

Tragic Flaw of Natasha Romanov in Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People*: A Cognitive Poetic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Tragic flaw is one of the ornamental figures of speech that propounds a character's demise in the plot. Cognitive Poetics is a literary theory that allow readers to interpret a text at his/her own cognitive level. By applying the theory of Cognitive Poetics this article intends to bring out the hubris of Natasha more over on a reader's perspective with his own linguistic and psychological domain. Also, the fall of Natasha is the outcome of her hamartia. Her defective characteristics like the thirst for fame and material pleasure eventually force her to travel on the path of crisis, which ends her life tragically. Moreover, this research excavates the reasons for the error of her judgement which eventually forces Richard to assassinate her own mother. Natasha's egoistic clash with her husband and unreal love for her son Richard make the plot more complex and tragic. Her desire to become an independent woman in a male-sophisticated society placed her in a spot of bother. Finally, this article concludes that the fall of Natasha Romanov is an outcome of her headstrong pride and her search for carnal pleasure.

Keywords: Tragic Flaw, Behaviour, Anti-Feminism, Downfall, Pride.

You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it.

- Maya Angelou

Introduction:

Joyce Carol Oates is a phenomenal novelist in exposing the deteriorating circumstances of women during the late post-war period in America. Oates exceptional portal quality is an outcome of her real-life experience in contemporary society. Her themes often revolve around the sadistic nature of the patriarchal society and the concept of second-class citizenship. Oates protagonists often struggle for survival, identity crisis, and visibility in society. But to their pity, they often get subjugated by the male-centered society.

But to a contradiction this research intends to excavate the causes that lead to the tragic end of Natasha Romanov. Oates's projection of the character Natasha might be an outcome of her real-life experience with the anti-feminist movement during the late 20th century. It is a fact that a mother and her son share

more bond than a daughter. But in *Expensive People*, by Oates the scenario is paradoxical. Natashya Romanov, one of the leading feminine characters of the novel is an emerging successful writer but as an outcome of her materialistic desire, she forgets her family which eventually leads her to a traumatic end. The present research article sets its viewpoint to bring out the episodes that led to the tragic end of Natashya Romanov. Also, it culls out the hubris of Natashya, which remains a crisis throughout the plot. The writer's attitude and the reader's interaction with the text make the novel's atmosphere more interesting and interactive.

Cognitive Poetics is a literary theory that interprets a text from both linguistic and psychological standpoints. Because it is a present version of reader-response theory, the reader can analyze the text using his or her cognitive level. His/her linguistic quality makes the reader a realistic character in the text so that he can get a lived-in experience of the plot. Cognitive Poetics wants the text to be an archaeology, and the reader to be an archaeologist so that he can dig deeper to find the text's untapped meaning.

Peter Barry in his book entitled *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, advocates this theory as "Cognitive poetic is a method of reading literature which combines linguistics and psychology, with the aim of better understanding basic cognitive processes" (322). By applying the theory of Cognitive Poetic in Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People*, this research intends to bring out the tragic flaw of Natashya Romanov in the plot.

Objectives of the research:

- To determine how her decision to leave the family for her individuality paves the way to her downfall.
- To demonstrate how the headstrong pride of Natashya Romanov leads her to a catastrophic end.
- To show how the hubris of Natashya leads to a terrible end.
- To demonstrate how by applying Cognitive Poetic theory, the reader presents a lived-in experience through a thorough analysis of the text.

The uniqueness of the research article:

Previously researchers have dealt with the topics of social inequality for women in a male-centered society. Many have examined the concept of matricide in the text. Joyce Carol Oates's bizarre encounters made researchers write many impactful papers. But the present research paper by applying the theory of Cognitive Poetics exposes the causes that lead to the catastrophic end of Natashya Romanov. Also, it portrays how women's quest for visibility in society eventually falls prey to materialistic pleasure and otherworldly pleasure unknowingly, leading to their own tragic flaw.

Research problems or questions:

- What are the defining characteristics that led to Natashya Romanov's demise?
- How does the generational gap affect the mother-son relationship?
- How does Natashya's quest for fame and pride lead to her own downfall?
- What events cause Richard Everett to turn against his mother and assassinate her towards the end of the novel?

