Abstract:
The main concern of this paper is to demonstrate how a literary work such as “The Cherry Orchard” reflects the turbulent conditions of the Russian society during the late 19th century. “The Cherry Orchard” is concerned with such issues as the diminution of aristocracy, the rise of the middle-class, the emancipation of serfs, the devolution of agricultural economics, and farming problems. The process of the garden’s dilapidation closely parallels the decay of the outmoded values of the Russian gentry.

Key words: The Cherry Orchard, Russian Society, Late 19th Century, The Aristocracy, the middle-class

1. Introduction:
As Rose Whyman explains “the Cherry Orchard” introduces the social, economic, and political changes in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. It also surveys the reactions of a social group to these changes. The 1890s witnessed drastic hardships such as the devolution of agricultural economics, heavy tax revenues, farming problems, cholera and typhus epidemics. Crop crises in 1901 gave rise to peasant insurrections in some provinces. These together with political tensions and migration to towns caused an indocile public attitude. By 1903, one-half of the private estates belonging to the landed aristocracy was mortgaged, and this forced them to sell their lands (147).

According to Edward Braun, the main concern of the play is related to the diminution of aristocracy during the 19th century in Russia where post-emancipation literature is stimulated by the issue of financially ruined estates and a newfangled enterprising class. He believes that Chekhov depicts the fall of Russian aristocracy in his early drama “Platonov” through helter-skelter scenes and actions; however, “The Cherry Orchard” in which social alteration has a prominent function outmatches Chekhov’s early works (111-112).

Rose Whyman maintains that the play pictures class identities and social relationships, and also surveys an enervated social order in which a minority of aristocrats used to count on the servitude of a majority of peasants for gaining wealth and comfort. She adds that with the commencement of industrial progression in Europe, despite the reign of an encompassing censorship, the political coteries in Russia reacted in different ways after 1900. They brought forward the question of whether Russia should comply with European capitalism or not. “The Cherry Orchard” which is situated near a large town is inevitably impressed by the social, political, and industrial changes which occur in that area. In this regard, Chekhov portrays his wholly radical perspectives in the play (148).

Donald Rayfield believes that for an audience which is more willing to accept modern and new ideas “The Cherry Orchard” can be something of a social and economic dinosaur which is not able to change and adapt itself to new situations, so it is doomed to extinction. The orchard actually represents a derelict country in which coherent demolition is far more satisfactory than a perturbed devastation (qtd. in Edward Braun115).

However, as Edward Braun mentions, the orchard has other imports for the characters of the play: Yermolai Alexeievitch Lopakhin, a parvenu who belongs to the lowest social class, regards the orchard as both an ill-fated economic dinosaur and an exceptional business occasion. Although the orchard is the incarnation of the misery his father and forefathers endured before the emancipation of serfs, he loves that garden and adores it as “the most beautiful place in the world”, and his only dream is to possess it. For Lyubov Andreievna Ranevskaya, and her brother Leonid Andreievitch Gayev, the blue-blooded owners, the orchard is the source...
of their wealth and also a place reminiscent of their late relatives and the memories of the past. Firs, an aged valet for whom the emancipation of serfs is something of a catastrophe because in old times everyone loved and respected the owners, remembers the orchard as the origin of a productive agricultural economy once dependent on skills and abilities which are now completely forsaken (115).

Rose whyman states that the plot line is from May to October. This duration implies a course of action which starts with birth and ends with death. The first setting of the story is Lyubov’s nursery which is filled with the fragrance of the cherry trees in full bloom at a May dawn. The last setting of the story is the same nursery in which Firs finds himself locked-up in the abandoned house and can do nothing but wait for an inevitable death (149).

Rose whyman adds that the major line of the plot is about indebted aristocrats who are obliged to sell their house and estate with its famous cherry orchard in order to cover their liabilities. For Lyubov and Gayev the orchard and the house are the incarnation of an aristocratic heritage, therefore, they can never think of cutting down the cherry trees or destroying the beloved mansion. According to Rose whyman the minor line of the plot deals with romances between Varya, Lyubov’s adopted daughter, and Lopakhin, Anya, Lyubov’s daughter, and Peter Trofimov, a university student who fights against the despotic political and social system of Russia, and a comic love triangle between Yepikhodov, Gayev’s awkward and unlucky clerk, Dunyasha, a maid who wants to imitate her wretched lady in relation to dress style and behavior, and Yasha, a malicious young valet who hates his so-called lords (149-150).

According to Rose whyman, “The Cherry Orchard” possesses the typical characteristics of Chekhov’s former vaudevilles, and therefore wide-ranging satire has a conspicuous presence in this play. Thus, each character has a distinguished form of speech which is often funny; however, comedy is constantly undermined by the distress and sorrow of the quandaries which afflict the characters (152-153).

In regard with the personal identity of the aristocrats in the play, Rose Whyman discusses that they cannot adapt themselves to new situations. They do not know how to perform the duties which are related to their aristocratic position and depend on others. Lyubov and Gayev are incapable of handling their financial problems and miserably count on an aunt in Yaroslavl to help and save the estate and the orchard. Lyubov is always emotionally troubled and suffers from a perplexed love affair. She cannot exert control over her money and does not feel responsible towards her relatives and servants so she is indifferent to Varya’s marriage and leaves poor Firs in the abandoned house. Gayev is an impotent character who feels redundant and ineffective. He cannot do simple everyday activities and depends on Firs to even dress him (154-155).

Rose whyman explains that most characters in the play experience new social identities. Lopakhin suffers from a lowly origin and in spite of his present prosperity he thinks there is no difference between him and his violent and ignorant father (156). In this same regard, Edward Braun refers to Lopakhin as a character laden with many contradictions: he is an indecent, uneducated man who has gained wealth and success through hard work; however, he feels humiliated because of his peasant origin. He is the person who buys the orchard in an auction. When he confronts the financially ruined aristocrats, he at times shows great satisfaction and joy for his success and victory and behaves in an unpleasantly offensive manner, and at others treats them with gentleness and sympathy. These fluctuations in his personality bespeak his altered role in an altered milieu in which aristocrats like Lyubov and Gayev resist change because they cannot depart from the lifelong ideals of a moribund aristocracy (117).

Continuing with the issue of the characters who experience new social identities, Rose Whyman then refers to Trofimov whose emotions and feelings are not matured yet; however, he constantly writes against serfdom and Czarist despotism and is consequently prohibited from taking the university exams. Anya who loves Trofimov is also in want of personality maturation and looks for some purpose in her life. She awaits a future which is still unclear; however, this futur seems hopeful. Varya has no definite social status; she might be the illegitimate daughter of Lyubov’s dead husband or Gayev. This might explain her lethargic and wavering moods which cannot deal with the realities of life reasonably. Firs who is locked-up in the abandoned house is also locked-up in a stagnant past and constantly feels a twinge of regret about the time the serfs knew their place, respected their lords, and were satisfied with their position (156-158).

As far as the writer of this article is concerned, “The Cherry Orchard” reveals part of the realities of a formidable past during which the Czarist dictators exploited large masses of poor people. Then it clarifies an agitated present which is laden with undecided dilemmas and perturbed contradictions peopled with restless characters who are entangled in the cruel milieu of changing standards. And finally it forebodes a future which is nourished by the tortures and the predicaments of the past and the unheard-of variations of the present. So be...
it! Harken! This is the clamorous outset of a great revolution, the greatest in history, which uprises and annihilates the entities of oppression and darkness through its soldiers of the proletariat: the soldiers of the inevitable Russian Revolution in November 1917.

References:
