

**Between Faith and Fear: (Re) presenting The Dubious Faith in Anton
Chekov's *A Dead Body***

Aravind Kola

Research Scholar, Department of English

&

Dr. Siva Nagaiah Bolleddu and Dr. P. V. Ravi Kumar

Department of English

Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation

(Deemed to be University)

Vaddeswaram, Guntur -522502, A.P.

Anton Chekov is a Russian playwright and short story writer. He is considered as one among the greatest short story writers in the world. His stories accommodate a wide range of themes. Among them, the highly relevant one is addressing the need and importance of religion and God. Although his religious inclination is debated, and is believed to turn into an atheist in his end days, many of his early stories depict strong religious themes. Mark Stanley Swift in his article regarding Chekov's notion towards religion says using a quote by Simon Karlinsky in his book *Introduction: The gentle subversives* follows:

Chekov's familiarity with biblical and liturgical texts is well established. His prose contains numerous references and allusions to various books of the Bible; these typically serve to characterise the speaker and define themes of a given story. In his correspondence Chekov frequently uses biblical quotations and mimics Old Church Slavic style "for purposes of solemnity or irony"(93).

Chekov in one of his short stories entitled *The Student*, deals with the theme on the need of religious tradition for the perpetuation of Civilisation. Similarly in the present short story

entitled *A Dead Body*, Chekov explicitly talks about the faithlessness of humans towards God in the present world, but inconspicuously emphasis the need of it.

The story *A Dead Body* starts with a very dark ambience. In a dark night, beside a small road covered in complete dark woods, two peasants kept on watching a dead body sitting beside a small campfire. While they were watching, a Clergy arrives there who was taking that path to meet his relative in a nearby village. He comes there shouting and singing taking the name of God. The Clergy hymns, "Ye that love not Zion ... shall be put to shame by the Lord". But when he saw the dead body which was being watched by the two peasants, he was overcome with fear.

In fact the Clergy who already walked alone for three hundred kilometers just by singing in the name of God was not into the state of fear and in dilemma of continuing his rest of journey for three kilometers.

In fact the Clergy stopped, on his way and wanted to know that way for his destiny, after seeing the two men who were waiting beside the dead body. The peasants directed the Clergy the way he wanted to go but the Clergy who had already completed almost part of his journey is now afraid of for the rest of journey and requested one of the peasants to accompany him. The Clergy is now afraid to go alone after seeing the dead body hence he requested one of the peasants to accompany him to till he reached his destination. As one of the peasants accepted to accompany the Clergy, they continued the journey whereas another peasant who was alone now with the dead body remained daring and stayed there keeping the dead body beside him.

The theme of the story is 'Dubious faith'. The two peasants in the story the older one, Syoma, a naïve and quiet man, and the younger one, a quick and smart one, although seem to be knowledgeable of God and having their own religious beliefs who are not expected to have high levels of faith and a great devotion with God compared to that of the Clergy, were fearless to spend time with a dead body in complete dark and alone. Whereas the Clergy, who generally is known for spending all his time in the devotion of Lord, praying and serving the Lord, who is expected to be strong and unwavering in the times of intimidation, actually felt afraid of the dead body and unable to continue his rest of the journey. The story tries to reveal us that the Clergy's faith in God is neither real nor complete. As the Clergy is living under the shadows of dubious faith, he was overtaken by fear for just a dead body. In fact the Clergy is supposed to be strong and stay there with those two peasants and fulfill the formalities like offering a prayer in the name of God and for the salvation of the soul of the unknown dead body.

On the other hand the two peasants in the story were instructed by someone to watch a dead body during midnight. It was all dark with no lights. And they were alone in the woods and no living area in vicinity to them. It was an unexpected and unwanted task and a 'most disagreeable and uninviting labour for anyone to perform.' (Chekov). But the peasants agreed to guard the dead body and remained on their watching duty without any fear.

