

# Chekhov's 'Little Woman': Exploration of Gender Roles and Family Values in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Traditions

Elena Dimitruk<sup>1✉</sup>, Anna Buchelnikova<sup>2</sup>, Titik Indarti<sup>3</sup>, Udjang Pairin<sup>4</sup>

(1,2) Fundamental and Applied Linguistics, Institute of Oriental Studies, Far Eastern Federal University, Russian Federation

(1,3,4) Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra, Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

✉ Corresponding author  
[elena.23011@mhs.unesa.ac.id]

## Abstract

This study examines the representation of the "little woman" in Anton Chekhov's short stories, focusing on the interplay of gender roles and family values in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian society. Through a literary sociology approach, the analysis explores how Chekhov's female characters navigate societal expectations, internal conflicts, and familial responsibilities, offering a nuanced portrayal of women that diverges from traditional literary archetypes of his time. Unlike previous studies, which often generalize Chekhov's female characters as passive or one-dimensional, this research highlights the complexity and agency of women in stories such as "The Lady with the Dog," "The Darling," and "The Schoolmistress." By analyzing narrative structure, character development, and social context, the study reveals how Chekhov critiques patriarchal norms while simultaneously depicting the emotional and psychological depth of his female protagonists. The findings demonstrate that Chekhov's "little women" are not solely symbols of sacrifice or victimhood but are multifaceted individuals grappling with identity, autonomy, and societal constraints. The study's novelty lies in its comparative framework, which situates Chekhov's work alongside other literary traditions of the period, underscoring his unique contribution to the portrayal of women. By emphasizing the psychological and social dimensions of his female characters, this research contributes to literary gender studies and offers insights into the enduring relevance of Chekhov's work in contemporary discussions on women's roles in society. The findings invite further exploration of how classic literature can inform modern debates on gender equality and personal identity.

**Keywords:** *Literary Sociology, Short Story, Feminism, Little Woman*

## INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in literature has long been a subject of scholarly interest, particularly in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature, where gender roles and family values were deeply entrenched in societal norms. Anton Chekhov, one of the most influential writers of this period, offers a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of female identity, agency, and societal expectations. A woman has a broad role, including roles in both public and domestic spheres. A lot of works exploring the issue use different approaches. In their study, Ali & Sasani (2024) explore the complexities of the man/woman relationship in B. Kingsolver's works, drawing from the sources of ecofeminism and binarism. They say that Kingsolver's depiction of male/female dynamics challenges traditional gender roles and norms, magnifying the need for equality and mutual respect. Other than that, Ahmadi (2023) says that studies about the spiritual journey of people can be included in the study of literature in a psychospiritual context. In this case, literature is evidence where a person's spiritual journey or an author can be traced. The role of women in the public sphere includes roles in society and social organizations. Women's role in the domestic realm is the role of being a mother and being a wife (Susi, 2018). Ilunina (2021) analyzing the novel by J. Winterson says that the author adheres to feminist beliefs, but the text of her novel is full of witty paradoxes and syllogisms in which sexist attitudes are rethought, while the irony is aimed not only at male misogyny, but also at the excessive radicalization of feminist

positions, in particular, in the area of so-called benevolent sexism (the perception of a woman as a beautiful, weak creature, and in this different from a man that must be protected; manifestations of "gentlemanly" behavior, in which a hint of a woman's inability to maintain independence is seen). In Chekhov's literature there is a mixture of different perspectives on the topic. Some of his heroines are glad to be the people society depicts. Meanwhile, others can see what they are stand for and not let the man's or other women's view of the problem interfere their worldview.

Literary sociology is an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between literary works and social processes. It views literature not only as an artistic phenomenon, but also as a reflection of social norms, values, and conflicts. Through the prism of sociology, texts become a tool for analyzing cultural, political, and historical contexts, as well as a way of understanding the role of the author, reader, and institutions in shaping the literary field. Kotelnikov (2023) draws attention to the cultural sociological line of thought in the analysis of fiction, since it offers relatively new ways of considering literature as an object of study. According to Anisimov & Shavlinsky (2022), a modern analyst (in the context of their study of Bunin's work) is obliged to place textual criticism, poetics, and literary history in the space of sociology, which allows one to see the very plan of Bunin's war with different schools, the directions of maneuvers between the landmarks and power centers of the "literary field", and how this Russian writer became a Nobel laureate. In this case, one can tell how not only the characters of the works, but also the authors become a part of literary sociology.

In the world of literature, the representation of "little woman" serves as a elaborate symbol of complexity and strength within the family and society. These depictions reflect not only the individual experiences and challenges faced by women but also the broader social norms, family values, and gender roles prevalent during the time of Anton Chekhov. The topic of "little woman" is deeply intertwined with sociological and feminist research, as it sheds light on the ways in which gender dynamics and family expectations are portrayed and questioned in literary works. According to Fakhri (2008), the feminist movement is a movement of struggle in order to transform unjust social systems and structures towards justice for men and women.

