

The Three Sisters: Chekhov's Idea into Cultural Conflict Between the Attitudes and Aspirations

Ali Reza Bonyadi^{[a],[b],*}

^[a] Institute of Literature, National Academy of Science of Armenia, 15 Grigor Lusavorich Street, Yerevan 0015, Republic of Armenia.

^[b] Department of Theater, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran.

* Corresponding author.

Received 4 June 2012; accepted 18 October 2012

Abstract

Chekhov was a far-sighted and freedom-loving personality; he respected the human rights and equality. In his stories and plays he presented social problems of the people, prospective ideas of Russian Intellectuals, Realism, Cynicism, Skepticism, Pessimism, Failure, etc.. In Chekhov's opinion life of the human is based on false conviction such as slavery. In *The Three Sisters*, he reflects his ideas of life, deep look at people, and sympathy for each other to attract attention of the readers and continues his way, having raised new issues of life.

Key words: Chekhov; Comedy; *The Three Sisters*; Moscow; Satire; Character

Ali Reza Bonyadi (2012). *The Three Sisters: Chekhov's Idea into Cultural Conflict Between the Attitudes and Aspirations*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(5), 84-87. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120805.2228> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120805.2228>

INTRODUCTION

Chekhov's humor is refined satire that is far from exaggeration. In contrary to classical writers he never focuses on a character and shows everybody and not the only one. It is interesting that the scene decoration and requisites originate from Chekhov's spirit. Chekhov's characters are fatigued and weary persons, obstinate, stupid and talkative, they do not listen to anybody and nobody listens to them. Love is present here, just like the works of all the other writers of the world. But there

is a difference, love is mainly unrequited in Chekhov's works as even the lovers do not understand each other as e.g. Treplev's love to Nina in "Seagull", Sonya's love to Astrov in "Uncle Vanya" and Andrey's failure in "Three Sisters". On the other hand Chekhov's characters are miserable and feeble to personal mistakes and social difficulties. They only try to pretend just and keep away from the reality to release from various difficulties. "The Cherry Orchard" becomes an abandoned and insignificant area and the sisters leave their house in the play "Three Sisters" and seek for a refuge. Treplev ruins his reputation and is terrified from his residence in the play "The Seagull"; just like the coffee table and the whole house in a mess in "Uncle Vanya". Chekhov skillfully used satire in his plays. E.g. there are wanderers in the play "The Seagull" who look for happiness and some, meeting their fates, do not make attempts. All the characters in "The Cherry Orchard" are landlords or servants; it is interesting that the rich men do not have advantages to servants and the servants sneer at their landlords. The characters of "Uncle Vanya" are hopeless, in spite of being unemployed or working; they do not find a way at dead ends. There are two opposite groups in "Three Sisters", some are romantic and polite; the others are realists. Nobody can do work as all of them are in misunderstanding.

DISCUSSION

Three sisters live in a town far away from Moscow where there is a military base; they have higher education and want to return to Moscow, which they left for about eleven years ago. From sisters Olga teaches in the school and to her words she got tired from free working.

Olga: "...and these four years that I have been teaching at the school I really have felt my youth and strength draining out of me, drop by drop and my one dream growing stronger all the time." (Chekhov, 1973, p. 94)

The other sister *Masha* who had broken up marriage

when she was young and now was in love with *Vershinin*, tries to reveal her intellectual skills in public and at last third sister Irina decided to overcome own depression and sadness using own volitional abilities. She is indifferent to *Tuzenbach* and *Solyony* who continuously made court to her. At the end *Tuzenbach* is killed in a duel. Irina is a very dreamy person and she expresses the following about her:

“*Irina*: I am twenty-three, I have been working for a long time, my brain has dried up, I have got thin, old and stupid. And there is nothing, no satisfaction! Time is passing and I seem to be moving away from the real, beautiful life, moving further and further away into a kind of chasm. I am in complete despair. And how I am steel alive, how I have not killed myself yet. I do not understand.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.139). Their brother *Andrey* is married to *Natalya* and his sisters are not fond of her appreciating her as illiterate. *Natasha* took off their paternal house and pledged her gambler husband’s house. In the drama sisters’ hope to move to Moscow is destroyed and rumors about closing the military base disturb them. They tried to find the way out: *Irina* begins working in telegraph office, *Masha* and *Vershinin* fell in love, and *Tuzenbach* is being killed. A martial music blew and sisters hug one another to forget own pains. Chekhov wrote that play in 1901, i.e. when beginning of literary revolution was declared.

