

The thematic issue of redemption in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky (A prominent Russian novelist)

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Abstract: The concepts of crime and punishment were prevalent though in somewhat different forms during the ancient times and in earlier civilizations too. However, the rules and regulations may not be so complex and rigid as these are in modern times. Punishment is related to successfully enforce rules and regulations framed by the society. Generally, punishment is given to the offender, in the form of some physical or mental pain or both depending upon the gravity of crime. Crime may be interpreted as a serious wrongdoing, delinquency, sin, senseless act, transgression or instance of negligence which is deemed injurious to the morals of society, interests of the state and is legally prohibited or forbidden. With the development of sociological thought process from the nineteenth century onwards, crime and criminality became the subject matter of discussion and exploration of various authors and scholars. According to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the crime and punishment find their roots in the teachings about sin and redemption in Christianity. He believed that crime is not only the violation and transgression of the accepted norms of society, but it also involves the feeling of sense of guilt. Punishment is the process of suffering that leads to salvation.

Keywords: Crime, Transgression, Turbulent, Redemption, Punishment

Introduction:

The purpose of this research paper is to conduct an analytical study of crime, guilt and redemption in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Dostoyevsky has extensively explored the themes of crime, guilt and redemption. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was a prominent Russian novelist, essayist, existentialist, short story writer and philosopher. Dostoyevsky has been hailed as one of the greatest psychologists in the history of literature.

Dostoyevsky was born in Moscow, Russia in the year 1821. He hailed from a very religious family and he himself had a deep faith in the religion throughout his life. His father, an army doctor, was very cruel and stern by nature. On the contrary, his mother was a kindhearted and generous lady. His mother passed away when he was just 15 year old. Three years later, his father was also killed by the Serfs, a term used for the people who had no land of their own but worked for their masters. They were, however, not slaves. He, infact, disliked this system of serfdom prevailing in the 19th century Russian society. Though he was in no way associated with the death of his father, yet he felt guilty in his heart of hearts. He realised the pitiable condition of serf people and wished for their emancipation.

Earlier, after having preliminary education at home, he was sent to military engineering school, but he had very little interest in science and technical studies. Dostoyevsky, however, graduated as military engineer and even did job also in this profile. But he never liked to pursue this career and left the job. Instead, he developed keen interest in literature and spent much of his time in reading works of various authors. He decided to become a writer and devoted whole of his life to writing. He was a very energetic person but with unstable mind. Dostoyevsky is a complex writer who cannot be interpreted with a singular paradigm. He has been considered as an existentialist and counter revolutionary, attacking the revolutions of his times. As D.A. Traversi aptly remarks, "A great writer like Dostoyevsky concentrates in himself the qualities of his society, and serves to those who can read him critically, as a mirror of its culture." (Traversi, p.159)

An internationally acclaimed Russian author, Dostoyevsky has written as many as eleven novels, three novellas and seventeen short stories. His best known works include *Poor Folk* (1846), *Notes from the Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Possessed* (1872), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), *The Insulted and Humiliated* (1861) and *The Adolescent* (1875). His notable essay collections include *Winter Notes on Summer Impression* (1863) and *A Writer's Diary*

(1873-1881). His prominent short stories are "Mr. Prokharchin" (1846), "A Little Hero" (1849), "A Nasty Story" (1862) and "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" (1877).

Dostoyevsky's first novel *Poor Folk* appeared in 1846 which was followed by *The Double*. In 1847, he joined an anti-government group of young intellectuals named Petrashevsky circle. Two years later, all the group members were arrested and sentenced to death. Initially, they were confined to isolated cells for sometime and later put in the barracks, where they could interact with each other. They were also provided religious books. Dostoyevsky, a prolific reader, made best of the opportunity and studied various aspects of religion in depth. As all the members of the group were pronounced death sentence, they were carried to the gallows on the appointed day. While the last process was underway, there arrived a messenger of Czar with pardon orders according to which, their death sentence was waived and instead awarded four years of imprisonment and six years of forced army service.

During the first phase of the sentence, they were sent to labour camps and exile to Siberia. The sudden change of death sentence to imprisonment drastically changed Dostoyevsky's perception towards life. He began to realise the importance of time. He felt that even a single minute should not be wasted rather it should be utilized judiciously and for the right cause. Moreover, his in depth study of religious books, particularly *The New Testament*, during his imprisonment resulted in gradual transformation in his philosophical and spiritual beliefs. After his release from Siberian Labour Camp and forced military service in 1859, he resumed his literary work with great passion and enthusiasm.