The main focus of feminist theory is understanding oppression of women based on race, gender, class, and sexual preference, and how to change it. Also, feminist theory explores the important values held by individual women and the experiences they face along with the struggles they undertake. According to Bashin and Khan (2004), it is not easy to formulate a definition of feminism that can be accepted by or applied to all feminists in all places and times. The definition of feminism changes according to differences in the socio-cultural reality as well as differences in the level of awareness, perception and actions carried out by feminists themselves. The fundamental concept introduced by feminism to analyze society is gender. The use of the word "gender" in feminism was first proposed by a sociologist A. Oakley (1972). According to her, there are two terms that are similar but different: sex and gender. Sex refers to gender which describes the biological division of two human sexes. Meanwhile, gender is a concept that involves the classification of masculine (male) and feminine (female) traits, which are formed socially and culturally (Oakley, 1972).

Unlike "little woman", the image of "little man" holds a significant place in Russian literature, reflecting the social and psychological aspects of the lives of ordinary individuals situated on the fringes of society. This interpretation symbolizes individuals who confront injustice, bureaucracy, and social vulnerability, often lacking the power to influence their own fate. The term "little man" first emerged in Russian literature in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its evolution can be traced through the works of many renowned authors. The term "little man" was coined by the famous literary critic V. Belinsky. Later, "little man" began to be understood as a person of low social status and origin, not gifted with outstanding abilities, not distinguished by strength of character (Amirov, Kudlenko, 2022). "Little man" characterizes a literary protagonist of the realist era, typically situated at a relatively low rank of the social hierarchy: a minor bureaucrat, a merchant, or even an impoverished aristocrat. In the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the concept of "little man" was interpreted quite broadly. Writers did not assign to it the specific meaning that would later be associated with the term. It was only in soviet literary studies that the mythologem of "little man" became synonymous with the minor St. Petersburg bureaucrat. Initially, it primarily referred to the bureaucrats of the

Nicholas period. Later, its social connotation expanded, and "little man" came to be understood as any poor individual occupying lower rungs of the social hierarchy (Nochevka, 2018). The social origins for the development of "little man" archetype in Russian literature undoubtedly stemmed from the third estate, which consisted of impoverished nobles, former students, and seminarians, and later included merchants seeking to establish themselves as prosperous and reliable citizens by acquiring noble status.

One of the first writers to introduce this image was A. Pushkin. Another prominent representative of this literary type became N. Gogol. F. Dostoevsky also made a significant contribution to the development of "little man" image in Russian literature. A. Chekhov, the focus of this study, devoted considerable attention to the description of "little man" as well. In his works, ordinary people are often depicted, their lives are filled with everyday difficulties and internal conflicts. Chekhov delicately and attentively portrays the moral and psychological states of his characters, making his works a significant contribution to the development of this literary type. Chekhov was an innovator in the field of psychology, using a unique approach to portray the inner worlds of his characters. His works focus on the moral state of ordinary people rather than extraordinary individuals. In his stories, Chekhov transforms of the human soul and the reverse process, where characters fall into despair, cease to fight life's difficulties, and succumb to spiritual limitations (Aleksina & Stepin, 2022). With his depiction of personality degradation, Chekhov achieved such a reproachful effect that the reader's various emotions were inevitable. It was a call to comprehend life, to preserve humanity in people. The awakening of an active consciousness was no less important in these pre-revolutionary years. And if the reader's thoughts coincided with the experiences of those Chekhov's characters who were looking for new and honest roads in life, then they inevitably came to the desire to "turn life around" (Polotskaya, 1983).

In the diversity of female characters depicted by Chekhov, a reader can observe various social and economic contexts that influenced women's lives at that time. Some women are depicted as tough figures, surviving poverty and hardship with dignity. On the other hand, some women represent internal conflicts in a complicated family life. Chekhov does not simply depict women as symbols of unlimited love and sacrifice. He uncovers deeper layers, showing the tension between individual desires and social demands, between the desire for freedom and attachment to existing norms. In their article, Poleshchuk & Sysoeva (2024) argue that the formation of Chekhov's perspective on women was shaped by a combination of personal, social, and professional factors. Among these, Chekhov's family background, deep affection for his mother—whose struggles he witnessed firsthand—and his medical career played pivotal roles. As a physician, Chekhov encountered numerous female patients, each with unique life stories, which undoubtedly influenced his honed understanding of women's experiences and their societal roles. During the early stages of his literary career, Chekhov drew inspiration from the women he encountered in his daily life—ordinary, accessible figures, close acquaintances, and even his sister. This proximity to real-life examples allowed him to create female characters marked by remarkable detail and precision in their portrayal. Notably, Chekhov's descriptions of women often mirror his medical background, as he tended to depict them with a certain clinical detachment, prioritizing anatomical details in a manner characteristic of a physician. This approach, while seemingly dry or objective, adds a layer of authenticity to his characters, grounding them in the physical and emotional realities of their existence (Poleshchuk, Sysoeva, 2024). Lyan (2021) noted the strong interest of Chinese scholars in Chekhov's diverse female characters, especially those with an active life stance, as themes of women's liberation resonated deeply in China. The studies often explore Chekhov's female self-discovery and expression within power dynamics and traditional structures, spotlighting characters like Anna in "The Lady with the Dog" as products of Russia's transitional era. Chekhov's depiction of Anna and Gurov's forbidden love as elevating and ennobling challenges societal norms, reflecting his progressive view of women's roles in a changing society.

