

AN EXISTENTIAL FEMINIST STUDY OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S BETROTHED

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ABSTRACT

Anton Chekhov is one of the greatest literary stalwarts of not just Russia but of the world. He addressed the woman question in many of his works. Betrothed is one of them. Existential Feminism debunks and discredits the enfeebling gender roles and cultural constructs foisted on women by society, hampering their self-determination. Through Betrothed, the paper tries to explore the authentic and self-reliant introspection, choices, decisions and action that the protagonist Nadya struggles to exercise through her journey. She attempts to identify and break the shackles fettering women from achieving subjectivity and availing university education.

KEYWORDS: *Existentialism, Feminism, Patriarchal Constrictions, Eternal Feminine, Immanence, Inessential Other, Religion, Narcissist, Sexual Inequality, Authentic, Agency, Autonomous Beings*

INTRODUCTION

Anton Chekhov is one of the greatest literary stalwarts of not just Russia but of the world. He captures complex, subtle, and varied human emotions, relationships and idiosyncrasies in the lighter as well as serious vein within the ambit of his short stories, plays and novellas. His works are marked by his prowess for creating intricate vignettes of women and men in an impressionistic manner.

Chekhov was a physician by profession. He was surrounded by sickness and death, and grappled with his own ailing health as he was afflicted with the white plague. It is evident he intensely felt the existential pangs which reflect in his works. Apart from his own personal life, the existential question which later gained the status of a philosophical theory, "Existentialism", was being already dealt by his contemporaries like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev. They engaged in existential dialogues through their works.

Existentialism as we know today is a philosophy through which an individual or individual experience are considered paramount. It is characterised by living authentically, that is, taking responsibility for one's existence, living true to one's being. Moral or scientific thinking are sidetracked for being insufficient criterion to understand human existence.

Existential Feminism on the other hand is debunking and discrediting the enfeebling gender roles and cultural constructs foisted on women by society, hampering their self-determination. The tenets of existentialism are demonstrated by women who make measured choices regarding their way of life and undergo the anxiety associated with that liberty, isolation, or nonconformity, but in spite of it remain free.

Chekhov married Olga Knipper in 1901, who was a theatre actress. Their marital arrangement was such that she continued to pursue her acting career in Moscow while Chekhov lived in Yalta. Thus it was an unconventional marriage in

which Chekhov did not let marriage to be a stumbling block in his wife's career. His respect for her individuality, space and work is apparent.

His views on women can be seen in his characterisation of them which is as dense as that of men. They are not solely caught in the socio-economic vortex or are just types, but they are authentic, flesh and blood representations of feeling-thinking individuals, with labyrinthine psyches in the grips of existential turmoil.

His women characters live on their own terms, have individual strengths and weaknesses unique to them. They are autonomous beings, having agency and are self-governing. Despite the social pulls and pressures, they act of their own accord and free will. In the face of failures, they exhibit the courage to live, to continue to hope and dream, make efforts to make the present worthwhile to live. When aggrieved, they have the ability to bear disappointments with grace. They don't fear to live, hence also make mistakes and learn from them. They have the sensitivity and grit to see and admit their own lapses. They have a voice of their own. They confidently evince their philosophy and ideology which forms the guiding principle of their lives. They express their ardour towards their work. They seek meaning through their vocation, like Sonya in *Uncle Vanya*, or her mother Maria Voynitskaya by applying herself to novel ideas of philosophy and women emancipation.

Chekhov recognises the pain, suffering and forbearance of women. He acknowledges their puissance in withstanding the crucible of life. Yelena in *Uncle Vanya* maintains her composure amidst uncomfortable circumstances of men making amatory advances towards her. She decides to stay with her husband despite being in a discordant relationship, out of her volition. When confronted with unrequited love, Sonya in *Uncle Vanya* exhibits remarkable sangfroid. In *The Seagull*, Nina Zareitchnaya a rich landowner's daughter pursues her passion for acting solely on her own ability, but after an unsuccessful attempt in the theatre as well as in her love for Trigorin, she continues with resilience and the realisation that the strength to endure and persevere is most vital in life.

Few of his women even live and breathe in a non-oppressive environment, where they are already emancipated, existing as free willed, self-determined and self-obliging individuals, far from any patriarchal constrictions and on the contrary are unapologetically flawed, with no feeling of victimhood, for example, the handsome and entrancing Ariadne– the eponymous heroine of *Ariadne*– with her womanly antics. Irina Arkadina in *The Seagull*, who is not a conventional sacrificing, doting mother but is a successful theatre actress, solipsistic, likes being the cynosure, takes pleasure in talking about her achievements, and has a young lover.

