Nikolai Gogol’s The Nose: An Abstract Satire

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Abstract

Every reader who is acquainted with Russian Literature will be delighted to read a piece of Gogol’s prose collection. These are not short stories, these are not long stories, but these are a coherent collection of long satiric prose. The humor patched up with satire brings out the absolute truth in The Nose that the society is corrupt. The funny thing is, everyone is highlighted, everyone is suited in his/her own place—only the place does not suit him/her. Gogol does his part as a writer—to find out the flaws in the social system—and then leave them to others to mend. This paper tries to show that the ridicule, when flatly proven, turns out to be biting satire. The abstract and unreal world of The Nose does really exist in a true form underneath.

Key-Words: Nose; Satire; St Petersburg

No creative art can be practiced or cultivated without the quality of a fertile imagination. All great artists have been the possessors of great imaginative minds. Nikolai Gogol too had rich imagination. Gogol came from a family of provincial Cossack gentry, Ukraine. His real name was Nikolai Ianovskii; he chose the pseudonym ‘Gogol’ because of the similarity of his nose to the beak of the golden-eyed duck known as a ‘gogol.’ In childhood, he used to sign his juvenile scribbling with a pen-name comprising of four zeros ‘0000.’

This famous Russian short story writer, Gogol, invested the genre with new content and lent it an unprecedented depth with his artistic archetypes. His writing marked a new development and intensification of critical realism, a literary trend, which expressed the protest of the enlightened section of Russian society against the chain of slavery, and tyranny in which the people languished (Mashinsky 1980). Gogol’s humor possessed an enormous destructive power. He displayed to the ‘eyes off all people’ the vile and rotten nature of serfdom and the satirist regime and at the same time reflected the people’s dreams of the possibility of another, superior reality. With Gogol’s entry on the scene Russian literature acquired an heir and successor to Pushkin, its greatest writer. But Gogol continued Pushkin’s tradition along a path of his own choosing. Pushkin expressed the contradictions of the society he lived in but the world he created in his art was one of beauty and harmony, and his negation of the vice of reality was balanced by his affirmation of life. However, Gogol’s realism stands apart in that he attempted to express the ideal exclusively through a negation of the hideous reality he saw around him. The spirit of negation dominates his work (Mashinsky 1980).

Dryden’s definition (Cuddon, 1999: 780), which is expressed in a few words, that satire is “the amendment of vices,” has been taken as the key to our analyses. Though total amendment is not possible in The Nose, Gogol takes the attempt to amend and then leaves everything to the power holder politicians. Defoe’s definition that satire is “reformation” suits the motif of “The Nose” in that sense. This paper focuses on Gogol’s attempt at reform. People live in society. The theme of The Nose conveys a reality which is applicable to all civilized societies irrespective to political boundaries. The reality hurts, the truth remains, and we live in that. The Nose uncovers the truth, protests the reality. This paper, nevertheless, tries to show how Gogol brings out the hard truths of reality in the guise of unreal affairs.

The Nose is a short story of great excellence and magnitude. The story is a typical Russian one. There are series of characters beginning from a barber to a pseudo major. Besides, plenty of hints have been given about the moral vacuum of the total atmosphere. In fact, the story can be treated as an allegory or a symbol of fantasy. Actually, the nose is nothing but the sudden loss of status in the society. Going through the whole piece it seems that the piece is really worthy of a critical assessment. In the first part of the story it is seen that here is a man who is a barber and his name is Ivan Yakovlevich and his wife’s name is Praskovya Ospovna. They have no children and they lead a happy conjugal life. There happens a strange thing on March 25 in St Peters burg where the barber lives (his surname has
been lost, and does not even appear on his shop sign, which depicts a gentleman with a well-soaped cheek and the legend: ‘Blood-letting also performed’) (The Nose 147). One morning he finds a nose when he is cutting his loaf in half. When his wife Praskovya Osipovna sees it she feels angry. She orders her husband to get rid of it at once.

For the sake of decency Ivan Yakovlevich put a coat on top of his night shirt, and seating himself at the table, poured out some salt, peeled two onions, took old of a knife and, with an air of the utmost gravity, set about slicing his loaf. Cutting it in half he glanced inside and, to his great surprise, saw something white. He cautiously prodded it with his knife and poked at it with his finger. “Feels firm...” he thought, “what on earth can it be?”

He stuck in his fingers and pulled out—a nose!...At this his hands fell to his sides; he then rubbed his eyes and felt the object: yes, a nose, no doubt about it! and even, it seemed, a familiar nose. An expression of horror crept over Ivan Yakovlevich’s face. But this horror was nothing compared to the indignation that overtook his lady wife.

