

Fall of Hypocritical Aristocrats in Anton Chekov's The Cherry Orchard

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Abstract

This research paper explores on the liberation of serfs in Russia by exemplifying the life of the protagonist, Lopakhin, of Anton Chekov's play, The Cherry Orchard. Lopakhin resembles the every the then Russian serf. He has the idealistic journey of evolution, emancipation from the serfdom to eventually becoming an estate owner. His transformation voices the Russian peasants' revolution after their suffering of almost two hundred years. By using the class struggles theory of USSR, giving the special touch of Socialism, this paper tries to investigate on the issue of serf exploitation, their revolution and their eventual liberation from the aristocrats. Ranevsky, the aristocrat of this drama is an example of those corrupted nobles of eighteenth century of Russia. Her ruin is ultimate destruction of aristocrats clearing the path for benevolent peasants. The rise of Lopakhin speaks the genesis of democracy in Russia. This research paper primarily depends on the theories of Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, VI Lenin and other socio-economic revolutionary theories to justify the socio-economic revolution that emancipates the two hundred years of slavery in Russia.

Introduction

The 'Serf Movement' in Russia happened for two hundred and twelve years (1649 to 1861). Their emancipation changed the scenario of USSR. While the serfs were declared absolutely free, two years were allotted to conclude arrangements between the serfs' proprietors as respected rent and plots of land. This period has passed away in peace and quietness: no revolution, no bloodshed, and the Russian peasant stands out to the world now, not only a free man, but also possessed with municipal privilege superior to those of any peasant in the world (Long, 1864, p. 13). The peasants had to pay about 200,000,000 rubles to the landlords for their emancipation. However, after the abolition of serfdom, "the peasants cease at once

to be serfs, and enter into a state of “provisional obligation” toward their landlords. This state is to last for twelve years, during which they enjoy all the rights, personal and proprietary, of all other taxable subjects of the Empire” (The Emancipation Question, Chapter I, 1858). The great “initiator” (to use a Mazzinian term) of the Russian Revolution, the Emperor Alexander II, has taken a new step in advance. On Nov. 13, last, the Imperial Central Committee for the abolition of servitude ... finally signed its report to the Emperor, in which the bases are laid down on which the emancipation of the serfs is proposed to be carried out (The Emancipation Question, Chapter I, 1858). The materialism ultimately became the destructive force for the upper class which was the precursor for the inception of Socialism in Russia.

Anton Chekov mostly tries to give an epitomic message through his plays using the marginalized characters. In ‘The Cherry Orchard’, Chekov tries to boomerang those so called Russian aristocrats, portending their intimidating imminent collapse, through his main character, Lopakhin through the lens of Marx’s class struggle theory. The story follows an affluent Russian family and their battle to maintain their estate, which is largely defined by the beautiful white cherry orchard trees that blanket the land (Flores, 2018). Chekov and his protagonist, Lopakhin, signify the transition of Russian society from Aristocratic feudalism to social realism. Lopakhin succeeds to remove the tag of being a serf’s son. In 1883, Plekhanov and a few friends organized the Emancipation of Labour Group, dedicated to switching the Russian revolutionary movement onto Marxian track (Baron, 1995, p. 5). Plekhanov’s contributed on leading worker’s party outset the labor’s revolution. Lopakhin’s father was a serf in Madam Ranevsky’s house. Lopakhin prudently owns this house eventually which marks the inception of labor’s movement. Lopakhin establishes himself as the landowner and smart businessman. He tries to save Ranevsky’s Mansion and the cherry orchard but the oafish Ranevsky is not ready to accept her nugatory aristocratic prestige. Though Lopakhin is not as intellectual in terms of education as Ranevsky and her family, however, he is the one who offers solution to protect the house, stands himself in that wealthy position to marry their daughter, and he is more capable to overcome his slavery and transform himself into a wealthiest person to obtain that cherry orchard. This research paper revolves around the insightfulness of the protagonist, Lopakhin, of *The Cherry Orchard*. Hence, this article will try to justify Lopakhin’s perspicacity to upend the hypocritical vainglorious attitude of the aristocrat, Ranevsky, and the major strategies of Lopakhin to end his serfdom by giving a rise to new Russia.

The predecessors have investigated on several issues of *The Cherry Orchard*. For instance, Saranya et al. (2023) explores on ecofeminism because, “The play

lends itself to several types of reading including an ecofeminist one...the play ends with the sale of the orchard and the departure of the Ranevskys, symbolizing the end of an era in Russian Society” (p. 224). The message is that the fall of any era is inevitable if the nature is hurt.

