



Thanatos as Catharsis in the Short Stories of Anton Chekhov and Pudumaippithan

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Citation: N. Sundar, et al (2024), Thanatos as Catharsis in the Short Stories of Anton Chekhov and Pudumaippithan, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11) 720-722

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.8720

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Sigmund Freud propagates Eros and Thanatos as the two major drives of human life, which represent procreation and death respectively. The Greek term 'Catharsis' means 'Purgation', i.e. the purification of soul through pity and fear. The term is used in common in Greek tragedies. While Thanatos is regarded as death and destructive, the better understanding of the drive in many ways help human beings to lead a meaningful life. Anton Chekhov and Pudumaippithan handle Thanatos in the effective manner to sense Catharsis at the end. To explain the concept, this paper has the following four short stories as primary sources: Anton Chekhov's "In the Graveyard" and "A Dead Body"; and Pudumaippithan's "Kayitraravu" ["Severing Life's Thread"] and "Theru Vizhakku" ["Street Light"]. Instead of identifying it only as a force of destruction, the short stories aim to identify a better life for the protagonists through their better understanding of Thanatos. In the stories mentioned above, Thanatos functioned as catharsis, and helped the purgation of the protagonists.

Keywords: Eros, Thanatos, Catharsis, Spiritual, and Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud's concept of life drives is based on the two opposite emotions, Eros and Thanatos; the former being the life drive and the latter, the death drive. Freud recognizes these drives as the driving forces behind human life. The construction of human societies and cultures are the reactions to the drives which, according to Freud, rule the human psyche.

Though these two drives are considered opposites, they are interrelated in many aspects. Understanding and perception of Thanatos shapes one's attitude towards life. It is imperative to overcome the parochial perception that Eros is associated only with the young and Thanatos is associated only with the old. Lack of understanding of Thanatos leads to a confused, fearful life in the young and middle ages. It may give the impression that both the good and the bad people are treated alike by Death. To the contrary, a clear understanding of Thanatos leads to a better clarity in one's life. It encourages the people to be productive and empathetic in the short span of human existence.

The Greek term 'Catharsis' means 'Purgation', i.e. the purification of soul through pity and fear. The term is used in common in Greek tragedies. One of the best examples is *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, where the kingdom and its people are doomed for the sin of the king. The irrecoverable mistake creates pity and fear in the mind of the audience. Pity arises because of the innocence and kind-heartedness of the king, Oedipus. The king is incognizant of the fact that he kills his father and marries his mother. Oedipus' self-inflicted punishment of losing his vision and his mother's suicide after the revelation develop pity among audience. Pity and fear, and so purgation, would not be the outcome if the audience get the impression that the character deserve such a fate.

Based on the above discussions about Thanatos and Catharsis, it would be apparent to understand the invocation of catharsis by Thanatos. It would function positively, against the notion that both the good and the bad are treated alike by Thanatos. Anton Chekhov and Pudumaippithan handle Thanatos in the effective manner to sense Catharsis at the end. To explain the concept, this paper has the following four short stories as

primary sources: Anton Chekhov's "In the Graveyard" and "A Dead Body"; and Pudumaippithan's "Kayitraravu" and "Theru Vizhakku" ["Street Light"].

The short story "In the Graveyard" is about the casual gathering of young friends. In a sportive way, they chose to meet at the nearby graveyard. On that day, they were surprised about their accidental finding of the number of funeral processions reached the graveyard every day. It was revealed to them that Thanatos has his work every day. They found the graveyard of Yegor Gryaznorukov, a councillor in his life time. The friends discussed about his achievements and power in his lifetime. The scene is reminiscent of Hamlet's reaction to Yorick's Skull in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Yorick was once a jester in King Hamlet's court. He made many people to laugh and to be happy. Hamlet's fervor about the skull of the court jester is as follows:

Alas, poor

Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite
jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his
back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in
my imagination it is!

Act V, Scene iii, Lines 190-202.

These equivalent situations provide the psychological space to have empathy for the dead. Apart from the locale, the significant similarity between "In the Graveyard" and *Hamlet* is the youth contemplating Thanatos. They envisage their future through the life of their familiar people. In the short story, a stranger who was actor by profession came to the graveyard. He searched for the grave of a famous actor, Mushkin. "...forgotten friend Mushkin..." we read. // Time has erased the *never*, and corrected the falsehood of man" (19). Only a few, like the stranger, remembered Mushkin and his contributions to acting. Mushkin's generosity were long forgotten. Even the stranger lamented that he did not succeed in his life because he followed the values and ethics of Mushkin. Moreover, many existing graves were dug out to make space for the new. Both Mushkin and Yorick were forgotten by their contemporaries; but had impacted the youth about life and death. The contemplation about Thanatos forced the procrastinating Hamlet to understand the limitations of human life. It made him quickly take revenge for his father's assassination, and so to make his life meaningful.

