

### **CHAPTER-III**

## **OBSERVING CHEKHOV THROUGH HIS SHORT STORIES**

The wisdom has been defined in many different ways. There is no one who possesses complete wisdom. This is also argued that individuals who are considered wise have no guarantee generally to display it equally in all aspects and almost all phases of their lives. In the above discussion one has already seen enough about Chekhov's life to think why Gorky and his other contemporaries thought of him as a man of wisdom. Central to his wisdom are values of compassion, freedom, humor, beauty, truth, goodness, humility, honesty, justice, and tolerance which time and again one can find while reading his succeeding short stories.

Contextualising is a key issue both to understand and implement for relevant and effective literary practice. The literature comes dressed in culture and it must be lived out in cultures. The writer gives life to it through his wisdom. The significance of context to the life issues, which the text must address and indwell, cannot be underestimated because it has an impression of the writer's wisdom. There are constructive approaches to contextualisation which facilitate an analysis of both literature and culture, and their dynamic ongoing relationship. The available short stories of Anton Chekhov are varied and each brings out particular aspects of his wisdom signifying through a context, which runs particular risks of misappropriation. The application of these approaches by Anton Chekhov is urgent, lest its 'Russian' cultures fail to die to self and enable a truly Russian expression of the literature to flourish.

Chekhov once while talking to Maxim Gorky remarked: “Does it bore you to listen to my dreams?” (Chekhov CW 7). Chekhov was a man of dreams and true it is that to be a writer one needs to be a dreamer as a salesman ought to be as was said by Arthur Miller about Willy Loman: “A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory” (Miller, Web). Similarly, dreaming comes within the territory of a literary artist. It is this quality of being a wonderful dreamer that makes Chekhov a great creator of short stories. According to a Soviet scholar who once calculated tells that in all Chekhov’s works more than 8,000 characters appeared (Lantz, 71). This shows the colourfulness of his imaginative and fertile mind. His short stories also gain more value owing to the fact that Chekhov was permitted to move amongst the mankind only for 44 years. He was fortunate enough to put on paper what he dreamed for mankind and did not have the feeling of fear as Keats who in one of his sonnets says:

“When I have fears that I may cease to be

Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain” (Keats Web)

Chekhov successfully poured his emotions in his stories and has left a legacy for the future generations to be blessed with. A filmmaker Woody Allen once said, “I’m crazy about Chekhov. I never knew anybody that wasn’t” (Woody 156). To Allen, Chekhov’s humour was no doubt part of his appeal, but perhaps his wisdom, sometime displayed through his humour, was also part of the attraction.

Chekhov has been a much admired writer in the world literature. He was blessed with a highly sensitive soul who continuously thought of the welfare of mankind, commenting on his social and humanitarian activities, one scholar wrote that “his life was one continuous round of alleviating famine, fighting

epidemics, building schools and public roads, endowing libraries, helping organize marine biology libraries, giving thousands of needy peasants free medical treatment, planting gardens, helping fledgling writers get published, raising funds for worthwhile causes, and hundreds of other pursuits designed to help his fellow man and improve the general quality of life around him.” (Karlinsky, 26) Further an editor while going through his letters, once wrote, “he was the least doctrinaire, the least dogmatic of men,” and that “his honesty was equal to his humanity.” (Chekhov, Letters, viii)

Fate was cruel enough to Chekhov and he suffered with tuberculosis for fifteen years without ever making his readers realize the agony through which he underwent. It is not an exaggeration to mention that the manliness with which he bore his sufferings and met his death was admirable. As one of his chief biographers writes, “Never in the nineteen years that were left to him could he ever have forgotten that his days were numbered” (Rayfield, 24). He was a humble and open-minded person seeking the truth as indicated at the end of his long story “The Duel”. The main characters speak that “nobody knows the real truth,” and one of them thinks the following: “So it is in life. . . . In the search for truth man makes two steps forward and one step back. Suffering, mistakes, and weariness of life thrust them back, but the thirst for truth and stubborn will drive them on and on. And who knows? Perhaps they will reach the real truth at last.” (Chekhov Web)

He was an ardent lover of reading and wished that all the teachers who are entrusted the task of teaching the youngsters need to be well informed themselves. The teacher in *The Teacher of Literature* holds the same opinion as if he mouths the words of his creator, says he: “It really is awkward. I am a

teacher of literature, and to this day I've not read Lessing. I must read him" (Chekhov, *Short Stories* 114). Chekhov, however, was much concerned at the pitiable condition of teachers in the remote and rural areas of Russia. His views are quoted at some length by Gorky in his memoirs. Chekhov not only wanted the teachers to be well informed but he had a strong love and sympathy for them. He behaved not like a school inspector to the teachers who would come to visit him but with a human heart. Gorky writes about a teacher who came to see Chekhov in his presence. After the early tension on the face of the teacher he gradually cooled and final at the time of departure had to say this to Chekhov:

I came to see you as if I was going to see a superior, shaking my shoes. I swelled like a turkey-cock determined to show you that I was worth something too and I go away as if I were leaving a good close friend, who understands everything. What a great thing it is — to understand everything! Thank you! I'm going. I take away with me a good, precious thought: great people are simpler, they understand more, they are closer to us poor mortals than the small fry we live amidst. Good-bye, I shall never forget you. (Chekhov *Collected Works*, 11)

This is enough to show that a very beautiful heart beat in the body of Anton Chekhov and this is the beauty that one can find in his literature in general and short stories in particular. Some of his short stories will now be discussed and critically analyzed to bring out all the aspects of the personality of Chekhov as a writer, his views on mankind, his Russia, the society by which he was surrounded with and the influence as well as the impact of his contemporary world. Numerous collections of his short stories have appeared

in print from his time to the present day. The book that forms the base of this study is the one which has his representative short stories from 1884 onwards to 1903, a year before his death. These stories are concerned more with the contemporary problems and ideas.

The collection has at its outset the story entitled *Chameleon* that was published in 1884. Though the story Chekhov draws attention to the cruel approach of the police towards the public on the one side and hypocrisy on the other. Police is the same over the globe and while reading the story it is felt that it does not matter it relates to Russia or our own India. The police which supposed to be the protector of masses in fact is their biggest torturer. Chekhov has beautifully captured the mindset of policemen in this story. The story has Police Inspector Ochumelov crossing the market place when he suddenly hears the words “So, you’d bite, would you, you cur! Don’t let it go, lads! Biting is not allowed nowadays. Hold it! Ow!” (Chekhov Short Stories 1) As soon as he hears the words the Inspector inside him comes to the fore and suddenly takes charge of his personality. “Looks like a public disturbance, Your Honor!” (Chekhov Short Stories 1), speaks the aide of the Inspector which is enough to awake the silent policeman inside Ochumelov. When he moves closer to the group he sees Khryukin, the goldsmith. Thinking that he would be doing a favour to Khryukin and be benefitted some day in some way he shouts to his constable to find out whose dog it was and that the dog must be exterminated without delay. Soon somebody shouts from the crowd that it belongs to General Zhigalov and that is the end of Ochumelov’s anger. It immediately cooled down as water has been put on burning cinders.

