

**ORDINARY DESTINY OF THE PEASANT WOMAN
(LATE XIX – EARLY XX CENTURIES)**

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Abstract: The attempt of historical reconstruction of Russian peasant woman's ordinary destiny in the late XIX – early XX century is made. The role of a woman in the family daily life is revealed. The essence of the basic life stages of a countrywoman and the value of behavioral stereotypes are found out.

Taking into account the significance of a man's role in the country life, it should be pointed out that rural daily life was mainly the world of a woman. Her special position in family life, the originality of the world perception, the significance in the maintenance of traditions – all these justify the need for the special research into the peasant woman's destiny.

The rural community, being inherently the man's community, produced some stereotypes related to a woman and cultivated them in everyday life. A peasant man perceived a woman as a being, who was lower in the position and consequently she had to obey him. Village people considered that it was necessary to be severe with a woman, suppressing malice typical to her, and if necessary to use violence in order to bring a woman to her senses. Woman's mental abilities were also valued at quite a low rate. "A woman's advice is best at a dead lift", – the villagers used to say. If a woman expressed her opinion at discussion of temporal affairs it was considered as objectionable behavior ("not woman's business"). Female propensity to verbosity, gossips and squabbles ("tongue like a broomstick") was blamed. Women's interference in men's affairs aroused irritation. Quite often the presence of women was a burden for men, and their leaving was perceived with relief. Perhaps in those cases they also said that phrase: "So much the better it is for us". Everything that has been mentioned above doesn't mean that in everyday interaction in private a man wasn't tender, attentive and careful in attitude to his wife. But it was shameful to show tender feelings to a wife in public in Russian village.

The destiny of a woman in Russian village was initially different from the man's one. The birth of a girl was considered as real misfortune. After all her birth didn't offer prospects of the land dilution to a family, and the only thing that could comfort the parents was a pair of new hands to help in housekeeping. All family education was subordinated to the only aim: to prepare for the performance of the main destination of a woman – to be a mother and wife. Unlike son education parents didn't aspire to teach daughters reading and writing ("not to become a soldier – it is necessary to spin"). Even

in prosperous families daughters were seldom given the chance to finish school. At the best case a daughter could be sent to nuns to study Psalter, Prayer-book. Such position was determined by the traditional attitude of peasants to women's education. They said that "reading and writing wasn't necessary to a woman, her business was to give birth and nurse children" In the opinion of parents the daughter from her birth was a free-wheeling person, after all her destiny was a marriage. "These "goods", – said Kursk peasant about daughters, – shouldn't be held for a long time, the quicker they are sold, the better" [1, d. 686, l. 22].

Socialization of girls was determined by the traditional ideas of the position and role of a woman in the family. First of all, mother aspired to pass to a daughter the skill of housekeeping. Since childhood a country girl was involved in the intense working condition, and in the course of growing her functions also changed. Five or six-year old girls worked as a nurse or had to weed a garden. Country women often used daughters as helpers in their activities. In spring girls were involved in linen whitening, and since autumn till spring they spun [1, d. 1276, l. 15]. Parents always gave children only that work which they were able to fulfill. In modern parlance, labor training in the village was carried out taking into account the age of children. So, an eleven-year old country girl sat at a spinning wheel, a thirteen-year old girl was trained sewing and embroidering, and when a girl was fourteen she was taught how to soak linens. Simultaneously she was taught how to milk cows, bake bread, and rake hay [6, p. 234]. In a word, a girl was trained to do everything that was necessary in the country life. Diligence was highly appreciated by the public opinion of any village. If a woman was considered by fellow villagers as a hard worker, by all means it was taken into account when choosing a bride.

A marriage was the most important stage in the life of peasants. By means of the marriage the full-value of rural life was reached. In the opinion of countrymen a marriage was an essential factor for acquisition of the status of a full member of the community. A single man, even middle-aged, was called "kiddo" and his opinion didn't count in the village. A matrimonial union was the basis of the material well-being of the household. It was said in the village: "In our life it is impossible without a woman: you can't start the household in a proper way, and the home will go down the chute". Appropriate functioning of the farm homestead couldn't be achieved because of the mentioned above family division of labor. Therefore choosing a bride the great attention was paid to her physical qualities and only then to others. A marriage was essential for peasants from the household point of view. In the midland Russia, in Central Black Earth provinces the economic possibilities of a family in many respects depended on the size of its allotment given only to married men. Such order induced parents to aspire to the early marriage of a son, in order to expand a family plot and to get in the house another working woman. Parents of a bride hastened "to get rid of the maid".