“Where did you cut off that nose, you butcher?” she shrieked, livid with rage. “You villain! Drunkard! I’ll report you to the police myself. Downright criminal! I’ve already been told by three people how you tug at their noses so hard while you’re shaving them that it’s a wonder that they stay on at all.” (The Nose 147-148)

Eventually, Ivan goes to Isakievsky Bridge and with a great cleverness throws the nose into the river. But he is caught red handed by a policeman.

In Part II, Collegiate Assessor Kovalev notices that his nose is no longer in the right place. Surprised, he starts for the Police Commissioner in search of the nose.

Collegiate Assessor Kovalev awoke fairly early and breathed out: “brr!...” as he always did on awakening, for no reason apparent even to himself. He stretched and called for the small mirror which stood on the dressing table. He wanted to have a look at the pimple which had appeared on his nose the previous night; but to his greatest astonishment he saw that where his nose should have been there was a flat space! Taking fright, he asked for some water and rubbed his eyes with a towel: it was true, there was no nose! He pinched himself, to make sure he was not still asleep.

He becomes amazed when he sees his own nose moving in guise of a State Councillor. They have a funny conversation in the church but again the nose disappears. Kovalev, most fanatically, gives an advertisement in the newspaper. He also goes to the police superintendent to put complaints about the nose. He remains unsuccessful there too. Finding no other way Kovalev comes back to his own residence and laments gravely for the lost nose. By this time, Kovalev has been thinking about the whole matter and comes up with the decision that most likely culprit Podtochina’s wife is behind it who wishes him to marry her daughter. He decides to take her into court via official channels. Meanwhile, Major Kovalev becomes very excited getting back the nose through the police officer. He finds that the nose does not stick to his face. He tries his best to fix it but fails. Hence, he asks a doctor to fix the nose while the doctor expresses his incapability. Kovalev becomes sure that it is a conspiracy against him by Podtochina and accusing her he starts writing a letter. Also he receives a letter in the meantime sent by Podtochina which makes him confused but he is convinced that Podtochina has no involvement with losing his nose.

Kovalev finds, in Part III, on April 7, his nose in its previous place and he becomes very happy. Major Kovalev is the protagonist of the story and he is the character pivotal to the story and all the incidents evolve round him. The very nose that gets detached from his face and roamed around and finally returns to its old place on the face of this Major Kovalev. He is the center of this strange implausible tale. Kovalev is known as collegiate assessor. The collegiate assessors who receive this rank with the help of various academic certificates are not on any account to be compared with those collegiate assessors who acquire their position in Caucasas. According to the writer, Kovalev is a Caucasian collegiate assessor who has only held this rank for two years, and thus still quite besotted with his newfound dignity (The Nose 151); to give himself even greater weight and authority he always calls himself major rather than collegiate assessor. Major Kovalev always shows that he is a powerful person. His whiskers are extended to the very middle of the cheek. The collar of his shirt is always snow-white and starched. He is fond of ladies but not of love. When he sees any woman in the street or any other places, he tells, “Listen my good woman, come along to my place; my flats in Sadovaya street; ask anyone where Major Kovalev lives and they’ll show you” (The Nose 151).

The sphere of the nose is a place of hallucinations where life revolves around the unreal. The characters act, behave and work in that unreal atmosphere as if they don’t even sense the reality. That makes the story difficult to understand. Is the barber, Ivan Yakovlevich, working in a maze of an intoxicated stage? Or is he hallucinating? His wife is more practical than he is but is she not wrong? So the total effect becomes abstract, and here lies the magnificence of Gogol’s satire. Probably, to bring out the lack of ethics in a totally rotten society, Gogol had to take the shade of abstract realism instead of allegory. Collegiate Assessor Kovalev is an example of those corrupt
officials who lives grandly in the society. He calls himself Major Kovalev, and in a grand manner addresses women as prostitutes and invites them to his home. What he does with his nose on he cannot do anymore except it. Without his nose he cannot go to watch the beautiful actress who has newly arrived in the theater. Here his nose is the symbol with which he keeps himself high and does the wrong things. Loosing his nose he is delirious: “My God O my God! What have I done to deserve this? If only I had lost an arm or a leg—it would have been far better; or even my ears—that would have been hard, but at least bearable; but without his nose a man is nothing: neither man nor beast, but God knows what!” (The Nose 161).

