

Cycles of Trauma in Chekhov's Unregulated Worlds: Analyzing "Gusev," "Misery" And "The Black Monk" through Caruth and Durkheim

Nihal Farhan Kabir
Department of English, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh
Email: nihaal_eng@cu.ac.bd

Received: 11/12/2024
Accepted: 27/02/2025
Published: 01/03/2025

Volume: 6 Issue: 2

How to cite this paper: Kabir, N. F. (2025). Cycles of Trauma in Chekhov's Unregulated Worlds: Analyzing "Gusev," "Misery" And "The Black Monk" through Caruth and Durkheim. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 6(2), 86-94
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v6i2.341>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

Chekhov's "Gusev," "Misery" and "The Black Monk" feature the characters Gusev, Pavel, Iona and Kovrin as individuals trekking particular traumatic courses in varying capacities, in the face of disorderly and indifferent social systems. Critical works focusing on these elements in these texts' analysis are not difficult to find and these works do provide insight into the nature of these characters' psychological anguish. However, such critical lenses never incorporated the theories of Cathy Caruth or Emile Durkheim in analyzing these elements. This paper aims to capitalize on this opening and analyze the protagonists of the mentioned texts taking into consideration Caruth's 'trauma theory,' and Durkheim's concept of 'anomy' – which describes normless, non-regulated societal conditions. The purpose is to find how the characters of these stories demonstrate traumatic symptoms and how these symptoms, & the trauma itself, correspond with the anomic conditions of society. Thus, the theoretical and conceptual framework is provided by Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, along with the adjacent concepts of 'repetition compulsion,' flashbacks & hallucination and the necessity of recognition in surviving trauma - as theorized in her *Unclaimed Experience*. Additionally, Durkheim's contemplations on anomy, as discussed in his *Suicide*, with its definitive, social and psychological implications, augment the framework even further. Taking findings from existing research into account, the discourses of the three stories have been analyzed in light of such theoretical and conceptual understandings to assess the nature of these characters' trauma, by tracing its symptoms, in the face of anomic social conditions. This paper's investigation of the characters in Chekhov's "Gusev," "Misery" and "The Black Monk" through the lens of Caruth's trauma theory and Durkheim's notion of anomy reveals that – these characters, representing traumatized individuals in normless structures, are obligated to endure their traumatic cycles, illustrating the effects of an anomic society where trauma circulates in cycles of delusion, fractured memories and disregard.

Keywords: Chekhov, Gusev, Misery, The Black Monk, Trauma, Anomy, Caruth, Durkheim

1. Introduction

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, one of the foremost short story writers in the Western literary canon, is notable for his depiction of suffering individuals in varying social settings. His "Gusev," "Misery" and "The Black Monk" represent this recurrent motif, found in most of his large body of work, through their protagonists and their respective journeys. "Gusev"

depicts a voyage at sea, whereas, “Misery” narrates the evening of a sledge-driver in St. Petersburg and “The Black Monk” portrays an extended period of a scholar’s life. While these stories bear different outlines, they come together when one observes their shared depiction of psychological distress in the face of adverse adjacent surroundings. Chekhov’s understanding of the nature of the human psyche and psychological distress has its basis in his observance of human life in the late stages of 19th-century Russia – an understanding which was profoundly informed by his visit to Sakhalin (Rayfield, 1999). This complex comprehension finds its outlet in these stories in the form of similarly complex depictions of the distressing experiences of the characters. Bearing in consideration the perceivable pervasive psychological despondency in the modern/current global society & the belief that art imitates life, a collectively investigative foray into these texts could be of substantial relevance, and this research seeks to provide appropriate contribution to such contemplation(s). Psychological distress, as depicted in these texts, provides an ease of approach to these stories with a study using Trauma Theory, which deals with trauma and its relation to such experiences. Thus, Cathy Caruth, who is largely deemed as the pioneer of Trauma Theory, and her text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* will be used in analyzing the traces of trauma in these texts. Though the profound events that induced the trauma itself in the characters cannot be evidently located in the stories themselves, critical projects on Chekhov’s works highlight conditions & present elements of these stories in such a light that the experiences of these individuals fall in line with those suffering from trauma. For instance, critical works on “Misery” present it as a narrative of a sledge-driver whose misery is heightened by the existing indifference in his society, creating a sense of isolation which resonates with the theme of disenfranchised grief and societal alienation (Khan, 2023; Polotskaya, 2000; Raveendran C., 2022). In “The Black Monk,” the protagonist Kovrin goes through stages of mental disorientation, where the black monk serves as a symbol for his delusions and the perplexing nature of unchecked delusions, with some scholars linking his condition to schizophrenia (Shukhratovich, 2022; Gatrall, 2009). Lastly, “Gusev” serves as an examination of suffering in the face of death, portraying these concepts as unavoidable elements of life – a motif that highlights psychological helplessness in the face of human and societal indifference (Rayfield, 1999; Loehlin, 2010). Taken together, these stories can be perceived as a reflection of Chekhov’s focus on the insubstantiality of the human mind when faced with overwhelming external forces. Additionally, as this research approaches the subject of such external societal elements in regard to psychological distress, and with the image of Chekhov traversing Sakhalin with “sociological questionnaires” in hand, it finds the French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s theory of ‘anomy,’ postulated in his *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, to be of pertinent utility (Rayfield, 1999, p. 95).

The objective of this research is to probe into the stories’ narratives to, using Caruth’s interpretation of trauma, establish these characters’ traumatic states as well as to establish the relation of their psychological situation to their external environs, using Durkheim’s notion of anomy, or “normlessness” (Nickerson, 2023). Being a library research, this research will use data collected from books and journals found in print or from online resources. Additionally, it is an analytical research and therefore, it will use the method of critical discourse analysis in its study of “Gusev,” “Misery” and “The Black Monk.” The analysis will, specifically, focus on the actions of the characters and their reactions to the societal structures they are parts of, and vice versa. As mentioned, the theoretical framework will be composed of the Caruthian ruminations on trauma as well as Durkheim’s theory of anomy. The section titled “Theoretical and Conceptual Framework” will delve into these concepts of Caruth and Durkheim to clarify their function as a composite research framework, deliberating on the definitions of trauma and other related concepts such as ‘repetition compulsion,’ flashbacks/hallucinations, the role of recognition and the meaning of Survival. This section will further discuss the concept of anomy and how it relates to traumatic situations. The section “Wounded Memories in Chekhov’s Worlds without Orders” will analyze the discourse of the three stories in light of this framework, focusing on the individuals, and their psychological states & surrounding society. In doing so, it will try to situate their traumas in the background of their societal structures to see how one affects the other. This paper’s multidisciplinary investigation will focus on the actions of Gusev, Pavel, Iona and Kovrin from Chekhov’s three stories, using Caruth’s trauma theory to find traces of traumatic symptoms, and then the analysis will shift focus to these characters’ social surroundings in relation to these actions using Durkheim’s notion of anomy to ascertain how lack of regulation in these structures affect their experiences of trauma.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper uses the notions of trauma and anomy to investigate the psychosocial states of the characters in “Gusev,” “Misery” and “The Black Monk”. With this design, the present section juxtaposes Caruth with Durkheim, in establishing a connection between trauma and anomy. Caruth’s postulations of trauma will be explored, as it is deemed as an intrusion from the past that disrupts time, memory and identity while also bearing the imperative for recognition. Durkheim’s notion of anomy will also be put under the lens to comprehend how societal disintegration might affect psychological landscapes. The discussion in this section will focus on the persistence and intensification of trauma and how a world lacking order & cohesion might aggravate it.

2.1. Caruth’s Perspective on Trauma: Distorted Time and Memory

2.1.1. Defining Trauma

The word trauma, meaning “a powerful psychological shock” with “damaging effects”, owes its modern infamy to Freud (*Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961) outlines trauma as resulting from “excitations from outside” the psyche, which are powerful enough to cause “a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier” inside (p. 23). Trauma, then, is an effect upon the mind that occurs as a result of an event outside the mind. Caruth (1996), in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, modifies Freud’s definition, defining trauma “as a wound inflicted not upon the

body but upon the mind" (p. 3). She (1996) states that "what causes trauma... is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (p. 61) resulting from an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (p. 58). In other words, trauma is a psychological shock that results from a calamitous event. Furthermore, trauma is not simply an event from the past but rather a constantly repeating experience of the psyche which affects an individual's identity, sense of time and existence. Caruth (1996) explains, "The experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly" (p. 2). Thus, traumatic memories keep coming back as flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations and reenactments which make them different from an ordinary memory. This recurrence transforms trauma from a single event into a continuous cycle, making it an ongoing crisis, not only a past event.

2.1.2. Repetition Compulsion

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1961) discusses the concept of "compulsion to repeat" (p. 13), or "repetition compulsion" (Caruth, 1996, pp. 2, 61, 63), highlighting how persistent trauma can be in a person's life (pp. 56, 80). The resistive nature of trauma causes it to unconsciously recur frequently through nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations and compulsive behaviours. Caruth (1996) states, "The painful repetition... can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way" (p. 59). This paradox suggests that the traumatized person lives within a cycle of his own trauma. Freud's 'fort-da' game illustrates this design—that the repetitions associated with trauma do not resolve it but recreate it (Caruth, 1996, p.68). Taking Freud's concept, what Caruth postulates on the 'repetition compulsion' is that in the traumatized individual's attempts to deal with the traumatic incident, the trauma resurfaces in the mind and it causes him/her to act out in ways – such as through flashbacks, hallucinations or even physical attempts – which reenact, or rather resurrect, the incident itself, resulting in the individual's cyclical re-experiencing of the trauma.

2.1.3. Flashbacks and Hallucinations

Since our, and Caruth's, discussion keeps referring to flashbacks and hallucinations, it is important to form an understanding of these concepts in the context of her reading of Freudian and Lacanian contemplations of trauma. Flashback is usually defined as "a recurrence of a memory, or the experience of reliving an episode from the past" (*Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.) and hallucination as "a perceptual experience similar to a true perception" but not involving a sense organ, occurring as a symptom of various psychological "disorder[s]" (*Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), flashbacks are defined as involuntary and intrusive recollections of the trauma, whereas, hallucinations are sensory and distorted experiences as they emerge from the unprocessed impact of the traumatic event (p. 59). Put simply, flashbacks are involuntary memories of trauma that encroach on a person's psyche without caution, and hallucinations are visual or auditory images resulting from the trauma - images that resemble reality but are actually distorted versions of it. While dissimilar in definition, these two phenomena find commonality when considering that both occur as repetitive responses, adhering to the notion of 'repetition compulsion,' to existing trauma within the individual. As Caruth (1996) explains, trauma induces a "response" that "occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). According to her argument, these flashbacks and hallucinations are unlike regular memories but rather are uncontrolled and unprocessed effects of trauma. They make survival difficult for the traumatized individual as his perception of reality is distorted. Caruth aligns with Freud by commenting that the 'repetition compulsion' disrupts the natural flow of time.

