

DECONSTRUCTION OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S IN THE GRAVEYARD

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ABSTRACT

Anton Chekhov is a master short storyteller. He occupies a prominent place in the Russian literary world. He has an acute sense of the contradictions that life holds. He uses this inherent dichotomy extensively in his works for an antithetical effect. Deconstruction is a poststructuralist approach of criticism, the leading figure of which was Jacques Derrida. It gained eminence in the 1960s. In the Graveyard's world is divided into the following binaries: Death and Life, Forgetfulness and Remembrance, Hate and Love, Reason and Faith. Anton Chekhov depicts the reality of the text in terms of these binaries, and, intends the second term of each pair to be subordinate to the first. The first term in each pair is privileged in Chekhov's understanding of the phenomenon under examination. The reversal of the hierarchies of the short story In the Graveyard thus eventuates in the collapse of the text's principal proposition.

KEYWORDS: *Deconstruction, Hierarchies Operating, Binaries, Irony, Paradox, Dichotomy, Contradictions, Privileged Term, Reversal of the Hierarchies, Poststructuralist Approach, Polarities*

INTRODUCTION

Anton Chekhov is a master short storyteller. He occupies a prominent place in the Russian literary world. His works are characterised by a strong sense of irony. He enmeshes paradox finely within the plot of his stories. He has an acute sense of the contradictions that life holds. Life exists in polarities and one polarity has meaning only because of the other. He uses this inherent dichotomy extensively in his works for an antithetical effect.

The greatest irony of Chekhov's own life was that he suffered from an unsound health for major part of his life and couldn't save himself. He died early of tuberculosis even though he was a doctor. His love for life and mankind is palpable by his literary and philanthropic pursuits, supplying books to libraries, treating peasants in epidemic for free, setting up clinic for alcoholics, building schools, but death claimed him too soon.

Deconstruction is a poststructuralist approach of criticism, the leading figure of which was the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. It gained eminence in the 1960s. It was a strategy aimed towards questioning and exposing the internal contradictions and inconsistencies in any philosophical or literary language. It unveils the insatiable trait of language. It discloses the ever shifting nature of the centre and meaning, thereby revealing the disunity underneath the text's apparent unity. It is a dismantling operation carried out on a discourse to divulge how the discourse itself undermines the philosophy it asserts.

J.A. Cuddon, in *Dictionary of Literary, Terms Elucidates that in Deconstruction:*

“A text can be read as saying something quite the different from what it appears to be saying... it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘stable’ meaning. Thus a text may ‘betray’ itself. (Barry: 69)

Summary

The story is set in a graveyard as the title suggests. A few men whose reason behind their presence in the cemetery is not mentioned, chance upon the grave of an acquaintance. They begin talking about the dead Yegor Gryaznorukov, titular councillor and cavalier, whose “habits of observation” (Chekhov 165) lead to his accidental death. All was well with his life, he was healthy and cherished his wife. But he fell victim to his own ill habit of eavesdropping. They marvel at the paradox of life that the man who did not read a verse in life, his entire tombstone is jeeringly engraved with verses. It is likely that to keep the thought of his own death at bay, the unnamed man with companions is jesting about the dead people to lighten the atmosphere or to conceal his own fear of death. This man and his companions then come across the unnamed actor who asks them to direct him to the grave of the once famous actor Mushkin. This sparks a conversation between them. While the unnamed man talks about life, the unnamed actor talks about death. The unnamed actor tells them about people who collected money for making a monument in the name of Mushkin but spent it all on drinking. This shows man’s tendency to exploit even death. But the unnamed actor wishes them well and the dead Mushkin. He recounts his bittersweet relationship with Mushkin. As Mushkin’s votary, he became a freethinker which he later regrets when he is nearing his own death due to over drinking. He pays Mushkin his final visit to reconcile with his memory and to forgive him. The unnamed man with companions while encountering another cortège, feels disconcerted at the sight of the third casket being brought for burial that day. Swarmed with the dead, he asks his companions to leave for home in his discomfiture.

The Hierarchies Operating in the Graveyard are

Even in this summary one can see, the text’s world is divided into the following: Death and Life, Forgetfulness and Remembrance, Hate and Love, Reason and Faith. Anton Chekhov depicts the reality of the text rife with these binaries. The first term in each pair is privileged in Chekhov’s understanding of the phenomenon under examination while he intends the second term of each pair to be subordinate to the first.

