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UNDERSTANDING THE AGON: A DIALOGIC READING OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S "THE BET"

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ABSTRACT

The individual's world, by the very nature of the individual's being, cannot remain static. The world widens from the individual's core self, and draws into itself, in a dynamic manner, one by one or in groups, several other individuals, resulting in numerous kinds of relationships, which, to all those interested in discovering structures, would present an amazing parallel with linguistic structures. Conflict, one of the elements in the plot, is the fulcrum based on which a story revolves. Right from the days of ancient philosophers and early dramatists, this element was used effectively to establish a curious yet serious encounter with the never ending questions of life and death. Plato's dialogues are a means of strengthening this conflict with oneself and the world. The early dramatists called this element 'agon'. The short story, "The Bet" by Anton Chekhov, explores this element of agon which is revealed through the bet between the Lawyer and the banker.

Key words: Agon, struggle, dialogue

INTRODUCTION

Literature, which is supposed to be an embodiment of life, is most often an arena where fights, battles and even wars unveil in its terrifying forms. Conflict, one of the elements in the plot, is the fulcrum based on which a story revolves. Right from the days of ancient philosophers and early dramatists, this element was used effectively to establish a curious yet serious encounter with the never ending questions of life and death. Plato's dialogues are a means of strengthening this conflict with oneself and the world. The dramatists of the old comedy like Aristophanes, for example, in his play *The Frogs* introduces a debate between Aeschylus and Euripides. The early dramatists called this element 'agon' which is defined as "the contest or dispute between two characters which forms a major part of the action in a story" (Baldick 6).

In the short story, "The Bet" by Anton Chekhov, it is this element of agon which is revealed through the bet between the Lawyer and the Banker. It was fifteen years ago that a heated debate about the legitimacy of capital punishment during a party came to a bizarre end. A young man argued against death penalty and advocated life imprisonment. The banker challenged him to remain in solitary confinement for fifteen years to prove his argument and offered two million as the bet amount. For the banker who had seen hard times since then, such a payment meant devastation of his situation. But the young man had transformed much beyond the banker's reckoning. Throughout the story, many ideas surface that relate to a larger theme regarding the importance of living a fulfilled life- what is necessary to make life worth living, the magic of literature, the effectiveness of imprisonment, and the ignorance of harsh realities. The whole imprisonment itself seemed to

be a large metaphor for the different stages of life; it is essentially a “man versus man” story that escalates into a ‘man versus himself’ story, in which spiritual happiness preponderates over material wealth.

Man is in constant struggle with the material forces of nature. It transforms into a wider realm when it comes to affect the interpersonal relations and eventually a person trying to escape from himself. The story “The Bet” opens when the banker is hosting a party in an autumn night. Just as usual with man-to-man conversations, everything under this universe will become a matter of discussion and debate, especially if there is a sip of liquor to boost one’s brains. The same happened in the banker’s party where life imprisonment vs death penalty becomes a matter of heated debate between the lawyer and the banker. Both of them took it too personally and they go to the extent of staking their valuables- the banker, his money and the lawyer, his fifteen years of life. The lawyer skillfully presents his defense for life imprisonment thus:

Capital Punishment and life imprisonment are equally immoral, but if I had to choose between the death penalty and imprisonment for life, I would certainly choose the second. To live anyhow is better than not living at all. (Chekhov 10)

The banker retorts to it stating the difficulty of this voluntary confinement. He warns the lawyer of the impending agon he has to face while all alone.

Don’t forget either, you unhappy man, that voluntary confinement is a great deal harder to bear than enforced imprisonment. The thought that you have the right to step out in liberty at any moment will poison your whole existence in prison. (10)

Hence, the moment they get into the bet, each of them started experiencing a new agon which was far more intimidating than a common argument between two youngsters. When fortune played its craziness with each of them, they started disputing against themselves and thus creating even more agons than it was the previous day. As is the natural law of nature, the bigger agon started swallowing the smaller ones.

Initially the agon was a man-versus-man contest where two personal ideologies fight each other for purely personal gains. This is very well evident in the words of the young man, “Agreed! You stake your millions and I stake my freedom!”(10). In the known history of life on this planet, the urge to surpass another is a distinguishing feature of animal world. Man, a social animal, is no exception to this rule and quiet often tries to defeat another in his socially acceptable circles.

