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## Anton Chekhov and the Theatre of the Absurd

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### **ABSTRACT**

Though writing more than half a century before the term the Theatre of the Absurd was coined Anton Chekhov's plays have striking resemblance to this form of drama. Dissatisfied with Russian stage of his times, he tried to invent new dramatic tools to present life as it is. Chekhov's four major plays represent a unique blend of two opposing consciousness. While he is aware of the doomed nature of human existence, he emphatically affirms his faith in the will of man that can stand against the mocking destiny. The form and the technique of indirect dialogue that Chekhov employed to present this existential paradox of human life in his plays greatly influenced the absurdist dramatists. He is one of the forefathers of the Theatre of the Absurd.

**Key Words**-Existentialism, indirect dialogue, paradox, Theatre of the Absurd, tragicomedy

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## Anton Chekhov and the Theatre of the Absurd

Martin Esslin coined the term the Theatre of the Absurd in 1960 to describe the theatrical revolution caused by the great dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter. Though absurdist drama thrived since 50s, almost half a century before *Waiting for Godot* was staged Anton Chekhov came up with his plays that anticipate the birth of this form of drama. Perhaps, they would have been labelled as absurdist dramas had the term been in use at that time. Today Chekhov is quickly appreciated as we are used to such plays but in his times he was little praised as his new form of presenting his vision of reality was hardly understood.

The controversy around the valid interpretation of Chekhov's plays is as old as the plays themselves. Chekhov was not, at all, happy with the drama of his times so he tried to invent new dramatic devices which would replace the romantic melodrama that the Russian stage was familiar with. But drama is not all about the script and during the period he wrote for the stage directors started to gain more authority over the production. Chekhov was not satisfied with the performance of his plays in spite of the dedication of a great director like Stanislavsky. His four masterpieces, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vaniya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* have always been closely associated with the Moscow Art Theatre but Chekhov emphatically blamed the company, especially Stanislavsky for its failure to realize the spirit of these plays (Allen 150-151). The plays have been staged for over a century but critics have often regarded these later performances as misinterpretations of Chekhov. Chekhov believed that 'the author has the right to demand that his play is performed and the parts played wholly according to his own interpretation' (qtd. in Borney 127). It is extremely difficult, if not pointless, to search for a single valid interpretation of his plays as the director's act of moving the drama from page to stage will vary according to each individual's own ideas and interpretation of the intention of the playwright. If we find anything common in all the presentations, we can, perhaps, take that to be what the playwright intended to communicate. Whether in a so called 'valid interpretation' or in a misinterpretation, one aspect of Chekhov's plays which easily draws the attention of the theatre-goers and critics of today is the traits and tune of what we now call the Theatre of the Absurd.

The form that suits the absurdist dramas is tragicomedy as it resembles human life that is tragic in its fate but comic in its appearance. Chekhov's plays are written in this spirit. He called

his plays comedies but a sad tune hums throughout. His plays end unhappily. *The Seagull* ends with the death of Kostya. In *The Three Sisters* the dream of the sisters is left unfulfilled and even a faint ray of happiness in the form of a marriage between Irina and Tusenbach is put out with the death of the Baron in a duel. In *The Cherry Orchard* the orchard is sold too. Still Chekhov insists that his plays are comedies and is furious at Stanislavsky who stages *The Three Sisters* as a tragedy. He complained that Stanislavsky turned his characters into ‘cry-babies’ while his aim was only to make people see the dreariness of their lives and he asks ‘What is there in this to cry for?’ (qtd. in Magarshack 14). Philip Callow points out ‘Stanislavsky, a pioneer of the experimental new drama, was for Chekhov a more complex foe, stubbornly refusing to see that tragedy could be depicted through comedy (105).’ He wrote the plays in a comic spirit though presenting the bleak monotonous life verging on despair. Though his plays present the difficult lives of the once rich families he never wished them to be seen as tragedies of the decaying bourgeois class. In *The Cherry Orchard*, when the orchard is sold, in spite of mourning he wants to see it as the beginning of a new life. ‘The orchard grows and blossoms to satisfy a mere whim, to gladden the eye of the spoiled aesthete. It is a pity to destroy it, but a necessity, for the country’s economic development demands it’ (Stanislavsky 27). He is not interested in the tragedy of a person or a class but in presenting the essential paradox of human life at large. The three sisters in *The Three Sisters* vow to go on even when all their dreams are shattered reminding us of the famous ending of Beckett’s *The Unnamable*. Olga’s speech captures this blend of hope and helplessness:

‘We shall go on living! The music is so gay and cheerful. It seems that any minute now we shall find out why we are alive and why we are suffering. Oh, if only we knew! If only we knew!’(158).