The thematic issue of redemption through sufferings appear prominently in Dostoyevsky's subsequent works. Dostoyevsky's life was full of sufferings, hardships and mental agony which had a direct bearing on his mind and psychology. The contrasting nature of his parents, sudden and tragic death of his father and later experiences in labour camps and exile had direct bearing on his writings and got portrayed through various characters of his works. Dostoyevsky has been hailed as one of the greatest psychologists in the history of literature. The depictions of human state of mind leading to crime and murder and the exploration of the themes of self-destruction, guilt and salvation had a profound influence on 20th century fiction. Dostoyevsky's immense philosophical and psychological insights enabled him to portray the thematic aspects of sin, guilt and redemption in emotionally and spiritually downtrodden characters of his works. The theme of salvation through sufferings appears in Dostoyevsky's works. It is predominantly evident in the novel *Crime and Punishment*. The novel was first published in parts in a monthly journal *The Russian Messenger* during 1866. Subsequently, it was published in one single volume.

Dostoyevsky, in his pioneering work *Crime and Punishment*, explores the concepts of crime, guilt, punishment and redemption very effectively, through the portrayal of central protagonist, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov. *Crime and Punishment* is an account of an individual's fall and redemption. The novel dwells on the psychological dilemma and mental anguish of the central character, Raskolnikov. It is the powerful presentation of the psyche and predicaments of an impoverished ex-student, currently out of job, living in St. Petersburg. Dostoyevsky places Raskolnikov in a world layered with guilt followed by redemption in *Crime and Punishment*. The novelist, through the portrayal of Raskolnikov, depicts the psychological account of the lives of poverty stricken Russians during the late 19th Century. In *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoyevsky claims that characters of his novels "suffer from the contemporary chaos of life. Because of the failure to comprehend the things taking place all around due to which their conception became disintegrated." (Dostoyevsky)

Raskolnikov, a man troubled by poverty suddenly decides to commit a heinous crime of murdering an old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna and her sister, Lizaveta Ivanovna, in an attempt to have a feeling of superiority. He thought he would use money belonging to his victim Alyona Ivanovna to improve the lives of many downtrodden and needy persons. Raskolnikov, in the course of the novel, justifies his actions by comparing himself with Napoleon Bonaparte, believing that some people think that they are empowered naturally and they possess the right to perform such deeds and to transgress the rights of ordinary man. Raskolnikov's Napoleonic theory leads to his downfall and alienation from mankind and society.

In nineteenth century, the extraordinary man theory was fairly popular and Dostoyevsky got greatly influenced by the ideologies and extraordinary man theories given by two great German philosophers Nietzsche and Hegel. He exhibits the characteristics and ideologies of the extraordinary man through the character portrayal of Raskolnikov. According to both the theories, humanity is divided into two categories of people: extraordinary and ordinary. Extraordinary people are especially empowered to violate any law or rule to achieve their goal, whereas norms and regulations are meant to be followed and obeyed by the ordinary people. Nietzsche believes that the extraordinary men, due to their self-centredness, have the capacity to transgress any law and indulge in any kind of immoral and unethical action for the benefit of themselves only. On the other hand, Hegel suggests that supermen can defy the societal laws and norms, and their such actions are justified, so far as these seek to benefit the mankind. Hegelian viewpoint also aims at throwing the corrupt and undesirable elements out of the society.

Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, is shown as a character who is very weak and frail, but considers himself to be not less than a superman, whom he believes is above all laws, rules and norms. For him, nothing was unethical. He could commit any crime and get away with it. On being asked by the police detective, Porfiry Petrovich, about the distinguishing features of extraordinary and ordinary people, Raskolnikov replies: "Sir, please bear in mind that mistakes are only possible on the part of the first category – that is, of the ordinary people." (Dostoyevsky, 311). Raskolnikov, influenced by this ideology, considers himself to be Napoleon like figure and indulges in an unholy act of murdering an old pawnbroker and her sister, as he aims at cleansing and liberating the society from such evils and corrupt practices. He affirms: "The old woman was a mistake, but she's not what it's all about in any case! The old woman was just an illness... I wanted to get my stepping-over done as quickly as possible... It wasn't a person but a principle that I killed!" (Dostoyevsky, 326)

Raskolnikov appears to be partially subscribing to both the theories. Firstly, due to his precarious and pathetic financial condition and always thinking about the possible ways of getting out of the miseries of his life and rooting out the evils prevalent in the society, he becomes almost insane. Secondly, his pride of being an intellect causes him to think as an extraordinary man who is above any law and can commit any crime for the sake of emancipation of the impoverished people of the society. This confused state of mind of Raskolnikov results in his being isolated or alienated from his family as well as society. He commits crime of killing Alyona and her sister due to his poverty, anguish and apathy towards the system.