The topic of gender roles is not only discussed in a prose but also in poetry. Sharonova & Savonina analyze the poem "Valentina" written by A. M. Sharonov and the concept of "eternal femininity", elevating the poem's context to existential and cosmic dimensions and everyday life creating a profound interplay between the earthly and the divine of the woman's image. The same way, Chekhov's stories are not just narratives about everyday life but are complex struggles women

face in searching for identity and meaning in a society that is sometimes unfriendly to individual aspirations. In this research, the representation of "little woman" in the stories of Anton Chekhov is discussed, female roles within the family and society are examined, and it's stated how Chekhov's depictions display the gender roles and family values of his time.

"Little woman" is a term used to describe women who occupy marginal and undervalued positions in society. The term refers to women who are overlooked, underestimated, or disregarded in various social, economic, and cultural contexts. These women may face systemic barriers and limited opportunities, leading to their contributions and potential being undervalued or ignored. The term foregrounds the intersection of gender and social status, reinforcing how societal norms and power structures can render certain groups of women invisible or insignificant in the public sphere. This marginalization can occur in multiple dimensions, including the workplace, political arenas, and within family dynamics, reflecting broader issues of inequality and discrimination. Through the study of literary sociology, it's possible to explore how Chekhov presents the concept of "little woman" in his works. The sociological dimensions of culture represent one of the most pressing issues facing the global community. Addressing this challenge within the field of literary studies is closely tied to the notion that literature serves as a mirror, reflecting both the collective imagination and the collective unconscious of the society from which it emerges. Chekhov continues to uncover the foundational elements that allow us to identify the unity of the author's philosophical vision of the world (Abramova, 2009). Kataev (2008) notes that the structure of Chekhov's prose is not subject to the usual traditional methods of analysis saying that the philosophical fullness of his work is beyond doubt, but it cannot be reduced to philosophical judgments or logical theses. "We have to talk about the specific conceptual basis of his artistic world. The author does not give us an illustration of a philosophical position with the help of pictures and images, but a holistic embodiment of the world in the light of the idea of life." (Kataev, 2008). Chekhov's stories offer a deep view of the internal and external conflicts faced by "little woman", whether in the context of domestic life, the role of caregiver, or within broader social dynamics. It is important to examine the representations of women, especially the "little women", in literary works because this not only enriches our understanding of gender roles but also provides a clearer picture of how society at that time viewed women's roles.

While much has been written about Chekhov's female characters, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in the existing literature by focusing on the concept of the "little woman". Unlike previous studies, which often generalize Chekhov's female characters as passive or confined to traditional archetypes, this research employs a literary sociology approach to uncover the perceptive nature of his female protagonists. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative framework, which situates Chekhov's work alongside other literary traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stresses his unique contribution to the portrayal of women. While writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky often depicted women as either idealized figures of virtue or tragic victims of societal oppression, Chekhov's female characters defy such reductive categorizations. By exploring the representation of women in Chekhov's stories, it is hoped that people can gain deeper insight into how literature not only reflects social reality but also shapes and influences the way people view gender roles in society. In the diversity of female characters depicted by Chekhov, various social and economic contexts that influenced women's lives at that time take place. This study also addresses the gap between theory and reality by examining how Chekhov's women reflect the life experiences of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian women. While feminist theory has often critiqued the patriarchal structures of this era, Chekhov's stories provide a literary counterpoint that complicates these critiques. His female characters are not merely victims of societal norms but active participants in their own narratives, grappling with questions of identity, autonomy, and fulfillment. By analyzing the social and economic contexts of Chekhov's time, this research demonstrates how his work bridges the gap between literary representation and historical reality, offering a more insightful understanding of women's roles in both public and private spheres. This also invites us to ponder how these stories are still relevant in a modern context, where gender roles and expectations of women are still hot topics for discussion. By understanding more deeply the representation of women in classic literary works such as Chekhov's, readers and researchers can open themselves to a richer dialogue about the role of women in society, while appreciating the

contribution of literature in depicting and celebrating human complexity. Examining the representation of "little woman" in literary works is crucial because it also enriches the understanding of this concept in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this context, Chekhov gives different dimensions to female characters, moving away from conventional stereotypes and often disclosing the complexities and contradictions inherent in these roles. More than that, the significance of this research extends beyond Chekhov studies, contributing to broader discussions in literary gender studies and the sociology of literature. By featuring the unique ways in which Chekhov portrays women, this study challenges the prevailing narratives of female passivity and victimhood in classic and modern literature.

According to Kuznetsova (2024), V. Bryusov, another prominent Russian author, put on a feminine mask to talk about gender roles in literature. Being an experimenter by nature of his artistic gift, Bryusov persistently sought to penetrate the female soul and psyche, as well as to cogitate on many issues related to the gender stereotypes of the era, "gender anxiety" (J. Butler) and the so-called problem of gender (Kuznetsova, 2024). Unlike Chekhov, Bryusov takes a female pseudonym to attempt to craft a prose piece from a woman's perspective, giving her a voice, which in turn served to inspire and energize his own creative process. Nevertheless, being a different approach, it also is a reevaluation of how classic literature can inform contemporary debates on gender equality, identity, and the evolving expectations of women.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in literary sociology, a methodological framework that examines the interplay between literary texts and the social contexts in which they are produced and received. Literary sociology provides dual focus: on the one hand, it analyzes the internal dynamics of the text such as character development, themes, and narrative techniques, and on the other, it situates these elements within the external realities of the society in which the text was produced. The application of literary sociology in this study is particularly significant because it presents the interconnectedness of literature and society. Chekhov's stories are not plainly artistic creations but also social documents that have the tensions, contradictions, and transformations of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian life.

