

# THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE COMEDY OF D. FONVIZIN "THE MINOR"

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Comedy "The Minor" by Denis Fonvizin is a masterpiece of Russian literature of the XVIII century. The work was included in the foundation of classical literature, touching on a number of perennial problems and attracting modern readers by the beauty of high style.

The play was conceived by Fonvizin as a comedy on one of the main themes of the enlightenment - as a comedy about education. Then the intention of the writer has changed. The Comedy "The Minor" is the first Russian socio-political comedy, and the theme of education is associated in it with the most important problems of the XVIII century such as the problem of serfdom and the problem of autocracy and despotic regime of Catherine II. The author was dissatisfied with the system of education and upbringing of minors, existing during the reign of Catherine. He concluded that evil lies in the feudal system and demanded the suppression of this injustice, pinning hopes on the "enlightened" monarchy and part of the nobility. Therefore, the main conflict of the comedy is the struggle of the enlightened nobility with feudal nobility.

Fonvizin creates in his comedy model of mini-state. It has the same laws and there are happening the same iniquities that in the Russian Empire. This mini-state is the estate of Prostakova. The owners Prostakovs are like high-ranking officials, which are devoid of notions of duty and honor, thirst for wealth, cringe in front of the highest nobles and push around the weak. Officer Milon and the official Pravdin are these highest nobles. Images of serfs Trishka and nurse Eremeyevna embody the joyless life of the dependent and oppressed class, which is pushed around by people like Prostakovs. And then, there is Sofya, which does not fit into this mini-state. She is the image of the future nobility, which is well educated and treats serfs as equals. In this essay, I would like to compare images of the existing nobility of the days of Fonvizin in the face of Prostakova and the future ideal, which is represented by Sofya.

Ms. Prostakova is a very bright representative of the class of landowners. Her surname means simple, without any frills but in fact, these features are not about our character. The fact is that her maiden name is Skotinina, which reveals all her essence. The actual meaning is pig or beast, cattle and she really behaves like a pig. Fonvizin ridicules it from the first lines of the play. In conversation with Trishka, Skotinina speculates that it is possible to sew a coat even without education and adds "What piggish thinking!" [1] addressing this phrase to the servant. However, it becomes immediately clear that this phrase is nothing more but the representation of Prostakova. She manages the estate; everything is under her rough power. Even her husband, because of despotism of wife, turned into weak-willed and spineless person. Talking to her, he "stammers from timidity", afraid to express his opinion, in all agreeing with her: "I've always believed you, Mother, and I still believe you" [1].

As a typical landowner of the time, she considers serfs as her entire property- with them she can do whatever she pleases. No matter how much her peasants and servants work, they never cannot please their ferocious proprietress. Disease of her serf woman leads her into a rage: "Oh, she is an ogre! In bed! Just like a lady!" [1]. Even her most loyal servant- Eremeyevna, who always tries to please her, Prostakova calls as "old witch" and "lousy bitch". In response to the words of the Pravdin "No one is free to tyrannize anyone", she resents: "The noble, when he feels like it, isn't free to beat up his servant? Then what's this directive about the freedom of the nobility given us for?" [1]. Here Fonvizin ridicules the permissiveness of the nobility and the tyranny of Catherine II.

Prostakova believes that control of the household is possible only through abuse and beatings. This she says to the Pravdin, naively believing that the way of her management worthy of all praise: "From morning to night, swinging like a clapper, I never sit down: I scold, I slap them, and that's what keep the house together, sir!" [1]. She is rude and oppressive to all in her house, even to the teachers whom she does not pay within a year. There is only one person to whom she shows love and affection- her son Mitrofan. All the time Prostakova runs in front of him and pampers him in every way she can. In her opinion, the education of the child is permissiveness and extreme denial of sciences and humanities. "Don't study this foolish science"- she says to her son. Prostakova does not see any benefit from science and learning. She does not understand why to learn geography when you can just order the coachman to drive you wherever you want. She is herself is an illiterate, uneducated woman and proud of it. The nature of Prostakova, the degree of mental development, the position of the landowner and sovereign mistress of the house, the attitude to others - all this is reflected in her speech expressively and clearly.

