
THE THEME OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN NIKOLAY KOLYADA'S PLAY THE CATAPULT.

Irshad Abdul Vadagaonkar,
Masters' student (Russian),
Department of Foreign Languages,
Shivaji University, Kolhapur.

Abstract:

The first talk of homosexuality in literature in Russia in twentieth century goes as a back as to the publication of complete works of Oscar Wilde in 1912 in Russian language. During much of the Soviet times for more than sixty years the subject remained a taboo in public life as well as in literature as homosexuality was criminalized by Stalin. It was only during the Perestroika and Glasnost times-the bureaucratic reforms undertaken by the last Soviet leader - Mikhail Gorbachev -the iron curtain of state censorship was finally lifted and writers started to openly write about the subjects banned earlier, the suppressed homosexuals being one of them. Russian theater was no exception to this. The playwright Nikolai Kolyada, one of the fathers of Russia's contemporary theatre movement, was the first to break the taboo about the homosexuality on stage. His Slingshot or the Catapult (1989) was the first play to address the gay relationship in Russian theater. It tries to depict the struggle of two men who try to come to terms with their sexuality but fail to achieve so. It captures the immediate post-Soviet culture of transition. It caused thought provoking debate in general public with its theme and drew considerable attention to the existence of the gay community in Russia. After the Moscow premiere of this play in 1993 the then president of Russia Boris Yeltsin halted discrimination against homosexuality and decriminalized it. The present paper aims to explore the treatment of the theme of homosexuality in the play.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Russian literature, Modern Russian Theater, Nikolai Kolyada, The Catapult

“Whatever kind love may be- impossible, unrealizable, forbidden, terrible, destructive – it still produces goodness in the world, produces humanity, produces mutual understanding.”

- **Roman Viktiuk** (a leading Russian gay theater director)

Background:

The first talk of homosexuality in literature in Russia in twentieth century goes as a back as to the publication of complete works of Oscar Wilde in Russian translation in 1912.¹ Though after the Russian Revolution the new Bolshevik government legalized homosexuality in 1923 the matter of wider homosexual rights and the treatment of homosexual people in the 1920s was often mixed. There was hardly anything in literature about it.² In 1933, the Soviet government under Stalin banned and penalized homosexuality and thereafter for more than fifty years the subject remained a taboo in public life as we as in literature, film and arts. It was only during the Perestroika and Glasnost times- the bureaucratic reforms undertaken by the last Soviet leader - Mikhail Gorbachev -the iron curtain of state censorship was finally lifted and writers started to openly write about the subjects banned earlier. The discursive silence on the topic of homosexuality came to an abrupt end in the late 1980s with Perestroika. The full potential of homosexuality burst forth in literature, film, art, media as well as in popular medical literature. Russian theater was no exception to this. Nikolai Kolyada's Slingshot or the Catapult proved to be the first play to address the gay relationship in Russian theater.

Introduction:

Nikolay Kolyada is one of the central figures in the Modern Russian theater and is considered to be one of the fathers of Russia's contemporary theatre movement. The playwright has paved way for Russia's new talented writers, dramatists and actors through his innovative and prolific dramaturgy. Kolyada was the first Russian playwright to break the taboo about the homosexuality in Russian theater in seventy years and address the theme of gay relationship on stage in his play the Catapult or the Slingshot (*Rogatka*). The play was written and published in 1986. It offered a sympathetic view of a gay relationship. For the first time the soviet audience witnessed on stage the struggle and agony of two men who try to come to terms with their sexuality but fail to achieve so. It captured the immediate post-Soviet culture of transition. While shocking Moscow, Kolyada found an enthusiastic reception in California where the play was performed by Roman Vikiuk(a leading Russian gay theater director) at the San Diego Repertory Theater in 1989 . The performance led to several performances in different foreign countries and translations of the play into Polish, German, Serbian and other languages.It caused thought provoking debate in general public with its theme and drew considerate attention to the existence

of the gay community in Russia. After the Moscow premiere of this play in 1993 the then president of Russia Boris Yeltsin halted discrimination against homosexuality and decriminalized it.³The present paper aims to explore the treatment of the theme of homosexuality in the play and also shade some light on the phenomena of homosexuality in post-Soviet Russian society.

The Play: The characters in Identity Crisis

The Catapult marks the beginning of Queer Theater in Russia.⁴The play has two acts, and six scenes punctured by five queer, intermittent dreams of the protagonist which depict his aspirations as well as agony. It is a story of the struggle of two men of different age and lifestyle, brought up under the Soviet culture and values and brought together by a chance event and have struck chord of feelings for one another and who struggle to come to terms with their sexualities but fail to achieve so, leading finally to the death of one and misery for the other. The characters fail to accept their sexual identities because of the moral restraints put upon them by the cultural and social values of the state sponsored Soviet life.

