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A Sociopsychological Analysis of Chekhov's "The Darling" in the Light of Fromm's Ideas: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Since its publication in 1899, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's "The Darling" has provoked a lot of controversy among literary scholars and critics. Was the portrayal of Olga Semyonova, the darling protagonist, meant to ridicule, sympathize with, or eulogize women? Generally, the story is analyzed from a feminist point of view. Moreover, Eric Fromm's ideas of freedom and mechanisms of escape are applied to the story. Thus the present research, firstly, aims to identify the motives behind Olga's unhealthy psychological state or identity crisis. Secondly, it addresses freedom as Olga's psychological problem as well as the escape mechanisms she adopts. Finally, the patriarchal society is blamed for Olga's problems.

Keywords: Anton Chekhov, The Darling, Feminist, Eric Fromm, Freedom, Escape Mechanisms

Introduction

Feminist criticism has always been a controversial approach and yet of great importance since its emergence. Although some may consider feminism rudimentary, as Alison Jaggar says, "All feminists address the same problem: what constitutes the oppression of women and how can that oppression be ended?" (124), yet its integration with other fields of studies, such as psychology and sociology, would bring about deep insights about human condition in a variety of contexts. As an instance, Corinne Squire in her *Significant Differences: Feminism in Psychology* stresses the importance of collaboration between feminism and psychology by referring to their interrelation in different social and historical contexts (1).

Erich Fromm, German Psychologist and Psychoanalyst, had a great contribution to our understanding of the human psyche by suggesting approval, revision, and even in some cases, disapproval of some notions that had been stated by pioneers of psychology, like Sigmund Freud. In addition to psychological studies, Fromm had a great share in sociology by studying not only man's inner psychological state in isolation, but also his relation with others as well as the effects of social structures on him. Consequently, applying his ideas to works of literature, especially the ones which concern human characterization, will lead to deeper perception of human condition and characteristics. *Escape*

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from Freedom, Man for Himself, and The Art of Loving are among his great works which mainly deal with psychology and sociology. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm has provided us with a thorough examination of freedom as a psychological problem, its consequences, and the mechanisms to escape from it.

Anton Chekhov is one of the greatest authors of fiction, especially when it comes to exploring characterization and probing human traits in works of literature. In the foreword of *Memories of Chekhov*, Alan Twigg, the chief editor of the Canadian magazine *BC Bookworld*, introduces Chekhov as the second most popular author of the world (1). Chekhov owes a considerable portion of his fame to his brilliant short stories. "The Darling" is one of those short stories which particularly narrates the emotions and relations of Olga Semyonova who is always submissive and over-dependent on a man. When a husband of hers dies, she marries another, and again becomes submissive to him as well. Even at the end, with no husband around, she sticks to her stepson and becomes over-reliant upon him. Since its publication in 1899, "The Darling" has received a lot of contradictory criticisms. The particular personality traits of Olga have been the subject of debate over Chekhov's intention in his portrayal of women. As Nadya Peterson puts it this way, "'Dushechka'-Chekhov's well-known 'The Darling'-is a puzzle which has long bemused critics." Then She adds, "For almost a century now readers have been trying to decide whether Chekhov's woman is there to emulate or ridicule" (199). Another critic, Thomas Winner, says that as long as Olga is capable of love, although submissive, she cannot be considered as a hypocrite; moreover, she cannot be simply categorized as other Chekhov's lonely characters. He adds that the absurdity of Olga is something that cannot be disregarded (211- 12).

But not all scholars are that ambivalent about Olga's portrayal as well as women's in this short story. Some critics condemn the way Chekhov depicts Olga. Maxim Gorki, a contemporary of Chekhov, was an opponent of the story and his criticism specifically targets Olga. As he says, "The dear, meek woman [Olga] who loves so slavishly and who can love so much. You can slap her cheek and she won't even dare to utter a sigh aloud, the meek slave . . ." (23). He clearly reproaches Olga's submissiveness.

On the other hand, some critics commend Chekhov's depiction of Olga. Another Chekhov's contemporary writer, Leo Tolstoy, praises Olga as an ideal woman. He states that Chekhov has achieved what was the opposite of his intention. Tolstoy compares Chekhov to a character from Bible, who goes to a mountain to curse the Israelites, but instead, at the will of God, blessed them. According to Tolstoy, Chekhov intended to deride Olga's character, but, in fact, focusing on Olga raised her up. Tolstoy believes that portrayal of Olga's passionate love for men of her life is the prime example of feminine love. Furthermore, her love towards Sasha, the young boy, is the epitome of maternal love (25-28).

It is not that simple to judge a character, Olga in this case, in isolation. To come up with a fair judgement, a number of factors should be taken into account, such as psychological situations and social circumstances. Hence this paper exercises the ideas of Fromm, such as his explanation of freedom as a psychological problem and his examination of escape mechanisms, in order to conduct a sociopsychological study of "The Darling" with the aim of espousing feminism. Firstly, the motives behind Olga's unhealthy psychological state, lack of identity and her over-reliance upon men, will be clarified; secondly, Olga's psychological problem, freedom, and the escape mechanisms she uses will be discussed; and finally it will be concluded that the male dominated society is responsible for Olga's problem.

