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THE EMANCIPATED WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF CHEKHOV

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ABSTRACT

Anton Chekhov, the Russian dramatist excelled in the creation of women characters. Russian theatre and other playwrights were his inspiration. Chekhov excelled in creating complex characterization of women. He possessed a multifaceted distinctiveness with a range of themes and subjects, voice and style. His plays combine popular appeal with credibility. Russia produced literature and actors of its own towards the end of the nineteenth century. Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, Stanislavskiy and Danchenko contributed to the development of realism on the Russian stage. Chekhov's plays gave them ample scope for success and their theatre was referred to as The Chekhov Theatre. Chekhov's major plays and his portrayal of female characters are then discussed. His female characters though beaten on all sides by life are strong enough to believe in themselves and find refuge in industry. They emerge victorious enough to encounter and find meaning in life.

Key words Chekhov, Female characters, Russian Drama, Resilient women.

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INTRODUCTION

In order to comprehend Chekhov(1860-1904) as a dramatist, a purview of the Russian theatre is an absolute prerequisite. Russian theatre and playwrights were the inspiration for this inimitable and thought provoking dramatist.

DISCUSSION

Unlike the European theatre Russian theatre had a late beginning. It commenced mainly as a form of establishing a national art and faced stiff competition from already established German and French troupes. It also encountered the opposition of the Church, the illiteracy of the general population and the indolent Russian nobles who evinced no interest in the progress of the Russian language.

However, Russians also had entertainers for important festivals and weddings. The ecclesiastical drama was later followed by drama that was performed by the nomadic entertainers who were pushed underground. They wandered in order to earn their livelihood. The period of Boris known as "Time of the troubles" left little or no leisure for drama. When Romanov I became Tsar in 1613 a house of entertainment was constructed and the chief actors of the Russian theatre were experienced Germans, while the Russian

strolling entertainers were attributed a secondary role. The decline of Tsar Alexis in 1648 caused the strolling entertainers to be replaced by the traditional church choir.

Simon Polotsky (1626-1680) produced two plays that were total scholarly exercises. The Tsar's visit to Poland once again caused the rise of the secular theatre. His second wife was an admirer of England and its plays and they celebrated the royal birth of their son, Peter the Great, in 1672 with a play. Actors were invited to visit Russia but nobody was prepared to venture there. A young German priest Gregory was assigned the task of producing a play. He wrote a tragic comedy, *Ahaseureus and Esther*. When Gregory expired in 1675, his assistant Huebner encouraged the secular theatre avoiding biblical subjects and was therefore dismissed. The death of Alexis in 1675 saw the deterioration of the Russian theatre. Peter the Great tried to revive the work of Gregory but to no avail. Plays about political events were also written. Feolan Parokopovich (1681_1736) made an attempt to produce tragi-comedy in 1705 which was based on a Russian historical theme.

The Russian theatre as a social force emerged in 1732 when a Cadet of the sons of nobility leading to the commencing of Russian national drama and admiration of Russian literature. Alexei Petrovich Sumarakov (1718-1777), Most of his tragedies dealt with Russian history.

Russia produced literature and actors of its own towards the end of the 19th Century and despite several obstacles, great Russian writers emerged - Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky.

After the observation of Russian drama, a study of Chekhov's predecessors is essential to assess Chekhov as a dramatist. His predecessors Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Gorky were masters of characterization.

The first Russian tragedy *Boris Godunov*, that dealt with a political theme of the relationship between a tyrant and his people was written by Alexander Pushkin. His desire was to create a truly national drama. Russian theatre remains indebted to him as he was the first writer to make Russian a literary language.

Gogol (1800-1852) was the first realist of the Russian theatre and was known for the social comedy that he produced. His masterpiece *Inspector General* was translated and produced in Europe and America. Turgenev (1818-1883) wrote his masterpiece, *A Month in the Country* in Stanislavsky 1850. He was the forerunner of Chekhov as he concentrated on internal dramatic conflict rather than the external.

Stanislavsky and a brilliant teacher of dramatics Nimirovich Danchenko contributed a great deal to the development of realism in the Russian stage. Chekhov's plays gave them ample scope to practice the theories of the Art Theatre. Chekhov's play "*The Seagull*" was presented by them to the public on December 16, 1898. It proved to be a tremendous success and their theatre was referred to as the Chekhov Theatre.

The study of Chekhov's women is refreshing and interesting when compared to Chekhov's hesitant men. His women represent the bright side of life and almost all of them possess indomitable will and courage to overcome the difficulties of life. As in the case of Chekhov's men, Chekhov's women can be classified into many groups to comprehend their essential nature.

The first group deals with Chekhov's selfish and jealous women and in this group can be placed Irina Arkadina and Polina of "*The Seagull*", and Lyuba Ranevsky of "*The Cherry Orchard*". The second group consists of Chekhov's female predators. Masha of *The Seagull*, Helena of *Uncle Vanya*, Natasha of *Three Sisters* and Zinaida of *Ivanov* belong to this kind. The third group comprises Chekhov's strong and brave women. Nina of *The Seagull*, Sonya of *Uncle Vanya*, Olga, Masha and Irina of *Three Sisters* and Anya and Varya of *The Cherry Orchard* are included in this group. The fourth group deals with Chekhov's old women, Maria Voynitsky and Marina of *Uncle Vanya*; and Anfisa of *Three Sisters*. The fifth group consists of Chekhov's good women, Anna and Sasha of *Ivanov*. The sixth group comprises his maid servants Charlotta and Dunyasha of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Conclusion

Chekhov's women have the ability to surmount the obstacles that they encounter and succeed in finding their paths in life. Even in the midst of desperate situations they do not consider surrender or suicide.

They are indomitable and there is not a single male character who can be compared with Chekhov's strong willed women. The emancipated group of Chekhov's women are delineated as strong, quietly determined, possessed with a stupendous will to be over comers in life. They represent the optimistic side of life and bring a kind of daisy like freshness to it.

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