The research focuses on three of Anton Chekhov's short stories ("The Lady with the Dog," "The Darling," and "The Schoolmistress") selected for their distinctive portrayal of female protagonists who embody the concept of the "little woman," diverse female experiences, their exploration of roles like mothers or teachers. The analysis involves a systematic process of close reading, thematic coding, and character analysis to identify key themes, characterizations, and literary devices that illuminate Chekhov's layered delineation of women. Additionally, the study applies contextual interpretation to situate the stories within the social, cultural, and historical context of Chekhov's time, examining how societal norms, class dynamics, and economic conditions influenced the lives of women.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The roles of women in Russian literature and the problem of gender in literature using prose and poetry as an example were discussed by such researchers as Li (2022), Balashova (2022), Mirkushina (2022), Uspenskij & Fedotov (2024), Hoogenboom (2024), Kibalnik (2024), Mitsyuk & Pushkareva (2024), etc. This concept, while rooted in the broader literary tradition of the "little man" in Russian literature, is distinct in its focus on gender-specific struggles. Unlike the "little man," who often symbolizes social and economic fragility, the "little woman" gives broader field of discussions of limitations and opportunities of a specific gender group in a specific society. Sarycheva (2023) mentions a short story "Two Crashes" by I. Grinevskaya about how women's hopes are destroyed first in childhood through the fault of a boy, and in adulthood through the fault of a man. Or "Mlle Roger", which tells the story of a middle-aged woman who comes to a ball with her nieces. She is disappointed because everyone considers her old and no one asks her to dance (Sarycheva, 2023). By defining the "little woman" this way, the study builds on but also diverges from previous research, which has often focused on women's passivity or victimhood.

While Chekhov's stories often focus on a wide range of characters and themes, his "little woman" reveals insights into the roles of women in society and the challenges they face in everyday life. He presents women in various stages of life, from young girls thinking about their future to older ladies reflecting on their past and the choices they've made. Through these diverse descriptions, Chekhov captures the universal experiences of life, including love, sacrifice, and the struggle for fulfillment within patriarchal societies, showing the tensions between individual wishes and societal expectations. At the same time, Chekhov challenges conventional notions of motherhood and womanhood, presenting characters who oppose stereotypes and societal norms. They are individuals with their own desires, ambitions, and flaws.

### ***"The Lady with the Dog"***

One of the most poignant examples of delving into the complexities of human relationships, with a particular focus on gender roles and family values is found in "The Lady with the Dog", which encapsulates Chekhov's representation of the "little woman" through the character of Anna Sergeyevna. A notable episode in Yalta tells how Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov, a man of superficial relationships, meets Anna Sergeyevna in Yalta. Their encounter initially seems insignificant, yet it marks the beginning of a profound transformation in Gurov. This transformation is subtly introduced in the scene where Gurov, eager to share his newfound emotions, begins to recount his experience: "If only you knew what a fascinating woman, I made the acquaintance of in Yalta!" Anna Sergeyevna is portrayed as an educated woman from a respectable background. Anna is depicted as a touching, pure, and naive woman who values honesty and simplicity. Gurov remembers: "Anna Sergeyevna was touching; there was about her the purity of a good, simple woman who had seen little of life."

Despite being married, she does not love her husband and regards him with disdain, referring to him as a flunkey: "My husband may be a good, honest man, but he is a flunkey! I don't know what he does there, what his work is, but I know he is a flunkey!" Anna's description of her husband showcases her own disillusionment with her marital life, indicating a deeper longing for genuine affection and respect. She finds it comical that she cannot recall where he works, further playing up her emotional detachment from him: "She was not sure whether her husband had a post in a Crown Department or under the Provincial Council—and was amused by her own ignorance." Her interactions with Gurov are marked by a shy, awkward innocence, unveiling her inexperience with the complexities of romantic relationships. Initially, Gurov's attitude towards Anna is one of casual detachment, but he soon realizes the profundity of his feelings for her. This realization compels him to seek out Anna in her provincial town, acknowledging that he cannot live without her. Anna, equally tormented by their separation, travels to Moscow every few months to see him. Despite the pain of their double lives, the societal constraints of the time make it nearly impossible for them to find a solution, such as divorce, which was exceedingly difficult to obtain.

According to Rogova (2012), the characters become alienated from themselves and their social roles. Despite the sincerity of the feeling experienced by Anna Sergeyevna, according to the "external performance", for an outside observer she is "the lady with the dog", "like a sinner in an old painting", a "geisha", and, like a heroine who is not free from social stereotypes of behavior, she speaks about herself: "I am a bad, low woman; I despise myself and don't attempt to justify myself." The illogicality of the characters' actions and their lives is expressed at the syntactic level of the story in the repeated repetition of syntactic constructions with the coordinating adversative conjunction "but". A picture of the world is formed in which everything is "strange", depends on chance, the logic of life is hidden from the characters and the reader, and is full of mystery. Sudden turns of events are the norm for characters, this explains the repeated repetition of the word-image "suddenly" throughout the entire narrative of "The Lady with the Dog":

"...and the tempting thought of a swift, fleeting love affair, a romance with an unknown woman, whose name he did not know, suddenly took possession of him."