Similarly, Baehr (1999) argues that, “Chekov’s play: the arrival of the progress (symbolized by the “machine”, as the railway was often called into the change-resistant cherry orchard (literally the cherry *garden*) of the old Russian nobility; and the movement of time, generally unnoticed by this class” (p.99). Baehr explores on the conflict between past (tradition/nobility) and modern (machine) in the play where ability to change can determine power and wealth.

Lyudmila (2008) argues that, “The garden in Chekov’s play, at the beginning of this new twentieth century, is doomed; its vestals have neither the strength nor the desire to tend the fire” (p. 113). He analyses on the abandonment of such environmentally aesthetic land is neglected in his *The Cherry Orchard: Paradise Abandoned*.

The author, Chen (2019) investigates how the memory hunts the Ranevsky and time teaches Lopakhin to change his scenario because “Lopakhin is a typical example presented in *The Cherry Orchard*, who cherishes every minute to change his destiny” (p. 1074).

There is no specific research on *The Cherry Orchard* about the serfdom movement and its inception. Hence, this research paper will, scrupulously, studies on this issue primarily analyzing the actions of the hero, Lopakhin. Besides that, it will further examine how he abolishes his slavery and turns to be affluent.

Methods and Materials

The basic text for this research article is Anton Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard* (1964). It has used the Class Struggle theory of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Fredrick Engels and other economists to justify how serfdom was eradicated with the rise of laborers and fall of aristocrats in Russia. *The Collected Works* of both Marx and Lenin has contributed significantly to shape the argument of this article. Other theorists do fulfill relevant role simultaneously.

Results and Discussion

The Perspicacious Lopakhin

This research fastidiously speculates on Lopakhin’s shrewdness to tackle with the severe capitalism. Lopakhin is a perspicacious businessman in his thirties. Once he was a serf’s son who faced hegemony and inequity. However, now he is

wealthier than his own master. His smart mind beyond his education enables him to earn this position which gives hint to the transition of Russia from corrupt minded aristocracy to socialism. Harold Bloom (2009) opines that:

What Chekov says about Lopakhin's plan presents in economic terms what he himself, in his own understanding, did in Russian Literature? Chekov was the most representative figure for the new development in Russian literature, which was a change from the literature of gentry to that of the third estate and a transition from the great Russian novel, spacious and cozy like a gentry seat, to the age of the great story. It happened in the early 1880s that the aristocratic tradition of Great Russian novel ended and a new literature of unpretentious and often uncouth short prose came to supplant it (p. 216).

Chekov himself spent most of his childhood in difficulties. Therefore, Lopakhin seems to be the author's mouthpiece in the play. Chekov's grandfather was also a serf who bought his freedom in 1841. It shows that Chekov was especially in favor of this social change where the conventional aristocrats were almost bankrupted and peasants' children were commencing to succeed in the business and real estate endeavors. Chekov has already used a doomed orchard to symbolize a political system on the verge of extinction (Rayfield, 1999, p. 256). Lopakhin is astute and eventually owning the Orchard estate proves his shrewdness. His savvy preparation to flatter and impress Ranevsky by picking her from the railway station reflects his sincerity toward his master. Furthermore, it bolsters the idea that he does not leave any chance to transform the Cherry Orchard into different plots and establish summer cottages so that the family can pay their debt and rescue the estate from the auction. Actually, at first, he has no vested interest to capture the property rather he is simply advising the family to save its estate but the old aristocratic showy Ranevsky remains still. Steph Hankinson (2017) bolsters the idea as:

The Cherry Orchard, more than any other Chekhov play, centers on one concern: how a fading aristocracy faces the material, political and psychological struggles of modernity. More specifically, *The Cherry Orchard* deals with the changing boundaries between upper- and under- classes after the freedom of the serfs in 1861. This upended Russia's feudal agricultural system, which relied on the labor of slaves who were turned to serfs (unfree peasants), and fueled the economy of empire.

