Father images in Brothers Karamazov

In Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky presented the various images of father to show what his thought about the father’s responsibility of education which most of the fathers shirked in society. The contrast between different types of fathers reflects his thinking about the right path Russian culture should follow in the upheaval.

Dostoyevsky was a father of several children when he was writing Karamazov Brothers. In May 1878, after going through a huge blow in the death of his youngest son, Alyosha, he followed his wife's advice to seek spiritual healing. Dostoyevsky, in the autumn of his life, had experienced both losing his father and his son. Recalling his experience of being a father and being a son, he realized the importance of an ideal father for the younger generation.

Dostoevsky constructed three kinds of fathers: Fyodor Karamazov and Grigory as biological father and foster fathers respectively, Ivan as an ideological father, and Zosima as a spiritual father. These three types of father work together and show what the ideal father looks like.

Fyodor Karamazov had never done his father's duty during the growth of four sons. Procurator Ippolit Kirillovitch’s said: “On the spiritual side he was undeveloped, while his vitality was excessive. . . He had no feelings for his duties as a father. He ridiculed those duties.” Defense lawyer Fetyukovitch also said that old Karamazov did not deserve to be a father. People all agreed that old Karamazov missed the spiritual responsibility as a father. Grigory was also an incomplete father. He raised the Karamazov Brothers but hardly educated them spiritually due to his limited capacity. The mental state of Smerdyakov, who grown up with Grigory from his birth, showed that Grigory’s role as a father was limited to providing food and necessities.

Ivan, a very studious person who has strong intellectual inclinations, was an ideological father, imbuing his ideas into others. As an atheist and nihilist, he questioned the reasonableness of god's creation of the world and mankind and challenged the ultimate meaning of the Christian god and faith. Ivan totally discarded traditional religious thought, no matter whether it was valuable or not. He thought that the world created by god was absurd because the way of saving is not reasonable. The incarnation of Jesus Christ was a kind of cruel torture for human beings, which contrasted with the ideology of Zosima. Ivan convinced Smerdyakov that "anything is allowed", which led to the murder of Fyodor Karamazov.

Compared to the two types of fathers above, Zosima was the spiritual and ideal father. Although he did not raise Alyosha physically, Zosima, who represented the ideal father in Dostoevsky’s mind, was an important mentor who guided Alyosha’s life. In addition to the Zosima, Dostoevsky constructed a variety of father figures, such as the autocratic old businessman as a tyrannical father and Snegiryov as a loving father. But, undoubtedly, Zosima was the most perfect among them. Zosima thought that Alyosha was inherently good and honest and could go through the earthly trials to understand the true love. Alyosha treated the elder as the embodiment of love and wisdom, a spiritual mentor, and a guardian. Zosima exhorted people to forgive and love those who committed crime because he believed that no one was perfect on the earth, and that all people have a seed of sin buried in their hearts. Zosima loved children and thought that children were pure people with Christ in their heats. He also educated people that legal punishment was good for a sinner, which could clean their sins and help them find the meaning of life. Thus, Zosima’s ideology represented the doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church.

All children receive certain characteristics of their person from their biological fathers. But, because experiences shape who children become, every child, especially those experiencing a clash between old and new ideas, need a spiritual father to guide them on life paths that lead them to virtue and good.

The Karamazov brothers all inherited the "broad Karamazov character" from their father, old Karamazov. Dmitry's impulsiveness and recklessness, Ivan’s sarcasm and rebellion, Alyosha's self-awakening, and Smerdyakov’s patricide and suicide all exhibited some extent of their father's personality, mentality, experience. However, they had different life patterns.

Alyosha, raised by Zosima, his spiritual father, inherited his divine qualities, and passed Zosima’s spirit of philanthropy to the next generation. He inspired Kolya, comforted Ilyusha, and taught the boys to love, appreciate, and care for others. He became a shining image in the eyes of children like Zosima did. But Ivan, influenced by western Europe thinking, lacking a spiritual father as a gueide, went to extremes and ended on the verge of insanity due to the patricide.

Many other comparisons reflect the importance of spiritual fathers. Kolya’s childhood was similar to Ivan’s. Kolya was then affected by Alyosha and welcomed the future with enthusiasm and universal love in mind. Ivan, however, went to extremes and ended on the verge of insanity due to the patricide. Zosima’s transition from an impulsive man to a kind person implied that If Ivan encountered a spiritual father, he could also leave his evil way and become a father like Zosima.

In the second half of the 19th century, the belief in an afterlife in the Russian Orthodox ideology was invaded by western European “rational supremacy”. Russia, like a son figure in the novel, was facing the cultural uncertainty and possibilities. Dostoevsky once was also influenced by this trend. During the assassination of Alexander II in 1866, Dostoyevsky showed extreme alarm and concern, which contrasted sharply with the radical thinking in his youth when he participated in Petrashevsky Circle and was sentenced to death by the Tsar. In his later literary creation, he turned from a rebellious child to a worshipper of the imperial power and viewed the tsar as the father of Russia. He gradually realized that passionate enthusiasm for the younger generation could not obliterate the blood inheritance of his parents. Fatherhood not only symbolized the outdated and conserved practices but also symbolized the bloodline, inheritance, and guidance. No matter how branches and leaves extended upward, roots must live in deep fertile soil. Dostoyevsky, like Ivan, attracted by western European culture, once criticized the Russian Orthodox and set people afire using his words. Yet, when he became a father, he understood the accumulating significance of Russian origin during the history.

In Karamazov Brothers, Ivan was influenced by atheism and nihilism from Western Europe. Meanwhile, the spirit of love emanating from Zosima contained a strong sense of humanity, the quality of asceticism, and the traditional belief in Orthodox Church. The life experience of Ivan exhibited the disintegrating life experience and the spiritual dilemma of modern Russian people who lost their cultural roots. Zosima was constructed to refute Ivan’s ideology. In a letter to Lubimov on 11 June 1979 (the Russian calendar), Dostoevsky said: "The next volume will be the death of El-Zakima and his conversations with his friends before he died. I want to force everyone to realize that pure and ideal Christians are not abstract, but very real, living, visible and tangible. Christianity is the only refuge of the land of Russia from all evil. God bless me for success." By Zosima, Dostoevsky was telling people the importance of spiritual fathers for Russia during the cultural shock.

The comparison between characters implied that, in Dostoevsky’s eyes, an ideal spiritual father would advocate a universal world where people saw each other as brothers as the doctrine of Russian Orthodox, let alone the different beliefs or fractions, other than western European ideology. In 1861, Dostoevsky used the example of Pushkin to refute the contempt for the value of Russian literature and art by "The Russian Messenger". In the Great Pushkin Celebration of 1880, Dostoevsky said: “The destiny of a Russian is pan-European and universal. To become a true Russian, to become fully Russian, means only to become the brother of all men, to become, if you will, a universal man.”

In Dostoevsky’s mind, the father of Russia was tsar, the father of Russian literature was Pushkin, the father of religion was God, and the father of all humanity was the universal love. Thus, Solovyov commented that “Dostoyevsky does not preach asceticism but infinite universal love.”