A Deconstructive Reading

Death over Life

In the story *in the Graveyard*, it is death that is dominant of the two binaries as per Chekhov’s discourse. Death is the absence or negation of life. The setting of the story is a cemetery that is visited by the unnamed narrator and his companions. The purpose of their presence there is not mentioned. They accidentally happen to be on the tomb of Yegor Gryaznorukov, titular councillor and cavalier. They discuss the irony behind his death. A grave is a gloomy place that reminds them of their mortality and this is the overwhelming feeling that the unnamed man with his companion’s experiences. Till the time of their presence there in the cemetery which was just “a couple of hours” (Chekhov 169), they witnessed three funeral processions. Slowly and gradually, death’s chilling and bleak awareness begins to grip the unnamed man. Surrounded by tombs all around, the unnamed man is reminded of the inevitable end that each life meets, especially his own. This fearful knowledge unsettles him and disturbs his composure. Thus he wishes to leave the graveyard right away seeking solace and comfort of his home. The unnamed man tries to escape the grim reality of death

whereas another, the unnamed actor, has placid acceptability of his nearing death. For one it is a much dreaded fact of life for another it is a peaceful repose from the juggernaut that life is. It puts an end to all his painful anticipation, longings and sufferings. The story is a testament to the all-consuming dismalness and the cold, numbing might of death before which each person whether rich or poor, successful or unsuccessful, succumbs.

Life over Death

The impulse of life is the animating principle behind these men. It is these men with their fears and insecurities, humour and irony, failures and successes, hate and forgiveness, cunningness and imperfections, acceptance and denial of death, make life what it is and give life its distinctive flavour and meaning. All these facets of life are what make these men alive. To be alive is to be undergoing these varied emotions and impulses, even the dread of death. It is the thirst for life that the unnamed narrator wants to go home away from the oppressing thoughts of the dead and death. Home is the symbol of an ensconcing familiarity of life. Life in the story is characterised by the vitality of the unnamed man with companions, pinpointing the paradox by his witticisms and quips about the ironical stroke of fate that Yegor Gryaznorukov, titular councillor and cavalier meets. The unnamed man with companions has a desire for life and life for him is valuable and precious, whereas for the actor life has been a torment, a relentless affliction. Life for the unnamed actor is a constant struggle. Whereas for some like Mushkin's fans, actors and journalists, life is a web of deceits and intrigue to turn even death into a commodity to be cashed in. Though death is all pervading and engulfing, life subverts the dichotomy, with life gaining superiority over death.

Forgetfulness over Remembrance

Forgetfulness is the Dominant of the two Binaries in the Story: The men of the story discuss the anonymity that even the once famous actor Mushkin slips into, who had died just two years ago.

Unnamed Actor: "there were a dozen wreaths on the coffin, and he is already forgotten." (Chekhov: 168)

Unnamed Man with Companions: "It (the grave of Mushkin) had sunken, was overgrown with weeds, and had lost all appearance of a grave. A cheap, little cross that had begun to rot, and was covered with green moss blackened by the frost, had an air of aged dejection and looked, as it were, ailing." (Chekhov 167)

The Admirer of Mushkin, the Unnamed Actor, Laments the Fate That His Hero Met: The condition of his grave signifies the scantiness of the visitations and its descent to oblivion.

Remembrance over Forgetfulness

A cemetery is a place where the loved ones or admired ones of the men are buried. The whole concept behind burying the bodies is for commemorating the dead. Tombs, tomb stones and the epitaphs over it are engraved in the loving memory of the deceased. Thus the graves or the cemetery becomes a symbol of reminiscing and eternalising the dead.

On the other hand, the idea of hard work and success is also evoked in the story. The reason the dead actor Mushkin was at the heights of his profession and was famous gives rise to the idea of the indelible mark he wished to leave behind for the remembrance of the future generations. One wishes to succeed to be imparted with glory. He is still talked about, and the topic of discussion of these men, connotes he is still being remembered. The presence of the unnamed actor

to pay his final tribute to Mushkin reinforces this fact. Not just him, but also other acquaintances, like the dead Yegor Gryaznorukov, titular councillor and cavalier, who may not have really made a mark in life are also remembered and discussed. Hence though forgetfulness is the idea at play, remembrance subverts the two binaries, with remembrance gaining dominance.

Hate over Love

Hate is the dominant of the two binaries in the text. The unsuccessful, unnamed actor who comes looking for Mushkin's grave, terms him his enemy. He blames Mushkin, his idol, for his failure in life. He chose to become an actor following Mushkin's steps "through looking at him and listening to him". (Chekhov: 168) But little did he know that this path would be ridden with "tears and sorrow". (Chekhov: 168) His actor's life turned out to be a "bitter one". (Chekhov: 168)

He says "I have lost youth, sobriety, and the divine semblance. I haven't a half-penny to bless myself with, my shoes are down at heel, my breeches are frayed and patched, and my face looks as if it had been gnawed by dogs..." (Chekhov 168)

The actor Mushkin exerts tremendous influence on him. He seduced him through his "actor's life". (Chekhov: 168) The unnamed actor scapegoats Mushkin for tempting him for the tinsel of the "actor's life" which turns out to be his doom. He could not taste the success to which he was lured. Success remains elusive to him. He calls Mushkin a "villain" (Chekhov: 168) and a "scoundrel" (Chekhov: 168) for his pernicious effect on him. He loathes Mushkin for he is the reason behind his life's plight.

