

'*Ariadna* is a work of misogyny, but *The Bride* is a work of feminism'. Account for the discrepancy.

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### ***As an Introduction***

It at first looks like *Ariadna* had a cause and effect relationship with Chekhov's life with the actress Lika Mizinova, and that because of personal reasons (embedded in the texture of the work) Chekhov would have come to write a deeply misogynist work. It would also look like an older, tired Chekhov, would then write a valedictory and more feminist story called *The Bride*, on his deathbed. One question arises, though; how are we to see the position of a male writer, writing 'feminist' or 'misogynist' work – and where does this authorial voice reside, in order to prove such positions?

### *I : Misogynist readings of the Works*

#### **Chekhov and misogyny**

Reading the stories as misogynist, one must note factors in Chekhov's life in addition to the text itself; significantly, his relationship to women, especially the actress Lika Mizinova and his wife. Despite his claimed 'biographobia', Chekhov inserted particular occurrences from his life into his fiction, and thus fictional meaning must be taken to offer at least the possibility of specific response to specific events or opinions in his life. This makes general statements of 'misogynist' and 'feminist' harder to pin on the author, who may have simply let his opinions flux. Flux, while writing in an observant and accurate style.

The two stories - a *Traviata* with a happy ending, and a sort of *Doll's House* theme - share a number of similarities that could be suitably used to bring up misogynist trends; of Chekhov's time, his own personal misogyny and of literary tradition (embedded in patriarchal culture). In *Ariadna*, the whole premise of the story and 'plot' could be construed as essentially chauvinist, in its assumption of the demise of woman and her emotionally led life. I use the term 'plot' with reservation, as the action is unfinished. Yet we today seem to know what is coming if the operatic 'fallen lady' theme doesn't come about; *Ariadna* will continue to lead a shallow life and get her comeuppance, when

the wisened Samokhin has escaped the prison of societal rules. In Chekhov's day, as well, this would have fit into the genres of opera and melodrama.

Though there are elements of misogyny in abundance (and not all from fictional male voices), one wonders where the misogyny is supposed to be coming from. One apparent answer is; from everywhere. The character Samokhin certainly is shown as stating himself as misogynist, though this doesn't seem as harshly done as coming from the narrator voice, who directly describes Samokhin as one, adding insult to injury by providing faux-oppositions to these misogynist opinions. If, as it may be suggested at the beginning ("you...I know very well..."), that the narrator is indeed Anton Chekhov; is he really painting a double picture of a misogynist? And by indicating himself also as one - is he making a feminist comment about a past Chekhov, as sculpted in the C19th by the frustrating conditions of the Mizinova affair?

After his experiences in Sakhalin, Chekhov came to a stronger, more stubborn mentality as far as work was concerned. One curious element of his personal misogyny (which seeps into his fiction) is the harsh set of demands put on woman - it seems, at times harder than on men - to be a liberated woman in the way Dr. Chekhov would like. As often male (proto) feminists do, Chekhov seems to have wanted to specify rules on the progression of the female condition - with 'condition' meant to be understood ontologically ('woman') and contextually (society's demands on women).

The contradictory effects of education and foreign countries on a woman are a theme that runs throughout both works. The fact that these only provide starting points and offer an uncertain, though new (read: promising) future, without initial provoking of a man or constant rescue by him, could be read in either a misogynist, or a contextual way - offering an sociological insight C19th gender relations.

There are elements in *Ariadna* and *The Bride*, that could be more misanthropic in tone, than misogynist. The theme of old vs. young generations, the seed of which is carried from *The Bride* to *The Three Sisters* is one such element. One can see it in Samokhin's growing gradually tired (old) and tired of *Ariadna* - a nice Chekhovian-Darwinian image of the female being symbolically a life-force, sucking the energy out of the male to 'shine' (though this could be read psychoanalytically as a shift into an exciting new form of culture).

The theme of male sacrifice could further be linked onto ideas of 'weak men', which can be read specifically in *Ariadna*, and don't necessarily be read from a specific feminist point of view. This Nietzschean based idea and search for 'purities' could lead to individual critiques of lethargy in the genders, or Chekhov may have assumed a 'humanity', which would be criticised. Again, it would be, either the compartmentalisation of genders (as in Irigaray or Cixous)

which could be criticised from a feminist's point-of-view, or Chekhov's position of power to dictate the female side (Ariadna's , socialites' opinions in the story) of the equation.

While Chekhov's stories here - like the treatment of female themes by his near contemporaries Strindberg and Ibsen - could be seen as celebrating the arrival of a new gyno-criticism, there are further problems. The situations Chekhov would get into in his real life, his reactions to these as well as the literary opinions of his characters could be criticised by claiming that he was in fact 'quasi' or 'pseudo' -feminist, in setting the female on a high pedestal in order to control her. From a Freudian perspective this could be called symptomatic of a neurosis. Whether this stems from his society and the misogynist trends of Russian literature or his personal life is unclear. From the perspective of later feminist psychoanalytic work, his could be called a misogynist 'feminist' strategy, in his underlying fear of the female, which he was symbolically losing control of as he was of his illness of Tuberculosis.

## *II : Feminist readings of the Works*

### **Chekhov + feminism**

*The Bride* is a work written concretely more from the woman's point of view than *Ariadna*, though when put into context with Chekhov's life, even if seen as a valedictory 'letter' addressed to his sister, it's hard not to ponder on the sentimental value of this as a desperate 'clear' message from a dying Chekhov. As such, and in direct relation to his wife Olga, the work would be placed in a context of complacency and male apology, with which Chekhov was trying to take the edge off his earlier ambivalence - in life and literary work. From today's perspective, this element in his feminism, of male sacrifice for the progression of women is hard not to look upon.

