The Drama of Loneliness: Its Evolution from Chekhov to Pinter and Bond

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The loneliness of human existence becomes an overriding theme in literature and drama of the 20th century due to the emergence of the European Avant-garde movements, Sigmund Freud's theory of the subconscious, and the philosophy of Existentialism (Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus) which focused on an individual in an alienated world devoid of meaning or purpose. Though written at the turn of the 20th century, the Russian author Anton Chekhov's work has been a major influence on the formation of European and British drama in its treatment of the human condition and its innovative dramatic techniques. All of his major plays: *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), are tales of human existence stripped of fulfillment and happiness.

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) wrote at the time when Russia's history was shaping itself against the polarized tensions of the centuries-old political rule of autocracy and the demands of the new rising powers for constitutional rights and parliamentary democracy. Emerging from a 300-year-old system of serfdom abolished in 1861, Russia's socio-economic structure was still largely dependent on agriculture where "only limited land was left to the peasant which had to be redeemed by payments to the state. The peasants began to lease from the gentry and were left, therefore, at the mercy of this class" (Hosking 144). The rising poverty among the emancipated peasants drove them to the cities in search of work thus giving a boost to the Industrialization of Russia and its growing middle class. The Russian middle class was asserting its powers in the shifting political paradigm of the time: the emancipation of serfs took away free labor from the landed aristocracy and weakened the economic foundations for their existence.

A progressive step in itself, the abolition of serfdom did not create civil liberties for all Russia's citizens, and the country's intellectual climate remained in the firm clutches of the Tsar's political and moral censorship. The last two reigns of the Romanov Dynasty: Alexander III (1881-1894) and his son Nicholas II (1894-1917), invoked the ideological doctrine of Official Nationality which claimed **Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality** as cornerstone values of Russian citizenship. The doctrine resonated with Russia's rulers at the end of the century as "the triad was inherently unbalanced in favor of *centralized autocracy*. The Russian Orthodox Church was impoverished and incapable of being an independent political force. Nationality through empowerment of the people was not a choice from the start." It became even less probable after the dreaded nationalist revolutions of 1848 in Europe and after the Paris Commune of 1871 the mere idea of which reduced the Russian emperors "to a state of almost catatonic fear" (Hosking 149).

The Tsar's fear of social revolution and his severe repression against any influence that could challenge the Establishment did not stop Russia's intelligentsia from showing a keen interest in the newest social and political theories infiltrating from the West. The spread of Darwinism and the emphasis on empiricism in natural and social studies along with Marxist theory prepared an ideological platform in Russia's

intellectual circles for a materialistic world view fiercely opposed by the Tsar's official propaganda. In response to the ideological tensions of his time, Chekhov defined his philosophical credo in a letter to his publisher Alexei Suvorin, “Materialism is not a school or doctrine in the narrow journalistic sense. Everything that lives on earth is necessarily materialistic. Creatures of a higher order, thinking humans, are also necessarily materialists. They can seek out truth only when their microscopes, probes, and knives are effective. Outside the matter there is no experience or knowledge, and consequently, no truth” (Letter 35 in *Anton Chekhov’s Life & Thought*).

A doctor by profession, a writer by calling, Chekhov came to fame at the age of twenty-six as a short-story writer, and by the last decade of his life when his major plays were written, his philosophy and aesthetics had been well defined. He claimed realism as his creative method, “One has to write what one sees, what one feels, truthfully, sincerely. …Living truthful images generate thought but thought cannot create an image” (Letter 21 in *Anton Chekhov’s Life & Thought)*. His core aesthetic principles, itemized with precision in a letter to his brother Alexander Chekhov, included, "Absence of lengthy verbiage of political-socioeconomic nature, total objectivity, truthful descriptions of persons and objects, extreme brevity, audacity and originality, compassion" (*Anton Chekhov’s Life & Thought*). These principles masterfully molded into his dramatic work produced *the question play*, a new genre fundamental to the modernist drama and literature of the 20th century "which was driven by a conscious desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities of the time" (Childs 2008, p. 4). Consciously or intuitively, Chekhov rejected didacticism and proscriptive politicking in art; instead, he saw the artist's mission in an intellectual inquiry into the issues of human condition and their objective portrayal as a result of this process. “Anyone who says the artist’s field is all answers and no questions has never done any writing. The artist observes, selects, guesses, and synthesizes. The very fact of these actions presupposes a question. …We are dealing here with two concepts: *answering the questions* and *formulating them correctly*. Only the latter is required of an author” (Letter 26 in *Anton Chekhov’s Life & Thought)*.

