

THE PORTRAYAL OF POVERTY IN SELECT SHORT STORIES OF ANTON CHEKHOV

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Abstract

The present paper studies some of Chekhov's short stories from Marxist and socialistic points of view. Chekhov's stories like "Vanka", "The Peasants" and "From a Case-book" show the then social picture of Russia. An attempt is made in the paper to show how Chekhov portrays the exploitations of the workers and farmers by the bourgeoisie of his time. He also criticizes the intelligentsia for not showing enough interest in finding out the solution for the social problems – poverty and unhappiness. The tone of the stories is didactic; literature seems to be a weapon for Chekhov through which he points at the social evils and wants to change them. Much like Marx, he believes that people will not be happy in the Russian society unless there is equal opportunity for everyone. The paper closely analyses the selected stories of Chekhov and contrast them with the then social problems in Russia

Key words: Marxism, Social criticism, Exploitation, History and Politics

Chekhov's rise as a short story writer happened at the turn of the 19th century. The Russian society in Chekhov's days was complex and rapidly changing. Jessie Coulson, a translator of Chekhov's stories, observes in the introduction of her book, *Anton Chekhov Selected Short Stories* (1963):

The year after his birth, 1861, saw the first 'great reforms', the abolition of serfdom, and the year after his death, 1905, the 'First Revolution'; in 1881, a year after his first story was published, the assassination of the tsar Alexander II led to the destruction of the 'Party of the People's Will', the heirs of the nihilists and populists, and to ten years of black repression and reaction. Throughout the period industry and commerce expanded and ramified, bankers and merchants grew in numbers and importance, railways multiplied, mills and factories sprang up, largely in the country, where cheap labour was available, and the social structure was modified and shaken by the emergence

or unprecedented growth of the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie, and the intelligentsia. (121)

Chekhov shows all these developments in his stories. In his stories, one can find a somber picture of poverty, bleakness, and credulousness of village life as well as city life. Chekhov depicts the miseries of the peasants as competently as that of workers in the factories, mines, and mills etc. The present paper deals with a select short stories of Chekhov, namely: "Vanka" (1886), "The Peasants" (1897), and "From a Case-book" (1898), and explores how the poor have been exploited by their masters in Russia. The tone of the stories is very clear and they are didactic in nature. Through the stories Chekhov also tries to discover why the poor as well as the rich suffer, why no one is happy in society.

"Vanka":

In "Vanka" Chekhov raises the issue of child labour and the inhuman treatment of children at work by their masters. The nine-year old Vanka Zhukhov's letter to his grandfather gives vent to his agony and sufferings. Vanka and his grandfather- Konstantin Makarych- are both servants and when the story begins we realize that both of them haven't got a holiday even on Christmas Eve. Konstantin is 65 years old and still works as a watchman to earn his living. Vanka reveals in the letter how he has been tortured and made to work hard without getting enough food. It is clear that Vanka's tone in his letter is filled with anger and hatred towards his master when he calls his master's child a 'brat' and tells his grandfather how he received thrashing because he fell asleep while rocking the master's child. One by one Vanka recounts incidents to show the ruthlessness of his master and mistress.

Vanka not only misses his grandfather but also misses the Christmas preparations at his old mistress's estate. He finds the people in Moscow lifeless and their celebrations artificial. One should also notice the attitude of the rich towards the poor. The newly rich class shown in the form of Aliakhin-the shoemaker-does not pity, sympathize with the poor whereas the landowners in the country- presented in the form/ character of Olga Ignatyevna- were more humane, sympathetic and kind towards their servants. There was solidarity among the servants in the village, while the other servants at Aliakhin, instead of pitying and helping the poor boy, make fun of him, make him work for them and thus they too exploit him. Vanka gives vent to his sufferings as:

The assistants tease me, send me to the tavern for vodka, make me steal the master's cucumbers, and the master beats me with whatever is handy. Food there is none; in the morning it's bread, at dinner, gruel, and in the evening bread again. As for tea or sour-cabbage soup, the master and the mistress themselves guzzle that. They make me sleep in the vestibule, and when their brat cries, I don't sleep at all, but have to rock the cradle. (208)

The story also raises crucial questions such as why does Konstantin Makarych - Vanka's grandfather- still work. How long will he work? Why was Vanka sent to Moscow after his

mother's death? Was it because the Landlady did not want to feed an idle growing boy? Till Vanka's mother worked for Olga, Olga was benign but sent the child immediately to Moscow when she realized that he would be a liability to her. Although the story runs only for six pages Chekhov makes readers empathize with Vanka and his feelings.