Tuzenbach said on this matter:

“... But only just! Only just! The time is coming when something huge will overwhelm us. A strong, healthy storm is on its way. It is already quite close and soon it will sweep away the idleness and complacency in your society, the prejudice against work and the stagnant boredom. I shall work and in another twenty-five or thirty years everyone will work. Every one!” (Chekhov, 1973, p.97). Characters in “Three Sisters” play have bright hopes for future even if this future will come after two or three hundred years.

On this matter *Vershinin* told, “...in two hundred. Three hundred or perhaps a thousand years -- the space of time is not important -- a new and happy life will begin. We will not take part in it, of course, but we are living for I now, working and, well, suffering for it. We are creating it. Therein lies the aim of our existence and, if you like, our happiness.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.118).

Vershinin believes in bright future; he is a good orator, but there was huge space between hopes and reality. *Vershinin* always complained about his wife’s difficult nature and due to her he attempted suicide. He jeers at own children for some reasons. She is unable to resist life difficulties and became pitiful person and object of ridicule.

Chekhov criticizes persons like *Vershinin* who only talk, have dreamy thoughts, but not able to undertake anything. Having created such characters the author involves them into his humorous circuit of works. Although way of life and behavior are funny, peoples’ pain and sorrow are hidden deep inside. Chekhov

himself insisted, “*The Three Sisters*” is a comedy and *Chebutykin*’s character is a bright proof to it. He is also dreamy and thinks that his expressed thoughts must be accepted as thought of an outstanding philosophy.

“*Chebutykin*: ... perhaps I am not a human being at all. Perhaps I am only pretending that I have hands and feet and a head. Perhaps I do not exist at all and only imagine that I am walking about, eating and sleeping...” (Chekhov, 1973, p.133). Chekhov criticizes intellectuals layer who are indifferent to public affairs. He created also character of *Andrey* who is a subject of bitter satire. He wanted to become a lecturer in university, but at present he works as a secretary of local council and board chairman was in illegal liaison with his wife. “Service” for *Andrey* was principal and he does not have any relation to science and local council service.

“*Andrey*: ... I do serve on the Local Council. I am a member of the Council and to my mind that is as noble and worthy as serving science. I am a member of the Council and proud of it, if you want to know...” (Chekhov, 1973, p.140).

In this play Chekhov criticizes the so-called “service”. In reality *Andrey* is a worthless human being and object of ridicule. It is difficult for him to accept his wife’s immoral behavior.

Andrey. “...I love *Natasha*, that is true, but at times she seems incredibly vulgar and then I feel lost. I do not understand why I love her so much, or did love her.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.149).

It seems that *Andrey* said the most ridiculous dialogues when he criticized his father. He oppressed them with education and knowledge of three foreign languages.

“*Andrey*: Father, God rest his soul, plagued us with education...” (Chekhov, 1973, p.104).

After father’s death *Andrey* “started to put on weight” and “become free from torment”, without noticing that he continues living at *Natasha*’s will and he is helpless and feeble under *Natasha*’s patronage. Chekhov criticizes persons who does not learn by own mistakes and absurd events and keep on persisting. They are very imaginary and not practical persons.

“*Andrey*. The present is hateful, but when I think about the future my heart leaps. The worry and constriction disappear. There is a glimmering of light in the distance, and I can see freedom, I can see myself and my children becoming free from idleness, from *kuass*, from goose with stewed cabbage, from after-dinner naps, from loafing our lives away.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.152).

These are very majestic and wonderful words but their execution is beyond strength of people like *Andrey*. Characters of this play are sorrow for the past, which does not exist any long and pinned their hopes on abstract beautiful future that has not come yet and will not come. In reality they live out of time, they belong neither to past nor to future as they are restricted by opportunities and can not create the life they have dreamt about. Chekhov’s

characters do not have centralization and are far away from each other, i.e. they are helpless for creation of bases for new future. Chekhov's heroes are devoid of natural dialogues and the best example is *Ferapont* with a partial hearing loss, and human types such as *Andrey* are fond of talking to each other but do not need to get answer. In reality they carried on monologue, but not dialogue. They do not want their hearers to listen or understand them.

Ferapont: I could not rightly say, Master *Andrey*. My hearing not what it ought to be.

Andrey: If you could hear properly I probably would not be talking to you. I must talk to somebody. My wife does not understand me, and I am afraid of my sisters, for some reason, afraid that they will laugh at me, or reproach me. I do not drink and I do not like public houses, but how I would love to be in Moscow now sitting at *Testov's* or the Bolshoi Moscow restaurant, old man.

