

“The Bet: A Lesson for Life”*Sajal Nidhi Bara**National University of Study and Research in Law,
Ranchi***Abstract:**

All that glitters are not gold and gilded tombs have worms enfolded. The world has beauties, worldly blessings and wisdom but they are nothing more than those objects that glitters but are not gold and the tombs that looks appealing from outside but have worms enfolded. They are merely lies but unfortunately people love to deceive themselves with lies and live in falsehood, falsehood for truth and ugliness for beauty. They escape from the harsh truth of death. Death never forsakes anyone, everything on this earth comes with an expiry date. The body comes from dust and to dust it will return. There are budding of buds and withering of flowers too. This article is just an attempt to portray the lessons of life that the author Anton Chekhov through “The Bet” has tried to convey it to us about the harsh truth of death and that time is the great teacher, even a proud and wealthy man fails before death and surrenders himself before the hardships that time puts forward. No matter how much wealth he has everything fades away but one should strive for true wisdom and knowledge. Because wealth, beauty that makes a person proud might fade away but knowledge stays with us till the end.

Keywords *falsehood, truth, death, life, time, wisdom, true knowledge.*

Introduction

Life is indeed very precious, each day in the world is a battlefield where everybody has to fight their battle in the bivouac of life, each day adds a lot to our experience and helps us to grow as a true human being. One who does not give up in the battlefield but stands till the end takes the prize of true wisdom whereas the loser loses everything and ends up being a pity fool. There are many illusionary things that are delusive as a mirage like luxury, wealth, beauty etc. that we all seek for but the question is, is this life all about?

Trust no future, howe'er pleasant!

- H.W. Longfellow, “A Psalm of Life”ⁱ

In the words of H.W. Longfellow “Trust no future, no matter how pleasant it may seem” no matter how much wealth we have at present, how appealing our future may seem but in the end death is something that does not leave anything but wipes out each and everything in this world. Death wipes out the proudest of all from the earth like the underground mouse. Everything in this world has an expiry date! Death is the hardest truth of life that no one can escape. There is always a clear call for everybody.

In the short story “The Bet”, Anton Chekhovⁱⁱ through banker and the lawyer has portrayed a lesson for life. The bet to know which is more moral and more humane is just a way to narrate us

what life is all about. The story begins with a party i.e. it begins with a pleasant note where there were many clever people and a lot of interesting conversations were going on. It was then this topic of Capital Punishment and Life Imprisonment was put on for conversation that which is more moral and more humane, some said they are equally immoral as their ultimate goal is to take life. Among them was a young lawyer, twenty-five years old according to him life imprisonment is better because it is better to live somehow than not to live at all. The banker who was even younger, being driven by his hot blood of youth bet two million for lawyer's stay in solitary confinement for fifteen years.

Both of them being driven by the ages of youth made an agreement. Banker staked two million and the lawyer his freedom. It was decided that lawyer would undergo life imprisonment under the strictest observation. He was almost deprived of everything. He could smoke tobacco, drink wine, read books and enjoy everything within the four walls, the only way through which he could connect to the outside world was through a little window. The question is how did the lawyer benefitted from fifteen years of life imprisonment? What did he get by losing his precious time of fifteen years? The story is thought provoking but the lesson it teaches us through fifteen years of solitary confinement of the lawyer is something that a person fails to learn in his whole life. Anton Chekhov ends the story in a very thoughtful note, leaving everybody in the reflection of thoughts.

Portrayal of different phases of life and a lesson for life through fifteen years of life imprisonment of the lawyer

Life is all about ups and downs. Life puts us to different tests, when someone is living a luxurious life at the same time there might be a person completely surrounded with problems of poverty. Life teaches us the great lesson of happiness and pain; at any time, it can turn the dice.

Through lawyer's solitary confinement author has portrayed us a beautiful picture of beauty of life. In the first year of his imprisonment he suffered from loneliness and boredom, rejected wine and tobacco because he said that wine excites desires that are the chief foes of a prisoner and tobacco spoils the air, sounds of piano could be heard and he read books of light character, novels with complicated love interests, stories of crime and fantasy and comedies. Depicting a phase of life how a person with loneliness, distress and boredom tries to escape it through music. For some it's a way to escape the pain of life. Music is the great healer for a soul. A person with utter emptiness and loneliness seeks for someone's company diving from one book to another in search of love, comedies etc. to cover up the emptiness in his heart. They reject all sorts of fake pleasure that wine, tobacco etc. promises because these things just give forged happiness that only last till its intoxication lasts and only excites the desires of a person, the worldly pleasures that fades away like the death that wipes out everything. It shows innumerable attempt from the side of the person to escape the loneliness.

We are the music makers.....

We are the movers and shakers

Of the world for ever, it seems.

- Arthur O' Shaughnessy, "Ode"ⁱⁱⁱ

One cannot deny the fact that we are the music makers. Arthur O' Shaughnessy in his poem Ode We are the Music Makers says that we are the movers and shakers of this world. It is completely true as we cannot make ourselves free from distress or any problems, in fact nobody can do that for us but it is we who can. We can change the gloomy environment, create music around us because we are the music makers and movers and shakers of this Earth.

Second year of lawyer's imprisonment represents that phase of life where a person is completely broken into pieces and surrenders himself to the problems of life and just lives a life for the sake of living. He does not enjoy it but becomes like a corpse. Classical, what the lawyer asked for represents his depression and a living corpse that he had become in his life. He has surrendered himself before the hardships. The other thing that the author wants to tell to his readers is that no matter how much wealth you have, wine, tobacco etc. to give you that worldly pleasure but without the company of a friend and family to whom you can share your problems, your pain and sorrow all these things are just worthless.

