

**Chekhovian response to *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*: Analysis
of Leo Tolstoy's artistic influence on Anton Chekhov's life and works**

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**A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

The thesis titled “Chekhovian response to *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*: Analysis of Leo Tolstoy's artistic influence on Anton Chekhov's life and works” submitted by Khadija Tul Kubra (ID: 20103031) of Summer 2023 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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Dedication

To my beloved family, my respected teachers, my dearest friends, who believed in me till the end, and made me who I am today. No matter how small it is, this will always be one of my most cherished achievements.

Acknowledgement

I am beyond and utterly grateful to the Almighty who gave me patience, resilience, and strength to move forward. And next to Him, my family members, who believed in me, for whom I made it this far.

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Abstract

In the context of Russian literature, the name *Anna Karenina* is widely renowned among the worldwide readers of classic texts. It remains a hallmark of Russian classics, being one of the greatest books of all time. Similar to the name of Leo Tolstoy as a novelist, in the realm of Russian short stories, Anton Chekhov is invincible till today. Throughout his literary career and his life, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* remained a source of major inspiration. This paper attempts to make an effort in addressing the literary and artistic relationship between Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, where the novel *Anna Karenina* played the role of a catalyst. In an attempt to provide dimensions to the purpose of this paper, Chekhov's major short stories that have been written in response to *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* will be analysed. The artistic differences will be pointed out by using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of author-character relationship later on in this paper.

Keywords: Russian literature, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, realism, Anna, response.

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Introduction

The Possessed (2010) - a collection of essays written by Turkish author Elif Batuman where she merged her various experiences with different Russian authors' works. Her love for Russian literature can be sensed by looking at the title itself, which she took from Fyodor Dostoevsky's one of the weirdest novels *The Demon*, previously published as *The Possessed*. Under the introduction section, she admired Vladimir Nabokov's translation of Alexander Pushkin's masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*, and later connected this novel with another greatest book of all time - *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. "*Anna Karenina* seemed to pick up exactly where *Onegin* left off, in the same world, (...) It was the same world, the same air, only everything was bigger (...)" - this was all she had to say to express her love for the novel.

Vladimir Nabokov, in praise of Russian novels, said, "Let us not look for the soul of Russia in the Russian novel: let us look for the individual genius. Look at the masterpiece, and not at the frame" (Nabokov 28). Being a Russian novelist himself, he understood that readers of Russian literature try to look for Russian life amidst the authors' words. They try to dissect the social background of Russia by reading through the character's lives. But *Anna Karenina*, for example, does not portray the life of a typical Russian family. Each and every activity are, in Batuman's words, "were beautiful, dignified, and meaningful in terms of plot". But what made this particular arena of literature a major subject in the literary genre is that the authors are capable of writing universal feelings that every person feels, the mundane details of everyday life, and the grandeur that these works perceive within themselves.

Years before Batuman's comparison of *Eugene Onegin* and *Anna Karenina*, another person - in fact, an author - agreed on the point that *Eugene Onegin* and *Anna Karenina* are genius productions, no other novel can outshine them. This person was none other than Anton

Pavlovich Chekhov, the greatest Russian short story writer and playwright. Although he was a medical student in his earlier years, he admired Tolstoy and his work *Anna Karenina* tremendously, and longed to meet him in-person. At the same time, the thought of meeting Tolstoy dreaded him so much that once he ran out of a bathhouse when he learned that Tolstoy had also come there. But on a similar note, he never saw the point of Tolstoyan philosophy - a set of philosophical and moral commandments developed by Tolstoy in his later years. On the other hand, Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* had taken an influential part when Chekhov was blooming as a short story writer during the late 1880s. Tolstoy's outlook on how a man changes during his lifetime as he turns old, the death itself and the gruesome reality of family life motivated Chekhov to write his short story "A Boring Story: From the Notebooks of an Old Man". Though it was a bitter-sweet relationship between these two extraordinary writers, Chekhov nonetheless remained in awe of Tolstoy to the end of his days. This paper, therefore, is aimed at to look into the relationship between Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov on an artistic level by analysing Chekhov's works in response to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on author-character relationship, the different artistic approaches of these two authors will be analysed further in this paper.

Chapter 1: Russian realism: Chekhov in context

According to Russian literary historian D. S. Mirsky, the genre of ‘realist novel’ dominated Russian literature from 1845 to 1905 - the golden age of Russian literature (169). From Ivan Turgenev to Anton Chekhov, to Maxim Gorky - each of them produced ‘realist’ works of their own. At that time, Russian scholars and writers heavily concentrated on the question of societal, philosophical, and political struggle that Russia was going through. But alongside these writings, another form of literature existed - the ‘realism’, which lived by its close ties with provincial, backward Russia, with a world which many writers avoided. This form of writing “preached nothing openly, taught nothing directly, but only told vividly and in detail about Russian life, about people of every class and professions, engaged in their daily affairs” (Eikhenbaum 22).

Scholar Mary Francis Slattery defined literary realism in her article “What Is Literary Realism?” as -

In literature, realism is reference that gives an illusion of exact correspondence with reality in its limited aspects. It is not unlimited, ultimate reality but the fragmented, flawed world of quotidian experience that literary realism seems to refer to; or, it may be something felt as borrowed from that kind of experience, for instance, fragmentation or flawedness simply as such. (55)

In a simple term, realism is a technique which is used to depict the reality or life “as it is”, without any exaggeration or compression. Vladimir Nabokov defined ‘realism’ as - “By “realism,” of course, I merely indicate what an average reader in an average state of civilization feels as conforming to an average reality of life” (89).

In the sphere of Russian realism, it is a mixture of the “satirical naturalism of Gogol” and “an older sentimental realism” represented by the influential Goerge Sand during the 1830s and 1840s (Mirsky 170). So in a sense, Gogol and George Sand were the masters of realism during the initial stages of its development. But the main influences that changed the mode of Russian realism from being satirical at its core were Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. They gave an example of “an equal, level, human treatment of all humanity ... a sympathetic attitude to human beings, without distinction of intrinsic moral significance” became a principle characteristic of Russian realism” (Mirsky 170).

On the whole, Russian realism barely has inherited anything from Gogol’s. But the core characteristics, like great attention to vivid and enlivening details of a character’s appearance and movements; or like the negligence towards narrative construction and the concentration on character and introspection, were taken from Gogol’s works. In this realm, Tolstoy was the one who followed it all along till 1880. He was far ahead of the European novelists of the times and was outdone by Western novelists only in the later works of James Joyce, Marcel Proust and some of Henry James (Mirsky 171). Another characteristic of realist fiction that is quite opposite to the example of Gogol is the artistic simplicity of prose - “a consistent effort to make its style as unobtrusive and as unstriking as possible” (Mirsky 171). Pushkin, and especially Lermontov were the followers of this realism.

The Chekhovian Realism

Anton Chekhov and Ivan Turgenev’s formula of Russian realism was like - people are not good or bad, they are only more or less unhappy and deserving of sympathy. This was what Europe accepted as their message to mankind when they were first revealed to the West. In the article titled “‘Killing Realism’: Insight and Meaning in Anton Chekhov” author Andrey

Shcherbenok provides a letter of Maxim Gorky to Chekhov in a response to Chekhov's short story "A Lady with the Little Dog" - "Do you know what you are doing? You are killing realism... This form has outlived its time, and that's a fact! No one can go further along this path than you have done, no one can write as simply about such simple things as you can" (qtd. in Shcherbenok 297).

