



RAISING SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE SHORT STORIES OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Rashmi Priya

Research Scholar, University Dept. of English, L N Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar

Prof (Dr) A K Bachchan

Research Supervisor, University Dept. of English, L N Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar

ABSTRACT

Anton Chekhov started writing short stories in the form of anecdotes. He developed the technique of the stream of consciousness in his stories, later adopted by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and many others.

His stories show that no matter how meticulously we go through the characters, the human condition remains mysterious.

Chekhov was a practising doctor, an environmentalist, a researcher and a philanthropist.

Many modern short story writers believe Chekhov to be the originator of the modern short story. Raymond Carver believed that Chekhov was the greatest of all short story writers.

His stories deal with different shades of human psychology in different conditions. These stories include "Bet", "The Lottery Ticket", "Lady with the Lapdog", "Husband", "Excellent People", "Fat and Thin".

Chekhov's stories are as wonderful and significant today as when they first appeared.

KEYWORDS : Anton Chekhov, Anecdotes, Consciousness, Realism

In this era of literature short story has emerged as a prominent form of storytelling. Its single and compact plot structure keeps reader spellbound. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) is known as the great specialist of the short story among all genres. Born in Taganrog, Russia in a lower middle class family he started writing anecdotes to support his family and education. He is best known for his innovation of the stream of consciousness technique in his stories, which very much inspired modern short story writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others. His writing is marked by a profound and meticulous study of the human condition in various circumstances. He was different in his genre because of his impressionistic portrayal of the true realism of the human soul.

Realism has been expressed through symbolism. He also draws the attention of the audience, thus stimulating moral thought, and stirring reaction. Realism is also defined as art-imitating life that is source. This is a fitting account of Anton Chekhov's stories, for they tend to show the stagnant, helpless quality of Russian society in the latter part of the 19th century. We should observe the remarks "The suffering we see around us these days - and there's plenty of it - is at least a sign that society has reached a certain moral level." Hence, while the portrayal of life here seemed 'gloomy and pessimistic', it was still good for theatre in that it presented issues which audiences could identify with. It was also the more intellectual theatre when the story writer could express their views, compared with the conventional dramas that merely played out fiction. Chekhov tends to portray people who are perpetually unsatisfied.

He was a contemporary of great Russian Writers Leo Tolstoy and Fyoder Dostoevsky but unlike them he never raised ethical issues through his stories, rather he depicted life as it is. He described the Russian life of his time using a simple plot and lack of obtrusive literary devices that led to Tolstoy's critical remarks "Chekhov is a photographer a very talented photographer, but just a photographer".² Though Tolstoy did not like his play, he liked his short stories.

Chekhov's initial literary work in the form of sketches and anecdotes appeared in humorous Journals. He often signed them pseudonymously as 'Antosha Chekhonte' and 'Man without a Spleen'. Gradually Chekhov's ambition grew and he made formal innovations that very much influenced the evolution of the modern short stories.

Concentrating on apparent trivialities, they create a special kind of atmosphere, sometimes termed haunting or lyrical. He is a master in

creating a very special setting mostly prevalent in Russia and dealing with major issues of the society through his stories.

Chekhov's mother, Yevgeniya, was an excellent story teller who entertained children with tales of her travels with her cloth-merchant father all over Russia. Chekhov admitted, "Our talent we got from our father, but our soul from our mother".

Chekhov's approach to life and to art was inextricably linked together by his scientific materialism. That in literary matters he was drawn to Naturalism was almost inevitable. The central dogma of Naturalism that creative writers was to employ the scientific method in their works and was 'to observe and to record as dispassionately and impersonally as the scientist' does. The scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century and the introduction of the scientific method in the arts were fundamental factors in shaping Naturalism. Being a materialist, Chekhov wished in his plays and short stories to analyse human behaviour in a wholly scientific manner. He endeavoured to apply the methods of science to his artistic creations. In particular he strove to employ the concept of scientific objectivity in all of his writing. The need to depict 'life as it actually is' was for Chekhov the *sine qua non* of his artistic and personal credo. Like other naturalistic writers, Chekhov's scientific approach to literature led him to include the seamy side of life in his depictions of real life. When he was attacked for including unpalatable elements in his short story Mire, he defended his approach by applying the principles of science:

For chemists there is nothing unclean on this earth. A writer should be as objective as a chemist; he must give up everyday subjectivity and realize that dunghills play a very respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions belong to life as much as good ones do. The artist observes, selects, guesses and synthesizes.