2.1.4. Role of Recognition and the Meaning of Survival

Caruth explores the ethical dimension of trauma through Lacan. Freud explained the recurring nature of trauma and Lacan took it further by suggesting that trauma compels others to identify it. Caruth (1996) states, "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p. 4). In other words, in order for resolution to happen – trauma needs to be witnessed and recognized (Caruth, 1996). That is to say, trauma creates a need within the individual which causes him/her to seek recognition, and validation, of the trauma itself from other individuals. And, said trauma cannot be resolved without this recognition taking place. Furthermore, trauma does not only represent a destructive force but also presents a paradox of survival for the individual. This contemplation goes beyond the traumatic experience and forms a new understanding of what it means to live, as Caruth (1996) asserts, "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (p. 58). Survival itself is central to trauma's impact, meaning different modes of survival can also be traumatic responses. As such, the "repetition" (Caruth, 1996, pp. 2, 9, 59, 63) associated with trauma is not simply the "attempt to grasp" (Caruth, 1996, p. 64) the original event, but also an attempt to 'grasp' one's own life beyond the event. Trauma, therefore, is not just about confronting distress but also about navigating the burden of life after the experience. Hence, trauma is not limited to confrontations with the distressing event; it is also about finding ways to live life after undergoing a distressful event and with one's own trauma.

2.2. Durkheim's Anomy: Psychological Dimensions of Normless Systems

2.2.1. Anomy and Psychological Distress

Emile Durkheim, a leading figure in modern sociology, defines anomy as a breakdown of societal norms that regulate behaviour. Originating from the Greek "a-nomos, meaning without laws, mores, and traditions" (*Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, n.d.), anomy describes "a social condition characterized by the breakdown of norms governing social interaction" (*Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, n.d.). Along with its sociological implications, the psychological impact of anomy is also significant as it leads to alienation, instability and existential crisis which are connected to psychological distress. People experience a loss of belonging as a result of the decline of traditional structures. As Durkheim (1952) notes in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, "Man's characteristic privilege is that the bond he accepts is not physical but moral; that is, social" (p. 213). But psychological turmoil intensifies with the failure of such moral and social structures which makes individuals feel lost. As

postulated in *Émile Durkheim - His Life and Work*, “while anom[y] ‘springs from the lack of collective forces at certain points in society; that is, of groups established for the regulation of social life’, its absence heightens distress (Lukes, 1973, pp. 198-199).

2.2.2. The Role of Societal Norms

Durkheim observes the boundless nature of human feelings & desires, which can lead to “great unhappiness, and points out that societal regulation is necessary to prevent frustration” (*Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, n.d.). As the norms break, expectations go beyond what the structure is able to provide which creates chronic anxiety, distress and often suicide. Durkheim (1952) further states that “anomy” or “the state of de-regulation” is “further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining” (p. 214). As trauma is not merely limited to a “wound... upon the mind”—rather it becomes more and more intense, or passionate, in a world without clear meaning or discipline (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Furthermore, this could be informed by Durkheim’s (1952) assertion that “in anomic” states, “society’s influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein” (p. 219). As seen in Tomasi’s (2003) article, “social order and personal equilibrium are closely interconnected” (p. 16) and without such ordering structures, individuals are left disoriented.

2.2.3 Anomy: An Expediter of Trauma

Anomy, as mentioned, is not merely sociological; it bears psychological impact also as it amplifies the crisis of meaning in a traumatised individual, intensifying the trauma itself. The mentioned “deregulation” (Durkheim, 1985, p.79) and the loss of meaning which results from this lack of collective cohesion induce detachment in individuals, intensifying isolation and distress (*Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, n.d.). Durkheim (1952) recognizes that “when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this influence” (p. 213). As the world lacks meaning and guidance, individuals feel lost because of their failure to reconcile their inner sufferings, intensifying their psychological distress. As long as “the social forces” have not “regained equilibrium,” their structures remain diminished and the required regulations follow a similar pattern, inducing disorder (Durkheim, 1952, p. 213). This disorder becomes ingrained, for “a constant state of crisis and anom[y] exists” everywhere which results in boundless psychological forces that cannot find appropriate limiters or outlets (Durkheim, 1985, p.80). This lasting instability makes trauma difficult to alleviate, and as a consequence, makes the burden heavier to carry as the world itself is disorderly and uncertain.

3. Wounded Memories in Chekhov’s Worlds Without Orders

This section analyzes Chekhov’s “Gusev,” “Misery” and “The Black Monk” in light of the theoretical discussion from the previous section. The analysis will try to establish the nature of the mental sufferings of the individuals in these texts and how they are shaped by their traumas as well as anomic social conditions. The research, through this section’s examination of the traces of trauma, will attempt to shed light on the persistent state of unacknowledged trauma in the face of an unstable societal system. In doing so, the investigation will probe further into how such a damaging combination might heighten the distress of individuals.