Feminism as we know today is multidimensional. Women coming out on the streets protesting for equal rights for they were always written off as the inessential Other. Feminist movement had women express disapproval and remonstrations with the portrayal of women, specifically gender stereotyping in literature, mainstream cinema, advertising etc., which perpetuates sexual inequality. Continued struggle of women brought a revolution in their status in the family, equal opportunities at their workplace, in obtaining equal wages, in the choice of their attire. But in the late nineteenth century Feminism in Russia was women lobbying the authorities to create and fund higher education courses for women. Various societies and projects to benefit women were formed.

Through “Existential Feminism”, the paper tries to explore the authentic and self-reliant introspection, choices, decisions and action that the character Nadya struggles to exercise through her journey. It is an attempt to identify and break the shackles fettering women from achieving subjectivity and availing university education.

The Shumins is a family of three women- the grandmother Marfa Mihalovna, mother Nina Ivanovna, and her daughter Nadya. The family regales in the preparations of Nadya's marriage to Andrey Andreitch. Nadya is nubile, twenty-three years of age. Her marriage is fixed with Andrey Andreitch, the son of Father Andrey, a chief priest of the cathedral. She ardently fancied marrying ever since she was sixteen years old. But now when the time was drawing near, there was no trace of joy or nervous excitement that is associated with a would-be bride. On the contrary her spirits were at a low ebb, she couldn't sleep well and felt utter unease with the approaching marriage. She felt disquietude and dread with the dawning of an acute awareness of the monotony that life had to offer after her wedlock. "...the hurrying servants, the clatter of knives, the banging of the swing door; ...smell of roast turkey and pickled cherries"(Chekhov, 2611) would form an unending routine of her life.

First Nadya is seen following into her mother's footsteps. She is quite under her mother's spell when the world around her seems to have a "deep mysterious significance" (Chekhov, 2616/4716) akin to Nina's sense perception. She's at a cusp where hitherto she viewed her mother admirably through her rose-tinted glasses. She's her definition of "an exceptional woman". (Chekhov: 2612) Nina "speaks French" (Chekhov: 2612) and "acts in private theatricals", (Chekhov: 2612, 2613) "she was interested in spiritualism and homeopathy, read a great deal". (Chekhov: 2616) Nadya perhaps looks up to her mother. She probably even aspires to be like her up till now. Marriage was a much awaited milestone of her life, and when a congenial man like Andrey Andreitch, of a well reputed family made a proposal to her, which was so congruous to the plan, she had every reason to accept the offer. There was no other alternative way of being she thought was possible. It was a decision in agreement with the norms which she thought ought to be correct. Her grandmother made it and then her mother, whom she deems intelligent. But she is soon disenchanted. When Nadya opens her heart to her mother about her spending sleepless nights, her mother is incapable of understanding the bugbears that have been assailing her. Reality intrudes her fancy and Nadya is disillusioned by her response and the former image of her mother in Nadya's mind is shattered.

It was now as if a veil was lifted from her mind's eye and she could see clearly that her mother was "a simple, ordinary, unhappy woman". (Chekhov: 2618) She "had not loved her father" (Chekhov: 2618) and "lived in complete dependence on her mother-in-law, Granny." (Chekhov: 2618) Abiding by the convention weighs Nadya down. This choice doesn't make her happy and she hasn't thought of an alternative. That alternative is presented to her by Sasha.

Sasha suggests her to go to the university. He has a fervent belief that only educated, enlightened and holy people can make the world a paradise. As they are authentic, original and individualistic, they have a belief system and *raison d'être*. They do not seek "moral support in the crowd". (Chekhov: 2617) He chastises Granny's, Nina's, Nadya's and Andrey's life, that is the entire upper crust, as "immoral", "unclean" and "filthy" (Chekhov: 2618) because of idleness, for "eating up someone else's life", (Chekhov: 2618) to which Nadya agrees to in her heart of hearts.

Sasha- "Nobody ever does anything. Your mother spends the whole day walking about like a duchess, Granny does nothing either, nor you either. And your Andrey Andreitch never does anything either." (Chekhov: 2613) It wasn't a captious remark from Sasha that Nadya was unaccustomed to, but as earlier it did not amuse her because now she believed in its truth.