Research Methodology:

This present article applies various aspects of Cognitive Poetic under the domains of interpretive and exploratory research methodology. Specially, this article wants to prove how the theory of Cognitive Poetics allows the researcher to apply his own cognitive level and linguistic quality to examine the causes that led to the tragic flaw of Natashya Romanov. This process intends to bring out how materialistic pleasure makes human forget their own flesh which ends in a chaotic way.

Aristotelian definition of tragic flaw:

Aristotle a disciple of Plato classifies tragedy into 6 parts and elucidated the concept of a tragic flaw. A tragic hero/heroine, according to Aristotle, must be a prominent figure in society who eventually falls due to his/her error of judgement and misfortune. The hero/heroine does not have to die at the end; instead, he/she must go through a shift or reversal of fortune Peripeteia. As Aristotle propounded, the plot is the soul of tragedy.

Natashya's Desire and Cause for Materialistic Pleasure:

The downfall of Natashya plays a significant role in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Expensive People*. The reader's cognition makes a debate with the text to expose the existing flaws that lead to her death. The title *Expensive People* itself has some metaphorical aspects because it almost reveals the context of the text. At first glance, the reader of the text will dive to the conclusion that the plot of the novel is about some issues of a well-settled sophisticated family. But culling out deeper uncovers the unexplored meaning of the text. The present research raises various questions regarding the chaotic end of Natashya. These questions appeal to the cognitive efficiency of the reader. A bonding between a mother and her son is stronger than any relationship. But Natashya Romanov's love for Richard is very flat. She is a self-centered woman, who rejects her family and wishes to live an independent life. Natashya's quest for worldly pleasure makes her travel on the path of anti-feminism which is a considerable satire Oates proposes in the plot.

Natashya's quest for earthly yearning stems from her difficult childhood experiences due to her Russian heritage. Nada's mental behaviors can be investigated as the struggling life of a Russian immigrant in America. Nada discloses the truth about her ambition for popularity towards the end of the tale and wonders about the null reason behind her Jewish ancestor's execution. Nada strongly believed that she will be also getting executed for no reason, so she decides to get a prominent position in society to escape her imaginary tragic ending. Nada's early-stage struggling horrors her throughout the novel. This is one of the hubris of her in the novel.

Natashya Romanov's quest for earthly pleasure is visualized in the first section of the novel, where she orders her husband to procure the property in Fernwood despite their economic condition. Because Fernwood in the novel gets compared to 'Paradiso', it is the coziest place, where all the well-settled people reside. She shared no emotions for her son and husband. Her thirst for fame and power made her forget Richard, which eventually leads to her tragic flaw. She is a perfect projection of a woman who misunderstands the concept of feminine equality and eventually follows the path of anti-feminism. To portray herself as a member of an aristocratic society, she started writing fiction and ordered her husband to buy a house in Fernwood.

She was intoxicated with it. She was intoxicated with our house – with her new expensive furniture, her marble-topped table and her exquisite bookshelf, given to her by father's great-aunt and worth oh let me

tell you! – quite a bit. She was intoxicated with expensive tidbits ginger had unfrozen not half an hour before, she was intoxicated with her white, white dress. (Oates, 46)

Throughout the narrative, Nada is fascinated by her fashion sense. Nada's actions or societal sense might be identified ironically because she pays more attention to her dress while still keeping her room unclean. Also, she never acknowledges the time with her family and enjoys solitude in her room. She spends hours with her typewriter which has caused difficulties for her family.

Richard dislikes Natashya from an early age due to her selfish nature and her preference for more expensive items than her son. She never provided Richard with what he lacked. The plot's first problem is a lack of love for an eleven-year-old son. Her misjudgment of the scenario plays a significant part in the narrative. Nada's love of sunglasses becomes another weakness because it conceals all of her feelings behind the spectacles. For example, in the opening section of the novel, Richard wishes to shatter the glass into two pieces so that his mother might show him some attention. This reveals Richard's sorrow behind his happy facade. Natashya's fondness for worldly pleasure is a key reason for her defect in the narrative, which sadly ends her life. Natashya's love for earthly pleasure can be expressed as an outcome of the struggles that she witnessed in her childhood days.

Natashya's disrespectful attitude toward her husband:

Another problem of Natashya is her rude attitude toward her husband Elwood. Elwood and her son are used to meet her worldly desires. "She had married father the way a girl goes on a date with a man she does not like at all or even knows" (30). Natashya and Mr. Elwood both had a difficult marriage, which significantly impacted their son Richard's mentality. She forbids her family from reading her work and forbids them from entering her library. "Nada forbade me to look at anything of hers, of course, just as she forbade father, neither of us could enter her study" (49). This implies a sense of estrangement from her family.

