

Image of “Justice” in Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment

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Abstract

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is a psychological novel, which has been subjected to various interpretations by the scholars worldwide. Dostoevsky has aptly dealt with the problems of the concept of justice and human existence. The protagonist is suffering from an acute psychological crisis after committing the dual murders. He has his own vision of justice inspired by the Hegelian concept of Superman to substantiate his act of murder of the pawnbroker. *Crime and Punishment* primarily analyses the concepts of utilitarianism and nihilism, which ultimately culminate into Kierkegaardian existentialism.

It is a gripping novel showing how the image of justice varies from person to person. The connotation of justice depends on the perspectives of different individuals. The novel makes us think again and again about the issues relating to justice. Does system really follow justice? If so, then why is there so much of social inequality?

In the present paper, I would like to analyse the image of justice in the context of the novel and in wider perspectives as well. Justice is basically a fluid concept. We cannot limit the meaning of the word in a definition.

Keywords: Hegelian & Nietzschean Concepts of Supermen, Existentialism, Nihilism and Utilitarianism

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Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* was written against the backdrop of socio-political reforms in Russia, when Tsar Alexander II had initiated substantial reforms in education and government policies. Overall, it was an era of emancipation and Russia was trying to be at par with European culture. The ideologies of German philosophers like Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche had been in the air along with the doctrines of Godwin as propagated in his book entitled *Political Justice*. According to Joseph Frank, this was the era, when the ideals of Utopian Socialism was replaced by "embittered elitism, which stressed the right of a superior of individual to act independently for the welfare of humanity" (Frank 567). Joseph Frank's statement as made in the essay entitled "The World of Raskolnikov", is quite apt in the context as the protagonist believes in the concept of Hero as doctrinated by Hegel in his book entitled, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Ian L.O' Kidhain explains this Hegelian concept of hero in an article entitled, "Dostoevsky's Hegelian Parody in *Crime and Punishment*", where he explains that the hero is meant to contribute his original idea to the society for its progress. Hegel's heroes are "world historical individuals" like Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte and Alexander the Great. Kidhain also says that Hegel believes that mundane people live in a group and their primary concern is to focus on their own comfort.

Furthermore, these mundane people uphold the rules given to them by their predecessors. What we understand is the heroes can only bring in a change in the society by their unconventional thinking and ideologies. They never associate themselves with the mass. They are passionate enough to shape the world in the image of their own interests (Ian L.O' Kidhain 5). In part five of the novel, Raskolnikov tries to justify his stance to Sonya for his act, which is an act of crime before the society. The society never accepts the murder of a human being by a fellow human being to prove a theory. The author once wrote in a letter, "to kill one worthless, harmful, and rich being, in order to use the money to make many beautiful but poor people happy..." (Sergei V. Belov 489). This was the original concept of the novel, which he had initially expressed to his publisher friend Katkov in 1865. It was the time, when the author himself was in debt as he had lost a huge sum of money in gambling. At the same time, he wanted to help his brother's family as his brother had passed away in 1864. This biographical information makes us understand that the author stands behind the psyche of the protagonist. The author portrays his own trauma through Raskolnikov. In part V, chapter IV, Raskolnikov tries to substantiate his act to Sonya. The murder of the pawnbroker for him is an act of proving a theory, which is otherwise a heinous crime. Let us listen to him: "I wanted to make myself a Napoleon, and that is why I killed her... it was only to test myself...I killed myself, not that an old creature!... that I committed a murder and dared not take the money, but hid it under a stone...you know they would laugh at me and say, "he was a fool not to take it" (350-355).

Here we clearly see that this is not an act of ordinary crime as he does not touch the money of the old pawnbroker. He slips away from the place of crime unnoticed. He wishes to be Napoleonic. Napoleonic idea of power has been explained by Sergei Belov very precisely in his essay entitled *The History of the Writing of the Novel*.

