



The Utopian Vision of the Future in Chekhov's Three Sisters

الرؤيا المثالية للمستقبل للكاتب جيكوف في مسرحية

"الأخوات الثلاث"

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Abstract

Writing at the turning point of the century pushes any writer to face and reflect the changes of this critical period. Chekhov comprehends this challenge; therefore, it becomes a recurrent theme that appears in most of his works which is a valuable resistance and survival against the social and economic changes that happened clearly in the modern age which have a great impact on man's life and psych.

إن الكتابة على مشارف القرن تدفع الكاتب إلى مواجهة وعكس التغيرات لهذه المرحلة الحرجة. ان الكاتب جيكوف استوعب هذا التحدي من خلال عرض فكرة المقاومة القديرة والإصرار على البقاء في وجه كل التغيرات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية التي حدثت في العصر الحديث. يقدم الكاتب من خلال مسرحية (الأخوات الثلاث) شخصيات تصارع ضد القوى التافهة والتي تشكل خطرا في تحطيم حياة وأحلام الشخصيات الرئيسية. إن هذه الشخصيات قد تعلمت ان التحمل والعمل الشاق من اهم مقومات مواجهة تحديات الحياة من اجل خلق حياة افضل للأجيال القادمة.



In the *Three Sisters*, the characters struggle against the power of triviality, there is an inner conflict between the character and environment. Triviality is a dangerous force that destroys and traps the lives and dreams of the main characters that learn how to face it and even conquer it by the power of endurance and the work hard to create a better life for the future generations.

Anton Chekhov usually mentions that modern drama should shift the interest more and more from the main action to the inner man, from the main action to the outward intrigue to the psychological conflict. Thus, it is to combine scenic realism with the drama of the souls. Also, Chekhov's aim is to deliver to the audience things related to the characters or the setting or the action by using dramatic devices more than words as he believes modern drama should present these things.¹

Chekhov is interested in presenting an illusion of life on the stage, and life is for him laughter and tears, both hope and despair, both longing and triviality. He works on having this emotional scale by developing a means of successfully presenting both 'life as it is' and 'life as it should be' by finding a way to present the latter function indirectly through implications.²

In *Three Sisters* (1901) we are introduced to the Prozorov family: Olga, Andrei, Masha and Irina over the course of four years. The family lives in provincial Russian town. The family feels continually displaced and dreams of returning to Moscow where they have grown up. The play begins on the youngest sister Irina's name day which is also the first anniversary of their father's death. Olga, the eldest sister, is unmarried and unhappy in her job as a teacher. Masha is married and pursues an illicit affair with a married man, Vershinin. Irina is single and prefers to ignore the courting of her suitor as she dreams of being loved and married back in Moscow, later on, she accepts, under the social pressure, to marry the Baron.



To his sisters' dismay, Andrei married to an unsophisticated and seemingly shy local woman called Natasha who later controls the household. Being married to Natasha, Andrei's plan to become a scholar is thwarted. Therefore, to cope with his despair, he starts gambling away the family's inheritance as he eventually mortgages the house to pay off his debts.

It is important to know the current situation of the Prozorv's family, in order to understand how Chekhov presents his hopeful vision of the future. Throughout the play the once prosperous house of the Prozorv falls and disintegrates, with the expectations and dreams of Olga, Masha and Irina being always frustrated and ultimately dashed. The decline of the Prozorv's household symbolizes the end to the aristocratic world. Cultured societies fall when they are confronted by the forces of bourgeoisie self-interest, fascist conquest or communist revolution. The material disposition of the Prozorv household can be understood as a result of the sisters being inactive. However, Chekhov chooses them to represent his utopian vision of the future.³

The dramatist portrays in *Three Sisters* a world which has all appearances of meaningless absurdity because humanity has failed to make life meaningful by refusing to work with nature in the process of change and evolution. The Prozorovs' determination to return to Moscow, where they were born, only expresses their desire for a full and throbbing life. But the provincial morass is stronger.⁴ The sisters cannot go back to Moscow because doing so would mean that they have accepted modernity and how it has transformed Moscow and their lives. The sisters continue to see Moscow as the happy place from their childhood and not the industrialized urban center that it has become. They affectionately remember Moscow as one would remember a family member. Throughout the play, remembering is their most common action. They remember Moscow, their parents, and each other. The sisters do not understand that constantly remembering prevents them from moving forward and only keeps them in the past. While they were happy in the past, the past is not the key to their future happiness. As long as they continue fight the future, they will never be happy. The sisters' suffering could end quite easily with a simple purchase. However, neither they nor



their brother succeed in extricating themselves-instead of living, they are compelled only to exist.⁵ Irina complains:

I have been working for years, my brains are drying up, I am getting thin and old and ugly and there is nothing, nothing, not the slightest satisfaction, and the time is passing, and one feels that one is moving away and being drawn into the depths. I am in despair and I don't know how it is I am alive and have not killed myself yet.⁶