The dual attitude of the police is finely captured by the author. He immediately turns to the goldsmith and retorts: “One thing I don’t understand — how did it happen to bite you? How could it have got at your finger? Such a little dog, and you such a strapping fellow! . . . I know you fellows! A set of devils!” (Chekhov Short Stories 2). Khryukin finding the Inspector turning against him speaks in honey dipped words to him: “May the justice of peace try me if I’m lying! It says in the law . . . all men are equal now” (Chekhov Short Stories 2). But the Inspector has more of fear of General Zhigalov and says, “Don’t argue!” Now this is how police behaves not only with the common man but also the special one when the other one is superior in hierarchy. He was about to speak more when the constable sounded: “No, that isn’t the General’s dog” (Chekhov Short Stories). At this juncture the tone of the Inspector suddenly changes and addresses the goldsmith: “You are a victim, Khryukin, and mind you don’t leave it at that. He must be taught a lesson!” (Chekhov Short Stories 2)

The readers enjoy this sudden change of attitude of the Inspector and the author brings home the message that might is right. At the same very moment the information is corrected and declared that it is not the General’s. The inspector this time does not show any sign of quick response being defeated twice and this time suggests that the dog should be taken to the General saying that it was found by him and if it is let loose in the street it may get spoilt, and at the same time advises the goldsmith to take care of his own self as “It’s your own fault...” (Chekhov Short Stories 2). However, it so happens that the General’s chef appears on the scene and when inquired he tells that the dog does not belong to his master. The Inspector immediately declares: “You’ve

been told it's a stray, so a stray it is. Destroy it and have done with the matter" (Chekhov Short Stories 2). They are all about to leave the place when once again the chef makes it clear that though it does not belong to his master but it belongs to the brother of his master and this again makes the Inspector take a U turn. "So it's *his* dog? Very glad! . . . What a pup!" (Chekhov Short Stories 2). The dog is sent with the chef and turning towards Khryukin says Ochumelov: "I'll have you yet" (Chekhov Short Stories 2)! and with a threatening attitude continues his way across the market place. The story throws light on the point of view as held by Chekhov regarding the police of Russia but he being a writer had a futuristic vision and perhaps believed that same is going to remain the situation of the executors of law and thus he tried to give a voice to it through his literature. This statement of Lenin supports Chekhov's depiction of condition of Russian public that the liberal are contributing to political degradation of the population by the Tsarist Government, enfeebling "the consciousness, already feeble enough, of the average Russian's sense of responsibility as a citizen, for *everything* the Government does." (Yermilov 225)

Chekhov like many other Russian writers writes much upon the miserable situation of the masses from all the walks of life. His favourite theme like Premchand was to bring out the miseries suffered by his countrymen. Writers tend to speak for the dumb, listen for the deaf and see for the blind. Chekhov found himself more at ease while dealing with the problems of a common man because though he had established himself well as a medical practitioner and a writer he always had a longing to meet and mingle with the masses as he found himself closer to them. As Gorky comments: "All

his life Anton Pavlovich lived the life of the soul, was always himself, inwardly free, and took no notice of what some expected, and others — less delicate — demanded of him.” (Chekhov *Collected Works* 12)

One of his stories entitled *Misery* deals with the theme of despair, seclusion and sorrow in a genuinely unique manner. Whereas the humans are unable or uninterested in the sufferings of their fellow travellers in this vast world and wide, the speechless animals at times become the true companions. They silently communicate and provide the much needed relief that is denied by those who call themselves humans but are so only in form and have lost the true meaning of being human. The story is short yet sweet in the sense as Shelley says: “Our sweetest thoughts are those that tell of the saddest thought.” (Shelley Web)

The story is about one Iona Potapov who is utterly miserable and is feeling isolated from the human world as nobody has time or intention to pay attention to his suffering soul. The story is supplied with a sub title “To whom shall I tell my grief?” The sub title amply brings out the intention of the author that he wishes to tell the story of such a person in whom no one is interested. But in God’s world man finds refuge amongst the animals when his own ones turn faces. The protagonist Iona Potapov is a sleigh-driver in the city of St. Petersburg, one of the busiest in Russia. The story is set in the background of the death of the son of protagonist. The author carefully matches the mood of the nature with the sufferer. It is twilight and the climate is heavy with the snowfall. A thin soft layer of ice has capped all that is visible. In this situation of dull and gloomy environment Iona Potapov is sitting double bent on the box of the sleigh. His mare is matching to his personality and through her the



writer draws the attention towards its master, “Her stillness, the angularity of her lines, and the stick-like straightness of her legs make her look like a halfpenny gingerbread horse. She is probably lost in thought” (Chekhov, *Short Stories* 12). The writer through the condition of the mare symbolically tells the reader that both the rider and the one rode are sailing in the same boat. Both are passing through utter trouble and turmoil. Iona is not only troubled in the heart but is also tensed for being without a single fare after coming out of the yard. The town as well as the life of Iona, both are being covered by the shades of evening, and the pale light of the street lamps are not sufficient to give glow to either of them. However, after a long waiting finally Iona hears somebody calling for the cab. An officer comes and occupies the seat and Iona gives a tug at the reins. Iona is unable to keep control over the cab as he has lost control over his life and soul. The officer who has occupied his cab angrily shouts at him to drive safely and carefully. But Iona is lost in his own thoughts: “Iona fidgets on the box as though he were sitting on thorns, jerks his elbows, and turns his eyes about like one possessed, as though he does not know where he is or why he is there” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 13). But soon a sigh of relief comes from him as the officer says words consoling him. And it is as if the gates of grief are let open for which Iona had been waiting for so long and hoping that the officer will share his grief utters with great difficulty: “My son . . . er . . . my son died this week, sir” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 14). Hoping to hear some more consoling words he gets a mere formal response from the listener, “H’m! What did he die of?” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 14). To explain his pain he turns his whole body round to his passenger but immediately hears somewhere from the darkness: “Have you gone off your

head, you old dog? Look where are you going!” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 14). Through such words of insult and pain he finally reaches his destination and the officer paying him the fare marches away without sharing his grief. Again Iona feels lonely and sits huddled.

Chekhov brings out the inner feelings of his characters and without commenting upon them places the characters in such positions that the readers can very well understand their conditions either of pity or of pleasure. Again Iona is lost in his own self and waits for another fare and hour upon hour pass and the waiting gets more and more tiresome and troubling. The outer actions help to forget the inner suffering but to Iona even this is not granted. However, when after a long wait new passengers arrive. They are a real mess and make the matter more worsen for Iona, “Are you going to drive like this all the way? Eh? Shall I give you one in the neck?” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 15). But the continuous talk of the passengers even though it is an abuse to him makes him less forlorn and the feeling of loneliness begins little by little to be less heavy on his heart. After some time when the passengers stop talking Iona turns and looks round at them and says: “This week . . . er . . . my . . . er . . . son died!” Hoping to receive soft words from them, he is utterly despaired when one of the three passengers says, “Well, you give him a little encouragement . . . one in the neck! . . . Do you hear, you old plague? I’ll make you smart.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 15)

Listening to this Iona feels a slap on his back. The merciless world is displayed in a passenger who comically asks Iona: “Cabman, are you married?” and Iona very painfully responds: “The only wife for me is the damp earth . . . The grave that is! . . . Here my son’s dead and I am alive . . .

It's a strange thing, death has come in at the wrong door . . . Instead of coming for me it went for my son. . . ." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 16). The words echo the same strain as the one that is to be found in the famous play *Riders to the Sea* where Maurya the mother of six young sons moans pathetically:

In the big world the old people do be  
Leaving things after them for their sons and children,  
But in this place it is the young men do be  
Leaving things behind them for them that do be old. (Synge *Web*)

The image of Iona created by Chekhov, and that of Maurya created by Synge, point out the singular fact that misery is the master, which rules everywhere without any check and control.

As soon as the passengers get off the cab and Iona is left alone he again gets tuned to the suffering and Chekhov says:

The misery which has been for a brief space eased comes back again and tears his heart more cruelly than ever. With a look of anxiety and suffering Iona's eyes stray restlessly among the crowds moving to and fro on both sides of the street: can he not find among those thousands someone who will listen to him? (Chekhov *Short Stories* 16)

Chekhov here comes very close to Dostoevsky who presents such painful picture of a father who loses his young son in his famous novel *Poor People*. Iona tries to share his grief with so many people but none responds properly and he feels so alone as if the world has gone empty of people. He feels the same pain as is felt by the ancient mariner in Coleridge's poem and

strives to express it fully but in vain. Finally he finds refuge in the animal world when he addresses his mare:

That's how it is old girl. . . . Kuzma Ionich is gone. . . . He said good-by to me. . . . He went and died for no reason. . . . Now, suppose you had a little colt, and you were own mother to that little colt. . . . And all at once the same little colt went and died. . . . You'd be sorry, wouldn't you? . . . (Chekhov *Short Stories* 16)

This is how he is ultimately relieved of his suffering. He shares it with the dumb animal who may not be having human voice but certainly has the heart and that too perhaps better than humans. "Misery" thus brings out the humanitarian approach of Chekhov in his fiction.