Chekhov entered literature from a by-path. He belonged to the serf family in Taganrog, later becoming a doctor in profession. And in order to support his family and himself, he started to write in local newspapers like his brother Alexander Chekhov. He at first began producing works under the pseudonym "Antosha Chekhonte", and under the same name his first collection was published in 1886 - the humorous sketches and comic strips that he did for newspapers. This attracted two influential literary people of that time - the writer Dmitri Grigorovich and publisher and editor of magazine the *New Times* Alexei Suvorin. His close relationship, but sometimes difficult collaboration with Suvorin began in the same year and continued till his death - as most of Chekhov's letters are addressed to him. Since then, he was no longer merely a humorist, he entered into the realm of serious literature, having "a delight in the absurd and a sharp eye for human folly" in the centre of his writing (Pevear 5).

At the beginning of his literary endeavour, literature was something like a second profession for him. He was occupied mostly with medicine, even in a letter to Suvorin, he wrote what is now regarded as one of the famous statements, "You advise me not to chase after two hares at once and to forget about practicing medicine ... Medicine is my lawful wedded wife, and literature my mistress ... If I didn't have medicine, I'd never devote my spare time and thoughts to literature" (September 11, 1888). Undoubtedly, if he had not been a doctor, he would not have been able to write many of his stories at all. Who but a doctor could have written stories

like “The Name-Day Party” or “Ward No. 6”. His medical practice supplied him with an ample amount of psychological studies, and gave him a keen insight into many sides of human nature (Werth 636). He even admitted in one of his letters to Grigory Rossolimo that “There is no doubt in my mind that my study of medicine has had a serious impact on my literary activities. It significantly broadened the scope of my observations and enriched me with knowledge whose value for me as a writer only a doctor can appreciate” (October 11, 1899).

He wrote his first stories lightly, gaily, and carelessly - as though he were not intending to go into major literature. But the nature of this lightness, however, was different in a sense that Chekhov discovered a whole realm of life which had been unexplored by literature - “a realm of everyday trifles and occurrences which seem insignificant and funny or strange at first glance, but which really are characteristic and worthy of concentrated attention” (Eikhenbaum 22). The Chekhovian grasp of Russian life is startling and cannot be easily compared - it would seem that there is no profession, no class, no corner of Russian life into which he has not peered into.

In one of his letters, Tolstoy mentioned Chekhov’s literature as ‘impressionism’ and him as an ‘artist’. “Chekhov is an incomparable artist,” he is quoted as saying, “an artist of life . . . Chekhov has created new forms of writing, completely new, in my opinion, to the whole world, the like of which I have not encountered anywhere . . . Chekhov has his own special form, like the impressionists” (Pevear 5-6). His ‘impressionism’ was regarded as a form of art for art’s sake - denial of the writer’s social role, the writer as detached observer, avoiding ideological excesses and moral judgements. He wrote to Suvorin in a letter that,

The artist must pass judgment only on what he understands; his range is as limited as that of any other specialist . . . Anyone who says the artist's field is all answers and no questions has never done any writing or had any dealings with imagery. The artist

observes, selects, guesses and synthesizes . . . you are confusing two concepts: answering the questions and formulating them correctly. Only the latter is required of an author.

(October 27, 1888)

As he accepted that no writer can be knowledgeable in every field, it is not easy to discern any social or political theory in his stories. He is only concerned with the present moment, his stories have the hallmark of being universal - the type of art that cannot be affected by time or place (Williamson 232).

His domain is short stories, he never tries to give a whole history of his characters, but only one fleeting moment that defines their whole characteristics to the readers. Like, the story “Fat and Skinny”, where two friends meet after a long period of time and get to know what are their present conditions; in “Vanka” we see the boy Vanka writing a letter to his grandpa and writing about what he is going through; in the “Enemies” he described a single night where a doctor amidst the grieving moment for his dying son had to leave to see another person’s nearly dying wife, and later on discovering all being a deception from the wife’s part. If someone is looking for moral or philosophical teachings, or political messages in his stories, they would be disappointed. Because Chekhov himself has admitted, “The people I am afraid of are the ones who look for tendentiousness between the lines and are determined to see me as either liberal or conservative. I am neither liberal nor conservative, . . . I would like to be a free artist and nothing else, and I regret God has not given me strength to be one” (letter to Alexei Pleshcheev, October 4, 1888).

Chapter 2: Research Question, Rationale for Research, Theories and Methods, Literature Review

Research Question

How Anton Chekhov reflected Tolstoy's artistic influence upon his thought and literary endeavour through his works? What were his literary responses to Tolstoy's moral judgement in *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*?

Rationale

This research considers the gap in exploring the relationship between two distinguished authors of Russian literature during the late nineteenth century - Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy. In an attempt to address the gap, the paper has focused on Chekhov's life, his letters to his family and friends, and specifically to his works which portrays his artistic mindset developed in close proximity to Tolstoy. It has been observed that rarely any research work has been focused on Chekhov's artistic inspiration, most of them focus on either philosophical perspectives, or solely on Chekhov's works. By analysing some of Chekhov's short stories, and looking into his life and letters, I intend to address the gaps in exploring the ambivalent relationship between these two authors and Chekhov's artistic response to Tolstoy's works, by adding more dimensions to its interpretation.

Methods and Theories

The paper covers a number of secondary sources, like books, critical essays, and peer-reviewed journal articles. This not only helped strengthen the paper and support the arguments that have been addressed, but also allowed for a gap to be discovered and identified. On the basis of a few

philosophical ideas, a close textual analysis has been done to explore the relevant themes in order to answer the research questions.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of author-character relationship has been taken into account in analysing and comparing Tolstoy's and Chekhov's approach to portray their characters under the light of author's life.

Review of Literature

In the year 1944, an essay titled "Chekhov at Large" by Russian scholar Boris Eikhenbaum was published, commemorating Chekhov's life and works on the fortieth anniversary of Chekhov's death. Here, Eikhenbaum talked about Chekhov's different contribution to Russian realist literature by stating that this kind of writing "preached nothing openly, taught nothing directly, but only told vividly and in detail about Russian life, about people of every class and professions, engaged in their daily affairs" (Eikhenbaum 22). He mentioned that unlike his predecessors, Chekhov wrote about Russian life where "everyday trifles and occurrences which seem insignificant and funny or strange at first glance, but which really are characteristic and worthy of concentrated attention" (Eikhenbaum 22). And in agreeing to the fact that this different kind of realism was much needed because it was necessary to show Russia "not only in depth, but in breadth as well, with all the features of her national life, her daily existence and nature" (Eikhenbaum 23). Mentioning that at a certain point in life he was involved in Tolstoyanism - but later on he himself declared in a letter that Eikhenbaum refers here "Tolstoyanism has ceased to move me" (24). Because, as Eikhenbaum mentions, his contemporaries did not understand why Chekhov did not write about morality, social life of Russians. But actually, as Eikhenbaum says, "The Chekhovian grasp of Russian life is staggering

... It would seem that there is no profession, no class, no corner of Russian life into which Chekhov has not peered” (23).