It is very interesting for me, why Prostakova did not get any education at the age of enlightenment, moreover, in a time when women reigned in Russia for more than half a century. Prostakova was born into a noble family and, as all noble children, she had to begin learning at the age of three. Yes, the education for girls did not differ in-depth study of sciences, but by age 12 or 13 girls had to be fluent in French and know all salon manners. For

women of XVIII century requirements of etiquette, a huge supply of free time for reading and education on a western-style played a huge role. The education of noble maidens throughout almost the entire XVIII century had a superficial character and was subordinated to the task of learning to shine, to captivate and to be loved. In the play of Fonvizin I cannot see where Prostakova shows her noble manners. She does not shine and captivate, she does not cause the reader any positive feelings for her. However, in one aspect Prostakova fully complies with the woman of the XVIII century. In the very complex and extensive estates Russian woman from time immemorial centuries surely felt the absolute mistress. This area of activity belonged to her according to tradition and was secured by Domostroi. It is here that a Russian woman always enjoyed full civil equality with man, and even significantly surpassed with her legal prerogatives of the western woman. As we can see, exactly this type of woman Fonvizin portrayed in his play.

Another key character in "The Minor" is Sofya. She is a prime example of highly educated woman of the XVIII century. Sofya received a good education, was brought up in a family of deeply decent and honorable people. She early became an orphan. Because her uncle Starodum lives in distant Siberia, Ms. Prostakova on the rights of the relative takes Sofya to her house, and manages her small inheritance. She shamelessly steals from fosterling and seeks to marry her to her brother, in order to seize all the property of the poor girl. However, Fonvizin did not accidentally called his heroine Sofya, which in Greek means "wisdom". The girl is quite smart and reasonable. She also has a wise and kind heart. Sofya forgives Prostakova for any offense, and in the final scene she rushes to the aid to the landowner.

Throughout the comedy, the character of Sofya remains unchanged: she is loyal to Milon, feels sincere respect for Starodum and respects Pravdin. Sofya is intelligent, she immediately notes that Prostakova became very affectionate and that she wants to marry her to her son. Her simple feelings are human: she believes honor and wealth must be earned by labor. Sofya has decent mildness and obedience to the elders, but she also can defend her love. When Starodum, not yet knowing Milon, wants to marry Sofya to a certain young man, Sofya "is embarrassed" and believes that the choice of the groom depends on her heart. Starodum confirms the opinion of Sofya, and she immediately calms down, declaring her "obedience." Fonvizin made a lot of efforts to give Sofya live features. To a greater extent he was interested in the education of an honest man, worthy of the title of nobleman. As a young woman, his heroine needed an experienced leader-mentor. She entered a new, most, perhaps, responsible period of life, and the playwright did not pass by this. The natural virtue of Sofya was to get a mental facet. On the threshold of the wedding, Starodum gives to Sofya councils, from whose content it turns out how he and the author of "The Minor" understands the correct education of girls and women. Most of all Starodum is afraid of the influence of "light", with its temptations capable of corrupting an innocent, pure and virtuous soul. Therefore, in the "light", says Starodum, the first step- the ability to put yourself and to recommend is very important. The general rule is: friendship should be conducted with those who are worthy of it. Sofya understands the lessons of Starodum and agrees with him. According to the author of the comedy, the education of an honest man or a woman - consists in the enlightenment of the soul.

Thus, in the comedy of Fonvizin, we can see two completely different characters of one problem. The problem of upbringing and education of the upper class, which is supposed to hold high offices and manage the estates. Ms Prostakova is what upper class looks like now and Sofya it is the future embodiment of the nobility according to the views of Fonvizin. At the end of the comedy, Prostakova receives a well-deserved punishment. The final scene in which Prostakova, deprived of power, stays alone because even her beloved son leaves, shows that the wicked man himself is preparing his own punishment by his actions. Sofya, always following the call of the heart and her virtue, gets permission from her uncle to marry the one she loves. So these two female characters are as two sides of the same coin. As a result, the clash between good and evil, between a progressive and ignorant world, is decided in favor of good. Perhaps Fonvizin was right in his attitude to the formation of the nobility and to the problem of serfdom. After all, as it is known, a short time later, the first uprising of the upper class known as the Decembrist uprising of 1825 will take place in Russia. These young well-educated people fully understood the inhuman treatment of serfs. So the power has been shaken and a new stage in the development of public life has begun, which in the end will lead to what we all know as The February Revolution.

### *References*

1. *Fonvizin D.* The Minor. [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://ilibrary.ru/text/1098/index.html/> (date of access:28 September 2017).