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The Image of the Russian Society during the Revolution in Alexei Tolstoy's Novel *The Ordeal*

Alexei Tolstoy's writing is primarily focused on the personalities and destinies of his characters caught in the turmoil of various historical events. In particular, his trilogy *The Ordeal* traces the development of the Russian society during the critical years of WWI, the 1917 revolution and the civil war. Covering one of the most intense periods in the history of the Russian state, this trilogy portrays the dramatic nature of social struggle, spiritual evolution of its heroes and the crucial changes happening in the country. This article will analyze *The Sisters*, the first part of Tolstoy's trilogy, which was written in emigration in 1921. The novel starts with pre-war events of 1914 and ends with the approaching of the end of Civil War in the spring of 1920. Published as a separate edition in 1922 in Berlin, the novel reflected the author's insights and perceptions of the radical changes underway in his native land.

The basic focus of the novel *The Sisters* is the search for personal happiness by its main characters - Dasha, Katya, Telegin, and Roschin - during the violent and tragic events of the First World War and the revolution. The novel also portrays the destiny of the Russian intelligentsia and their choice in life during the revolution: "As many other writers of the senior generation, at the time of writing the novel, Tolstoy was more interested in the attitude of the intelligentsia to the revolution, rather than the documented

historical image of events.”¹ The novel shows the transitional period from the bourgeois structures in Russia to the Soviet system. In the process, traditional way of living is destroyed and beliefs of many people are changed. The trilogy is filled with sharp life-and-death conflicts, dramatic struggles and collisions, deep crises in both public life and the destiny and psychology of individual characters.

The first chapter of the novel *Sisters* may be viewed as an introduction to the plot, where St. Petersburg is expressively described as a bourgeois society with decadent morals: "The spirit of destruction pervaded everything. These were the days when love with all its emotions, was regarded as commonplace and old-fashioned, when people felt not love but desire... Girls concealed their innocence and married couples were not faithful. Destructiveness was considered a sign of good taste, neurasthenia a sign of refinement. Fashionable writers who seemed to have sprung from nowhere in a single season, preached these doctrines. People invented vices and perversions for themselves - anything, rather than be considered a bore.”² As Galina Smirnova states in her critical work *The Trilogy of A. Tolstoy - The Ordeal*: "Against this background proceeds the life of the intelligentsia - lawyers, poets, philosophers, journalists, artists, public activists - all those who considered themselves as the blossom of the nation, the intellectual elite of the country.”³ Depravity, binges, wine parties, scandalous processes in court - all this is colorfully represented in Tolstoy’s description of St. Petersburg: “From glass and cement were erected banks, music halls and skating rinks, as well as luxurious restaurants whose patrons were stunned by music, dazzled by gleaming mirrors, and the spectacle of half-

¹ The History of the Russian Soviet Literature, Volume 2-ed, Publisher "Nauka" Moscow, 1967, p.215

² Alexei Tolstoi, “Ordeal” a trilogy, Book I “The Sisters” Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.29

naked women, and overwhelmed with champagne.” Describing the raging life of St. Petersburg during the pre-revolutionary period, Tolstoy shows moral and political disintegration of the Russian society, examples of bourgeois decadence, and the life of various layers of society at the turning point in Russian history

The plot of *The Sisters* revolves around the destiny of the Bulavin sisters, Ekaterina and Dasha, and their history of love, joy, and suffering. Tolstoy highlights their nobility of character, inner strength, sincerity, and beauty. To Dasha, who moved in with her sister, the new and unusual life conditions seemed interesting, fascinating, but also difficult - she felt divided, reflecting on the life of people surrounding her and her place in life. Katya’s idle and empty life style that consisted of receiving visitors, shopping, talking about art and politics, and going to exhibitions and to the dressmaker’s generated a feeling of melancholy and dissatisfaction: "...she lived surrounded by these people and she submitted to this standard way of life.”⁴ The sisters painfully experienced the inadequacy of life, unwilling to reconcile with the unhealthy, corrupted conditions of bourgeois milieu with its platitude, and idleness. Dasha noticeably differed from Katya in that she was ardent, strong, courageous, and independent. What she needed was an active, energetic involvement in life. Her soft and feminine sister was different: "Affectionate, kind, too sensitive for this life, she had clutched at all sorts of trivialities in her attempts to find an anchor, to save herself from utter destruction, but there had been nothing and nobody to help”⁵ Dasha became acquainted with guests at the literary Tuesdays at Nikolay Ivanovich Smokovnikov’s home, where various progressive people