Chekhov like Premchand in India and Dostoevsky in Russia writes much on the theme of social injustice. Many short stories of Chekhov deal with the theme of quest for fulfilment as well as social injustice. Among the many, one can be discussed from the selection taken up for this study. This story is "Gooseberries". It was written in the year 1898 and may be put in the category of his last stories. The story discusses much like Premchand the life of the landowners. More important than this in the story is how a man works hard and arranges his life to make his dreams fulfilled. However, Chekhov carefully delineates the futility of personal achievement. A man is a social animal and if he lives only for himself than it is no life at all. The life should be a balanced one, and neither excessiveness of strain nor too much of liberalism should dominate one's life.

The story has three persons who interact with each other and talk of the fourth who is brother to one of these three. Chekhov himself had closely

watched the country life and thus we find faithfulness in his narratives. Two friends namely Ivan Ivanich who is professionally a veterinary surgeon and Burkin who is engaged as a high-school teacher happen to go on a walk in the countryside when they are suddenly arrested by a strong rain shower and forced to walk to an acquaintance nearby named Alekhin who was a landowner. As they reach his farm house they are welcomed by Alekhin who is busy winnowing. He welcomes the guests and directs them to his living room upstairs. On the way they meet the gorgeous Pelagea who is maidservant to Alekhin. As Alekhin joins them they decide to go for a bath as all are stained with mud.

They enjoy the tea on return and Chekhov narrates the air of superiority of Alekhin who enjoys his lavish living, says the author: "Alekhin, washed and combed, paced the room in his new frock-coat, enjoying the warmth, the cleanliness, his dry clothes and comfortable slippers" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 188). This description of Alekhin makes the reader aware of the miserable lifestyle of others who are less fortunate and as Ivan Ivanich tells about his brother who was a clerk in a government office, says Ivan: "He lived thriftily, never ate or drank his fill, dressed anyhow, like a beggar, .... he became terribly stingy" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 188). However, he leads such a life not for the want of resources, which he had perhaps enough to live decently but his obsession to possess an estate in country made him live thus. Even when Ivan would send him some money, that too he would put in the bank. Ivan says: "Once a man gets an idea into his head, there's no doing anything with him" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 189). His brother had a dream to live in country in an estate possessed privately as he would often say: "Country life has its

conveniences, you sit on the verandah, drinking tea, with your own ducks floating on the pond, and everything smells so nice, and . . . and the gooseberries ripen on the bushes” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 188). A person in order to fulfil his quest may go to any extent and he married an ugly elderly widow, for whom he had not the slightest affection, just because she had some money. The human mind is a strange thing, and may even grow devilish to attain the desired aim. He goes on living the same life of thrift and it is a heavy blow to the widow who within the three years of marriage goes to kiss mother earth in her grave.

Chekhov through Ivan tries in the story to answer in his own way the famous question raised by Leo Tolstoy when he asks: “How much land does a man need?” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 189). Ivan loves his brother but is not able to understand the obsessive disorder of having an estate of one’s own. In fact Chekhov wishes to show the influence of being a landowner in his times in the Russian society. Says Ivan:

To escape from the town, from the struggle, from the noise of life, to escape and hide one’s head in a country-estate, is not life, but egoism, idleness, it is a sort of renunciation, but renunciation without faith. It is not six feet of earth, not a country-estate, that a man needs, but the whole globe, the whole of nature, room to display his qualities and the individual characteristics of his free soul. (Chekhov *Short Stories* 188)

Chekhov asserts that man is in search of his identity and no piece of land could do for it but his own mind. It has been beautifully put by Milton in his most significant contribution to mankind *The Paradise Lost* where he says:

“The mind is its own place,

And in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” (Milton Web)

Man is unable to see what lies behind the beautiful estates, he is blind to the evils that creep in with wealth and prosperity, he does not realize that when he is “no longer the poor, timid clerk, but a true proprietor, a gentleman”, he not only has become a person who is rich but along with this riches comes from the backdoor without his knowledge the ‘ego’ which was in fact the force behind all this desire to be a landowner. Ivan’s brother who kept glued to his office-desk during the days of his clerkship now “took offense if the peasants failed to call him ‘Your Honour.’” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 189)

Chekhov uses gooseberries as a symbol of fulfilment of one’s long cherished desires. When Ivan goes to meet his landlord brother they meet with great warmth and then after tea is served the cook brings a plate full of gooseberries, they were not from the market but from the orchard of the owner of the estate. The scene is highly emotional and Chekhov tries to capture the moment in a precise manner: “Nililai Ivanich broke into a laugh and gazed at the gooseberries in tearful silence for at least five minutes. Speechless with emotion, he popped a single gooseberry into his mouth, darted at me the triumphant glance of a child who has at last gained possession of a long-for toy” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 191). Chekhov suggests that most of the worldly possessions are nothing more than toys the only difference being that they are fought for with more seriousness rather foolishness even though everyone knows that all their material achievements come to nothing.

The story gives Chekhov the platform to discuss several serious issues pertaining to human life. He shows the real life of man that lurks beneath his

humbleness when he is not in power. Chekhov is a master artist and even while describing the pangs of life does not do so in dark manner. He does not allow the frustrations to peep in the text. The story creates the impression of people and places both real and not fictional which are difficult for the reader to believe. This faithfulness of his portrayal of scenes, sights and citizens makes him one of the greatest writers of all ages and climes.

Chekhov has rarely for his protagonist a woman but the story entitled “The Darling” has a very nice and original woman Olga Semyonovna nicknamed as Olenka who displays all the beautiful traits a woman may possess. She is a gentle woman who throughout the story keeps herself occupied with love and care. She is so gentle and true to life that reading about her one is bound to be reminded of Prince Myshkin one of the greatest characters and most loved by the creator himself in the novel *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Speaking about him Dostoevsky had stated that he wanted to present a truly good man. This character Prince Myshkin is so gentle and tender that it is impossible for anyone to think ill of him. Even the most evil and devilish persons are mesmerized by his simplicity, humbleness, humanity and love that all their thoughts of ill-will spontaneously drop down. It will not be out of place to say the same for Olenka in this story. Andrew G. Colin in the introduction of Anton Chekhov: *The Woman in The Case And Other Stories* comments on the Chekhov find understanding of Russian Woman that in the spiritual sense woman is higher than man which is evident in his early stories. (Chekhov *The Woman* xv)

Human beings are often referred to as social beings that cannot live in isolation and that isolation is the biggest punishment that can be given. Even



the most hardcore of criminals are afraid of isolated imprisonment. Seclusion is the greatest pain to be suffered by humans. The famous poem by T.S.Eliot *The Wasteland* has an episode of an affluent society woman who regularly pleads with her lover to speak to her:

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.” (Eliot Web)

Olenka in the story is most disturbed when she has none to speak. She is unable to bear the moments of isolation and often in her dreams startles to speak her repressed thoughts. Fate has played with her and time and again put her in such situations that she has to live on her own. The title of the story is the most appropriate as no other title would have done for it. Her innocence makes people get pulled towards her like iron filings on a magnet. They call her darling out of compassion and the word has no other overtones. Rarely do we find such characters that are the purest in heart and soul. She is endearingly sweet and unaffected. She has no opinions of her own and treads on the impressions she receives from her relations with her male counterparts.

Critics and scholars find in her the epitome of female disempowerment but the greatest power of a woman i.e. to love is kept intact in her personality by the author. It is not that she has no autonomy to express her opinion or is forced to follow men but she is so simple that the idea to counter or add to the ideas of other does not occur to her. Here in, lies the beauty of her character. She is more concerned with her relationship with her man than to express her opinions. She feels more and thinks less and this is no sin for loving has brought more peace in the world and thinking less. She follows the words of the men with whom she is associated. Chekhov says: “She was always fond of someone, and could not exist without loving” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 212).

Thus the dominating force in her life was love and not the mind. “In earlier days she had loved her Papa . . . her aunt who used to come every other year . . . and before that, when she was at school, she had loved her French master” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 212). Her loving nature made her earn the title ‘darling’.

