



Waiting and Russian Utilitarianism in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

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Abstract:

Waiting is the central theme in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Exploration of the theme of waiting and its attributes with regard to the historical and social discourses at the time of play's writing is the main focus of the present article. The absurd waiting for future and its manifestation in different characters of the play is brought under scrutiny in the first part of the play. Furthermore, in order to delineate an explanation of the purposeless waiting, Foucault's concept of episteme helps to highlight the dominant discourses in the Russian society, including utilitarianism and pessimism which shape such depiction of waiting. The concept of episteme, as defined by Foucault can further elaborate the nature of waiting in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the causes that make such waiting a useless, senseless and devoid act.

Key Words: Chekhov, Three Sisters, Waiting, Foucault, Episteme.

Introduction

Considering the central theme of waiting in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, the present article is an attempt to add a new type of analysis of the play with an eye on Foucault's ideas of episteme and social discourse in order to shed more light on the impacts of social factors in the formation of this play. The issue of social discourses helping the formation of this type of waiting cannot be ignored. Absurd waiting, in contrast to the previous examples of literary figures waiting for a better future, like Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*, is the result of episteme at the time of its writing. *Three Sisters* depicts the meaningless lives of three sisters whose only hope is to leave their city one day and head towards Moscow. Therefore, the only action on their part is waiting for the future to come and bring about change, much like the two tramps in *Beckett's Waiting for Godot*.

The play can be studied with regard to the major theme of waiting that is interwoven within the structure of the play. Chekhov's drama is the one which "repudiates progress and solution as it repudiates active 'plot', the literary procedure that most centrally embodies the movement from present to the future (Gilman, 1972, 145). Gilman's argument is acceptable in expressing that "Chekhov's plays are notoriously full of talks about world and societies to come. His characters are indeed full of future, but as an idea . . . since the time to come by definition does not yet exist" (146). "As Irina laments in Act III, "life is passing and will never return, never, we will never go to Moscow... I see that we will never go..." (166). Under the shadow of a hope endlessly deferred, the three sisters "see no meaning in their lives, in their sufferings" (Gatrall, 2003, 124).

The characters in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* have lost a lot; Masha and Vershinin have lost love, Andrei lacks the past glory, Irina loses her future husband. The present time devours the members of this family like a beast and in the meanwhile, they are staring at an imaginary future. Their pompous words with regard to their future are just words which lack the power necessary to shape their true future. The present article investigates the theme of absurd and passive waiting for a better future in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. The notion of waiting is also studied in the light of Foucault's definition of episteme in order to highlight the significant social and historical factors which shape it.

Discussion Absurd Waiting for the Future:

Richard Gilman (1995), in a much praised book on Chekhov's plays, having given his chapter on *Three Sisters* the mock-Beckettian subtitle 'I Can't Go On, I'll Go', goes on to explicitly link Chekhov with that Absurdist dramatist. He outlines the claim that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has such profound affinities with *Three Sisters* (148). These two plays share many identical themes. They are both abound with "Eventful immobility, or movement around a still center, or a circle, or a series of flat planes rather than a more or less straight line" (Borny, 2006,195). These images will establish the play as a true embodiment of the consequences of inactive waiting in human life.

Chekhov incorporates the absurdity not in the surrounding situations, like that of Beckett, but rather in the characters' inability to deal with their problems. The sisters have no obstacle on their way to Moscow; however, they are not moving anywhere. As Borny (2006) asserts "Chekhov's play does not depict a world in which there is nothing to be done, but one in which 'no one is doing anything'" (196). The characters' inertia and passivity in *Three Sisters* make their lives absurd. Their inactivity leads them to a life which is changed into a passive waiting stage for an illusionary better future to come by. Chekhov depicts a world devoid of hope for future.