3.1. “Gusev”

“Gusev” by Anton Chekhov deals with trauma, memory and the dissolution of identity through its protagonist Gusev, and his companion Pavel Ivanitch. The story illustrates a ship carrying dying soldiers back home from Sakhalin (Rayfield, 1999). It further portrays the characters dealing with profound loss and suffering as an aftermath of some conflict as well as impending death. This paper applies the Caruthian notions of trauma & repetition compulsion to analyze how the characters Gusev and Pavel Ivanitch experience trauma through memory, flashbacks and a disoriented perception of time. Also, Emile Durkheim’s theory of anomy sheds light on the breakdown of social norms and isolation the characters face. Existing literature is centred around the contrasting responses to death and suffering in “Gusev” by shedding light on the way the characters cope with the impact of trauma in their psyche. In *Understanding Chekhov*, Donald Rayfield (1999) locates a passive surrender to fate or system as he states that Gusev “is submissive to the injustices of his life and the approach of death” (p. 98), whereas, Pavel, his counterpart, embodies dissent and resistance, repeatedly demonstrating a struggling with his own internal conflicts. The impact of trauma can be perceived in the two characters as they process it differently which suggests a contrast - where some accept the suffering as something inevitable while others struggle to deal with it. Furthermore, if we take Rayfield’s (1999) notion that “the sea is the beginning and the end of life” (p. 98), the sea stands for the social structure which induces the repetitive nature of trauma. As Gusev’s corpse sinks beneath the waves, the story presents the sea as a symbol of a force that represents the endless cycle of suffering and death.

In the story, the sea symbolizes a force that represents the endless cycle of suffering and death. According to Caruth (1996), trauma is an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” (p. 11) that distorts the perception of time. Thus aligning, “Gusev” presents trauma through the memories and suffering of the characters, not in the war or catastrophic events. While Gusev rests in his hammock, he experiences vivid hallucinations of home, recalling his brother and children in a sledge: “His brother Alexey comes out in a sledge from the fifth yard from the end; behind him sits his little son Vanka in big felt overboots, and his little girl Akulka, also in big felt boots” (Chekhov, 2013, “Gusev”, Part I). Though Gusev can, perhaps, be thought to be finding solace in these memories – said memories are fragmented, mixing past and present in a state of fever-induced delirium. He doesn’t have a clear vision but instead sees a surreal, nightmarish image: “instead of a pond there suddenly appears

apropos of nothing a huge bull's head without eyes, and the horse and sledge are not driving along, but are whirling round and round in a cloud of smoke" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part I).

As argued by Caruth, trauma cannot be processed into normal consciousness. Rather it shows up as hallucinations and flashbacks. A similar tendency is indicated by Gusev as he does not only remember the past, he relives it which is akin to staying trapped in a distorted state where the memories are mixed into his perception of reality. Similar to him, Pavel Ivanitch, who is suffering from consumption, experiences time as a continuous cycle of suffering rather than as a linear progression. His ranting critiques of society indicate an unresolved past, in which he perceives his own death as an extension of systemic neglect: "Your doctors put you on the steamer to get rid of you. They get sick of looking after poor brutes like you" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part II). Pavel Ivanitch's bitterness with the situation as well as with what can be perceived as a troubled past demonstrates how trauma transforms time into a cycle—his anger does not attach to a moment that can be specifically located but is repeated compulsively, serving as a symptom of suffering which cannot be resolved.

Caruth's reading of repetition compulsion can be taken into account to explain how "Gusev"'s characters continually relive their traumatic experiences rather than moving beyond them. No matter how different their responses are towards their ongoing suffering and death, both of them demonstrate a repetitive cycle. Gusev repeatedly has recollections of home, only to have these recollections disrupted by deformed distortions, and Pavel Ivanitch on the other hand, compulsively critiques society in the face of the hopeless situation as if voicing his grievances might prevent his fate. The 'repetition compulsion,' as it relates to Freud's account of the 'fort-da' game—a child's attempt to control his loss—manifests in "Gusev" as well through its portrayal of hallucinations and psychological resistance. Gusev clings to thoughts of home to create the illusion of return, even as he physically deteriorates: "And so on till daybreak" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part I). Still there is no comfort for him even in the thoughts of home as it fails to soothe his traumatic psyche. His final flashback further depicts the traumatic effects in his mind. Pavel, on the other hand, tries to gain control of his distress but this proves to be fruitless. He becomes frustrated as a result which suggests that the repetition does not heal trauma but only makes the experience more intense and heavier for the person enduring it.

The theory of anomie by Durkheim argues that in a society where the structure is broken and there is a lack of norms and regulations, people are prone to suffering psychological distress, worsening the traumatic experiences of an individual. Following that line of thought, the ship in "Gusev" could be taken as a microcosm of society in which order has been replaced by perceivable disorder, where individuals are abandoned to distress without a distinct moral or social structure. Pavel Ivanitch, "subject to sea-sickness" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part I), explicitly articulates this breakdown, lamenting the indifference of the system: "To tear a man out of his home, drag him twelve thousand miles away, then to drive him into consumption... and what is it all for?" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part II). According to Durkheim, the failure of such external structures of society makes people experience intense psychological anguish which deepens their trauma as a consequence. Gusev, unlike Pavel, thinks there is "absolutely nothing to be vexed about" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part I), and lacks comprehension of systemic injustice and responds with passive acceptance: "If you live as you ought and obey orders, who has any need to insult you?" (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part I). Though his strong faith in the system presents a stark contrast to Pavel's cynicism, both are equally powerless in the chaotic, unruly space of the ship. The sea, with "no sense and no pity", is a cruel final metaphor for anomie – representing an indifferent force that renders individual suffering meaningless (Chekhov, 2013, "Gusev", Part IV). Durkheim's assertion that the loss of social regulation intensifies distress is evident in Gusev's final moments. As he is cast into the sea wrapped in the fabric of the ship's sail, the structure of his identity—anchored in structures such as home, service, and duty—is erased, leaving only the vast, indifferent sea.