In probing the complexities of Russia's life and the individual's ability to survive in it, Chekhov created a modern drama where loneliness became the basic premise of his characters' existence. The deeply ingrained sense of loneliness in his plays stemmed from his own existential angst: as a doctor, he was acutely aware of his failing health, especially after having been diagnosed with an advanced stage of tuberculosis; due to his condition, he spent most of his life in the milder parts of Russia, away from Moscow's cold winters and its vibrant cultural scene which he painfully missed. He often wrote of his loneliness to his friends and family, and his contemporaries spoke of a discernible sadness in him which Chekhov himself denied.

Loneliness in Chekhov's plays is also rooted in his awareness of the societal issues of the time, his keen perception of imminent political change, his deep understanding of

the Russian national character, the emotionality and impracticality of "the Russian soul," and his empathy for his fellow human beings trapped in an unjust and frustrating world. The idea of a lonely individual in a fundamentally painful condition ties Chekhov's plays to the Symbolist movement, especially to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) whose work Chekhov read and admired. Schopenhauer's main philosophical construct, the "Will to Live" (*Wille zum Leben*), represented a malignant metaphysical force which controlled the actions of an individual; since Schopenhauer believed that humans were motivated only by their own basic desires, he saw them as futile and illogical, and so was all human action prompted by these desires.

Schopenhauer's idea that human desiring or "willing" causes suffering and pain becomes the underlying theme in Chekhov's plays where his characters suffer indomitably in their hopeless struggle to reach fulfillment and happiness. In *The Seagull*, the young writer Konstantin Treplyov suffers from an acute feeling of insufficiency of his writings which deepens when his play is rejected by his mother Arkadina, a prima donna of the Moscow stage. He commits suicide when he loses Nina who cannot return his love. Nina, the Seagull, a young aspiring actress, is in love with Trigorin, an established writer and Arkadina's lover. Trigorin is painfully aware of his mediocrity and inability to control his life when he seduces Nina and leaves her later to come back to Arkadina. Trigorin's aging mistress lives in a frail world of illusion of her past successes on the stage and struggles desperately to win him back from Nina.

Uncle Vanya's theme of unhappiness is built on an intricate pattern of frustrated relationships: the title character, Uncle Vanya, is hopelessly in love with Elena, professor Serebriakov's beautiful wife; Elena is attracted to the country doctor Astrov but scared by Astrov's passionate confession to her, stays with her aged husband, thus leaving both, Uncle Vanya and Astrov, in complete desperation; Sonia, the professor's daughter, remains heart-broken under a heavy burden of unrequited love for doctor Astrov. In *The Three Sisters*, the feeling of loneliness and tragic loss is as dominant as in his earlier plays. The sisters Olga, Masha, and Irina Prozorov are dreaming about moving to Moscow where they spent their happy childhood. Masha, bored with her husband Kuligin, falls in love with the Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin who is stationed in town but cannot commit to Masha as he is married and has to leave with his artillery battery for Poland. Irina's fiance baron Tuzenbach dies in a duel on the eve of their wedding. The sisters lose their chance of happiness as they will not be able to leave their provincial town and return to Moscow, the city of their dreams.

Chekhov's last play *The Cherry Orchard* continues the theme of loss which is summed up in the image of the cherry orchard: Madame Ranevsky loses her young son and her husband who dies of drinking; her lover takes her money and abandons her in Paris; she loses her family estate to debt; the upstart merchant Lopakhin, son of her former serf, buys the estate and cuts down the cherry orchard.

A tragic sense of loss in Chekhov's plays underscores the loneliness of his characters which he disguises with trivial conversations and routines on the stage. But their everyday conversations inadvertently crescendo into philosophical postulations on human character and the meaning of human life. Chekhov's characters become his mouthpiece in their criticism of their own class, the landed gentry and the educated intelligentsia. In *Uncle Vanya*, doctor Astrov says to Sonia, "I simply can't stand our Russian provincial philistine life. I have the utmost contempt for it. Our dear old friends all have petty minds and petty feelings, and they don't see further than their noses. In fact, they are simply stupid. And those who are bigger and more intelligent are hysterical, given to self-analysis and morbid introspection" (Chekhov 84). Astrov sums up the futility of their lives in his remarks about Elena, "She is beautiful, but all she does is eat, sleep, go for walks, fascinate us by her beauty and-nothing more. She has no duties. Other people work for her" (84).

