

Exploring Human Quest for Meaning: A Critical Analysis of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

Mr. Rojith Raja J M

II M.A English

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)

Tiruchirappalli – 620 002, Tamilnadu, India

Introduction

Fyoder Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was one the prominent writers in 19th century Russia. His famous works were *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot* and so on. He was celebrated as one the greatest psychologists as most of his works are based on the experimentation of the human psyche. Dostoevsky lived during the crucial times where there was revolution in all the fields and literature was not an exception. The impact of Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism had gained so much attention across Europe. Dostoevsky considered it to be a threat and to him anything that preaches, 'life is meaningless and it has no purpose' would cause immense chaos in a way that the men view life. Thus, Dostoevsky played a crucial role in nurturing European society.

Intellectual European society

19th century Europe witnessed numerous movements. There was revolution in all areas. Whether it is science, philosophy or literature each field saw the influence of enlightenment. On the other hand, there was sweeping injustice against the middle and lower class. This was one of the worst impacts of the industrial revolution. As a result, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels jointly produced "*The Communist Manifesto*", which had unique views regarding the ownership of properties, distribution of wealth and State's intervention in all aspects of life. Critics say that this was the early work which laid the foundation for the leftist movements that occurred in various ways in the twentieth century. In the beginning, it faced severe backlash from various people.

Yet the horrors of harsh labouring, united so many people as they needed justice for the injustice they have undergone. In many aspects Communism was contradicted with some ideologies. Not only Communism spread across Europe but also similar movements got the attention of so many youngsters. One among the prominent movements was existentialism

which was slightly contradictory to nihilism. It primarily focused on finding meaning in the meaningless world. Dostoevsky desperately wanted to prove that life had meaning and it was worth living. However the rise of leftist intellectuals was obviously a drawback to Dostoevsky. Somehow he was able to attack them via his writings. Thus the twentieth century European society paved way for upliftment and freedom of speech.

Beginning of Reason

In the 18th century there was a light in the way intellects perceive the world. They gave priority to reason and rationality and it was called the age of enlightenment. Some of the famous thinkers of this age were Immanuel Kant, John Locke, David Hume and so on. Their works created an immense shockwave in the western society. To them, emotions were vain and rationality was superior. Most of them were atheist. So, they questioned the existence of God. Similarly, in *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky talked about the importance of reasoning through the character of Rodion Romanovitch Raskolnikov. Furthermore, the contribution made by Kant in the realm of philosophy regarding rationality could be considered as the beginning of modernist movements.

Nihilism and its consequences

Nihilism is a philosophical movement initiated by Friedrich Nietzsche. It talks about rejection of all religious and moral principles and also nothing in this world is worthwhile. It got into the academic fields and fascinated a number of professors and students. Nonetheless, conservative personalities like Leo Tolstoy and Fyoder Dostoevsky worried about the ill-effects of its profound impact on people. Moreover, Dostoevsky in his *Crime and Punishment* talks about the danger of being a nihilist through the character named Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov. Svidrigailov is a complex character who is accused of the suspicious murder of his wife Marfa Petrovna; he is also the former employer of Raskolnikov's sister Dunya. He is involved in manipulating Raskolnikov that he is morally righteous yet he possesses some evil traits like drinking, gambling and having illegal affairs. He is accused of immoral approach towards Dunya.

Throughout the novel, he appears as a foil to Raskolnikov, seeing the world through a nihilistic perspective. He utterly disregards societal norms. Despite being happy outwardly, Svidrigailov reveals his inner agony and a sense of despair. His desire to pursue Dunya and the

way he killed himself in the end, highlights his struggle to find meaning in life and the emptiness of his existence. Therefore, Svidrigailov is a perfect example who explicitly portrays the eventual destruction of being a nihilist.

To Dostoevsky, nihilism is a threat to human existence. Firstly, he disregards nihilism because it says life has no meaning. When there is no meaning in life or objective truth, one may find a different path or will be led astray. The contemporary psychologist, Jordan Peterson has been talking about the importance of having a meaningful life. Because a meaningful life never makes one feel ashamed of him or herself. To Peterson, every individual must have a goal. It involves having short term goals and long term goals and it can be in any area of life; whether it is education, profession or even building a good physique because when a person is consistent in achieving his goals, there are very less probabilities of feeling depressed or alienated. The reason behind it is, when a person sees a tiny progression towards his goal it would give positivity to that person and there is no room for depression and pessimism.