Pointing out the influence of Tolstoyanism in Chekhov’s life and works, Thomas Gustav Winner, a well-known Chekhov specialist, talked about it in-details in chapter 4 of his book *Chekhov and his prose* (1966). Previously, Eikhenbaum hinted about this major event of Chekhov’s life in a line-or-two in his article. Winner talked about the whole event in-details through looking at Chekhov’s life and work in his article titled “Chekhov and Tolstoy: An Ideological Relationship”. Winner’s main focus was to narrow the period when Chekhov was strongly influenced by Tolstoy’s moral teaching (Winner 57). In tracing Chekhov’s stories written in different years, he mentioned, “There is, however, general agreement that Chekhov’s writing during the period of the 1880’s shows the influence of Tolstoy’s precepts” - specifying the time between 1895-1890 (57). The story that Winner specifically mentions is “Misfortune” (1886) - a story of a young married woman who resists her admirer’s proposal only to submit to it in the end. “While Chekhov first mentioned reading *Anna Karenina* only in 1887, there can be little doubt that he was acquainted with this work when writing “Misfortune”, for the influence of Tolstoy’s novel is unmistakable in Chekhov’s story” - Winner added to it (59). He mentioned the story as a “light parody” of *Anna Karenina*, as it also revolves around the theme of adultery and the ironic touch to it (60). Later on, he speaks about how Chekhov’s stories written after 1890 lose Tolstoy’s ethical views, but nonetheless, the admiration for Tolstoy was never lost (65).

Keeping up with the part of Chekhov’s life when he was under the influence of Tolstoyan Philosophy, Harold Schefski wrote about the impact of Tolstoyanism throughout Chekhov’s life and works in his article titled “Chekhov and Tolstoyan Philosophy”. Referring to Thomas

Winner in the essay, Schefski also traced back to that particular period in Chekhov's life and his works associated with that phase. "Chekhov experienced an ephemeral phase of Tolstoyan influence toward the end of the 1880s before adamantly rejecting his mentor's precepts in the early 1890s" (81). One of the main criticisms of Chekhov regarding this philosophy is about romanticising the peasants - which Thomas Winner also mentioned in his essay while stating Chekhov's views. Schefski, following Winner's statement, also includes the letter where Chekhov said, "Peasant blood flows in me, and you can't astound me with peasant virtues" (83). Additionally, Schefski mentions Chekhov's everlasting fascination for Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and his later stories where his heroines are named after Anna. This technique of his "are actually conscious attempts to rework the theme of adultery so that Anna may enjoy a less gruesome fate than the one which Tolstoy designed for her in his novel" (85) - as Schefski continues. By putting this example, Schefski concludes the essay by stating that Chekhov had rarely any objection towards Tolstoy's artistic participation, but towards the "narrow perspective of Tolstoyan philosophy" (86).

In the article titled "The ethics of three Russian novelists", critic Thomas C. Williamson discussed three major Russian writers of the nineteenth century - Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov. In this article, while talking about Tolstoy's life and works, he mentions the shift in his thinking during the early period of 1880s, which Eikhenbaum and Winner mentions in their essays as 'Tolstoyanism'. Williamson briefly summarised the changes that occurred in Tolstoy's mindset by stating, "He (Tolstoy) gradually became convinced that all private property was unlawful, that no form of compulsion was permissible, that natural affection was wrong, and that man's whole life should consist of work and a direct approach to God" (222). On the other hand, Chekhov's writing was opposed to Tolstoy's view on art and artist; he

was not a man of philosophy, as Williamson states, but an observer of the details of life (233).

“His art is”, as Williamson stated in praise of Chekhov’s short stories, “the antithesis of realism; he never forgets that what we see is less important than what we do not see” (235).

On the other hand, Lev Shestov, one of the well-known Russian philosophers and critiques, called Chekhov “the poet of hopelessness” in his chapter “Anton Tchekhov: Creation from the Void” from his book *Chekhov and Other Essays* (1966). “during all the years of his literary activity, nearly a quarter of a century long, Tchekhov was doing one thing alone: by one means or another he was killing human hopes” (18) - Shestov goes on. He said this because Chekhov had that unique potential to create such a situation for his heroes that there remained no way for them to escape their fate (Shestov 27). The example he gives is the short story “A Boring Story: from an Old Man’s Notebook”, where we see the mundane days in the professor's life, where he has nothing left apart from submitting himself to death. Furthermore, Shestov goes on saying, “In his work Tchekhov was influenced by Tolstoi, and particularly by Tolstoi's later writings ... I think that had there been no *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, there would have been no *Ivanov*, and no Tedious Story (“A Boring Story”), nor many others of Tchekhov's most remarkable works” (24). This definite statement of Shestov is the underlying theme behind his discussion of Chekhov’s ‘hopeless’ works, especially “A Boring Story”. He agrees that when Tolstoy wrote *Ivan Ilyich*, he was already a renowned writer by that time. But Chekhov wrote “A Boring Story” when he had only written a couple of well-known stories, but it is still the best ‘autobiographical’ story of Chekhov’s life (25).

Responding to Shestov’s comments on Chekhov’s story “A Boring Story: from an Old Man’s Notebook”, Alexander Werth mentions that Shestov on his essay on Chekhov “strongly complains of his (Chekhov) incapacity to teach us anything, and compares him to the old

professor of “A Dreary Story”, who, after a life's experience and learning, is incapable of saying one word of moral support to the only being he still loves” (623). This statement of Werth kind of summarises Shestov’s whole discussion on Chekhov and his way of portraying his heroes. But Werth also included Tolstoy’s influence on his story in a more detailed manner. “It is a curious fact that the individualist Chekhov had, for a long time, sought the clue to human perfection in the teaching of so profound an anti-individualist as Tolstoy” (635), Werth goes on to say. In addition to this aspect of his essay, Werth highlighted Chekhov’s study of medicine and how he implied his learning to his later works. Like Boris Eikhenbaum, who also mentioned the medical career of Chekhov in his essay, Werth mentions that Chekhov might not have been able to write many of his stories if he were not a doctor. His profession has supplied him with enough opportunities for psychological study of his patients, a keen insight into the lives of normal people and human nature (Werth 636). In the case of his stories, “It is enough for Chekhov to give the bare physical fact as a clue to the psychological and emotional situation”, as Werth states (637).

Following the discussion on Chekhov’s “A Boring Story: from an Old Man’s Notebook”, Peter Hodgson in his article titled “Metaliterature: An Excerpt from the Anatomy of a Chekhovian Narrator” talks in-detail about the story and the artistic touch of Chekhov. He calls it a “story about loneliness”, and continues by saying that rather than the tale itself, the reader's attention shifts towards the teller - the professor (37). Thus the title, “A Boring Story” - which was, according to Hodgson, intentionally given by Chekhov so that his audience pay attention to the narrator rather than his boring description of day-to-day life (38). Contradictory to Hodgson’s view on the story, Carol A. Flath gives importance to the story and its components in the article “The Limits to the Flesh: Searching for the Soul in Chekhov’s ‘A Boring Story.’” Flath mentions

Chekhov's style of narration particularly in this story by stating that "He distracts us from the dynamics of the plot in two ways: first, by skillful use of the first-person narration; and secondly, by telling almost the entire story in the imperfective aspect, present tense, blurring the distinction between repeated and unique events" (Flath 272). Mentioning Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Flath stated on the fact that Chekhov's story transcended the issue of moral judgement, unlike Tolstoy's story (281).

