

# Existential Dilemma in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment

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**Abstract:-** Fyodor Dostoevsky is unanimously considered by critics, readers and philosophers to have been Russia's greatest modern writer. He can be called the central pillar upon which the edifice of Russian literature rests. His approach to life is in sharp contrast to Tolstoy, another great author in Russian literature. If Tolstoy drew his material from the nobility, peace and stability, Dostoevsky drew his material from chaos and disorder. His fictional world is mainly dominated by Dionysian elements rather than the Apollonian elements. To understand his genius properly one should have a deep knowledge of all his works for each work unfolds different aspects of his mind. His novels are true reflection of lively circumstances of life. If we try to have a look at Dostoevsky's personal life, we find that it is replete with lots of disappointments. Perhaps the very circumstances of his life made him bitter towards life, which we find in his novels from Notes from Underground to The Brother Karamazov. John Middleton Murry once remarked about Dostoevsky:

“It is not that he is a cruel genius, but that he, in whom the human consciousness worked more keenly than in other men of his age, was more terribly the victim of the ultimate cruelty of things.”

(Fyodor Dostoevsky, Critical Lives, page no 209)

**Key words:-** poverty, gloom, dilemma, extraordinary man theories, Hegelian superman, submissiveness, regeneration, meaningless world, rebellion, despair, nihilism and suicide.

Crime and Punishment is a well-known novel by Dostoevsky. It was first published in 1866 in 'The Russian Messenger' a famous literary journal. Its theme is woven around existential elements like despair, poverty, suicide, murder, anxiety, free choice, indomitable will and suffering. The aim of the present paper is to reveal existential dilemma in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, a book that represents the world of chaos and disintegration. This book raises some questions: Is man's destiny pre determined? Can he use free will? Or are there some laws of nature which determine life? His characters always behave according to the norms of existential elements outlining the limitation of human life and typically going some steps far.

The main existential motif of the present novel is suffering. Through suffering comes realization of decisions and the circumstances of life. Philosophical theories develop through realization of the characters. Two philosophies are represented through Crime and Punishment- existentialism and nihilism. Raskolnikov, the protagonist has both philosophies in his behavior. Although other characters Marmeladove, Katerina Ivanovna, Sonya, Luzhin and Svidrigalov represent nihilism and existentialism through one way or another way. Dostoevsky blessed Roskolnikov with an extreme thought process that makes him a character fit for psychological study. It is his ideals and thought process, which lead him toward dilemmas of existence. He believes in the theory of extraordinary man. According to this theory, there are two types of people in the world, one who are ordinary, second who are extraordinary. Ordinary people lead their life like roosters in coop. They are exploited by others but remain silent. They are unable to rebel against their exploiters, as they are simpleton. But the second category is of extraordinary people who assume themselves as superior to others. They think that they are free to do what they like, ignoring the social taboos. Therefore, Roskolnikov regards himself as an extraordinary man as he wrote in an article as Porfiry reads:

“The point is that in his article people fall into two classes, the ordinary and extraordinary. The ordinary must be submissive and have no right to transgress the laws because of their ordinariness, you see. But the extraordinary have the right to commit any crime and break any law just because they are extraordinary.”  
 (Crime and Punishment, 113)

As Raskolnikov belongs to the category of extraordinary man so he does not care about the consequences of his crime on the name of free action. He thinks that he has an inner right to decide his actions according to his own conscience, which is essential for the practical fulfilment of his ideas. So great men create new laws by their discoveries. Being free, they have the right to eliminate a few persons in order to make their discoveries beneficial for humanity. Same way, Raskolnikov sanction bloodshed of two women on the name of conscience. He constantly uses Napoleon as a point of reference by saying;

“Such man as Napoleon is above the common laws of humanity because he had the daring to commit various acts in order to complete his plans” (195).