Ferapont: The contractor at the Council was saying t'other day that some merchants got together and started eating pancakes in Moscow. One of them ate forty and popped off. Or was it fifty? I cannot remember.

Andrey: You sit in a large Moscow restaurant, you do not know anyone and no one knows you, but all the same you do not feel like a stranger. Yet here you know a complete and everyone knows you, but you are a stranger. A complete stranger, all on your own.

Ferapont: Eh? (Pause). And that contractor said -- maybe he was lying -- that there is a great cable running right across Moscow. (Chekhov, 1973, p.114). In these scenes we are a witness of collision between dreamy *Andrey* and realist *Ferapont*; in reality *Andrey* feels life's events even that his wife was unfaithful to him.

Andrey: ...The wives deceive the husbands, and the husbands lie and pretend they do not see or hear anything... (Chekhov, 1973, p.152), and the oppressing, inescapable and degenerate influence crushes their children, and the spark of divinity is extinguished in them, and they become just the same pitiful and mean corpses without life, all the same as one another, just as their parents were before them.

And again we are witnesses of funny scene between *Ferapont* and *Andrey*.

Andrey: ... (To *Ferapont* angrily). What do you want?

Ferapont: The papers have got to be signed.

Andrey: I am sick and tired of you.

Ferapont: (handling him the papers). The cloakroom attendant at the town hall said the temperature dropped to two hundred below freezing in St.Petersburg. (Chekhov, 1973, p.153).

The painful thing in all these events is cold manners of persons who do not want to get in touch with each other, isolate and blame the other one for pure understanding. These individuals have unique inward life, which do not share with others, try to solve problems alone and if try to find somebody to share with, meet someone like *Natasha*. In one of the letters written to Chekhov; *Danchenko* said,

"Topic of this work is always open without deep shocks used by old dramatists" (Chekhov, 2009, p.73).

Heroes of the play were so absorbed into own thoughts that even were unable to leave for Moscow willingly or even when they were hearing about movement of military base they sank into sadness. As if they chained to small town environment and did not have the way out. Chekhov criticizes and presents their tragedy, blames main characters of situation, i.e. the same persons who might be thinking about.

"The characters in *Three Sisters* oscillate between the world of strict order and the world of chance (which turns out to be ill chance). Chance rules their lives as the uniform once did. They have no power over either because they always flow with the stream, no matter which pole they belong to; this is true not only for the characters but for all of the creatures in the play" (Ulea, 2003, p.120). Satire is obvious also in characters of *Solyony* and *Kulygin*. *Solyony* pretends to participation in a duel and *Kulygin* is a flippant schoolteacher who appreciates environment only by academic points scale; he knows nothing else.

Kulygin: (Applying to *Chebutykin*). Three minus for behavior (Chekhov, 1973, p.109).

Or in other place:

Kulygin: (Picking up the watch pieces). Fancy breaking such a precious object. Oh, Doctor! Doctor! Nought minus for conduct (Chekhov, 1973, p.135). He seems to be so ludicrous and poor that even seeing his wife in *Vershinin's* arms says consolation words;

Kulygin: (Embarrassed). Never mind, never mind. Let her have a little cry. Good *Masha*! Nice *Masha*! You are my wife and I am happy, whatever happens. I am not complaining. I do not reproach you.... (Chekhov, 1973, p.155).

Fedotik is also one of the satirical characters. When he hears about the fire in his house and burning of all property down he comes in to the room by dancing and declares:

Fedotik: (Dances). It is burn down! It is burnt down. Right down to the ground! (Laughter).

Irina: Has it really? Down to the ground?

Fedotik: (Laughs). Yes. Nothing left at all. My guitar and the camera, and my letter -- they have all gone. I wanted to give you a notebook, but that is gone too (Chekhov, 1973, p.136).

Fedotik is type of persons who can resist any life difficulties and even does not take burning of housewares to heart. It is interesting that Chekhov brought the fire scene in the performance at the time when all characters were dancing, but in reality they were celebrating their unhappy life. Another interesting character in drama is *Rodey*.

He is a drill coach, he burrs and his speech is amusing. If *Ferapont* is deaf and does not hear others and only he hears, in case of *Rodey* nobody hears or does not want to hear him;

Rodey: (loudly). Happy birthday and all the very best.

The weather is wonderful today, absolutely marvelous. All morning I was out walking with the schoolboys. I teach gym up at the grammar school.

