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A PERENNIAL SONG OF HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT

The rural hinterland in any country, more so in developing world like erstwhile USSR has been a source of great inspiration for bards, philosophers and thinkers. A great many original ideologues and leaders have emerged from its backwaters. The contrast between rural and urban has always remained intact and still remains true even in this era of science and technology where market- based economy and new means of communication has reduced the difference between city and village in Russia. Leo Tolstoy has been a greatly inspiring legend who has always written with traditional morality as his guiding lamp. He remained an epitome of ethical representation of rural Russia. His writings are a touchstone against which the contemporary writers' acumen can be judged. This giant of Russian literature had a long and eventful life. His faith in Christianity and human values and his deep insight into the human psyche has helped him a lot in giving true representation of human nature both in his novels as well as short stories. Generation of regeneration of students not just in Russia but also in English speaking countries have benefited from these moral fables through translations of his works. The current research deals with *A Candle*, *After the Dance*, and *Alyosha the Pot*; three famous stories by the renowned writer from *Selected Stories by Leo Tolstoy*. The researcher has analysed various facets of the writing and tried to bring out the deep and ever invasive observation handwriting skills of the writer in these selected stories which share amongst themselves a unique era of Russian history.

Keywords: pious, peace, contentment, tragic, strife, harmony.

A Candle is a fabulous narration which presents a stark contrast between the personas of Michael, the landlord and Vasili, the pious serf- the two characters so separate from each other. How can a man be so inconsiderate and so violent even in his later years when age makes a man sombre? What exactly is the narrator trying to bring out by delineating such a scoundrel of a character? Verses 42 and 43 of the celebrated Buddhist text *The Dhammapada* state:

Whatever harm an enemy may do to an enemy, or a hater to a hater, an ill-directed mind inflicts on oneself a greater harm. Neither mother, father, nor any other relative can do one greater good than one's own well-directed mind. ("The Mind")

The readers may get baffled at sheer audacity and emotionlessness of Michelle even though his wife has been presented as a woman who has a human heart and human feelings. In portraying the couple, Tolstoy has shown a wide grip and understanding of human nature. The couple is not a typical representation of Aristocracy. The man is vulgar and violent but the woman is depicted as good natured. This in itself adds to the diversity of characterization in the work. Vasili is an out of world character. He is a man who is ready to serve the harshest punishment for no fault of him. His guileless person is well represented in the blowing scene where even his harsh critics find it impossible to censor his act of Yeoman Service. It is in this context that one may bring out the statement by renowned gen philosopher and saint *Thich Nhat Hanh* in his wonderful work titled *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*:

My only desire is to help you see this. How can we bring the practice of mindfulness to the widest spectrum of society? How can we give birth to the greatest number of people who are happy and who know how to teach the art of mindful living to others? The number of people who create violence is very great, while the number of people who know how to breathe and create happiness is very small. Every day gives us a wonderful opportunity to be happy ourselves and to become a place of refuge for others. (Hanh 155)

The story is also unique as it depicts the rural Russian scene where the poor gathered together in their rustic environments sharing their tales of passion and woe. This gathering of the Rustics has an almost anthropological significance as can be highlighted by a corollary of the Japanese hinterlands in foregone days as illustrated by Shunmyo Masuno in his amazing work *Zen: The Art of Simple Living*:

Historically, the Japanese have been an agricultural people. We till the land and we live by the grace of nature's bounty. The culture of an agricultural people is, as it were, a forest culture. Unlike in the desert, there is an abundance of food in the forest. The trees produce flowers and bear fruit, nuts and berries. Not knowing when the trees' offerings would fall, our ancestors gathered beneath the trees and waited. Thus developed a culture of gathering. (Masuno 130)

The narration fuses the characters with their environment the two cannot be separated. The people become the land and the land becomes the people. Agriculture is their forte, they know not anything beyond their small rustic dwellings as their lives and deaths revolve around these forests, meadows, farmland and so on. It is but natural that they flock together and share amongst themselves everything about their past present and future. Such bonhomie and brotherhood would be hard to find in the cities.

Ivan Vasilievich in *After the Dance* presents the readers with a unique situation where the narration starts from the depiction of a possible love affair and it wards off in the end into something very different. The narrator's supposed love for the girl whom he admires and who has an almost fairy proposition about her, vaporises over the time into nothingness. The father of the girl is a colonel and a towering personality in the story and presumably the one responsible for the anti-climax as one would call it. One very weird analysis can lead the reader to think deeply about the profession of the father almost to the point of disillusion. Was it his military background and the inhumane treatment that he meted out to the unknown rebel and of which Ivan was a witness, the cause of determination of Evans infatuation with the girl? Even if one were to assume it to be true how far can the colonel be held responsible for the job he performed? Was it the fault of the colonel, or his job, or was it over-sensitivity of Ivan? The reader is left with mixed feelings at the end of the story and still the question of one's profession is a tough call as *Hanh* states:

We may think the butcher's livelihood is wrong and ours is right, but if we didn't eat meat, he would not have to kill. Right livelihood is a collective matter. The livelihood of each person affects everyone else. The butcher's children might benefit from my teaching, while my children, because they eat meat, share some responsibility for the butcher's livelihood. (Hanh 115)

Ivan's Over sensitivity is also brought out in the scene when he criticizes his fellow beings for being moderns and for not paying respect to women in love. He belongs to the generation that never objectified women and always held them in high respect. The women of his generation too kept their standards high and were not shallow. Physical intimacy was not the prime concern in past and people were more interested in emotional bonding. Tolstoy wonderfully brings out this dichotomy between two different generations - so to say the traditional and the modern-a fairly devised categorization to appease the sentiments on both sides. A reader of this generation who belongs to the postmodern world may find it hard to believe Ivan's words or to read his gestures as he effortlessly expresses his deep reverence and love for the lady of his life. Whatever the case be, the fact remains that Ivan has been depicted as a gentle soul who has heart of gold and he feels for his fellow beings a compassion that runs deep. Through Ivan, Tolstoy has brought out the best of love, passion, devotion at one end and respect for the integrity of an individual human being on another. His decision not to see the girl anymore after being a witness to the supposed cruelty of her father is a clear testimony of his human nature.

Alyosha in *Alyosha the Pot* is a simpleton, a village lad who is simply plain and innocent in his conduct and thoughts. He is an epitome of an ideal childhood and an ideal adult. Since his childhood, he is a good son and as he grows up into a servant in a city home, he proves to be a worthy servant. He is one who never betrays whatever role he is bestowed upon. He is a boy who is happy and contented even in extreme penury. He has hardly any good clothes to wear when he is a child and still, he is not bothered and almost with a saintly simplicity he walks around the streets echoing the Zen philosophy of the eastern monks:

There is a saying in Zen practice, *munen muso*, that describes a state of being free from worldly desires and distracting thoughts. Another way to say it is just *mushin*, or 'clear mind'. You empty your mind and do not let it settle anywhere or wander. This allows you to focus on what needs to be done now, without worrying about all the other things in your life. It is a teaching that demonstrates the amazing power available to us if we can achieve a clear mind. (Masuno 90)

This young boy as depicted by Tolstoy is in fact a representation of scores and scores of common rural children who grow up with pure hearts and little malice. They know nothing of cheating. They belong to a generation that has never refused an order by the parents. They are so pure and good hearted that they can hardly find fault with anything outside themselves. But the only trouble with such un-bias souls is their inability to act independently when the time demands. They are so ill equipped and outrightly dependent upon faith that they fail to fight even for their own basic rights in face of harsh situations. This aspect of their personality brings sometimes about the tragic doom. Tragedy, it seems, is made up for such people alone for they are passive when they should act. Another character in the story that needs special attention is that of the house maid Ustinia. She is the girl who knows her place in the scheme of things, and she is not shy of demanding something better from her life. She is not passive like Alyosha. She actively promotes her feelings and single handedly brings out Alyosha's confession of his love towards her. His passiveness is complemented by her active involvement in life. She has her own way of doing things and ensures in her own way to bring out his hidden feelings. This she does by promoting him to speak. She is one who listens to his heart, she acts like panacea for all his ailments. Her silent listening is no less than miraculous for his soul and as Thich Nhat Hanh states:

Deep listening is at the foundation of Right Speech. If we cannot listen mindfully, we cannot practice Right Speech. No matter what we say, it will not be mindful, because we'll be speaking only our own ideas and not in response to the other person. In the *Lotus sutra*, we are advised to look and listen with the eyes of compassion. Compassionate listening brings about healing. When someone listens to us this way, we feel some relief right away. A good therapist always practices deep, compassionate listening. We have to learn to do the same in order to heal the people we love and restore communication with them. (Hanh 86)

Many of the readers might not be happy with the way the story ends. At least readers who belong to the contemporary generation might find it imposed. There are people who are going to raise questions as to was it necessary to make the end so hasty and so tragic? The answer lies with the predilections of the writer and the special circumstances that he might have been a witness to which forced him to end the story with the death, tragic and untimely, of the young boy. What happens to the girl afterwards is not the concern of the writer, but the story cannot end with the death of the boy in real world. However, the writer has not bothered to mention a word about the future of the poor maid. Maybe this is his way of depicting the tragic predicament of people who are not cared for.

Tolstoy's fiction is based on realism and his portrayal of the contemporary Russian society is so truthful that it encompasses the immediate representations and becomes a mirror of human society in all the ages and in all the lands. A brief review of these three stories brings to light the various facets of Tolstoy's fiction, features that makes him one of the best and most revered storytellers of all times. The intimate portrayal of human relations as is present in these stories coupled with their relationship with their surroundings, their culture, their ethos, brings out a very delightful kaleidoscopic panorama of human life and resonates as a perennial song of humanity.

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