This paper's analysis of Chekhov's "Gusev", thus, demonstrates the persistence of trauma in the compulsive repetition of suffering, and the dissolving reconfiguration of identity in the face of anomie. From the perspective of Caruth's trauma and repetition compulsion along with Durkheim's theory of anomie, Chekhov's portrayal of trauma is depicted as an unassailable force that distorts memory and time, leaving an individual powerless within a world devoid of order. Gusev and Pavel, though dealing with their traumas in separate ways, are both consumed by the cycle of suffering which echoes Caruth's notion that trauma is a cycle.

3.2. "Misery"

Chekhov's "Misery" is the story of Iona Potatov, a sledge-driver, dealing with the loss of his son Kuzma. Iona tries to share the weight of his grief with his passengers but his attempts are futile. Thus, the story becomes a melancholic portrayal of grief and alienation. The passengers' disinterest to partake in his expression of grief heightens his sense of isolation and grief. In "Cries Unheard: Trauma of Disenfranchised Grief in Anton Chekhov's 'Misery,'" Raveendran C. (2022) touches upon this repetitive futility by noting a "cavernous breach between individuals and their unsympathetic reciprocation to one's bereavement" (p. 140), which leaves Iona isolated in a state of distressful disrepair, echoing trauma in the individual. Polotskaya's (2000) article paints the "crowds" of St. Petersburg as "cold and indifferent" (p. 23), which serves to put a grieving individual in a detached state in the societal structure. Iona has no way left but to turn to his horse for comfort which can be interpreted as a desperate attempt at survival, turning the story into a portrayal of suppressed grief seeking unexpected and tragic expression (Raveendran C., 2022, p. 143). Thus, the narrative suggests that when grief is ignored, it seeks unexpected, tragic expression. Also, according to the unpublished article "Chekhov's Misery: Alienation in a Capitalist Society" by Mike Kiernan, the story also criticizes societal structures that render individuals invisible by shaping their existence by economic principles. Taking all of this into account and using the notions of Caruth and Durkheim, this paper will try to trace the elements of trauma and anomie in the narrative while also pondering how the latter affects the former. Essentially, the analysis will focus

on Iona's repetitively failing attempts at communication which could indicate a breakdown in social cohesion, shedding further light on what it means to survive with trauma and what role 'witnessing' plays in its cycle.

In "Misery," it is evident that the death of his son is not merely an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic [event]" for Iona but also an ongoing crisis (Caruth, 1996, p.11). Though he tries multiple times to express his grief to his passengers, they express no empathy. This lack of empathy can be logically construed as a lack of recognition and his continuously failed attempts underscore how he needs his trauma to be assimilated or processed through said recognition but contrarily, the trauma is unassailable as the required recognition does not transpire. Iona's first attempt to speak occurs when an officer boards his sledge. He tries to express his grief: "My son... er... my son died this week, sir" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery"). But this attempt at a cathartic discussion withers in infancy as the officer only briefly acknowledges his grief before dismissing him, with some additional insults. This shows the relationship between unrecognized trauma and societal indifference. Additionally, this indifference from society further isolates the traumatized individual.

Still Iona repetitively and compulsively tries to tell his story to his passengers despite seeing no encouragement from the opposing end, manifesting the Caruthian (1996) assertion that trauma "repeats itself, exactly and unremittably" (p. 2). He later tries to reiterate his grief to a group of rowdy young men: "This week... er... my... er... son died" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery"). This expression, mirroring but also inverting the syntax of his last attempt, indicates a further need and effort on his part to process the trauma. Nevertheless, these young men ignore his pain the same way the officer did and reduce him to a target of mockery rather than empathy which he desired. Iona enacts the 'repetition compulsion' through his repeated attempts at failed expression where he, the traumatized individual, relives his pain continuously and unconsciously, without reaching any resolution. This cycle, aligning with Caruth's interpretations, persists due to the mind's incapability to process the traumatic event. Thus, Iona's grief cannot be processed due to having no willing listeners, compounding the sense of isolation.

Durkheim's concept of anomie, in understanding Iona's trauma, juxtaposes his distress with the boundlessness of human desires and the disintegration of the societal regulations required to prevent existential distress. Iona's grief is ignored by the people of St. Petersburg which makes the burden more intense for him to carry, evidenced by his repeated attempts to communicate with the passengers. It shows how the lack of regulations in societal norms can make the suffering worse and heavier for a traumatized person. Iona's attempt to find consolation by sharing his sadness with St. Petersburg residents, as well as their failure, comprise the story of "Misery," which aligns with Durkheim's theory that societal regulations can have an inverse effect on psychological distress. His social invisibility is illustrated through the indifferent crowds: "His misery is immense, beyond all bounds... yet it is not seen" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery"). This is augmented by the "cavernous breach" which is a byproduct of anomie and something that further intensifies trauma (Raveendran C., 2022, p.140).

"Misery" probes further into the anomic conditions of society by exposing an individual's vulnerability to trauma in lieu of his alienation in a societal system that disenfranchises individuals. This is evidenced by one of the three young men's reductive statement "We shall all die" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery") and the officer calling him a "devil" and a "dog" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery") when Iona tried to share his grief. If his existence is indeed shaped by such a system, Iona was made susceptible to such a traumatic cycle by the system itself which also rendered him incapable to process it. The passengers of his sled represent the society of St. Petersburg which can be taken as the symbol of a society without any norms or regulations for trauma such as his. And, his lack of stability in the face of this normless – anomic – societal framework induced in him an incapacity to deal with his child's death and this structure itself fails to work as a necessary safety net for the troubled individual to fall into. The phrase "A man who knows how to do his work... who has had enough to eat... is always at ease" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery") reverberates the submission to fate found in "Gusev" and reveals the dehumanization intrinsic in an anomic society, where the structure fails to support emotional well-being.