In his *Three Sister*, Chekhov stages a life of ordinary people living a provincial Russian life. They all lead their monotonous ordinary lives in which nothing particular happens. The only thing they can do is to wait for their hopes to come true, a dream which apparently never comes true. "They play cards, gossip, philander, drink vodka, and go to their offices without ever being able to overcome their ennui. . . . All are sick to death of their emptiness" (Slonim, 1953, 63). Many characters in Chekhov's plays discuss the future and their discussions reflect these philosophical ideas. They have lost their hope for future. Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is the depiction of waiting for a Godot like figure, but in form of a city, Moscow, in that the sisters long for going back to the glory and peace they were having "eleven years ago" as Olga says in the beginning lines of Act I:

OLGA: . . . Father was put in command of a brigade, and he rode out of Moscow with us eleven years ago. I remember perfectly that it was early in May and that everything in Moscow was flowering then. It was warm too, everything was bathed in sunshine. Eleven years have gone, and I remember everything as if we rode out only yesterday Oh, God! When I awoke this morning and saw all the light and the spring, joy entered my heart, and I longed passionately to go home. (24)

Irina also believes that "there is nothing in the world better than Moscow" (203), obviously Moscow plays the role of a utopia, a promised land for these sisters, waiting for the arrival to Moscow would thus be a relief from the present miseries they are dealing with. The pessimist view of Chekhov however, would not let him make the sister arrive at Moscow. We witness so such action as going to Moscow, all is arguments of the desire to move to Moscow while they never set out for the city of their dreams. In its depiction of constant struggle between optimist and pessimist views of life and death, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* is like a continuation to his Uncle *Vanya*.

Episteme of Russian Pessimism:

The absurdity sensed in the passive waiting of the sisters in Chekhov's play, as it was discussed earlier, is a desire to go back to the glorious past the family has had in Moscow. Thus, the absurd waiting for a better future is embodied in form of a city, Moscow. The theme is a result of historical and social events of the time, according to Foucauldian interpretation. Foucault does not merely reject the concept of

history as a separate entity, he rather points to the ideological use of history. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, he states: "the . . . ideological use of history by which one tries to restore to man everything that has unceasingly eluded him. (1972:14). History has been used as a tool in order to impose certain ideological concepts. In his *Order of Discourses*, Foucault defines episteme as a historical priori that grounds knowledge and its discourses and thus represents the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch:

I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible, those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific. (*Power/Knowledge* 197)

The episteme is recognizable by the next generation. Foucault defines literature as a discourse in its nature which is "a silent, cautious deposition of the word upon the whiteness of a piece of paper, where it can possess neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being" (*Towards a Poetic Culture* 299-300). The study of dominant discourse shaping the theme of waiting and its different representation in the present article would shed more light on the overall meaning of this play in relation to the time and place of production.

The waiting theme in the play bears a special negative tone. None of the sisters would go to Moscow. There is no sign of their going to Moscow, in spite of their hope, enthusiasm and capability in moving out of the present situations. Such negative attitude towards life staged by Chekhov is apparently shaped by the contemporary time spirit at 1900s, when he wrote the play. Therefore, it is necessary to take this issue into consideration here. The biography by Rosamund Bartlett entitled *Chekhov: Scenes from A Life* which "is not a conventional biography, which unrolls the often-depicted facts of Chekhov's life once again, but rather a study of Chekhov's environment—of the Russian world in which he lived and had his being" (Frank, 2010, 219). This book gives a true image of the universal feature of Chekhov's works.

The *Three Sisters* has been received as the play which abounds with pessimist ideas towards life and its meaning. The characters and their long speeches do not picture a hopeful life, not only for themselves but also for the next generations to come. Even Magarshack (1980), who pioneered the attack on the pessimistic school of Chekhov interpretation, could find little evidence to support the more extreme Soviet readings which see in his work a powerful prediction of the bright future that was to result from the Communist Revolution of 1917. "Chekhov never had an optimist view for the revolutionists who believed that by sweeping away the old order they would establish peace and harmony on earth" (Borny, 2006, 197).