As she grows young she is first of all attracted to Kukin the manager of Tivoli an open-air theater. Her love is unalloyed and is in turn blessed with the same degree of pure love. Kukin is troubled to see the rains and the clouds for they mean bad business to him and men are more worried if they find their bread earning entering in difficult times. He says to Olenka: “There! that’s the life we lead, Olga Semyonovna. It’s enough to make one cry. One works and does one’s utmost; one wears oneself out, getting no sleep at night, and racks one’s brain what to do for the best. And then what happens” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 212)? Listening to these painful outpourings of her husband Olenka too grows sad and tears came to her eyes. She helped Kukin in his business and soon became a favourite of all the actors and other supporting staff at the theatre. They too started calling her ‘the darling’ out of sheer love for her innocence and sincerity of emotions. Life starts laughing at the couple after some time and they have a sunny time in winter when they took the theater in the town. Olenka was soon satisfied with the progress of the theatre and took it immediately upon her and ‘grew stouter’ while Kukin ‘grew thinner and yellower’.

This shows the purity of her life she is true whereas Kukin in spite of the profits he continually complained about the losses. However, she takes every care of Kukin and his business and when he had to go to Moscow to collect a

new troupe, she missed her sleep in his absence, so deeply was she attached to him. The departure was not thought by either of them as the final one but fate had willed it otherwise. Kukin died of sudden in Moscow and she was summoned there to attend his funeral. When she returned she could not contain herself and “as soon as she got indoors she threw herself on her bed and sobbed so loudly that it could be heard next door, and in the street.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 214)

Olenka observes the mourning period and feels lost in this vast world and wide. However, as is said time is a great healer and she soon gets attuned to life, when another person comes in her life and she started loving him, “Olenka loved him — loved him so much that she lay awake all night in a perfect fever” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 214). Such love may arise only when one is pure in the core of his being. She soon marries Vassily Andreich Pustovalov who is a timber merchant and Olenka finds herself one with her husband. “Her husband’s ideas were hers” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 214). Though she is innocent but the innocence sometimes becomes ludicrous as she says to one of her friends who suggests her to go to theatre for recreation: “Vassichka and I have no time to go to theatres. We have no time for nonsense. What’s the use of these theatres?” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 215). However, she is the personified ideal of female selflessness and this comment of hers may be pardoned owing to the fact that she has no individual identity of her own and has merged and mingled herself entirely with the identity of her husband. Being devoted to one’s life partner is no sin in any way. Chekhov has created a unique kind of female character in Olenka that is not traceable in other writers. She is so much satisfied with her life that she would sometimes

say: “Yes, we have nothing to complain of, thank God, I wish everyone were as well off as Vassichka and I” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 215). But to test the goodness of Olenka, Chekhov still has more miseries for her and after six years of happy and satisfied married life Vassily caught cold and left Olenka a widow once again. And at her husband’s funeral she sobbed, “I’ve nobody, now you’ve left me, my darling” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 215). And Chekhov comments: “It was evident that she could not live a year without some attachment” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 215). She was soon attached to a veterinary surgeon who was acquainted to her. The attachment this time was not in form of marriage but purely on human relationship, one needy supporting the other. The surgeon was living separated from his wife whom he had deserted for her being unfaithful to him. The only reason of the last bond between them was their son who was with the mother and loved dearly by the father.

Olenka is such a spiritual being that she says to the surgeon: “You know, Vladimir Platonich, you’d better make it up with your wife. You should forgive her for the sake of your son. You may be sure the little fellow understands” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 216). Olenka is very happy to live in close relationship with the surgeon but he has to go as his regiment moves to Siberia. She is once again left alone and this time it is awful. Time passed with wings and she grows plain and elderly. But luck is bound to shine upon such a pure soul and years after when somebody knocked on her gate: “Olenka went to open it herself and was dumbfounded when she looked out: she saw Smirnin, the veterinary surgeon, gray headed, and dressed as a civilian” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 218). Speaking to him she comes to know that he has

reconciled with his wife and wishes to settle in this town. She willingly offers her house to the family and that too without any rent. Now there can be no greater proof than this of Olenka's humanity and sincerity. The family settles and Olenka gradually grows liking for the child and feels as if existence has finally blessed her with a baby and she readily takes his charge as his mother goes to Kharlov to see her sister and his father is busy with his profession, and would not come home sometimes for days together. The boy Sasha was a real gift to her from God.

Olenka looks after the child as her own and even did not feel hurt when the child would at times say annoyingly to her:

Oh, do leave me alone!" The child could not grasp the river of love flowing in her heart and showering its last drop on his head. She would help him in all his activities and accompany him to the school but "he would feel ashamed of being followed by a tall, stout woman; he would turn round and say: "You'd better go home Auntie. I can go the rest of the way alone. (Chekhov *Short Stories* 220)

The woman suffers a lot in her life and yet remains gentle. She is blighted by disappointment in all the relations she has had in life. One is pained to see that the sense of fulfilment which she gains in rearing Sasha is also specious because the boy does not reciprocate her love. Chekhov beautifully comments: "Ah, how she loved him! Of her former attachments not one had been so deep; never had her soul surrendered to any feeling so spontaneously, so disinterestedly and so joyously . . . Why? Who can tell why? (Chekhov *Short Stories* 220). Chekhov here touches the chords of human heart with such tenderness that the blame that Olga is unintelligent holds no value.

Her all encompassing love that reaches to the heights of godly love is enough to nullify all the blemishes in her personality. She in taking care of Sasha even surpasses his parents. She is so deeply attached to the child that with every knock at the gate she would tremble for the fear that: “It must be a telegram from Kharkov . . . .Sasha’s mother is sending for him from Kharkov. . . . Oh, mercy on us!” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 220)

Even the slightest thought of separating from the child would run shivers down her spine and she would feel that “She was the most unhappy woman in the world.” The readers are puzzled at the goodness of Olga as the story comes to an end they have mixed feelings for her. They feel both sympathy and irritation towards the protagonist. But think as they will Olenka is made of such stuff that nothing can deter her from loving mankind in whatever form existence offers to her. Chekhov ends the story on the cries uttered by Sasha in sleep: “I’ll give it to you! Get away! Shut up!” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 221). certainly these words are spoken to Olga who must be trying to help the boy in some way but who is bent on feeling of the insult being tied to her.

The story is a rare one in which Chekhov has successfully reached the dark recesses of a woman’s heart. Even Tolstoy is reported to have liked the character of Olga immensely even though he is believed to be an anti-feminist by some critics, who quote some statements for his *War and Peace*, to quote one of the many: “Tie yourself up with a woman, and like a chained convict, you lose all freedom . . . . If you only know what women in general are! Egotism, vanity, silliness, triviality in everything. That’s what women are when they show themselves as they really are” (Tolstoy Web). Whatsoever the opinion may the world may have for women but it is rare to find a character in

fiction as Olga who is so immensely loving that she appears not of this world. She has loved and lost so many times that the readers fall in love with her for being an epitome of womanhood.

Chekhov was a master craftsman who could convey his message in a very short space too. His story “The Student” narrates the deep mystical anguish of mankind. The story deals with the theme of betrayal and remorse as expressed in the *Bible*. In this short story a young student Ivan Velikopolsky is returning home from shooting. He is absorbed in his thoughts and it is a very cold winter night. Chekhov narrates the darkness and cold of the weather in a graphical manner and in an elaborate style. It seems that he is trying to express what is going on in the mind of the student who is as dark and despaired inside. He is a student of the clerical academy and it is natural for him to ponder on the spiritual matters. When he thinks he finds that mankind is the same as it was in the days of Jesus when he was betrayed by his favourite disciple Peter. He is despaired to recollect the gospel and all this becomes more important because the day was Good Friday and he had not eaten anything because nothing had been cooked that day in the house to observe fast. The shivering climate made him think that perhaps such a wind also blew in the old days of Rurik, Ivan the Terrible and Peter and also that the same kind of poverty and hunger ruled in those times also. He thinks that nothing has changed for mankind since times immemorial and nothing is going to change also as man is the same with the same tendency to crush the others sometimes out of self-love and sometimes for no reason at all. He thinks: “the same desperate poverty and hunger, the same thatched roofs with holes in them, ignorance, misery, the same desolation around, the same darkness, the