Ranevsky's retrieval after five years to Russia with the same haughtiness brings her own destruction. Such pretence in due course falls heavily on her. This theatrical act renders the cultural futility- the futility of the aristocracy in trying to

cling on their false standard and the futility of the bourgeoisie to find its place in newest materialism. Ranevsky's audacity of calling her Mansion as wealthiest Manor of her ancient generation and the Cherry Orchard as the symbol of her aristocratic prestige despite her insolvency portrays the struggle of nobles in maintaining their bogus standard. All the Russian aristocrats are deeply indebted to the credit banks, or, what is tantamount, to the Crown (Marx, 1858, p. 139). However, it is notorious that the Russian nobility are, moreover, indebted, to a large extent, to private individuals, bankers, tradesmen, Jews and usurers, and that the great majority are so heavily encumbered as to leave them but a nominal interest in their possessions (Marx, 1859, p. 139). Despite overcoming the bankruptcy, Ranevsky is inanely nostalgic and attempts to maintain hypocritical aristocratic profligacy. Her delusion devastates her badly at the end. Lopakhin (Chekov, 1964) offers his plan to Ranevsky, in the first act:

As you know the cherry orchard is to be sold to pay your debts. The auction is set for August twenty second, but you need not worry, my dear, you can sleep in peace, there is a way out. This is my plan. Now, please listen! Your estate is only twenty versts from town, the railway runs close by, and if the cherry orchard and the land along the river were cut up into lots and leased for summer cottages, you'd have, at the very least, an income of twenty-five thousand a year (p. 712).

Lopakhin shares this master plan to save them but Ranevsky is still hooked to her aristocratic mentality that she believes his strategy may ruin her status. She is fatuous as she wants to save her property as well as wishes to be solvent. However, she has no idea of making it feasible. Lopakhin provides her the solution which is practicable. He shares his strategy of destroying the ramshackle outbuildings which carry no worth. He further shares of deforesting the old cherry orchard because they are growing tasteless; hence, they have dramatically decreased their customers since ages. Before thinking twice, she bursts to Lopakhin in act first (Chekov, 1964), "Cut down? Forgive me, my dear, but you don't know what you are talking about. If there is one thing in the whole province that is interesting, not to say remarkable, it's our cherry orchard" (p. 712). She is not earnest rather precipitous. The auction of the estate and the cherry orchard is at hand that is on second of August. As per Karl Marx (1874-1883):

What is threatening the life of the Russian commune is neither historical inevitability nor a theory; it is oppression by the State and exploitation by capitalist intruders, who have been made powerful at the expense of the peasants by the very same State (p. 362-63).

Ranevsky cannot accept the reality due to her misapprehension. Despite fixating on the major issue, Ranevsky vacillates, sticks to past and inately gets nostalgic for the Mansion and the orchard. She considers Lopakhin's plan cheap and vulgar because she deems the orchard as the epitome of her title. She is ready to be sold if she loses her property. With the property's auction, her hypocrisy is at risk. She is idiosyncratic and oscillates to tackle with the dues of large debt. She cannot even comprehend the cautious plan shared by the Lopakhin. Her strong effort to conceal her dark reality fails to decode the suggestion of Lopakhin. She only considers him her servant therefore his advices surpass her head. Shahnawaz (2019) clears that, "Mrs. Ranevsky's character was remarkable in this regard. She did not consider this change favorable" (p. 1). The middle class was wretched due its wicked nature. For her, as according to Geoffrey Borny (2006), "Objectively Lopakhin is a rich man, subjectively he is still a peasant" (p. 232). Although, Lopakhin is wealthier now, his root of slavery shadows his present ever. She sticks herself to the fifteen thousand rubles i.e. the help of her aunt, which is very much trifle amount to save her estate. She even strives for finding alternative ways rather cooperative with Lopakhin's proposal.

Lopakhin outsmarts the feigned aristocrats overcoming his slavery with perspicacity and hard work. Ranevsky rushes to marry her daughter, Varya, to Lopakhin because of her avariciousness. Now, those who were once gentry bow to Lopakhin now. Ranevsky is much pathetic because Lopakhin hesitates to marry Varya. In this regard, James N. Loehlin (2006) quotes Arnol Bennett that:

It has a theme and it has a perfectly plain theme –the break of an estate and of a family. It has a plot, and the plot is handled throughout with masterly skill. It is simply crammed with character. Indeed it has so much characterization, and unfamiliar characterization, that an unimaginative audience could not project itself beyond the confusing externalities of characterization into the heart of the play . . . it is one of the most savage and convincing satires on a whole society that was ever seen in the theatre (p. 92).