³ G. Smirnova, *The Trilogy of A.N. Tolstoy "The Ordeal"*, Publisher "Hudozhestvennaia Literatura" Lenengradskoe Otdelenie Leningrad, 1969, p.25

⁴ G. Smirnova, *The Trilogy of A.N. Tolstoy "The Ordeal"*, Publisher "Hudozhestvennaia Literatura" Lenengradskoe Otdelenie Leningrad, 1969, p.33.

met to discuss the possibility of a democratic revolution. Among them were well-known artists and the famous poet Alexey Alekseevich Bessonov, who made an impression on Dasha because his personality was so strikingly different from others. There was a lot in him that was mysterious and unusual. For example, the decadent Bessonov did not believe in the future of Russian creative intelligentsia saying, “There is no such thing as poetry. Everything has been extinct for ages - people, art, everything. Russia is mere offal, with a flock of crows hovering over it at a crow’s banquet. And all who write poetry will find themselves in hell one day.”⁶

When Katya’s and Dasha’s lives suddenly got caught up in historical events, such as WWI and the revolution, their habitual ways of bourgeois existence were changed. They came to an understanding of the sense of life, which made them closer to the working people because they, too, went through pain and suffering like everyone else. After starting her work at a hospital, Katya managed to overcome her disgust for dirt and pain: “This self-mastery was in itself a joy. For the first time she has felt in touch with life around her.”⁷ Working at the hospital, Katya experienced pleasure because she could be useful to people.

Tolstoy clearly shows a spiritual conflict in the Russian intelligentsia through the characters of the lawyer Smokovnikov and the poet Bessonov and exploring their attitudes toward the revolution. Smokovnikov, Katya’s husband, who considered himself a liberal and a patriot, is complacent, sentimental, engaged in self-flagellation, assuring others that the revolution is an immediate necessity and that without it Russia will simply

⁵ Alexei Tolstoy, “Ordeal” a trilogy, Book I “The Sisters”, Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.98

⁶ Alexei Tolstoy, “Ordeal” a trilogy, Book I “The Sisters”, Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.43

⁷ Alexei Tolstoy, “Ordeal” a trilogy, Book I “The Sisters”, Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.198

suffocate. Smokovnikov drinks champagne to the future revolution. His life is noisy and busy but, at the same time, it is empty and senseless, like Bessonov's life. Eventually, however, Smokovnikov proves to be a hypocrite and an empty, trite person. On learning about his wife's infidelity, he starts a long conversation "about family values becoming worthless, about corruption of morals" though he himself is having a relationship with a widow. He also promised the position of the Minister of Justice to one of his friends because he knew that, after the revolution, the so-called "public figures" would take advantage of the fruits of victory and take hold of the key positions in the future government. Smokovnikov is a typical representative of those levels of the Russian society, who after the February revolution became new leaders of the state and members of the Provisional Government. The end of Smokovnikov and Bessonov was disgraceful. Smokovnikov was killed by a soldier after flying into a rage and calling upon soldiers to wage war "until the last victory". Bessonov was strangled by a former soldier - deserter.

Doctor Bulavin, the father of Katya and Dasha, was a liberal in the past and, after October revolution, became a counter-revolutionary White Guard officer who hated the Russian lower classes. He dreamt of the punishing sword going down on the "gang of the robbers managing Russia" and believed the Bolsheviks were about to destroy his country and force the people to forget their history. To prevent this from happening, Bulavin called upon the ministers of foreign governments to give wide and generous support to the "lawful representatives of the people" in Russia.