The irony of the story lies in the role of dialogue that paves the way for having fear or overcoming the fear. If we consider the presence of the peasants in the story, both of them, instead of being conscious of being with a dead body and being scared, sat there around the fire, they indulge in a casual conversation. The younger one chides Syoma for his naïve nature. During their conversation, they hear some sound of something falling to ground from top of the

tree. The younger one gets alarmed, but when Syoma assures that it might be an Owl, the younger one again reverts to his normal and stable composure. Except this situation, at no point the two peasants display any fear of being with a dead body alone in the dark woods. Whereas the presence of the Clergy made us understand that he was on his long journey over three hundred kilometers just on singing songs which is to be considered having a dialogue with God through his hymns and prayers. But the Clergy after looking at the dead body remained still and clam like a statue and of want of courage. The Clergy in general, should not fear of such instances, for he should have the confidence of God's protection to him if he had truly believed and served the God all his life. But it was not like that. When Clergy was nearing the peasants, he arrives "singing in the stillness of the night" taking the name of God (Chekov). He was all alone while arriving in that dark night. He sang as if he was meditating on God and celebrating the blessing bond of communion he had with God. Though he might have served God for all his life as a Clergy and though he rejoiced in singing of God, his faith and trust in God was never stood to its fullest. His bud of faith might have opened up its petals a little, but never transformed into a full blossom. He says he travelled "over three hundred miles" so far in his journey and when he is "near home.....there's trouble. I[He] can't go on..." (Chekov). He could cover all those hundreds of miles easily assuming himself to be a faithful one, is only because he never had faced a situation of affliction. Only when affliction appears, question of real faith arises. Clergy clearly failed in it.

If the Clergy really trusted in God, he should be upholding himself and finding confidence through verses of holy scriptures like "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me"

(The King James Bible, Ps. 23.4). Holy Bible holds a number of verses which say not to fear or God comforts in the time of fear. But being a Clergy, he never seemed to call upon his God with a belief that God can deliver him from that fear and can strengthen him. When he was only some three miles away, his devotion towards God, his trust in God, his mood of rejoicing in name of God vanished. His mountain of faith had got reduced to a size of peanut in front of the fear which now had become a colossus in his mind. There was no more God in his mind and heart at the core. He was all filled with fear without any trace for his faith in God.

Clergy came singing “Ye that love not Zion ... shall be put to shame by the Lord” when he was nearing the peasants (Chekov). This reflects words from a verse from the Book of Isaiah from The Holy Bible: “I lay a stone in Zion..... the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic.” (*New International Version*, Isa. 28.16). Here the ‘stone in Zion’ represents “messianic prophecy revealing the Person of the Lord Christ” (Y. Malaty 215). So, the biblical verse means that whoever loves the Lord Jesus, submits himself and “trusts in Him will never be dismayed” (215). The word “Zion” in the line sung by Clergy means the Lord Christ. The Clergy also means the same meaning as the verse means, but in a negation that whoever doesn’t submit himself and have his trust in the Lord, will be diminished and depreciated in his life. This is a great irony that, while singing this, the Clergy himself did not have his whole hearted submission and trust towards the Lord.

Anton Chekov, through this story *A Dead Body* tries to reflect the ironic status of people in the present world, who assume themselves to be trusting and faithful to the Lord, but are not. Chekov says that it is when these people are confronted by affliction, only then their real status of their faith is surfaced and they rather ignore it and move on taking the aid available in the

world than to realise their incomplete and deficient faith in Lord, like the Clergy in the story who took the help of the peasant to accompany him in the dark. Fear of dead body in Clergy symbolises the incomplete and deficient faith of humans, and the Clergy's desire for peasant's company to walk in dark symbolises the human's dependence on the worldly aids.

Works Cited

Chekov, Anton. "A Dead Body." *Best Short Stories of Anton Chekov*, Kindle ed., Jaico Publishing House, 2016.

New International Version. Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+28&version=NIV>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2019.

Swift, Mark Stanley. "Chekov's Restatement of Gospel Truths." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, vol. 45, no. 1, Australia and New Zealand Slavists' Association, 2011, p. 93.

The King James Version. Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+23&version=KJV>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2019.

Y. Malaty, Tadros. *The Book of ISAIAH*, Translated by George Batros, Revised by Nora El-Agamy, 1st ed., Coptic Orthodox Christian Center, 2002, p. 215.
