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**Monisha Duara
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Address : M. G. Road. Na-ali, Jorhat, Assam. PIN-785001
E-mail : tujorhatcollege@gmail.com
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Chekhov's A Marriage Proposal **through Aristotelian lenses:** **An Elucidation**

Subhrajyoti Chanda

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Jorhat College (Amalgamated)

Introduction:

A play has to have a beginning, middle and an end. The 'beginning' informs us about the situation or the circumstance(s) from which the play starts; the 'middle' means the turning point - the attention-grabbing situation which brings forth a change in the development of the story. The crisis is followed by the end, and that happens without much ado in a one - act play. While a Shakespearean play has five acts with a running time of at least two and half hours, a one act play is shorter and usually continues for half - an - hour. In a full-length play, the playwright has the scope of designing a complex plot; but in a one act play there is little opportunity for such an adventure. While a parallel can be drawn between a full-length play - with elaborate stage description/characterisation - and a novel, a one - act play is like a short story where the focus is on a single idea or emotion. There are only a few characters in a one - act play and like a poem, the lines are charged with meaning; the plot is perfectly

structured and the dramatist cannot take liberty with the time factor. The three unities of time, place and action that Ben Jonson advocated so whole heartedly (and which Shakespeare flouted with abandon) cannot be challenged in a one – act play.

The one – act plays originated in the church; the priests enacted certain popular scenes from the life of Christ in order to educate the largely illiterate congregation. These were of short duration; those dealing with subjects taken from the lives of saints were called Mystery plays and those from the Bible were called the Morality plays. The fifteenth century interludes were short stage entertainments with secular and religious points and those were similar to the modern one act plays in form. In the Nineteenth century, the one act plays were used as curtain raisers – as preludes to the full-length plays – in order to fill in the slot while as the audience trickled in and filled up the auditorium gradually.

Methodology:

The six focal points suggested by Aristotle in the interpretation of drama are mythos, ethos, lexis, dianoia, opsis and melos. These points are elaborated through a close reading of Chekhov's one – act play – *A Marriage Proposal*. Chekhov's follows the realistic mode of writing; there is little causality, the language is that of everyday life; the dramatist tries to put on stage what is verily ordinary life.

Mythos¹:

In the one – act play under study – *A Marriage Proposal* there is not much 'story'; the narrative does not progress much

and there is little use of the cause – effect correlation. In fact, there is little scope for the development of the narrative – Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov, a bachelor of 35, comes to propose for marriage in the house of Stepan Stepanovitch Tschubukov but gets engaged in an unnecessary squabble about ownership of a meadow and later on, oddly enough, about the size of a dog's lower jaw. At the end, however, Natalia, the bride to be, and Ivan do get engaged but only after the latter had escaped a fatal cardiac arrest. The narration is brilliant and gives the reader glimpses of the mental makeup of the elites who normally give importance to wealth, estate and family reputation and to a disproportionate ego rather than to love and fellowship. That a person is led to the brink of death because of an unwanted quarrel over property shows the unconcern of the people involved; it shows the apathy and the lack of empathy in the society of the rich.

Ethos²:

From the mannerisms and the customs of the society we learn that the play is set in Feudal Russia ruled by the Tsar where the aristocrats had sway in all important affairs. The two families of the Lomovs and the Tschubukovs belong to the landed class and that is revealed in the description of the attire and manners. The way Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov dresses in an evening suit and arrives at the place of the Tschubukovs gives a glimpse of the cultural practices of that period where formal marriage proposals were made in the house of the girl in the presence of her father.

Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov is 35 while his would – be father – in – law: Stepan Stepanovitch Tschubukov is double his age

and yet the former addresses the latter by name. Such a thing would be unthinkable in an Indian context. As Indian students of European literature of the 19th Century, we need to orientate ourselves to the cultural setting of that time and place; it is especially necessary because literature is never context free. That rich people having wealth and property should get involved in petty quarrels even while discussing a serious subject such as marriage speaks volumes about the workings of their idle feudal mindsets. The war of words over ownership of a stretch of fallow land from the members of the two families indicate the lust for property. Later, the unseemly quarrel over the trivial issue of the size of a pet dog's lower jaw is, indeed, a satiric take on the ways of the rich who wasted their time and energy on trifles to feed their ego. The revolution in Russia in the early years of the 20th century may be studied in this context of stark contradictions – the carelessness of the elites who wasted their time in hunting with dogs and the hard labour of the serfs in the fields. The fact that hunting on horseback with a pack of dogs was a serious passion with the people of that time is another piece of information that is obtained from the play. Today, hunting is restricted by the governments of most countries, but there was a time when the aristocrats could own woodlands where they could engage in their favourite pastime of hounding birds and animals. The references to horses and dogs bring to the fore the picture of the slow pre – industrial/revolution time in Europe when people largely depended on animals for day-to-day businesses.