It is not their fault only that all their efforts are useless and that things go from bad to worse. Chekhov's aim is to make his audience aware of the stagnant, stupid and mediocre lives they all lived and, by doing so, make them understand that this is not the inevitable fate of humanity. He believes that work, education and business would help speed up the improvement of life as his character operate in a fictional world in which personal and social development is possible. Thus, it becomes one of the main themes is to find a purpose to life through socially useful activity.⁷ The various philosophical discussions throughout the play between the sisters and the soldiers about how life will be on earth two hundred years from now, the significance and the need of nature for humanity's existence, and the will to sacrifice and work for the better meant of all are expressions of the values of the world which the sisters represent. These values are practiced by them throughout the play; the sisters open their house to the local town's people who have lost their homes in the city fire. Olga even gives most of her clothes to those who no longer possess any. By contrast, Natasha resent the refugees in the house and takes her frustrations out on Anfisha, the elderly family nurse.

Natasha represents the characteristics of self-interest, vulgarity, and sensual gratification. The end of the first act, Natasha is in tears and embarrassed by her garish dress and awkward manners; Andrei protected her as he finds her sexually irresistible in spite of her lack of social sophistication. With the next act, Natasha prowls around the house



possessively and interrupts her husband's study with her worries about their baby's need for his own room. In the next act, Natasha openly assures her authority. Having a second child in the nursery and the house crowded with refugees. Natasha is able to dismiss Anfisa, when Olga know what I'm talking about.... That old thief, that old witch must get out of this house tomorrow!... How dare you vex me so?"(297).

The result is Olga's decision to live at school with Anfisa. By the time of the final act, Natasha reproaches Andrei for the noise that he is making because it is disturbing the children. She turns Andie from a potential scholar to a husband pushing babies around that may not even be his. His greatest achievement is a post on the town council, which is chaired by his wife's lover. Criticizing her, Andrie says: "There's something about her which pulls her down to the level of an animal... a sort of mean, blind, thick-skinned animal-anyway, not a human being."(318).

As she surveys her newly conquers realm from a window, she decides to cut down the trees in the avenue and dares enough to criticize Irina for her poor taste in clothes. One important thing to notice about Natasha that she does not want anything to remind her that the household was once of the Prozorov's and not of Natasha's, a matter which explains her insistence to dismiss Anfisa, and changes in the avenue. In fact, Natasha is the best example of comprehensive perception of time, and how her children physically push the sisters out of the house, also the debt from the mortgaging the house supports her lavish lifestyle. Eventually, Natasha's success shows the price of vulgarity triumphing over taste, bourgeoisie self-interest over aristocratic sacrifice, and material wealth over spiritual idealism. The sisters and Andrie are unable to resist Natasha a matter which creates a condition where evil - the absence of any moral direction for individuals and society-can flourish and have destructive consequence.⁸



Through the members of the Prozorv, Chekhov presents a highly sensitive person, faced by the rough and ruthless competition in modern the other hand, success is a progressive of the unscrupulous, the coarse, and the vulgar. Chekhov, however, looks upon it with a suspicion which has been crushed because they expected or even demanded from life more than it could give. The price of their failure, perhaps, is not entirely in vain. They learn new things out of their failure.⁹ As Irina's praises the virtues of work in the last act: "Someday people will know why such things happen, and what the purpose of all this suffering is... Meanwhile we must go on living... and working. Yes, we must just go on working! Tomorrow I'll go away alone and teach in a school somewhere; I'll give my life to the people who need it... I'll go on working and working"(329).

To work in the service of others provides a possibility to resist evil. What Irina suggests is work for the betterment of society. It is an attempt to translate the participatory mode of reality from leisure to work, thereby preserving oneself and one's society from a subjective approach to life that allows evil to flourish. There is one significant requirement in working in the service of others which is capability to identify with another person's suffering that enables the realization that all humans are equal. Olga's identification with Anfisa, Masha sympathy of Vershinin's familial situation-being unable to leave his suicidal wife and his two daughters- and Irina's with the needy after the news of killing her fiancé.¹⁰

Another thing Chekhov reflects through the price of the Prozorovs' failure is the possibility that they are paying the bill for the happiness of the next generations, whose life will be less muddled and stupid than theirs. At least that possibility of a meaning which refuses to slam her door an all hopes. The theme of hopeful future developed throughout the play from the Prozorovs' own hopes to the next generations' hopes.¹¹ From the very



beginning, there is a hope. For Irina, Moscow is the opportunity to reach her potential and meet the man of her dreams. Moscow symbolizes the ascriptive society for which they all goomed. For Olga, her desire for Moscow is one of wishful memory-her thoughts and language are in the past tense. Since Olga is the eldest sister and surrogate mother figure, she lives for Irina's hopes. This hope for the next generation and the struggle to preserve it becomes thematically important as it repeatedly surfaces in the play.