Secondly, Dostoevsky warns against the dangers of being immoral. In the novel, Svidrigailov did not have any religious belief so he got indulged in various immoral activities and he did not have any concern regarding his own life. All he wanted was to satisfy his carnal cravings. He experienced all sorts of physical pleasures, yet, inside he lacked something; he was not contented and peaceful with himself. Literally, his conscience tormented him. So, he was not hesitant in killing himself. The point is, he did not have anything to look upto so there was no other options for him but to take his own life. According to Jordan Peterson, religious belief would help one to cope with worldly temptations and afflictions. In short, one must have a centre to look upto. Thirdly, Dostoevsky talks about the importance of keeping everything simple. It is the human tendency to achieve greater or seek validation. Both Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov failed in this matter. They always wanted to do something bigger at all costs. If it is for a good cause it does not matter, but if it is to be achieved through the means of evil, there comes the problem. As they chose the evil path, they ended up in despair and loss of hope.

Raskolnikov's Loss of Morality and Rationality

Raskolnikov is the protagonist of the novel *Crime and Punishment*. He is a former law student, delirious young man, isolated at home. He developed his own theory after getting inspiration from Napoleon Bonaparte and he killed the old pawnbroker and her sister, Alona Ivanovana and Lizaveta. As a result, he struggled with his own morality and the consequences

of his actions. He undergoes spiritual transformation once he gets into love with Sonya and faith in God. This is the short summary of Raskolnikov's journey.

Raskolnikov was not enthusiastic and he had hypochondriacal condition. As a result, he was seeking something else and he was desperately searching for meaning in life. However, the way he satisfied his conscience was through wrongdoing. To begin with, when he devised the plan to murder the old pawnbroker, he lost his entire reason-the reason why he chose to murder her-because he was in mental chaos. Raskolnikov was totally different once he committed the evil act. His mental illness only deteriorated. He did not even sell what he stole from her, rather he buried the jewels in a secluded place.

Dostoevsky portrays the typical characteristics of young men, irrespective of the age they belong too, through the character of Raskolnikov. They are vigorous, rigorous and vibrant. He also points out one the biggest errors young men committ more often that is contemplating certain things that are beyond the capabilities of punny mind. Just like Raskolnikov, young men get involved in the unwanted activities because their heart is empty, there is something beneath that troubles them; nothing would calm down their troubled heart. Therefore, they indulge in immoral activities however their troubled heart is not cured, it still aches them.

Dostoevsky portrays the problems faced by young men and brings out the solution for those problems. To him, having religious faith would create a huge impact on an individual's life. Once Raskolnikov was convicted of the crime and he was imprisoned. At that time, he reads the New Testament and it profoundly changed him into a new person. Furthermore, Dostoevsky talks about how true love transforms a person, with the reference of Raskolnikov. Sonya played a pivotal role in the life of Raskolnikov and his enhancement. In reality, Dostoevsky critiques his contemporary society, when it comes to marriage and relationships, because, most of the young men back then preferred only physical pleasure and intimate relationships out of marriage. This happened because of the impact of nihilistic thinking.

To him this sort of relationships only give momentary pleasure but not everlasting contentment. So, he clearly defines what true love really looks like, through the portrayal of Raskolnikov and Sonya. Even in prison Sonya regularly met Raskolnikov and she was part of Raskolnikov's spiritual awakening process. Conspicuously, their love confounded morality so, there is no room for hate. Dostoevsky deeply analyses their relationship in the novel and urges young men to keep them as their idols.

In the 21st century, Dostoevsky's ideas are highly relevant. As it is mentioned earlier, the contemporary thinker Jordan Peterson, strongly suggests writers like Leo Tolstoy and Fyoder Dostoevsky for the students to read. So, they could win any battle that arises in their mind and also there are some prominent personalities, even though they do not talk about Dostoevsky directly. They do preach some of the major thoughts that Dostoevsky himself wrote in his novels two centuries earlier which were believed to bring revival in the lives of young men. There are numerous young disciples of Fyoder Dostoevsky across the world.