The city in which the play is set is a rural setting far away from the metropolitan culture ". . . with a rising bourgeoisie, but in rural surroundings" (Whyman, 2011, 22). It is not possible thus, to separate Chekhov from the injustices and cruelties of the Russian society he witnessed. In the meantime, he can be readily linked to any of the social-cultural and political movements agitating the intelligentsia which were apparently paving the way for the future of Russian society. *Three sisters* was written in 1901 and "From the late 1880s, Chekhov's work focused on the currents of the times, reflecting philosophical and political ideas in popular thought" (Whyman, 2011, 18). In *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault uses the term *episteme*, to designate the background for knowledge and all its related discourses which signifies the condition of their possibility in a special period of time. Later on, he added the plurality of episteme which may co-exist at the same time, as they are various parts of power-knowledge system.

Certain discourses at work would eventually shape any form of knowledge, which are in constant interaction with one another. One form being literature, we can thus examine the specific time spirit of the Russian society at the time Chekhov wrote *The Three Sister*, e.g. the turn of the century to understand the representation of the theme of waiting in this work much more comprehensively. Shevtsova (2006) notes that the Prozorov family, as a whole, represents the "Enlightenment values of critical reason, productive knowledge, social justice and personal ethics, as well as the Renaissance ones of individual liberty, honor and dignity" (96). A blend of Enlightenment and Renaissance values is also tinged by the fear and

disappointment at the turn of century to shape the ennui and depressive inaction crystalized in form of absurd, passive waiting in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

The provincial life in a seemingly small town has no color for this family, as they are in isolation from the great events of the day The Prozorov siblings are living in a status of semi-exile and they are "heirs to the cultural capital of one such industrial city Moscow" (Frank, 2010,131). Olga, Irina, and Andrei attempt to ease their burden as bearers of European Enlightenment by becoming themselves teachers for local school children, and Vershinin predicts that the three sisters will not have lived in the provinces "without influence," even if they themselves will never be able fully to "conquer the dark masses surrounding [them]" (131)." (Gatrall: 2003 127) Their waiting is a passive one. This waiting for a better life is also present in the words of Tusenbacj and Vershinin. The characters words are their true actions, and no direct action could be witnessed throughout the whole play.

Vershinin: A man must work, toil in the sweat of his brow, whoever he may be, for that is the meaning and object of his life, his happiness, his enthusiasm. How fine it is to be a workman who gets up at daybreak and breaks stones in the street, or a shepherd, or a schoolmaster, who teaches children, or an engine-driver on the railway.... My God, let alone a man, it's better to be an ox, or just a horse, so long as it can work, than a young woman who wakes up at twelve o'clock, has her coffee in bed, and then spends two hours dressing.... Oh it's awful! Sometimes when it's hot, your thirst can be just as tiresome as my need for work. And if I don't get up early in future and work, Ivan Romanovitch, then you may refuse me your friendship. (186)

Such long speeches in their deepest level appear to be mere long philosophies about life which are in apparent paradox with the situation of people in the play. In spite of their seemingly tautological utterance, every single character in the play has a certain problem in his or her life. They are not similar to classical heroes able to manipulate their lives' events in the direction of their own benefit. Because they are lonely, they talk about routines and their long words substitute their impotency in taking any action. The approximately nonsensical monologues, seemingly poking fun at the soliloquies flourishing out of the deepest thoughts which could be heard on the stage back to Shakespeare's times, are shaped by the surrounding conditions at the time of their production. Whyman (2011) states that "Chekhov's fame began to spread through fin-de-siècle Europe and he died in 1904, just before the first Russian revolution of 1905". Political events thereafter eventually led to the overthrow of the Tsars in the revolution of 1917 and the establishment of communist rule in Russia. "Chekhov' formative years and working life, therefore, were in a Russia undergoing a period of political and cultural turmoil, which is examined in Chekhov's work" (3).

