

# ANTON CHEKHOV'S THE CHERRY ORCHARD AS A SAD COMEDY

Anil Apral  
Department of English  
Raichur University, Raichur – 584133, Karnataka, India

## ABSTRACT :

The nineteenth century offered two important developments to Russia which are manifested in the play. In the 1830's, the railroads arrived, an important step in Russia's move into a more international sphere. More importantly, in February of 1861, Russia's vast population of serfs was liberated for good, bringing a long-awaited social change. These two dimensions, social change and the growing importance of the international community, pervade the play and even drive the plot. Chekhov's writing style is very pertinent to the population of Russia at this moment. While former aristocrats still patronized the arts, there was also a growing class of less educated, nouveau-rich attending the theater. Chekhov's plays are famous for their simple language, which many hold partly responsible for his popularity. The fact that his play discusses every social class in language that everyone can understand makes his play accessible to people of all backgrounds. It makes high-brow jokes while also being universally comedic. Chekhov has given us a new type of Comedy, which he can call Social Comedy. In the present play *The Cherry Orchard* he describes incidents which throw light on the conditions prevailing in modern Russia. The play may be regarded as the farewell of the new, youthful Russia of tomorrow to the past which has outlived its usefulness, is doomed to a swift end, is on the eve of extinction.

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is one of the most important Russian writers. Other Russian writers were Tolstoy, Torgenev and Pushkin. Anton was born in Taganrog in 1860, got educated at Moscow to become a doctor, soon he realized he has love for literature. Being a doctor he developed into a famous short story writer and dramatist. *On the Road*(1884), *The Bear* (1888), *The Wood Demon*(1889) are his early plays. His later plays are *Ivanhoe* (1887), *Three Sisters* (1899), *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). His plays portray the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian life in its variety facets.

The present play *The Cherry Orchard* is a modern play of 20<sup>th</sup> century, was not a comedy; it was not a tragedy. This play is admixture of both tragic and comic elements in their perfect balance, was rather tragic comedy or comedy with the under tools of sadness. The play is about the fall of feudal system in the post Tzar's Russia. The play highlights most important human value i.e. love that binds the present and people at large. It is only love which pre-supposes sacrifice on the part of the individual and makes the life tolerably palatable.

*The Cherry Orchard* had deep impact on Russian life and revolution of 1905. The condition of Russia before 1905 was very backward. The Tsars who ruled Russia were despotic. There was no freedom to the common people of Russia. Civil liberties did not exist. People were uneducated and illiterate. There was no public system of education. There was worst type of exploitation of farmers and laborers. Under these circumstances Chekhov wrote *The Cherry Orchard* to revolutionize the social conditions of Russia. Even the political conditions of Russia were not satisfactory. People were harassed for realization of taxes and for minor offences of crimes. Severe punishments were given. The prisoners' conditions were so bad that innocent people were punished very severely. Anton has described the intolerable sufferings of the people of Russia in this famous book "Sakhalin Island". Anton was very much grieved and upset to see the worst conditions of Russia.

The big land owners called kulaks were exploiting the peasantry. They were living very expensively. The luxurious life of the kulaks has been portrayed by Chekhov in many of his plays. The title of the play *The Cherry Orchard* which belongs to Madame Ranevskaya, owner of the orchard, has two children Anya and Varya. The whole action of the play takes place inside the house. Ranevsky's husband, who was a big landlord, had built the most beautiful house in the cherry orchard. The house was so beautiful that it was mentioned in the world encyclopedia as the most beautiful orchard. The play begins with the return of the owners to their house in the cherry orchard and ends with a note of going away from the house that was on an auction.

During 19<sup>th</sup> century the economic and political power of the noble family was gradually eroded in Russia. Many rich families gained debts. Tzar Alexander II freed serfs in 1861. They had only two options in front of them, one, to go for agriculture labor

or two, to factory, to earn their livelihood. Between 1880-90 these serfs became aware of their power. Meanwhile, a hardworking entrepreneur like Lophain in the play found to purchase land in which their ancestors once had sweat and blood.