"He suddenly drew her to him and kissed her passionately."

"He felt suddenly frightened." (Rogova, 2012).

In the beginning of "The Lady with the Dog", Anna Sergeyevna's behavior is genuinely sincere, but to Gurov, it appears as though she is playing a role. Anna suffers deeply, pouring out her feelings and crying. By the end of the second chapter, Gurov reflects on Anna's perception of him, noting that she always called him kind, extraordinary, and noble, yet he realizes that she sees him as something he is not, inadvertently deceiving her. Gurov becomes aware of his own "arrogance of a happy man" and recognizes that Anna, like the women before her, is not happy with him:

"...it was clear that she was very unhappy."  
"... and from her eyes he could see that she really was unhappy."  
"And not one of them had been happy with him."

Even if Gurov loves Anna, he does nothing to leave his wife. Anna's remarks divulge her confusion and uncertainty about her desires:

"I wanted something better."  
"Something happened to me."  
"I don't know what I am doing."

This uncertainty, randomness, and irrationality, characterized by the strangeness and illogical nature of events beyond control, are defining features of Chekhov's artistic world, indicating the presence of absurdity in "The Lady with the Dog". By the end of the story, it is noted that they see each other secretly, hiding from people. In "The Lady with the Dog," symbolism is employed to underscore Anna Sergeyevna's entrapment within societal norms. The gray fence of Anna Sergeyevna's house symbolizes the societal constraints that trap her. Similarly, the recurring motif of the sea represents freedom and escape, contrasting with Anna's stifling domestic life. The fragmented, episodic nature of the story mirrors the disjointed and uncertain nature of Anna's relationship with Gurov, the instability and impermanence of her pursuit of happiness. Chekhov quickly links Anna's youth to her innocence, suggesting that her naivety stems from her lack of real-world experience. Anna contrasts sharply with her lover; her innocence and youth juxtapose Dmitri's age and experience with deception. This contrast is pointed up when Anna laments that Dmitri must think less of her for betraying her husband. These episodes carry an irony since Dmitri, a serial adulterer, cannot comprehend why Anna is so distressed by recent events. However, as the story unfolds, Anna's loneliness becomes so profound that she is willing to abandon the principles she once desperately clung to.

The title "The Lady with the Dog" serves as a social characterization. The dog and luxurious details of Anna's attire align with her sophistication, elegance, and aristocratic background. The motif of misunderstanding pervades Chekhov's story, illustrating the complex dynamics of human relationships. Chekhov's portrait of Anna Sergeyevna as a "little woman" underscores the limited roles she has in this very society. Anna's predicament includes the broader issues of marital dissatisfaction and the lack of autonomy experienced by many women. Her character is emblematic of the struggle between personal aspirations and societal obligations. Berkowski (1962) explains that both characters are amenable to evil in their own way. Both have taken real life away from themselves. Their love is without temper, just like they themselves, people, who have removed from themselves everything that gives people character and personal initiative. "Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna imitate life, imitate love, believing that their imitation is this is the original itself. Obviously, this is the essence of the famous story: people are convinced that they are in love, when love has barely touched them; they mistake glass for diamond, they are helped by ignorance of what their relationship really is, who they themselves are. Their happiness is that they understand less than what readers are allowed to understand through the author." (Berkowski, 1962).

### **"The Darling"**

One of the most disturbing topics for the writer, to which he invariably returned throughout his work, was the topic of the vulgarity of the surrounding life. Vulgarity, like a terrible swamp,

sucked a person into the abyss of a meaningless existence. A person became helpless when this miserable existence for some reason went out of its usual rhythm. In the story "The Darling" this problem takes on a new shade: the heroine, a sweet and pleasant girl, endowed with the rare ability to love, faces this topic in a completely different way. Olenka Plemyannikova's entire life is centered around love, which is as necessary for her as air. Everyone refers to Olenka Plemyannikova as "Darling" for her sweet disposition and pleasant appearance. Before her marriage, she loved her father, her aunt from Bryansk, and her French teacher. Having married the entrepreneur and owner of the Tivoli pleasure garden Kukin, she is completely immersed in new love, losing her individuality and adopting her husband's interests and habits. Kukin despises the audience of his establishment, and, having become his wife, Olenka begins to repeat his words: "But do you suppose the public understands that?" she used to say. "What they want is a clown. Yesterday we gave 'Faust Inside Out,' and almost all the boxes were empty; but if Vanitchka and I had been producing some vulgar thing, I assure you the theatre would have been packed. Tomorrow Vanitchka and I are doing 'Orpheus in Hell.' Do come."

The death of her husband deprives her life of all meaning, reducing it to a purely physical existence. When a new man, the timber merchant Pustovalov, appears in Darling's life, she again surrenders to love and is completely immersed in worries about selling the forest. His speeches become her speeches. After his death, she feels empty again. Darling again gives herself over to a new feeling, now for the veterinarian Smirnin, and begins to live by his interests and concerns, to speak in his words: "We have no time for nonsense. What's the use of these theatres?"