Rural brides hurried up down the aisle for fear of "being left on the shelf" – remaining unmarried for too long. Rural guys found the marriage with a girl who was older than 20 years quite a grim business. For girls who didn't get married in time, there was a threat to remain "an old boiler". It should be noted that without a husband a woman in the village had no independent significance, therefore she preferred the worst match to girlhood. The position of married women, according to the standards of the common law, was more significant and higher than others, not married [5, p. 273].

From the peasants' point of view an ideal disparity of years between newly married was 2–3 years in favor of a man. It was considered to be disgrace for a woman to marry an "old man", i.e. the man who was 3 years older than she. The average life expectancy of men in the village was 2–3 years shorter, than of women. The probability of early widowhood for a peasant woman grew with the increase in the disparity of years of a bridal couple [8, p. 164].

The new stage in the life of Russian peasant woman began with a marriage. The public status change involved new functions conditioned by the traditions of family life.

According to the national thinking, the main destination of a woman was the continuation of generation. In accordance with orthodox canons the coition itself between a man and woman was justified only as means of the beginning of pregnancy. The birth of a child was considered as an action of God, and the absence of children in a family was treated like a visitation of God for people's sins.

The sexual maturity of Russian peasant woman at the turn of XIX – XX centuries came at the age of 15–17 years. In accordance with the research of doctor V.S. Grozdev (1894) the average age of the first menstrual period for peasant women of the midland Russia was 16.1 years. According to doctor N.M. Kakushkin, the first menstrual period of peasant women of Tambov province began earlier, at the age of 15.3 [3, d. 1, l. 53]. On the average Tambov peasant women gave birth to the first child at 18.4 [10, p. 112]. Physical infertility began at 40 years, i.e. 5–7 years before a menopause. By that age as a rule the reproductive performance of a country woman had finished: severe conditions of work and life together with enormous physical activities prematurely deprived the woman of the ability to a child-bearing [9, p. 104]. Thus, the age of fertility for a rural woman in the late XIX-th was 20–22 years. By the estimates of demographers, Russian peasant woman of that period gave birth 7–9 times on the average. The average number of childbearing for peasant women in Tambov province was 6.8, and the maximum was 17 [3, d. 1, l. 53]. Further some separate recordings from the report of a gynecology department of Tambov provincial territorial hospital in 1897 are given: “Eudoxia Moshakova, a peasant, 40 years, married for 27 years, gave birth 14 times”; “Akulina Manuhina, a peasant, 45 years, married for 25 years, gave birth 16 times” [11, p. 40]. In the conditions of absence of any artificial birth control, the number of children in a family depended entirely on the reproductive possibilities of a woman.

On the whole the reproductive performance and medical condition of a peasant woman depended, first of all, on working and living conditions. It was said in the village: “the beard indicates the husband and hardscrabble life indicates the woman”. Excessive daily work and poor diet deteriorated woman’s organism and resulted in early aging. The most part of household or other activities which were performed by a peasant woman was connected with weight lifting. “A lot of female-specific diseases – retroversion of uterus, uterus metritis with the subsequent sterility or a birth of “exhausted children” – were the consequence of excessive work”, – stated Saratov territorial doctor S.P. Mironov [13, p. 8]. As a result of such “hard labor” peasant women often had abortions. 195 out of 1059 parous women interrogated by Doctor P. Bogdanov had 294 abortions in total [2, p. 11]. In 1897–1899 in Tambov district there were 267 deadborns of 2164 obstetric aids registered by physicians, 142 supposed dead and 187 abortions and it was 3,5 % from the number of children born alive [4, p. 73].

