rough criticism appeared in popular media such as the *New York Times Magazine* and *The Globe and Mail*.

He never stopped writing, daring to combine his politician side with fictional works such as *Scar Tissue* or *Asya*, being both of them a subtle hint of his own biographical experience.

As a historian and a philosopher, he also wrote *A Just Measure of Pain* and *The needs of Strangers*, narrating social injustices occurring at the period of time when Industrial Revolution came up. But one of his most remarkable works is the biography he wrote about

Isaiah Berlin. Through this biography we understand the dimension of the influence this author had upon Ignatieff and his vision of the world.

His international studies have also contributed to explore the most relevant problems happening nowadays, paying particular attention to moral issues and condemnable actions infringing upon human dignity and basic human rights. Some examples of his international writings are *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* and a very interesting article called *Human Rights as Idolatry*.

Although he did not really consider the possibility of becoming a politician, he turned out to be very popular on this ground, having the complete support of his fellow politicians and collaborating with new and creative ideas to develop effective political programs.

But it did not seem to last for a long time. Two years later, in 2011, Ignatieff was defeated in the elections since the Conservative Party gained a majority in Parliament. Bob Rae replaced him and Ignatieff retired from active politics. This served him as a useful experience for the writing of his book narrating his political course, *Fire and Ashes: Success and Failure in Politics*.

After his adventures and misadventures generated by politics, he became a professor at Massey College, in Toronto, in which he has remained to this day.

The writer in the world

Michael Ignatieff has lived in many places around the world since his father was intended for travelling due to his diplomatic career. Therefore, Ignatieff has experienced a great deal of circumstances that have given to him an interesting and broad vision of the world. He has been engaged with human rights policies and has been a great defender of the uselessness of war and its worldwide destructive impact. As I mentioned before, he has reflected his points of view in several articles in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker* and *The Guardian* among others. Also, he has worked in BBC programs such as *Thinking Aloud* and *The Late Show*.

He reflected upon the American involvement in the war in Iraq, agreeing with this at first claiming that weapons of mass destruction should be removed and that it was necessary to finish with Saddam Hussein's government. Of course, given the human rights' policy written by Ignatieff, Hussein's violation of human rights is deplorable and was severely criticized by the Canadian author. He believed that American's purpose was to uphold its duty to protect other people's rights.

But he ended up criticizing even more the unnecessary military interventions from US, which are described as unsuccessful and unfair. He actually talks about the hypocrisy and inconsistency of America when it comes to human rights, when it is supposed to belong to the group of developed countries.

In his essay *The Lesser Evil Political Ethics in an Age of terror* (2004) he discusses the idea of democracy, especially what democracy means to American citizens. According to them, democracy would favour the majority of individuals, without taking into account the person oneself. This would clash with the idea of human rights protecting the essential needs and the voice of citizens that Ignatieff strongly defends. He criticizes that the government is above population when it should be the opposite. He is convinced that everyone should protect their rights and seek their freedom, opposing to coercion and any action that goes against human dignity.

But what gives name to this essay is the arguable point that Ignatieff exposes: the fact that there are wrong actions which could be justified in some cases in order to prevent a major disaster (that would be called a 'lesser evil'). This way, Ignatieff claims:

'...Consequences can matter so much, for example, saving thousands of people from terrorist attack, that it might be worth subjecting an individual to relentless— though nonphysical interrogation to elicit critical information. But this style of interrogation, which would push suspects to the limits of their psychological endurance, would remain a violation of their dignity. It would be a lesser evil than allowing thousands of people to die, but its necessity would not prevent it from remaining wrong.'

In other words, democracy should be sought whatever it needs to carry out although it attempted on the principles embodied in its concept. Ignatieff believes that we should try to draw a line between what is moral and necessary, and strike a balance between both main points minimizing the possible damage.

He also argues a very controversial point about human rights in the world. Ignatieff asks in an article from the *Humanity Journal* whether we should allow certain practices happen in the world due to diversity and cultural differences. But beyond that, he raises the question of responsibility of the governments: *'If the regime does not value human rights, are the rights of humans under their control simply negated? And who decides if crimes committed in, or by, a state are so horrendous that intervention is justified?'*

There are very strict and violent regimes that put into practice really cruel and harsh injustices against their population. The Canadian author agrees that it is a very polemical issue to debate since it does not only include a western point of view, but other countries' visions of the world. This could lead to inequalities and lack of freedom in some places where the concept of democracy is developed in a particular way.

In his article *Human rights as Idolatry* (2001) he leaves open the question about what human rights are. Are they a belief? Hope? Faith? What he claims as sure is that we need rights: *'Human beings are at risk of their lives if they lack a basic measure of free agency; that agency itself requires protection through internationally agreed standards...'* He defends the fact that policies should be created to protect these basic needs within the worldwide population. Ignatieff believes that human rights are essential for people to manage themselves and grow as individuals with their own mindset and opportunities to achieve whatever their goals are in life. We can perceive substantially here how Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) influenced him through his concept of 'negative liberty', defined as *'the capacity of individual to achieve rational intentions without let or hindrance.'*

But as a controversial topic that it is, this issue about human rights is not seen equally by everyone. Ignatieff states that there are other groups of people who understand human rights in a way that challenges the concept involving equality, justice and freedom. He also wonders what is naturally human. Do human beings have natural and innate features attached to themselves as creatures? He argues that we all tend to protect those who are close to us, not only as family members, also as ethnic groups of people or fellow countrymen who share common historical background. In this article, he quotes Avishai Margalit, who says: *'we need morality to overcome our natural indifference for others.'*

Although he has withdrawn from politics, he encourages his students to try this field, teaching them that it is not only about deceiving and betraying others, but about contributing to the community with valuable and helpful actions. He believes that it is necessary to adopt the attitude that gives Canada its own identity with its own rules, engaging vigorously in politics. In *The Globe and Mail* he affirms: *'We should be looking out for the ones who want to step forward, to get up in front of a crowd with a microphone in their hand and tell the people a story about their city, province or country that will make others follow them in the search to make life better for others.'*

In *Asya* we discover that a major part of this ideology permeates the story and we find significant references and reflections about this throughout the book. We can see how the concept of *human right* is virtually meaningless at war period and its deviation through

leadership and willing to control other people to protect their own interests. In essence, that is what war is, isn't it? Ignatieff portrays that necessity of human beings to remain together in the face of adversity and the desire to look after our dearest ones or those belonging to our race or ethnicity. We can witness it in many passages throughout the novel. *Asya* also leads to many questions Ignatieff has already pointed out. One of them deals with our human nature and our instincts, with our most primitive side. It also arises questions about love and all its variants, how such feelings can take place when characters are involved in that gloomy atmosphere but filling their lives with hope and illusion.

Regarding war, Ignatieff describes the harshness and brutality of the two World Wars, giving the reader a full account of the terrible atrocities committed. Also, related to his article *Human Rights as Idolatry*, he shows these crimes were allowed even though they are attempting on people's dignity and freedom, which is the opposite of what he defends in his article. This gives us the real flavour and leaves us with our heart shrunk in impotence and desperation, knowing that, unfortunately, this novel is not just fiction.

Literary Output

Michael Ignatieff is popular for his political works due to his involvement in politics. Nevertheless, he has written some fictional and philosophical books besides his non-fictional works. Among his fictional works we find some great novels. One of the first ones he wrote was *Asya* (1991). It was followed by *Scar Tissue* (1993), an exploration of the inner self of a philosophy professor dealing with the loss of her mother, a complicated marriage and a bad relation with his brother, a physician professor. *Charlie Johnson in the flames*, on the other hand, narrates the story of an American reporter who experiences how a woman is burned due to the conflict of Serbia and Kosovo and reflects on it throughout the novel.