Chekhov shows no tendency towards communism. He saw no hope in the formation of a communist society in Russia, which could be a justification for his depiction of a hopeless waiting in *Three Sisters*. Chekhov emerged from the inheritance of serfdom, from poverty, violence and domination and he did whatever he could to become a famous artist and thinker in a repressed and problematic society. Inevitably, his works, both his plays and short stories do reflect such troubles of this kind of life. The nineteenth century Russian intelligentsia is known by agitating for social reform. Its members were reformists and the social activists who were not content with the political situation of their country under the reign of Tseras. They were objective to the plight of Russia's rural population. The spirit of the 'utilitarian purpose of art' in the eyes of the revolutionists, who were under the direct influence of the "German idealist philosophy romanticism and the enlightenment politics that inspired the French Revolution", along with the next generation called the "beautiful souls of 1838-48 who lived under the continued repression of Nicholas I, who established the secret police, or the later decade of 1860s proponents of the development of a national consciousness for Russia" was not to be found in Chekhov's writings as they asserted. (Whyman, 2011, 10-11).

In 1855, Alexander II succeeded to the throne and set about abolishing serfdom. His other reforms included building new schools and hospitals, the reform of the judicial system. The emancipation of the serfs took place in 1861. However, there was no glorious improvement witnessed as one might

expect. Surfs were still "tied to the mir or peasant commune and had to buy themselves out to leave". (Whyman: 2011: 11-12). Chekhov's taking side with the Zemstav, and other proponents of liberal movements toward freedom and development is clear in his representation of some "characters *Ivanov*, for example, and DrAstrov in *Uncle Vanya*"

Along with the emancipation of the surfs came also the first official university level courses for women, the first of their kind in Europe which opened in Russia in 1878, "though they were closed again for a while, in a wave of repression in the 1880s (Saunders 1992: 314, 162) " (qtd in Whyman: 2011, 14). Chekhov depicts the three sisters who are well educated especially in foreign languages such as English, German and Italian, which they desperately see no use in anymore. The passivity leads them to lose such merits gradually as Irina, for instance loses her ability to talk Italian, after being disappointed of her brother, or of going to Moscow. She says:

I'm forgetting everything, everyday forgetting, and life slips away and will never return, never, we'll never go to Moscow . . . I can see we'll never go. . . no satisfaction of any kind, and time is passing, and it all seems to be moving away from any real, beautiful life all moving away farther and farther into some abyss. . . I'm in despair, and now I'm alive, how is it I haven't killed myself, I can't understand. . . (198)

Chekhov is primarily entangled with the theme of women education in his *Three Sisters*. Irina, Masha and Olga are all educated women who know more than one foreign language, however, there is no hope, or use they see for such knowledge they see for themselves. The pessimistic view regarding the absurdity in life prevail the whole play, along with several of his other works. His concerns with the women are rooted in the hopeless situation he apparently envisions for the women in his surroundings. The sisters are seemingly stuck in the provincial life, from which they desire to be relieved, while they do nothing to reach this goal.

Married, like Masha, or single like Olga, the women are to suffer, as in his other plays namely *Uncle Vanya*. The sisters see their hope for future, not in the marriage, but in going to Moscow, which is never fulfilled. They see the dysfunction of marriage in their surroundings, like Andrey's failed marriage with Natasha, threatening their whole family structure, as well as Masha's dissatisfaction with her marriage. Clyman (1974) states that Chekhov wrote of 'impressionable, genteel women confined in oppressive and intellectually barren provincial towns' such as his birthplace, Taganrog, and used this theme in many stories such as *Three Years, Lights, Big Volodya and Little Volodya*. He noted: As soon as you go out onto the street and begin to observe, say, women, then life is terrible. He adds that women mirror most vividly the horrors of life . . . the deviations from the ideal, the 'norm', as Chekhov put it (26). The future oriented speeches of Vershinin are tuned by a certain sense of naturalism, or what might be more properly considered as fatalism. In the final scene, the sister disappointedly pinpoint that one way they will realize why man has to suffer so much, however; they are forced to live their static life as the waiting continues in an apparently endless circle of life.