Chekhov's art of story-telling is at its peak in this story because of the ending of the story and also because he compares subtly the treatment of the poor by the landowners and the businessmen in cities. His view towards the social conditions is close to Marxism; he shows the oppressions of the poor of his time. Ironically Vanka, at the end of the story, dreams of his grandfather reading his letter, but as readers we know that the letter will not reach his grandfather as Vanka did not write the full address on it. Thus Vanka's attempt to rescue himself from the house will go in vain, his sufferings will not end. Ironically Vanka is happy in the end but the readers are sad. Chekhov touches the hearts of readers, makes them empathize with Vanka. The issue of child labor as well as the exploitation of the poor tickles the delicate strings of the human heart. Through the heartrending story of the nine-year-old boy, Chekhov brings out the inhuman treatment of the poor in his time.

"The Peasants":

In the story, Chekhov presents a grim picture of rural poverty and the heartrending condition of the peasants. Natural calamities and the barren land in many regions in the country impose a heavy burden on the peasants; in addition to this there were installments of "quit-rent", the redemption payment that must be paid to compensate the former owners for the loss of their land. The somber picture of poverty, bleakness and crudity of village life in "The Peasants" did not seem to be an exaggeration to Chekhov's contemporaries. Some of the poor did think that they had been happier and more secure under the old masters.

The story is divided into nine parts or sections. It tells the story of a Muscovite couple that has to move from the capital to their native place, a village. Nikolay, the husband, was a waiter in the Slav Bazaar restaurant in Moscow but lost his job as a result of his illness. Chekhov emphasizes the lack of medical facilities for the poor in his time. The couple decides to go home, to the country, because "at home being ill is easier and living is cheaper" (152). He goes to Zhukovo, his village, along with his wife Olga and daughter Sasha. What follows in the story is the stark representation of the poor and their poverty. Chekhov not only depicts the poverty but also comments on the reasons for the situation. When the couple first visits their home, a very small hut inhabited by thirteen members- what they see is "Poverty, poverty everywhere!" (151).

Chekhov contrasts the present situation with the past. Old Osip gets reminiscent of the past when he was a peasant on the estate and says:

It was better under the masters. You worked and ate and slept all in their proper turn. You got cabbage soup and buckwheat porridge for dinner and for supper as well. As much cucumber and cabbage as you liked: you could eat to your heart's content, as much as ever you wanted. (189)

Not only the rich but the parish also has been ill-treating the peasants. The priest would take fifteen kopecks from each of those who did not make preparations during festivals. The peasants could not decorate their houses, buy presents or new clothes for any festival for the family and according to the then prevailing law of the church the peasants had to pay a certain amount to the church as penalty for not celebrating the festival. Ideally the church should pay them for the celebrations, for buying new clothes or gifts but ironically it extracts money from them. Towards the end of the story Chekhov conveys the latent irony in the Russian society that, even towards the end of the 19th century the poor were robbed of their rights by political and religious laws. Instead of fighting for their rights the peasants pray to God during the processions. Granny, Osip and their drunkard son Cyriac pray to the images of the Blessed Virgin who is a “protection against insult, slavish bondage, oppressive, intolerable poverty, and the terrible vodka”. They are made to believe that only God can relieve them of their miseries.

Chekhov subtly records the attitudes of the peasants towards God and religion. Some rich peasants in the village are God-fearing, believe in salvation of the soul but are afraid of death. Since they are better off than others, the sense of duty towards God in them is stronger than in the poor peasants. Marx called religion the “opium” of the masses which prevented them from realizing how terrible their lives were and the need to rebel against the existing order. The Chikildeevs and many other families in the village on the contrary welcome death; they are ready to embrace death anytime because they see it as redemption from sorrows, poverty and sufferings. They are more afraid of every kind of illness than death.

How does the state apparatus work to exploit the workers? On one hand there is the government which is forcing peasants to pay for their freedom and on the other hand the church, too, exploits the peasants by asking for alms from them. There is no way by which the peasants could have money to pay for their freedom. Thus the whole system runs in such a way that the peasants will remain poor throughout their lives, there is no way to pay for freedom; they are trapped. Marx would advocate rebellion on the part of the peasants. But in the story there is no spirit of rebellion or revolution among the poor. There is lethargy and acceptance of the established system. But in the real world suddenly we see the first revolution coming in 1905 in Russia. Chekhov, who depicts the workers in his short stories as dull and submissive started fighting for their rights in the early 20th century. Chekhov built hospitals and schools for the poor in his country. The anger and hatred for the established system gave way to the first revolution in Russia.

