

## UTILITARIANISM AND EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the principles which were hailed during 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Dostoevsky has predicted its outcome. All the philosophies which focus objectivity fail to assist the existence. Existence is all about subjective experience. This paper deals with utilitarianism, nihilism, extraordinary man theory which is later termed by Nietzsche as Übermensch or “Beyond Man”. It also highlights the existential crisis particularly Isolation and its impacts. This paper ultimately focuses on psychological and philosophical tension in the mindscape of the protagonist Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov. This deals with the conscience and compulsion in terms of psychology. It pictures the tussle within himself and the murder and highlights the philosophical experiments which he undertook such as Utilitarianism, Nihilism, concept of extraordinary man and his existential crisis such as isolation, depression, anxiety.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian novelist. His body of works consists of 12 novels, four novellas, 16 short stories, and numerous other works. His works serves as a tool for the emergence of Existentialism and Pre-Freudianism.

Key words: utilitarianism, nihilism, existentialism, isolation, anxiety

Fyodor Dostoevsky a Russian writer, deserves to be read by all. What makes him so special is his aesthetic approach in playing with philosophies and psychology. He is a genius with awe – inspiring taste. All his books were considered to be dark but, in his darkness, we do find light. Dostoevsky's novels dig to the depths to which he excavates the soul of the protagonist in very alluring manner.

*Crime and Punishment* hailed as his magnum opus and can be considered as an extraordinary piece in literature. It manifests the haunting reality of Utilitarianism and Nihilism (however this can be interpreted in many ways) that challenges the existence of the protagonist.

Existence is something which is inevitable in this absurd world. Existence is subjective experience. For existence, humankind chooses many mediums. One of such is Ethics. Ethics can be known as the internalised ideals that we have acquired from infrastructure. When the medium becomes too objective, the crisis begins inside which is termed as existential crisis. Raskolnikov takes utilitarianism and extraordinary man's theory as survival mechanism for existence whereas all these theories were too objective in practical.

Raskolnikov's murder is not due to one cause. One of such cause is Utilitarianism. Raskolnikov utilises Utilitarianism to calm his conscience. Utilitarianism is a philosophical theory under normative ethical theories which interrogates the questions that arise regarding how one ought to act in a moral sense. John Stuart Mill in his essay *Utilitarianism*, written in 1863, puts Utilitarianism as follows

The greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. (10)

Raskolnikov considered Alyona Ivanova as a louse or a threat to the society. She takes people's money as a pawnbroker. By killing her Raskolnikov believes he can give the money to the poor people and can use for himself. He strongly believes that killing for the sake of poor people is okay. Also, not only Raskolnikov many of the characters in the novel takes this principle in their hand. In Traven scene two men talk about this saying

A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on the old women's money which will be buried in monastery... Kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all. What do you think, would not one tiny crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds? For one life thousands would be saved from corruption and decay. One death, and a hundred lives in exchange – it's simple arithmetic!  
(80)

Raskolnikov with this motto, murders the pawnbroker and unfortunately, he is forced to kill her innocent sister. But after murder things went not as planned and he could not able to produce a beneficial impact in the society.

This is not only in the case of Raskolnikov, but with both Dounia

(AvdotyaRomanovnaRaskolnikova) and Sonya (SofyaSemyonovnaMarmeladova). Dounia is Raskolnikov's sister who is well educated, beautiful and strong-willed woman. She decides to marry a wealthy lawyer Luzhin (PyotrPetrovich) just to make her family free from all financial insecurities and to settle Raskolnikov. All she wants is to make her family happy and without any second thought she agrees for the marriage even though she got least interest in marrying Pyotr Petrovich. In a letter to Raskolnikov his mother says,

She is a resolute, sensible, patient, and generous girl, but she has a passionate

heart, as I know very well. Of course, there is no great love either on his side, or on hers, but Dounia as a clever girl and has the heart of an angel, and will make it her duty to make her husband happy who on his side will make her

happiness his care... So Rodya may be of the greatest use to you, in every way indeed, and Dounia and I have agreed that from this very day you could definitely enter upon your career and might consider that your future is marked out and assured for you. (47)

This obviously portrays how Dounia lives for the mere happiness of her family and not for herself. Raskolnikov clearly understands this saying “for her comfort, to save her life she would not sell herself, but for someone else she is doing it. For one she loves, for one she adores, she will sell herself! ... She will sell everything!” (57).

Sonia Marmeladova, a 19-year-old daughter of Marmeladova, who displays unselfish utilitarianism by prostituting herself to support her poverty-stricken family. She is the only hope of her family. With a drunken father perpetually unemployed and a step mother who got some other kids to take care, Sonya is the only source of income and survival. She is a very pious, shy, innocent girl. She hates to be a prostitute. When Raskolnikov meets her for the first time, he talks to her uttering these words,

But you are a great sinner, true... And your worst sin is that you have destroyed and betrayed yourself for nothing. Isn't that fearful? ... It would be better, a thousand times better and wiser to leap into the water and end it all. (350)

Sonya responds in a very sacrificial tone “but what would become of them?” (350). Sonya clearly understands that with prostitution she cannot liberate her family from poverty but it is only because of her, family survives. She tries to apply utilitarian calculus to her life.

All the characters live for others betraying themselves. They believe that the happiness of the family is much more important than their own self. Such results in applying utilitarianism where as it failed to make them live for themselves. The true self is kept in pawn for the sake of net pleasure of the maximums. All these characters undergo existential crisis in diverse ways. They have no idea for their existence except for the people around them. They try to create meaning in their life through their decisions and behaviour however they fail to. Soren Kierkegaard in *Either or A Fragment of Life* states that it is impossible to return to aesthetic again because it is not a permanent one.