One interesting book he wrote, and it is believed to be Ignatieff's first novel, is *A Just Measure of Pain: Penitentiaries in the Industrial Revolution*, in which he examines the English Penal system and how public punishments were replaced by a subtler way of imprisoning people directly related to the mind. Imbued with biting irony, he criticizes the new conception of being 'civilized'.

Moreover, Ignatieff wrote a book based on his family's experience when they lived in Russia in the 19th century and had to exile to Canada, *The Russian Album* (1987).

Among his philosophical books, the most remarkable work that needs to be mentioned is the biography he writes of Isaiah Berlin, *Isaiah Berlin* (1998). There, he examines with careful detail the life of this author and shows Berlin's experiences and mindset, very well reflected thanks to several interviews of him that, certainly, ended up becoming friendly in meetings they both enjoyed.

We also find *The Needs of Strangers* (1984), in which he describes how community is necessary to contribute to a peaceful state and the importance of the union of people.

He wrote a trilogy consisting on the following titles: *Blood and Belonging* (1993), *The Warrior's Honour* (1998) and *Virtual War* (2000). The first part studies the nationalist feeling through European countries, giving a direct criticism of the kind of nationalism we

find and how these people want to fulfil their purposes at any cost. The second part explores what the first part did but he widens the scope to other countries. Finally, the third part concludes with this trilogy stating how easily people resort to war rather than exploring other less violent options. The whole picture draws the dehumanization of the world nowadays.

Among his political writings, it is worth mentioning *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (2001), reflecting on what a human right may be and the achievements related to human rights in the world, and also *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (2004).

Asya, the Work

Plot and story

Asya is one of Ignatieff's first novel. Of course, knowing about his origin it is easy to unravel the meaning portrayed in the story of *Asya*. He was born to a White Russian family and he was educated into that culture himself. The fact that his father and grandfather were Russian and involved in politics has had a considerable influence on how this book has been written and how he describes certain feelings.

When reading *Asya*, we are not absolutely sure if it is a war novel or a sentimental one. It is the story of a Russian Princess who goes through both World War I and II, dealing with a number of entanglements and adventures which result in a whole intense life. She loses both her mother and father and works for a White Army hospital, where she meets a White officer, the one who would be the love of her life: Sergei. They have a short romance until he disappears due to the mess provoked by the Russian civil war, and she decides to leave Russia to find him. During her trip she realizes that she is pregnant from him and as she does not find Sergei, she raises her son alone. As time passes by, she has several love affairs while her son Nikki is getting bigger each day more and more. She meets Botynsky, who becomes her lover, and Razumkin, a doctor who helps her and loves her although he is not requited by Asya. One day Sergei appears in front of her door, evoking all kind of mixed feelings that move Asya for it had been years since they saw each other. Sergei, then, takes care of both Asya and Nikki, becoming a competent businessman. Although he is providing for his family, his constant and unjustifiable absences make Asya feel suspicious and lonely. Also, as Nikki grows up he comes out in favour of the extremist right group of politics, clashing with his father's political ideas.

One day, Sergei leaves to Poland and nobody knows of him again. Nikki leaves to serve the Germans too, leaving Asya accompanied by Botynsky and Razumkin. She meets a new friend, Gaby, who will help her during the World War II. Asya leaves to England, where her brother Lapin lives, and leads a tranquil life there. She gets back in touch with an old

friend from her own town in Russia, Nick, and both live a complicated romance in the midst of the war.

Gradually, she discovers that she has been surrounded by betrayals and lies from the people she had trusted the most. Botynsky and Razumkin worked for the French Intelligence Service, providing useful information to them. She ends up going to Russia in her old age with the hope of finding Sergei there. When she arrives to her town, she gets a mixture of feelings which make the reader feel truly emotional, and that way this touching story gets to the end.

The Work and its Background and Setting

European Context in the Interwar Period

Asya tells the story of a Russian girl but it is not only set in Russia, it also describes the Paris and London of the middle of the 20th century. The writer portrays Russia showing a masterly grasp and knowledge of it, passing on to the readers the passion he feels about his land.

After the devastating consequences of the World War I, European major forces became poorer and disorganized. Those countries that needed to pay debts had to borrow more money, making their debt even greater and debtors found impossible to achieve the conditions imposed on them. Germany bore the brunt of all it, since the Treaty of Versailles was seen by many highly hard to accomplish. This, together with the American Great Depression and the subsequent collapse of banks in the whole Europe, created a really dark atmosphere which made impossible to overcome economic obstacles.

At this period of time patriotism arose in European countries. This feeling of “belonging” and “protecting” people’s own lands was needed under the shadow of a bigger terror coming. There were some people who were tired of monarchy and wanted to state their rights and freedom. Others, however, believed that monarchies contributed to the

preservation of a more peaceful system. Conflicts began between different groups of people with different political ideas. Socialists and defenders of peace supported wars as long as they had the intention of defending people's nations but they did not agree with those with the purpose of colonizing other countries and enslaving them.

Europe, then, was divided into two extreme political ideas: the extreme left and the extreme right, and this led to a constant internal conflict in each country. These most extreme political sides sought to spread all over Europe. Communism and Fascism began to gain more power and followers, becoming the two major sources of strife and despair.

Italy, Spain and Germany were the main examples dealing with these opposite ideologies.

The former had Mussolini, who promoted the advance of Fascism. Spain, for its part, was drawn towards a civil war that ended up in a dictatorship. The latter, being the most controversial one, had Hitler as a new leader who wanted to conquer Europe, exalting the Aryan race and having the intention of eliminating the Jews.

We should not forget about the Soviet Union, where Communism expanded rapidly bringing a considerable instability. These radical ideologies led to the Russian Civil War and the consequent end of the Romanov dynasty: the Bolsheviks, on one hand, known as the Reds, and the Whites, formed by many opposing groups. Some of the main characters in *Asya* take part on these two different sides, showing the extreme attitude people may adopt against one another due to political issues. The Red Army won the war and, of course, after the World War I, the Allies felt reluctant to collaborate with the Whites, and avoided to make agreements with them.

Two main opponents fought for the leadership of the Communist Party after Lenin's death, Trotsky and Stalin. Stalin finally won this position, creating his own policies but without accepting any kind of opposition. This sparked bloody revolts in which many people died.

In the meantime, Britain and France, also impoverished, had a period of a relative stability that finished with the explosion of another war within this polemical and almost intolerable political context.

Asya also faces another war, having been exiled to Paris first and London later. Paris is portrayed with dynamism, reflecting moreover a tense atmosphere hanging over the city and the whole Europe.

Characters

Asya

Asya's name is Anastasia Vladimirovna. She is actually a princess, princess Galitzine, and she was born just in the turn of the century, in December in 1899. She is described as an exuberant girl at a very young age. Thin and tall, she has beautiful black hair contrasting her pale skin and expressive grey eyes under her large eyelashes. She is very determined and truthful to her beliefs, which she never abandons no matter what. Growing up in Russia, she becomes a nurse early in her life, changing the course of her destiny. Although she has enough reasons to give up, she stands firmly against adversity and faithful to her convictions. When she arrives to France alone, she is a grown girl becoming a woman in a different cultural background. Her good humour and enthusiasm saves her from the surrounding gloomy atmosphere in such a terrible war time. Whereas people were not ready to face it, she seems to be apt to confront any situation. At first, her bravery and courage are probably derived from the lack of awareness about the situation. But soon she will prove her audacity through many adverse situations.