If trauma is "fundamentally, an enigma of survival" Iona's repeated yet failed attempts to share his grief exemplify this paradox (Caruth, 1996, p. 58). His survival, as we can see in the short passage of time that covers the story's plot, is bound to the burden of his son's death. "Misery," thus, seems to repeatedly suggest that trauma necessitates recognition. His attempts to communicate his trauma indicates his need for its recognition as in order to live with, or survive, the trauma of his son's death, recognition is necessary. This further suggests that trauma cannot be resolved without recognition taking place. But when a society refuses to bear witness, or acknowledge, said trauma as the St. Petersburg representatives fail to acknowledge Iona's trauma, unconventional manifestations occur. Iona's final act of speaking to his horse indicates both his helplessness as well as his resilience. Iona's final interaction—his monologue to his horse—demonstrates trauma's hallucinatory aspect: "That's how it is, old girl...He went and died for no reason" (Chekhov, 2013, "Misery"). This desperately repetitive attempt at communication, which bore no reciprocation from fellow members of the society but found an outlet in a being outside society, points out how it is society's lack of regulation or supporting structure itself that makes processing trauma difficult.

The attempts at communication from Iona align with the Caruthian (1996) notion that trauma "cries out" (p. 2) for acknowledgement. And, if this acknowledgement fails to find its purpose in human listeners in an anomic world void of empathy, then the traumatized individual – such as Iona – attempts to find solace in nonhuman listeners as substitutes. While his statement to his horse is an acutely personal moment, it also extends as a commentary on the society he is a part of – his son, someone whose death became the fulcrum of his life, means nothing in the face of a disenfranchising societal system. Chekhov's "Misery" portrays trauma through a cycle of futile attempts to find comfort, which is a sequence perpetuated by the anomie existing in society and the resulting absence of solidarity. Thus, the story can be inferred to be a representation of the necessity of acknowledgment in breaking the cycle of suffering.

3.3. "The Black Monk"

In "The Black Monk," the central action follows the protagonist Andrey Vassilitch Kovrin, whose interactions with a mythical black monk lead to his descent into a precipice between illusion and reality. This descent as well as the distortion between illusion and reality reflects the notion that trauma disrupts how an individual perceives time and identity. Donald Rayfield (1999), in *Understanding Chekhov*, classifies Kovrin's delusions as a form of defence against his perceived normalcy of everyday existence (p. 128). While the origin of trauma is not specified in the narrative, it can be inferred that his trauma might have originated from this realization of normalcy at some point in his life. The belief that he is "the chosen of God" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part V) and his obsession with rising beyond ordinary existence isolates him from his close ones, as seen in the particular moment when he acknowledges that "he was a mediocrity, and readily resigned himself to it" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part IX). Shukhratovich (2022) views the eponymous monk as a symbol of his inner distress, who acts as the inducer of the madness he experiences (p. 358). Chekhov's use of nature can also be symbolically viewed to be representing the social environment surrounding him, since his views on nature are informed by the inputs from Tanya and Yegor Semyonitch - a point also highlighted in Shukhratovich's (2022) analysis: "It was Kovrin's environment that gave rise to delusional ideas" (p. 358). Taking these into account, this paper will analyze "The Black Monk" as a portrayal of the disruptive cycle of trauma and psychological distress, in which the protagonist's repetitive delusions provide temporary relief from an existential dissatisfaction stemming from the anomic society but ultimately lead to a tragic outcome.

As the narrative of "The Black Monk" progresses, Kovrin's gradual descent into madness becomes more and more palpable, and as a result, his notion of reality gets further distorted. This indicates the Caruthian/Freudian psychological "breach" which transforms his perception of himself and the world around him (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Furthermore, when he realizes the actual reality of his situation, he asks himself, "If I know I am mentally affected, can I trust myself?" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part V). This, as is the case with Chekhov's other stories mentioned in this paper, signifies trauma's resisting nature and how it manifests as an unprocessed, repetitive experience. As such, Kovrin goes through extreme psychological shifts - ranging from elation to despair. Initially, his visions empower him: "The little the monk had said to him had flattered, not his vanity, but his whole soul" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part V). But as his hallucinations persist, his understanding of reality fractures - leaving him vulnerable to deeper psychological distress. 'Repetition compulsion' denotes those experiencing trauma reliving the trauma unconsciously and in a cyclical manner. Kovrin's repeated visions of the black monk and the monk's advisory words bear reflection of this notion, as the vision recurs repeatedly, further pushing forward his obsession with his supposed greatness. This re-experiencing of trauma prevents him from moving beyond it and instead pushes him further into his delusory state. Caruth's deliberation on trauma focuses on hallucinations and their disruptive nature, i.e. how they disrupt time and distort reality. Kovrin's repeated visions of the monk are a clear demonstration of this phenomenon. His hallucinations are not passive recollections but active distortions of reality, as seen when he insists the monk is real: "You are a phantom, an hallucination. So I am mentally deranged, not normal?" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part V). Though here he questions the monk as a hallucination, he gradually escalates into his inner chaos as he embraces these hallucinations as reality itself and starts embracing his delusions. Even after his recovery through medical intervention, Kovrin laments the loss of his visions which has stripped him of meaning: "I was cheerful, confident, and even happy... Now I have become more sensible and stolid, but I am just like everyone else: I am—mediocrity; I am weary of life" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part VIII). His trauma persists even when the hallucinations cease, illustrating how the mind remains trapped in the sufferings of the past. One of the most striking moments in the story occurs at the end when the monk's hallucination reappears to him at his death as it had many times before: "The monk with bare grey head... floated by him, and stood still in the middle of the room" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part IX). This is suggestive of the persistent nature of his trauma which remains unresolved until his final moments.