same feeling of oppression — all these had existed, did exist, and would exist, and the lapse of a thousand years would make life no better” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 106). As the student reaches the place called Widows’ Garden he sees a campfire and decides to give himself some heat of the fire. While sitting with Vasilisa, the elder widow he starts narrating her, the gospel of Peter. The gospel has been heard innumerable times but is ever new as it accords with the human temperament of self- love. The student tells the story once again but it appears to be as fresh as ever when the impact of the story is viewed upon the mother and the daughter. The elder lady starts shedding tears listening to the gospel. And the student thinks: “if Vasilisa had shed tears, and her daughter had been troubled, it was evident that what he had just been telling them about, which had happened nineteen centuries ago, had a relation the present — to both women, to the desolate village, to himself, to all people” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 106). The student could analyse the situation and feels that the woman was weeping not owing to his story telling but the fact that she felt Peter to be near to her, “because her whole being was interested in what was passing in Peter’s soul” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 107). He suddenly became joyous at the realization that the past was linked with the present and the situations that prevailed in the days of Peter and Jesus still prevailed which kept them linked to the present. The feeling of exhilaration is immense in the student when he feels that: “he had just seen both ends of that chain; that when he touched one end the other quivered” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 108). The theme of mystical love and universal brotherhood has been beautifully brought out by Chekhov in this very short story. Chekhov had an irrational intuition that certainly there must be some meaning in human existence. He comes close to this viewpoint



in this story and it is reported that he insisted it to Bunin that this work was his favourite and most optimistic piece. In this story we see that Chekhov for the first time shows he has found out the feature that makes art having crucial importance to humanity. The student who is only twenty two but Chekhov makes him understand the mystery of human existence because only a fresh mind with energetic youth may comprehend the forms of power displaying themselves in various ways. The setting of the story is in the background of the campfire and is correlated with the campfire in the story of Peter. In a way this short story is a junction the past, present and future as well as it is a perfect example in miniature of Chekhov's art.

Chekhov has dealt with the theme of love; its fulfilling power, the frustrations arising out of unfulfilled love and the various shades of love within and without marriage, time and again in his fiction and particularly in his short stories. His story "The Lady with the Dog" which was published in the year 1899 is one of the most anthologized and favoured stories of Chekhov. Here he takes up the theme of lovers who cannot marry. This story may be labelled as a dark one as we find no humour here, it is only pathos and bitterness for fate which brought the relationship of Dmitri and Anna to the point of such intensity that it was impossible either to sever or protract the relationship.

Virginia Llewellyn Smith in her article relates this story with "About Love" another story by Chekhov on the same theme. She writes:

The emotional climax of "About Love" is reached as the hero, Alekhin, parts with his beloved forever: 'oh, how wretched she and I were! I confessed my love to her, and with a searing pain in my heart I

realized that everything that stood in the way of our love was irrelevant, petty, and false.’ A similar, if more restrained, emotion is expressed in “The Lady with the Dog”. Gurov and Anna Sergeevna had fallen in love for the first time in their lives: ‘they felt that fate itself had predestined them one for the other’, but in reality fate has brought about incomprehensible fact of their being married to different people, so that ‘it was as if they were two migrant birds . . . which had been caught and made to inhabit separate cages. (Chekhov *Short Stories* 351)

The story is set in Yalta which is a seaside resort in Crimea. The author has carefully selected the spot as it symbolizes the vastness of love as the sea and the prohibitions of the society imposed by the institution of marriage like the limits of the land. Just as no one is supposed to leave the land for his safety in the same way love is not supposed to cross the barriers of conjugal relationship since only within the limits of marriage love is considered by the society as holy and virtuous. However, true love has always been free of any restrictions and only in such freedom does love bloom in all its colours.

Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov is spending his vacations in Yalta alone and is attracted towards a young woman who was fair and not very tall. She was Anna Sergeyevna. Dmitri was no more attached to his wife and had been unfaithful to her several times, though they were married for many years now and had three children all grown up now as he himself was nearing forty. He had several painful experiences too in these extra-marital relationships but “every time he encountered an attractive woman he forgot all about this experience, the desire for life surged up in him, and everything suddenly seemed simple and amusing.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 221)

Gurov had developed the art of enticing women in talks. Introducing himself to her he said that he had a degree in Literature but took up a job in a bank in Moscow and was presently very well to do. She on her part was married only a couple of year ago, she hailed from St Petersburg and that her husband was in some position in the district administration. Gurov was sexually attracted towards her and thought a lot about her. But Chekhov aims at creating this character a bit different from his other heroes who are merely after sex. The thought processes of Gurov move from the beginning of the meeting to the end and finally thinks, "And yet there's something pathetic about her." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 221)

Gurov felt a strange feeling of affiliation for Anna and he inseparably fused with her for the next whole week. The heat being too much they found shelter in each other's company. Anna waited for the steamer which she hopes will bring her husband to her but everyday turned out to be a hopeless one. Gurov had by the time mustered courage enough to kiss her on the lips and moved to her room for the same act which he was so much habitual of enacting with so many women with who he had enjoyed on night stands. Gurov for the first time in all his relationships felt an alien feeling never ever felt before. He felt it was not merely the body of Anna he craved for but something beyond it. Never ever before his women had displayed 'feeling of embarrassment' as was visible in Anna. Gurov wished to make love to her but she was lost somewhere else and it was not an easy job for Gurov to do to her the same as he had done to so many other women. When she is approached with caresses she could not make up with the mind of Gurov and her appearance takes the shape of a repentant sinner in some classical painting.

She says to Gurov: “It isn’t right, you will never respect me anymore” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 225). Gurov is taken back with such a Christian response. He had never thought that he would ever meet with such a situation. He ponders: “How full of strange encounters life is!” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 224). Unable to comprehend her and with tears coming to her eyes he says, “I don’t understand, what is it you want” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 225). Their relationship is growing in a very mysterious dimension. It is both the physical and the spiritual at the same time. She is with Gurov and at the same time always expecting her husband to come and meet her, she is not trying to betray him but at the same time she is enjoying the company of Gurov too.

Chekhov seems particularly interested in the continuity of existence. In his story “The Student” he talks of the gospel of Peter and finds it meaningful even in the present day as the old widow cries bitterly hearing to it and the student sates: “If Vasilisa had shed tears and her daughter had been troubled, it was evident that what he had just been telling them about, which had happened nineteen centuries ago, had a relation to the present.” Again he thought: “The past is linked with the present by an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of the other” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 108). In the same tone in the story “The Lady with the Dog” sitting by the side of the sea with Anna, Gurov ponders:

The sea had roared like this long before there was any Yalta or Oreanda, it was roaring now, and it would go on roaring just as indifferently and hollowly, when he had passed away. And it may be that in this continuity, this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation, of the continuous

movement of life on earth, of the continuous movement towards perfection. (Chekhov *Short Stories* 226)

Chekhov seems to suggest that only love has the potential to make us realize that the continuity of life is the blessing of love, love in its various shades, the physical, spiritual or universal. This feeling was rooted deep in Chekhov and this is what makes him one of the most humane writer in the world literature. Love as treated in this story has a unique flavor, it is both the lusty and the lust less at the same time. Gurov finds Anna seductive and virtuous both together. Anna on her part was ever the same and Gurov pondering on her says to himself, “When you came to think of it, everything in the world is beautiful really everything but our own thoughts and actions, when we lose sight of the higher aims of life and of our dignity as human beings” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 226). The relationship starts moving in the vertical direction from the earlier horizontal one and one day Anna received a message from her husband imploring her to return as he was having problem in his eyes and could join her at Yalta. Anna who was never at ease in this relationship with Gurov but was caught in a kind of *Catch-22* situation, finally feels that the letter was a blessing for her as she says to Gurov: “It’s a good thing that I am going. It’s the intervention of fate” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 227). But she is not sure whether this is what she wanted because sitting in the train to home she says: “I shall think of you . . . I shall thing of you all the time . . . God bless you! Think kindly of me. We are parting forever, it must be so, because we ought never to have met. Good bye — God bless you.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 227)

Gurov and Anna separate after this brief stint and with a feeling that perhaps that is the end of their relationship. But fate had some other plan for the couple and Gurov after reaching Moscow hopes that in a month's time Anna "would be nothing but a vague memory . . . she would occasionally appear in his dreams." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 228) But even though the month was over Anna lingered on in his memory as if he had parted with Anna Sergeyevna only the day before. Every moment that he had spent with her came back to him as if it was not the past but the present. The memory was so overpowering that he felt he should see Anna immediately or it will be the end of his life. At the outset of the Christmas holidays he packs his bag and making an excuse goes to see Anna. He is not sure where he shall find her but with a faint hope to see her somewhere in the town she had mentioned in their meeting he sets out.