Territorial (zemsky) doctor V.I. Nikolsky examining the conditions of a genital sphere of Tambov district peasant women in 1885, wrote: “Our woman performs extremely hard field work, it is harmful to her since it is connected with strengthened mechanical work. Weeding is especially unhealthy and destructive when the whole day a woman has to move having bent in hip joints at an acute angle”. According to the author, changes of uterus form and position caused 16.6 % of all diseases of a genital sphere of rural women [3, d. 1. l. 42 vol, 43]. For the prevention of falling of womb, older women put a potato, beet, turnip, and sometimes wooden balls into the vagina of ill women [2, p. 8, 10]. The female medical condition was also influenced by the demographic situation in the village when the traditional balance of male and female work was broken.

In family household woman occupied quite the place defined by the traditions of rural life. The researchers of Russian village of the end of the century agreed that women did not have enough influence on household affairs. It quite corresponded to the peasants’ views. “The woman can only master the house but do what she is said to do, and it’s not her business to conduct the affairs” [12, p. 64]. The position and role of a woman in the peasant holding changed essentially under the influence of objective conditions. The reasons for that were both the development of commodity-money

relations in the village, and the increased social mobility of rural population. In the context of wide spreading of seasonal work a woman often had to carry out the duties of the head of her family because of the husband's absence and she had to run the house by herself. According to the reasonable comment of researcher I.N. Milogolova, women in the areas of the developed trade were more independent and self-confident and knew the price for their work [7, p. 73]. A woman could manage the household if the actions of her husband led to the ruining of the farm homestead property. The village commune considered it possible to make a woman responsible for the solvency of the farm homestead if her husband was prodigal or a drunkard. She became the head of the farm homestead with all the consequences that came with it such as disposition of the family property. When a husband was admitted incapable and powerless all the property also passed to his wife. The following case can illustrate it: the decision of Pichaevsky volost court of Tambov province admitted a peasant woman a full mistress because her husband was in the clinic for mentally disabled [3, f. 232, c. 1, d. 111, l. 5–6].

Owing to her public and marital status a peasant woman accumulated the traditions of rural daily life. Her family daily life was the sequence of a number of accustomed true-life roles (a wife, mother, mistress and etc.). Any deviation from the behavioral stereotypes was almost impossible due to the rigid control of the public opinion.

The position of a peasant woman in the family life was determined by the traditions of Russian village, and the peculiarities of the peasant household economy conditioned her production functions. Woman's behavior in a family and community was generally regulated by the standards of the common law. The role of a woman changed as a result of the objective processes accompanied by the destruction of the patriarchal foundations of the village. The destruction of common relations, modernization of rural life, tendency to have a smaller family – all these were accompanied by the emancipation of a peasant woman, the growth of her deviant behavior.

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Обыденная судьба крестьянки (конец XIX – начало XX века)

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Ключевые слова и фразы: брак; деторождение; крестьянка; повседневность; обычное право; семья; традиции; труд.

Аннотация: Дан опыт исторической реконструкции обыденной судьбы русской крестьянки конца XIX – начала XX века. Установлена роль женщины в семейной повседневности. Выявлено содержание основных жизненных этапов селянки и значение поведенческих стереотипов.

Übliches Schicksal der Bäuerin (Ende des XIX. – Anfang des XX. Jahrhunderts)

Zusammenfassung: Es ist die Erfahrung der historischen Rekonstruktion des üblichen Schicksals der russischen Bäuerin des Endes des XIX. – des Anfanges des XX. Jahrhunderts angegeben. Es ist die Rolle der Frau im Familienalltagsleben festgestellt. Es ist den Inhalt der Hauptlebensetappen der Bäuerin und die Bedeutung der Verhaltensstereotypen aufgeklärt.

Destin de tous les jours d'une paysanne (fin du XIX-ème – début du XX-ème siècles)

Résumé: Est présentée une expérience de la reconstruction historique du destin de tous les jours d'une paysanne de la fin du XIX-ème – le début du XX-ème siècles. Est établi le rôle de la femme dans la vie de famille. Est démontré le contenu des étapes essentiels de la vie d'une paysanne ainsi que l'importance des stéréotypes du comportement.

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