

## The Agony of the Unheeded Sobs in Anton Chekhov's *Misery*

Noorbakhsh Hooti<sup>1</sup>, Neda Partovi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant professor, Razi University, Faculty of Arts, English Department, Kermanshah, Iran.

<sup>2</sup>B A Student of Modern languages and literature, Faculty of Foreign languages and literatures, University of Turin, Turin, Italy.

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### ABSTRACT

This study makes an attempt to have a deep journey to the tragically terse world of Chekhov's *Misery*, to uncover the buried layers of man's private world. It further shows how a passionate and emotionally structured individual becomes resistant to the highly emotionally inflicted contexts. It tries to display the rusted conscience, which seems to have lost the altruistic rhythm of humanity. It eventually reveals the fragmented world of each individual, which enjoys and suffers its own touch of joy and melancholy that may create a paranoiac sense of isolation and alienation in the tragically stricken world of the emotionally susceptible individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** Chekhov, misery, alienation, melancholy, conscience.

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### INTRODUCTION

Chekhov in his *Misery* gives a beautiful picture of a world; where individuals show different reactions to the inevitably dominant circumstances. The melancholic moot point of the story is the pre-assumed expectations, which individuals have taken for granted as the vanguard to face all the forthcoming events of their lives. Indeed, expectations are the universally common traits of man, which exist in each and every mental structure of individuals. But, the depth and extent of this sense of expectation vary from one individual to another. We cannot have identical expectations from different individuals of differing affinities. Hence, it should be noted that lots of elements are responsible for giving birth to an expectation, namely; social, cultural, religious and moral elements and so on. Among the various expectations, the highly expected expectation is the moral expectation. Mellema (2004: 23) asserts:

Our moral expectations are frequently shaped or determined by sociological factors. Whether or not we are expected to perform actions which benefit another person depends to a certain extent upon the nature of our relationship to the person. Other things being equal, we are more likely to be expected to act for the benefit of someone to whom we have close ties than someone to whom we do not have close ties. Strangers are people to whom we are least likely to be expected to benefit, especially strangers who are distant.

Man is a social animal, and as a social animal, he needs the attention of his fellow beings. He expects others to feel his pain as well, which may be the most common way to lessen his burden of sorrow and sufferings. The tragedy begins when he finds himself alienated in his surroundings and feels the vacuum of communication. Chekhov gives a close scrutiny to the mental web of the individuals. He displays their dominant practicing values, which instill meaning to their lives. Indeed, he is deeply agonized to see the soulless socio-political contexts, where individuals hardly lead a novel life. As Whyman (2011: 27) asserts, "Chekhov shows that circumstances are often not conducive to the individual's search for meaning in life. He depicts the triviality of everyday life in the Russian provinces, where people have little artistic or intellectual stimulation."

#### *Misery and the Sense of Agony*

Chekhov is a writer, who cannot turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the sufferings of the common people. He tries to delve into the very crux of the epicenter of man's sufferings. He does not simply display the sorrow and steps aside, but tries to open an optimistic window of a joyful future. According to Patrick (1932: 658):

Men of genius like Chekhov are usually not satisfied with flinging only criticisms. When they criticize and condemn the sluggish current of contemporary existence, their action is motivated by a sort of "categorical imperative," by the persistent innate demand of their restless souls which cannot be appeased by existing conditions. This demand is in itself something positive, something real; for it is born of an ideal of life which the author has visualized, towards which he aspires, and with which he compares the humdrum world.

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\*Corresponding author: Noorbakhsh Hooti, Assistant professor, Razi University, Faculty of Arts, English Department, Post code: 6714967346 Kermanshah, Iran. E-mail: nhooti@yahoo.com Phone No: +989125935460

Chekhov tries to awaken the indifferent man, who seems to be enchained in the dark dungeon of the deceptive slumber. He wants to show how insipid and tasteless life may be, when the doors of communication are closed to one another. Indeed, the highly torturing agony of man is the sense of solitude that he feels in the presence of the absent individuals of the crowded world of indifference. As Scott (2007:10) asserts:

Dimensions of indifference define interruptions of orders as well as limits to our sense of meaning. We will see that living with alertness to the dimension of indifference can help to shape attitudes that are alert to the value of incommensurable differences. At best those attitudes are not inclined to overcome such differences in the interests of orders that in the name of right and goodness add to the misery of people.