It is vital to shed light over the characters of the three men of the story- Sasha, Andrey and Father Andrey. Sasha and Andrey can be seen in stark contrast to each other. Andrey has a healthy constitution, "a stout and handsome young man with curly hair looking like an artist or an actor" (Chekhov: 2613) whereas Sasha "was very thin, with big eyes, long thin fingers and a

swarthy bearded face, and all the same he was handsome”. (Chekhov: 2612) Sasha kept frail health and came to stay with Granny every year to recuperate. He was a lithographer. Andrey was fond of playing the fiddle and “took part in concerts for charitable objects” (Chekhov: 2614) occasionally and he was perceived as a “musician” (Chekhov: 2614) in the town. Andrey stands for slavish subjugation towards the societal model and ideals whereas Sasha stands for going against the grain. Andrey is a conformist and traditionalist whereas Sasha is a heteroclit and a renegade. Andrey stands for order and system whereas Sasha stands for disorder, chaos and disarray. Sasha wants to turn lives upside down. Andrey is more than happy and content with the prevalent conventional way things were fashioned. Sasha lived in a slipshod fashion and barely managed to pass his art exam in architecture. Sasha scorned comfort whereas Andrey has predilection for enjoying the niceties of life. Sasha is a man of the mind whereas Andrey is a man of the body, inclined to a voluptuous life.

Andrey is in constant awe of his father and never fails to express his admiration for him. Andrey far from questioning his father’s authority, considers him “splendid”. (Chekhov: 2614, 2621) His father is the reason he can lead a vacuous, princely life of “no definite work”. (Chekhov, 2614)

Father Andrey, is a symbol of patriarchal and religious authority exerting his sense of entitlement, thrusting his domineering views over others’. His overbearing demeanour is seen during supper when he broaches the subject of hypnosis with Nina Ivanovna, which she prescribes to the realm of the “mysterious and incomprehensible”. (Chekhov: 2614) He repudiates Nina’s argument, as for him a man of faith, religion has answers to all the puzzles, nothing in the domain of religion is “insoluble”. (Chekhov: 2614) Thus his dismissal of Nina’s voice takes place on two planes, one that he knows better than a woman because he is a man and two, of the exaggerated sense of self because he is a man of religious authority by virtue of which he assumes his view is supreme. He is also mentioned to have had a “sly smile”, (Chekhov: 2622) which is Chekhov’s way of insinuating the craftiness of church clergymen. He is also critical of Sasha’s way of living which he opines to be “riotous”. (Chekhov, 2614) He is a man of the system who is likely to have a low opinion of anyone like Sasha who does not believe in following the social codes. He inspires unquestioning filial piety in his son.

Marrying Andrey, Nadya will not be able to realise her full potential. She will be inhibited to the role of a wife, a mother or a daughter-in-law, or a home maker. With Andrey she sees all her hopes for her future smothered. She’ll only be recognised as Andrey’s wife. She’ll live in Andrey’s shadow and have a secondary place next to him. She realises how paltry and degenerate her life of idleness is and would be. Her marriage would only further subject her to this idleness and looking attractive for the man she’ll marry to satiate his sexual fantasies.

When presented with the idea of going to the university at Sasha’s behest, she is enraptured and quickly seizes the opportunity. Though all the same she is anxiety ridden to take the leap but nevertheless overcomes it rather than letting it paralyse her. She summons up the courage to tread into the unknown territory which would naturally be disposed to its own challenges. Here she acts upon Sasha’s sway and exhortation. Under the guise of seeing off Sasha at the railway station, Nadya too boards the train and runs away.

But after spending a winter in Petersburg when she meets Sasha, she is disabused of her former notions about Sasha. She finds Sasha “grey and provincial” (Chekhov: 2626). She is able to see through him. He appears to her prosaically ordinary and narrow in outlook. He lacked the “novel”, “cultured” and “interesting” (Chekhov: 2627) qualities, which she associated with him as his hallmark a year before. She is just a small cog in a large machine of his scheme of “turn your life upside down”, (Chekhov: 2625) upsetting the applecart to his liking which is in agreement to his design within which

he is operating. He mentions another woman, a wife of his friend, whom he is trying to impel to go to the university “to turn her life upside down” (Chekhov: 2628). He can be seen fulfilling his own agenda subverting the status quo with these women acting as potential candidates. Though it is a progressive end for Nadya but nevertheless it is his desire to achieve his goal and ideal, that is, to overturn society’s ideals which propels him to this purpose. Emancipation of Nadya is not exactly his concern. Just as human civilisation and all its institutions have developed on man’s fervid need for security, similarly Sasha is no different and he too seeks security in his “turn your life upside down” (Chekhov: 2625) bid which he does not seem to be applying to his own life.

It is Nadya who embraces uncertainty head-on. She temporarily may have sought security in the person of Sasha, but soon after Sasha’s death, she is out of Sasha’s orbit, completely on her own. Nadya is continuously evolving, gradually outgrowing all external influences and stimulus to gain sovereignty over her life. Even before his demise, she feels the grip of his being loosening over her, and his death is the final factor that liberates her completely. She becomes unmistakably free. She is rather enthralled with the incertitude of the future, the several possibilities that it held.