The image of the heroine, according to Lakshin (1975), is marked here by the clearly negative attitude of the author. Chekhov himself writes about her this way: "She repeated the veterinary surgeon's words, and was of the same opinion as he about everything. It was evident that she could not live a year without some attachment, and had found new happiness in the lodge. In any one else this would have been censured, but no one could think ill of Olenka; everything she did was so natural." "Without him [her husband] she could not sleep, but sat all night at her window, looking at the stars, and she compared herself with the hens, who are awake all night and uneasy when the cock is not in the henhouse."

In "The Darling," Chekhov uses stylistic elements such as repetition and irony to critique societal expectations of women. Olenka's repeated adoption of her husbands' interests and opinions is presented with a subtle irony that exposes the absurdity of her lack of individuality. Yet, this repetition also serves to bring to the fore her capacity for love and devotion, challenging the reader to reconsider whether her selflessness is a weakness or a form of strength. The narrative perspective shifts subtly throughout the story, allowing the reader to see Olenka both through the eyes of others and through her own experiences. The ironic comparison of Darling with a hen that concludes this fragment speaks for itself (Kadyrova, 2022). According to Popova (2011), lexical repetitions in the text clearly speak about the main thing in the heroine's life - the need to love: "The black kitten, Briska, rubbed against her and purred softly, but Olenka was not touched by these feline caresses. That was not what she needed. She wanted a love that would absorb her whole being, her whole soul and reason - that would give her ideas and an object in life, and would warm her old blood. And she would shake the kitten off her skirt and say with vexation: "Get along; I don't want you!"

She does not have an inner core that does not depend on the environment, and becomes helpless in the face of real life. Researchers of Chekhov's work reproach the heroine for this very thing. In many ways, this point of view was formed by the writer himself. A speech portrait of a heroine who does not speak herself, but only echoes, supported by an extensive author's commentary, it would seem to create a comic image ("And what was worst of all, she had no opinions of any sort. She saw the objects about her and understood what she saw, but could not form any opinion about them, and did not know what to talk about. And how awful it is not to have any opinions!"). It should, but it doesn't. There is comedy, but it is the comedy of the situation, not the image (Popova, 2011).

All the diminutive forms that Chekhov uses (Olenka, Vanichka, Vasichka, Volodichka, Sashenka, kitty, darling, etc.) only aggravate the hopelessness of her life, the understanding that her life will not change, there is no such thing that would trigger even the slightest changes in her



life and way of thinking, her vision of life. However, the same thing is repeated again: Darling is caring towards a boy named Sashenka. She dreams of Sasha's future, without thinking about herself: "... then she would go to bed and dream of that faraway misty future when Sasha would finish his studies and become a doctor or an engineer, would have a big house of his own with horses and a carriage, would get married and have children..."

The narrative describes Darling's past, and only in the finale, when we talk about her mother's love, do present tense verbs appear. Her life story is shown to illuminate her present. Without this past, her affection for the veterinarian's son might have been perceived differently. Love fills her life with meaning. Olenka dissolves in love. You can no longer tell where she is and where her loved one is- Olenka becomes a copy of the one she loves. Gorky wrote that Olenka is a sweet, meek woman, but at the same time a gray mouse, a faceless slave of her affections (in Lakshin, 1975). According to Tyupa (1989), Olga Semyonovna appropriated someone else's personal experience, someone else's direction of life, as if doubling the object of her affection. Darling's selflessness is a form of spiritual dependency (Tyupa, 1989). Darling's love is an imaginary love, under the shell of which something else is hidden: the affection of a helpless "I", a dependent, unsupported soul (Kamyayov, 1989).

Popova (2011) raises a curious question. Darling is a provincial young lady who lived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Who knows how her life would have turned out if a strong, intelligent man had been next to her? His thoughts could become her thoughts, and perhaps her position (Popova, 2011). Darling's life is paradoxical: she lives only for the sake of others. For her, this is both an escape from real life and a way to join it. Complete dedication is both a sacrifice and a forced measure, dictated by its nature and manifestation of selfishness. Her tragedy is absurd, her life passes in a vicious circle, it shows how shallow her personality is. The story has such an amazing feature: when you read it, surrendering to the pure sensations of the soul, it gives the impression of authenticity, correspondence to the inner feeling of correctness, some kind of deep and gratifying justice. But as soon as you turn on your reason, contradictions begin to multiply and pile on top of each other. However, soon the contradictions begin to multiply and pile on top of each other. The image of Darling is ambiguous - hence the range of opinions. L. Tolstoy admired her as the epitome of the "ideal woman", following her destiny, A. Glinka considered Darling to be an expressive example of Chekhov's "unconsciously indifferent" people (in Polotskaya, 1983).

### **"The Schoolmistress"**

Anton Chekhov's short story "The Schoolmistress" is a description of the life of a "little woman" in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian society. The protagonist, Marya Vasilyevna, exemplifies the struggles and societal expectations of women during this period, providing rich material for discussion of the topic.

Marya Vasilyevna, a middle-aged schoolteacher, on her arduous journey back to her village school after collecting her salary in town. The narrative captures her physical and emotional fatigue, marking the monotony and solitude of her life. Marya Vasilyevna's journey is not a physical one, but also it is a metaphor for her internal struggles and the burdens she carries. The heroine, while traveling from city to village, not only recalls a prosperous past, which unexpectedly ends due to a series of life failures, but also analyzes the present. Marya Vasilyevna's mental wanderings through her destiny represent her life in the reader's perception as ongoing, unconscious suffering, as an endless, monotonous and aimless path, the result of which is loneliness. Remembering the past and analyzing the present, Marya Vasilyevna begins to realize her spiritual restlessness and its reasons. This becomes an internal impulse to revise life criteria and guidelines (Oleinik, 2010).