In discussion of Chekhov's stories, the story that contains Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* kind of plot is Chekhov's "The Lady with the little dog". Nathan Rosen, while discussing the story in the article "A READING OF ČEXOV'S 'THE LADY WITH THE DOG'", also looked into the title to analyse it. "But the title also represents his (Gurov) point of view: when he first meets Anna, he sees her only as a blonde-haired young lady distinguished only by her small white dog" (13), as Rosen gives her opinion on that. But an interesting fact about the story that Rosen has mentioned is Chekhov's use of the theme of sexuality, which rarely anyone notices or gives importance to while analysing the whole thing. Rosen mentions here, "Up to this point sexuality has been carefully underplayed. When it did appear, as in Anna's first sexual experience with Gurov, it was associated with guilt and suffering" (16).

Connecting the theme of sexuality with guilt and shame, Lyudmila Parts in the article "Down the Intertextual Lane: Petrushevskaja, Chekhov, Tolstoy" quotes Thomas Winner in terms of comparing the behaviours of Vronsky and Gurov, "unlike Vronsky, Gurov appears cynical. When faced with Anna's shame, he takes her unhappiness lightly and eats watermelon while she weeps" (82). Whereas, as Parts pointed out, Vronsky felt like a murderer who had murdered Anna's happiness. Vladimir Nabokov, in his lecture of Chekhov's "The Lady with the little dog", also points out that particular scene and states, "The unexpected little turns and the

lightness of the touches are what places Chekhov, above all Russian writers of fiction, on the level of Gogol and Tolstoy” (Nabokov 259). However, taking their behaviours into account, Parts takes it as a symbol to state that Gurov’s response to Anna’s guilt is symbolic to Chekhov’s response to Tolstoy’s view of morality in general (Parts 83). “Chekhov renders Tolstoy’s moralistic and social message ineffective by assigning inherent value to love” (83).

In discussing Chekhov’s stories which have similar plotlines to *Anna Karenina*, Caryl Emerson discusses Chekhov’s major stories with the plotline of *Anna Karenina* in the article “CHEKHOV AND THE ANNAS”. While Emerson analyses the whole story under the light of Tolstoy’s work, she mentions the underlying morality of the story that contains Chekhovian touch to it, not the one Tolstoy has put on his Anna’s fate. “In Tolstoy, indifference and compromise could never bring salvation. And thus the inadequate, makeshift, purely private and secret structures that sustain true love in “The Lady with the little dog” could not, for Tolstoy, be an acceptable moral resolution” (257), as Emerson mentions, as she emphasises the famous ending of the story. “The story ends with the word ‘beginning’. This inconclusive ending is perhaps a type of tragedy, but with no tragic climax or closure — and its very stability becomes a moral achievement” (Emerson 256). Admittedly, this sort of abrupt ending Tolstoy would never approve of, as he looks forward to a definite judgement. On the other hand, Emerson also takes into account the story “Anna on the neck” to discuss. The fact Emerson mentions about this story is that Chekhov has chosen an intriguing plot to discuss, we never get to see Anna’s side of the story in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, which we get to see in “Anna on the neck” of Chekhov’s (Emerson 253). Again here, Emerson focuses on the ending of this story as well. She mentions that in the case of Tolstoy, the moral measurement is always family and children. But in

Chekhov's case, family remains nearly out of focus, especially in this story (255). So again, there is a clash between two authors about their own definition of ending a story like this.

In discussing the story "Anna on the neck", most interesting views can be found in Stephen L. Baehr's article "The Locomotive and the Giant: Power in Chekhov's 'Anna on the Neck'". Baehr looks into the underlying theme of misuse of power and battle between the two main characters of the story, which is definitely a different approach. She intriguingly points out that, "The story is structured on the reversal of power and is divided into two symmetrical parts that are, in effect, reversals of each other ... Part I portrays the patriarchal domination and oppression of Anna by Modest Alekseich ... Part II depicts Anna's "conquest" of her husband (and the male sex in general)" (29). A very unique outlook on a story from Baehr's part, unlike Emerson's view. Baehr also goes on talking about how the power is seen to be corrupted in different spheres - even in the case of family and religion, "The story has been interpreted as reflecting the hierarchical power structure of the nineteenth-century Russian bureaucracy" (Baehr 33). By throwing this light on Chekhov's Anna's nature, Baehr compares her with Tolstoy's Anna at the end by stating that Chekhov's Anna is "a vulgar variant of Tolstoy's. Where Tolstoy's sensitive, suffering Anna is snubbed by society, disenfranchised, and ultimately destroyed as a result of her honest and open affair, Chekhov's calculating, unfeeling, predatory Anna achieves power precisely because she plays by society's rules" (Baehr 35).

Chapter 3: The Tolstoyan Influence on Chekhov

“Tolstoy’s philosophy moved me deeply and possessed me for six or seven years. It was not so much his basic propositions ... it was his way of expressing himself, his common sense, and probably a sort of hypnotism. But now something in me protests.”

- Chekhov to Alexei Suvorin, March 27, 1894

In this letter to his publisher Suvorin, in a couple of sentences Chekhov expressed his fading admiration for - whom he once regarded as his master - Leo Tolstoy. He experienced a momentary phase of Tolstoyan influence at the end of the 1880s till the early 1890s, when he resolutely rejected Tolstoy’s teachings (Schefski 81). In the book *Chekhov and his Prose*, author Thomas Winner traced back to the exact time when Chekhov immersed himself in Tolstoy’s philosophy: “I should prefer to narrow such a period to the years when Chekhov's interest in serious stories became dominant, from 1885 to 1890 - the year in which Chekhov undertook his trip to the penal colony of Sakhalin after which he became increasingly critical of ‘Tolstoyanism’” (Winner 57).

Many critics, while looking into the life and works of Anton Chekhov, have deeply looked into the relationship between him and Tolstoy. After the publication of his greater masterpieces in the realm of world literature - *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* - there was a sudden shifting in Tolstoy’s perspective on life and literature. He thought creation of art as a sinful act, and established five ‘commandments’, which he thought as the central to the teachings of Christ (Winner 58). Along with it, he tried to romanticise the peasant life and physical labour. Chekhov admitted his teaching from an artistic viewpoint, but the latter perception had a negative effect on him. In a letter to Suvorin in March of 1894, he said, “Perhaps because I’ve stopped smoking,

Tolstoy's morality has stopped moving me, in the depth of my soul I am hostile to it, and that of course is unjust. Peasant blood flows in me, and you can't astound me with peasant virtues".

At the beginning of his influential period of life, he produced stories like "The Duel", "The Cossack", "The Shoemaker and the Devil", "Enemies" and others, which showcased Tolstoy's moral and philosophical thinking. Like in "The Cossack" God's judgement was taken into account, that the downfall that came into the protagonist's (Maxim) family was a punishment from God. or in "The Shoemaker and the Devil" where Fyodor despises the rich people for being rich and eventually learns from his dream that being rich is the same as being poor, that money is not the ultimate solution of life. However, unlike these earlier stories, which held some of Tolstoyan principles, after a certain period of time Chekhov did not include any of those teachings in his stories anymore.

Alexander Werth, in his article, mentioned that "It is a curious fact that the individualist Chekhov had, for a long time, sought the clue to human perfection in the teaching of so profound an anti-individualist as Tolstoy" (635). Because the way Chekhov would look into each accurate detail in a story, which is very unlikely found in any of Tolstoy's works. It can be found in numbers of letters which Chekhov wrote after returning from Sakhalin, where he mentioned the flaws in Tolstoy's another masterpiece novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*. In a letter to the renowned poet Alexei Pleshcheyev on February 15, 1890, he says that he is "full of admiration for *The Kreutzer Sonata* from an artistic point of view". But as for the medical side of the story, he indicts the author as an "a man who is ignorant and who has not taken the trouble in his long life to read two or three books written by specialists".