Revival of Dostoevsky's thoughts

Among all other ages, this age can be considered as an unique one because, this age paved the way for various movements and unbound stereotypes that have been there over the ages. For instance, the prejudice against queer community and women vanished after so many influencers spread awareness regarding it via social media. One way there is positivity in it, and on the other way there is negativity in it. The moral principles among the Gen Z were completely lost and it worried the older generations. Therefore, in order to bring change in the life of Gen Z influencers began to campaign about conservatism which closely resembled Dostoevsky's thought. They said life has meaning, when a man looks up to the Supreme being and the true transformation happens. These principles captured the attention of millennials and they began to change their perspective. Thus, Dostoevsky's thoughts are the healing gem, irrespective of age.

Dostoevsky and Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the 19th century, it means, finding meaning in the meaningless world. Soren Kierkegaard is considered as the Father of existentialism. His notable works are *fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness unto death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. These works, just like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, explore the meaning of life in different angles. Kierkegaard talks about three phases of life-Aesthetic stage, Ethical stage and Religious stage. In the Aesthetic stage one values art, literature and other forms of beauty; they merely focus on pleasure and immediate gratification. The second stage is the Ethical stage, where an individual abides by the law that governs the society, and gives priority to fairness and justice. Lastly, the Religious stage is about an individual's primary focus is on God and follows His Commandments without any condemnation and gives priority in maintaining spiritual relationship with God.

Kierkegaard believes a person can go through all of these stages. Religious stage is the most imperative form of existence. Nevertheless, he also says, an individual may not progress from one stage to another, rather sticks to one phase and may not have the desire to move farther. To him, man's ultimate goal is to find comfort in God alone. There are few reasons behind this dogma of Kierkegaard. One of the most crucial reasons behind it is the way Kierkegaard was brought up. He was born to strict Roman Catholic parents, his father during his childhood, taught him Christian ethics which kindled him into an infamous philosopher in the later period.

Philosophers like Jordan Peterson have talked about Kierkegaard in their lectures and connected his ideas and Dostoevsky's ideas beautifully. In order to elaborate Kierkegaard's view, he himself explains it through a biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham did not willingly wake early in the morning and he had no intention of sacrificing his only child. But he did as the way God had commanded him. Some critics come up with different ideas, how faith and reason differ. If Abraham had reason, he would have questioned God's righteousness. But Abraham chose faith over reason. He believed in God's sovereignty and it was counted as right. Kierkegaard gives this example and urges everyone to be like Abraham. Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard readily agree that an individual ought to believe in God, only then a person may discover that life has meaning.

Kierkegaard in his books argues that it is better for a person to be in solitude and focus more on the subjective experience, rather than blindly following the crowd. During the era of Kierkegaard, there were numerous changes in the Christendom. Christianity which was perceived differently hitherto, witnessed immense changes in the way people perceived it. That was why Kierkegaard insisted that it was better to focus on the subjective realm and derive meaning. Most importantly, only this idea led to the foundation of the existentialist thought.

Raskolnikov and Existentialism

Raskolnikov was delirious; he has not had any aim in his life, always depressed and melancholic. Yet when it comes to family he is ready to provide anything. He loved both his mother and sister beyond anything. He often felt guilt for not being a good son. Amongst all these chaotic lives Raskolnikov loved a girl and was very compassionate towards his mother and sister. It literally kept him moving ahead, this is what Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard try to convey to their readers that responsibility, courage and hope are vital ingredients for life.

Work cited

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Constance Garnett. *Crime and Punishment*. Om Books International, 2019.

Internet Sources

“Dostoevsky and Existentialism - UBC Wiki.” *Wiki.ubc.ca*, wiki.ubc.ca/Dostoevsky_and_Existentialism#:~:text=One%20of%20Dostoevsky.

“YouTube.” *Youtu.be*, 2024, youtu.be/2aGIhcaOJe0?si=HxfoN40Iy9x9q0Iq. Accessed 2 Oct. 2024.

“YouTube.” *Youtu.be*, 2024, youtu.be/DKpibvZhr4k?si=QsMZ59eqhuZLbLVE. Accessed 7 Oct. 2024.