Identity Crisis and Love

One of the most important aspects regarding a healthy psyche is the individuation process. According to Fromm, any impediments to this process would lead to psychological problems such as 'isolation' and 'powerlessness' (*Freedom* 47). Although one may suffer from hunger or suppression,

suffering from aloneness is the most painful one (Freedom 51). There are some ties in one's life that guarantee their security against this feeling of loneliness. As soon as someone lacks or loses these ties, their sense of identity will be jeopardized. In "The Darling", Olga constantly struggles to gain these ties through her relation with others, but since they are not stable enough to give her the constant security she demands, her suffering is observed throughout the story.

To name a few of these ties, Fromm refers to 'property' and 'social prestige' (Freedom 142). One can build up their identity by the admiration they get for their property, and by their social status which represents their social prestige. Having a job plays a vital role in one's identity, since the job is one of the most important elements which builds up one's social status. Job gives the person a sense of relatedness and adds to their esteem which is the fourth most prepotent goal in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, basic human needs are mainly physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Until one goal is not met, until one need is not satiated, the next need would not arise, and it is worth mentioning that their order is from physiological towards self-actualization (18). Olga seems to be always busy fulfilling other prepotent needs, that is safety, love, and esteem. As is read in the story, "She forever loved someone, and could not live without it. Earlier she had loved her father" (221). In addition, having no job of her own, Olga does not enjoy this social prestige which would lead to esteem, and this is why she does not complete the process of individuation. Such situations are seen in a patriarchal society where men dominate the work place and women are mainly deprived of having job, or a job as prestigious as men's jobs. Thus women would not have the opportunity to fully gain their social prestige.

For the ones who fail maintaining previous ties that lead to social prestige, family is a substitute as a source of individual prestige. One can feel like "somebody" by either obeying others or making others obey. Although they might be socially considered as "nobody", according to Fromm, they are still "somebody" within their family (Freedom 142). This is why Olga, who fails maintaining her identity through her own social status, perpetually defines herself through her family members as well as her role as the wife or the mother in the family. Fromm believes, "The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love—is the source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety" (Loving 9). This is why, according to the story, "she [Olga] could not live without an attachment even for one year" (225). Since losing the attachment means separation from the source of security and emergence of the anxiety, the anxiety that stem from isolation and loneliness.

Such attachments to a family member in order to form the ties and to build on one's identity with someone else's are achievable through love. But this type of love has its own characteristics identified by Fromm:

If a person has not reached the level where he has a sense of identity, of I-ness . . . he tends to "idolize" the loved person . . . what is characteristic for this type of idolatrous love is, at the beginning, the intensity and suddenness of the love experience. (Loving 99-100)

So, it can be the reason why Olga cares about her relationships and her male figures so much that their separation, even temporarily, seems unbearable to her. This is why Olga's love for those men is also greatly passionate, as this love is the only way to avoid her loneliness and separation. As when "he [Kukin] went to Moscow to recruit a company, and without him she couldn't sleep, but sat all night at the window and looked at the stars" (223). It was so for other husbands as well, "When Pustalov left for Mogilev province to buy lumber, she missed him very much and at night did not sleep but wept" (224).

Yet to Fromm, the love that results in overcoming the anxiety and separateness is of two kinds: the sadistic and the masochistic. To define the sadistic, Fromm says, "The sadistic person wants to escape from his aloneness and his sense of imprisonment by making another person part and parcel of

himself” (Loving 20). In this case, the individual tends to overcome the separation and achieve the sense of identity by making others worship him or her. While to define the latter, masochistic, Fromm says, “The masochistic person escapes from the unbearable feeling of isolation and separateness by making himself part and parcel of another person who directs him, guides him, protects him; who is his life and his oxygen, as it were” (Loving 19). So, in masochistic love, the person lies every aspect of their life on the beloved. In this case, they even take the attitudes of their partner. Perusing “The Darling”, it can be concluded that Olga’s love towards her husbands is of masochistic one. As is read in the story, “Whatever her husband thought, she [Olga] thought, too” (224). She clearly gets her opinions from her husbands, and this is why:

With Kukin and Pustovalov, and later with the veterinarian, Olenka had been able to explain everything and give her opinion on anything you like, but now in her thoughts and in her heart there was the same emptiness as in her courtyard. (226)

Because in masochistic love, people fully obey their partner, they do not even decide on their own as they see the partner as a god. In a male dominated society, the male figure is the authority and dominates different parts of society, including the household. Therefore, this subordinate woman in the family is left with no choice but to become submissive. Then, once becoming submissive, the masochistic love would arise and an Olga-like case would happen.