In this respect, the ambivalence of Nadia's departure, is not as empowering as *Ariadna*'s constant destabilising force against the patriarchal structures, because Nadia's whole position has been initiated by a man and fits into the demands of a woman having to make unnecessarily harsh choices to stand on her own for a great future (another of Chekhov's famous themes). In current feminist criticism, *Ariadna*'s 'body-politics', Chekhov's more open style in the story and the possibility for Chekhov not to dictate her as a 'heroine', could be seen as more fruitful for a discourse in feminism.

Of course there are many facets of the female condition, which can be looked at, and, in this respect the outcome in the two stories is different. In *Ariadna*, the main female character doesn't seem as in control of her own decisions as

does Nadia. One could say, however, that while Nadia is intellectually more 'in control', viscerally and sexually she is far behind Ariadna, having supplanted her femininity for a simulated 'learned' male identity. The first comment about Ariadna's position as to intellect could be countered, though. By arguing that the fairly complete world view of Nadia and also her arrogance to Sasha ("...and her friendship with Sasha seemed now something from the past, sweet, but very, very remote!") could be seen as not very profound as she was possibly going to continue her mentor's strategies of learning and, importantly - its supposed boundaries.

She does become disillusioned with Sasha and his habitus, but while his late environment is described in the style of Dostoevskian squalor (with symbolic flies galore), she is described always as making great sacrifices in tear-jerking style (one sees some similarities with the treatment of Nina and her location amidst Trepliev's 'ideas' - hardly making the feminist point).

In *The Bride* it is much clearer to see the theme of (older and younger) generations, which runs strongly through Chekhov's oeuvre, here affecting gender specifically - as in *The Three sisters*. Though here a narrative of feminist progression can be seen in the vertical construction of the female characters. Again, the relative values of Nadia's escape can be studied, when looking at the corresponding reactions of each generation to Sasha. In this way, the presence of a male persona act as a catalyst to show perhaps Chekhov's assumptions (not that incorrect at times) about female public behaviour stemming from society's (male-defined) structures.

As the structures vary in different historical periods and generations, so will the essential liberties of woman. Noting the neurotic tendencies of Nina, Nadia's mother, this can be taken as a kind of breaking point for feminist ideas into society, though not a point of 'cashing' the benefit of these ideas - as Nadia is still struggling.

*III : Men and Feminism; who dictates style, content, meaning ?*

### **Progression in Chekhov's many identities as intertexts**

It would seem that the question of misogynist/feminist polarities is closely linked with a personal biography and politics of the individual and his public rhetoric. As such it is the responsibility of the person (here, a fictional writer) and the reader to create the balance needed for the act of evaluating the positions (e.g. sexual-political) of the work.

Chekhov's intentionality and symbolic art and biography aside, his works often had not the fullest effect at the 'desired' point. In his dislike for translation, in keeping with his ideas of nationality and symbolic functions in his art, he was significantly narrowing the possible appropriations of his art to a certain Russian audience.

Though despite specific 19th socio-economic references that may now be merely the domain of scholars, some of the gender characteristics (and assumptions) are more available to the contemporary reader because they have been, historically, dramatised so heavily. It is from this vantage point that I come to see, perhaps contrary to the essay title's traditional view, that *Ariadna* is the more feminist work. This requires looking at it as a mature, contradicting version, an older sister of *The Bride* as well as looking at it as a specifically human response to events in the writer's life.

*The Bride* certainly is more finely tuned as a piece of artistry. It has the makings of great work - in terms of feminism - but, in my opinion, relies far more in context than *Ariadne*, which as discussed briefly earlier has a more complex narrator figure. It both indicates the author's ambivalent position towards gender comments as well as potentially making himself a culprit of symbolic crime. He also states his dependence on his society's norms while attempting to deconstruct them - but all this *without spelling it out*. For, in *The Bride*, one gets a much more classical notion of gender divisions, without signifying difference (biological) in sexual terms. Perhaps one will find this in the climatic changes and refusal scene of Andrei, the son.

*Ariadna* dictates meaning less than the more clearly stylistic and political (emancipatory) choices in *The Bride*, and in this it subverts the notion of being simply a misogynist work, which could be fancifully seen as feminist. By seeing *Ariadna* as a specific commentary on themes from Chekhov's life - the menage-a trois with Lika and Potapenko and the memory of his old Latin teacher - and thus positing Chekhov in that specific time (though continuing ambivalent themes of feminism in different forms to *The Bride*) one can see 'different Chekhovs' developing through his chronology. Looking at *Ariadna*, one could also go further into themes of gender and sexuality; to see Chekhov's comments on 19th culture in the light of triangles such as Rozanov-Suvorin-Chekhov; to gentlemen 'in control of identity'?

*To conclude: lack of finite authorial endings -*

#### **dependence on reader and his/her times**

*Ariadna* is more of a misogynistic story, but it is not necessarily less feminist - but in fact may even be more feminist when seen from today's perspective, than *The Bride*, in its breaking down boundaries/categories of woman. The strategy of undermining the stability of meaning in prejudiced topics can be seen as a device, which works into the

fabric of the culture that has helped write it. The naming of prejudice itself is a significant deconstructive point. Taking this naming further into making an authorial point, is to be socially and artistically conscious of one's creative powers. The control and withdrawal of conventionally achieved pleasure in narrative will thus work critically against both genders. But, more importantly it will open up questions about the power of each gender to define its own assumptions about identity. One of these is Ariadna's 'confused' search for herself; her desire for a category in gender and sexuality, which - without being labelled a courtesan - didn't exist yet.

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