She had even abandoned him and Richard three times and moved in with another man for no apparent reason. Even after these experiences, Elwood's love for his wife did not change, and he accepted her with love. But Nada's attitude towards her family left an impression on Richard, and he eventually grew to welcome her absence from the house. He even celebrates her absence by going out with Gustave and his family. But Elwood Everett's love for his wife is deeper than the reader may comprehend. After discovering Natashya's affair with Sheer in New York, he accepts her. "Your mother has left this house and is living in New York City with someone named Sheer – and we know all about him too!" (105).

Their relationship deteriorated after her reunion with her spouse in Cedar Grove. She begins to live her own life. Nada declares their relationship to be amicable. This explains their relationship's hollowness. This emptiness could be the result of their disinterest in sexual life and disagreements. For instance, Nada disrespects Elwood in a meeting by refusing his words in front of an editor expressing her supremacy over her husband. Natashya's vision of herself as an independent woman leads her down the path of anti-feminism. It is true that many women misunderstand the concept of feminism. Her desire to be a self-sufficient woman leads her down the wrong path, which is one of the key causes of her catastrophic collapse.

Natashya's failure as a mother:

Natashya in order to present herself as an aristocratic person forces her son to enter John Behemoth Boys School. Another cause for her shortcomings is that she was unaware of Richard's desire and never

cared about it. She makes her son take an IQ test in order for him to be admitted to the school. Unfortunately for Richard, he had a low IQ score and was rejected by Natashya. She even tells Richard to stop referring to her as a mother. Instead of soothing Richard, she displays dislike for her son. Because John Behemoth is one of Fernwood's most prestigious schools, where all of the aristocratic families send their children to learn. Even if she claims it is for the benefit of Richards' career, her attitude towards this occurrence has some personal significance. Finally, after passing the IQ test, Natashya lavishes Richard with affection and brings him to the park as a result of gratifying her yearning. This was the first time she had taken her son outside the house. This is one of the reasons Richard harbours ill will towards his mother.

Natashya controls every action of Richard so that she can project herself as a higher-class society woman. While walking with her son into John Behemoth's school she insists and pokes him to walk straighter even though it hurts him. Richard calls this incident miserable and questions whether it is his fault to be a child. Nada spends more time with people like Dean Nash and his wife and does not give importance to her own family. Her behaviour typifies aristocratic ladies in the late postwar period when they talk about cricket, politics, and other important issues in order to appear occupied in society.

In order to be self-sufficient, she rejects her son three times in the narrative. He was a baby the first time, six the second time, and eleven the third time. Following her departure from Fernwood, Richard enters her mother's chamber and watches everything in a haphazard manner, symbolizing his mother's muddled intellect. In her pursuit of fame and power, Nada neglects her family, which is the beginning of her downfall. Richard divides her mother into two categories. One who frequently rejects him and shows no regard for him. Another image he created in his imagination is of how his mother should be.

Two Nadas existed – the one who was free and one who abandoned me often and the other who has become fixed irreparably in my brain, an embryonic creature of my own making, my extravagant and deranged imagination- and I loved them both, I swear it was both of them I carved. (Oates 83)

Natashya's existence in Richard's memory is compared to an 'embryonic creature,' which he chops down near the end of the story. Despite the fact that he believes this assignment is impossible, he assassinated her since he had no other choice. Richard frequently tells his readers that Natashya's death will bring his book to an end, which would finally lead to his death also. He compares Nada's appearance to Medusa, a terrifying figure from Greek mythology. Medusa had a curse that turned any man who saw her eyes into stone; similarly, Nada's appearance was horrifying, and Richard had no words to express her horrific vision on him.

Nada's absence in Richard's life made his life a chaotic one psychologically, he barely had a friend and longed for love. Nada's assumption that her son can do whatever she can, made his boyhood days miserable. For example, to demonstrate her authority over her son, she forces him to talk in French at a party given by Dean Nash. Richard becomes a puppet in Nada's hands, and she eventually develops a loathing for her mother. Richard compares himself to a translucent piece of glass that can be easily broken into millions of pieces. Natashya's feelings for Richard waned following their reunion in Cedar Grove; she could not even recall how old he was. Because he was rejected by her mother for her selfishness at an early age, he began to generate a sense of irritation for her, and in the end, Nada died tragically. This is another factor that leads to the flaws of Natashya.