Asya's main problem or, in other words, main weakness is her love for Sergei and all she struggles to get to him – in vain – after having left her country to search him. This weakness is shown when he reappears and gives her a new life based on lies and secrets. She changes after the deceptions of Sergei: the weight of all her way until that moment starts being too heavy for just one person. She is completely alone, although some people claim to be by her side. The only ones who really remain loyal to her are Gaby and Josette. The rest of them die or betray Asya somehow, for what she feels really afflicted and heartbroken. However, she always keeps her good mood even in the worst situations, even

at death's door. Asya does not need reasons to go ahead, she loves life and fights to make it worthy. At her old age, she does not seem to regret anything. Her attitude remains impeccable, keeping her ethical values in such a changing world. It is then when she realizes that she belongs to two periods of time: the old world and the new world, with everything that entails.

Sergei

Sergei is a very important and complex character in *Asya*, since he is going to trigger a chain of events crucial to this story. Sergei is in charge of one of the White batteries above Kislovodsk but he gets hurt and is taken to the nearest hospital, in which Asya was working. He does not give much detail about himself, but we learn that he had left everything behind when joining the war. He feels hopeless but in a ways, seems to show conformity with the situation given. His attitude towards life and his own duty astonish Asya. Sergei feels attracted to her and starts falling in love with her. He seems to dislike showing any type of emotion so we, as readers, do not know what he is exactly feeling or whether he is what he appears to be or not. Sergei disappears and Asya tries to find him at any cost without knowing that he had got imprisoned. He had been to many countries and been through famine and agony. He comes back thin and pale as if he had not seen the sun in years. War gives him a great sore that never heals. But his reunion with Asya in Paris seems to provide him the tranquillity he yearned and the chance to rebuild his life with her and his son, about whose existence he did not even know. Sergei and Asya marry and buy a beautiful house in Paris, where they begin to have a really well-off life due to Sergei's new businesses.

Asya starts having the sense that he was hiding things from her, things related to the big amounts of money he was earning. Sergei is not a man of words, but more a man of action. He never specifies the kind of job he was performing nor gives much detail about his whereabouts, which make him a man of mystery. Moreover, he begins showing sympathy for the Reds, the Bolsheviks, something that confronts him with his own son, supporter of the Young Russia and the Rightist movements. This leads to an unbearable conflict between them, pushing Niki to leave his house.

One day, Sergei goes to a trip as many others, and he disappears again. But this time, he never comes back. Later on, we find out that he had been serving in War as a very influential commander during all his life, not retiring until reaching a significant age. We see he is capable of leaving everything behind to fulfil his purposes and fight for what he believes. But this leaves us with a question. Is it like that from the very beginning? Does he come back to France because he had another business there and Asya was just ‘the other part’ of it? As we never know what is on his mind, these questions cannot simply be answered; we can just perceive the reality from what he shows through his actions.

Lapin

Asya’s brother. Organized, polite, considerate, he was always behaving prudently and taking care of his loved ones. Asya did not understand him most of the times, but they got along well. They always had each other. Lapin ends up living in London but visits Asya in France and welcomes her to his house when she is abandoned and sick. He marries but it does not work and since it turns out to be a childless marriage, he grows old by Asya’s side.

Uncle Dimitri and Aunt Olga

They are the only family left for Asya and Lapin. Genuine people, they are a childless couple and help their nephew and niece with their tasks while they are still young living in their mother land. They had a great connection, to the point of finishing each other’s sentences. Before Asya leaves Russia, they try to stop her and make her see reason but they surrender to Asya’s stubbornness. Both of them are forced to migrate after the Russian civil war and settle in France, where they start a new life. This enables them to help her with her child and serves as a relief since they remain together as a family. They live their lives calmly until World War II breaks out and Dimitri dies of a heart attack in an internment camp. Olga feels desolate and miserable but at least, Asya comforts her and stays close to her from time to time.

Razumkin

He is the doctor who attends to her when she gives birth to Niki in Paris. Descent from Russian people, he was born in Paris and had lived all his life there. He is one of the first people Asya knows when she arrives to France and, knowing that she had helped as a nurse in her mother country before, Razumkin also gives her a job in his friend's private clinic. Too fat and asthmatic to serve in the war, he is dedicated to his profession at hospital. But there is more: he lives a double life, having illegal businesses which are unknown to Asya and people around him. He helps other people get rid of their mistakes and gets a big amount of money for it. Razumkin is well-off due to his illegal earnings and he offers to help Asya and Niki, but she always refuses. He falls in love with her inevitably, which makes him jealous of Botynsky, who does have a chance with Asya. He knows that she would never put her eyes on him the way he wants. He is not precisely an attractive man but Asya considers him one of her most loyal and trustworthy friends, although he keeps his secrets from her.

Botynsky

Botynsky is portrayed as a very tall and thin man, with long limbs and an untidy look. He is Russian but very well adapted to the new country. He lacked money so he lives humbly according to his necessities but always trying to help Asya in any way he can, just as Razumkin does. He also falls in love with her, so he tries persistently to please her. At first, he feels frustrated because he knows that Asya is not interested in him at all, but he does not stop being around trying everything he can to get her attention. Finally, they start a relationship based on companionship and trust for Asya, although he does feel intense things for her. They break up at the time Sergei reappears in Asya's life, leaving him desolated, but still remaining as a good friend to the family.

Niki

Niki is the living proof of Asya and Sergei's love. Thanks to him, Asya overcomes all the difficulties arisen when she was a lonely newcomer in France. He grows up under the protection of his mother but without the comfort of a father. However, he is raised with the help of Razumkin and Botynsky, who represent a very important role in his life, especially the latter. He does not want the new life they have when Sergei turns up suddenly, although it is the kind of life he should have had from the very beginning. In a period of political instability, youth was confused and could be easily misled, which was dangerous since they were indeed the future of their countries. Niki is influenced by some of the new friends he makes when he goes to Germany to continue his studies and, this way, he ends up supporting 'Young Russia' when he becomes older. This confronts father and son, who back up extremely opposite ideologies, and it separates them forever. Asya's life is torn apart when he is forced by Sergei to leave the house and she loses contact with him. Later on, she finds out that he dies in the middle of the World War II.

Gaby

Gaby portrays the image of explicit sexuality. Through her clothes, we can get a clear idea, but it is especially her behaviour towards other people what makes her look so seductive and feminine. Men feel desire for her, and, as she knows that perfectly, she gets advantage of it in subtle and not so discrete ways. She always wears red lipstick and fashionable clothes that called everyone's attention. Gaby seems to be cold and ready for anything, sliding from one group of men to another just to get what she wants. She even sorts men into different types, depending on their level or probability of 'marriage' in order to give her security and a stable economic situation. Gaby knows things Asya does not know about her own husband but she remains loyal to her, although she keeps all the secrets for herself. She is constantly showing her strength and optimism in that dark period, making a 'situation full of chances' of the war, and a way to meet new people who allowed her desired future.

Nick

He is Asya's neighbour in Kislovodsk. Nick and Asya's families were very close and they met when they were children in their town. Nick's father was the only person who attended the funeral of Asya's father. They did not have much contact since Asya was ten years older than him, and then their lives followed different courses. Nick ended up going to war after Asya left Russia, but their paths crossed again in London. He was then Captain Nick Isvolsky, having achieved many feats and become an honourable man. They feel attracted to each other and get involved in a love relationship when she leaves her household in France behind and believes that she lost Sergei forever. Despite the fact that he is married, Nick does fall in love passionately with her, although Asya's feedback was not as intense. When he is transferred to other country to fight he promises to get back and marry her after getting divorced. But he never does. He kills himself in a car accident caused by himself, but nobody except his son finds out the truth.