Throughout the play, the burden of sorrow and non-achievement is balanced, and even perhaps transcended, by the longing for happiness and fulfilment. The depiction of life as it is engenders a yearning for a life as it should be. Michael Billington, a critic, concludes "what I hunger for is more of the peculiar Chekhovian balance between hope for the race and deep personal despair".¹² The Prozorovs are conscious that their own hopes and ideals are obstructed, but are not aware that they have lost control over their own property. When they realize that they acknowledge that their future is destroyed: Andrie abandons his dreams to be a professor, Olga accepts permanent exile of life at the local high school, Masha nobly relinquishes her love for Vershinin, and Irina weeps for the Baron, her fiancé, who has been killed in a duel by one of her former suitors. Having inner conflict between whom they were in the past and whom they hope to be in the future, the sisters find themselves forced to reconcile their dreams with reality. All they can do is simply work and live.

Chekhov believes that "Modern culture is but the beginning of a work for a great future, a work which will go on, perhaps for ten thousand years, in order than mankind may, even in the remote future".¹³ In *Three Sisters*, Vershinin is the first one who expresses this belief :



I don't think there could exist – a town so dull and boring that it didn't have a real need for intelligent, educated people. All right, let's agree that this town is backward and vulgar, and let's suppose now that out of all its thousands of inhabitants there are only three people like you. Of course you won't be able to overcome the unenlightened mass that surrounds you; little by little you'll disappear into this crowd of thousands, life will swallow you up. But you won't simply disappear; you will have some influence. And after you've gone there will be six more, let's say, like you, then twelve, and so on, until finally people like you will be in the majority. In two or three hundred years, life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful, astonishing. Man needs a life like that, and if we don't have it yet we must wait for it, dream of it, prepare for it, and that's the reason we must be able to see and know more than our fathers and grandfathers. [Laughs] And you complain that you know a lot that's unnecessary!(263).

His speech shows his vision of a hope for the progressive evolution of man. He speaks to the work they must do and the suffering they must endure in order to create this vision for future generations. Thus, hope is presented as a symbol of endurance that prevails the play and keeps them alive in spite of all the misfortunes.¹⁴

It is important to notice the way Chekhov reflects his vision of the future at the end of play through the expression of hope which is given by all three sisters. Masha says, "listen to that band! They're leaving us... one of them gone for good... for ever! We're left alone... to start our lives all over again. We must go on living."(329)



Olga, being inspired by Vershinin's vision of life in which the present generation must prepare the way for a better life for those yet unborn: " I feel as if I wanted to live! Merciful God! The years will pass, and we shall be gone for good and quite forgotten... our faces and our voices will be forgotten and people won't even know that there were once three of us here... there'll be a time when peace and happiness reign in the world, mid them we shall be remembered kindly and blessed". (329)

This speech, which concludes Chekov's vision of the future, presents the discovery of a new purpose and the acceptance of the suffering, and hard work that must be performed to ensure the happiness of future generations. In fact it is a significant indication of the tone Chekhov may have been trying to create for the final scene. Chekhov was an educated man of science, who was writing for a new, modern and some may argue, avant-garde theatre. He loved his adopted home of Moscow as it was in the current day. He embraced change and modernity and perhaps only wanted his fellow countrymen to join him.



الخاتمة

ان مقطع الحديث المقدم على لسان شخصية فيرشنن يلخص و يستنتج رؤية جيكوف للمستقبل كونه يقدم البحث عن هدف جديد لمواصلة الحياة و تقبل المعاناة من خلال العمل الشاق لضمان سعادة الأجيال القادمة. في الحقيقة انه مؤشر مهم على الرسالة التي حاول جيكوف إيصالها بشكل واضح في المشهد الأخير. ان هذا الكاتب إنسان مثقف مؤمن بالعلم لهذا نجد انه يكتب للمسرح الجديد و الحديث الذي سيكون في المستقبل. ان جيكوف امن واعتنق التغيير و الحداثة لدرجة جعله يرغب من جميع من عاصروه ان يلحقوا به.



Notes

1 Nilsson Nils Ake, "Intonation and Rhythm in Cechov's Plays" in Anton Cechov, 1860-1960: Some Essays.(Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), p. 171.

2 Geoffery Borny, . Interpreting Chekhov (Australia: The Australian National University, 2006), p36.

3 Kenneth A. Lantz, Anton Chekhov: A Reference Guide to Literature. (Boston: Hall, 1945),p 155.

4 Borny, p. 27.

5 Robert Russell and Andrew Barrett, ed. Age of Modernism (Houndmills: Macmillian, 1990), p. 134.

6 Anton Chekhov, Anton Chekhov: Four Major Plays) . London Penguin Books, 1954), p. 306. All subsequent references to this play cited parenthetically within the text by page number.

7 Borny, p. 32.

8 Janko Lavrin, Russian Writers: Their Lives and Literature (Toronto: D. Van Nostrand, 1954), p. 210.

9 Ibid., p.221.

10 Konei Chukovsky, Chekhov the man. trans. Pauline Rose. (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p247.

11 Ronald Hingley, A New Life of Anton Chekhov (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1972), p. 72 .



12 Michael Billington, Guardian (3 April 1986).

13 Lavrin, p. 212.

14 Harold Bloom, ed. Anton Chekhov: Modern Critical Essays (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), p. 234.

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