Poverty deprives them of education and renders them superstitious. Nikolay dies because his mother falls a prey to the primitive system of treatment of blood-letting as a cure for his illness. Nikolay is actually improving after taking medicines but one day his mother brings a Jew, an incompetent, amateur physician who wrongly treats him with blood-letting. He makes the family believe that the illness will be cured by letting the blood flow out of his

body. But unfortunately, Nikolay catches cold after the treatment and dies. Granny, in a way, is responsible for her son's death.

When Chekhov started writing short stories many things had changed in Russia. He presents vivid pictures of the contemporary Russian society such as the clash of ideas between the old and the new generations, the struggles, aspirations of the bourgeoisie etc. Often, Chekhov takes a stand on the issue of class division in Russia. He is contemptuous of the newly emerged middle class for adopting the values and life style of the upper class, for imitating them and for forgetting their humble backgrounds from which they have come. In the stories like "Gooseberries" he lashes out at the middle class mentality and behavior. Instead of sympathizing with the poor and helping them, the middle class keeps itself busy with enjoying life and exploiting the underprivileged. Chekhov sees no change in the mentality of the Russians; the social psyche remains the same. Earlier the landowners subjugated their serfs and now the bourgeoisie was exploiting the poor. Chekhov, like Maupassant, is unpredictable because there is always a twist at the end in their stories.

"From a Case-book":

Through the story Chekhov projects the picture of factory workers, a newly emerged class in Russia after 1861. The factory workers were earlier peasants but their sorrows had not ended even after the abolition of serfdom. Mrs. Lyalikov's daughter, Liza, is suffering from an unknown illness; she is disturbed in her mind and has palpitations, occasionally. A factory doctor had been treating her but her mother and the governess decide to consult an expert from Moscow. Korolev does not find any particular reason behind the illness; it is more psychological than physical, thinks Korolev. He finds the cause of her illness in the sufferings and exploitations of the workers in the factory. While wandering around the factories he sees the terrible working conditions of the workers and gives an analysis and explanation of the whole situation at the Lyalikos. He believes that since Liza and her mother exploit the poor, there is no peace and happiness in their lives; there seems to be poetic justice in reality.

Korolev in his thoughts highlights the class-division and puts forth the theory of exploitation. He finds the hierarchy of the classes in the society, the poor, the middle-class and the rich. The rich are represented by Mrs. Lyalikov and Liza; the middleclass are the clerks and other officers in the factory who are busy in keeping records; while the poor are the factory workers who work indefatigably. At the end of his analysis of the situation, he finds that neither the master nor the workers are happy and only a few people- like the governess- get more than they deserve. Korolev believes that this uneasiness is common in society; this is an anti-thesis which will soon resolve itself in synthesis.

Chekhov gives the details of the workers' sufferings but does not support the idea of revolution. The situation will change, that is the tone of the story in the end. But how the change will come, Chekhov does not indicate. Schefski in his article "Chekhov and Tolstoyan Philosophy" rightly argue that in his early career as a writer Chekhov was greatly influenced

by Tolstoy's philosophy. Chekhov disapproves of the aristocrats in the 19th century, criticizes them for their idle and aimless living³. He, too, like Tolstoy, seems to advocate the importance of physical work in life.

Korolev does not find much change in the conditions of the poor between the past and the present. Christina Dmitrivna, the governess, boasts that the workers are being given enough facilities such as magic-lantern lectures, tea rooms and theatres at the factory but Korolev understands that it is not enough and they are not of much help to the workers. He represents the 'intelligentsia' in the country. He is sorry for the plight of the workers, but is helpless; he does not know what to do or how to help the poor.

.Chekhov's attitude can be clearly seen in the story. Korolev does think of nature as the supreme power punishing Liza and her mother. Neither Tolstoy nor Chekhov thinks about revolution as a possible answer to the problem of inequality in the society. They do not support the idea that the poor should fight for their rights. Chekhov's response to the question of poverty seems ironical. On the one hand he agrees that there has been exploitation of the poor but instead of fighting for their cause he shows that if the poor in Russia are sad, the rich are also suffering emotionally, mentally. So there is a kind of equilibrium in the society; all are miserable. He sees the answer to this situation in the future. The disturbances in the society will be resolved in the future but he does not say how they will be resolved.

By the time Chekhov started writing, the social picture has changed. One could observe the upward mobility of some peasants and workers. The masters in Chekhov's stories are hard taskmasters who are after profit. They are cruel and treat their servants inhumanly; "Vanka" illustrates it. The peasants are nostalgic about the past; they are often shown as brooding over the days before the abolition. They are gloomy and do not find escape from the situation. However, in Tolstoy as well as in Chekhov the peasants accept their fate and surrender to the situation, they do not revolt.

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