Chekhov's *Misery* is a melancholic display of the dismal world of indifference, where man seems to be doomed to swallow his worries dolefully. It shows the cavernous abyss between individuals, who seem to be deficient in altruistic sense of emotional dependence and affinity, which consequently entangles them in a mesh of pestilential mental state. Chekhov shows the misery of man in introducing his leading character Iona Potapov, the sledge-driver, whose son has recently passed away, but cannot find any sympathetic ears and hearts to commune with. It shows the impossibility and impotence of communication in the world of man as an unsociable social animal. The following text shows the first traumatic agony inflicted to Iona through the indifferent reaction shown by his first passenger, who does not seem to be touched by the news of Iona's son's death:

"Sledge to Vyborg kaya!" Iona hears. "Sledge!" Iona starts, and through his snow-plastered eyelashes sees an officer in a military overcoat with a hood over his head. "To Vyborg kaya," repeats the officer. "Are you asleep? To Vyborg kaya!" In token of assent Iona gives a tug at the reins which sends cakes of snow flying from the horse's back and shoulders. The officer gets into the sledge. The sledge-driver clicks to the horse, cranes his neck like a swan, rises in his seat, and more from habit than necessity brandishes his whip. The mare cranes her neck, too, crooks her stick-like legs, and hesitatingly sets of..."Where are you shoving, you devil?" Iona immediately hears shouts from the dark mass shifting to and fro before him. "Where the devil are you going? Keep to the r-right!" "You don't know how to drive! Keep to the right," says the officer angrily. A coachman driving a carriage swears at him; a pedestrian crossing the road and brushing the horse's nose with his shoulder looks at him angrily and shakes the snow off his sleeve. Iona fidgets on the box as though he were sitting on thorns, jerks his elbows, and turns his eyes about like one possessed as though he did not know where he was or why he was there. "What rascals they all are!" says the officer jocosely. "They are simply doing their best to run up against you or fall under the horse's feet. They must be doing it on purpose."

Iona looks at his fare and moves his lips.... Apparently he means to say something, but nothing comes but a sniff. "What?" inquires the officer.

Iona gives a wry smile, and straining his throat, brings out huskily: "My son... er... my son died this week, sir." "H'm! What did he die of?" "Iona turns his whole body round to his fare, and says: "Who can tell! It must have been from fever.... He lay three days in the hospital and then he died.... God's will." "Turn round, you devil!" comes out of the darkness. "Have you gone cracked, you old dog? Look where you are going! "Drive on! Drive on!..." says the officer. "We shan't get there till to-morrow going on like this. Hurry up! The sledge-driver cranes his neck again, rises in his seat, and with heavy grace swings his whip. Several times he looks round at the officer, but the latter keeps his eyes shut and is apparently disinclined to listen. Putting his fare down at Vyborg kaya, Iona stops by a restaurant, and again sits huddled up on the box.... Again the wet snow paints him and his horse white. One hour passes, and then another.... (Chekhov, 1886: 1-3-henceforth Chekhov)

Iona feels the twinge of the first apathy through his officer passenger. He is left mute to hear the gratuitously caustic and poignant remarks from the officer and the other by-passers. He is indeed, jarred to see how easy the officer is with the term *Death*. He looks at *Death* as a routine event, which seems to be a repetitive common issue that has lost its power of emotional and traumatic bang. All these showers of the mental repressions give him a new picture of humanity and human world. Patrick(1932) very aptly quotes Maxim Gorky's comments on the misery of Chekhov's *Misery*:

In "My University Days" "Maxim Gorky, too, tells us that when he had received the sad news of his grandmother's death, he felt an indescribable longing to tell someone about her, how kind she was, what a good mother she had been to everybody." "I carried about that desperate longing with me for a long time," says Gorky, "but there was no one to confide in, and so it burned out, unsaid." Many years later, when he read Chekhov's "wonder-fully true story" "Misery," Gorky

recalled those days of agony and regretted that he had had neither a dog nor a horse at his side, and that he had not shared his grief with the rats with which he was "on friendly terms" in the bakery where he worked. (665-666)

Chekhov tries to show the shattered and highly segmented layers of the human values, which seem to be dying out in the ocean of the so called advancement and civilization. He does not mean to act as a savior or find the solutions to give a structure to the mono-dimensional individuals. As Whyman (2011:23) comments, "His writing continued to explore issues of the day without propounding solutions." Chekhov makes an attempt to put in the picture the impending jeopardy of cliff-like gap between the moving individuals. He has beautifully highlighted this issue in confronting the grief-stricken Iona with different individuals. He manages to bring to light the triteness of the everyday life and the meaninglessness of the pretentious reciprocation exchanged among the individuals. The most tragic point is that most individuals try to prove their superiority over others by undermining and snubbing others, and unfortunately this negative sense has been taken for granted as a positive value among the young generations. This attitude is quite tangible between the perturbed Iona and his impudent passengers:

"Cabby, to the Police Bridge!" the hunchback cries in a cracked voice. "The three of us,... twenty kopecks!"