The theme of the play is happiness and love. It implies that the whole play revolves around the same subject. The playwright wants to convey is that material wealth is immaterial. Reneveskya's husband died early and left behind large number of servants. In short times she was involved into debts. She had spent large amount of money extravagantly in fashionable society of Paris where she used to go to meet her loving friends. The family of her is the symbol of extravagant landlords in Russia. On the account of extravagance and luxuries the people of Russia were becoming very miserable. Reneveskya, in spite of grass, widow and unhappy because of her unpaid debts, they are poor and do not want to show they are poor and unable to lead their high styled life, longing for the past life with her husband who was unfaithful but loves him still. The whole family appears to live in the world of fantasy and their aim is to be happy. So they arrange a party on the occasion of their auction of their house without knowing who would buy it. It is surprising coincidence that Lophain, the merchant who was the son of Reneveskya's serf, buys the house.

Here, Chekhov's play is on the land owners' custom of referring to serfs as souls, despite the fact that the land owners often treated them worse than animals. The cherry blossoms may be lovely, but orchard, because of the suffering of it represents for all concerned, must go and it must according to the rules of the new social order. The action of the play resolves into the characters acceptance of the harsh reality of the changing times. Its main theme is the passing of the old order is symbolized in the sale of the cherry orchard which is treated in spite of high comedy. In the first act, Lophain, the rich self made business man, the son of a serf, who adores the owner of the orchard Mrs. Reneveskya, as the personification of goodness because she saved him as a child from a beating by his brutal father, is determined to save her turns. He offers many plans to save the orchard from being put to auction. In the second act, however, is a significant change in his attitude, if therefore, Mrs. Reneveskya still refuses to accept Lophain's plan and permits her estate to be sold at a public auction to pay her creditors, she can no longer count on his loyalty, in fact this is what happens. Lophain suggests all these plans out of hypocrisy. Actually, he is interested in owning the cherry orchard. Therefore, when the orchard is put to auction he buys it and becomes its owner. The occasion of the farewell becomes very painful and the most melancholy incident for the family of Reneveskya. Lophain comes to the orchard and declares that he has become the owner of the cherry orchard. He does not bother about the feelings of pain and sorrow of the Reneveskya's family.

**Reneveskya:** Who ought it?

**Lophain:** I bought it.(A pause)

**Reneveskya:** What?

**Lophain:** Yes. I bought it.

Kindly wait a moment ladies and gentlemen. I bid up to ninety thousand, it was knocked down to me. The cherry orchard is mine. I bought the estate where my grandfather and father were slaves, where you wouldn't even let me in the kitchen. I am asleep, it's only some dream of mine, it only seems so to me- that's nothing but the fruit of your imagination, covered with the darkness of the unknown. Hey musicians, play the music, I want to hear you, let's dance everybody the cherry orchard is mine.(p 69)

Lophain orders his servants to cut down the trees of the garden. The farewell scene becomes very ironical and the play begins to bear a moral lesson. The Reneveskya's family becomes the symbol of the disintegration and Lophain becomes the symbol of the new bourgeois class

This play is combination of realism and symbolism. There is a realistic portrayal of the landlords of Russia. But at the same time the decadence of landlords is portrayed through symbolism. Cherry orchard is the decadent symbol of the past decline of landlordism. The landlords lived in palatial buildings surrounded by very wide and special garden but landlords were unable to pay the excessive revenues of the Tzars (kings) their estates were being auctioned and this general condition of Russia has been described in *The Cherry Orchard* by the wretched condition of the owner of the cherry orchard. The owner Reneveskya's financial condition is totally unsound. She is unable to pay revenues of the estate, which was the condition of all the landlords in Russia. Chekhov has presented both realistically and symbolically the miserable condition of Russia.

The play was written in 1903, a year before the death of Chekhov. But it was so powerful that it shook whole of Russia. It was staged in various towns and cities of Russia. Its influence was so great that the people of Russia rose against the exploiting classes of landlords. In 1905 Russian people rebelled against the despotic power of the landlords and the rulers of Russia. But this revolution of 1905 was not a proletarian revolution. Even the middle classes and the petty traders and the businessmen took

part in the revolution and succeeded in bringing civil liberties to the people of Russia.

The terrible tragedy turns out to be no tragedy at all for the simple reason that the actors are incapable of feeling anything serious or tragic, that's why it is a sad comedy. Chekhov is a great dramatist of Russia who has given us a new type of comedy, which he can call social comedy. He does not give us developed characters. But he describes incidents which throw light on the conditions prevailing in modern Russia. Thus *The Cherry Orchard* is the greatest sad comedy of Chekhov. It is really a problem play which was a great success on the stage. It was a blow on the rollers of feudal systems. It pointed the realistic picture of Russia and created stir for the revolution of 1905.

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