Marya Vasilyevna's character exemplifies Chekhov's "little woman" — her role as a schoolteacher, though respectable, is fraught with challenges and lacks recognition. She lives a solitary life, devoid of familial warmth and social connections, reflecting the limited opportunities and expectations for women in her position. Marya Vasilyevna's profession as a teacher is undervalued, mirroring the broader societal tendency to underappreciate woman's work, especially in nurturing and educational roles. Her low salary and the difficulties in collecting it signalizes about the economic challenges faced by working women, putting emphasis on their financial dependency and sensitivity. Marya Vasilyevna's personal life is marked by loneliness. She has no family of her

own and her social interactions are limited, life experienced by many women who dedicate their themselves to work or familial responsibilities. Unlike other Chekhov's characters who find solace or conflict within family structures, Marya Vasilyevna's life lacks familial ties, giving prominence to her marginalization. The school and her students become her surrogate family, indicating how women in her position often find alternative forms of family and social connection. Her previous life with parents is also somewhere in the past: "Of her old belongings, all that was left was a photograph of her mother, but it had grown dim from the dampness of the school, and now nothing could be seen but the hair and the eyebrows."

In "The Schoolmistress," Chekhov employs imagery and tone to convey Marya Vasilyevna's disillusionment. The monotonous landscape of the provincial town and the repetitive nature of her daily routine exhibit her emotional and spiritual stagnation. The contrast between her memories of a happier past and her bleak present underscores the theme of unfulfilled hopes. The story's somber tone and understated prose further make conspicuous Marya's quiet suffering, making her a poignant example of the "little woman" who endures societal neglect with dignity.

For comparison, in their research, Demenyuk & Menshikova (2022) talk about the problem of education, the responsibility for which in traditional society lies with women, the observed destruction of the traditional institution of the family, in which women acted as the archetypal keeper of the "hearth" raised in the work of A. Bierce. Bierce is limited to purely social frameworks, and the delusion of his characters is limited to specific illusions about their purpose and social structure. The Chekhov's story enhances specific symbols of the heroine's uneventful life and lack of societal interaction as well. Nevertheless, Chekhov goes beyond mere social commentary to explore the psychological and emotional consequences of these constraints.

The events of the story take place the village Vyazovye and a small provincial city. Bakhtin (1975), among various chronotopes, called the chronotope of a "provincial town". One of its characteristics is cyclical everyday time. Time here is eventless and therefore seems almost stopped, there are no events, but only repeating existences (Bakhtin, 1975). The life of a rural teacher is boring, without affection, without friendly participation, without interesting acquaintances. And this is where the main character gets stuck, with her dreams that are unlikely to ever come true, she turns into a "little woman". Chekhov speaks about her past with a detailed remark, since the heroine herself does not think about it (according to Flegantova (2013), the motive of oblivion). The desire to live leads to the heroine seeing her dead mother in a random woman. Thus, the past that arose in the memory of the rural teacher makes her realize the shortcomings of her existence: "The barrier was down at the railway crossing. A train was coming out of the station. On the little platform between two first-class carriages a lady was standing, and Marya Vasilyevna glanced at her as she passed. <...> "Mother!" And she began crying, she did not know why. At that instant Hanov drove up with his team of four horses, and seeing him she imagined happiness such as she had never had, and smiled and nodded to him as an equal and a friend, and it seemed to her that her happiness, her triumph, was glowing in the sky and on all sides, in the windows and on the trees. Her father and mother had never died, she had never been a schoolmistress, it was a long, tedious, strange dream, and now she had awakened...". The bright memory that arises in the mind of Marya Vasilyevna, from the author's point of view (and sometimes from the position of the character), is a fleeting memory, unable to overcome the drama of her every day, present existence (Flegantova, 2013). "The Schoolmistress" exemplifies Chekhov's ability to capture the complexities of women's lives and the societal forces that shape their experiences. The story unearths the systemic undervaluing of women's work and the isolation experienced by women who do not conform to traditional family structures even though dreams about one.

Previous studies have frequently characterized Chekhov's female characters as either passive victims of patriarchal oppression or idealized figures of virtue. Golovina (2017) in her studies of female characters in classical Russian literature, mentions similar examples in the works of Russian writers of the late 19th-early 20th centuries (Gorky, Kuprin, Bunin, etc.). Her paper mentions images of socially humiliated, powerless women who find themselves driven into a corner as a result of the living conditions that prevailed at that time, rules and laws, images of victims, as well as socially conditioned images that gradually sink to the bottom of life, floating along flow,

succumbing to the temptations of an easy life, and who, according to the author, are themselves to blame for their situation, because passive, inactive, inert. These are images of women "lost" to society and family (Golovina, 2017). Meanwhile, Polotskaya (1983) sets off their self-sacrifice and lack of agency. Polotskaya claims, for instance, that "The Darling" is a story in which the death of the human soul seems to be combined with sincerity and humanity. Darling's life is presented as a series of repeating cycles: falling in love to the point of oblivion - loss of a lover and the meaning of life - new love and new hobbies. Despite the appearance of activity, its existence moves in a circle because repetition is typical for Chekhov's stories and it still remains one of the most important techniques of irony.