Such ‘a projection of a psychological reality’ and ‘human archetypes shrouded in perpetual mystery’ is ‘the element that the Theatre of the Absurd has tried to make the core of its dramatic convention’ (Esslin 416).

The plays are built on dialogues as there is little action in the traditional sense of the term. Nothing really happens. But the interesting fact about these all important dialogues is that they are often less organized i.e. one statement is not always followed by another which would seem to be some kind of a response to the previous one. The characters do not listen to one another.

They are lost in their own thoughts but they keep uttering one by one. Neither do they pay attention to what others say nor do they demand attention to themselves. They are not irritated when nobody listens to them and keep speaking. While listening to them the audience would feel that they are listening to two different people in different spaces though they are locked in the same physical space. The dialogues are like overlapping monologues. Though a multiplicity of characters huddles together there is a lack of communication that foregrounds their loneliness. Andrei, the brother of the three sisters can not talk of his fear, sadness or discontentedness to any one who is supposedly close to him. He could give vent to them only in front of Ferapont, the old watchman who is hard of hearing. However, the playwright communicates with the audience through this breakdown of communication among the characters as he knew that human beings do not express themselves in explicit terms. It is in the juxtaposition of misfit responses or apparently irrelevant comments from a character who is not a part of the ongoing conversation that we come to know about their condition better. At the end of *The Three Sisters* when the sad news of the death of Baron Tusenbach in a duel shocks the sisters their emotional outburst is cut short by Chebutykin who sings quietly:

‘Ta-ra-ra boom-di-ay. I’m in the soup today. (*Reads the newspaper.*)It makes no difference. No difference at all’ (158).

This gibberish of a drunkard seems to be nonsensical though it points to the undeniable sense of littleness and insignificance of human life. A trivial conversation is often more important than long speeches that do not express what the character feels. In case of the eloquent characters we seldom know about their motivations or past experiences that made them think like that. They talk incessantly only because they are too shy to express their deepest thoughts and emotions. Their too much word makes them equally less communicative as they who speak less. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Charlotta regrets: ‘I long to talk so, and there’s no one to talk to, no friends or relatives’ while Anya and Varya irritated at their uncle Gayev’s continuous talking plead him to stop(177). Most of the time, they are engaged in insignificant conversations, philosophical argumentations or making speeches as they are afraid of talking about themselves. While their words hide what they think, it is in their silences, pauses, apparently insignificant and short replies, ironical laugh and remarks that we find out what is glossed over as we do in the plays of Beckett or Pinter. Chekhov deliberately employed indirect dialogues which influenced

the later dramatists of the absurdist tradition. As Martin Esslin points out that Arthur Adamov thought he invented a new dramatic device of indirect dialogue for *L'Invasion* but later he realized that he had merely reinvented a technique already used by Chekhov (103).