Josette

Josette is Gaby's mother. She appears to be somewhat cold at first, but she remains by Asya's side when she is really sick. Josette looks after her without asking any question despite the dangerous times then. She believes that Asya is innocent and although she knows about Razumkin's secrets, just as her daughter does, she decides to keep it from Asya. She did her best to protect her, keeping her safe in the house, far from suspicions and police, who come often asking about Gaby's whereabouts. Asya never knows that Josette is Gaby's mother until it is too late, but she feels forever thankful for all the care and attention she received from that beloved woman, who risked her life to save Asya's.

Major themes in *Asya*

Besides the two themes this essay is about, there are some interesting themes also in *Asya* that are worth to talk about. They are recurrent throughout the book and although they are collateral subjects, they are really interesting in general terms.

The idea of destiny

The idea of fate may vary depending on the culture, but it usually refers to the idea that some things are predetermined and meant to be in the way they happen. In general, Russian people believe their lives are conditioned by some unknown supernatural force. As Christian Lysvågs says: *'In Russian eyes the basic and undeniable fact of human life is to be conditioned and in the hands of an otherness, i.e. destiny, history and God.'* The belief in destiny is a consolation to those who need some motivation to go on with their lives and strength to overcome tough situations. When people feel pain in their lives they can always justify it on behalf of destiny, and if they need to excuse some kind of behaviour or situation, destiny would be also the answer to that.

We see several allusions to destiny throughout the novel, but the most important one is that related to Asya's feelings. Asya's loss of her lover pushes her to the adventure of her life, and she believes that she has to search for Sergei because it is her destiny: *'[...] But she was certain that the time had come which she had imagined so long before in her mother's Japanese sitting room, the moment when she must hurl herself at her fate.'* (page 36). Asya is convinced that she would find him since it is the only man she had ever loved and she believed they belonged to each other. We can sense here the two interlinked ideas of love and fate, which are portrayed in literature very frequently, especially cultivated in Eastern Literature.

The concept of time

The question of ‘what is time?’ has been echoing since time immemorial. Although ‘time’ can be defined in scientific terms, it would still be very imprecise if we want to express the effect it has on human beings. Time is directly connected to emotions and experience, to people’s inner world. At the same time, not all people perceive time in the same way. We all have our own psychological rhythm of time, and it is completely individual and exclusive. But, unfortunately, it is something human beings are not able to control in order to extend or reduce as they please. Time passes by and we are mere victims of its willing. In literature, we have as many reflections and approaches of this concept as authors exist. We see references to time persistently, trying to decipher its meaning, its significance, its recurrence, and all possible questions about it.

Through Asya, for example, we notice the despair it provokes to her when she finally comes to realize about its inevitability. *‘Until this moment, she had thought that her life stretched before her, like the river through the trees, broad and strong and endless, and now she knew that it did not, that time was not hers to use as she wished, that time was racing ahead of her own beating heart.’* (page 14). Asya, as a child, was not aware of the fact that time is unstoppable, that she would have to face to become an adult one day and take substantial responsibilities in her life.

Another emotional moment at the end of the book describes how Asya comes back to her country, to the city of her infancy, almost forty years later.

The changing of people through the age and distance

Human beings are not just animals who remain unchangeable no matter what. We are what our circumstances are and what other people make of us. And, of course, we are what our own choices reflect. In Asya we see how characters change through time due to the different obstacles and situations they pass through. They become people who turn out to be complete strangers. We live this through Sergei’s reencounter with Asya after so long. They met in the freshness of their youth, when they had a long life ahead, a life full of plans and expectations, never imagining what was to come. After losing contact, Sergei had been

imprisoned and working roughly to get out there, almost dead in life. He came back more experienced and mature, also harsher and colder in a way. War had cost him his happiness and yearning to live, leaving him hopeless and completely sunk in darkness. However, he found Asya in Paris and started a new life he never thought he would have while working and fighting in the shadows of Solevetsky. Asya could not avoid the feeling of not recognizing him, despite the fact of trying to do her part to look at him in the same way. But he was not the same, he changed.

Asya changed too. She had to let her dreams fade once Sergei disappeared. She thought he had died and the love she once felt would never light up her life again. But there was so much to be thankful for at times like that, that Asya stopped seeking perfection to make room to a more simple life in which she did not expect big things for she would never have them anyway.

Gaby is also a character who reflects this change. The very indestructible and strong woman who never feels an ounce of vulnerability, ends up falling in love and marrying Captain André. When he returns from the battlefield weighing just forty kilos, Gaby explodes full of rage. Asya had never remembered having seen her like that before, so bereaved and exhausted. Now, Gaby cared for someone for the very first time in her life, and the rest seemed to be pointless. Gaby does not see war as a show now, not as a 'chance' to make her life more entertaining or profitable. Actually, she comes back down to earth and she witnesses what war is with her own eyes.

The idea of passion

Passion drags most of the characters into a hectic spiral that turns into unexpected events. Asya's love for Sergei is full of passion and moved by the naivety of her youth, and this will determine her life forever. She decides to follow him in a mad frenzy, ending up leaving her country and exiling alone. As readers, we cannot help but ask ourselves what would have happened if she had stayed in Russia, if she had not been drawn by that passion and, somehow, craziness. But, again, people felt things with great force and intensity, they were made vigorous because they could never know if their end would come the following day.

Passion is portrayed through love, but we feel Asya's passion towards life too when she goes ahead alone and tries to live it at its fullest. She does not give up despite having many reasons to do it; she constantly shows her vitality and enthusiasm, two things that will make her rejuvenate in her old age. Whereas people accepted their lives with apathy and consternation, she goes outside full of life and hope. Gaby portrays this type of mindset more broadly. Her wit and her lust for life take her farther and show that everything is possible if the attitude is right.

Exile

At war period, generally, people did not migrate voluntarily. They were trying to escape from oppression and execution, and most of them had to leave without planning it or even luggage to carry with them. Exile was not easy: many people had to adapt themselves to a different cultural background, had to deal with other races they were not accustomed to and had to construct a new solid base on which they could make possible a new life far from all that was familiar to them. In most cases, they had lost people already or were abandoned, which made it even tougher. Definitely, it was a very hard situation for many. There was so much loss and so much grief that it seemed to be impossible to go ahead and provide for a family, having such a heavy burden on them. Nostalgia and loneliness were striking. However, it has been said that we all keep a secret strength in our inner self for when we need it at extreme situations, and all these people had to use it because they did not have anything else to hold onto. At least, some of them had dreams to pursue and expectations of a better life, but there were those who had abandoned any hope and gave up.

Asya does not belong to the latter group. Since she has a new occupation being a mother, she is motivated and settles for very little. She seems to take her condition as émigré in a very good way: *'She was immune to the émigré's disease. Indeed, hers was the opposite syndrome.'* (page 57). She faces the new circumstances with good humour and energy. Razumkin feels amazed at such attitude and believes that she would be ready for everything.

People belonging to the same race or cultural background liked having meetings in order to introduce themselves to newcomers and remaining together in a foreign land, which would soon become their own one. Botynsky introduces Asya to this Russian community in Paris and they meet in cafes or attend social events together. There is a passage in the book that shows this perfectly when Botynsky takes Asya to Café Voltaire, where all people are Russian and are sharing some vodka while listening to the great singer Plevitskaya, wife of General Skoblin.

After Plevitskaya, a Russian poet takes part in the event, talking intrinsically about exile and we get the feeling that he is relating his own experience. He actually recites line about death, about the futility of life, about decadence: *'I am carrying my soul to be slaughtered for the dinner of impending years. Rolling like an unwanted tear from the unshaven cheek of the square, I am probably the last poet.'* (page 107).

Many artists were exiled too, which was a source of cultural enrichment. That way, their own experience and inspiration mixed with different artistic contributions from the country they arrived to, they produced really creative and wonderful masterpieces.