Love over Hate

Though the unnamed actor abhors the dead Mushkin for his failure, but behind this hate is his deep affection, love and admiration for Mushkin. He comes to his grave one final time to pay his respects to his lifelong inspiration when no one else does. Mushkin has lost the honour and veneration which was once bestowed upon him. It is only in the unnamed actor's heart that he is still idolatrous. He comes to pay homage to him out of his reverential adulation for him as Mushkin determined and moulded his entire existence and gave his life direction.

He says "he was the only one I had in the world, the only one." (Chekhov: 168)

Hence the binary gets subverted with the inferior becoming the superior, i.e., love dominant over hate.

Reason over Faith

Reason is the superior of the two binaries in the text. The unnamed character mentions "eternal memory (means) nothing but sadness. God give us remembrance for a time, but eternal memory—what next!" (Chekhov: 168) He seems to be against the concept of heaven and hell which eternal memory evokes. Eternal memory is rather ambiguously placed in the text. It hints at the biblical or Christian hymn sung as an encomium. It is addressed as a prayer to God on behalf of the departed. It is said so that the deceased continues to be in God's memory. Thus it is a Christian concept that the soul is eternal and only if God remembers the person's name does she/he live with Him in Paradise and if He does not remember the name, it is spiritual death and extinction for the deceased's soul.

For this unnamed man with companions, it is reason which is supreme and he doesn't believe in any such biblical or religious hogwash and hence he terms it as "sadness". (Chekhov:168) The unnamed actor also calls himself a

“freethinker”. (Chekhov: 168) “My head’s full of freethinking and nonsense He robbed me of my faith—my evil genius!” (Chekhov:168) Under the impact of Mushkin, he became a freethinker. Rational enquiry, reason and independent thinking characterised his thought process which made him a disbeliever of religious dogmas and doctrines. Thus he lived his life as a sceptical, free spirit rejecting others’ or any authority’s opinions.

Faith over Reason

The men of the text have practiced sense throughout their lives. Rationality and logical reasoning form the core value of their lives. But towards the end of life, the unnamed actor who is nearing his death, complains of being robbed of his faith and his head in a muddle with “freethinking and nonsense.” (Chekhov: 168) At this junction, he seems to lament his loss of faith. Faith is what he needs to make sense of the approaching death. His freethinking evades answering some essential existential questions of life and death. Thus he wishes he had faith acting as an anchor at such desperate times.

Though their rationality may deny God, bible, Christianity, religion etc., but they do understand the force of an invisible mystical power before which man is a mere puppet. It is this invincible presence before which a person cannot exercise her/his will. Birth and death are out of man’s control. Man is a mere helpless being before a power of such imposing magnitude. Humans appear paltry little things and their lives amount to a picayune in the great scheme of things. Hence Faith subverts Reason and becomes the superior binary.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Graveyard is a work on the pall that death casts, which challenges some important oppositions of conventional thought. Through the uncertainties relating to existence, the story questions the primacy of death by showing it is always already inhabited by life. Chekhov tries to assert the superiority of death, but this assertion is problematic. Hence it is questioned and reversed by life. Similarly, forgetfulness operates as the higher of the two binaries, but after close scrutiny, a reversal seems to be initiated with remembrance attaining eminence. As a story of faithlessness, reason and disbelief in religion, it questions the mystical and inexplicable aspect of death, that makes it an enigma to understand. This superiority too is revealed to be insufficiently argued and the hierarchy is seen to be actually functioning in the opposite way which reinforces the idea of God. Hate harbours some of the key traits of love. Love and Hate instead of being opposites are thus revealed to be constitutive of each other. Therefore, no absolute statement about the human emotions of love/hate can be passed. Thus the unnamed actor’s stance becomes dubious whether he exactly hates Mushkin or loves him. When his responses are studied closely, they are uncertain. Neither hate nor love can be considered the privileged term, the assumptions of the conventional philosophy of the text are thereby deconstructed. The reversal of the hierarchies of the short story *in the Graveyard* thus eventuates in the collapse of the text’s principal proposition. This subverted hierarchy again becomes open to the same deconstructive operation, ad infinitum.

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