The flaw of Natashya Romanov:

Nada exhibits disdain for her own family and portrays themselves as a person with liminal power. Nadas

quest for social acceptance led her down the path of an anti-feminine viewpoint, which progressively blossomed into a parasitic feature in Richard's mind. Nada's thirst for power and celebrity began at a young age. At the novel's end, Natashya's true identity is revealed as Nancy Romanov. She never disclosed her real identity, and some of her snapshot photographs revealed everything towards the end of the novel. Natashya's irrespective behaviour against her spouse and eventual preference for financial pleasure over paying attention to her family cause her to become invisible in the family. Her passion for worldly pleasure paves the way for her death.

Richard in the second part of the section proclaims that "life without Nada was a surprise because it was so much like life with Nada. We discovered that she hadn't been around the house that much" (95). Richard never had a sense of the presence of Nada in the family, which symbolically suggests the beginning of her demise in the novel. Natashya's love for Richard is never visible in the text, because rather than enjoying her time with her son, she acknowledges the time with her typewriter. Nada's preference for her room and library shows a sense of alienation for Richard.

In the final part of *Expensive People*, Mr. Elwood and Richard reunite with Natashya in Coder Grove. To the reader's amazement, Richard exhibits no emotion, pointing to Nada's separation from the family. Her role in the book ends due to her poor judgement in elevating herself to a position of prominence in society, which causes her son to choose the wrong path. As a result of Nada's sadistic behaviour in the book's final chapter, Richard shoots her and never looks back. Ultimately, he finishes his memoir by spending time in the hospital.

Findings:

The chronological delineation of events in *Expensive People* by Joyce Carol Oates, explains how Natashya Romanov's path of self-centeredness, eventually ends her life tragically. An emerging writer, Natashya Romanov portrays herself as a significant member of society but eventually forgets her family. To show her supremacy over her family in front of others, she betrays her husband and son. Nada's behaviour against her husband for buying a house in Fernwood shows her quest to become an aristocratic woman.

Natashya's never had any feelings for Mr. Elwood Everett. She needs him so that he can gratify her earthly pleasures. Nada often refers to her husband as 'son-of-a-bitch' in the novel, which suggests a sense of hatred for him. But while Natashya abandoned him three times, Mr. Elwood still accepts her as his wife, making their love seem incredibly genuine in the story. Her selfish attitude against her husband for attaining carnal pleasure paves the way for her demise.

Natashya's love for Richard also seems to be liminal. Moreover, Nada wants her son to be just like her. Her attitude at John Behemoth School against her son for scoring low marks on the IQ exam shows Nada's selfishness. She even orders her son how to walk and speak. Richard felt disgusted by Nada's aspiration for stardom and her betrayal of her family. Nada's absence in the house never had any impact on her son's mind. Because more or less she always remained invisible in the family. She spends more time with her typewriter than with her son.

Natashya Romanov's deeds cause Richard to eventually get angry with her. Finally, Richards' sense of hate towards his mother forced him to assassinate her because of his psychological makeup. Nada's pursuit of popularity and material pleasure ultimately leads to her untimely demise. Oates skillfully incorporates all of these elements into the story to empower women against anti-feminist figures in society.

Conclusion:

Natashya Romanov's journey to prominence in society does not go well for her. Yet still, her selfish attitude haunts her at the end of the novel. The tragic flaw of Nada is an outcome of selfish exploitation in her own family. Her attitude almost haunts her whole family towards the end. Joyce Carol Oates presents Natashya Romanov as a representative of anti-feminism existence in society. So, this article finally concludes that women's contribution to society can act contradictorily. Her contribution to the welfare of society can lead to rising in position. On the other hand, her verge for self-esteem can lead to society's demise.

Future Scope of Extension:

Natashya's quest for identity crisis can be taken as a separate part of the research. The generation gap between Richard and Natashya Romanov will offer a rich source for research. Literary devices applied in the text can be a fruitful area of research by applying Cognitive Semantics Analysis. Conceptual Metaphors in *Expensive People* can offer a new area of research. Text World Theory can also be applied to cull out many uncovered meanings of the text. The anti-Feminism quality in the text can also be an exceptional area for research.

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