Chekhov's characters' inability to apply themselves in life is opposed to the idea of *work*. In *The Three Sisters*, Irina wakes up one morning with an idea that "man must work by the sweat of his brow, whoever he might be. That alone gives a meaning and a purpose to his life, his happiness, his success" (Chekhov 120). In the same scene, baron Tusenbach relates the idea of work to the imminent social change, "Dear Lord, how well I understand this craving for work. The time is coming when something huge is about to overwhelm us. A mighty hurricane is on the way; it is quite near already, and soon, very soon, it will sweep away from our society idleness, complacency, prejudice against work, and effete boredom. I shall work, and in another twenty years everyone will work-everyone" (120-21)!

Chekhov's characters speak of work with a fervor of a newly found religion: the juxtaposition of the class that never depended on their work for survival and the object of their worship creates a comic effect which reinforces the meaning of Chekhov's subtitles as comedies. Comic is also professor Serebriakov's admonition to Uncle Vanya and Sonia before he leaves the estate, "We must work, ladies and gentlemen, we must work!" (68). This grotesque character, a scholar who "has been lecturing and writing about art for twenty-five years, and yet doesn't know anything about it" has lived solely at the expense of Uncle Vanya's and Sonia's hard work without ever acknowledging it (68).

As much Chekhov's characters see work as the only remedy against social evil, it does not become a substitute for their personal happiness but rather a disguise for their unhappiness. Doctor Astrov works harder "than anyone else in the district" but "fate is hitting hard" at him, and "there is no light gleaming in the distance" (84). After Elena and Serebriakov's departure, Uncle Vanya says rummaging nervously through his papers, "I'm sick at heart. I must get to work quickly. Do something-anything... To work, to work" (111)! His final words to Sonia, "My child, I am so unhappy! If only you knew how unhappy I am!" are an outcry of his wounded soul (113).

The inertia and passivity of Chekhov's characters are brought to light by their endless *talk* about work without ever resorting to any action. Their realization of the need for a change generates more conversation about it but not the change itself. Chekhov felt deeply the ineptitude of the Russian intelligentsia and called it a national malaise. Vershinin sums it up in *The Three Sisters*, "A Russian is particularly susceptible to high thinking but why does he aim so low in life? …If only we could add education to diligence and diligence to education …" (141). In the final scene of *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin starts working diligently on his newly acquired property so that he can develop and resell it at a profit. The ax strokes offstage as Madame Ranevsky is leaving the estate are symbolic of the victory of Lopakhin's entrepreneurial spirit over the inertia of the gentry, a dying class. Though socially progressive, Lopakhin's impatience "to take an ax to the cherry orchard" is ethically reprehensible and insensitive towards the heart-broken Ranevsky. The ambiguity of this scene speaks of Chekhov's uncertainty about the imminent social change and its outcomes.

Chekhov's innovation in drama lies not only in his treatment of the human condition but also in the core principles of its portrayal on the stage: he shifts from an action-based plot to a discussion play which speaks of the influence of Henrik Ibsen's drama on his work but unlike Ibsen, Chekhov diffuses the intensity and pointedness of the intellectual discussion by a polyphony of voices, thus creating an appearance of casual, disjointed conversation with layers of meaning hidden in the subtext. Chekhov's precision in the use of language, his disdain of verbosity, and the use of pauses as cadence in the flow of dialog and dramatic action laid the stylistic foundations for the 20th century drama and were adopted by numerous playwrights regardless of their philosophical or aesthetic orientation.

Chekhov's drama of loneliness with a deep subtext underneath a polyphonous, seemingly superficial dialog impacted the work of Harold Pinter (1930-2008) who came to the British stage with the First Wave of post-war dramatists in the 1950s. Pinter, the author of the comedy of menace, wrote his plays in the tradition of the French anti-drama or the Theatre of the Absurd. Influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy, French existentialism (Albert Camus), and the work of his friend and mentor Samuel Beckett (1906-89), Pinter explores the absurdity of human existence in the menacing and dehumanizing world.

The hopelessness of the human condition, menace from the outside, and fear of annihilation become the main themes in his first play *The Room* (1957). The main characters Rose and Bert are confined to the room, their private space which is opposed to the dark and threatening world outside. The mood in the room is tense, the characters are incapable of communication: Rose attempts to care for Bert but Bert ignores her efforts. He speaks of his car referring to it as "she" and imbues his account of traveling home in his beloved van with undisguised sensuality.