Reaching the town he searches and soon comes to know about Anna and her husband. He is a rich person and famous in the town. He plans very meticulously and manages to find Anna at the theatre with her husband. He meets her in the first interval as her husband goes out to smoke. Anna is flabbergasted and could well have fainted but controlled herself anyhow. She is true to him and accepts before him: "I could think of nothing but you the whole time, I lived on the thoughts of you. I tried to forget — why, oh, why did you come?" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 232)

This meeting is one of the most beautiful scenes in the story. It shows that now both are in deep love with each other and it is cruelty on part of the existence that they are bound to persons with whom they have no love feeling. Taking a promise from her to come and see him in Moscow he leaves and

soon she reaches Moscow to keep her word. Gurov goes to meet her and it becomes a routine act on part of Anna coming to Moscow on the pretext of meeting a gynaecologist. After several meetings Gurov one day while going to meet Anna in her hotel thinks of his relationship and begins to ponder: "Every individual existence revolves around mystery, and perhaps that is the chief reason that all cultivated individuals insisted so strongly on the respect due to personal secrets" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 233). Chekhov wishes to bring to light the most significant aspect of human life. Everyone is bound to live on two levels; one the social and other the personal. The personal is so secret, so hidden in the dark that at times even the individual himself dares not peep into it. The same feeling as that of Gurov is felt by Anna when on meeting him she starts crying from "her bitter consciousness of the sadness of their life; they could see one another in secret, hiding from people, as if they were thieves. Was not their life a broken one?"(Chekhov *Short Stories* 234). Gurov starts thinking of his relationship with other women in comparison to his relationship with Anna and feels that with all the other women: "There had been all sorts of things between them, but never love" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 234). And it was love which gave him so much pain but at the same time for the first time in his life he was tasting love and that was the most satisfying part of this relationship. Says he, "And only now, when he was gray haired, had he fallen in love properly, thoroughly, for the first time in his life" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 234). Chekhov puts his characters in such demanding situation that they feel life in its utmost. They cannot live together and they cannot live without one another. They finally realized that of their relationship the most complicated part was only just beginning.

This story was very dear to Chekhov and it was bound to be so with any other author for in such a creation the creator feels fulfilled. The joy lies not in solving the mysteries of life but in understanding them and his lovers come to that point in the story.

Chekhov has touched not only the beauties and joys of life achieved through love but he is also aware of the sufferings undergoing these joys. He like Premchand has written on the pains shared by the subaltern sections of the society. A story entitled “Sleepy“ written in 1888 truly captures the mind of the working class child who has to bear ordeals in order to meet her two ends. The story has a girl of thirteen for its protagonist named Varka. She is engaged as a nurse to a baby and has to look after a baby when she herself has not moved out her own childhood. She takes care of the child who keeps on crying without end. Varka feels sleepy owing to her hard household chores during the day, “Her eyes are glued together, her head droops, her neck aches. She cannot move her eyelids or her lips, and she feels as though her face is dried and wooden, as though her head has become as small as the head of a pin.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 65)

Chekhov minutely captures the psychological suffering of the child as she sees the master snoring soundly in the next door as if lulled by the lullaby sung by her for the baby. Varka is provided with very hard task masters who are cruel and despotic. She has to keep awake in the night for the baby because if the baby cries and Varka is found asleep her master and her mistress would beat her. The girl is so much tortured by lack of sleep that she starts having hallucinations. The writer through this scene of hallucination tries to emphasize the ill effects of hard labour upon a small girl as Varka. Even in the



hallucinations she dreams nothing else but sleep. She sees dark clouds that are screaming like the baby. She sees people falling on the ground in the liquid mud and Varka asks: “What is that for” and they answer “To sleep, to sleep!” Varka falls asleep hearing these words and “someone hits her on the back of her head so hard that her forehead knocks against a birch tree. She raises her eyes and sees, facing her, her master” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 67). She is a little suffering child to whom fate has denied even a little sleep.

Chekhov lived in an era when such liberties by the masters were common and there was no appeal to any authority. The servants were entirely at the mercy of the master whether it was children or grown-ups. The girl again starts to rock the child. But soon falls to sleep. She again hears angry and harsh words: “Are you asleep, you wretched girl” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 68). It’s the mistress this time and she has come to feed the baby. After feeding she goes back and Varka puts the baby in the cradle. She tries to hold herself back from sleep but her eyes are glued together and her head is heavy. She has not even closed her eyes when she hears the master’s voice to heat the stove. So it is already morning and she has to do the household chores. Running from one job to another she is exhausted. The mistress is roaring loudly near her but Varka longs to flop to the floor regardless of everything, and to sleep. But the owners of her fate deny her even this pleasure for which they do not even have to pay. Varka is so much distressed that at night when she dozes off she again has the same dream. She wants to run away from the place but is unable and is also unable to understand what force binds her to the place. She tries to find the foe who will not let her live. She is possessed by the hallucination and comes to the knowledge that the ‘foe’ is none else than this

baby. And she has the feeling: “Kill the baby and then sleep, sleep, sleep. . .” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 69). She walks up to the cradle and strangles him. Immediately she lies down on the floor, laughs with delight that she can sleep, and in a minute is sleeping as soundly as the dead. The story is moving and makes the readers realize that man has degraded to the extent of devil-hood that would not allow a small sleep to an innocent child. Cruelty on part of the adults breeds cruelty among the children and then they are punished for what they have not done by choice.

Similar to the story “Sleep”, Chekhov has penned another story “Vanka” published two year earlier the former one. It has a male protagonist named Vanka who is even younger to Varka the protagonist of the former story. Vanka is nine years old. He too like Varka is in service of a shoemaker. Chekhov has presented his sufferings in a more direct manner than Varka. It is the Christmas eve and he did not go to bed but sits writing to his Grandpa. At the outset of the story the pangs of the child are shared by the readers as he writes in the letter: “Dear Grandad Konstantin Makarich, I am writing a letter to you. I send you Christmas greetings and hope God will send you his blessings. I have no Father and no Mummie and you are all I have left” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 49). The child is seeking blessing for his old grandfather when he should be receiving blessing from his parents. But he is an orphan like Varka and none to look for him.

Chekhov has the peculiar ability to look in to the troubled souls of the children. He is very close to Dickens while narrating the agonies of the children. Chekhov delves deep into the psyche of the children and brings before the readers all that is going in the innocent minds of the children.

Vanka while writing to his grandfather thinks about him. He is an old man of nearly sixty-five years of age and lives in a nearby village doing the job of a night watchman. Vanka while writing the letter imagines of his grandpa in his rest time and working hours. He is a happy man who has the habit of joking with the cook and kitchen maids on the estate. During the night he is escorted by his two dogs one of whom is very naughty and has been thrashed several times but he remains the same in his activities.

Imagining his past days he grows nostalgic and keeps on writing the letter. He narrates all the agonies which he has to undergo being away from his family. He tells his grandpa in his letter that he was beaten for falling asleep while rocking the baby of the master. He is sailing in the same boat as Varka in "Sleepy". A child's touching words come when he is denied proper food, he writes: "And there is nothing to eat. They give me bread in the morning and gruel for dinner and in the evening bread again but I never get tea or cabbage soup they gobble it all up themselves" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 50). The psychologists have found that a child comes to know the world by tasting. Everything the child gets first takes it straight to the mouth. A child's world revolves around eating. And in such a stage if a child has to write such a thing as this he is for certain dwelling in hell. The pain of the child cannot have been described by Chekhov in more poignant terms than the following: "Dear Grandad for the dear Lords sake take me away from here take me home to the village I can't bear it any longer. Oh Grandad I beg and implore you and I will always pray for you do take me away from here or I'll die. . . ." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 50). Such words of misery coming from so small a child tell more than can be written. Continuing his letter he narrates the cruelties of his

master. He implores his grandpa to take him away along with him and he would be a nice boy never giving any pain to him. He tells that he has even thought of running away from his master to the village on foot but says that he has no shoes and the cold is biting. He very innocently tries to tempt the old man by saying that once he grows up he will not let anyone hurt him and also that when he dies he would pray for his soul as he does for his Mummie.