Raskolnikov's extraordinary theory is indirectly agreeing with existential beliefs as existentialism promotes the freedom of individual. Existentialist love their free will and freedom more than anything. Same case is with Raskolnikov who is a 23-year-old student. He is living in utter poverty and borrowing money from the old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna. He has a young sister Douniya who has already escaped ruin by Svidrigalov at whose house she served as governess. This incident increases his mental confliction much more. Confronting these problems, he falls under the spell of superman theory which has already existed in his unconscious mind. Dostoevsky has given the touch of Nietzsche and Hegel's theory of superman to Raskolnikov. George Hegel, the German philosopher's superman exists for noble purpose while Nietzschean super hero is different from Hegelian super hero. Nietzschean hero exists only for personal gratification. He is a mixture of both these theories. Raskolnikov murders the old pawnbroker and her innocent sister just after listening the conversation of two students. They thought to kill the old lady in order to utilize her money for the welfare of mankind.

Raskolnikov thought in the same way but he wanted to utilize that money first for his personal benefits as for the completion of his university education, her sister's marriage and some money he would like to distribute to poor people. As applied to the crime of Raskolnikov, the Hegelian superman theory has relevance in many ways. Hegel feels that any harmful segment of society should be removed. For Raskolnikov Alyona Ivanovna, the old pawnbroker, is an evil segment of society as she cynically grasps on the poor people who come to her for pawning various articles in the time of distress. Raskolnikov, by murdering the lady, wants to remove the harmful segment from the society. With her money, he wants to perform his duties, side by side he wants to serve all mankind and common weal otherwise the money may be wasted on useless rituals after her death. These very ideas were moving in his mind before the murder. But still, murdering someone is not very easy task for Raskolnikov. He makes a trial visit to the pawnbroker and feels repulsion for the very idea of murder. Before a murder, his condition was like 'to do and not to do'. Though he pretends to be follower of Napoleon yet he is not so bold. He began to tremble with this horrible idea as he knew that he could not endure this idea. In dream he has perceived the brutality of his act. In confliction, he asked lots of questions to himself. So, it is clear that his psychological dilemma begins with the very idea of murder.

The choice of individual plays very important part in the novels of Dostoevsky as it may lead an individual towards glorification or it may lead an individual towards degradation. So, Dostoevsky never tries to create any hinderance in between an individual and his choice. It depends on an individual, to which path, good or evil, he would like to choose. Razumikhin and Raskolnikov both are good friends but choose differently. Raskolnikov chooses evil path assuming himself extraordinary. According to Joseph Frank, Raskolnikov's psychology is placed at the center and it is implicated with the ideas behind the crime; the whole novel illuminates the agonizing dilemma in which the hero is caught. Ignoring his inner voice, he murders the old pawn broker. As soon as he murders the lady, her sister Lizaveta returns to the apartment unexpectedly. Consequently, Raskolnikov murders her also. This brutal action shows that Raskolnikov is presenting himself as the master of free will who is dominating others with the power of free will. This action isolates him from the social circle. He refuses to accept any morality being a human as he murders Lizaveta. After murder, he mentally collapses and remained on his so far one month. He didn't talk to anyone as psychological dilemma regarding the confession of guilt was tormenting him since murder. Despair spreads over him. Insoluble questions confront before him and demand justice. Especially, the murder of innocent Lizaveta torments him. Though, Razumihin helps him in his physical sickness but he cannot help him in mental sickness.

Raskolnikov's own search for punishment leads him to alienation, confliction and finally acceptance. Earlier he thought that he could avoid the truth and suffering. But ultimately, he began to feel soft corner for the suffering of Sonya hitting back to his alienation. Sonya changes him with her submissiveness, suffering and magical words of love. She plays the role of "Pole star", which guides the lost ships in the sea. Same way Sonya strengthens Raskolnikov's trembling existence by her presence. She is the passive redemptive figure who brings about the hero's spiritual regeneration. Through Sonya's suffering, Raskolnikov realizes the truth of existence that human beings are bound to suffer in this meaningless world, sometimes without committing any crime. Sonya is a good girl who is always ready to help other as much as she can. She has to enter into prostitution in order to support her family as the father is a drunkard. By profession, she is fulfilling the essential requirements of her step mother and step siblings. In a way, she is suffering due to her drunkard and irresponsible father. Her dying father Marmelodove, feels guilty for the life which he provides to her. He makes apology for his irresponsibility and finally dies in her arms. Sonya's life situations touch the core of his heart deeply. Raskolnikov perceives in her the symbol of all human suffering. He recognizes a fellow sufferer in her. This feeling creates human warmth in him and consequently he opens his heart to her.