Also, because of this situation, many people felt that they belonged nowhere and they lost their own identity. This happened especially with the successive generations due to the variety of cultures. Some of them were born from different ethnicities and gave way to very interesting mixtures. But it is the sense of rootlessness and instability added to the family disintegration what made these people feel so emotionally affected.

The river

There is a certain parallelism between the river Asya describes when she is young and the one she finds when she comes back to Russia almost eighty years later. Young Asya gives us a picture of the river as her own and produces a warm feeling on the readers in such a cold environment. She uses the adjective *'silver'* and the landscape is full of light. It was isolated, full of wild nature surrounding, suggesting almost a magic atmosphere. For her, the river means life: *'She loved it when the frozen world began to move, when the torrent of life reclaimed the river for its own.'* (page 4). Asya's feelings towards the river were real

and it probably serves as a metaphor for Asya's vitality and intensity. However, old Asya, gives us a very different picture of the river when she is back to her home town. Many years have passed and now the landscape is occupied by houses and families, so that magical place she met has disappeared. Now she finds people bathing and having picnics there. Readers realize about the passing of time when Asya tells her companions how much that place had changed, how nature grew unrestrainedly without human presence and remembers nostalgically how she and her brother used to go fishing there. The river now represents the time going and never coming back again.

Analysis of Love in *Asya*

People have tried to define love since ancient days trying to give a detailed explanation of it. It has not been easy, of course, and many questions have arisen.

Some have opted to seek explanation in science. Bartels and Seki (2004) state that *'romantic love is correlated with deactivations in brain areas associated with assessment of other people's intentions and moral judgment.'* Others have found more mystical approaches to love. There are even some who consider love to be a simple literary creation. Some scholars have concluded that love is something social and that we all are influenced by social conventions and rules. But there is another group that defends that love is natural and instinctive, emanating from individuals' psychology and mind. In some cultures, it is believed that love does not even exist, which is even rarer.

Love is usually defined in dictionaries as 'a very strong feeling or affection towards someone who you are romantically or sexually attracted to' (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary). However, some other definitions include that love also means that 'a person's happiness is very important to you, and the way you show this feeling in your behaviour towards them' (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary).

It is also said that there are different types of love. We have platonic love, family love, romantic love, friendship love, and so many more, all of them entailing the same significance. But what about the love we feel for a pet? Or companionate love? What happens with self love? Or even idealisation? All these matters lead us to the ancestral question: What is love? Ann Beall and Robert J. Sternberg (1995) claim: *'A frequent argument for love's constructedness has been that "there is no definition that describes love throughout the ages or across cultures."'*

Of course, the concept of love varies depending on the culture. Some describe love as an amazing and essential feeling, while others think it is a frightening and useless emotion that blind people and make them act irrationally. If we consider it to be a cultural thing, then none of them is more right than the rest, they just perceive love as it has been traditionally understood over time within that culture.

Love has been one of the most recurrent themes in worldwide literature, since it is a human feeling experienced by all of us at some points of our lives and authors have reflected its complexity in a great number of titles. However, some authors have exaggerated its effect on people by exalting qualities such as intensity or by magnifying the epic side of love. The real and rational part of it has been overshadowed, and love seen by ordinary people in their daily lives has been portrayed vaguely throughout the literary tradition. This may have influenced on the concept people acquire of what is love exactly and may have prompted them to pursue something that does not maybe exist.

In this novel, we can examine love through the main character, Asya, and the way she describes her emotions and feelings. It gives us a more realistic approach attached to a turbulent period of time in which life was as fragile and trifling as any other thing then.

When she was a child, Asya believed in love at first sight. She said she would be sure when she found 'the right one': '*When I meet the man I will marry, I will know immediately*' (Ignatieff's *Asya*, page 13, Vintage Edition, 1994)³. This could be probably interpreted as a naïve approach due to her youth, although many people believe in love at first sight. In fact, in Western literature it has been a common theme, believed to be dated back to troubadour times. This kind of love can be related to attractiveness and passion, based on the fact that it would take just the first minutes of contact to determine if two people would have a successful relationship. Nevertheless, there are some arguments against love at first sight that prove that it is impossible to fall in love with somebody when you do not know them enough. It would imply a great dose of idealisation and imagination that moves away from the more realistic concept of love conceived nowadays.

Asya's mother adds this realistic touch when we find out about her life and what love has meant to her: '*I have not lived my life [...] but you must live it, child. You must. No one must stop you. Don't let anything stop you. Not love, not your husband.*' (page 14).

We find out that she married Asya's father, Vladimir, too soon and her life stopped belonging to her anymore. She had been to Japan and had a very cheerful life there, a life she used to remember and relive through her memories every time she talked about her many anecdotes and experiences. She felt with such vivacity those times that her husband always knew deeply inside that he took her happiness away when they started their life

together. Marriage is supposed to entail certain duties and this was a very deep rooted belief within society, especially at that time. Wives should be obedient and please their husbands, manage the household and, of course, take care of their children while husbands work. This has been the traditional family model. That is the new life for Asya's mother after the freshness of Japan, and she ends up feeling trapped in it.

Love and marriage do not have to be necessarily linked, and we learn that the relationship that Asya's parents had was not based on any type of passionate love but, instead, companionship and trust. Anyhow, Asya did wish to find that romantic love, and she sure does.

Later on, she meets Sergei, a lieutenant who gets hurt in the battlefield and is looked after by Asya. They soon become close and she starts feeling new and undiscovered things to her until that moment. It was a hopeless period of time in which everything was being torn apart for Asya and she finds in Sergei the strength and 'the piece of life' that was taken away from her when she lost her parents and saw the devastation of war. During that time, emotions were intensified and carried to the limits since the word 'tomorrow' might not exist for any of them. That is why, when Sergei disappears, Asya is determined to look for him at any cost, putting her life in danger eventually. Although warned by her uncle and aunt, she decides to leave in the midst of the chaos, surrounded by explosions and soldiers shouting and running towards the enemies.

She believes that Sergei is her fate. She knew that it was the correct thing to do, that it was part of her destiny and she had to stick with it. However, she will have to face a new life alone, with nobody to count on, having lost her dearest ones and leaving the other part of them behind despite the fact of not being sure about her reencounter with Sergei. This type of love could only be possible in a period of time like that: the context of war, the breach in both of their lives, the breaking of family connections, all together makes possible to illustrate this story. Love was as intense as to raise someone to a limitless happiness or to stomp them with the most extraordinary pain or desperation.

As time passed by, she started to surrender and give a chance to other people, just meeting them for the sake of having men's company. Deep inside she knew that she was not in love with any of them, and that is precisely what she pursued: encounters with men who would

fade away the very next day. We can see a very important change in Asya's attitude at this point of her life. What at first was desperation to find real love and follow her fate, became a resignation and distress when she came to realize that it just happened once and it would never come back again. She had two options: go on with her life and open to the world in a new country starting from the beginning or staying true to a phantom, which seemed pointless to her after so long. Through Niki, Sergei's son, she tries to cover that absence, knowing she has still kept part of her lover by her side.

She stopped searching that idealised love. Asya confesses that to Botynsky, the man who turns out to be her new 'lover' according to her new way of seeing it: *'I've left perfection behind. And that is why I am happy'*. (page 48). She feels comfortable and accompanied with Botynsky around, especially when it comes to Nikki. Raising a son is not an easy task but Botynsky gives them all his attention. Razumkin, the doctor who helps her giving birth to her baby, is another loyal friend facilitating her life. They both insist on competing between each other to please Asya, although Razumkin assumes his passive role in that kind of 'love triangle'. Asya is not in love with any of them but she does spend intimate time with Botynsky, and they both establish a particular relationship in which Razumkin seems to be present most of the time. They three, together with Niki, and regularly also Olga, Dimitri and Lapin, form a single happy family.