Nevertheless, Chekhov's critique of Tolstoy's art is rarely directed at method, but at the narrow perspective of Tolstoyan philosophy (Schefski 86). No matter how many times he

expresses his disappointment about Tolstoy's ignorance towards the small details of his works, he never lost his admiration for Tolstoy's artistry. As we see, during the late 1880s he began to produce what can be called as 'counterstories' to Tolstoy's works or his thinking (Emerson 249). For example, "A Boring Story" as a more honest reflection on death than the ruthless dying process described in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*; "Peasants" as a more realist, unromanticised picture of peasant life that Tolstoy was reluctant to tell; "Ward No. 6" as the real, ghastly result of non-violent resistance to evil; and so on.

Chekhov and Anna Karenina

"In *Anna Karenina* and *Eugene Onegin* not a single question is solved, but they satisfy fully because questions are posed correctly."

- Chekhov to Alexei Suvorin, 27 October 1888

Among all of Tolstoy's creations, none intrigued Chekhov more than *Anna Karenina* which, along with Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, saw how they both asked questions or problems correctly instead of answering or solving them. Chekhov can be regarded as another admirer of Anna, apart from his deep fascination for the novel itself. "Perhaps the most frequently employed literary archetype in Chekhov's works is that of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina", as Winner mentions (qtd. in Schefski 85). Some of his most famous works, like "The Lady with the little dog", "About Love", "Anna on the Neck", "A Misfortune", "The Duel", include the plotline similar to *Anna Karenina*. And surprisingly, the first three stories mentioned - "The Lady with the little dog", "About Love", and "Anna on the Neck" - all of them contain a heroine with the first name 'Anna'. From Chekhov's part, it was his conscious attempts to rework the theme of adultery, so

that Anna can have a less tragic fate than the one which Tolstoy designed for her in his novel (Schefski 85).

It was Chekhov's way of 'literary response' to the author and his work which he deeply admired. But how did he respond to *Anna Karenina*? The above mentioned short stories all contain 'Anna' as the main lead, with the same theme of adultery revolving around them. He recombined the couples, reaccents the novel's themes, alters the time and place, changes the background and personality of the lover. There are crucial moments set at railway stations (as in "The Lady with the little dog" - when Anna leaves Gurov, or in "Anna on the Neck" - where the newly married Anna meets her husband for the first time); the experience of a 'first ball' where the heroine discovers her power over men ("Anna on the Neck"); the unhappy marriage with an elderly man which leads to an adulterous relationship with another man - married or unmarried.

The main issue that was to be considered was - how can he respond to a novel over eight hundred pages long, with a numerous cast of characters, within some pages of a short story? As during his time, the nineteenth century, realist novels were at its peak. There were high descriptions of nature and the surroundings, along with unnecessary details of everyday life. But Chekhov, nonetheless, successfully compacted this huge bulk of novel in a few pages, and created not only one but several stories with the similar theme in them. It became easier for him because by the 1880s, *Anna Karenina* had become an 'infidelity stereotype'. "The briefest invocation of its story, via easily recognized motifs (black curls, squinting eyes, prominent ears, trains), could set the stage for an estrangement or a re-emphasis of the plot" (Emerson 252). Despite applying the same stereotype, Chekhov as a master of portraying human relations, opens up Tolstoy's novel and dissects it in order to reform it, to give Anna another chance to live in an alternate literary world.

Chapter 4: Bakhtin on Author-Character Relationships

Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay titled “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” talks about the author and his relationship to his character (‘hero’), under the section called ‘The Problem of the Author's Relationship to the Hero’. Translated by Vadim Liapunov, at the beginning of the essay Bakhtin states, “every constituent of a work presents itself to us as the author's reaction to it and that this reaction encompasses both an object and the hero's reaction to that object (a reaction to a reaction)” (4). According to him, an author not only “sees and knows everything seen and known by each hero individually and by all the heroes collectively, but he also sees and knows more than they do” (12).

As further he delves into the essay, he mentions that an author should keep a distance from his hero in order to keep “the whole of the hero must remain the ultimate whole” (17), that the hero should not reflect the author’s thoughts and ideas. When an author takes possession of its hero that means the author cannot keep himself ‘outside’ of the hero's position, where the author and his hero become a single entity.

Bakhtin categorises three cases while considering the author-character relationship and the distance between them. Among those cases, the second case states: “the author takes possession of the hero, introduces consummating moments into him, and the author's relationship to the hero thus becomes, in part, the hero's own relationship to himself. The author's reflection is put into the soul or mouth of the hero; the hero himself begins to determine himself.” (20). Two types of heroes can be categorized under this case - 1. where the hero is autobiographical, and 2. where the hero is not autobiographical, and the author’s ideas are introduced to him (20). Tolstoy’s major works, especially *Anna Karenina*, can be considered under this realm, where we see him portraying his character Levin as his own reflection. On the other hand, Anna is shown

and judged the way Tolstoy would judge a sinful woman, and he eventually gives her a miserable ending to show God's (in this case his own) judgement.

The third case in author-character relationship states: "the hero himself is his own author, and, as such, himself interprets his own life aesthetically—he plays a role, as it were. A hero of this kind, ... is self-contented and surely consummated" (21). Which means that this kind of hero is not a 'reflection' of its author, he is, as Bakhtin said, 'his own author' in the story. This case is prevalent in Chekhov's most notable stories, like "A Boring Story: from an Old Man's Notebook", "The Lady with the Little dog", "Anna on the neck" and so on.

In a Bakhtinian sense, Chekhov not only responded to Tolstoy's works thematically, also as an author he played with dialogues, situations, words to create an artistic response towards Tolstoy. We see Tolstoy's judgements and endings in his *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* being the absolute judgement, no one can think of anything else other than that specific situation. But in the case of Chekhov, his stories are open-ended, his goal was not to put a judgement over his characters or so, but to show certain occurrences that came in their lives. The rest will be judged by the readers; however they like to judge his characters' fate. Like he said in a letter to his editor-friend Alexei Suvorin,

Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language. (name) criticizes me for finishing the story with "You can't figure anything out in this world!" ... But I don't agree with him. It's about time that everyone who writes (...) admitted that in this world you can't figure anything out. (May 30, 1888)

Chapter 5: Chekhov's artistic responses to Tolstoy

Unlike Tolstoy - who, in Bakhtin's words, takes the possession of the hero - Chekhov's heroes on the other hand are independent of their author. While reading *Anna Karenina*, or *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, one can easily figure out the omniscient narrative voice hanging over the characters' thoughts, actions, movements. They go through philosophical and moral changes, sharing major ideas with each other, which is a reflection of the author's own ideas. But Chekhov's voice is objective, universal. He does not impose any kind of moral or philosophical thinking of his own upon his characters. Author Arthur Luther remarks on Chekhov's characters' view on philosophical ideas by stating, "Chekhov's heroes eat, so as not to have to talk about God" (qtd. in Chudakov and Graffy 376). Like Gurov in "The Lady with the little dog", when Anna cries over the sin that she has committed, Gurov cuts and eats watermelon, without uttering a single word of sympathy towards her. But when Tolstoy's Anna Karenina points out the same thing, Vronsky feels like he has murdered her happiness. These small yet symbolic details of their writings created the huge difference between these two writers. And Chekhov collected Tolstoy's details and brilliantly gave it a Chekhovian touch, using Tolstoy's framework to point back at Tolstoy himself.

i. "The Lady with the little dog"

This story of Chekhov is considered as one of the world's best, which is a love story at its heart, also is a famous work which mixes Tolstoy's prototypes, and at times diction, to achieve a new perspective on adultery and responsibility (Emerson 256). Chekhov takes the essence of *Anna Karenina*, and gives his touch at places where Tolstoy cannot delve into. By the time Chekhov had written the story, he had already rejected Tolstoy's philosophical teachings. Nevertheless, he was influenced by his works altogether, and this one is no different from his

others. This story itself is “engaged in an intertextual dialogue with Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*” (Parts 77).