As Jean Jacques Rousseau, the French philosopher says in *Emile, Or Education (1792)*

”Men and women are made for each other, but their mutual dependence differs in degree; man is dependent on woman through his desires; woman is dependent on man through her desires and also through her needs; he could do without her better than she can do without him. She cannot fulfil her purpose in life without his aid, without his goodwill, without his respect; she is dependent on our feelings, on the price we put upon her virtue, and the opinion we have of her charms...” (Rousseau, 290,291) But Nadya disproves such dependence. She needs no person, man or woman to estimate her worth.

The period of incertitude for Nadya’s mother Nina, however, especially in the wake of Nadya fleeing from home, is dealt by her by taking refuge in religion. She leads a life of boredom on account of her being a country aristocracy, where she does no work. Earlier she invested her time and thoughts in getting her daughter married well but on Nadya’s escape, she is left in limbo. With religion and philosophy as her solacement, she can be seen grasping at straws. Religion is another comfortable option that acts as a sedative. It curbs the curiosity for probing and inquiry. It offers tailor-made answers and lulls the minds. No change comes over Nina or her position in the house. She continued to live like a “poor relation” (Chekhov: 2629), dependent on Granny financially. Thus Nina is seen complicit in her Otherness. She further only reinforces her own dependency. As in *The Second Sex (1949)* Simone de Beauvoir says that “the Narcissist” (Beauvoir: 756), “the Woman in Love” (Beauvoir: 773) and “the Mystic” (De Beauvoir: 802) drown their selfhood in an external object- mirror, a lover or God and thus embrace their immanence.

Thus Nadya turns away from the refined society life prescribed for women of the nobility. Seeing her mother she could imagine the life that awaited her after marriage. She would’ve been socially esteemed, a well-endowed silk-stocking with the pressures of having to be “tightly laced in” (Chekhov: 2613), adorned with diamonds, be a society hostess, behaving decorously, smiling forcibly in hospitality, palavering over shallow subjects to entertain her guests. Society’s ideal of manhood in the person of Andrey feels like “unbearable vulgarity” (Chekhov: 2620) to her and his presence in her life “hard and cold as an iron hoop”. (Chekhov: 2620)

As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*- “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.” (De Beauvoir, 330) Hence Nadya deconstructs the myth of a woman. To be a woman has multifarious meanings rather than the eternal feminine fiction. She discovers the pleasures of freedom, which no woman in her household ever experienced for the diffi-

culty of giving up security and comfort which induced them to accept the roles of wife and mother, which are usually unfulfilling. That first step towards freedom for Nadya is discernment of the bondage that enchained her.

As Mary Wollstonecraft says in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1790)* -“I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and happiness consists, I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both for mind and body.... (and) to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being regardless of the distinction of sex...” (Wollstonecraft, 11-12) Thus Nadya obtains human character and selfhood through her university education and lives a life of dignity which a life of trifles could not have provided.

Nadya’s underlying angst is apparent when she wishes her town to undergo transformation and envisions a “young and fresh” (Chekhov: 2630) beginning “in which one will be able to face one’s fate boldly and directly, to know that one is right, to be light-hearted and free!” (Chekhov: 2630)

Eventually she stands unscathed by society’s skewed perspective and the mocking remarks of the boys next door- “Betrothed! Betrothed!”, (Chekhov: 2630) and on the contrary is entertained by them. She is comfortably ensconced in this unprecedented freedom, with no qualms about her choices.

She visits her Granny and mother only out of homesickness. But after some time she finds herself “alien”, (Chekhov: 2630) “isolated” (Chekhov: 2630) and “useless” (Chekhov: 2630) there. With her vistas broadened, she is galvanised at the prospect of a life that bosoms several mysteries which she is enticed to experience unfurl before her. Thus she wishes “Good-bye, dear Sasha” (Chekhov, 2631) in her thoughts and the “next morning said good-bye to her family, and full of life and high spirits left the town— as she supposed forever.” (Chekhov: 2631)

Existential Feminism, at its core is the study of women’s being and assaying their internal domain born out of their existential quest. Chekhov is certainly the supporter of the feminist cause much before it became a full-fledged movement. It is one of the last few stories he wrote in 1903, (Chekhov died in 1904) that has Nadya, the protagonist, take charge of her life. She dispels the dictates of convention, the darkness of tradition, uncritical and unthinking servility to the early impressions and socialisation of women to believe domestic happiness to be the only happiness in life. She refuses for her desires to be trampled upon under the nebulous notion of femininity. She stretches her parameters, gives definition to her own existence by educating herself. She renounces her haut monde life of irrelevance to explore more avenues which so far were out of women’s grasp. “Betrothed” is clearly an exponent of self-subsistence and self-actualisation.

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