

## Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* | Serfdom and Generation Gap

Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* is a book which, among other things, carefully tries to view the institution of serfdom and the shape it takes with the changing times in Russia of 1858. The book, published almost a year after the emancipation, zooms in on the final years of serfdom and attempts to portray its inevitable as well as impending abolition in many different ways.

Stifled in the ubiquitous air of discord which shrouded an entire nation, the piquant wafts of poisonous strife imbued itself in every fiber of the Russian life. The omnipresence of dissatisfied peasants, disagreeing intelligentsia, a widening generation gap, an oppressive state apparatus, and a low national morale plagued the Russia Turgenev was living in. Amidst such turmoil, Turgenev chose to write a book in which he did not shy away from revealing the filthiest lesions his country had been afflicted with and hence has given us a glimpse of the repulsive institution of serfdom.

Serfdom, the roots of which can be traced to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, ensconced itself in Russia for more than eight hundred years. The official estimate shows that 10.5 millions of Russians were privately owned before the Great Emancipation. Alexander I, despite creating a new section of society called "free agriculturists" by extension of land owning rights in 1801, was unable to liberate the serfs. Also, serfdom found the required state support to perpetuate itself for a long time owing to the role it played during the military conscription which ultimately contributed to the victories during the Napoleonic Wars. It was only during the reign of Alexander II, a student of the humanitarian liberal poet Vassily Zuchovsky that the Emancipation of serfs took place. He was of the view that "it is better to liberate the peasants "from above" than to wait until they won their freedom by uprisings "from below".

*Fathers And Sons* has a certain reflective and retrospective vantage point in viewing the master-serf relations as it was written just *after* Emancipation and is set in a time just *before* Emancipation. Interestingly, the novel, despite its name, begins with a depiction of a man and his master, not a father and a son.

We come to know that Nikolai Petrovich has liberated some of his serfs and divided his farm among the peasants. However, even after freeing his serfs he decides not to “entrust them with any jobs involving responsibility” This is a brief, though a telling hint that relations between Nikolai as master had not been as cordial as his relation as a father, a brother or a lover. Also, the fact that he uses French to refer to Piotr in his presence speaks volumes about the air of mistrust breathed in by both serfs and their master.

This class antipathy is also seen in Yevgeny Vassilyich’s estate where he is shown flogging a peasant. It is also questionable whether Nikolai Petrovich frees some of his serfs out of his own free will ( and if so, is it because he is a good master or a bad manager) or that he is forced to do so owing to the socio-political developments. We are told that his property is in a bad shape as Bazarov himself says:

“I’ve been all around your father’s establishment. The cattle are inferior, horses mere hacks...and there’s no doubt that these peasants are taking in your father properly” ( Turgenev, 149)

Moreover, the debates on Emancipation had been inflaming Russia before 1861, during the time when the novel is set. When Arkady asks Nikolai the reason behind selling their forest, he replies that it “ is to be given to the peasants." and they will “pay their quintrent *someday*."

His words smack of the anticipation of Emancipation which many sections of the society had developed by 1858.

Nikolai’s move of granting a certain degree of freedom to his peasant then becomes a practical move of a landlord’s desperate attempt to prevent his estate from falling apart. However, Nikolai claims to have “made arrangement for the peasants” and in Yevgeny Vassilyich says:

“I have put my peasants on the rent system and given my land to them for land cropping. I regarded that as my duty.” (Turgenev, 186)

Therefore, we can safely assume that landlords have been bathed in a slightly favorable, if not saintly light as far as the novel is concerned. This however doesn’t reflect the owners in real life scenario who were far from the figure of Nikolai and Yevgeny Vassilyich. Turgenev’s grandmother for one is known to have smothered a serf boy to death.

Nevertheless, Turgenev seems to point that despite individual efforts to seek reconciliation, the peasants and their masters find themselves talking in different tongues due to the element of conflicting interests inherent in the system of serfdom itself.

The generation gap often handled in the novel is limited not only between the fathers and sons of the gentry but also between different generations of serfs themselves. Piotr is depicted as suave buffoon of the modern generation who thinks himself 'advanced' as compared to the older serfs. He doesn't believe in staying in constant vigilance of his master and, unlike traditional custom, bows instead of kissing his master's hands. However, in times of crisis such as the duel between Pavel and Bazarov, his legs are the first to quiver like a flippid mandarin. Contrastingly, serfs from the old generation like Prokofich and Tomefich, are extremely servile in their attitude towards their masters and attach a certain degree of honour in being able to serve them. The generation gap manifests itself in Piotr's reply to Nikolai's enquiry about where his serfs were heading towards. Piotr suggests the possibility of a tavern seeking some support but finding none in the coachman:

"The coachman was a man of the old school and didn't share the latest views."(Turgenev, 16)

The narrator notes that "Prokofyich in his own way was quite as much of an aristocrat as Pavel Petrovich" If this be the case, it wouldn't strain our imagination to see an extremely diluted Bazarov in the form of Piotr. Turgenev contrasts the *widening* generation gap between fathers and sons with the *narrowing* gap between men and their master of the new generation intelligentsia (Arkady and Piyotr). This might explain the ease with which Bazarov becomes popular with young serfs in the Petrovich household. It also sheds some light why Bazarov, without hesitation, forwards Piotr's name to bear witness in his duel with Pavel.

The relation between the country peasants and the intelligentsia is yet another issue taken up by the novel. The narrator highlights the ignorance and sloth of peasants through his character who voice words like "*The Russian peasant will get the better of God himself*" and later "*Does anyone understand the Russian peasant? He does not even understand himself.*" Both are spoken by Bazarov who tells Nikolai and Pavel that the peasants would listen to him rather than them. However in Bazarov's interaction with the peasants, we see the evident chasm between the peasants and the intelligentsia.

"He was just blabbing, felt like wagging his tongue. He's a gentleman, you know; you think he understands anything?" (A peasant, about Bazarov). ( 180)

This brief exchange between Bazarov and the peasant severely inverts the lens which Turgenev had provided us to view them with. In any case, we can safely say as does Isaiah Berlin in his Romanes Lecture of 1970:

“Turgenev’s sympathies, which he repeated several times, was with the victims, never with the oppressors, especially with the peasants.”

The relationship between Nikolai and Fenichka however, gives birth to a whole set of different issues and by the time they get married, a conduit for upward social mobility gets created which in many ways accelerates the disintegration of serfdom, finally abolished by 1861.

Though Nikolai and Fenichka seem to love each other, their relationship isn’t free of the taints of serfdom. In her conversation with Pavel regarding Nikolai, Fenichka talks about him not as a lover but as a master:

“Nikolai Petrovich was kind enough to give them (curtains) to me; they've been here for some time, thanks to Nikolai Petrovich," Fenechka whispered. (29)

Also, the narrator says that she could easily relate to Bazarov as he did not have that air of superiority which Nikolai, despite his love for Fenichka couldn’t do away with. Nikolai also claims of having a ‘*serf owning mentality*’ in his dealings with Fenichka and confesses to Pavel that the strength of the younger generation may lie in the absence of precisely that same mentality ingrained within him. The rigidity of nobility certainly declines towards the latter part of the book where it modifies itself by becoming more accommodative towards the less privileged classes.

In conclusion, we see that Turgenev faithfully attempts to depict the lives of serfs, how a rapidly growing generation gap affects their relation between themselves, their masters, and the intelligentsia and above all depicts how and why Emancipation is inevitable and one might perhaps say *desirable* in the Russia of his times.

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