In the fifth year of his confinement, music was heard again, he asked for wine and started eating, drinking and used to lie on his bed. He used to yawn often and his irritation was quite prominent through his behavior as he used to talk angrily to himself, books he completely abandoned, before he used to read books but now he completely abandoned them. At night he used to sit down to write for a long time but tear it all up in the morning, it seemed that he used to write his emotions on it but thinking there is nobody to share it, it was useless writing them so he would tear it all in the morning, there was utter confusion inside his mind. More than once he was heard weeping, it showed his complete chaotic life. His actions made it clear that he did not know what to do, how to remove his emptiness or loneliness, he was like a drowning person that is trying to save himself by trying to fix his arms on whatever thing that comes his way. Like that drowning person who was trying to fix his arms on everything in order to save himself, in the same way the lawyer to stop himself from sinking deep inside the worries of life was trying everything, sometimes music sometimes wine, another time reading books and so one. He was not firm on one thing but was simply confused about what he actually wants to do. Where his interest lies? What is the aim of his life? Because unluckily he did not know the answers to the question he simply ends up his fifth year with complete confusion, irritation and aggressive behavior of his.

This is the situation exactly a man faces when he is completely unknown with the meaning of Life.

Second half of the sixth year, the lawyer studied languages, philosophy and history. He also wrote the letter in six different languages. He asked the banker to show them to experts and if there is no error, then a gun to be fired off in the garden. There were no mistakes found in his letter as per the lawyer's demand the gun was fired off in the garden symbolizing firing off of all his loneliness and depression and entrance of the burning spirit to know what his aim in life is. Now there is passion inside him and that passion and the spirit inside him makes him thirsty for knowledge. He studies philosophy, history and many languages. All his years hard work truly proved to be worthy as he says to the banker that you cannot imagine my heavenly happiness right now! Because now I understand that the geniuses of different ages and countries, though they speak different languages, yet the same spirit burns inside them.

Remember, no men are strange, no countries foreign

Beneath all uniforms, a single body breathes.....

- James Kirkup, "No Men Are Foreign"^{iv}

Through this the author is trying to say that though we are separated by languages but our spirit connects everybody in this world. We might be from different part of the world, from different culture, different corner but that same problem, that same hardship each one of us might have faced in different form and that same spirit burns inside everybody.

After tenth year he read only the New Testament and sat immovable before his table which was then replaced by the history of religions and theology. Showing us that in the end everybody has to meet their Pilot i.e. God. Here the New Testament symbolizes that one day all of us have to cross the bar and have to meet our pilot and nobody can escape it.

Hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crost the bar

- Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Crossing the Bar"^v

Last two years he read in extraordinary amount, he would apply himself to natural sciences, read Byron or Shakespeare, Chemistry, medicine, Novel, Philosophy, theology. He read as if he was swimming in the sea among broken pieces of wreckage in the desire to save his life by eagerly grasping one piece after another. All these years made him a man thirsty for true knowledge and not willing to waste even a second uselessly.

Through fifteen years of solitary confinement, the author portrays the problems of life and really narrates beautifully before us what life is all about.

Two different lives presented by the lives of the Lawyer and the Banker

There are two different lives that have been presented through “The Bet”. By the lives of the Banker and the lawyer, author has showed that how a person though having lots of wealth and the lawyer without any wealth became wealthy in true knowledge but the banker completely failed to achieve in his life.

In the end of the story the author reveals to us that the money and wealth that the banker was proud of, lost everything in the end. If a man thinks that he is something when he is nothing at all, he simply deceives himself. Fifteen years before he had too many millions to count but now he had more of debts. Due to Gambling on the stock Exchange and risky speculation of which he could not even get rid in his old age and ended up in complete disaster. That fearless and confident banker was now reduced to a minor banker. Wealth makes a person proud and proudness blinds him.

When I had money, money, O!

I knew no joy till I went poor;

Much have I thought of life, and seen

How poor men’s hearts are ever light.....

- William Henry Davies, “Money”^{vi}

There is a beautiful poem by William Henry Davies where he shows us how in presence of money there is absence of joy and although being poor they laugh, smile, there life is absence of worries but richness makes him coldly frown.

On the other hand, the lawyer away from all luxuries, living within the four walls of a room. In comparison to the banker he could not enjoy the worldly things but through the books he hunted deer’s, drank wine, preached religions, loved women and did numerous things. Instead of all the pleasures that he had from these books in the end he despised all books, worldly wisdom and blessings. Everything is frail, void, visionary and delusive as mirage. He now knows that though a person is proud of his wealth, he is beautiful yet death will wipe each one of us like we never existed. The lawyer gained the true knowledge and knows the reality of life.

It is now clear that time is a great teacher. Time teaches us everything that requires us to become a better human being. Anytime time can turn up the dice and can make rich, poor or poor, rich. Time teaches us great lessons of our lives.

Conclusion:

Everything is void and meaningless. The world is full of illusion that completely makes a person blind and he sees nothing but falsehood. All that glitters are not gold^{vii}. Everybody chases glitters

and try to deceive themselves with lies for truth is hard for them to accept. The truth is death, the true wisdom and knowledge. A person might be proud and beautiful but death wipes each and every person. As there is budding of buds on the earth there is also withering of plants. We cannot escape the harsh truth of death. The Earth will burry each one of us one day.

The rose that smiles today,
Though beautiful and gay,
Will shortly fade away.

-Ardeshir M. Modi, "That too will pass away"^{viii}

The story ends up giving lessons for life that time gives a person experiences and teaches that time never waits for anybody. One hour he might be happy but in another hour he is completely sad or distress. Another lesson that can be derived is that how money brings proudness in a person but proudness takes that person to the mouth of disaster. That one thing he was proud of, that he used to propose of ends him in complete disaster and teaches it is nothing in front of true wisdom.

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