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Exploring In-Betweenness after the Loss of Transcendental Signifier and Reversal of Binary Roles in Anton Chekov's The Cherry Orchard

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Irum Iqbal *

Ahmad Naeem †

Muhammad Mahmood Ahmad Shaheen ‡

Abstract: This paper aims to apply Derridean deconstructionism to Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* to explore the emergence of new possibilities in the in-between space due to the loss of Transcendental signifiers and the reversal of binary roles. Derrida presents a universe wherein the Transcendental Signifier is lost, and the world is freed of a binaries-based signification system. Consequently, the area between binaries becomes the space where the polarity of binaries disintegrates. The in-between area suggests new possibilities emerging from the collapse of polarization. The worldview portrayed by Chekov in the play hinges on the in-between area where new possibilities emerge in the absence of a Transcendental Signifier. Orchard works as a Transcendental Signifier in the text, but with its sale, the orchard loses its place as a value-giving entity. So, the play proceeds in the deconstructed world where the Transcendental Signifier is lost, and the polar conformity of binaries merges into each other in the in-betweenness.

Key Words: Chekov, Orchard, Transcendental Signifier, Binaries, In-Betweenness

Introduction

The story basically revolves around two major binaries, i.e., aristocracy vs serfdom and youth vs the old. Characters from the landowning stratum belong to the aristocracy, while the others working at their lands are connected with serfdom. Both parts of a binary have different outlooks on life. There are young characters as well as aged ones, and both categories have different ways of thinking. The landlady, who kept Lopakhin as her serf, is now going to be bankrupt. Therefore, she sells her cherry orchard. The 'orchard' in the text is considered as a shadowing figure which gives meaning to all the entities under its umbrella. As the orchard is sold by the lady and cut down at the hands of Lopakhin, who is now the owner of the estate, the binary of aristocracy vs serfdom is subverted. The role assigned to the particular

pole of a binary undergoes change. The play hints toward a new horizon of meanings. Thus, the characters, in a state of uncertainty, suffer from the pangs of meaninglessness in their life. Their condition in the new system of signification presents them with a deflated worldview. Concurrently, this state of affairs in the play also hints toward the possibility of opening new windows of meaning.

Literature Review

[Tulloch \(1980\)](#) explains the effects of social change on people and society in *The Cherry Orchard*. Each character's reaction towards the sale of an orchard is oriented to the social class that he represents. Chekhovian characters react within their social circle, but they support neither the upper nor any other faction of society. Although the process of change has been initiated yet the reactions of

* Lecturer, Government Associate College for Women, Bhakkar, Punjab, Pakistan.

† Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan. Email: anaeemk@hotmail.com (Corresponding Author)

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Sadiq Egerton Graduate College, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

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the characters towards it show that they are reluctant to accept the change. They are not ready to change themselves on social grounds. Social mobility in a decayed system disturbs stratification in the social sphere as a well-crafted system is not present. Hence, every person encounters the absurdity of human existence because of his sense of solitariness. A sense of solitariness heightens the tragic effect, but comedy arises when characters fail to communicate with one another. The crisis in society shows a breach of ideology which was prevailing over the whole system before the transition (pp. 185-195).

[Leone \(2000\)](#) analyzes the orchard's non-presence from the stage and its working in its absence. The orchard's role of presence in absence transcends the traditional concept of setting (p. 7). The functioning of the orchard in its absence gives food for thought. [Golomb and Heskia \(1998\)](#) analyze the orchard as an important offstage metaphor whose presence in absence suggests confusion from the physical and dramatic point of view. Non-presence of the orchard allows the readers to read the play on an abstract level (pp. 125-129). [Pavis \(1988\)](#) argues that although the orchard is not on stage, it is a key figure of the play around which the whole play revolves. The absence of the orchard makes it a piece of land constructed upon human deliberations which can be averted (p. 12).

[Bera \(2013\)](#) presents Chekovian belief in the willpower of man in face of the doomed human existence. In fact, Chekov sowed the seeds of the theatre of absurd in his works. There are some elements of absurd theatre which can be viewed in Chekovian works. Like absurd plays, Chekovian plays have comic content with a tragic presentation. The introspective nature of characters, trivial conversations among characters, loneliness and lack of activity make them akin to characters of the absurd play (pp. 1-3).

[Grevtsova \(2014\)](#) throws light on Anton Chekov's ideas about religion and his concept of the world in philosophical terms, which affiliate him with the category of existential writers. Quoting another critic, [Kataev \(2004\)](#) says that Chekov never gives any transcendental answer to the inquiry about

truth. Rather he puts this search into the further process by never giving it up. He highlights the plan of human existence on a social level (pp. 60-62).

[Coptseva \(2008\)](#) states that Chekov tends to find the solution to transcendental issues like the problem of finding authentic existence. In his works, behind the quotidian problems, there is a pursuit to find the answer to human problems on the universal plain. Unlike many Russian writers and thinkers, who were telling truth in its absolute form, Chekov insisted that truth varies for every person. He finds out the combination of *Everything* and *Nothing* in the big picture of the universe. He thinks that in the absence of transcendental truth, life becomes a burden. Thus, he adds philosophy to art in his works. These issues, related to transcendental truth and existence in the face of death, are problematic in the 20th century. In *The Cherry Orchard*, not only a single person but the entire existence of the world is going towards the stage of non-existence (pp. 23-32).

[Borny \(2006\)](#) asserts that *The Cherry Orchard* has a balancing tendency. From the angle of characterization, either this or that approach should not be adopted rather both this and that approaches should be adopted (p. 24). [Michael Frayn \(1978\)](#) hints toward the dualistic nature of the Chekhovian characters. Characterization is not divided into high and low characters. Two opposites are fused together in the play (p. 229). Not only the characterization but the whole texture of the play is woven with both *this and that* tendency. The play has fused structure on the level of characterization and events also.

[Bartlett \(2005\)](#) examines Anton Chekov's dramaturgy which has a particular quality of inactivity. Characters in Chekovian plays are incompetent to do any activity. Although many chances are given to them so that they may do any activity, they fail to do so. Their inactivity is not because of their unwillingness to do work. Rather they want to do any work, but they cannot do so (p. 1). He analyzes their impotency in the light of certain philosophical concepts like human freedom, self-knowledge, and human action. He also points out the delimitations that make characters either unwilling to take action or

impotent to do any work. [Bartlett \(2005\)](#) justifies that although Chekovian plays lack action, they make dramatic movements forward (pp. 2-8).

[Klimenko \(2001\)](#) regards Chekov as a postmodern writer as his works deal with a sense of nostalgia, a peculiar characteristic of the postmodern age. He discusses the English sense of nostalgia, particularly in the Edwardian era (p. 123). The nostalgic side of Chekov makes his notable dramatic contribution to the development of British drama in the twentieth century. It is the prominent tendency of drama in the 20th century to deal with the absence of something. From this perspective, Chekov is much akin to Beckett. He can be called a postmodern playwright.

Theoretical Context

this purpose, it works systematically. It traces the structure based on a binary system, subverts the system of polarization and displaces it. Deconstruction does not believe in conformed names; therefore, it disrupts the normal patterns in a text ([Shodhganga, 2018, p. 70](#)). At this point, a new space of "in-betweenness" is introduced ([Papadelos, 2007](#)). The new space shows that the borderlines between binaries are not fixed. Rather, they are blurred ([Khezerloo and Wollstonecraft, 2010, p. 127](#)). As soon as, the borderlines between poles of binaries blur, the proper system of signification becomes nullified.

The nullification of a system of signification allows opposite poles of binaries to move freely to break into each other and make the *in-between area* prominent. It shows that the opposites in a binary are, in fact, part of a binary. They are not the production of polarization but rather the product of the pairs. There are trails of differences which are already working in binaries ([Khezerloo and Wollstonecraft, 2010, p. 128](#)). One thing cannot be labelled either true or false at one time. Rather it can be both at the same time (Wang and Tian, 2016, p. 82). Each part of the opposition traces the other ([Guillemette and Cossette, 2006, p. 37](#)). The non-conformity to polarization leads the deconstructionist to new horizons.

New possibilities emerge in the face of the absence of a conceptual grid or haunting figure called a *Transcendental signifier*. The centerless universe shifts into the regime of free play where the ending is unachievable ([Bertens, 2013, p. 132](#)). The unending chain of signifiers is the maze in which the play enters and never ends. It depicts a situation of possibility which is impossible at present ([Price, 2018, p. 117](#)). *Transcendental Signifier*, *Trace* and *Supplement* are some of the important concepts of the theory of deconstruction pertaining to the present study.

The entire western philosophy seems to be haunted by the enigmatic concept of the *Transcendental Signifier*. It serves as the endpoint of references toward signs. It points toward the central meaning, which binds the sense into a coherent whole. All the forms of human thinking exist under the umbrella of *Transcendental signifier*. Derrida challenges the concept of the *Transcendental signifier*. Consequently, it has led him to liberation from transcendence ([Hendricks, 2016, p. 2](#)). Deconstructionists roam in a universe where the *Transcendental Signifier* never serves the purpose of eternal being ([Gorman, 2011, p. 26](#)).

Trace, a French word, has the meaning of track or imprint ([Shodhganga, 2018, p. 113](#)). Derrida views that *Trace* is absent in a sign, but it defers/differs from other signifiers. Thus, one signifier leaves the *Trace* of another signifier. *Trace* in a sign is neither fully present nor fully absent. *Trace* is the influence left on the opposite side of a binary ([McQuade, 1992, p. 90](#)). The *transcendental signifier* is substituted with the *Trace*. *Trace* serves as the origin of some absent origin. Every opposite in binary is a *Trace* of the other and a binary is completed through *supplement* ([Shodhganga, 2018, pp. 113-114](#)).

A *supplement* is an insignificant extra thing which is added to something already completed. Derrida explains it from two aspects. From one aspect, *Supplement* adds to something which is already completed, but from another aspect, it fills the empty space in that thing. *Supplement* leaves behind a *Trace*, and it is preoccupied. To break the binary logic, there is supplementary logic for *Supplement* represents excess and, at the

same time, lack. Through *Supplement*, Derrida demonstrates that one side in a pair does not only add meaning to another side, but it can also replace it (Wang and Tian, 2016, p. 82). *Supplement* stands between the plus and the minus.

Trace and *Supplement* lead to a situation of non-decision where new possibilities emerge.

Discussion and Analysis

Aristocracy and Serfdom

Orchard in the play *The Cherry Orchard* is the haunting figure hovering above the textual universe. Throughout the play, the main part is associated with the orchard. Everyone is concerned and worried about the fate of the orchard. It reinforces the importance of the orchard in the minds of the readers. Economically, the orchard gives earnings to both the classes of society, named aristocracy and serfs. Socially, it keeps the society in order by maintaining the hierarchies. It makes the aristocrats remember their golden days as the orchard is reminiscent of their ancestors' golden values. Lyubov even makes the orchard parallel to her mother's image because the white flowers in the orchard stir in her mind the memory of her mother in a white dress (Chekov, 2015, p. 104). It symbolizes the old traditions and golden culture of the aristocrats, which they miss in their present life. As Lyubov says, "What have not these old walls seen..." (p.186). As an orchard connects all the fields of life, it can be called the centre. While going through the text of the play, the readers can realize the significance of the orchard through several dialogues of the characters. For example:

- i. "... And here it is...the same...nothing has changed...dear orchard...the angels have not forsaken you" (p. 104).
- ii. "Cut it down? ...Are you serious? . . . This cherry orchard is the most remarkable. . ." (pp. 94-96).
- iii. "...I cannot imagine my life without the cherry orchard. . .the most remarkable place" (pp. 156,96).
- iv. "This cherry orchard is mentioned in the Encyclopedia!" (p. 96).

These lines show the significance of the orchard in the lives of the characters who are associated with it in one way or the other.

Under the overarching figure of an orchard, the world is going on systematically. Orchard has regulated a proper system of signification. In this system of signification, two binaries, i.e., aristocracy vs serfs and old generation vs youth, are working. Both the poles of binary work according to the roles assigned to them under the shadow of the orchard. Firs sums up the whole situation in these words: ". . . you knew where you were. . ." (p. 132). The serfs know that they are serfs, and aristocrats know that they are aristocrats. Aristocracy enjoys the privilege over the serfs because of the ownership of the orchard. The old generation shows an association with the orchard, while the youth is indifferent towards the orchard. Orchard's existence has polarized them. They are working on the principle of mutual exclusiveness.

The normalcy of the world, assured by the presence of an orchard, gets disturbed by a single event – the sale of the orchard. The discussions and suggestions about the sale of the orchard show that the existence of the orchard is at stake. Orchard has become unable to maintain the previous system of signification. The incapability of the centre to hold things together further results in the absence of an orchard when the orchard is sold. With its sale, the shadow of the orchard fades away from the textual universe. Consequently, the previous elements of the system become free to move. The previous system of polarization ends up. The two opposite poles of a binary start to break into each other.

Firstly, aristocrats and serfs both are not behaving as they used to behave in the past. Aristocrats were controlling the lives of the serfs, but now their own life affairs are slipping out of their hands. While arranging ball parties and spending money lavishly, they are concerned about their wealth. They cannot keep up the previous pomp and show. In the past, they patronized the serfs, but now they depend upon them. For example, Firs is dead due to carelessness and Varya's marriage cannot take place. Gavey depends upon Firs, and Lyubov depends upon

Lopakhin. On the other hand, serfs are becoming independent. They are adopting their masters' previous life patterns. Dunayasha is always busy copying the aristocratic women. She dreams of going abroad and always powders her face with a mirror in her hand. Epikhodov is busy making love with the maid. Lyubov's previous life shows a love affair with her lover in Paris. Now serfs are following them. Yasha asks Lyubov to take him to Paris because he is serious about making his earnings. The elite are not elite in the proper sense of the word, and the servants are not servants as they were in the past. The boundaries between proper feudalism and serfdom are blurred.

Youth and Old Age

The role of youth and the old generation has also been interchanged. Youth is taking the place of elders. The old generation is proposing impractical ideas that may save the orchard from sale. They are not ready to face the truth that the orchard will be sold out, but the youth is looking forward in a positive way. The young ones are more practical in their approach toward the sale of the orchard than the old ones. Lyubov is behaving like a child. Lopakhin says about her, ". . . You are nothing but an old woman" (p. 126). She is behaving in a nonsensical manner. She endorses her childishness when she says, "I feel like a child again" (p. 80). There is Gayev, who depends upon Firs even for changing his coat. He always comes with his impractical proposals to save the orchard. His logic to save the orchard is also absurd and impractical. He says, "This orchard is mentioned in Encyclopedia" (p. 96). The very first image of the nursery and the old generation's affinities with the nursery suggest their childish behaviour. Act I opens in a nursery. The image of the nursery reflects the immaturity of the old generation. It is not the youth but the old generation who shows a sense of belonging with the nursery. Quite contrary to the old ones, the youth is more responsible, broad-minded and optimistic. From the youth, it is Trofimov who is best representing his generation. He criticizes the old ones who always keep on praising themselves and do not do any practical work. He introduces himself ". . . I am young..but I have been

through so much already" (p. 144). There is Anya, who follows the radical ideas of Trofimov. Trofimov comments about her: "Light! . . . first flower of spring" (p. 116). She is the first one to allude to the new life and hope. The roles of the youth and the old generation are interchanged with each other. Again, the boundaries between youth and old age are also blurred.

The confusion caused by blurred binaries highlights the absence of a *Transcendental signifier*, centre or objective truth. With the sale of the orchard, the shadow of the *Transcendental signifier* disappears, and inconsistencies woven in the social fabric of society become highlighted.

The illusion of social coherence vanishes and inconsistencies become prominent. The characters become uprooted from their social footing, and their roles are changed. These gaps and tensions exist before the sale of the orchard, but the orchard, working as a *Transcendental signifier*, keeps them concealed. The new situation brings the fact to light that the aristocracy was living at the expense of the serfs. Their lives totally depended upon them. As Trofimov says to Anya, ". . . you are living on credit at the expense of others.." (p.144). A loosely structured so-called system of signification is established. Serfs are muted because they do not own the orchard, and the aristocracy enjoys privileges. The presence gives privilege to the aristocrats and keeps the serfs at a lower status. Aristocracy, owning the orchard, is enjoying privileges. Their lives are full of comforts and luxuries. Anya refers to her mother's lavish manners that ". . . she orders the most expensive thing on the menu and then tips the waiter a ruble each" (p. 84). Again, she gives the gold coin to the vagrant. The meanings in the play are generated in the absence of an orchard. The trees in the orchard are cut down, and it remains no more an orchard physically. But transcendently, it loses its central place as well. Aristocracy finds the true meaning of their lives when the orchard is sold.

The absence of the orchard gives birth to many new possibilities. There starts a chain of signifiers. In this chain, new signifiers appear, like Dachas and the emerging middle class. It

creates several new possibilities. The play is pivoted to the point where new possibilities are emerging. The sale of the orchard is a door which opens to show different new possible solutions to the existing problems. The *Transcendental signifier* is lost, and hierarchies are not working in a previous way. This situation is more promising as stability is lost and the game of free play starts. In the play, the absoluteness that the orchard was enjoying in the past is now over.

The new possibilities emerge in the *in-between* space called *Trace and supplement*, where the two poles of a binary break into each other. The deconstructionists focus on the *in-between* space named *Trace*. The play also hinges on the concept of *Trace*. Firstly, the middle class in the play is the example of *Trace* as it is neither aristocratic class in its proper sense nor it is class of serfdom. They exist as semi presence. They have the element of presence in absence. From the Saussurian perspective, both the binaries are mutually exclusive, but deconstructionists believe that this empty space between the two parts of a binary is filled with *Trace*. *Trace* stands both for presence and absence. The newly emerged middle class is the *in-between* area in which both the binaries break into each other. Neither is it fully present nor fully absent. Secondly, Act II also works as a *Trace*. It stands midway between the old and the new era. On the one hand, there are ruins of old age, and on the other hand, there are railway and telegraph poles. One can see the newly emerging city, which would be the residence of cottage dwellers. Act II starts in a shabby place, but at the end, there is a conversation between Trofimov and Anya in which Trofimov predicts the arrival of mankind's happiness. Act II shows the *in-between* space through the powerful symbols of the orchard and train. The train is the symbol of progress. At the start of the play, Lyubov's train is late. It suggests that still the old generation or the aristocrats have not perceived the true meaning of progress. Their life is fixed with the orchard, whereas Lopakhin's declaration about the railway line in their village and the idea of cutting down the orchard shows that he is ready to accept progress. But still, both the classes are in the state of *not yet* condition, and symbolically

Act II highlights this state. Thirdly, Dachas are symbols of *Trace*. It is Lopakhin who gives the suggestion of Dachas. He says, ". . . divide up the orchard.... build dachas.... little cottages" (p. 94). Again, he mentions the summer dwellers and says, "Things have been changed.... now there is new sort of visitors" (p. 98). On another occasion, he says, "We are going to build dachas for our children...they will see a new life here" (p. 174).

The most important example of *in-betweenness* is the character of Lopakhin. He is not presented as a typical merchant who is busy money-making. He is a sensible and cultivated fellow who, after the sale of the orchard, sometimes behaves like a serf and sometimes like a landlord. He stands for the semi-presence of aristocratic values and their absence as well. He announces after the sale of the orchard, "Here comes the new landlord...the new owner" (p. 174). In another place, he says that his father was also a peasant, and he is not better than his father. Lopakhin is the key character who goes beyond the normal system of binaries and refers to new horizons.

Trofimov stresses the new possibilities in his dialogues. He says, "Humanity is on the move towards the higher truth...towards the greatest happiness possible on this earth" (p.182). In another place, he says, "We must be free of the small, the pointless.... throw away the banal in order to go forward in freedom and happiness" (p. 142). Trofimov even suspects the very ending of the human beings in these words ". . . with death only the five senses known to us perish, and the other ninety-five remain alive" (p. 136). The phrase '*perpetual student*' associated with Trofimov suggests free play. As no signified is absolute or eternal, there starts a chain of signifiers. Anya's idea of a new orchard is like a Derridean game of free play. She refers to free play by saying that "We'll plant a new orchard" (p. 176).

At the end of the play, it seems that it is going to start again from a new perspective. All the characters are moving towards a new life. The play ends on a journey. Although a pensive mood prevails throughout finally, the play ends on a note of happiness, which is expected in the future lives of the characters.

The whole play reflects the doomed human existence, but the ending makes the reader believe in the human capacity to make a new start. The ending dialogues of the characters suggest that they are moving towards new destinations. After purchasing the orchard, Lopakhin says to Lyubov, "Why must be it like? Why cannot we change...finish with all the mess and misery in life!" (p. 174). Lyubov says to Anya, "Your eyes are shining like diamonds...are you happy?" (p. 186). Anya replies that "A new life is about to begin!" (p. 186). Trofimov foresees the upcoming happiness "Here comes happiness" (p. 146). The old life is forsaken. New life is welcomed. Anya says "Goodbye, old house" (p. 198). Trofimov's answer synchronizes with her reply, "To the new life" (p. 198). Even Gayev comments: "Everything is fine! Think how miserable we all were before the orchard was sold. When it was all over...we all calmed down" (p. 186). Moreover, Pishchik feels fortunate as she receives wealth unexpectedly. She exclaims with joy, "We have been having a fine time!" (p. 170).

Firs is the only character who is unwilling to accept the change which causes his death. He is left alone to die. Yepichodov expresses

his views about him that "Firs has reached an irreparable state of dilapidation" (p. 184). Firs wants to live in the past, which is a peaceful place for him. He idealizes the previous system of signification in which binaries existed. Everything was categorized and kept in its place. As a member of an obsolete society, he does not want change and consequently dies.

Conclusion

The whole situation before and after the sale of the orchard shows that the worldview presented in the play is deconstructed. In a deconstructed universe, a *Transcendental signifier* is absent, which further leads to new possibilities. The play does not offer any solution to the problem which has been dramatized by the playwright. Rather, it presents the problem from different angles and makes its readers look at reality from new perspectives. Whereas this newness creates a kind of confusion, it also portrays a worldview where nothing is eternal and permanent. New possibilities may take place at any time.

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