



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)

Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring 2013

A Feminist Interpretation of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper tends to explore Chekhov's play from a feminist perspective to high light how the play carries feminist overtones without conforming to a particular feminist theory. The way male and female characters in the play have been presented and an implies consideration for women as spectators add to the feminist ideas in the play. The study also points out that feminism should not be understood to be expression of male dominance and female subordination only.

Key words-Feminism, patriarchy, sisterhood motif, struggle for supremacy, woman as spectator.

There has been a spurt of different theoretical perspectives used to make sense of life and literature in recent times. Instead of treating literary works as representations of reality in an objective way works of art are now studied more in relation to philosophical ideas related to postmodernism, post- colonialism, ethnic studies and feminism. Apart from this, the role of the

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring2013

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-3-no-1spring-2013/>

URL of the article: <http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Neb-8.pdf>

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reader or the spectator in the process of meaning generation has also acquired unprecedented significance. These factors have resulted in a thrust on interpretation and analysis of literary works rather than unearthing the meaning as intended by the author. Interestingly, the philosophical perspectives deployed for the study of literary works mostly belong to non-literary disciplines. It tends to make literary criticism an interdisciplinary exercise. However, such an exercise becomes very useful in exploring those aspects of art which otherwise remain unexplored and it also adds to the multiplicity of meanings conveyed in a work of art. Another development related to the exercise of analyzing and understanding a literary text by relating it to one or the other theoretical perspectives is the emphasis on reinterpretation of already existing texts. Literary works produced at a much earlier time are now analyzed in the light of the new ideas expressed in different systems of thought currently in vogue. It helps find the relevance of a work of art in the changed context and its value in the contemporary times.

The present paper is an attempt to interpret Chekhov's play *The Three Sisters* from a feminist perspective. It becomes almost an imperative to point out in the very beginning of this analysis that this study is not to insist on asserting the feminist nature of the play in the strict sense in which feminism is often used. Feminism as an ideology demands to see whether a work of art supports women's struggle for power and equality in a male dominated society and challenges the patriarchal structures that marginalize and suppress women. Chekhov's play *The Three Sisters* certainly cannot be termed to be a feminist work of art according to these ideas. And a study of the play cannot be undertaken in the way suggested by Toril Moi in her much discussed essay on feminist literary criticism: "As politically motivated critics, feminists will try to make the political context and implications of their work explicit, precisely in order to counter the tacit acceptance of patriarchal power politics which is so often presented as intellectual 'neutrality' or 'objectivity'. (Moi Toril, 1986: 206) However, a close study of the play points out certain elements that suggest feminist tendencies in it. These elements attract critical attention to explain the play from a feminist perspective. The notable factor that tempts the reader to trace feminist concerns in the play is the very title '*The Three Sisters*'. It drops the hint that the drama

is about the life and experiences of women that form a major characteristic feature of feminist works of art. Another equally significant factor is the overwhelming presence of female characters in the play and their meaningful and highly positive responses in the situation in which they have been placed. Apart from this, an apparent rejection of the patriarchal biases against women characters also makes it a suitable subject of study from feminist point of view.

The play opens on the name-day ceremony of Irina , the youngest of the three sisters . It is also the anniversary of her father Pozorov's death. The family had moved from Moscow to this town eleven years ago when Pozorov was appointed the brigade commander. The sisters feel suffocated in a surrounding informing still life marked by deathly stagnation. They repeatedly think, dream and talk of going to Moscow the dream land that promises life and happiness for them. Olga the eldest one tells Irina , "And just one dream grows stronger and stronger...", and Irinia further supports her views and shares her dream when she says, " To go to Moscow . Sell the house , wind up everything here and to Moscow".(Chekhov,1956:140)The way these three sisters and the other characters respond to different situations in this dreary, dusty and decadent world that marks the existence of the three sisters like house arrest, reveals Chekhov's understanding of life in which women have a specific place. It also reveals the dramatist's stance towards women which can be ascertained from the study of male and female characters in the play. The attitudinal contrasts evident in male and female characters can be usefully explored to trace feminist leanings of the play.