It is not a common concept of family to have, but at that time, people who belonged to a common country and had to exile to other completely different place, tried to keep together. In such a rough moment, they were rebuilding a normal life far from their customs, which they tried to respect, and far from their people. So how could there be room for love? This was really hard. Many people lost their loved ones or were just lonely with nothing on their hands. These people felt the dread of an uncertain future in which they did not have any prediction of success. Asya saw this everyday working at hospital, but she went ahead thanks to her baby.

Maternal love is something ancestral. Mothers always feel moved by their maternal instinct and would make any kind of self-sacrifice for their own child. Asya, despite the feeling of emptiness and dispossession, in spite of being completely alone and having left everything

behind, gathers all her strength to take care of her child. That bond created between the mother and the child is said to be one of the most powerful things for a human being.

In a world turned upside down, Asya was happy and established already until Sergei appears again giving her unclear feelings. She sees such a big change in Sergei that she is not really sure about her love for him. She had spent the last years of her life near Botynsky and she knows more about him than about her old lover. Here, we see how love can become merely a reflection of what it used to be. These two people were completely strangers to each other, however, they share a son and they decide to try to go ahead with their relationship. They finally marry but just because it seems to be for them the correct thing to do.

Sergei starts working in the import and export business but keeps a lot from Asya, who was very suspicious. If we come to analyze the situation, Asya does not feel happier now that Sergei is back in her life, quite the opposite.

She and Sergei have two really opposed personalities. She is passionate and warm, taking advantage of every second of happiness that life provides her. On the other hand, Sergei is not really an enthusiastic person, he never was. Now he had been through so much his personality traits were aggravated and it was hard for her wife to interact with him at times. *'She once implored him: 'Why can't you just live? Why can't you just be?''* He could not help it, that way of being was attached to him and it would be forever. Aunt Olga realizes that Sergei and Asya do not completely fit together; she even mentions the fact that he has changed a lot and she fails to understand what Asya sees in him. Nonetheless, love is characterized by its inexplicable nature. Asya knows deeply inside that Olga is right, but it seems as if she wanted to continue that kind of 'charade', getting more and more aware about the fact that she does not know who the new Sergei is. In a certain way, she is lying to herself. That self-deception is all she has to hold onto.

When Sergei leaves again and, this time, forever, she feels a mixture of feelings that flip between consternation and betrayal: *'Love could no longer be counted on to ensure her self-deception'*. She even feels guilty for having let him manipulate her life and do his own will with his own laws to which Asya was never a party. The walls built between Asya's love for Sergei and herself fall down giving way to reality and pointing out that everything

might have been a lie from the beginning. The thought of it gives her chills and the heavy feeling of having been blind and silly, letting all that happen in front of her.

Although she gives love another chance later on, with Nick, it is not at all the same kind of feeling she had felt once towards Sergei. After all she has been through, she sees Nick as an incentive to fill her life with joy again and share her vitality with someone. She also feels somehow connected to him because they belong to the same place back in Russia. This brings her back memories she thought lost and restores her life in a way after being abandoned and having lost Niki. Nick's feelings for Asya are deep but she does not feel the same. He feels amazed by her and admires her for the woman she is, however, she sees him as a brother: *'You are like a brother'* (page 209), she confesses. Asya loves having the life she lacked all these past years next to Sergei, next to a man who acted more like a passive machine than any other thing. With Nick, she has an ordinary life full of those little details that make it complete and meaningful.

Love has different connotations depending on the person who perceives it. Nick is happy with Asya by his side, doing simple things without luxury or great possessions. He has experienced war too, but he achieved victories and came back from the horror safely. He does not seem as tormented as Sergei is, showing always a cheerful attitude that Asya had missed in other men. Asya feels comfortable with Nick because they share the same lifestyle and crave the same. So, indeed, this couple works out perfectly but their feelings do not correspond. It happens the same with Razumkin, who is completely in love with Asya, although he and Sergei betray her, keeping important issues from her when she had been honest and trustworthy. That feeling of betrayal grows deeply inside her progressively, creating a wound from which she would never recover: *'She felt old now, wounded and depleted. All her losses lay there beside her.'* (page 172).

When Nick does not turn up again after promising her, this betrayal becomes pain and sorrow for she had decided to believe in someone again. Love and confidence are two fragile things that do not always go hand-in-hand. In any case, Asya does not feel cheated because she loved him but because she puts her trust on him and he throws it away by not letting her know at least that he did not have any intention to come back.

By the end of her life, she looks back at everything, at all the things that happened and the people coming and going, all the feelings and experiences, and wonders about it all. *'It was a catastrophe to have lived so long. They were all gone now[...] It was senseless to have outlived all her reasons for living, and yet life went on and on, and she sat there waiting for the end to come. But it didn't.'* Which is even more heartbreaking is the sense of time passing by inevitably. She once felt that she had her whole life ahead but now, extremely quickly, she was reaching the end of it. She wanted to fall in love, to go outside and to prove herself what her mother told her once, that she should not let anyone stop her from living. But it is at this point of her life when she feels truly deceived, especially by Nick. When she finds out that Nick did meet Sergei when he was away in Poland, a powerful disappointment strikes her. Asya never stops loving Sergei, but when he leaves her she needs to kill what she feels for him in order to continue her life with the minimum degree of pain possible. She was told he died but he is no longer a dead phantom; Sergei is alive somewhere else or, at least, he had been for some longer time. As if time didn't have passed by, she decides to look for him again and goes back to her mother land, Russia. With the help of Nick's son, she gets there, excited to be home and full of hope to find the one supposed to be the love of her life. She would have never expected to go back to her country. Everything was so changed. She belongs to the era of the Tsars and has lived two World Wars. She is a whole story herself.

It is very impressive the shock she has when she is back to her village. Smiling, she says: *'The same. Still the same.'* But she does not find Sergei. The question rolling around the readers' minds should be: was she naïve or wicked? *'No, Peter was not so sure. He would never know what she willed herself to believe, what she allowed herself to ignore, what she suspected and the drove from her heart'*. (page 302). A good answer to that messy question would be to say that she was just in love. She would believe whatever her lover told her and she would be happy thinking she was not being lied to. Perhaps she was blind to the facts she chose to be. When people are in love, they often lose the track of reality or the perception of the truth. Truth is a very relative and subjective concept; everyone has its own truth. Sergei had his and Asya chose her own one. Although this does not mean that Sergei was being truly honest to her. When it comes to love, sometimes people consider it is preferable to hide those things displeasing their loved ones so they do not suffer. What is

sure is that there was much more going on than what appeared to be, and Asya is probably aware of it no matter how much she pretended she was not. Life was already a dangerous adventure at that time. But love was present somehow in all the characters, since it is a universal feeling, flooding their lives with emotion and joy.

Analysis of War in *Asya*

The conflict of War is almost as old as its own etymology. The word 'war' comes from Old English *wyrre* and *werre*, and it meant 'to confuse'. This nearly represents the concept we have of war today; it does imply confusion and perplexity, although it bears within itself so much more.

Despite being such an ancient event, war was not invented by anybody else but human beings. There are those who defend that war is in our belligerent nature, something universal that is innate in every of us. But then others would say that this means to admit that we are not rational enough as to avoid such a terrible practice and we are just blinded by our animal instinct.

War has been defined as 'a conflict carried on by force of arms, as between nations or between parties within a nation; warfare, as by land, sea, or air.' (dictionary.reference.com). But what happens to those conflicts occurring at prehistoric times when nations were not even invented yet? It could be understood then as conflicts between communities to get their basic needs covered or to protect a piece of land occupied by a group of people already. The sources of war have been varied through history. There have been religious wars, political wars, economic wars, ideology or thought wars, and many more. But it is simple, all of them seek the same goal: to have power over the rest.