Iona tugs at the reins and clicks to his horse. Twenty kopecks is not a fair price, but he has no thoughts for that. Whether it is a rouble or whether it is five kopecks does not matter to him now so long as he has a fare.... The three young men, shoving each other and using bad language, go up to the sledge, and all three try to sit down at once. The question remains to be settled: Which are to sit down and which one is to stand? After a long altercation, ill-temper, and abuse, they come to the conclusion that the hunchback must stand because he is the shortest.

"Well, drive on," says the hunchback in his cracked voice, settling himself and breathing down Iona's neck. "Cut along! What a cap you've got, my friend! You wouldn't find a worse one in all Petersburg...." "He—he!... he-he!..." laughs Iona. "It's nothing to boast of!" "Well, then, nothing to boast of, drive on! Are you going to drive like this all the way? Eh? Shall I give you one in the neck?" "My head aches," says one of the tall ones. "At the Dukmasovs' yesterday Vaska and I drank four bottles of brandy between us." "I can't make out why you talk such stuff," says the other tall one angrily. "You lie like a brute." "Strike me dead, it's the truth!..." "It's about as true as that a louse coughs." "He-he!" grins Iona. "Me-er-ry gentlemen!""Tfoo! The devil take you!" cries the hunchback indignantly. "Will you get on, you old plague, or won't you? Is that the way to drive? Give her one with the whip. Hang it all, give it her well." Iona feels behind his back the jolting person and quivering voice of the hunchback. He hears abuse addressed to him, he sees people, and the feeling of loneliness begins little by little to be less heavy on his heart. The hunchback swears at him, till he chokes over some elaborately whimsical string of epithets and is overpowered by his cough. His tall companions begin talking of a certain Nadyezhda Petrovna. Iona looks round at them. Waiting till there is a brief pause, he looks round once more and says: "This week... er... my... er... son died!" "We shall all die,..." says the hunchback with a sigh, wiping his lips after coughing. "Come, drive on! Drive on! My friends, I simply cannot stand crawling like this! When will he get us there?"(Chekhov: 2-3)

Chekhov shows the climax of the individual's frustration and misery, when Iona resorts to his horse to commune with. Indeed, he feels quite alienated and secluded in the world of human beings. He is already fluctuating in the flood of grief and so cannot digest anymore snubs from his fellow beings. So, he ultimately turns to his mare to unburden his heart to:

"Are you munching?" Iona asks his mare, seeing her shining eyes. "There, munch away, munch away.... Since we have not earned enough for oats, we will eat hay.... Yes,... I have grown too old to drive.... My son ought to be driving, not I.... He was a real cabman.... He ought to have lived...." Iona is silent for a while, and then he goes on: "That's how it is, old girl.... KuzmaIonitch is gone.... He said good-by to me.... He went and died for no reason.... Now, suppose you had a little colt, and you were own mother to that little colt. ... And all at once that same little colt went and died.... You'd be sorry, wouldn't you?..." The little mare munches, listens, and breathes on her master's hands. Iona is carried away and tells her all about it. (Chekhov: 5)

## **Conclusion**

The study tried to give a vivid picture of the banality of individuals in a meaninglessly pathetic atmosphere of ignorance and negligence. It showed the mental impotence of the physically vigorous creatures, whose rusted

conscience seems to be lulled to a deep sleep. The study made an attempt to show Chekhov's main worries about the nature of advancement in the world context, where moral and cultural values had lost their potency. As Moss (2010: 37) believes, "Chekhov's hopes for progress lie not with just science and technology, but also with moral advancement and culture."

The study reached its closing mode by claiming that life cannot be lived with joy and happiness, until and unless individuals do feel the need of caring and sharing their pains and joys and stick together through thick and thin.

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