The child is hopeful of his only living relation in the world. He further describes the city of Moscow from a child's point of view and longs for all the nice things they have to sell in the city. Vanka then remembers his childhood in the village when his mother was alive and he was loved by Miss Olga in whose house his mother was a maid. Miss Olga used to teach him read and write and would also give him sweets. The circle of time has moved so that now he struggles even for the simplest food such a tea and cabbage soup. Remembering his childhood Vanka's lips twitched, he rubbed his eyes with a black fist and gave a sob. The story reaches to climax when he writes: "Pity me unhappy orphan they beat me all the time and I am always hungry and I am so miserable here I can't tell you I cry all the time. . . . I remain your grandson Ivan Zhukov dear Grandad do come" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 51). The child time and again stresses upon calling the Grandad, he is not so much troubled by what is going on at the moment but he is worried that this may continue and infinitum. Man may bear any number of hardships if he has a hope that the days of suffering are numbered but if there is no ray of hope even the small sufferings become gigantic. The immortal character *Dr Faustus* created by Christopher Marlowe in the play of the same title prays towards the end:

"If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,

Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood had ransom'd me  
 Impose some end to my incessant pain;  
 Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,  
 A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd." (Marlowe Web)

Faustus, the most learned man in Europe could not bear the thought of eternal suffering how can a small child of the age of nine and orphaned find solace in his unending sufferings. These lines of Faustus show how unbearable it is to be put in a place where one has to suffer for eternity.

The child after writing this letter folds it and puts it in the envelope which he had purchased for a kopek. The innocence of child is heart touching when he simply addresses the envelope as "To Grandfather in the village" and on second thoughts adds: "TO KONSTANTIN MAKARICH" not knowing that the ways of the world are different than that of the pure minds of small children. He is more happy not that he has written a letter to his grandfather and he will come to fetch him, that a remote possibility but the joy of writing the letter uninterrupted in solace enough for him, "Pleased that no had prevented him from writing, he put on his cap and ran out into the street without putting his coat on over his shirt." (*Short Stories*, 52) He dropped the letter in the nearest letter box and "An hour later, lulled by rosy hopes, he was fast asleep. . . ." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 53)

The story is heart rending when one sees the kind of comforts he offers to his own children and a mere thought of such sufferings for them sends shivers down his spine. But Chekhov has not exaggerated as such cruelties were the order of the days during the tsarist Russia.

Another story dealing with the miseries of life is “A Journey by Cart” which describes the sufferings of the teaching community in Russia during Chekhov’s days. Chekhov was always very much concerned about the teachers engaged in the rural areas of Russia, speaking once to Gorky he said: “If I had lots of money I would build a sanatorium here for sick village teachers. . . . In Russia we have simply got to create exceptional conditions for teachers, and that as soon as possible” (Chekhov *Collected Works* 7). The working conditions for the teachers in rural Russia must have certainly been very poor which invited Chekhov to comment like this. With such original experience about the poor teachers in his day Chekhov has written this story.

Marya Vasilyevna is a teacher for the last thirty years and has travelled innumerable times to the town to draw her salary and for other works related to the school. She in this long period of service has become totally disillusioned with the system of the government administration regarding the welfare of the school, the students and the teacher. She would often be annoyed with the board of *Zemstvo* (district administration). It was a very poorly managed institution and none cared for nothing. There was not even a person with whom she can confide about the miserable situation of her school. Even the school watchman was beyond her control and was rude to her. All her requests for help, fell on deaf ears. The school inspector too was of no use as he had been promoted from the excise department. The system was so disorderly that Marya said: “The Lord only knew whom one could turn to have complaints remedied and wrongs put right” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 169)! Marya is an example of a person who has not entered the profession of teaching by choice but it was the want that had pushed her into it. In her long

career she never had been interested in teaching as a mission. Her sole concern was the examinations which would judge her skills as a teacher. Chekhov was well aware of the poor recognition that the teachers received in the society and he writes in the story: "School teachers, and poor doctors, and apothecaries, struggling with their heavy labours, have not even the consolation of thinking that they are advancing an ideal, and helping mankind" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 171). Teachers are sadly enough clubbed with heavy labours showing that the Russian society in Chekhov's day considered school teachers nothing more than skilled labours. Teachers did not get the kind of respect as one today thinks a teacher should be crowned with. They had to struggle so hard for the daily bread that all the ideal talk of teachers being the torch bearers of society etc. held no meaning for them. It was only a few like Marya who are silent beasts of burden and are able to sustain the profession for a long period others "who are sensitive and impetuous and nervous, and who talk of their mission in life and of advancing a great ideal, soon become exhausted and give up the fight." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 171)

Marya ponders upon her life as a teacher while doing her journey from the town back to the village where she is posted as a teacher. The road is rough and dangerous one symbolizing the road of her life. She too has tumbled in her journey many a time but she held tight whenever she had the slightest feeling of falling down. Teachers in government service have always been helpless beings who are thought to be well off by the society but in fact they have their miseries to fight with. The gossips disturb Marya when her coach drivers Semyon informs her that in the village Nizhni Gorodishe some people including the president of the school board, the warden and the teacher made

huge sums of money. Marya calls all this nonsense but Semyon does not believe in the facts forwarded by her. In spite of the fact that she had honestly served the school people thought her to be corrupt: “they also believed that most of the money which she collected from the children for wood she pocketed herself” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 173). People thought that she received a huge salary though it was not more than twenty rubles a month but the people thought that five would have been plenty for her. Marya thinks of all her past, present and the future during her journey. Upon reaching her destination she suddenly has the memory of her parents and her home in Moscow, she is overwhelmed by the feeling of her past and she says: “No! Her mother and father had not died; she had never been a schoolteacher; all that had been a long, strange, painful dream, and now she was awake.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 174)

Chekhov through the journey of Marya has focused upon the hardships that the teachers had to face in his times and how teaching was not a too much sought for profession but on the other hand many people quit it as and when they found the opportunity to do so. Marya, too has never been happy with her profession and is true in expressing her feelings unalloyed. Chekhov brings to the fore the hidden recesses of a teacher’s psyche. He does not glorify the profession of teaching rather with a cool eye of a realist presents the picture in its truthfulness. Chekhov points out through this story that teachers as a salaried class have never been able to attract the respect of society that they ought to have and that was accorded to the ancient teachers who would teach in their own way without being in the service of the state.



Chekhov like all the other Russian writers has written upon the Siberian tortures that were forced upon all those whom tsar desired and also those who were criminals of severe kind or at least proved to be so. His story "In Exile" is one of the few stories that he wrote influenced by the extended journey to Sakhalin Island in 1890. Dostoevsky's account of Siberian prison is the most celebrated work of fiction and fact in his famous work *The House of the Dead*. The story by Chekhov is a short one but very touching and fascinating. It tells of the souls who are tormented by their solitary life in Siberia. These men gain the purity of soul as they come home to the realities of life.

"In Exile" tells about the life and views upon life of a ferryman old Semyon, nicknamed Preacher working in a Siberian village. Apart from Semyon, there is another equally troubled man the young Tartar punished with Siberian exile falsely on the charge of killing a man. There is also the story of a gentleman named Vassily Sergeych who was full of hope and happiness when he arrived in Siberia and within two years managed to bring his wife and their only child to join him in the Siberian village but with the passage of time things all turn against him and he becomes a depressed soul but not like the Preacher who lacks all juice in life. Vassily leads a life with a positive attitude towards it. The young Tartar who is always made fun of by his peers is continuously solaced by Semyon and is time and again advised that it's no use grumbling about the dead past, what has ended cannot be mended and to take to the attitude of not wanting anything as it was the only way to live happily in the hell on earth named Siberia.