Talking about a crime, the sinner can't very well flee to the temple of aesthetics, and yet the aesthetic will put in an extenuating word for him. Still, it would be wrong for him to seek comfort there, for his path leads him not to the aesthetic but to the religious. (123)

When Raskolnikov brings utilitarian aspect as one of his reasons for murder. He was also planning to construct a test on himself to examine whether he is extraordinary man or not. So, after murder he came to realise the failure of his own philosophy. He could not able to overcome the failure of his own ideas and brings utilitarianism as his rescue which results

him in existential crisis. Same is with Dounia and Sonya. They both try to bring affirmative situations in their family through their act however their intentions are completely different from their actions. In short this can be considered as a crisis for identity. The lack of self for the goodness of their loved one's results in a situation where these people constantly undergo the existential crisis.

The common impact of existential crisis is alienation, anxiety, depression, stress, hopelessness and persistent sadness. This overall creates an illness both physically and mentally. All the characters in the novel undergoes all these but the way they tackle differs. Raskolnikov who is a man with radical and rational thoughts lives in isolation from the beginning of the novel. At first, he was visited by the thought, to do or not to? After murder he was terribly shocked by the outcome which leads him to isolate from his friend, Razumikhin and from his mother and sister. He is not able to accept the failure of his theory.

This upsets him a lot and his own thoughts creates anxiety and depression for him. He believes in his intelligence more than anything. Automatically he feels himself to be above all norms and people and without knowing he starts isolating himself from crisis

This isolation also paves way to his murder. After murder he feels ashamed of himself and thus, he hesitates to be with his mother and sister. His poverty and his intelligence did not go hand in hand. His poverty also makes him isolate from people. He also lacks social life. He likes to be in his small room and apart from that he is not a socio – friendly man. He got very few people who surrounds him. He is young and intelligent with handsome look, but he lacks friends and not interested in any romantic life. He got only one friend Razumikhin to whom Raskolnikov never meets or talks regularly.

Raskolnikov had hardly any friends at the university; he kept aloof from everyone, went to see no one, and did not welcome anyone who came to see him, and indeed everyone soon gave him up. He took no part in the students' gatherings, amusements or conversations. He worked with great intensity without sparing himself, and he was respected for this, But no one liked him.  
(65)

During the sickness that followed Raskolnikov's murder, Razumikhin tries hard to make him socio friendly, to make his loneliness vanish. But Raskolnikov with his guiltstricken thoughts never minds him. This alienation from society results in a kind of madness accompanied by depression and anxiety. Razumikhin and Raskolnikov's conversation shows his psyche. "Alone? When you still cannot walk, when your mug is white as a sheet, and you can barely breathe! Fool! What were you doing in the Crystal Palace? ... it means that I'm sick to death of all of you, and I want to be alone" (240).

Raskolnikov's relationship with his mother and sister is also not a very usual kind. He rarely replies to his mother's letter and never sends any letter explaining his poverty, or studies in law school. He leads a very private isolated life. His sister and mother only know

he lives in Petersburg but not the exact place of his lodging. He maintained all his dilemmas about the murder very confidentially. In the letter which his mother sends reiterate the point that he never sends or replies to his mother.

Raskolnikov's isolation is triggered by also his nihilistic thoughts. "Nihilism" derives from the word Nihil from Latin which means "nothing," the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless.

Raskolnikov finds no value for life and considered humans life as just a toy which he can keep for playing. He distances himself from society because he finds everything meaningless. He expresses his toying belief in his new doctrine saying

I want to attempt a thing like this... Hmm yes man has it all in his hands, and it all slips through his fingers from sheer cowardice... Is that something serious? No, not serious at all. I'm just toying with it, for the sake of fantasy. A plaything! Yes, a plaything, if you like! (17)

Raskolnikov also employed the superman theory which Friedrich Nietzsche termed in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as *Übermensch* as "Beyond – Man – one could say that what makes the "over- man" genuinely self – transcending is that he can over- come himself, accomplish, when necessary, this self-transcending (selbst – Überwindung). He thereby has gained power over himself" (26) who has the courage to transcend the norms and conscience. Raskolnikov considers himself to be above all people from the society and feels like the society is kind of inferior to his intelligence and capacity. The narcissist inside him makes him immersed in himself and he "never used to crowds" as Dostoevsky portrays him.

He was poor and somehow haughtily proud and unsociable, as though he were keeping something to himself. It seemed to some of his friends that he looked upon them all as children, from above, as though he were ahead of them all in development, in knowledge, and in convictions, and interests as something inferior. (65)

Raskolnikov places himself above all and has no connections with the society. His ideology isolates him from others thus he sets apart from all. But later after the crime he could not open to anybody because now he finds his ideas as failure and he is no more a superman but an ordinary man. This tension causes him to voluntarily isolate from the people around him. This isolation later leads him to anxiety and depression. The role of isolation plays a crucial part before and after murder. It's the isolation that later makes him feel guilty and rethink about his ideas and finally allows him to redemption through his confessions. Isolation brings him anxiety, depression, and sadness together which results in existential crisis. The choices one make depends on the values he/she live by. Jean Paul Sartre in his lecture "*Existentialism Is a Humanism*" states his idea:

Existence precedes essence... What do we mean by saying that Existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards. If man as the

existentialist see him as not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (290)

Finally, Raskolnikov decides to live. He is free to make choice. He is ready to accept that his idea is a failure and takes the consequences. He decides to exist with self-love and empathy. Dostoevsky's characters do not generate pathos but they are flawed in ways that do not come across as faults. Dostoevsky believes that all have heaven and hell within and nobody can succumb to one thing. One can do a terrible thing, admit the mistakes, and survive with self-love and empathy.

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