Kovrin's actions also indicate the state of the existing societal structure as anomic. His society, or its adjacent structures, fails to regulate his behaviour appropriately and instead compels him further into his chaotic psychological state. This is symptomatic of anomy as per Durkheim's postulations. Such conditions incur a heightening of his isolation, amplifying his trauma even further. While he thrives initially, indulging in his feelings of superiority as he prides himself in being separated from the "common herd," this separation indicates the failure of the regulatory functions of society (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part V). Thus, he deteriorates and finds himself lost, and unable to differentiate between his delusions & reality. This gradual increase in his detachment from societal norms can be perceived in his interactions with others, specifically - his wife Tanya. Despite her plea for him to grasp his own psychological state, he remains dismissive and flippant, enveloped by his own illusory world: "Oh, of course, I am Herod, and you and your father are the innocents. Of course" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part VIII). Kovrin's lack of touch with reality eventually separates him from his family completely, climaxing in an intensified psychological anguish that reinforces Durkheim's notion that anomy causes the exacerbation of psychological distress, i.e., trauma.

Kovrin's final moments reveal the degree to which his trauma is compounded by his societal situation. He asks for the presence of his former wife, former environment and former life in desperation: "he called Tanya, called to the great garden... called to life" (Chekhov, 2013, "The Black Monk", Part IX). In doing so, he exposes a longing for the very normalcy he once rejected as he feels a lack of purpose for a lack of stability. This signifies how his social untethering affected his psychological distress, reflecting the degenerative effects of trauma and anomy. Chekhov's "The Black Monk" portrays the cyclical nature of trauma through Kovrin's repetitive hallucinations, flashbacks and delusions, and, his increasing dysfunction in relation to societal structure aligns with the concept that anomy increases inner turmoil. The story provides a ground where the unresolved

nature of trauma can be perceived – which distorts reality for individuals isolated by anomy, increasing and perpetuating their psychological agony.

3.4. Resolution of Traumatic Considerations

Considering the large body of fiction produced by Chekhov, it would be whimsical to deem this paper's analysis as a solid conjecture regarding Chekhov's overall writing. Nonetheless, the three stories discussed in this paper explore how trauma and anomy intersect, depicting the sufferings and isolations experienced by individuals in societal structures that fail to provide stability. Trauma can be located not as a singular event but rather as a cyclical and unresolved crisis across "Gusev," "Misery" and "The Black Monk." This crisis fractures time, distorts reality and perpetuates suffering. Both Gusev and Pavel, though offering two opposing responses to their situations, remain trapped in their repetitive cycles of suffering till their demise. In "Misery," Iona's grief wants recognition, but societal indifference forces him to revisit his pain. Notably, Chekhov's own account of "two burials at sea" inspired "Gusev" and, perhaps extraneous to present study, this story could be his personal endeavour towards providing some sort of authorial 'recognition' to what he witnessed (Loehlin, 2010, p. 10). Kovrin, in "The Black Monk," uses his delusions to escape reality which provides some relief at first but ultimately leads to his destruction. In these three works, trauma can be seen as a disruption in the regular perception of time and identity, the resolution to which remains out of reach, reflecting the Caruthian reading of the 'repetition compulsion' functioning via flashbacks, hallucinations and seeking recognition.

These individuals are left without anchors in unstable social systems where social norms are disrupted, which, according to Durkheim's theory of anomy, exacerbate their trauma. "Gusev" symbolically signifies a society without moral or structural firmness. In such a society, sufferings transpire and persist without regulation. Pavel's repetitive condemnation shows that he is aware of this neglectful regulation, whereas, Gusev's resignation reflects the submissive condition of individuals who have internalized the anomic conditions. Akin to "Gusev," "Misery" shows Iona's plight in an anomic society that refuses to witness his grief and he is left with no choice but to confide in a nonhuman listener. Kovrin's detachment, in "The Black Monk," similarly illustrates how anomic social conditions wear away psychological stability. His pursuit of some prophesized grandeur entails a response to an environment that failed to provide him meaning, or stability, leading him to retreat into a cycle of hallucinations and delusions. In all these discussed cases, the failure of societal structures in regulating distress transforms human suffering into an unending state that fails to find any resolution.

Consolidating these findings, the analysis of these stories seems to suggest an associated cycle between the operations of trauma and anomy. While prevailing criticism touches upon the psychological anguish of the characters of these texts as well as commenting on their societal settings, this paper initiates a plausible evolutionary progression of such commentary by - establishing the existence of trauma from the perspective of Caruth and forming a discernable bridge between these individuals' trauma & their environs through Durkheim's anomy. On one hand, trauma requires acknowledgement, and on the other, anomic conditions put forth obstacles to meeting this requirement. As a result, it becomes difficult to integrate trauma into a solid reality, prolonging the cycle. The stories "Gusev," "Misery," and "The Black Monk" symbolize societal conditions that perpetuate misery by refusing its recognition and resolution. These narratives highlight the persistence of trauma cycles in individuals, underscoring Caruth's claim that trauma resists finality. They also expose the repercussions of an anomic society, where trauma perpetuates in cycles of hallucinations, illusions and neglect, highlighting the difficulty in integrating trauma into a stable reality.