There are only three characters in the play. Two male characters and one female character. Ilya is 33-year-old former soldier who has lost his legs in the Afghan war and is now a crippled invalid who uses wheelchair all the time. He lives alone in a Soviet-time apartment on the eighth floor in a very dingy room littered with all sorts things. He is an embittered drunkard and lost person, neglected by all. He begs for wine in a nearby shop, sings terribly, engulfs himself all the time in his loneliness, plays with ideas of suicide. His favorite pastime is to sit at the window and idly throw stones at passers-by through his catapult to attract their attention as well as irritate them. He is a potential misanthrope. Anton is an 18 year kind hearted, educated youngster from a good family who thinks that he doesn't get well along with girls. He lives in the next lane to Ilya's. Larisa is 30-year neighbor of Ilya of violent nature, whose husband has run away with a woman. She often takes care of Ilya and looks after his room. She madly loves him and wants to be with him and raise a family with him. But Ilya doesn't have love for her, though he pities her for her miserable condition. He thinks that she is after his room and doesn't love him as such.

One evening when Ilya, out of his spite for meaningless life, attempts to commit suicide by throwing himself under railway. Anton turns up on the scene in time and saves him and brings

him to his apartment. All the action in the play takes place in the room of Ilya. Ilya is furious with Anton for saving him. He thinks the lad did it to gain some fame for himself in newspapers. Ilya swears at him, talks to him in a very rough manner. Nevertheless, he likes the company of the boy. Anton stops Ilya from drinking too much. A conversation is struck, from which Ilya learns that Anton has always observed him in the streets. That intrigues him. Ilya is happy to get one considerate interlocutor and narrates him the queer dreams he has had in the past. Both like each other's company. Anton promises to visit him again. In the next meeting Anton asks Ilya about what dream he saw. Ilya tells him that among other strange things he saw him walking naked in the room. Anton blushes. He narrates one of his secrets to Ilya about how he doesn't get well along with girls. His past sexual experiences with girls were all failure. Ilya is confused as to why he is telling him about this. On Anton's asking 'are we same?' Ilya answers that 'Yes, same. Two brothers-degenerate.' (9) Slowly over the period of time tender feelings are born in their minds for one another, but they don't express them. They are not ready to acknowledge them at all. In the third act when Larica approaches Ilya with sexual desires, he drives her away by saying that it is a disgust for him to be with her, nothing will come out of it. Larica curses him as an impotent scoundrel.

Meanwhile Anton and Ilya's relationship grows. In one of the meetings, when they are playing and merry making, they kiss each other. Embarrassed Anton gets up and goes away. From here now Anton starts to feel little shame for his relationship with Ilya and what he did with him. In next meeting he starts to talk to him in a nasty way. He openly expresses his shame, anger and regret. He remarks, 'Paradox of Age- She loves him and he another guy. Guy!' (20) When Anton confronts Ilya directly with the question 'Do you like me?'(21) Ilya responds positively. Then Anton, frenzied, threatens to kill him. He swears at Ilya. Anton desperately wants to feel normal about himself. In order to prove this 'normality' he has a sexual experience with a girl named Sveta, where, as he tells Ilya, everything went as should be. Ilya tells Anton such a similar story about Larica in order to soothe himself and Anton. Anton categorically asks Ilya to forget about what has happened between them, because he thinks that it is shameful and disgusting to have a such thing between a man and another man. He further asks Ilya to simply disappear. Ilya can't digest such change of behavior from Anton. All he wanted to be with Anton. But when he feels desperation of Ilya, he promises him never to cross his path again in life. When Anton is gone Ilya pours out all his anger and frustration by cursing him and asking

God to torture him for the rest of his life for his cruelty. But a moment later he realizes his mistake and asks God for his wellbeing and to help him to live. He realizes he must go. He jumps off the balcony and ends his life. After a gap of six months Anton comes to the apartment of Ilya only to learn about Ilya's death from Larica. He accuses Larica of his death. He accuses her and everyone of not loving him. With tears in his eyes Anton calls out Ilya, but it is too late. The play ends with Anton's longing for Ilya.

Discussion and Conclusions:

Nikolay Kolyada in the play tries more to explore the homosexual identities of his characters and their response to the realization of their sexual identities than to depict the social life of homosexuals and their problems. It is a depiction of spiritual agony.⁵ Both Ilya and Anton are conscious about their sexual identities, but they lack the courage to accept it openly. Only when Ilya meets Anton and thinks that he has got a kind person to talk to him he narrates him one of his dreams, in which he first hints at his sexual identity. Ilya's queer dreams play an important role in understanding his character.