Chekhov's short story "A Dead Body" discusses about the experience of a man guarding the dead body of an unknown person. The dead body was guarded by two young men at first. When it became night, a traveller had lost his way to monastery. One guard left for guiding the traveller and Syokushka was left alone to guard the body. He ruminated on the meaning of human existence; culture, society, religion and values created by humans on earth. The story was open ended, giving the space for the readers to think about one's own life and death.

The Tamil writer Pudumaippithan's short story "Theru Vizhakku" explores the friendship between an old beggar and an old street light under which he resides. The street light became very old and existence disturbed the area. It was considered outdated and a nuisance. One fine day, the municipal corporation replaced the old street light with a new one. The beggar found the replacement. The next morning, the residents saw the dead body of the old beggar under the new street light. Both the beggar and the street light was at their old age. They did not have protection against harsh weathers. They together bore severe heat, heavy rain and the winds. They faced the days and nights together. Similarly, they both were excluded from the mainstream society. For the society, they needed to be replaced. As a rule of nature, new humans and street lights came into existence in the same place. Replacement and forgetfulness are the only permanent aspects in their life.

"Kayitraravu" by Pudumaippithan is considered one of the representative short stories of the author. The story is set in Kailasapuram, and the protagonist is named Paramasivan. The names are symbolic of death and destruction. Kailasapuram is the heaven in the Hindu mythology. Paramasivan, one among the three primary Gods, is considered the representative of death in Hinduism; the other two Gods, Buddha and Vishnu, respectively represent Birth and Protection. The story is universal. Similar to Chekhov's "A Dead Body", this short story also did not have conventional beginning and ending. Not being pessimistic about life and death, the story revolves around the endless cyclic nature of life. The short story begins with the birth of Paramasivan, like the birth of any other living being on earth. The growth of the child from birth to death, and the respective drives of each stage of the person, is well expressed in the story. The story primarily questions the classifications such as 'self' and 'the other', humans and non-humans, today and tomorrow etc. The story narrates how human beings strive hard to teach the new born child to differentiate between oneself and the other. Paramasivan's father taught the child to differentiate between oneself and the other. Pudumaippithan was skeptical about this differentiation, and tried to identify the universal soul. The author enquired the exact time that differentiates yesterday from today, and today from tomorrow. Thinking beyond these manmade classifications will help the people to better understand the meaning of human existence.

The hypothesis of Freud's drives advances in regard to the powerful that creates between the two primary psychic powers. Eros is related to sexual urge and procreation; and Thanatos is related to death and destruction. It has the capacity to lay out the bonds that hold individuals in shared relations, and in its job in the formation of the best accomplishments of the human astuteness and motivation. Freud explained the presence of an urge inclining toward obliteration or the disintegration of life, and he saw this to be an outflow of a power of feeling of decline in people. The Freudian hypothesis of drives gave noticeable quality to the possibility that there is a natural tendency for destruction and ending of life called Thanatos. The similarities and tensions between Eros and Thanatos gave rise to the rational discussion of human existence. Freud discussed about Thanatos in many

of his works. The psychoanalytical view about the battle between Eros and Thanatos, with regards to the civilizational interaction, ignited the philosophical investigation of human development. Freud focused on his dualistic view, which advocated two particular drives. From the perspective of Freud's clear dualistic idea, two similar and contradicting drives exist.

The mystic component guided by the delight boosts to accomplish fulfilment. The pleasure principle emerges fulfilment of natural excitement. Inside instinctual life, drives try to keep up with the manners that shift, either for the construction or the destruction of the energy of life. The interest for joy crashes into the law of nature, for the ending of life is in contrary to the pleasure principle.

The two drives could be placed in Freud's psychoanalysis. He classified human thinking into id, ego and superego which represent pleasure principle, reality principle and morality principle respectively. Id, the pleasure principle, strives to fulfill the basic human desire. It neglects cultural, social and religious laws. It is often referred as animal instinct in human beings. Id does not encourage rational thinking. Super ego, the morality principle, guides human beings to live in the society by following the law of the existing system. Contrary to Id, Superego is rational and idealistic in its approach. Ego, the reality principle, tries to create a balance between Id and Super Ego. While trying to understand the drives from the classification of these three principles, Eros could be linked with Id. Thanatos, though a basic human instinct, demands a deeper and rational understanding with the help of Super Ego. This seriousness could be credited to conceivable proof with a power of the past. The condition demanded the presence of Super Ego to understand Thanatos. At times, the mediation of the Superego renders inoffensive tendency towards Thanatos. Accordingly, this is projected toward oneself, and is really sent back to the source from which it began, that is the inner self of human's instinct.

The selected short stories initiated the discussion of Thanatos. Instead of identifying it only as a force of destruction, the short stories aim to identify a better life for the protagonists through their better understanding of Thanatos. In the stories discussed above, Thanatos functioned as catharsis, and helped the purgation of the protagonists. Anton Chekhov's experience as a medical practitioner and Pudumaippithan's spiritual quest helped to establish Thanatos as catharsis in these short stories.

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