Though already celebrated by the Russian readers his talent was unknown to the world until World War I. It was Constance Garnetts' translations that won him English readers and made him famous worldwide. George Bernard Shaw was one of the first non-Russians to praise Chekhov's plays. He subtitled his Heartbreak House "A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes" and observed resemblance between the quandary of the British landed class and that of their Russian counterparts as portrayed by Chekhov. "The same nice people, the same utter futility". Despite his early death, Anton Chekhov left a large corpus of short stories. He was awarded the Pushkin Prize in 1888 for his volume of short stories. In the 'Twilight' his talent was acknowledged by J M Murray as early as

1920 as 'a standard by which modern literary effort must be measured'. Chekhov is known as a pioneer of the plotless story. He developed a number of technical innovations in the art and craft of short story. Chekhov never had any philosophical theory of life to explain. His great talent lay in his day to day depiction of life around him. He believed that 'literature is called artistic when it depicts life as it is'.³ He did not present life as completely white or completely black, rather he put gray shades in life. He maintained a fine emotional balance between characters, simultaneously tragic and comic, pathetic and ridiculous.

Chekhov's modern translation that brought him fame worldwide was the rendering by Ronand Hingley, *The Oxford Chekhov* ⁴. Among the greatest of his mature stories are 'Ward No. Six', 'My Life', 'Lady with the Lapdog', 'Difficult People', 'Husband', 'Fat and Thin' and others. All stories are characterized by their subtle blending of realism and naturalism and unique combination of comedy, tragedy, and pathos.

'Bet', the famous story of Chekhov argues between the question of which is better, a death penalty or a life in prison; undoubtedly life is superior in all conditions over death. And it is knowledge that makes life meaningful, that is why realizing the power of knowledge the young lawyer denounced the two millions and wrote to the Banker:

*To prove to you in action how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two millions of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deprive myself of the right to the money I shall go out from here five hours before the time fixed, and so break the compact....*⁵

A same incident, what can be important for one can be unimportant for another is beautifully shown in the story *An Incident*.

While Vanya and Nina are deeply hurt with the kitten's death, their mother is worried about their dirty looks and their night gowns. Children consider the death of the kitten no lesser than the death of a human being, while their mother takes it in an easy manner as a part of day to day life.

Modern problems like monotonous life and infidelity are the central theme of the story 'Lady with the Lapdog', it starts with an affair that begins usually but ends in an unforeseen way.

'Husband' is the story of a jealous husband who feels envious when he watches his wife dancing merrily with a soldier.

'Fat and Thin' shows the duality of human relationship, finely explored in the interaction of two grown men, who were once schoolboys together.

That man is mysterious in all conditions, is beautifully shown in the story 'An Enigmatic Nature', when a budding young author meets a pretty lady on a railway carriage; several shades of his enigmatic nature are revealed.

Raymond Carver who wrote 'Errand', the short story about Chekhov's death, strongly believed him to be the greatest of all short story writers and put his remark- "Chekhov's stories are as wonderful and necessary now as when they first appeared. It is not only the immense number of stories he wrote – for few, if any, writers have ever done more-it is the awesome frequency with which he produced masterpiece stories that thrive (*sic*) us as well as delight and move us, that lay bare our emotions in ways only true art can accomplish".⁶

References:-

1. http://www.chuckiii.com/Reports/English/What_Is_Realism.shtml
2. The Anvil, Literary Journal with a difference; P-116, ISSN:- 2350-0638
3. http://www.cengage.com/english/book_content/141300654X_arp/bios/a_f/chekhov.html
4. Ronand Hingley, *The Oxford Chekhov* (9 vols, 1964-80)
5. Selected Stories Anton Chekhov; P-8; ISBN:- 978-81-291-3143-0)
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Chekhov