Pinter's dramatic situation is based on the existentialist idea that human existence is inherently absurd. "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his

religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin 5). Therefore, the characters cannot share thoughts, emotions or exchange words in any meaningful way. Pinter's dialogue becomes a dialog of non-communication where the characters speak in monologs that cannot be heard or understood by others:

Mrs. Sands. Why don't you sit down, Mrs.-

Rose. Hudd. No thanks.

Mrs. Sands. What did you say?

Rose. When?

Mrs. Sands. What did you say the name was?

Rose. Hudd. (Pinter 102).

The symbolic figure of the blind black man Riley is a force from the outside that invades Rose's space, the room, and threatens her relationship with Bert. Riley brings her a message from her father to come home. Riley calls her Sal which is a reference to her possibly Jewish background. Bert kills Riley. Rose becomes blind.

According to the critic Martin Esslin, "*The Room* already contains a good many of the basic themes and a great deal of the very personal style and idiom of Pinter's later and more successful work-the uncannily cruel accuracy of his reproduction of the inflections and rambling irrelevancy of everyday speech; the commonplace situation that is gradually invested with menace, dread, and mystery; the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action. The room, which is the centre and chief poetic image of the play, is one of the recurring motifs of Pinter's work" (Esslin 232).

The room as a symbol of human existence, loneliness, and isolation is not a secure place: in Pinter's plays, it is always threatened by the menacing forces from the outside. The characters who inhabit the room are frail bleak images of the human beings trapped in their inability to articulate their thoughts and needs. Their helplessness and passivity makes them kin to Chekhov's characters but their regression into an almost childlike condition makes them worthy inhabitants of the absurd world. Pinter evokes the image of this world through a highly stylized vernacular where allusion, implication, tautology, the meaning of words, and subtext play a special role. The dialog is punctuated by an abundance of silences and pauses which mark the cadence of the characters' speech and the dynamic of the dramatic situation. In Pinter's work, silences are more meaningful than words. According to Pinter, "There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed. ...One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant strategem to cover nakedness" (Billington 82).

Another British dramatist Edward Bond (b. 1935) has acknowledged his interest in Chekhov and Chekhov' influence on his dramatic style. He started his career in1960s as part of the Second Wave of British drama. Bond writes about violence and its causes in the modern world. He considers contemporary society to be inherently unjust; therefore, affecting human lives in dangerous and destructive ways. *Summer* (1982) is also about violence and its effects on the human psyche and human lives but it is Bond's most Chekhovian play in its psychological insight, poetic detail, ambiguity, and allusion. Like his other plays, *Summer* reveals Bond's recurring theme of the oppressors and the oppressed through a collision of class consciousness during World War II. Xenia, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, comes from England to vacation on the Adriatic in her family home that was expropriated after the war and is owned by her former servant Marthe. On her arrival, she discovers that Marthe is dying of cancer.

Xenia's relationship with Marthe and people who worked for her family is characterized by kindness: she offers to bring Marthe to England for the newest treatments for her condition and to take care of her while she is sick; Xenia saved Marthe's life during the war when she was taken hostage by the Germans. Kindness and generosity run in Xenia's family as her father was known for his generosity to his employees, for giving them education, even for collaborating with the guerillas during the Nazi occupation. But Xenia carries a tragic memory of her father's reprisal and death after the war at the hands of the same people who he supported.

During Xenia's conversation with Marthe about the past, Marthe gathers her last strength and spits Xenia in the face. After all these years, she still sees Xenia as the daughter of a wealthy capitalist and her gesture of ultimate scorn is in the name of all the victims of the war and oppression. She has no forgiveness for the oppressors. The tension between Xenia and Marthe is disguised in a Chekhovian manner by subdued conversation about the inconsequential details of the inconvenience of travel and the lost keys to Xenia's luggage. Xenia's dissatisfaction with the life after the war in her country is felt in her casual remarks about the new hotel, the polluted water in the sea and about the sloppy visitors who put out their cigarettes in her cacti bowls.

As in all Bond's plays, there is an antithesis to hatred, violence, and death: Martha dies but her son David and Xenia's daughter are in love and expecting a baby. The new life is a promise of hope, peace, and innocence.

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