The key-thing of Gogol’s story is the nose, which is most probably the least significant part of human body. Because of its shape, size, location and because it is seen by others not by its owner it is something inconspicuous. Major Kovalev with the lost nose is the epitome of empty appearance. The Major has two main objectives—to get promotion and to marry well. Kovalev’s fake title ‘major’ shows his lack of dignity: “He had only held this rank for two years, and was thus still quite besotted with his newfound dignity; to give himself even greater weight and authority he always called himself major, rather than collegiate assessor” (The Nose 151). Here lies the writer’s ridicule of the character. The loss of nose throws the Major into a big problem i.e. it ruins his appearance. The Major dresses very smartly (the collar of his shirt was always snow-white and starched), scrutinizes the least pimple, wears ornate side-whiskers (these whiskers extend to the very middle of the cheek and thence reach right to the nose) and his entire thought is of how will he look to others—his friends, colleagues and sweethearts. In fact, it is his sense of personal importance that makes the loss of nose painful: “Of course I…actually I’m a major. And, I’m sure you agree, for me to walk around without a nose is a rather unseemly. It would be all right for some market-woman, selling peeled oranges on the Voskresensky bridge to sit there with no nose; but as I’m hoping for a promotion…and moreover being acquainted with the ladies of a number of distinguished houses” (The Nose 153). To lose his nose is a worse calamity for the Major than possibly to lose even a hand or a leg. Perhaps Gogol’s use of the nose as a gauge of personal esteem finds its climax in the Major’s encounter with his nose in the streets of St Petersburg. The city that Gogol immortalized in his Petersburg Tales ultimately came out conspicuously void of its typical landmarks, such as the architecture, the river, canals, bridges, statues. Not a single park or tree was mentioned by Gogol, nor were the proverbial white nights, rhapsodized by every Russian writer. In contrast to Pushkin's depiction of the place, Gogol's cityscape lacked geometry; absent were the horizontal and vertical aspects, and there was no tension between the chaos of waters and the cosmos of the stone, as in Pushkin's The Bronze Horseman, which succeeded in canonizing The Petersburg Myth. Gogol’s Petersburg was made neither of stone nor water. Perhaps made of fog, it was immaterial and often ominous (Davydov 2006).

Kovalev’s nose is probably the symbol of his snobbish attitude with which he keeps himself high. This man is neither big in his profession nor in his manners, but this does not reflect because seemingly he carries on a different identity. And the fake identity he can keep only with his nose on. The moment he loose his nose, he becomes low and unconfident to himself. He cannot do things he did before. He sinks and moans, grumbling to himself.

Surprisingly, however, Kovalev’s nose takes its master’s place and roams around the city. It goes to the park. It is seen in different places of the city which are Kovalev’s favorite ones. Kovalev himself, on the other hand, cannot go anywhere or cannot do anything without his nose. He cannot flirt with the girl whose mother wants him to marry. Instead, he visits the church when his detached nose visits the church. The Major goes to the church not to pray but to get back his nose. The whole thing makes him sad as well as ludicrous. He moves around to get his nose back. It turns out that the nose is the Major's superior by several grades: the nose appears, in deed, in the a ccoutrements of a protagonist of his story. Gogol’s own nose was conspicuous, and he was sensitive about it. His private correspondence contains more than one joking reference to his own nose. Also numerous references to noses are made throughout Gogol’s other literary works for example in The Nevsky Prospect and The Diary of a Madman.

The nose as a literary theme had been treated by Russian authors at least ever since the translation, completed in 1807, of Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, in which the subject of noses is elaborately dealt with especially in Slawkenbergius’s Tale. Noses and heads which run about on their own, which disappear and then return as well, even which are baked in bread as in Part I of The Nose are to be found in Russian literature of the 1820's and 1830's.
Nabokov says that the Russian language perhaps even more than the English language, is rich in expressions dealing with the nose and Gogol’s writing makes extensive use of them. Therefore, a great variety of biographical and historical considerations can be called upon to show why Gogol might have been attracted to the nose as the protagonist of a story. But they hardly help at all to explain the particular story which Gogol wrote (Nabokov 1945).

Gogol was satirizing a variety of stock attitudes, stock figures and stock responses within the official and public life of St Petersburg. The author himself worked here briefly as a government clerk, “copying out the stale fantasies of department heads.” The emergence of the low-level civil servant (soon to become the stock protagonist of Russian literature) was a direct consequence of Peter the Great’s administrative reforms (Davydov 2006). The scenes located at Newspaper office, where Kovalev tries to insert an advertisement for his nose in the newspaper, Police Inspector’s office, where the officer outrages the Major and so forth are the examples of Gogol’s satire of the then bureaucratic officials of St Petersburg.

The whole affair is, in fact, the creation of the writer’s superior imagination to portray the follies of the society. When Ivan is caught red-handed by the policeman and the constable returns the nose to its owner, the city people watch it roaming around the city. This hallucination world show how corrupts like Kovalev stay high in the society by just keeping a big nose on the face. The society, in any way, does not change in Gogol’s story. Collegiate Assessor Kovalev goes back to his own place as soon as he gets his nose. In the guise of abstract, Gogol portrays the real. His humor is woven with giggling satire. He mocks; his criticism is biting. Though, at the end, it turns out that the society cannot be changed by the writers, it has to be changed by the politicians.

Works Cited