The surprising aspect of male and female characters that strikes the audience in a clear and assertive way is the preference of the male characters for passivity in life whereas the women characters are more interested in action and work. The sisters keep dreaming about going to Moscow and feel miserable on being unable to do so. However, they are not ready to accept meaninglessness of their life. Irina, for example seeks meaning in work. She realizes her isolated and desolate life yet she asserts, "With us three sisters life hasn't yet been beautiful; it has stifled us as weeds do grass... We must do something, must work. That's why we are not happy and look at life so gloomily – we don't know anything about working. We come of people who despised work". (p.159) She thinks of adding meaning to the otherwise dull, crude and backward life that she along with her other sisters has been condemned to lead. Similarly, her sister Masha tries to make her otherwise dull life more agile by getting involved in an affair that she later

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gives up. Olga, the third sister, like a true matriarchal figure, looks after her sisters and encourages them during their despondency and supports the elderly nurse Anfisa when Natasha turns her out of the house.

In existentialist terms, these women make frantic attempts to make life meaningful. They fight against the nothingness and moral vacuity of their surroundings on the one hand and the frustration of their dreams on the other. Their constant longing to go to Moscow may be associated with the desire to find meaning in life. Irina's words, "The time will come when all will know why all this is, what these sufferings are for, there will be no secrets- but meanwhile we must live – must work, only work!", (p.222), acquire philosophical significance in existential terms. It implies that existential despair and hopelessness has to be fought against through the strength to face and tolerate sufferings and not by simply surrendering before the situation. Therefore, the three sisters though aware of their lot: inability to go to Moscow, do not take recourse to any escape routes. Perhaps therefore, their repeated mention of their desire to go to Moscow finds almost equal, if not more, assertions of their commitment to work and do something worthwhile.

As compared to the female characters men in the play present a dismal picture of their attitude towards life and their hopeless wasting of time and indifference towards vital issues concerning life. They seem to exist simply for the sake of it: without having any purpose in life and without even awarding any meaning to life or seeking some purpose in it. A look at the male characters individually reveals their insignificant thinking and ridiculous approach towards life that makes them poor caricatures of what may be called men. For example, Captain Solyony is a neurotic, Tchebutykin is a futile old doctor of sixty who reads futile newspapers and keeps on taking useless notes. Andrey is spineless and inconsiderate and Vershinin is a foolish philosopher who keeps on talking about useless things. These men's attitude towards life and work can be ascertained from these words of Tchebutykin: "And I really never did anything. Since I left the University, I haven't lifted a finger; I've not read a single book even, but just read the newspapers."(p.144). Their attitude towards work and life is that of non- performers.

Tchebutykin, a doctor forgets even his own professional skills: “They think I’m a doctor, know how to cure any sickness, but I know absolutely nothing, I’ve forgotten everything I ever knew, remember nothing, absolutely nothing.” (p.190). These elements point out the degeneration, sterility, barrenness and meaninglessness of their life. Unlike the women characters in the play these men do not ever think of undertaking some serious work nor do they get involved in serious and meaningful action. On the contrary, when Andrey fails to get solace and satisfaction in his relationship with his wife Natasha he starts gambling and loses huge amounts of money to the extent that he has to mortgage his house.

The contrast developed in the male and female characters in the play highlights a different understanding of women from their stereotypical presentation in which all the positive qualities are often associated with men and women are understood to be weak, docile, passive and submissive. The playwright’s development of women characters is altogether different from these essentialist ideas. Instead of presenting men and women characters in terms of binary oppositions, Chekhov has depicted them in their human traits. The women, consequently, move around not as typical specimens of their gender but as common human beings with exceptionally great courage and strength of mind. Of course the patriarchal biases of some characters like Andrey are observed in the play but their attitude is not related to the stance of the writer. Andrey, like a typical patriarch, takes the vital decision of mortgaging the house without consulting or taking his sisters into confidence. But this gesture is not presented as some ploy of patriarchal man to marginalize or suppress women in the given context as the way he breaks the news to his sisters shows his sense of regret and helplessness more than his male supremacist attitude. It is quite obvious from the way he tells them, “In the third place, I have something else to say....: I mortgaged the house without asking your permission. ... Of that I am guilty, yes, and ask you to forgive me. I was forced to it by debts...”(p.202).

Another aspect of the play that goes with the feminist interpretation can be related to the sisterhood motif that finds relevance for such a study. From this view, the depiction of women in a work of art is studied and analyzed to see how far women support, encourage and sympathize with other women for their struggle in life particularly against male domination. In the play *The Three Sisters*, this motif is seen operating at a different level. As the play hardly presents any situation in which we find men and women as two sexes involved in an endless struggle for

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supremacy, the women characters, particularly the sisters, are seen supporting, encouraging one another and sharing their sorrows with sympathy in a way that marks their collective attempt to preserve their world and its values. A study of such aspects of women's behaviour is often not considered relevant in terms of feminism as "The dominant feminist paradigm actually encourages us not to think in terms of any oppression other than male dominance and female subordination" (Gaines, Jane, 2000: 341). Therefore, in a largely male dominated society an interest in women's destinies can objectively be considered a support for the feminist project of making women visible. The way the three sisters face the situation, and try to maintain their integrity against all odds also serves a feminist purpose.