IRINA. [Puts her head on OLGA's bosom] There will come a time whenever everybody will know why, for what purpose, there is all this suffering, and there will be no more mysteries. But now we must live... we must work, just work! To-morrow, I'll go away alone, and I'll teach and give my whole life to those who, perhaps, need it. It's autumn now, soon I will be winter, the snow will cover everything, and I shall be working, working.... (96)

It could be agreed that "No play has ever conveyed more subtly the sense of the transitory nature of human life" (Valency, 1966, 219). More significantly; however, the nihilism is rooted in Chekhov's main concerns with the social injustices he witnessed. In spite of all the positive social reforms taking place at that time, he apparently could not be that much of an optimist for a better movement forward in Russian society. Russian nihilism, whose chief proponent was Pisarev, was oriented towards the future. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) also had a profound influence in nineteenth century Russia, one of his main proponents being Ivan Turgenev" (Whyman, 2011, 14).

Chekhov was also a doctor. Therefore, inevitably the scientific ideas regarding the evolution of mankind, mostly prominent in that time, had crept into his artistic mind as well. Based on the ideas of Foucault, besides nihilism, and the rejection of social reforms, scientific ideas are seemingly other discourses which shape the passive waiting depicted in his *Three Sisters* with which we are mainly concerned here. The children of Pozorov family are idly waiting for a better future to come by. The sisters are so much overwhelmed in their dream like waiting for a better future in Moscow. Anrey also daydreams about becoming a famous university professor when he reaches Moscow. Their hope and desire for living in Moscow has apparently led to their ignorance to the present situation in which they live. Vershinin has this fact expressed in the following lines:

VERSHININ. A few days ago I was reading the prison diary of a French minister. He had been sentenced on account of the Panama scandal. With what joy, what delight, he speaks of the birds he saw through the prison windows, which he had never noticed while he was a minister. Now, of course, that he is at liberty, he notices birds no more than he did before. When you go to live in Moscow you'll not notice it, in just the same way. There can be no happiness for us, it only exists in our wishes.(172)

Vershinin cannot find any meaning in the present life. That is why he lingers into wishes for the future. The sisters passively wait for their future to come in a changed way, in another cloth, much more beautiful and as colorful as the days passed. Such passive waiting leads to more unhappiness with the present life as well as to more disappointment. Masha is not happy with her marriage to a person she mistakenly thought as being intelligent, whom has apparently proved to be otherwise. Kulygin has disappointed Masha to the point that she is also passively waiting for a change as well. She thinks her husband is "not fine enough, gentle enough". She finds life meaningless and is almost most of the time suffering from constant headache, and always tired of her job as a teacher. For her, life is empty and boring "it seems to me a man must be a believer or must seek some belief, otherwise his life is empty, empty . . . To live and not know why cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky . . . Either he knows what he's living for, or it's all nonsense, waste" (173).

At the university as a doctor Chekhov also encountered new scientific ideas permeating his epoch with the work of evolutionists Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, and that of Claude Bernard, who developed thinking on scientific method. Whyman (2011) asserts that like most of his colleagues at that time, Chekhov had adopted a materialistic view of man and nature, stating that: 'Outside of matter there is no experience or knowledge and consequently no truth' (Chekhov, 1973: 144). He was deeply interested in Darwin's work. He rejected scientism, and also Social Darwinism. He was mainly against the ideas of the survival of the fittest stating that on the basis of such assumptions, human race should be naturally moving towards a progressive future, while such is less believable, in Chekhov's ideas, if we accept Darwin's ideas of chance in the development of human life rather than the idea that the human race was progressing through evolution towards a predetermined goal. "He argued against Social Darwinism in 1891 that willpower and wisely directed education could overcome inherited evil traits" (Hingley, 1976, 152)

These discourse eventually shaped Chekhov's mind making him stage passive waiting, stagnation, ennui, depression and lack of any hope in a bright future in action in his *Three Sisters*. In a rare act of duel, which presumably belongs to the previous generation, Baron is killed. Such an action demonstrated how people's lives could be the subject to the vagaries of chance rather than predetermination. Irina loses the chance to fulfill her dream of living happily ever after with a nice husband. Chekhov mocks the ideals in this play. *Three Sisters* was also written at the time of change, and Chekhov witnessed the change, reflecting it naturally in the play's story and the characters interaction with one another.

Chekhov's close examination of the certain ideals in life, such as romantic love essential to fulfillment in life ends up mostly in disappointment. The failure of the characters' most firmly assumptions is another explanation for the futile process of waiting they are experiencing. Andrei is a failure in his love with Natasha reminds us of the failure of a romantic expectation. In an incessant sequel of time, then; Chekhov stages the failure of expectation fulfillment in the characters' lives. Waiting for a

future of a changed nature in future is ironically a result of such unhappiness with their present situation. Life goes on as it never ends, and the Pozorov siblings are doomed to wait and wait.

The disappointment with future life in *Three Sisters* is related to the topic of 'progress', having roots in one of the dominant discourses of the time, that is "Teleological ideas about progress" which "had begun to shift from the mid-nineteenth century when existing values were challenged by positivism and Schopenhauerian nihilism. (Kline 2001: 805) Nihilism as a major school of thought in the nineteenth century Russia could be thus regarded as one of the main discourses of the time shaping the ennui and passivity in the waiting process in this play, a process which leads nowhere but to where it had all started. Vershinin idealizes the future, articulating his points of view about life's purpose, which in his ideas, shape a happy future life. Tusenbach expresses a rather more pessimistic view about life as he pinpoints his denial of any change in life in the future. Like Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*, he foresees political revolution.

Waiting in a static manner for the future has caused the characters forget their present life. They are losing present in price for a future which shall never come. Their inability to take a step in order to fulfill their dream of going to Moscow differs from that of the two tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. For Diddy and Goggo the road is open but they have no slight idea of where to go or even of whom they are waiting for. The three sisters in Chekhov's play, on the other hand, do have a picture of how their life would look like, had they lived in Moscow. After all the calamities, the sisters appear to have gained the realization about the meaning of life. The end scene is the only time they are once ore united since the beginning of the play. Masha talks about the need to go on living, Irina announces her decision to devote her life to educate the others, and Olga expresses her hope of being remembered in the future as their suffering will bring happiness in the life of others.

Conclusion

Theme of waiting in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* resembles the one staged in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Both plays express the waiting in the play's major characters, waiting for Godot to come and waiting to go to Moscow. The ultimate result in both is the same, 'they do not move'. However, the point of difference appeared to be the degree of self-knowledge achieved at the end of each play. While Beckett's tramps obviously suffer from amnesia and they cannot even remember whether they know Godot or not, Chekhov's sisters know what their life would be in Moscow.

Envisioning a better future hope in the characters is linked to the dominant discourses of the time. "Chekhov was a progressive and democratic thinker, committed to equality and human rights" (Whyman, 2011, 25). Therefore, he depicts the characters that are stuck in their present stagnant situation, but are not able to move beyond and take a step to change. In other words, they are the fore generations of Beckett's tramps and other similar characters who get born on stage in western dramatic works to come. Chekhov investigates the dominant discourse of the time along with the ideals of the Russian intelligentsia, utilitarianism, utopianism, nihilism and the pessimism coming out of the disillusionment of the ideality. The investigation of passive, absurd waiting in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in accordance with the episteme of the time, as defined by Foucault, reveals the bilateral relationship between literature and history once again.

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