Written during December of 1899, the whole story is narrated from the perspective of Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov, who can be compared to Tolstoy's Count Vronsky, or in terms of his personality, Oblonsky. Even the title itself suggests his point of view - when he first met ‘the Lady’, his perception was “a young woman, not very tall, blond, in a beret, walking along the embankment; behind her ran a white spitz”. This white ‘little dog’ was the first impression of her, distinguishing her from other women to him (Rosen 13). Indeed, as when he first approached her, the white spitz became the link between their budding relationship.

“He gently called the spitz, and when the dog came over, he shook his finger at it. The spitz growled. Gurov shook his finger again.

The lady glanced at him and immediately lowered her eyes.

"He doesn't bite," she said and blushed.” (240).

Although on a surface level they resemble the characters of Tolstoy's novel, in the story we see both Gurov and ‘the lady’ - Anna Sergeevna, have spouses who, in one way or another, resemble Karenin. Nor were they serious about their affairs and rendezvous at the beginning (Emerson 256). Unlike Tolstoy's Anna and Vronsky, who belonged to aristocratic society of nineteenth century Russia, Chekhov's Gurov and Anna are ordinary people - a bank employee and a wife of a middle-ranking civil servant. Tolstoy's grand tragedy of an illicit love affair between an extremely beautiful society lady and a dashing military officer is brought down to earth by Chekhov, portraying their affair as something like an ordinary event of life (Parts 80).

Throughout the beginning of their encounter the theme of sexuality has been carefully neglected. But when it did appear, it was associated with guilt and suffering (Rosen 16). Just like the way it happened with Tolstoy's Anna, he subjects her under the light of both God's and societies' judgement on her morality - "She felt herself so criminal and guilty that the only thing left for her was to humble herself and beg forgiveness" (Tolstoy 149). It was something that made Anna lose her mind at the end, leading to her self-destruction. But in the case of Chekhov, this moral and abstract judgement is replaced by characters' private fears (Parts 87). Chekhov's Anna is not afraid of God's judgement, but she is fearful of losing Gurov's respect. As we see after their first sexual experience, Anna is described as - "she sat pondering in a dejected pose, like the sinful woman in an old painting. 'It's not good,' she said. 'You'll be the first not to respect me now'" (242). Similarly, Gurov looks around to see if someone has seen him or not while he tries to kiss Anna on the street.

One of the most striking points in the whole story is the conversation and small ordinary actions that happen at Anna's hotel room. After Anna mentions her doubt, Chekhov describes, "There was a watermelon on the table in the hotel room. Gurov cut himself a slice and unhurriedly began to eat it" (242). Such a Chekhovian thing to do when a serious matter is being brought into consideration. This kind of "unexpected little turns and the lightness of the touches are what places Chekhov, above all Russian writers of fiction, on the level of Gogol and Tolstoy" (Nabokov 259). This subtle yet impactful action was also pointed out by Thomas Winner, "unlike Vronsky, Gurov appears cynical. When faced with Anna's shame, he takes her unhappiness lightly and eats watermelon while she weeps" (Parts 82). Whereas, in *Anna Karenina*, we see Vronsky getting 'infected' by Anna's guilt and fear as he gets influenced by her overwhelming emotions throughout the first part of the novel (Parts 83). Unlike Gurov,

Vronsky feels “what a murderer must feel when he looks at the body he has deprived of life” (Tolstoy 149) when Anna is overcome by humiliation and guilt.

This small action of Gurov showed how Chekhov was different from Tolstoy in the case of emphasising a situation through small bits of actions. Gurov is not only immune to Anna’s feelings, but also he sees this romantic liaison as an ordinary event of day to day life, similar to consumption of food in this case. “This dramatic difference in the men's reaction to adultery and to the women's expression of guilt highlights the differences between Chekhov's and Tolstoy's artistic and philosophical objectives”, as Parts stated (82). Like the setting itself, Chekhov portrays the ordinariness of human lives through the most subtle movements, just the way he shifted from Tolstoy’s tone of high moral displeasure to a romantic love story that deepens after this event. Moreover, Gurov’s response to Anna’s moral resentment is a representation of how Chekhov perceived Tolstoy’s high philosophical and moral message (Parts 83). The action in particular, can be a ‘parody’ towards Tolstoy’s moral judgement considering the themes of love and infidelity.

Apart from all the similarities that Chekhov portrayed deliberately, the ending of “Lady with the Little Dog” is “famously open” (Parts 84).

“And it seemed that, just a little more—and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning.” (250).

The story ends with the word ‘beginning’, which gives the whole story a cyclic order. This open-endedness took this story to a whole new level, and also another distinguishing feature from Tolstoy’s work itself. Unlike Anna Karenina, this open-ending ‘end’ of this story is what makes

it more tragic, but with no moral tragic climax or closure (Emerson 256). Because we do not know whether they will successfully conduct their liaison, or if their affair will come to an end, as Anna's husband 'believed and did not believe' her reason for visiting Moscow, the city where Gurov lives (Rosen 24). Or the affair can also end due to the complications of their situation. But Chekhov kept it all upto his readers to infer their final fate, unlike Tolstoy who provides a definite judgement.

In the case of Tolstoy's characters, they strive towards wholeness, like Anna herself, who at a certain point wished to have her son, her lover, her societal reputation, her unchanging beauty - all at once. When she cannot have it all, she destroys herself (Emerson 254). On the other hand, Chekhov's characters are indifferent towards the notion of life, death, and love, which, according to Tolstoy, cannot bring salvation in our lives. That is why the ending of this story cannot be accepted by Tolstoy in terms of moral resolution (Emerson 254). Eudora Welty, the American short-story writer, commented on its ending:

It is a story firmly restrained, whose mood is not broken from first to last; nothing is placed in full direct glare. There is, rather, a quiet shimmering from within, and then the emergence of that last sentence, which is not a summation but a prophecy, and which long after the story ends goes on pulsing light into the mind. (Rosen 25)

ii. "Anna on the Neck"

Another story of Chekhov famous for his heroine 'Anna' and the literary tropes of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* that he uses throughout the story. Unlike his previous story, "The Lady with the little dog", this story is not about the illicit romance of Anna with a good-looking officer. Rather, it is a story about the way power is corrupted, and the central institutions of

society that assists this corruption - family, religion, and bureaucracy. Published in 1895, it is also interpreted as “reflecting the hierarchical power structure of the nineteenth-century Russian bureaucracy” (Baehr 33).