The story opens with both Semyon and the young Tartar having a conversation on the riverbank by the campfire. The Tartar who hails from a

Russian province named Simbirsk recollects how nice it was at home. He tells about his beautiful and clever wife left behind at home. Comparing his life in Siberia with his native place exclaims: “It’s bad! It’s bad” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 90)! He looks at the stars and the blackness around and feels it’s the same as at home but something was lacking. As he ponders on his past, present and future he hears the recurring words of Semyon: “You will get used to it . . . I’ve been going like that for twenty-two years, day and night. . . . And thank God for it, I want nothing; God give everyone such a life” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 91). Though the words of Semyon contain a deep truth in them but to a new arrival in Siberia they hold no meaning for these new arrivals are full of hope and they are unable to be compatible with such detached attitude. Their memories of home, relations, friends, work, the right and wrong deeds, all are fresh and indelible. They consider Semyon to be a foolish fellow who has come to this situation because of his long lonely life in Siberia. But Semyon on his part has known the secrets of the functioning of human mind that gets used to any and every situation. The young Tartar still thinks of his sick father and is hopeful that he shall meet his mother and wife once his father is dead, as they will come to him here as promised. Semyon on his part tries to console him and wishes to preach him the way of life that is suitable to the convicts in Siberia, he says: “It’s the Devil confounding you . . . He is on at you about freedom, but you stand up to him and say: ‘I don’t want it!’ I want nothing . . .” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 91)

Semyon appears very cruel to the Tartar but it is the only way one can survive in Siberia or one pines and pines for the golden past and passes away before time. Semyon knows that life should be lived facing it with strong will,

making a choice on your own and then there's no more suffering. Once one realizes this fact there can be no troubles and misery. One creates miseries and if he decides to drop them no power can force them upon him. Semyon has learnt all this from his own experience; under the influence of the Devil he too pined for his wife, his home, his freedom, but says he: "When they sent me here from Russia from the first day I stuck it out; I want nothing!" and "now I have brought myself to such a pass that I wish no one a better life. I want nothing and I am afraid of nobody, and the way I look at it is that there is nobody richer and freer than I am." (Chekhov *Short Stories* 91) Semyon here speaks of a very relevant psychological situation and tallies with the thought of Milton who in *Paradise Lost* had wrote about the power of mind. It is the mind that can make one joyous even in hell and he can be miserable even in heaven if his mind is not in his control. It is a good servant but bad master and according to Semyon one need to beware of it. He says to the Tartar: "if anyone gives way to the Devil and listens to him, if but once, he is lost, there is no salvation for him" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 91). This devil is none other than our own mind.

Semyon narrates the tale of a gentleman to the Tartar to bring home the fact that one who succumbs to the devil suffers like the gentleman, Vassily. He was exiled to Siberia fifteen years ago and since then has worked hard like a coolie as he said on his arrival: "I want to live by my own work" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 92). Even to Vassily, Semyon had preached: "the chief thing is not to want anything . . . if Fate has wronged you and me cruelly, it's no good asking for her favour and bowing down to her, but you despise her and laugh at her, or else she will laugh at you" (Chekhov *Short Stories* 92). But he did

not listen to him and he has suffered all these fifteen years. Two years after his arrival he managed his wife and daughter to come to Siberia and join him. They were a happy lot and he worked hard to keep his family comfortable and he would often say to Semyon: “Yes, brother Semyon, even in Siberia people can live!” But Semyon was a seasoned person and he knew in the heart of his hearts that it’s not going to be the case forever. And then the misery came out of the blue, his wife eloped with an official to Russia. It was doomed to happen Semyon knew but Vassily could not conjecture the simple fact that people who have the option wish not to live in Siberia. Vassily for five days and nights galloped in pursuit of them and then he beat his head, and when Semyon reminded him: “people can live even in Siberia! . . . he beat his head harder than ever. . . .” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 93)

However, Vassily is the brighter side of human mind that never loses hope and he started longing for freedom from the exile in order to see his wife and get her away from her lover. He started sending petitions to the authorities to have mercy on him and allow him to go back home. But as it happened in Siberia these petitions fell on deaf ears. In spite of hopefulness he started growing gray and bent, he appeared as if afflicted of consumption. He became more and more miserable. Strange are the ways of the world, hope keeps one bright but at the same time it feeds upon his vigour and from the one end it leases him new life but from the other it feeds upon the same life. And this eating is at a greater pace than the supply of vitality. None but Semyon knows the truth, all others are under the delusion that hope shall give them a new life and they shall be born anew from their ashes like phoenix. Vassily with the passage of time grew gray and bent. It appeared to others that he was suffering from consumption. But it so happens that his daughter grows up into a sweet young girl and

he forgets his miseries and Vassily is once again given a fresh lease of life by existence. He was very happy with his life but Semyon who has seasoned on the Siberian soil knew the fact: “Wait a bit, the wench is young, her blood is dancing, she wants to live, and there is no life here” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 93). Semyon prophesizes truly and she begins to fade and is taken over by consumption. Now Vassily left no stone unturned to get his daughter cured. That now becomes the meaning of his life.

The young Tatar starts hating the wise Semyon at his casual attitude towards life. Semyon’s statement that one needs nothing is troublesome for the Tatar. He says that something is always good than nothing. He refers to the three years of joy of Vassily spent in Siberia with his wife and daughter. The Tatar says, “His wife lived with him three years — that was a gift from God. ‘Nothing’ is bad, but three years is good. How not understand? . . . Better one day of happiness than nothing” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 94). Semyon is never willing to accept the theory that Siberia is worth living. When Vassily comes to him one day to ferry him across the river to fetch a doctor as his daughter is in a very serious condition, Semyon, again suggests Vassily that: “ but as you know yourself, people have been driving about for years and years, day and night, and it’s always been no use. That’s the truth.” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 97)

On the one hand Chekhov has created one of the most hopeful characters in form of Vassily and at the same time we have Semyon one of the most hopeless characters, but both have their own truths. However, the Tatar does not agree with the opinion of Semyon and in a very touching outburst reprimands him, “He is good . . . good; but you are bad! You are bad! The gentleman is a good soul, excellent, and you are a beast, bad! The gentleman is alive, but you are a dead caracass . . . God created man to be alive, and to have joy and grief and sorrow; but you want nothing, so you are not

alive, you are stone, clay! A stone wants nothing and you want nothing” (Chekhov *Short Stories* 97). The Tatar has certainly some truth in his outpourings, but he is young and dynamic, he is fresh and new on the Siberian soil, he has yet not come face to face with the harsh realities of life, which have been witnessed by Semyon, and thus finds him nothing but a stone. No doubt, he is correct in a sense but he forgets that Semyon has witnessed life in all its colors and has finally come to this conclusion.

This in no way suggests that Chekhov is not interested in the joys of life, since he spares more space to Semyon in the story, he wishes to present the story of human life in the most impartial and just manner, he has pitched two characters, Vassily and the Tatar, against Semyon. Chekhov very seriously tries to draw the attention of the readers to the facts of life that it is a mixture of good and bad both and both need to be accepted with equanimity.

It is hoped that the preceding discussion has amply brought to light the art of Chekhov’s story telling. Chekhov in his short stories has dealt with all the themes related to mankind in a dexterous manner making his fiction pulsating with life. He has through his short stories presented a fictional world based on the real world, and going through his stories one meets the characters and situations that are very much our own. His deep understanding of mankind makes him stand parallel to Premchand in the treatment of human emotions and actions.

The above discussion makes it clear that the stories written by Anton Chekhov reflecting the Russian life which is an overall make up of the history, sociology, politics and the economy of a nation under Tsar autocracy struggling to enrich their culture for new generation. Chekhov's wisdom is perfect in its breadth and in its depth. He was primarily a writer of short stories and he had many things of wisdom to

replete such genres. Like the works of his contemporaries Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, he was interested in wide range of timeless issues: such as love, sex, family life, aging, and death. The wisdom one can gain from reading him is not so much in the thinking of his characters, but in raising significant questions for the readers to consider. In addition to dealing with various timeless issues, the characters in Chekhov's above mentioned short stories deal with important social, political, economical and environmental concerns of his era. His approach to these issues reflects wisdom that is still part and parcel of the social and political system in the present context.

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