Fedotik: you can move now, Miss Irina. (Takes a photograph) You are looking very nice today. (Takes a top of his packet) by the way, here is a top for you. It makes a lovely noise ... (Chekhov, 1973, p.110). Characters in comedy of Chekhov and weak and unstable relations are pictured in the form of satire. In "Three Sisters" this relation is revealed through wrong belief and embarrassment, on the one hand and general slavery. That is why world of "The Three Sisters" becomes extremely symbolic -- stable and unstable elements without knowledge of human real relation or performance of any relations create their own way.

"The play discusses fatalism and simultaneously shows how lives are shaped by time and the importance of acting in time. 'No play has ever conveyed more subtly the sense of the transitory nature of human life'" (Whyman, 2011, p.138).

This symbolic world becomes a border for two quite different worlds, i.e. border between a civilized world without war and a military world. All roles are divided into simple groups: military and non-military. In other words in military world of Three Sisters' soldiers, teachers, staff of post department and others continue their life and even at difficult moments they differ from people as three sisters who live in another, non-military world. Passage through the monotonous world into their free life is threatened and its result is death or failure.

Actually, disaster for characters, who are pleased at getting free from father's authority, takes by another way. This time they become slaves not of human outward authority but first of all of inward weakness, and the second they are depended on irregular and chaos environment. At this nothing, but "their father's death" can not save them from slavery. So, their incapacity to rule over the dual dreams, outward and inward environment become method for creation of curious characters in "Three Sisters" play for Chekhov.

"Chekhov points up one of the strangest true facts of emotional life: nothing binds people closer together than mutual unhappiness. And that is why Chekhov is sometimes so funny" (Moss, 1999, p.128).

Characters in "Three Sisters" play are varied between difficulties from military life on the one hand and happy life. At last it is found out that happy life is harmful for them.

It seems that Chekhov wrote "Three Sisters" play to expound characters of Vaudeville. At the end of this play Chekhov describes traditional and some peculiarities of Vaudeville comedy (who decided to modernize and make accessible own comedies through it), e.g. *Chebutykin's* dialogue, "... will not you take this little date from me?" (Chekhov, 1973, p.135). He emphasizes that it is

just vaudeville song and wishes *Chebutykin* to sing it. Beginning of first curtain as a base for sisters' dialogue begins with satire and humor of *Solyony* and *Chebutykin* and their dialogue is diminished by songs. In such performances the author's aim is to emphasize own ideas that brings in many opinions in the play.

Stanislavski believed that "the men of Chekhov do not bathe, as we did at that time, in their own sorrow. Just the opposite; they, like Chekhov himself, seek life, joy, laughter, courage. The men and women of Chekhov want to live and not to die. They are active and surge to overcome the hard and unbearable impasses into which life has plunged them." (Geoffrey, 2006, p.203).

So, at writing "Three Sisters" (from the beginning to the end) Chekhov works at comedy and not on drama. As they do not have any power and nobody helps to gain opportunities they always follow public opinion, moral and manners ruling over them and their dreams, which will never become real.

CONCLUSION

The character of Chekhov's plays live in real freedom and democracy where the ideology of equality is something, like falsification and lie. It also corresponds to the principles of Moscow theatre that educated such artists that shouldn't become stars but be good enough and on the same level. The dialogues of the plays fully correspond to the following idea of A. Chekhov "The people are indifferent to each other and there is no mutual understanding". They do not want and cannot understand each other. Everybody only talks about their preferences and are indifferent to others' ideas. So, the dialogue is a combination of incoherent expressions that are grounded not on the logic but the atmosphere and the situation. This was also an art innovation during those times as in real life a human couldn't talk like Chekhov's heroes.

REFERENCES

- Chekhov, A. P. (1973). *Selected Works in Two Volumes* (K. Cook, Trans.). (Vol. 2). Moscow: Progress Publisher.
- Chekhov, A. P. (2009). *Chekhov's Complex Works* (Vols.1-10). (N. Kashichi Trans.). Tehran: Tus Publisher.
- Geoffrey, B. (2006). *Interpreting of Chekhov*. Australia: ANUE Press.
- Moss, H. (1999). Three Sisters. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Anton Chekhov* (pp. 121-138). USA: Chelsea House Pub.
- Ulea, V. (2002). *A Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type: Chess, Literature, and Film*. USA: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Whyman, R. (2011). *Anton Chekhov*. New York: Routledge Publisher.