“...Napoleonic Idea,” the idea of power for the sake of power, the idea dividing mankind into two unequal parts: the majority—the trembling creatures---and the minority---the masters, called from birth to the mission of ruling over the majority, standing outside the law and having the right, like Napoleon, to transgress against the law and to break the divine order of the world, for the sake of the ends which they require (Sergei V. Belov 490). Our protagonist is greatly influenced by this idea. But he fails to realize that he is not potent enough to rule over the mass. He believes that only the murder of the old pawnbroker will save this earth from misery and he goes against the natural order of the universe. His personal ideology is to some extent contradictory. On the one hand, he has love for fellow human beings. On the other hand, he possesses a sense of contempt for them. We can say that he is a confused individual. Leo Tolstoy says that Raskolnikov did not live his life before the act of murder. He was just following a theory mechanically. He lacked in the foresight to realise the practical implication of a theory. Theory cannot always be proven in our life. A scientific theory can be proven as it is empirical. But a philosophical or sociological theory may not always offer a desirable outcome after implementation. We have seen that in the history of our society. When our protagonist refers to Napoleon, we have to remember that he is alluding the patriotic war of 1812 with France, when the grand troupe of Napoleon had suffered extensively due to the bad weather and Napoleon was defeated. This battle incurred a huge loss for French army. But Raskolnikov did not learn the lesson of a great sense of waste, which is quite inevitable after a war. We can say that he is in a state of utter confusion. His idea of justice is somewhat vague and that leads him towards the verge of existential crisis.

Some critics call him a nihilist as he is extremely dissatisfied with the socio-political scenario of contemporary Russia. A nihilist, as we know, suffers from an extreme sense of negativity. Raskolnikov is no exceptional. His nihilistic approach to life may be the result of the failure of all the ideologies. Dostoevsky was basically a socialist and a fourierist as well. Both socialism and fourierism advocate the doctrine of common welfare. Individual will have no control over property. Along with that fourierism also upholds the concept of divine order in the universe, which can be equated with John Locke’s natural law theory. Naturally, Raskolnikov is also influenced by these theories as the author himself stands behind his creation. In reality, we see that socialism failed as the individual interest was thwarted in the interest of the collective. Raskolnikov however adheres to theories like utilitarianism, socialism and Hegelian concept of superman to protect his mother and sister. This caters to his personal interest. Protecting one’s own mother and sister will never bring in a change in the society. This is a duty for all of us. But Raskolnikov’s sense of justice is motivated by a theory. He tries to substantiate that by murdering the old pawnbroker and her sister. Theories may help us to form opinions but we have to remember that the theories are not always enough to rule the ways of this universe. The universe has its own law. Raskolnikov fails to understand that. Plato in Book IV of *The Republic* says that Justice is harmony. “Justice is, for Plato, at once a part of human virtue and the bond, which joins man together in society. It is the identical quality that makes good and social. Justice is an order and duty of the parts of the

soul...it is a harmonious strength. Justice is not the right of the stronger but the effective harmony of the whole” (Web).

Godwin also promotes the concept in the same line in his book entitled, *Political Justice*. The chapter IV of Book II is entitled, “Of Personal Virtue and Duty”, where Godwin says, “Justice requires that I should put myself in the place of an impartial spectator of human concerns...Justice is a rule of the utmost universality, and prescribes a specific mode of proceeding, in all affairs by which the happiness of a human being may be affected” (Web).

Both of them believe that justice promotes collective happiness and it follows the rules of the universe or the natural law. Therefore, Godwinian and Platonic concepts of justice have nothing to do with utilitarianism and superman theory. Raskolnikov’s sense of justice is just the opposite of this traditional concept. He hardly bothers about the collective welfare. His definition of justice is too selfish in the wider perspective.