Here again, the readers are introduced to the heroine Anya, or ‘Anna’, on the train, as she proceeds to travel with her newly-wed husband to a religious monastery. Like Tolstoy’s Anna, who arrives first on the novel at a train as she arrives at Moscow, but in her case it was to meet her brother, and eventually at the turn of events, falling in love with Count Vronsky. In the story also we get the scene of ball, where the heroine rediscovers herself as someone who has immense beauty and power over other men (Baehr 29). And the reiterated world of love contrasted with the boring, grey world of officialdom (Emerson 253).

Chekhov’s heroine is also, like Tolstoy’s Anna, a beautiful, slender, attractive, who marries a man double her age to save her father and brothers from poor living conditions. The husband, who possess the same first name as Karenin - Alexeich, or ‘Modest’ Alexeich - is fifty-two year old man, and like the name also possess Karenin-like nature, “Modest Alexeich was of high rank and no longer young,(...) as a man of principle, undertook this trip to the monastery, essentially, to let his young wife know that in marriage, too, he gave first place to religion and morality” (181). The difference is that, in the case of Karenin, Tolstoy made us sympathise with his tangled situation that he was going through. But in the story, Chekhov did not keep a single space for his readers to show pity towards this husband, even when he was rebuked by his young wife. Even the way his features are described gives an unmanly impression of this ‘Modest’ Alexeich, “He was an official of average height, rather stout, plump, very well fed, with long sidewhiskers and no mustache, and his clean-shaven, round, sharply outlined chin resembled a heel” (182).

Chekhov has chosen a very intriguing starting point for this story. We see an eighteen year old young, beautiful girl getting married to a fifty-two year old 'stout, plump, very well fed' high-ranked officer. This strange marital situation is the same for Anna Karenina, as in the novel, she is married when she was eighteen to a man who was much older than her - Karenin. But in this huge novel, little did we get to see the past vision of her marriage to Karenin. We know nearly nothing about how they met, how they got married, how their marital life was, what was going on with Anna when she married this high-ranked disciplined man. What little we are informed is tucked into Karenin's story, that Anna Oblonskaya was beautiful but not a profitable match, that Karenin had visited her often enough to make a proposal the proper thing to do. But how did it begin, their feelings for each other, remained untouched by Tolstoy (Emerson 253).

In contrast to Tolstoy's overlooked event, Chekhov primarily wrote about the early events of this 'situational' marriage, and the power that works behind it. We get to see the actual history or reason behind this unbalanced marriage. We did not know how Tolstoy's Anna felt when she married Karenin, but Chekhov's Anna, from the beginning, is flirtatious and loves to get attention from random good-looking strangers (Emerson 253). As in the story, when Anna noticed that Artynov was looking at her, "she narrowed her eyes coquettishly and began speaking loudly in French" (183). After this incident, "she was suddenly filled with joy, (...) and she went back to her compartment feeling as if she had been convinced at the station that she would certainly be happy, no matter what" (183). Whereas, we get to observe this sort of behaviour from Anna's side in the later part of the novel, when she tried to not admit that her life was slowly falling apart. "Anna had narrowed her eyes precisely when it was a matter of the most intimate sides of life. 'As if she narrows her eyes at her life in order not to see it all,' thought Dolly" (Tolstoy 628). When Anna showed this trait of her, we sensed tragedy, self-

deception from her part. But Chekhov's Anna is different, other than the misery of her father and brothers, and the first few days of her marriage, no such thing as 'tragedy' ever touched her (Emerson 254).

The story is divided into two symmetrical parts that are, in effect, reversals of each other on the basis of power and dominations (Baehr 29). Part I of the story portrays the patriarchal domination and oppression of Anna by her husband, which is stressed by Chekhov again and again. To show Modest Alexeich's power over Anna, Chekhov wrote that at the dinner table, Modest Alexeich was "gripping the knife in his fist like a sword" (184). Which made Anna "afraid and unable to eat, and usually left the table hungry" (184). Eventually, she became unhappy with her situation, stressing that,

She did everything her husband wanted and was angry with herself for having been deceived like a perfect little fool. She had married him only for money, and yet she now had less money than before her marriage. (...) She could not take money secretly or ask for it, she was afraid of her husband and trembled before him. It seemed to her that she had borne a fear of this man in her soul for a long time. (185)

On the other hand, part II is the reversal of power and fate. It shows Anna's 'conquest' over her husband by the statement "Get out, blockhead!" (188), as she went through the transformation when she looked herself in a 'huge mirror' at the ball. Chekhov's Anna, achieves her power over male sex because "she plays by society's rules", with her "calculating, unfeeling, predatory" terms and actions (Baehr 35). But Tolstoy's Anna Karenina was humiliated by the very society people whom she considered as her dearest of friends, and ultimately was destroyed as an outcome of her honest and open affair. In a sense, Chekhov's Anna "is a vulgar variant of Tolstoy's" (Baehr 35).

Furthermore, Chekhov's Petersburg is indifferent to affairs, family, and love, as we see Modest Alexeich using his wife in order to rise higher in the rank. By doing this Chekhov gives us the impression of Russian high-class society of the nineteenth century as it should run (Emerson 254). In contrast, Tolstoy's moral measurement is always family - Anna was destroyed because she left her husband, and mostly because of her son, for whom she was so desperate at one point (Emerson 255). When Karenin, while opening up to Anna about her affair, said that, "Our lives are bound together, and bound not by men but by God. Only a crime can break this bond, and a crime of that sort draws down a heavy punishment" (147) - it was Tolstoy who emphasised the role of family in terms of religion and morality.

iii. "A Boring Story: from an Old Man's Notebook"

This story, along with his play *Ivanov*, is considered to be "the most autobiographical of all his works" - according to Russian scholar and philosopher Lev Shestov. "The professor had overstrained himself, and thereby cut himself off from his past life and from the possibility of taking an active part in human affairs" - this statement of Shestov about "A Boring Story" kind of sums up Chekhov's life. He was a doctor in his early years, like the protagonist of the story, later turned into a writer. This story attracted particular attention, not because it is regarded as one of Chekhov's masterpieces, but because this story reflects some of his life's dilemmas at the time (Hodgson 36).

Though he was inspired from Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, unlike Tolstoy he did not have any reassurance of his career and fame when the story was written (Shestov 24). Before writing *Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy had already been at the peak of his writing career, already having *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* behind him. Chekhov, on the other hand, had published only a handful of stories here and there. But this by no means implies that Chekhov had borrowed a

single word from Tolstoy's work. Yet it was hard for a young writer like Chekhov to take the risk to write something like "A Boring Story". It was, at the end, Tolstoy who paved the way for writers like Chekhov, so that he can come into public consciousness with his writings, his confessions (Shestov 24).

"A Boring Story: from an Old Man's Notebook" is about a prominent professor of medicine, Nikolai Stepanovich, who undergoes certain physical and psychological changes at the end of his life, as narrated by himself. According to Peter Hodgson, "... it is a story about a man facing death. It is about the people who love him, and, insofar as he cannot love them in return, it is a story about loneliness" (37). The word 'boring' in the title suggests that this story is 'dull' in the ordinary sense - there is no action, no conflict, no suspense. The narrative is nothing more or less than a "representation of a man's life and death" (Flath 272). This has been done intentionally in order to divert readers' attention towards the narrator, not the narrative - to see how the story has been delivered, not to see what has been delivered. The subtitle 'from an Old Man's Notebook' says enough about it - readers will look into an old man's notebook. A notebook is something where people remain candid about their thoughts and feelings. And through this 'notebook', we see the dramatic development of the narrator's prose, revealing a new insight to the readers about his situation (Hodgson 38).