Ranevsky does not like Lopakhin. Her sole purpose of marrying Varya to Lopakhin is to make her clear itinerary for opulence. Her daughter even follows the path of her mother. Varya loves Lopakhin's wealth but not him. On the other hand, Lopakhin is so focused about his business and career that he does not give a pretty glance to Varya. Everyone is running behind his money. Ranevsky even compels Lopakhin to purpose Varya in the act four. She says to Lopakhin that, "She loves you, you are fond of her, and I don't know- I don't know why it is you seem to avoid each other. I can't understand it!" (Chekov, 1964, p.729). However Lopakhin disagrees with her: "To tell the truth, I don't understand myself. The whole thing is

strange somehow. . . . if there is still time, I'm ready right now. . . . Let's finish it up- and basta but without you I feel I'll never be able to propose to her" (Chekov, 1964, p.729). It portrays his lack of interest towards Varya. He is only concentrated in growing his abundant affluence. He is highly enthusiastic, vigorous, and shrewd. Ranevsky feels that Varya's future is almost secured. She immediately calls Varya before Lopakhin changes his mind. However, Lopakhin does not purpose Varya ruining all the extravagant dreams of Ranevsky. Due to the lack of Lopakhin's interest, Ranevsky's dreams are all ruined up.

The Superficiality of Ranevsky

Ranevsky and other family members do not once ruminate over the idea of Lopakhin and that allows Lopakhin to own the estate and Cherry Orchard at auction. Lopakhin even offered some money to Ranevsky to follow his plan in order to save the estate but she denies accepting his outline just because he is a servant. She has lost her sanity somehow while maintaining her aristocratic life beyond her insolvency. Anya tells to Varya (Chekov, 1964) in the first act that:

"She had sold her villa near Mentone, and she had nothing left, nothing. And I had not so much as a kopeck left, we barely managed to get there. But mama does not understand! When we had dinner in a station restaurant, she always ordered the most expensive dishes and tipped each of the waiters a ruble" (p. 710).

This pictures the pitiable mentality of aristocrats who cannot endure the loss of their economic prestige. Just to maintain their false reputation, they get ready to sell themselves. Sean McEvoy (2017) views that, "It concerns the condition of the provincial gentry in a Russia that we know on the verge of cataclysmic change following the 1917 revolution" (p. 115). Not only that, *The Cherry Orchard* is a forerunner for the rise of Marxist and Socialist ideologies in USSR. 'The Collected Works' of Lenin (1969, p. 213-214) reflects that:

Marxism distinguishes itself from all primitive forms of Socialism in the fact that it does not attach the revolutionary movement to any one form of struggle. It admits of the most different methods of action, without, however, 'inventing' them. It confines itself to generalizing, organizing and giving conscious purpose to those modes of action by the revolutionary classes which arise spontaneously in the course of the movement (p. 213-214).

Ranevsky's supercilious nature gives way to Lopakhin to rebel silently. She represents the overall callous dictators. Their torment coerced the laborers to be vindictive for their unrestraint. However, the nobles were weakening while

indulging in voluptuousness. Their hypocrisy built the path for the 'have-nots' to rise up. That retaliation was the pavement for the promising socialist communist Russian society. For instance, Ranevsky invites her friends in her apartment to play cards and enjoy with drinks and foods so that she can maintain her lavishness. Similarly, after her arrival in Russia, she again organizes the musical party with drinks and games for some merchants. Even though, she is penniless, she gives a gold coin to a beggar. There is nothing to eat for servants at home whereas she has a gold piece to give a nomadic beggar. Due to her doltishness, Lopakhin becomes the victorious owning the estate. Ranevsky and the bourgeois like her coerced the peasants and serfs for retaliation. Lenin (1905-07) says:

The mass of the peasants, crushed by feudal exploitation, are being ruined and some of them let their allotments to "thrifty" farmers. The small minority of well-to-do peasants develops into a peasant bourgeoisie, rents land for capitalist farming and exploits hundreds of thousands of farm-hands and day-laborers (Ch. I).

