

Debates on Education and Livelihood in Anna Karenina

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“And our society has so shaped itself that the more the people work the richer the merchants and landowner will become, while the [peasants] will remain beasts of burden forever. And this system must be changed” (86).

-Nicholas Levin, Anna Karenina.

Abstract

Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, published for the first time as a complete novel in 1878, is a landmark in Russian realism. Tolstoy's interlacing of the land and labor ties, identification of the line between essential and extravagance and emphasis on bucolic issues in Russia of the 1870s, at best represents the political and cultural tension of the period. Tolstoy ropes in the dissension on Education and livelihood through a few aristocratic families in Moscow and Petersburg to the Russian peasant class and strikes the dichotomy between the city and the countryside. Levin's storyline runs parallel to Anna's plot to contrast the unsophisticated with urban and concrete with the arbitrary and mundane. The Great Reforms, European influence and proliferation of education invited new perspectives towards matrimony, divorce and the role of women and the laborer class in Russian society.

Keywords

Russian Realism, Superfluous Man, Countryside, City, Nihilism.

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Tolstoy investigates the relationship between individual and society, education and livelihood by bringing up university wits like Levin (Kostya), Nicholas (Levin's nihilist brother), Oblonsky and philosophers like Koznyshev (Levin's half-brother). The marked contrast between prodigal and flamboyant Oblonsky and unsophisticated and rustic Levin becomes forthright when the latter compares the restaurant oyster meal to the parsimonious meal of the countryside lot. Unlike Oblonsky, his fellow people, "try to get over [their] meals . . . to be able to get on with [their] work" on time (35). Moreover, these working people don't grow their nails too long like Grinevich to restrict any obstacle to their vigorous toil on ranches. Levin counts himself as an aristocrat having a responsibility towards his estate and can fight for his ownership rights, unlike Oblonsky who considers counting trees in his grove beneath his rank before selling it to Ryabinin. Levin and Oblonsky are the typologies intrinsic to Russian verisimilitude which marks the discrepancy between the livelihood of the city dwellers and the humble country folk.

On the other hand, Nicholas is a specimen of Ivan Turgenev's "superfluous man"¹, like Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, who happens to have a university education and is compassionate to the cause of peasants in Russia. His wish to start a "Locksmiths' Association" which would give access to the "instruments of production" to Russian laborers remains at best a distant possibility as he dies an invalid galloping for life (86). Despite his aristocratic genealogy and formal education, Nicholas remains:

"an 'ineffective idealist', a hero who is sensitive to social and ethical problems, but who fails to act, partly because of personal weakness, partly because of political and social restraints on his freedom of action." (Cited in Chances 112)

¹ A term that became popular after Turgenev's *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850) and is applied to a particular character in Russian literature, who has acquired a Western education, is a nihilist and has his roots in the Russian countryside. Levin's perception of livelihood and Russian tradition and the significance he attaches to hard work and devotion to his land comes from a sense of accountability and his conviction in the rights of the landed gentry. This stands in close contrast to Koznyshev, who was bewitched by nature's bounty in the countryside; it is a place of retreat from philosophical work and the cosmopolitan world of Moscow and Petersburg. But for Levin, handling a scythe and mowing in the fields himself is not merely a getaway from the city's unremitting dinner parties and futile toilette but a way of life in itself. He contradicts Koznyshev on almost every contemporary issue in Russia – medical health care, zemstvo meetings and the utility of education for peasants. But his indifference to these social questions

comes from his first-hand experience of working with them. Unlike Koznyshev's bogus interest in the Russian peasantry, Levin both admired them for their fortitude and ridiculed them for their negligent behavior. Levin works as a spokesperson for Tolstoy when the former ideas for running his estate and supplying favorable working conditions to farmers give rise to another significant debate in the novel i.e. utility of education for Russian peasants. Levin is uneasy with the idea of educating the peasant class while the landowner Sviazhsky favors it since European schooling of the people resulted in rational farming. Similarly, he believes, that schools in Russia can contribute to their "material and moral development" (333). However, Levin contemplates the economic aspect as well, where schools in no way can eliminate their destitution. While Sviazhsky merely evangelizes philosophy, Levin is a philosophical man who has read Mill and other contemporary European theorists and can trace the question with more profundity and by the socio-economic condition of the peasants in Russia. Levin's new hay-pitching machine breaks but the problem is not with the technical failure but rather the intention of the peasants to enforce new methods of production is questionable.

Thus the introduction of new machines and modern equipment runs against the conventional farming methods of Russian peasants and they break into the hands of Russian farmers not because they are rustic and unrefined, as Sviazhsky premises, but because Russia is no Europe and "laborers are only willing to work . . . in the way natural to them" (338). Hence, reforms that demand rapture with the Russian "elemental force"² are bound to collapse no matter what (Morson 158). Levin is impressed by the methods of farming employed by one peasant family where he stayed on his way to Sviazhsky's house. They used a modern plow and improvised their antiquated farming techniques accordingly, hence reform, in this case, became conceivable with time and experience only. Along with farming, Levin decides to write a book where the entire system of farming shall be examined by the people of their native land.

Another important theme that operates parallel to that of peasant education in *Anna Karenina* is that of women's education. At Oblonsky's dinner party, so-called scholars like Karenin, Koznyshev and Pestsov pertain to the question of women's emancipation and rights. After John Stuart Mill publicized *The Subjection of Women*, this became one of the considerably debated topics in Russia. Karenin, nonetheless, vocals Tolstoy's ideas about women's emancipation and equality of the sexes by believing liberation through education is an awful outcome. Tolstoy almost spurned the concept of equivalency between the sexes and discredited the idea of women's independence. Tolstoy sustained the postulate of his contemporary

Nikolai Nikolaevich Strakhov where the two would approve of the place of women which belongs to home alone. Tolstoy creates a high-society woman in Anna, who commits adultery but ends up making her character pitiable to allow the reader to comprehend the consequences of moral dereliction and transgression. The counterweight of Anna and Vronsky's turbulent illicit love affair is the happy marriage of Levin and Kitty where Levin's picture of his future wife as a "holy ideal of womanhood" is symmetrical to Tolstoy's beliefs about women. That is why Tolstoy creates Kitty as a foil to adulterous, passionate but learned Anna where he successfully captures the disastrous consequence of a woman's education and transgression from home and heart. By weaving the ideas of marriage, love, pastoralism and culture together, Tolstoy would rather have a woman sheltered within her gender roles than break free from a patriarchal society to seek life of liberation.

² This Elemental force according to Tolstoy is central to *Anna Karenina* and is a brutal entity when its outcome is contradictory. Here, it is Russia's love for its culture and tradition that has its firm roots in the land itself. For detailed analysis, see Morson 154.

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