All these conflicts have the same components: violence, threat, death, loss, fear, emigration, loneliness, devastation, destruction, and uncountable more. There is not the least sign of anything positive in any of these words. However, wars have followed one another over the course of history. Of course, the complexity of these disputes has been increased as time passed by. What started as a mere fight among villages, it now encompasses the desire to take over other people and ways to show power and influence. At prehistoric times, men tried to project this power through force and violence, committing atrocities which we may qualify as 'primitive' nowadays. But how much have we changed since then?

The struggle of war is not only reflected in the battlefield. War involves other types of abuse and violence, such as raping, genocide, torture or even the killing off an ethnicity,

which is the major form of brutality shown. It may sound really incoherent the fact that human beings kill one another just because they disagree or have divergent ideologies. So, as we see, things have not really changed since those prehistoric times: violence is still involved and promoted by human beings. Certainly, soldiers do not mutilate or eat their enemies, but the same madness is perceived. Not only do soldiers suffer the consequences, but civilians do too, economy and even geography being affected as well. For when we talk about war, we usually think of physical assaults, it also has a very deep psychological effect that strikes human mind. Actually, traumas caused by the war affect people in a higher percent than physical injuries do. Traumas turn out to be incurable in most of cases, causing depression and distress for a whole life.

Countries become indebted forever to pay war reparations, even ceding parts of their lands as payment. Some nations never recover from war, getting poorer and poorer and having their people migrating to other emerging countries.

Having seen all that devastation, famine, fear, the miserable conditions under people had to live: how could anyone be completely healed from that? How could a person overcome the sight of death?

Still, there are people who defend a warlike attitude, believing it is a necessary resource in some cases. This leads us to the question of whether war can be moral or not. There are people who justify it, and they think it is a moral duty depending on the case. This viewpoint runs in direct opposition to Pacifism, which defends that peace should be always considered as the best and unique option over any other form of violence and injustice. In any case, contrasting ideas will always arise, dividing people into opposing groups determined to fight against one another to defend their position or to reach their interests at any cost.

Thus we have the European context given in *Asya*, in which we can distinguish two leading political forces: communism and fascism. We can see even a Civil War in Russia in which two different communist groups fight against themselves: the *Whites* and the *Reds*. Moreover, this had an international impact over other nations since it happened during the World War I followed by a second one. *Asya* precisely examines this impact on a Russian family and the consequences and meaning that war carries with itself. Through her we live

the grief and unavoidable struggle suffered by people who become dispossessed and damaged forever.

Asya loses her parents at a very low age, left alone with her brother Lapin and the Ourosoffs, her uncle and aunt. She knows that: *'From an arid place that had opened up inside her, a soundless voice cried: I am alone'*. (page 25). Sadly, she is thrown into the world and has to learn to take care of herself and earn her living. The Civil War erupts and Asya witnesses the horror of it in the first person working at hospital. Ignatieff narrates it giving a fairly detailed account of the smells, the views, descriptions of people's faces, frightened and scared. Children starving, awaiting for a plate of food and dying of famine, stand everywhere tearing Asya apart. Everything was uncontrolled. Chaos and noise filled the hospital rooms and crowds of people run to protect their lives.

Asya has the chance to escape that destruction but she would always carry a deep scar on her soul. When leaving to France in the steamer *Orient Star* she remembers: *'[...] Asya could suddenly see, distinct and inefaceable, each one of her losses: Praskoviya, Olga and Dimitri, Isvolsky and his little boy...'* (page 41). She laments while the steamer moves further and further away to another unknown land.

Once in France, Asya is friendless and about to give birth to a child whose father is probably dead. But she would find her way through all the obstacles positively.

Asya is lucky enough to find two good friends who remain loyal to her and her family, but not everyone shared the same fate when they migrated. Also, Asya, as a woman, did not go to the battlefield and suffered the violence or see the moral decay embedded in there. Nevertheless, Sergei is the true portrait of this dehumanization of war.

When he reappears he has changed physically, he looks pale and much thinner. He had been travelling around Europe, working in extreme conditions, day by day under the shadow of his old life. He, as any other soldier, had a life prior to the war; he had parents and had played at the park or gone to school. Then, war takes his life away. Sergei feels more dead than alive, he loses the notion of time and despair seizes upon his soul. The man he used to be was left behind to give way to this new Sergei whose look comprises the fear and disasters he had lived.

Asya notices how much he has changed; she is the only person who can really tell since she has met Sergei previously. It was more a moral issue, a mental disease taking over these people. They would never forget what they had lived: people killing other people in cold blood on behalf of a nation. *'Brother fighting brother. It suddenly seemed pointless'* (page 69) narrates Sergei to Asya. It was almost about a fratricidal war. Violence breeds violence, and injustice breeds more violence. They had such deep-rooted ideologies – all of them put into their heads by their leaders – they believed their task was a duty to fulfil. Although all of them had a purpose, it might provide a straightforward vision of the extreme cruelty provoked by the intolerance and disagreement of human beings. They were sacrificing themselves by killing their own brothers just for the sake of enacting their leaders' wishes. They felt indifference about all these deaths, and which is even worse, they felt complacency. World War II shows a faithful picture of the limitless inhumanity of men. Such massacre could only be led by a leader like Hitler, whose attitude towards war was clearly defined. Asya lives this opposition through her own husband and son: *'Her life had now split in two. Her husband traded with the Soviet regime, while her son devoted the time left over from his studies in German language and literature at the Sorbonne to working at the offices of Young Russia on the rue de Colisée.'* (page 123). These groups were being born in a period of confusion and turmoil. A new world was emerging and with it, new ideologies developed from the discomfort of people and the desire to obtain better conditions for their lives. These were really extremist and sworn enemies among themselves. Sergei was on one hand convinced that Soviets should be helped and supported whereas his own son defended the extreme fascist ideology led by Hitler. This controversy would take them far from each other to the point in which they do not even want to be related in the eyes of people. Both of them feel shame for what the other one believes and denigrate their practices. They are a clear reflect of society: the voice of dissent and discord echoed in many houses separating the members of many families and becoming unknown people among themselves.

War was the real catastrophe, but the most controversial period was the Interwar period, in which all these ideologies and beliefs, all the desires and anxiety to change things were rooting deeply in people. During this time, Asya's life is succeeding since she lives in great conditions and Sergei provides her with all the comforts imaginable, although they were not

obtained in a very honest way. However, Europe was on the brink of another war, a war that would definitely change the course of history.

World War II erupted in 1939. That year, Sergei is transferred to Danzig, where he has to take a shipment into the right hands. This is the last time Asya knows about Sergei until much later. Soldiers abandoned the household in their way to war and they would never be back probably. Of course, families tried to handle their absence as they could, but it was really painful to see their loved ones leaving without the certainty of their return. Most of them chose not to think about it in order to keep themselves sane without giving in to madness. They could not help but feeling powerless and guilty. The sense of emptiness became intense and permanent making life incongruous.

Asya did not know then that it was the last time she would see Sergei. Her son knew perfectly about Sergei's plans: '*He has gone to fight for Stalin*' (page 137), Niki answers to Asya's statement: '*He has gone to fight for Poland*'. She has that puzzling trust on Sergei because she still believes he is her fate. She could only believe what he told her, anyway there was no possible way to find the truth at that moment so she awaits patiently until he returns. War was everywhere now, and the most central European countries were taking part on it.