In a way, Sonya stands for the Christ figure or the earth mother. She is a symbol of self-sacrifice in a world where chaos and degeneration are rampant. She is guided by heart not by reason like Raskolnikov. In this way, she is an antithesis of Raskolnikov whose intellectual theory of extraordinary man creates downfall. Dostoevsky is consistently critical of scientific knowledge, which can tell only what is, not what can be; it can tell us much about the laws of necessity, but absolutely nothing about what humans actually choose to do. Raskolnikov, ignoring humanity and faith in justice is, lost in chaos that ties him in knots of dilemma. Sonya provides him much needed human warmth. She touches the compassionate side of Raskolnikov with her compassion and love. Her basic faith in Divine Providence strengthens her goodness; so being in prostitution, she retains her innocence. Raskolnikov develops compassion for her self-denial sacrifice which she makes for her step mother and her siblings. This is the reason that he opens his guilt-ridden heart to Sonya. Though, before it, two times he had confronted Porfiry but he could not reveal his sin. But as soon as he opens his heart before Sonya, she reconciles him to accept his sin first before "the mother earth" and then to police inspector Petrovich Porfiry as she advises him:

"What's to be done?" She exclaimed, starting up and her eyes, which had been full of tears, began to flash." Get up!...."Go at once, this instant, stand at the cross-roads, first bow down and kiss the earth you have defiled then bow down to the whole world, towards the four corners of the earth, and say aloud to all, I have committed murder!" Then God will send you life again. (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment 422).

Thus, she plays the role of a friend, philosopher, guide and mentor to him. With love and care, she makes him ready to go to police station to reveal his sin. Before going to police station, Raskolnikov asks her if she would go to see him in prison. She promised him that she would follow him wherever he would go for punishment or penal servitude.

Then, the next very significant role is played by Porfiry, in spiritual regeneration of Raskolnikov. He belongs to the category of those people who work for the betterment of mankind. He believes that Russia is destined to become a great nation of the world and is to guide the world into a new era based on love and understanding. He perceives in Raskolnikov a potentially great man who has good capacity to serve great nation. So, knowingly he gives chance to him to accept truth, even though he knows very well that Raskolnikov is the murderer of two sisters. He believes firmly that only by finding his true self, Raskolnikov will become a man with potential greatness who can serve Russia properly.

Porfiry is a psychologist who studies the mind of criminal not as a sleuth but as a sympathetic well-wisher. When Raskonilov comes to his officer, he asks him whether he believes in New Jerusalem and in God or in Lazarus' resurrection. By this inquiry, Porfiry wants to test whether Raskolnikov has any moral or religious foundation. When he becomes sure about his religious bent of mind, he allows him to leave the place. Thus, he stimulates the protagonist's hidden respect for Christianity. Acceptance of suffering marks religious potentiality of Raskolnikov. With their sincere efforts, Sonya and Porfiry make clear to hero that only acceptance of sin can provide relief from the psychological dilemma from which he had been struggling for

a long time. So just after his interview with Porfiry, Raskolnikov directly goes to Sonya and asks her to read out the story of Lazarus and his resurrection from the New Testament.

Porfiry again in the next interview with Raskolnikov began to speak in the tone of Sonya and did not use irony any longer. He shows faith in Raskolnikov as he firmly believes that he will accept this suffering. He frankly tells him that without any outer force he will arrive the same conclusion himself. By this way Porfiry gives him way for confession. Raskolnikov felt somehow fright at the thought that Porfiry considered him innocent. It suddenly alarmed him. In the final interview, he accepts his crime before Porfiry. Thus, Porfiry also helps Raskolnikov to come out of his existential dilemma.