The story is delivered from the first-person perspective of the narrator, which is unusual for Chekhov's stories. This slight change in narrative technique is what gives rise to the practice of reading the story as Chekhov's personal confession (Hodgson 37). In the beginning of the story, we see the narrator talking about a person, "There is in Russia an honored professor named Nikolai Stepanovich So-and-so" (45). Suddenly, at the end of the first paragraph, the narrative shifts to first-person narration, informing the readers "All this and many other things that might

be said constitute what is known as my name” (45). This unique style of writing can only be done by Chekhov, where the narrative reveals the narrator himself, the professor comes to know himself as he writes his chronicle (Hodgson 37).

The whole story is divided into six chapters. The first three chapters describe the professor’s daily activities, thoughts, and events over the course of a single day in winter. Where we see him reminiscing about his past circumstances, how he delivered lectures to his students in a very skillful and joyous manner. His state of affairs with his family and children, how he loved them and was loved by everyone. This part of describing Nikolai Stepanovich’s daily life events offers a typical picture of his way of life, as one should write in their ‘notebook’. But at present, he shifts his position from centre to periphery - hides from public life and shifts to private life, from workplace to the place of rest, abandoning first acquaintances, then colleagues, and finally his family (Flath 275). Later on, in chapter V, the professor recounts the events of a single night, as he experiences what we might call today a ‘panic attack’. This is one of the most remarkable chapters of Chekhov with the most subtle and expressive scenes. Time seems to stand still as the professor suddenly wakes up at midnight and thinks, “It seems to me for some reason that I'm suddenly just about to die” (75). As Flath remarked about this chapter, “The silence, the lack of motion, the calm are all linked explicitly with his impending death” (273).

This particular chapter provides insight into the narrator’s mind, like Ivan Ilyich, he is also waiting for his death, suddenly becomes frightened at the thought of dying at midnight. But Chekhov’s way of handling a grave matter like death, is not clinical but artistic. He only needs to give bare physical fact as a hint to the psychological and emotional states that the protagonist goes through (Werth 637). As Lev Shestov pointed out, “Of all our writers Tchekhov has the softest voice. All the energy of his heroes is turned inwards.” (Shestov 62). We see in *Ivan*

Ilyich, Tolstoy wrote about his physical and mental agony in such a manner that it seems forceful for readers to connect with Ivan Ilyich's tormentation. The description gives a slithering feeling inside. On the other hand, we see Chekhov's poetic death-scene in comparison to Tolstoy's crude realistic portrayal. He did not even write about Nikolai Stepanovich's death explicitly. It is upto readers to infer from the last scene of him bade farewell to Katya. Indeed, "Death is never horrible in Chekhov" (Werth 637).

One needs to pay attention to the story in order to infer its deeper meaning. Otherwise the story would be concluded as an exploration of morality, of right or wrong. Because the professor's illness is by no means spiritual, like Ivan Ilyich. Chekhov's main focus was not to seek morality in life, but to show the essential truth that everyone has to die at one point. And the fact that Nikolai Stepanovich is a renowned doctor made the tragedy more compelling (Flath 2821-282). As scholar Beverly Hahn puts it while speaking about his character,

Nikolay Stepanovitch's instinct for humanist values is often too passive and that he is and has been at his worst in his relations with other people. In his inner self he feels compassion for other people, but he does nothing positive to help them: in terms of action he has remained- and remains-unmoved through the most terrible crises. (161)

We see our narrator's passive behaviour even when he receives the telegram containing the news of his daughter's sudden marriage. He does not react to the fact at all. Chekhov himself has said about his character's passivity in a letter that, if he had been any different, "Liza and Katya might not have come to grief" (Hahn 161). Nevertheless, a closer inspection at the narrative structure of the story reveals that his passivity is not necessarily a character flaw, because previously he was a caring and loving person in his family and workplace. But it is

rather an intensifying symptom of his disease, “signalling his gradual withdrawal from the material world” (Flath 275).

Most importantly, this is a story about a man’s life - nothing more, nothing less. In *Ivan Ilyich*, through Ivan Ilyich’s unbearable sufferings before his gruesome death, Tolstoy wanted to provide a message of ‘just’ punishment and redemption (Flath 281), as he was a man of ambitions and everything material being. But Chekhov does not make any judgement, he provides an artistic depiction of a human’s whole life and his psychological state before his death. This story on the whole is the existence of the story itself, reflecting man’s life, as Nicolai Stepanovich stated, “... looking back, my whole life seems to me like a beautiful composition, executed with talent. Now it only remains for me not to ruin the finale. For that I must die like a human being. If death is indeed a danger, I must meet it as befits a teacher, a scientist, and the citizen of a Christian country: cheerfully and with a peaceful soul” (65)

At the end, as Shestov said, in “A Boring Story”, “there you have helplessness, sickness, the prospect of inevitable death, and no hope whatever to change the situation by a hair” (33). Like a typical Chekhovian hero - he puts his heroes in such a situation that all that is left for them is “to fall down and beat their heads against the floor” (Shestov 27). They refuse any kind of salvation that would make their situation easier to escape from, but they would not accept those. Here, Nicolai Stepanovich tries to escape reality by immersing himself in his past memories, but those memories only bring him pain and irritation, instead of consoling him. Though all these portrayals of physical and psychological tormentation is inspired from Tolstoy’s *Ivan Ilyich*, “his artistic workmanship was essentially different from Tolstoy’s” (Werth 638). “I think that had there been no Death of Ivan Ilyich, there would have been no Ivanov, and no Tedious Story, nor many others of Tchekhov's most remarkable works” - as Shestov commented on it. Still, no

human art can explain the mysteries of life and death - neither Tolstoy's intense description, nor Chekhov's artistic view. But "A Boring Story" has successfully laid the question of life and death before us, and as Chekhov himself said that posing questions was his job, not answering them (Hodgson 41), it is upto the readers to dissect themselves.

Conclusion

What makes the Russian literature of the nineteenth century still prominent and unbeatable across the world and decades is that no other author can produce such a work that is, returning to Elif Batuman's words, "simultaneously so big and so small—so serious and so light—so strange and so natural?". In western literature, we get a series of consequences, happening one after another. Very little space remains there for the readers in-between the author's words to think about what is happening, to grasp the characters' situations. Russian authors, on the other hand, put small details and objects here and there, carelessly. It is upto the readers to search for meaning in them, to analyse them symbolically, if that particular detail means something or not in the character's life.

Although Chekhov has never written something as big as *Anna Karenina*, or *War and Peace*, or *Eugene Onegin*, or *Crime and Punishment*, he successfully and marvellously managed to produce something that weighs the same as these greatest works. No one, other than Chekhov, can take the charge of attempting to dissect Leo Tolstoy's pieces and remould it the way he wants - only keeping the existing frame. Though these both writers were fond of each other, the differences lingered when it came to their personal opinions. Chekhov's medical career was always a matter of disagreement between him and Tolstoy. Tolstoy always believed that had Chekhov not been a doctor, he would have been a great writer. And Chekhov always thought that "Tolstoy's philosophy of non-resistance to evil could not hold a candle to the scientifically based doctrine of self-preservation" (Schefski 86). Nevertheless, although Chekhov has rejected Tolstoy as a thinker while accepting him as an incomparable artist, he welcomed his personal friendship while growing more and more alienated from his doctrines and beliefs.

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