Asya gets really ill during the first year of war. Thanks to Razumkin and all the medical advances she recovers. In ancient ages, people died in wars from disease and infections, which became mortal injuries. However, the development of drugs and medicine and their immediate procedures saved a lot of lives in the most recent wars. It is ironic that people spend years and years managing to find cure for disease, virus and afflictions in general but then they kill one another in an open field without hesitating. But, of course, they had also spent time and money on developing warfare and new and more efficient weapons for this matter. Another human incoherence to add to the list.

War brought suspicions and mistrust. People belonging to the opposite regime or ideology did not want to be caught by the enemy, so many of them falsified their identities or hid in illicit places to save their lives. This led to constant investigations and very uncomfortable police persecutions. Police did not have a pacific role in this matter, more the contrary, they used violence and other means of torture to get what they wanted. They worked under the

authority of the national leader and they were allowed to employ these strategies, which were physical and also psychological.

Throughout the book, we see how Gaby is searched by police, who visit her place very often demanding to speak to her. People who were up to something could be allowed to be scared. But there were many people who were innocent and they were being murdered too.

Most of these people did not even care about politics nor followed any particular party. People began feeling psychological fear. This was a subtle way of dehumanization, but as devastating and of longer duration than the physical side.

It was so intense that people lost their capacity to express themselves even in their confidence circles or think with lucidity. People did not trust anyone and ethical values were ghosts hanging around in the middle of disorder and a dehumanizing atmosphere. Social conduct was terribly influenced by the prejudices that other people established, distorting reality to the point that they believed these could be right. These became rigid and firmly rooted in many people, leading them to support a particular group they were akin to. Moreover, as these principles grew steadily in people, they began feeling extreme hate and desire for revenge. This kind of psychological process was the most dangerous one since it is the one pushing civilians into the streets to give up their lives for a cause of senseless nature.

Asya has to hide too because she had no reliable documentation, but she is only sought due to her husband's activities. Sergei was a kind of spy so he was being searched by his enemies. However, Asya is helped by Lapin to reorganize all her papers and be free from any undesirable encounter. In the end, she has nothing to hide herself and nothing to cover up related to Sergei since she was not engaged in any of his illicit practices or activities.

Back to London, Ignatieff shows us the portrait of a calamitous place where there is no room for life or hope. Asya describes the place: *'On the other side of the same street, not a single house had been left standing. The entire row had been flattened and left a tangle of blackened beams, wrenched windowframes, pulverized bricks and mortar [...] She believed that such a fate, neither wild nor exuberant, but cold and precise like a surgeon's knife, was poised above her life and the life of her child.'* (page 197).

London had been bombarded and looked like a complete wound and ruinous. Houses were destroyed, streets were filthy, there were ashes suspended in the air, craters in every corner... The city was full of phantoms of death corpses lying with frightened looks in their eyes. The picture of it was overwhelming.

Through Nick we also know about the awful hardship soldiers passed through while they were away. They looked thinner and emaciated, weakening everyday more and more until many of them died of starvation. *'Threw up every meal for a week. Must have lost twenty pounds. Haven't had a square meal in three months. Do you know what they're eating in Murmansk? Seal. I saw men skinning and boiling rats.'* Relates Nick to Lapin.

When the war ended, economic and civil losses were uncountable. A really high percent of the infrastructures was completely destroyed or damaged and millions of monuments suffered a lot due to the perpetual bombings. World War II left a scar in Europe and the whole world that would never disappear. But the worst thing is the mark left in people's minds and memories.

The over-exploitation, the lack of basic needs, torture, repression, everything had a tremendous impact on everyone who lived the war – whether in the first person or through other people's lives. To greater and lesser degree, they all were affected. This self-depreciation and the disdain for human values shown by so many groups could not be easily forgotten. Some people felt very disturbed after the war, suffering from chronic depression. They would never be the same, as we see with Sergei and most of the characters of the novel.

Asya witnesses all this horror and through her, we can perceive the insignificance of life after so much pain and loss. Back to Russia, to the starting point of the novel, we sense that there are still shadows of the war, shadows of what once was her homeland. Although lands and economy recovered or, at least, can get better, human mind withholds the terror and darkness of a period of time in which life was just nothing.

Conclusions

After undertaking research on Asya's author and examined his articles and what they mean, we could conclude that his book denounces and puts forward many of his ideas related to human rights and human nature itself. Love and war are two universal themes, discussed perhaps in different ways, in literatures of the rest of the world, and they converge in this novel creating a story full of mixed and emotional feelings. Throughout *Asya* we have been able to experience the cruelty of war and the infinite violence and barbarity that human beings can produce. But also, we can observe what war implies and the sadness and rootlessness that people feel when they are exiled, how war affects more psychologically than physically and the destruction of millions of human lives. Moreover, we learn that love serves as a barrier against the desolation of this dark period that helps the characters to rebuild their lives with even more strength and determination, relying themselves on the only feeling that keeps them together. This brief study about love and war, their diverse approaches and the ones we find in *Asya*, helps us to understand the author and his concept of 'cosmovision' of the world a little better. As a Canadian author with Russian heritage, he represents himself the crossing of two cultures and their blending.

Michael Ignatieff reflects the reality of a time of changes and confusion for the most part of the European population with such a detailed account that it immerses the reader in the main character's life, transporting him to the cold Russia to take him later on to France and England, in the middle of the World War II. Thus *Asya* shows us the philosophical side of the writer, who meditates upon concepts that he discusses in his journal articles related to the relevance of governments' justice, individual freedom and the need for protection.

As a journalist and politician, Ignatieff has enjoyed extensive popularity but the truth is that his ability as a fiction writer, his skill and style make him an author that is certainly more than worth stopping to read.

Conclusiones

Tras haber indagado sobre el autor de *Asya* y haber examinado sus artículos y lo que ellos afirman, podemos concluir que su libro denuncia y expone muchas de sus ideas relacionadas con los derechos humanos y la naturaleza humana en sí. El amor y la guerra son dos temas universales tratados, aunque de forma distinta quizá, en las literaturas de todas las partes del mundo, que confluyen en esta novela dando lugar a una historia llena de sentimientos encontrados y emotivos. A través de *Asya* hemos podido experimentar la crueldad de la guerra y la infinita violencia y barbaridad a la que el ser humano puede llegar. Pero además, podemos observar a lo que la guerra conlleva y la tristeza y desarraigo que sienten aquellos que son exiliados, cómo esta afecta más psicológica que físicamente y la destrucción de millones de vidas humanas. También aprendemos que el amor es una barrera ante la desolación de este oscuro periodo que ayuda a los protagonistas a rehacer sus vidas con más fuerza y determinación, apoyándose en el único sentimiento que los mantiene unidos. Este breve estudio sobre el amor y la guerra, sus distintos enfoques y los que encontramos en *Asya*, nos ayuda a entender un poco mejor al autor y a su concepto de ‘cosmovisión’ del mundo. Como autor canadiense descendiente de familia rusa, él mismo representa el cruce de dos culturas y la herencia de ambas.

Michael Ignatieff refleja la realidad de una época de cambios y confusión para la mayor parte de la población europea de forma tan detallada que casi hace sumergirse al propio lector en la vida de la protagonista, trasladándole a la fría Rusia para llevarle más tarde a una Francia e Inglaterra inmersas en plena segunda guerra mundial. Así, *Asya* nos muestra el lado filosófico del autor, que reflexiona sobre conceptos que él mismo debate en sus artículos como periodista relacionados con la importancia de la justicia de los gobiernos, la libertad individual y la necesidad de protección.

Como periodista y político, Ignatieff ha gozado de gran popularidad pero lo cierto es que su habilidad como escritor de ficción y su destreza y estilo lo convierten en un autor contemporáneo en el que merece la pena detenerse.

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