Role of women in Russian society and literary had changes a lot, but some examples are obvious about how society differentiate female authors and characters from male ones. In her research, Kim (2021) examines the work and pseudonym Teffi of the Russian writer Nadezhda Lokhvitskaya. Russian social thought of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was no less critical of the possibility of granting women social roles outside of marriage and motherhood. Teffi seems to break this tradition. Undoubtedly aware of the critical attitude towards women's creativity, she deliberately does not take a male pseudonym and writes humorous stories and feuilletons. Also, Nuri (2021) analyzes how Pasternak portrays the three female characters in 'Doctor Zhivago,' and each of them represents distinct archetypes and stages in Yuri Zhivago's life. One of them is depicted as the traditional wife, typifying stability and familial devotion. The second represents the "new woman," characterized by her independence and resilience, while the third one symbolizes love and hope, a figure of sacrifice and compromise for the male character's sake. These relationships are intricately tied to both man's inner world and the external historical context, reflecting the tumultuous era of Russia in which he lived. Almost the same happens with Chekhov's female characters. Each of the characters mentioned above accentuate different attitudes towards their personalities, not only of the other characters in the short stories, but for sure of people reading the book.

## CONCLUSION

The research is expected to have uncovered how Chekhov's female figures are far more than mere products of their societal confines. Instead, they emerge as layered individuals who grapple with, confront the pressures of their environment. Chekhov's narratives both mirror and interrogate the era's rigid gender constructs such as the ideals of devotion, domesticity, and restricted professional avenues, while simultaneously presenting women who exhibit emotional complexity, quiet strength, and a subtle defiance of societal expectations. No doubt, through his stories, Chekhov offers an exploration of the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and tribulations of life of a woman in Russian society of the 19<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chekhov's female characters are not only symbols or archetypes but fully realized characters whose stories resonate with readers across generations, inviting reflection on the timeless themes of love, family, and the human condition. The main features of "little women" in Chekhov's stories are: 1) Inability of the women to escape social attitudes and expectations. Women in Chekhov's short stories often find themselves trapped in social norms and roles imposed by society. They are forced to live up to expectations, which limit their personal freedoms and ambitions. 2) Focused on finding love as a way to find meaning in life and self-identity. This love may be conditional or insincere, but for them it remains the only available source of comfort and self-determination. 3) Emotional and physical isolation many of Chekhov's heroines live in. They often feel disconnected from the world, whether due to geographical distance or lack of support and understanding from others. 4) Unreasonable self-sacrifice and dedication for the sake of family or love. They rarely think about their own needs and dreams. 5) A constant feeling of dissatisfaction and unfulfilled hopes. Their dreams and hopes often remain unfulfilled, and they are forced to put up with the routine and dullness of their existence. 6) Low social and economic status that increases their dependence on others and focuses on their exposure. 7) Modest joys and simple pleasures where the heroines find joy - short moments of happiness, small victories and quiet pleasures become important in their lives, while more lofty life goals either fade against the background of small ones, or don't appear at all in their picture of the world. Chekhov's artful portrayal of a woman transcends the boundaries of time and culture,

resonating with readers across generations. His exploration of female experience delves into the twists of human relationships, shedding light on the universal ideas that define the human condition. The women, with their intricacy, resilience, and defenselessness, serve as mirrors reflecting the intricacies of the human soul. These women attracted critics and scholars during the writer's lifetime and continue to do so to this day. There are many reasons for this: this is an interest in the writer's characterology in general, and the desire to project his interest in current women's issues onto Chekhov's artistic practice. But the main thing, perhaps, is that it is in female images that the utmost concentration of contradictory, seemingly incompatible traits, thoughts and aspirations is most obviously revealed - that same masterful Chekhovian balancing on the finest semantic borderland. The female image is considered as an integral part of the world of Chekhov's dramatic art. The different personal characteristics of his female characters are one of the most important aesthetic features of Chekhov's dramatic texts. The examples of "little women" examined in this study do not detract from the dignity of Chekhov's female characters, but make a deep impression on the perception of their reality and attitude, which allows us to indicate modern society, its standards and attitudes in relation to the topic of feminism.

The implications of this study extend beyond Chekhov's works, offering valuable insights for literary gender studies and contemporary discussions on women's roles in classic literature. By making a point of the nature of Chekhov's female characters, this research invites a reevaluation of how women are portrayed in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, moving beyond stereotypes of passivity or victimhood. It also underscores the relevance of these narratives in modern debates on gender equality, identity, and the evolving expectations of women. Chekhov's ability to capture the quiet struggles and resilience of his female protagonists provides a timeless lens through which to examine the enduring challenges faced by women across different historical and cultural contexts.

For future researches, this study could be expanded in several directions. A broader feminist theoretical framework could be applied to further analyze the power dynamics and systemic inequalities depicted in Chekhov's works. Additionally, a comparative analysis with literary works from other periods or cultures could illuminate how women evolve across different societal contexts. Exploring Chekhov's influence on later writers or examining how his female characters resonate in contemporary adaptations could also yield fruitful insights. Ultimately, this research is expected to deepen the understanding of Chekhov's literary legacy and to make prominent the enduring significance of his work in fostering meaningful dialogue about gender, identity, and societal change.

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