Whatever the directors might have made out of his plays, Chekhov had a clear idea of what he wanted to say. Apart from the artistic expression of his world view in his plays and short stories we find him stating it directly in his letters and conversations with others. In 1902 he said to the writer Alexander Tikhonov "...All I wanted to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are'..." (qtd. in Magarshack 13-14). For Chekhov life does not need to be something, rather life is life. So in his plays he never tries to define life but tries to capture 'life as it is' (qtd. in Corrigan 95). So, unlike in a well organized play, in Chekhov's plays there is no central action or character. Nor is there any plot or gradual development of any crisis or its resolution. He concentrates on a situation where a number of aimless characters are caught up and his plays become 'a series of inscribed but tangential circles' (Corrigan 84). He captures human life with all its tediousness, repetitions and stasis. He was keenly aware of existential loneliness as evident in his outlook to see the condition of the life of the characters of his plays. None of the characters are happy with life though they differ in their views of the purpose of life. This sad tone is heard at the very beginning of *The Seagull*, the first of his four major plays, where Masha always wears black because 'I'm in mourning for my life' (39). Masha wearing black is also an unhappy character in *The Three Sisters* and she is almost the same person who quotes Gogol: "It's a boring life, my friends" (119). None of the characters fulfils what they planned to do though many of them like to occupy themselves in work all the time. But work is not an answer to the question Dorn, a doctor in *The Seagull* asks 'What can I do?' but rather it is a way to avoid the question. At the end of *Uncle Vaniya*, Votski buries himself in work as he wished but still finds life miserable and Sonia can only console him by the same helpless resolution of moving on as she does not know the answer to the existential question: 'What can I do?' There are other people, however, who do not try to do anything. In *The Cherry Orchard* Mrs. Ranevskaya, though extremely fond of the cherry orchard does nothing in advance to save it from being sold even when others help her with a solution. Her inactiveness is also her helpless acceptance of the workings of the inevitable forces of circumstances. Perhaps she is aware of the fact that her life will always be futile whether the orchard be sold or saved. The condition of the three sisters in *The Three Sisters* is also similar.

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All their life they dreamt of moving to Moscow but they could never manage to do so. The life in a provincial town seems claustrophobic to them and they can afford to visit Moscow, still they never do it. Even if they had moved it would not have changed their life as wherever they are life remains meaningless. Rather they are better in the town where they have already got a 'Godot' to wait for, namely the hope of moving to Moscow. In short, work or no work, the very condition of life dooms man to failure.

Chekhov presents the stagnant, devitalized society of his time but he is not altogether hopeless. Many of the characters believe in hard work that will lead to a better world in future. His aim is to jolt people out of their inertia.

'The important thing is that people should realize that (dreariness), for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves.' (qtd. in Magarshack 13-14)

It is very difficult to gauge the stand point of the dramatist from any individual play as they contain multiple of voices. While some characters like Tusenbach in *The Three Sisters* expound the view that human beings are fated to pine and grieve whatever the condition may be as we are to live on according to the mysterious and never-to-be-known laws of life, others firmly believe that a brighter future when everybody will be happy is awaiting our distant descendants if we start working hard from now. Both the arguments are put with such equal conviction that we fail to understand what Chekhov felt. While all the characters are aware of the fact that meaning or happiness is unachievable, the hope of the future is repeated by many characters in all his plays. Chekhov's life itself and what we come to know of him from his letters and other sources clearly show that he held a strong faith in a brighter though distant future which must be built on hard work and suffering of generations. In spite of his awareness that his death is imminent he never lost the zeal for life. He worked really hard as a doctor and always maintained that he is not a dramatist but a doctor. In stead of modernist nostalgia for a better past we find a scientific looking forward to future in Chekhov. This hope and dedicated effort to attain the hope is, perhaps, best represented by the character of Astroff, a doctor and environmentalist like Chekhov himself in *Uncle Vaniya*. This hope, however, is not altogether absent in postmodern absurdist drama. As in *Waiting for Godot*, Gogo and Didi always find something to give them the impression that they exist, many of Chekhov's characters try to make out a meaning of their

existence through engagement in work. The difference between these two hopes lies in the degree of conviction. While in Chekhov they believe that the world would change after a few centuries, in absurdist dramas though they wait for something to happen they know that 'Godot' will probably never show up. While in the absurd dramas it's only an impression or illusion of existence, in Chekhov it is an emphatic affirmation and this hard core of optimism markedly strikes Chekhov off from the postmodern absurdist dramatists though he is like their forefather in other aspects.

Chekhov's plays represent the unique blend of two opposing consciousness. He knows the utter impossibility of searching for a meaning and purpose of human life. When his wife Olga Knipper asked him what he thought the meaning of life was he replied: "You ask me what life is? It is like asking what carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known." (qtd. in Corrigan 79). He did not have any answer to the essential question. While he is aware of the doomed nature of human life he is at the same time aware of the fact that we are meaning-making animals and can not live without meaning and aim for ourselves. He does not lose faith in the will of man that can stand against the overwhelming and mocking destiny. The meaning of life that he made of his own life and propounded in his plays is working hard for an ideal world which is achievable and would surely be achieved some day. He is a great influence on future drama that, ironically, presents his vision of future as only an illusion with a laughter inherited from him.

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