The drama is mocking the aristocrats of twentieth century who disappeared later because of their idiotic attempts to maintain their class. Their harsh treatment to servants gave way to their own deterioration. Hence, it gave rise to socialist communism. Lopakhin, a serf's son thinks aloud than the once wealthiest Ranevsky and her family despite having profound educational intellectualities and rich lifestyle. It is because of her "Noblesse Oblige- the duty of the upper class to help the poor- is still part of her ethos, even if it also involves her own ruin" (Chekov, 1964, p. 707). When Lopakhin buys the estate of Cherry Orchard he cannot control his emotions. His endeavor gets the triumph breaking the age old stereotype of a serf family. When Ranevsky asks who brought the estate, Lopakhin replies enthusiastically (Chekov, 1964):

I bought it! Kindly wait a moment, ladies and gentlemen, my head is swimming. I can't talk. Was already there. Leonid Andreich had only fifteen thousand, and straight off Deriganov bid thirty thousand over and above the mortgage. I saw how the land lay, so I got into the fight and bid forty. He bid forty-five . . . hey, musicians, play, I want to hear you! Come on, everybody, and see how Yermilai Lopakhin will lay the ax to the cherry orchard, how the trees will fall to the ground? We're going to build summer cottages and our grandsons and great grandsons will see a new life there. . . Music! Strike up (p. 726)!

Those musicians were invited to create the jovial musical environment to celebrate the victory of Ranevsky in auction. However, it badly befalls on her when

the result of auction turns to be disastrous for her. It is humorous to write that “there’s no one to arrest them and nowhere to exile them to, so you can be as liberal as you like” (Chekhov, 2005, p. 209). Lopakhin wins the auction and the music, instead, bits the cord in favor of his success. Paul Gordon (2001) forwards that:

The Cherry Orchard, then is not only a tragedy; it comes close to tragedy insofar as it is a tragedy about tragedy. The musical state of rapturous superabundance and excessive passion that leads Madame Ranevsky and her family to destruction is the same “siren song” that has been leading tragic heroes since Achilles chose, despite the Lopakhinian warning of his mother Thetis, a brief, incandescent life of fame and destruction over a less illustrious but longer life of more mundane accomplishments (p. 81).

Lopakhin is eminent. His predecessors would be more proud to him. His achievement as a serf and lowly educated man is truly commendable. He removes all the stigmas of his class. Jennifer Farrar (2011) corroborates that, “Self-made merchant Ermolai Lopakhin is aghast at the impractical attitudes of the aristocratic Russian siblings whose family has for generations owned the estate and lovely cherry orchard where he grew up.” In turn, the landowners are bemused that former serfs like Lopakhin are now amassing fortunes. His sublimity wonders him whether he is in dream. His happiness has no boundary which “is the fruit of imagination, hidden in the darkness of uncertainty” (Chekhov, 1964, p. 726). McCain (2023) reviews the play as:

The story presents themes of cultural failures, as both of Russia’s aristocracies fail to maintain their wealthy social status through the ownership of serfs and the loss of the new society of free peasants failing to combine their new-found materialism with their anti-materialist upbringing.

We reader already knew the reality but Ranevsky is absurdly unaware of the truth. This dramatic irony has profound effect on the audience. This marks the onset of the revolution and the “People are not afraid to talk aloud here. Accordingly the Social Democrats had the duty of inculcating in the proletariat awareness that Russia was ripe only for a “bourgeois” revolution, and the folly of attempting to go beyond that stage (Baron, 1995, p. Xiv). The only answer to that possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 1874-1883, P. 426). Turning this masterpiece into a tragicomedy, Chekhov literally laughs on the tragic plight of the falsity of capitalists. Lopakhin is the epitome to challenge the waning aristocratic of

20th century to notify that servants and working class people can defeat the ridiculous aristocrats with their perspicacity and hard work. Hence, the flame of liberation has kindled then.

Conclusion

Lopakhin despite being poorly educated achieves the richness competing Ranevsky. He proves that strong dedication and acumen can defeat the hypocritical aristocrats. Chekov succeeds to portray the twentieth century's social transformation of Russia where slavery is disappearing with the rise of working class. The vanishing nobles mark the rise of prosperity of the servants. Capitalist development in Russia has made such strides during the last half-century that the preservation of serfdom in agriculture has become *absolutely* impossible, and its abolition has assumed the forms of a violent crisis, of a nation-wide revolution (Lenin, 1905-07, Ch. V). The Ranevsky's inanity cannot think beyond of maintaining phony aristocratic stardom to rescue her property. Her plight coerces her to request Lopakhin to marry her daughter Varya. Lopakhin, an ultimate owner of the estate, devalues her proposal. As a result, he establishes his stardom which slaps hardly on the face his Master but despite her depreciation, she kneels down to for her daughter's marriage. Nevertheless, her dream becomes nightmare. Thus, Lopakhin is a symbolic character to reflect the declining aristocracy of twentieth century in Russia. Thus, the drama hints for the rise of prospective political revolutionists like Bolshevik, Lenin, and other democrats and it truly became real later.

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