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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF 'WARD NO. 6' BY ANTON CHEKHOV

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Abstract

The role of physical spaces in creating the mindscape of people who populate them has been a constant refrain in the pages of Russian Literature. But the 'little man', inhabiting corners knocks on the conscience of a society and asserts his existence and in doing so immortalizes the discourse of struggle and a future victory that Russia saw before the Revolution.

Keywords: human incarceration, spaces, emptiness, indignation, mainstream.

The desire to portray the substance of contemporary life is always alive in the best examples of artistic creation. It is also because of this that they survive their own eras and become timeless.

Anton Chekhov's short story, *Ward No.6* is a case in point.

A major part of 19th and 20th century Literature from Russia centers around prospects, squares, cubes, carriages, closets, bug-infested one-room tenements, crossroads, underground spaces and shadows. With Anton Chekhov, hospitals and wards got added. Later in Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the same hospitals, prison bunks and cancer wards come back to remind us of the stories of human incarceration, disease and death. What is common to all these geographical spaces is that they are inhabited by the 'little man' from Alexander Pushkin to Gogol to Dostoyevsky to Chekhov to Solzhenitsyn to Mandelstam to Andrei Biely. These little men have a common story: they have been crushed out of existence from mainstream Petersburg society.

Russian Literature is characterized by its "affinity with the people". In Chekhov's 'Ward No.6', we see the same affinity at play. The writers aforementioned did not let the poor miserable clerks, consumptives, drunks, beggars, emaciated children, be annihilated. Their struggle is immortalized in the pages of what constitutes the best of Russian Literature. Chekhov, too, as both Doctor and Writer, travels into a hospital, a mental asylum, and acquaints us with people who have been obliterated out of existence by powers who are authorized to run other people's lives.

Among the people who populate the story, there is a doctor, Andrey Ragin, and a patient, Ivan Gromov. The patient is a madman whose place is in the asylum. That is also the doctor in Chekhov speaking. Ivan Gromov lives in a "continually overwrought condition". His madness is evident in his grimaces, in the way he trembles all over, his teeth chattering. It can also be seen "in his longing to say something very important".

What does this lunatic say? "He speaks of the baseness of mankind, of violence trampling on justice, of the glorious life which will one day be upon earth, of the window gratings which remind him every minute of the stupidity and cruelty of oppressors".

The 'little man', hitherto docile, surrendering and if rebellious, only seemingly (Dostoyevsky's underground man) has come of age. He has found a voice, albeit in his mentally deranged condition. In fact, it could be argued that he could have found a voice in this condition. Yevgeny in Pushkin's 'The Bronze Horseman', Akaky Akakievich in Gogol's 'The Greatcoat', Devushkin in Dostoyevsky's 'Poor Folk', Parnok in Madelstam's 'The Egyptian Stamp' and Ivan Denisovich in Solzhenitsyn's prison camp story in 'One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich', finally cry out in indignation against forces that have profaned human dignity and barricaded, fenced and imprisoned it in hospital and prison buildings.

The hospital and Ward no.6 are geographical spaces that house the last of the vestiges of a human populace that have been exiled from mainstream society. The writer in Chekhov (like all his literary predecessors) will continue to tug at our conscience. To quote from the text, Ivan Gromov's ranting "makes a disorderly, incoherent potpourri of themes old but not yet out of date". Ivan Gromov questions, "Is it not absurd even to think of justice when every kind of violence is accepted by society as a rational and consistent necessity, and every act of mercy- for instance, a verdict of acquittal- calls forth a perfect outburst of dissatisfied and revengeful feeling?"

The question is a telling comment on a society that is essentially punishing and is not forgiving and merciful. When the doctor mouths beautiful lines and quotes Marcus Aurelius, "A pain is a vivid idea of pain; make an effort of will to change the idea, dismiss it, cease to complain, and the pain will disappear", one is reminded of the immortal lines from Anatole France:

"The law in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal reads".