Apart from Raskolnikov, Svidrigaylov is another strong male character in the novel. According to Georgy Chulkov, Svidrigaylov is needed in the composition of the novel as the crooked mirror to Raskolnikov himself (Georgy Chulkov 496). Critics like James L. Roberts say that Svidrigaylov represents the Nietzschean Superman or übermensch, who is an overman, overhuman or above-human (Web). This term had been used by Hitler and the Nazis to depict the idea of biologically superior race, the Aryan. Nietzsche’s superman follows the Dionysian principle of existence. He explains the characteristics of a Dionysian man in his book entitled *The Birth of Tragedy*. A Dionysian man is passionate, creative, dynamic and to some extent irrational. Indeed, Svidrigaylov embodies all these characteristics but his dark irrationality crosses the limit. He does not use his energy for any creative work. K. Mochulsky calls him a “voluptuary” (Mochulsky 507). We can say that Raskolnikov and Svidrigaylov combine both the Apollonian and the Dionysian principles respectively. Raskolnikov wishes to bring in order, harmony and peace in the society whereas Svidrigaylov does not know how to use his excessive energy. Both of them fail as one is not realistic enough to judge the practical aspect of a theory and the other one overstretches himself to satisfy his dark desire. He tests his freedom that how far he can go. His notion of justice is purely subjective. He does not bother about the society at all. K. Mochulsky says, “The superman can find nothing to do in the midst of people. His strength finds no outlet for itself, and so it becomes self-destructive” (506-7). Here, I would rather say that Svidrigaylov could have used his energy for a creative pursuit. He lacked in the vision to lead a better life. His perception of life is pessimistic and he acts accordingly. Both Raskolnikov and Svidrigaylov suffer from a strong sense of existential crisis. They do not find any meaning of their existence. This crisis blinds their ability to see things in a proper light. They become too individualistic and egoistic to satisfy their own needs. Their sense of justice is dominated by their personal ideologies. They are not even in a position to think of collective benefits. Whereas the character of Sonya is just the opposite of the duo. Her sense of justice follows the divine order or the natural law, which had been spoken by the classical philosopher, Plato in *The Republic* and then it was again taken up by Godwin in *Political Justice*. Sonya embodies the image of our

conscience, which protests against the bloodshed and the reason justifying the bloodshed (Sergei V. Belov 491). Sonya too is also a victim of poverty like the protagonist and it pushes her to take the extreme step of prostitution for survival. She does not complain against her fate or the system. She appears to be extremely passive or submissive throughout the novel. But we should not neglect her gesture of passivity. Her apparent passivity is an attempt to put a strong face before all the odds. She knows very well how to survive in an adverse socio-political condition. Her language of protest is silence. When critics like George Gibian makes a statement that it is significant that Sonya, the wisest person in the book, is the most inarticulate of the major characters of the novel (George Gibian 527). I would like to differ with Gibian as Sonya is aware of the fact that she cannot win over the situation. She has control only over her fiancé and she tries to impart her message of justice through Raskolnikov. In fact, Dostoevsky is criticizing the attitude of contemporary intellectuals who are prone to ratiocination. Their sense of reasoning goes beyond the inner sense of right and wrong or individual sense of justice. We can say that Sonya is the spokesperson of the novelist. Her message to the protagonist ultimately explains the core ideals of the novel. She speaks out the doctrines of Christianity as well as the universal spirituality that we should not go against the moral law. We can relate her with the image of Cosmic Feminine or Dynamic Feminine, who restores harmony and balance in Raskolnikov and in the society at large. “No matter what the origin of this law may be, it exists in the soul of man, as a reality, and it does not allow itself to be broken. Raskolnikov tried to breach it, and he was defeated. Everyone is bound to be defeated in this way if he possesses the moral sense, and breaches the moral law “(Sergei V. Belov 492)

The inner law wins over the theories. The final message of the novel can be equated with the Kierkegaardian principle of existentialism that human beings must live sincerely and passionately. The world does not seem to be absurd and meaningless, if we are optimistic. The human beings create their world with their own consciousness. Our consciousness forms our values and that offers us a meaningful existence. In the present context, we see that the notion of justice varies from individual to individual because of our differing consciousness. Therefore, it is difficult to define justice literally. The very concept is fluid. Our sense of justice lies in our consciousness and in our perception of the world. Raskolnikov, Svidrigaylov and Sonya have different notions of justice, which appear to be contradictory in the given context. Over all, in reality, it is the individual sense of justice, which dominates one’s action. Therefore, we cannot really limit the meaning of the word in a definition.

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