The prevalent question is whether agon is something that ends up in a dispute between two people or two characters as in literature. But the fact is that this debate is not something without a purpose. It entails in unveiling the deep recesses of human psyche. The ultimate end of every agon is to better understand and express one’s power and personality. Hence, the agon is a gradual process of fighting with the conflicting emotions and thoughts within and without.

The story vividly depicts this transition of the agon into a man-versus-himself story through the emotional dialogism which unsettles the mind of the lawyer during his initial years of imprisonment. Mikhail Bakhtin defines dialogism in his theoretical praxis thus, “we cannot understand how meaning is produced, unless we grasp that the meaning of individual words is a result of a negotiation, not only between actual speakers, but also with language itself” (Buchanan 131). The emotional baggage with which the young lawyer dealt with his agon is clearly stated in the following words which describes how he spent the first year of his self-imposed imprisonment.

For the first year of his confinement, as far as one could judge from his brief notes, the prisoner suffered from loneliness and depression. The sounds of the piano could be heard continually day and night from his lodge. He refused wine and tobacco. (11)

However, the receding dialogues he has with himself -the anxieties and fears- slowly abandoned him and a new vibe started to enlighten his thoughts. He zealously read languages, philosophy and history. This is another transition stage and he started to initiate a new agon, one with the books. It is said that in course of four years, some six hundred volumes were procured at his request. Here the lawyer started to develop a new discourse with the world of books which gave him insights much more than he could gather all throughout his life of freedom. This is evident in the metaphor Chekhov uses: “His reading suggested a man swimming in the sea among the wreckage of his ship, and trying to save his life by greedily clutching first at one spar and then at another” (12).

On the other side, the banker who at one point in his life actively seeks to engage with new agons is heavily disappointed with himself and a dangerous agon started to engulf him- the thought of killing his opponent. He mutters to himself, "cursed bet! Why didn't the man die? He is only forty now. He will take my last penny from me" (13). The extend of cruelty which this new agon instilled in him is revealed through his thoughts, "Poor Creature! He is asleep and most likely dreaming of the millions. And I have only to take this half-dead man, throw him on the bed, stifle him a little with the pillow, and the most conscientious expert would find no sign of a violent death"(14). At this point, the banker loses all his sanity and the agon has turned out to be a little demon which demands nothing less than the very life and personality of the banker. This sheds light on the meaninglessness of those disputes a man unnecessarily engages in which ultimately ruins one's existence.

A gnosis, however, turns turtle down all the existing agons. This is revealed through a letter which the young lawyer writes to his onetime opponent. He expresses his strong dislike for all those worldly treasures for which man constantly engages in various agons. He says, "With clear conscience I tell you, as before God, who beholds me, that I despise freedom and life and health, and all that your books call the good things of the world" (14). Here we reaches the culmination of a discourse where a man who was taken away by the passions of his young age completes transforms himself to renounce everything for which he has staked his 15 years of life. As Karl Jung rightly said, "As understanding deepens, the further removed it becomes from knowledge" (Read 4577). This is true of the young man who is now distant from all those agons which once ruled his life. His strong dislike for all those materials possessions is expressed below:

To prove to you in action how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deprive myself of the right to the money, I shall go out from here five hours before the time fixed, and so break the compact. (15)

The individual's world, by the very nature of the individual's being, cannot remain static. The world widens from the individual's core self, and draws into itself, in a dynamic manner, one by one or in groups, several other individuals, resulting in numerous kinds of relationships, which, to all those interested in discovering structures, would present an amazing parallel with linguistic structures. Like the Richardsian "interanimation" between words in different "contexts of situation," the individuals in different contexts of relationship have several kinds of interactions, and move up, as the words do, to enter into relationships in "higher" structures (Dawes26). Through an interesting analogous process, individuals enter into familial, societal, racial and other relationships in a wide variety that could be seen in the phonological, morphological and syntactical processes of the languages of different climes. The analogy need not be stretched too far. It can stop with discourse analysis, where one looks for the total effect contributed by the parts and their relationships. The very nature of the individual self and the dynamic, organic relationships the individual enters into, contribute to the wholeness of life.

These discourses which the human beings enter are in fact agons, a struggle for existence and establishment. Chekhov's short story "The Bet" is such a struggle between a banker and a lawyer; both of them undergoes through numerous agons, following the basic principle of the bigger agon swallowing the smaller ones. Finally the lawyer constructs the super agon, one of renunciation which finally triumphs the bet. Thus the short story offers the possibility of a noval reading in the light of the theory of agons.

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