Dostoyevsky also exhibits the element of duality in the character of Raskolnikov in his highly proclaimed novel *Crime and Punishment*. On the one hand, Raskolnikov thinks himself to be a superman and on the other, he looks quite a timid and fearsome person who is always trying to avoid the people around him and evade the law of the land. He is not prepared to confess his crime and face the consequences. Raskolnikov is seen as a split personality. All along, he is constantly troubled by the inner conflict between his pride and reason on the one hand and compassion and conscience on the other. Sometimes, he is full of aggression and sense of alienation and at times, he is very protective and concerned about the well-being of his mother and sister. Andre Gide notices the "disquieting duality" (Andre, p.112) in most of Dostoyevsky's characters including Raskolnikov. Another aspect explored in the novel is the internal conflict in the minds of different characters, particularly Raskolnikov. Victor Terras in 'The Art of *Crime and Punishment*' rightly refers to "the inner dialogue Raskolnikov and some of the other characters (Razumikhin, Luzhin) conduct in their own minds." (Terras, p.196)

Dostoyevsky in the novel *Crime and Punishment* elaborates on the psychological behaviour and the compulsions of his principal character Raskolnikov which ultimately leads him to become a criminal. According to Sigmund Freud, popularly regarded as the 'father of Psychology', "Two traits are essential in a criminal: boundless egoism and a strong destructive urge. Common to both of these, and a necessary condition for their expression, is the absence of love, lack of an emotional appreciation of human objects." (Freud, p.19)

Dostoyevsky asserts that punishment is the suffering of a guilty conscience, rather than a punishment awarded through legal process. Tortured by his own mind, Raskolnikov suffers from the conflict between the humanness and the reason within him. He asks a question, "Can that be the punishment already began? Indeed, indeed, it is!" (Dostoyevsky, 270) He loses his rational thinking and goes through the bitter solitude after committing the crime. He confesses his crime to Sonia because she has the faith in the goodness of Christian doctrine. He says to Sonia, "I was ambitious to become another Napoleon; that was why I committed a murder." (Dostoyevsky, 295) Sonia symbolises Christ-like figure for Raskolnikov who arouses his novel conscience. She preaches and inculcates in Raskolnikov immense love and leaning towards Christian principles.

The Christian love preached by Sonia leads Raskolnikov into a sort of spiritual wilderness. Initially, he always tried to justify his sin on one pretext or the other, but later, when Sonia tells him the steps to achieve salvation, he is made to believe that after the crime, the real punishment is not judicial or legal one; instead the real and relentless self-punishment begins.

Therefore, the heartfelt sorrow overpowered his mind. He felt that he must do penance for his sins. Raskolnikov attains salvation after a psychological struggle which is directly dependent upon his ability to suffer. Highly impressed by the preachings of Sonia, Raskolnikov finally surrenders to punishment. He sincerely feels that he should redeem his sin not only in the eyes of law following the judicial process, but also in the eyes of Almighty, the God.

In his much adored work, *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky who himself experienced traumatic events and sufferings in his personal life extensively depicts the ideas of crime, guilt and redemption portrayed through the characters Raskolnikov, Sonya and Svidrigailov.

Conclusion:

Various strategies have been employed by these authors to manifest the experiences of guilt and redemption. The words included in the research study focus on the possible causes of crime, nature of guilt, i.e., internal or external, struggle for existence, quest for redemption, and the ways through which universal order can be restored. Interestingly, Dostoyevsky himself lived a very turbulent and uneasy

life, full of bitter and horrible experiences. It appears that he has mirrored his own biographical sketch through excellent portrayal of the character of principal protagonist, Raskolnikov in his tremendously philosophical masterpiece *Crime and Punishment*. He has also dealt with quite exquisitely and magnificently various psychological issues and concepts like crime, guilt, redemption and punishment etc. in their different perspectives and in the context of the then prevailing socio-economic, socio-political and cultural environment and challenges through his characters.

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