These representatives of bourgeois decadence are shown opposite the character of Ivan Telegin, a simple-hearted, courageous man, and a passionate patriot of Russia. Through his love of the native land, Telegin comes to a recognition of the need for the

revolution. An engineer at a Baltic factory, he was a kind and dependable individual, devoted to his loved ones and respected by everyone who knew him. Telegin was dedicated to his job and treated the workers with loyalty and fairness. When the war broke out, he enlisted in the Russian army. While understanding the anti-humanistic nature of the war Telegin participated in it because of his patriotic duty. The character of Telegin “embodied” the spiritual growth of hundreds of thousands of lower class people. The genuine and sincere Telegin is opposed to the hypocritical, superficial and pretentious bourgeois intelligentsia: “He, with the decent morals, acts as an antipode to the pretentious Bessonov.”⁸

The approaching revolution was felt by all characters in the novel, who see this life-changing event through the prism of their own views and emotions. Bessonov wrote, "Night is descending upon Russia, the curtain is rising upon the final tragedy, the God fearing people, assuming a terrible mask, will be gloriously transformed like the Cossack in Gogol's Terrible Revenge into the fighters against God. A nationwide celebration of the Black Mass is being prepared. The abyss is opened. There is no escape."⁹ In a similar vein, Smokovnikov observed, "The people are rotting alive. The whole of Russia is eaten up by syphilis and vodka. Russia is decaying. Blow on it and it will crumble into dust. Such a life cannot go on... we need the sacrificial pyre, purification by fire."¹⁰ Telegin argues, “You can't think how foolishly and inefficiently everything is done here. It's incredible! God knows what reputation we Russians are making for ourselves. It's a shame, a disgrace! Just look – a talented nation, with vast natural riches - and what have we to show for it? It's nothing but a set of insolent clerks! Paper and ink instead of life.

⁸ The History of the Russian Soviet Literature, Volume 2-ed, Publisher "Nauka" Moscow, 1967, p.219

⁹ Alexei Tolstoi, “Ordeal” a trilogy, Book I “The Sisters”, Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.86

You have no idea the amount of paper and ink we waste.”¹¹

An especially strong internal crisis was experienced by the White Guard officer Roshchin as his ideals collided with reality and the world. Scholars suggest that "through Roschin, Tolstoy shows disintegration and depravity of the White Guard army which is alien to sincere patriotism. The artist has drawn real images unknown to the scope of the historical conflict of old and new Russia.”¹²

The First World War is presented in *The Sisters* as a senseless massacre, and the ending is permeated with a sense of destruction and violence: "The old life had come to an end – it seemed as if Russia was being stirred and muddied with a gigantic ladle, and now everything was in motion, pressing onward – all were drunk with the intoxication fumes of war.”¹³ “Arriving at the battle zone, the thunder of which could be heard miles away, the carts and troops seemed to be swallowed up. Here all that was living and human came to a standstill. A place in the earth, in a trench, was assigned to each – a place in which to sleep, to eat, to kill lice, a place from which to shoot into the fine mist of rain till the senses reeled.”¹⁴

Illiterate Russian lower classes started to understand they were "only mute cattle meat in this massacre, in the scheme of the officers.” Defeats on the fronts, a shortage of rifles and shells, confused orders and insults of the officers caused discontent and resentment of soldiers, intensified by the rumors of betrayal "at the top”. By the spring of 1917, all hopes for a fast ending of the war have disappeared. The overthrow of the Russian autocracy changed nothing: the Provisional government proclaimed the policy of

¹⁰ Alexei Tolstoy, "Ordeal" a trilogy, Book I "The Sisters", Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.92

¹¹ Alexei Tolstoy, "Ordeal" a trilogy, Book I "The Sisters", Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.103

¹² The History of the Russian Soviet Literature, Volume 2-ed, Publisher "Nauka" Moscow, 1967, p.220

¹³ Alexei Tolstoy, "Ordeal" a trilogy, Book I "The Sisters", Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.162

war to a victorious end and soldiers at the front began to show open disobedience to their officers. Eventually, the war which had continued for almost three years was finally over having destroyed millions of lives and families, many of them in the countryside. Bad news from home reinforced the unrest of soldiers even further, resulting in an imminent danger of mass desertion. The first part of the trilogy ends with the description of the events that occurred in Russia in the summer 1917. Thus, pre-Revolutionary Russian bourgeois society is represented by Tolstoy as decadent, in the state of moral and spiritual decline and against the backdrop of important political events. The author describes this society through the eyes of the main characters and by way of opposition between the bourgeois class and the lower class in Russia.

¹⁴ Alexei Tolstoy, "Ordeal" a trilogy, Book I "The Sisters", Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p.162

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