A related aspect of their collectively fighting against the crisis situations without depending on men can be seen in the way they share their feelings with one another. It consolidates their strength and expresses their faith in themselves as women. For example, Masha talks about her affairs to her sisters, "I want to confess, my dear sisters. I'm tired in my soul. I'll confess to you and then to nobody else, never.... It's my secret, but you must know everything In one word, I love Vershinin...." (p.199). Her confession before her sisters marks her faith in them and also shows women's consolidation of their strength as women. In the same way Irina and Olga also lay bare their secrets. It marks the existence of a sacred and strong bond among them. In feminist terms, these gestures of these women mark their separate existence in which they no longer are required to justify themselves before men.

Their stoic and heroic behaviour at the end of the play marks their strength of character and sense of endurance. The writer depicts them as great heroines who face tragic situations boldly. In the play their earnest desire and cherished dream is to go and settle in Moscow. They also think of selling their house before they go to Moscow. Neither of their desires is fulfilled and they are extremely pained and miserable when the final shock comes in the form of their brother having mortgaged the house and Baron having been killed. Now they are supposed to live far away from Moscow. At this stage the reactions of these women are worth mentioning. Masha comes back home learning about the army brigade's leaving the town along with

Virshinin with whom she had an affair and confides in Irina , “ They are leaving us , one has gone entirely, entirely, forever. We’ll be left alone to begin our life over again.” (p. 222). It reveals the depth of shock that she experiences but she does not feel defeated and tells her sister in the same breath, “We must live. We must live” (p.222). Irina, who wanted to marry Tusenbach has learnt about his tragic death, like Masha , she too expresses her commitment with life and her resolve to face desolation and despair by making her life meaningful through her own efforts when she says,” Tomorrow I’m going away alone , I’ll teach in the school and give my whole life to those who need it perhaps.I’ll work, work....” (p.222-223). And Olga, reasserts the faith of all of them in life and its values when she says , “ Oh, dear sisters, our life isn’t over yet . We shall live!”(p.223). These reactions of the girls and their thoughts collectively make them what has been referred to as Russian womanhood in the following words: “The sisters take each other by the hand. Their faces are stern and solemn. They speak little about what is in their hearts. Their eyes talk. Their eyes sparkle, not with tears, but with a stubborn belief in the future. And the three sisters here begin to show that they are great and strong ... a magnificent type of Russian womanhood, with its suffering, self-renunciation, and moral strength.” (Gorchakov, 1965:94).Such words about the women characters and the play also reveal its proximity with the ideas that seek to confirm women’s strength and reject the views that treat them as subordinate and secondary to men .

A consideration of woman as spectator of the play also makes it more relevant for a feminist interpretation. The images of women that the play generates and presents seem directed towards female spectators. In other words, the way these women behave , think, move around and conduct themselves is not meant to appear as what woman represents for man. On the contrary, they appear what they are as women. It also implies that they are not presented as the ‘other ‘to man. In fact, they are involved in a situation in which their tragedy is not because of something terrible happening to them which could involve men. Instead they suffer due to something not happening. In such a situation their lives are not seen and understood in their relationships with men and what they mean to the men around them. They are not supposed to cater to the male desires or expectations. They behave as women and not as men would have them behave. As they are not modeled as per the male desire their depiction is more significant for women as spectators. It no longer marks the assumed presence of the female audience among

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the men spectators. Women as characters as well as spectators get their due which certainly marks the play's significance as a work of art having significance for women.

To conclude, *The Three Sisters* certainly has feminist overtones that make its feminist study relevant. It adds to the multiple meanings of the play and exhorts us to think that feminism should not be restricted to strictly political meaning of the term. In literary studies the term feminism should also include the study of the way a writer treats women in a work of art and makes them worthy participants in the game called life. Moreover, a work of art is not supposed to be a simple expression of an ideology. If it explicates some issues concerning philosophical ideas it should not be at the cost of the artistic worth of the work. In Chekhov's play the feminist elements may be treated as a byproduct of his other major thematic concerns.

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