Another important existential character is Svidrigalov who is double of Raskolnikov as he mirrors the protagonist's thoughts and existential way of life. What strikes us about this character is that he confronts Raskolnikov with the answering image of his own mind. Raskolnikov hates him because Svidrigalov is everything that he fails to do. Svidrigailov lives the same life that was implied by Raskolnikov's extraordinary theory. Though he himself started that life but could not live it long. The arrival of Sonya awoke the human warmth in Raskolnikov so he moved back from his fundamental theory. But Svidrigailov, in absence of human warmth, continued to lead that amoral life. He oversteps everything according to his own free will. It may be said that Svidrigilov is the better existentialist of the two, Raskolnikov and Razumikhin. Svidigailov takes the action freely and boldly faces the consequence. What he likes, he does that act whether it is moral or amoral. He is not trapped in rational consciousness like the hero. He does not repent for his free action as Raskolnikov. There is no doubt that Raskolnikov's final submission shows more goodness or virtue which we never find in rebellion Svidrigailov. When he finds that he is incapable of living in the world which his evil action has darkened. Only then he thinks about suicide. His egoism would never allow him to submit before faith, rule of nature and Christianity. He cannot live in dilemma for a long time. According to Nikolay Berdyaev- he who does not yield before 'the supreme will' that person will destroy his neighbor with himself; that is the meaning of Crime and Punishment.

This statement can be applied on Svidrigalov appropriately. He is working like a destructive force throughout the novel. Earlier he tries to rape Dounya later he wants to get her love by marrying her. But Dunya fires at Savidrigalov, during her meeting with him. Though the shot missed, yet it showed her hatred for Savdrigalov. So, he could not bear this hatred and nihilism born in him, in absence of his unfulfilled desire. He feels nothing worth living in his life, so he commits suicide. His final state of mind is a kind of despair. The laws of corruption and decay were worshipped by Sividrigailov so it resulted in the form of destruction of his own existence. The truth of freedom was born in the case of Sividrigaliov. It seems that like a stern existentialist, he is the author of his action and free will.

In a way the whole novel is the tale of suffering. All the characters whether major or minor, experience this suffering in the form of internal dilemma. Only acceptance of suffering leads towards salvation or tranquility. The very moment when an individual accepts his suffering, the burden of his dilemma begins to remove. But if an individual, like Svidrigailov does not want to accept this truth, he has to face the bitter result as suicide or depression. Sonya understands this very truth of life so she never complains against his father. She honestly remains busy in removing the problems of other. Raskolnikov also helps her by giving money for her family after her father's death. But she supports Raskolnikov in very critical time. She silently gives him strength to confess his crime and accompanies him all the way to Siberia. She shows him the way of goodness and faith. So, after listening the resurrection of Lazarus from Sonya, Raskolnikov took the same New Testament with him while going to penal servitude in Siberia. He begins to put the New Testament under his pillow. Thus, removing the psychological dilemma of hero, Sonya opens a new life or new world of love, care, sympathy, faith, humanity, kindness and emotion for Raskolnikov. Love overpowers the extraordinary theory of logic or reason. It may be the gradual transition of hero from one world to another.

Sonya encourages not only Raskolnikov but other convicts also, to accept suffering for removing the burden of their guilt. By her good behavior, she becomes 'the little mother' to the fellow sufferers in Siberia. Raskolnikov wonders why all prisoners adore her so much. Though she meets them rarely still they all know her. She never shows any special favor to any convict but with her sympathetic words and feeling, she wins their heart as a sufferer can understand the suffering or circumstances of other sufferer in a better way. She is

very happy because she sustains Roskolnikov through all the trial. Besides this, she was perceiving the dawn of happiness for Raskonikov and herself at the end of prison term.

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