Freedom and its Escape Mechanisms

Failure in maintaining all aforementioned ties, neither social prestige nor individual prestige, would lead to one’s identity crisis, and Olga living in patriarchal society is no exception. Olga’s relationships were not the permanent solution to overcome her feeling of isolation and separation, since they are temporary support in her life, and as soon as these supporting factors fade, the anxiety would re-emerge. Losing all those bonds, which help overcome separation and guarantee security, means freedom from all those mentioned ties. This kind of freedom, freedom from relatedness, brings with it bewilderment to the individuals. Fromm asserts that such situation “makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction” (52).

So far, some social and psychological aspects of Olga’s life have been discussed and it has been concluded that Olga, due to the lack of social and individual prestige as well as her failure to maintain family relations, confronts difficulties building up a sense of identity and completing the individuation process. Therefore, she has nothing to do but to escape from this predicament, freedom.

Isolation and insecurity of the individual, their freedom from ties and relatedness, will give rise to escape from it, which is probable through the escape mechanisms. According to *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm believes:

It [escape] is not a solution which leads to happiness and positive freedom; it is, in principle, a solution which is to be found in all neurotic phenomena. It assuages an unbearable anxiety and makes life possible by avoiding panic; yet it does not solve the underlying problem. . . . (162)

As in the case of Olga, too, it is observed that she cannot accomplish an ultimate happiness. She merely uses the escape mechanisms to flee from her unbearable psychological state, identity crisis, and to provide herself with substitutions for the lost ties. But what escape mechanisms does she use? The mechanisms, to Fromm, are of three kinds, authoritarianism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity. Among which, authoritarianism and automaton conformity can be applied to Olga.

To begin with authoritarianism, first, it is worth defining it briefly. Fromm explains that in this mechanism when the individual lacks power and strength, they tend to surrender their ‘individual self’

and merge themselves to somebody or something else in order that the individual can make up for the lost power through 'secondary bonds' (Freedom 163). Accordingly, authoritarianism would be achieved through submission. Since by being submissive, one can be merged into another person whom Fromm calls 'the magic helper' (Freedom 197) and consequently feel the relatedness to their power, which finally lead to a pseudo identity. Olga explicitly uses authoritarianism as an escape mechanism. First, Fromm calls the process in which one seeks the magic helper 'falling in love' (Freedom 197). Interestingly, Olga is always in love with a male figure since in the story it is said that "She forever loved someone, and could not live without it" (221). Furthermore, it was discussed, in the previous paragraphs, that Olga's love is of masochistic type. In masochistic love, one tends to blend even their thoughts and opinions to those of the beloved. A behavioral pattern which can be precisely seen in Olga.

Olga adopts her attitude according to her husbands'. With Kukin, her first husband and her second male figure, after her father, she only values art and theater, as Kukin runs a theater. With her third male figure, Pustovalov, she totally changes her attitude. As Pustovalov is a timber merchant, now she belittles art and only values timber and its related products. When she is asked to go to the theater, she replies, "Vasechka [Pustovalov] and I have no time for going to theaters. We're working people, we can't be bothered with trifles. What's the good of these theaters?" (224). And with Smirnin the veterinarian, she only talks about Smirnin's business. When Smirnin asks her not to talk about what she really knows nothing about, she Replies, ""Volodechka [Smirnin], what then am I to talk about?" (225), which shows that she can think of and talk about nothing except for what is related to her male figures' occupations.

The next mechanism to discuss is automaton conformity. In this mechanism, according to Fromm, "The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns" (Freedom 208-209). In this case, the individual tends to adapt himself or herself completely to the expectations of social and cultural patterns and therefore become a pseudo self. This way, they can again acquire the sense of relatedness and escape the unbearable insecurity of freedom. To consider Olga, with her last male figure, Sasha who is raised by her, her behavioral pattern is set according to the role of a mother. This time, her main concern seems to Sasha, his school and whatever relates to him. "And she starts talking about teachers, lessons, textbooks—saying all the same things that Sasha says about them" (228). She cares about Sasha so much and pays all her attention to him because she has totally accepted and embraced social and cultural maternal role as a mother in order to form her pseudo self. About Olga, it is told in the story that, "the maternal feeling burned in her more and more" (228). Thus, Olga takes the maternal role, acquires sense of relatedness, and finally escapes from freedom.

Conclusion

The study of Olga's behavioral traits has revealed that she suffers from lack of identity. To elaborate more, she has neither social nor individual prestige to build her identity upon and complete her individuation process. So, such deprivations are the main causes for her psychological problem, freedom. Moreover, as a spontaneous response, she escapes from this adverse condition of freedom using some mechanisms named authoritarianism and automaton conformity. But, where do all these problems originate from? First of all, in a patriarchal society, women are mostly deprived of having a job, or at least, having a job as valued as that of men. Their roles and contribution to the society are seen as inferior in comparison with those of the men. Hence, they cannot accomplish the social prestige which leads to identity. Furthermore, in a patriarchal society, the family institution is governed by the male figure and is mainly male dominated. Therefore, women mostly become submissive to men and relinquish the individual prestige which can be acquired within the family institution to men. Regarding

all the discrimination against women, it is concluded that, for Olga's eccentric character as well as her psychological problem, what is really to blame is the reprehensible patriarchal society.

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