The rich will never know the pain of homelessness, hunger and want. The travesty of justice meted out to the poor for sleeping under bridges or for stealing bread or for begging on the streets, is real. Real, like pain is real. An effort of will cannot make the pain of hunger or homelessness go away. To quote Ivan Gromov, "You are only theoretically acquainted with reality....." And to all those who wax eloquent and philosophize on "the wise, reflecting, thoughtful man who is distinguished by his contempt for suffering", Ivan Gromov's answer leaves a lasting impact on our minds for the naked, unpretentious truth it lays bare: "No sir, it is not philosophy, it is not thinking, it is not breadth of vision, but laziness, fakirism, drowsy stupefaction".

When Ivan Gromov says, "To pain I respond with tears and outcries, to baseness with indignation, to filth with loathing. To my mind, that is just what is called life", the conversations between the doctor and the patient have reached a point when Chehov becomes more a writer than doctor. This is also the point when the doctor, Andrey Ragin, realizes the hollowness of his own self and develops a loathing for all human company exemplified by the likes of the hospital staff and authorities, colleagues and even his hitherto good friend, Mihail Averyanitch. The doctor accompanies his friend, on the latter's insistent entreaties, on a tour of Moscow, Petersburg and Warsaw. At Iversky Madonna, Mihail Averyanitch prays fervently, even shedding tears and bowing to the earth. Later, he insists Ragin kiss the icon, while Mihail Averyanitch prayed in a whisper, and again the tears came into his eyes".

One is reminded of the lines from William Blake's, 'The Human Abstract':

"He sits down with holy fears,

And waters the ground with tears".

What kind of a man was Mihail Averyanitch?

A jolly good fellow who liked good company, good wine and food and good conversation. Nothing else mattered. When everyone else dubbed Ragin abnormal (because the doctor was seen more and more in the company of Ivan Gromov) one would have expected Mihail Averyanitch to be different.

The truth, however, is that Mihail Averyanitch, like everyone else, believed Ragin was indeed losing it! But the 'good' man in him shed tears at Iversky Madonna! Mihail Averyanitch exemplifies the tribe that will shed tears easily for they make them feel "somewhat easier". We understand why Ragin begins to abhor him. The emptiness of the man is exposed. Together with the rest of human society, "the deceit that grows in the human brain", is exposed for Ragin, in ! Mihail Averyanitch also.

Confronted with the uncompromising reality in Gromov's words, Ragin's philosophy, "A man's peace and contentment do not lie outside a man, but in himself", receives a death-blow. Gromov is right when he said, "Go preach that philosophy in Greece, where it is warm and fragrant with the scent of pomegranates".

When Ragin is finally shut up in Ward no.6, Gromov's rant reverberates in our ears for a long time:

"They will never let us out. They will leave us to rot here! Oh Lord! Can there really be no hell in the next world? Will these wretches be forgiven? Where is justice? Open the door, you wretch! I am choking".

These lines establish beyond all doubt how a society creates Ward no.6, which is a veritable hell. Justice will come only when "prisons and madhouses will no longer exist". And in the words of Ivan Gromov, who speaks for the entire human populace, incarcerated since 1703 (when Petersburg was born) and in the prison camps of Siberia, "Of course, that time will come, sooner or later".

The deadening expose in Ivan Gromov's, "Yes, I am ill. But you know dozens, hundreds of madmen are walking about in freedom because your ignorance is incapable of distinguishing them from the sane. Why am I and these poor wretches to be shut up here like scapegoats for all the rest? You, your assistant, the superintendent and all your hospital rabble, are immeasurably inferior to every one of us morally; why then are we shut up and you not? Where is the logic of it?" leaves us both ashamed and stunned.

In its intensity and in its irony of who is mad and who is not, it can match the lines from a play, 'Come back little Sheba' by William Inge, where a madman, prays:

"Lord, Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom always to tell the difference".

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Biography

Dr. Pranava Manjari.N has taught in Bangalore and then NOIDA for a total of 25 years. She has publications in Penguin India, Harper Collins and the erstwhile KATHA. She received the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi award for Translation for the year 2000. She has book reviews published in Indian Literature, a Sahitya Akademi journal. She presently works as Head and Professor in the Department of English in JSS Academy of Technical Education, NOIDA.