Ilya: I'll tell you one more dream. Such, interesting ... I had a dream a week ago. I'm like a crow. Here I am flying, flying over the city. I fly over my house, past the balcony, I fly, I fly ... My feathers are black, my wings are like that, you know ... And I croak, croak, but it turns out: "I'm a crow! I'm no gender! I am neither female nor male! I spit on you all from this height! I look at you all with contempt! I will fly for another three hundred years and shout to you about myself! I will live another three hundred years!" And then suddenly I say: "Ku-ku! Ku-ku! " Funny, huh? (6)

Ilya's understanding of his sex and his contempt for society is visible here. He imagines himself to be crow, a negative symbol for society's contempt for a person like him. Both Ilya and Anton never really completely come to terms with their relationship with each other throughout the play except till the very end. And when they do one of them, Anton, rejects it as disgusting and shameful.

Anton: Wait, wait ... That's it! (He crossed his arms.) Do you understand everything? Everything is correct. And what happened between you and me must be forgotten, plucked out, forgotten, forgotten ... You said correctly then - I dreamed it. You and I, of

course, drank too much ... Only a drunken person can do this, do you understand? Forget it, huh? I will not come to you again, never! What for? And you will be ashamed, and I ... It must not be so! This is disgusting, disgusting. It's a shame. You can't have that between men, you know? This is a mess, is it clear to you? You and I are men, you know? It's a shame, it can't be so, it's a shame, it's impossible. (page 23)

Though the construction of homosexual identities appears superficially the same across cultures, it is important to understand, as the anthropologist Lisa Rofel noted, that “the emergence of gay identities . . . occurs in a complex cultural field representing either a wholly global culture nor simply a radical difference from the West.” In Russia homosexuality almost never simply denotes same-sex desire or specific sex acts, the association of homosexuality with sexual pleasure is far more negative in Russia, where the pursuit of individual desires “against the norm” may appear to be a willful separation from the collective, and therefore “un-Russian,”⁶

That’s why see such an outright rejection of his sexuality by Anton because it would make him look ‘un-Russian’ culturally and socially.

Why Anton so desperately wants to feel ‘normal’ about himself? The answer lies in the discourse on the homosexuality in the post-Soviet Russia. Russian society tends to be very normative. And so, although homosexuality was finally removed from the official list of clinical pathologies by the Russian Psychiatric Association in 1999, it is still common to hear homosexuality referred to as “abnormal love” and heterosexuals as “normal people.” The association of homosexuality with abnormality has in Russia produced its own logic, according to which homosexuals are capable of all kinds of abnormal activities and has become a repository for almost anything considered to be outside the norm.⁷ In the recent Constitutional amendments in Russia in 2020, one of them defined marriage as a relationship between only one man and one woman⁸, thus practically excommunicating the homosexual community to the periphery of society.

Combined with homosexuality and identity crisis is the theme of suffering which Kolyada highlights through the persona of Ilya. A penchant for suffering has long been seen as a central feature of the Russian soul. As Dostoevsky wrote in his *A Writer’s Diary* ‘I think that the principle and most basic spiritual need of the Russian People is the need for suffering—incessant and unslakeable suffering, everywhere and in everything.’⁹ Within that historical post-

Soviet context, the almost privileged relationship to suffering accorded the Russian homosexual. In 1977, the Russian gay poet Genady Trifonov described homosexuals as “the very symbols of Sorrow and Suffering,” and images of the suffering homosexual abound in post-Soviet culture.¹⁰ Kolyada’ Ilya is a prime example. He learns through his love for Anton not only to accept his own suffering but to take on the suffering of others. Ilya ‘sacrifices’ himself by throwing himself from the balcony. In the final dream, he tells Anton, “... No, the main thing is spare other suffering... They mustn’t suffer.” (26) Ilya and his suffering are transformed and spiritually redeemed through his love for Anton. It transformed Ilya from a misanthrope into a kind of potential Prince Myshkin from Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Idiot*.

References:

Kolyada, Nikolay. Trans. Tegel Peter. *The Catapult*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989

Baer, Brian James. *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 91

Kon, Igor-James Riordan. *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*, Simon and Schuster, 1995,

Gerstner, David. ed. *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, Routledge, 2011, 493

Baer, Brian James. *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 4 Ibid, 9

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *A Writer’s Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz, vol. 1, 1873–1876, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, 161

Baer, Brian James. *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 95