Lexis³:

The play is originally written in Russian, the English

version under study is by Barrett H. Clark. Unlike in full length plays (for instance, in those of George Bernard Shaw), here there is no elaborate stage direction. The language is conversational and the play starts with the arrival of a prospective bridegroom in a cosy reception room of the Tschubukovs and ends at the same place; the mood of the characters travels from cheerful to boorish and after a slight tension back to the mundane – but it's hardly ever romantic; the change in sentiments is captured in Chekhov's language. The way in which the prospective bridegroom reacts is definitely humorous; he cannot bear the slightest tension without raising the palpitation in his heart. The gentle speech heard at the beginning is in direct contrast to the distasteful manner in which the daughter – father duo engage in crude repartee:

Lomov: Your mother limped.

Tschubukov: And your dear father was a gambler and a glutton. (p.16)

Natalia, who is 25, is quirky; so long as Ivan Lomov was in the house, she quarrelled with him and as soon as he was gone her father to bear the brunt of her temper tantrums: Natalia: No you! You have no manners, you are brutal. If it weren't for you, he wouldn't have gone. (p.18)

Old Tschubukov, when tensed, has the tendency of shouting and cursing. On two occasions he calls out for his pistol in a bid to commit suicide but changes his opinion the very next moment and return to his business with ease.

Dianoia⁴:

The emotion that is evoked by the words and actions of

the characters is greed and whimsicality of landed elites of Nineteenth Century Russia. They had the money and leisure to go hunting in the woodlands and engage in idle chit chats.

The dramatist laughs and also makes his readers laugh at the pettifogging ways of the nobility. The rich, apparently sensible, would not miss a chance of grabbing land gratis and in making a show of family reputation, power and prestige – and, for that matter, they would not mind even fighting over the size of a dog's lower jaw and its ability to grab hunted birds and animals.

Opsis⁵:

The characters have typical Russian names. In the opening stage direction, the dramatist states that it is the reception room of the house of a well to do family where the two neighbours – the owner of the house and the visitor dressed perfectly in an evening suit – greet each other. The different emotional reactions of the characters are given in parenthesis. Lomov suffers from nervous debility and, from his long asides, the readers come to know about his tension and his perpetual palpitation of heart; he drinks water frequently to ease the apprehension of making a marriage proposal. Natalia, the would-be bride, is querulous and would not give in without a fight; and her father – Old Tschubukov – regardless of his seniority gets involved in the quarrel and shows himself as a worldly man. But towards the end, he acts sensibly and brings about reconciliation between Ivan Lomov and Natalia by reminding them of the original purpose behind the meeting – marriage!

Melos⁶:

Music is an essential part of drama. As the play is read the accompanying music needs to be imagined by the reader; here the stage direction is very limited and there is no mention of music. But in any case, the music is always associated with the happenings in the play. Even after the union, mediated by old Tschubukov, Lomov and Natalia do not relent and continue with their 'fighting'; nevertheless, the father detects the seed of 'domestic joys' even in their wrangling and 'drowns' them in champagne. The music, following the trajectory of the progress of the story line would move from serious to light and cheerful.

Conclusion:

With subtle strokes, Chekhov paints the picture of a group of people who are utterly casual and forgetful of social decorum and behave ridiculously even while dealing with serious subject matters. Like Ben Jonson he holds a mirror to the society; the follies and foibles are magnified through caricature and presented to the audience with dollops of humour. The brief study of this one act play through the six Aristotelian focal points provide interesting perspectives for analyses and interpretation. A similar approach may be employed fruitfully with regards to other plays as well.

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(Footnotes)

- ¹ Mythos: It is the story and the narrative and the causality behind it.
- ² Ethos: It is the environment of the play, the intellectual climate, the cultural settings, the customs, and the manners relevant to the play.
- ³ Lexis: It is the style of writing; it can be poetic, heavy handed, colloquial or there may be the use of particular register etc.
- ⁴ Dianoia: It is the emotion evoked in the mind of the readers; the ideology at work in the narrative; the context, sub text, the feelings, sentiments of the dramatist etc.
- ⁵ Opsis: What is seen on stage – the setting, the props, the costumes; while reading one has to imagine these.
- ⁶ Melos: Melos is music, and it forms an integral part of drama; the reader has to check how music helps to elaborate the characterisation.