4. Conclusion

This paper's investigation into the actions and the adjacent societal structures of the characters from Chekhov's "Gusev," "Misery" and "The Black Monk," using the Caruthian interpretation of trauma and Durkheim's notion of anomy, thus reveals that – these characters show symptoms of trauma, which can be perceived from the evidence of pre-existing research, in their repetitive actions, recollections and attempts at recognition; and furthermore, the communal structures surrounding these characters compound their trauma by making them susceptible to it while elongating their suffering. In "Gusev," Gusev's repeated statements and hallucinations, along with Pavel's repeated expressions of ire, demonstrate traumatic 'repetition compulsion.' And, the socially symbolic significance of the indifferent ship and sea are stark backgrounds to their mental states, resonating the cyclical interrelation between trauma and anomy. Iona's grief, recollections of his loss and repeated attempts to find recognition for this grief, in "Misery," reflect the Caruthian notion that trauma demands recognition. Furthermore, the symbiotic association between trauma and anomy is also perceivable in the action-lack of reaction paradigm of his plight and the non-empathetic St. Petersburg crowd. "The Black Monk" shows Kovrin going through bouts of delusions in the forms of hallucinations, attempts to find respite in the forms of flashbacks, and overall, clear psychological duress. Here we find the conjugation of trauma and anomy as well since it is his environment which made him susceptible to such psychological fits, leading to a traumatic cycle but this environment also fails to offer the means necessary for him to escape this cycle. These analytical explorations, thus, reach the conclusion that – the three stories by Chekhov reflect the nature of human suffering, i.e., traumatic existence in the face of unsupportive and disoriented societal structures: the anomy in the social structure can make individuals more vulnerable to trauma, leading these individuals to relive this trauma through various symptoms and conversely, it is the anomy in the society that prevents these humans from taking their traumas to the resolitional finality.

This study is not without its limits – it is dependent entirely on printed and online resources found in Bangladesh. Furthermore, while the implications of trauma and anomy in regard to the three stories by Anton Chekhov have been

investigated in this paper, his large body of work allows for the incorporation of elements from other stories as well such as “Ward No. 6.” Additionally, Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* also touches on the historicity as well as the father-child relationship when it comes to trauma, and Durkheim’s *Suicide*, on the other hand, analyzes anomy from various, such as economic and conjugal, perspectives. Such outshoots of Caruth’s and Durkheim’s theoretical contemplations were left out in this research though they provide the intriguing possibility for a deeper research on the three stories discussed in this paper, leaving scope for further study.

References

- Abercrombie, N., Hill, S., & Turner, B. S. (2006). *The Penguin dictionary of sociology* (5th ed.). London, England: Penguin Books.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chekhov, A. (2013). Misery (C. Garnett, Trans.). In *Complete works of Anton Chekhov*. East Sussex, United Kingdom: Delphi Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/anton-chekhov/>
- Chekhov, A. (2013). Gusev (C. Garnett, Trans.). In *Complete works of Anton Chekhov*. East Sussex, United Kingdom: Delphi Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/anton-chekhov/>
- Chekhov, A. (2013). The Black Monk (C. Garnett, Trans.). In *Complete works of Anton Chekhov*. East Sussex, United Kingdom: Delphi Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/anton-chekhov/>
- Colman, A. M. (Ed.). (2000). *The Oxford dictionary of psychology* (1st ed.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1952). *Suicide: A study in sociology* (J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.; G. Simpson, Ed.). London, England: Routledge. (Original work published 1897)
- Durkheim, É. (1985). Suicide. In K. Thompson (Ed.), *Readings from Émile Durkheim* (M. A. Thompson, Trans.) (pp. 63–83). London, England: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1920)
- Gatrall, J. J. A. (2009). The paradox of melancholy insight: Reading the medical subtext in Chekhov’s “A Boring Story.” In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Bloom’s modern critical views: Anton Chekhov-New edition* (pp. 55–76). New York, NY: Infobase Publishing.
- Khan, K. T. (2023). Theme of human miseries and misfortunes in Anton Chekhov’s select short stories. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2023.ICMRS23.300>
- Loehlin, J. N. (2010). *The Cambridge introduction to Chekhov*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Lukes, S. (1973). *Émile Durkheim, his life and work: A historical and critical study*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Malcolm, J. (2002). *Reading Chekhov: A critical journey*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Nickerson, C. (2023, September 22). Anomie theory in sociology: Definition & examples. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved February 03, 2025, from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/anomie.html>
- Polotskaya, E. (2000). Chekhov and his Russia. In V. Gottlieb & P. Allain (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Chekhov* (pp. 17–28). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Raveendran C., A. (2022). Cries unheard: Trauma of disenfranchised grief in Anton Chekhov’s Misery. *Assonance: A Journal of Russian & Comparative Literary Studies*, 22, 140–143. Retrieved from <https://russian.uoc.ac.in/images/Doc/Assonance%2022.pdf>
- Rayfield, D. (1999). *Understanding Chekhov: A critical study of Chekhov’s prose and drama*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Shukhratovich, N. Z. (2022). The tragedy of Kovrin’s delusional ideas in the story “The Black Monk” by A.P. Chekhov. *Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, Educational, Natural and Social Sciences*, 2(11), 356–360. Retrieved from https://www.oriens.uz/media/journals/ORIENS_Volume_2_ISSUE_11_compressed.pdf
- Tomasi, L. (2000). Emile Durkheim’s contribution to the sociological explanation of suicide. In W. S. F. Pickering & G. Walford (Eds.), *Durkheim’s Suicide: A century of research and debate* (pp. 11–21). London & New York: Routledge.
- Turner, B. S. (Ed.). (2006). *The Cambridge dictionary of sociology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.