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Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: A Manifestation of 'Moral Fable'

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"Morality is a private and costly luxury"

(Henry B. Adam 273).

Morality is a philosophical concept, concerning about what is good and bad, or right or wrong behavior. It is the quality of being accord with standards of right or good conduct or a system of ideas that fall into those categories. Morality is often thought to be founded solely through religion. In this context Richard Dawkins believes that the origin of morality began with the origin of human kind and has gone through the same evolution as the human species, which confirms his beliefs with Darwinian reasoning. Some believes that 'morality' has a natural origin to be rooted in human nature; its development is in operation and support of public policy in the harmonization of individual and common goals. The emerging fields of evolutionary biology and in particular sociobiology have demonstrated that, though human social behavior is complex; the precursors of human morality can be traced to the behavior of many other social animals. Sociological explanations of human behavior are still controversial. The traditional view of social scientists has been that 'morality' is a construct, is thus culturally relative, although others argue that there is a 'Science of Morality'.

We can logically conclude that as mankind developed higher intelligence, the concept of morality become well developed in the human psyche too. Morality evolves with our intelligence also. Therefore there was no single defining point in time when morality started.

In literature the focus of the writers of different ages was on morality, though the thematic concern was same but the presentation was different. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is one of the finest examples of morality. This novel is considered as a 'moral fable' but it exposes superficial (fake) moral system. As one of the critic George Andrew Panichas comments:

"Critics speak of *Crime and Punishment* as 'the ripe fruit of the katorga', a 'novel drama', which depicts 'philosophy in action', embodies 'the ethical problem', 'puts forward problems and riddles', and

illustrates the The crisis of humanism, what its morality leads to the suicide of man by self affirmation”

It focuses on the mental anguish and moral dilemma of the main protagonist of the novel Rodion Ramanovich Raskolnikov, an impoverished ex- student in St. Petersburg who formulates and executes a plan to kill an unscrupulous pawnbroker’s for her money. Raskolinkov argues that with the pawnbroker’s money he can perform good deeds to counter balance the crime, while riding the world of a worthless parasite. He also commits this murder to test his own hypothesis that some people are naturally capable of, and even have the right to, do such things. Several times throughout the novel, Raskolnikov justifies his actions by connecting himself mentally with Napoleon Bonaparte, believing that murder is permissible in pursuit of a higher purpose, only to find out him “..... is not a Napoleon”.

The morality in *Crime and Punishment* is that, Is any person inherently better than another? Does any person have the right to take another’s life? Is there such thing as an appropriate justification for murder? In the novel Raskolnikov struggles with these questions and ultimately decide that murder can be justified and that some men are better than others. His reasoning for this is that murder is okay if it helps more people than it hurts. This belief leads him to commit a terrible crime which leaves him ridden with guilt until he is saved by the pious prostitute Sonia. According to G.A.Panichas:

“From begining to end, from Crime and Punishment and its aftermath the novel recreates Raskolnikov’s conflict, and action, mirror to a soul in tormented; conscience and hope struggle against an arrogance of intellect and a sense of nothingness; the scared oppose the profane impulse in man; doubt and disbelief content with certitude and affirmation”.

Dostoevsky does an excellent job of demonstrating Raskolnikov’s guilt through his physical illness which plagues him throughout the entire book. It aids in the understanding of his intense suffering over his guilt and add tremendously to his character’s erratic behavior. After

Raskolnikov wakes from his sleep he begins madly trying to cover any evidence that could link him to the crime:

“Pieces of torn linen couldn’t rouse suspicion, Whatever happened; I think not, any way! He repeated, standing in the forgotten anything. The conviction that all his faculties, even memory, and the simplest power reflection were failing him, began to be an insufficient torture. Surely it isn’t beginning always: surely isn’t my punishment coming upon me? (II.II.p.76).

This is extremely interesting because it suggests Raskolnikov’s punishment is not being caught, but the guilt that plagues him. He is torn between reason and ethics. He is haunted by his own morality why he had done this petty deed. Dostoevsky is concerned not with the actual repercussions of the murder but the way with which the murder forces Raskolnikov to deal with tormenting guilt. Dostoevsky seems to suggest that actual punishment is much less terrible than the stress anxiety of trying to avoid punishment. Since Raskolnikov spends most of the novel trying to avoid being caught he has brought the punishment upon himself.

The guilt takes a strange hold on Raskolnikov. It is clear how the guilt took its toll on Raskolnikov, and it fits in with the idea that guilt is ‘a self-generated’. Raskolnikov is the one creating his own anxiety from his fear of being caught and being punished by it. He begins to act more erratic and is even held up in bed for four days in a state of fever. Although he is unaware of how truly, guilty he feels, Raskolnikov conscience is pushing him towards the truth and confession.

Raskolnikov is a complicated character who on the one hand wants to be isolated from the masses and proves himself to be above them. So he kills the woman and takes her money. Yet, he does not spend it, and gives away twenty rubles to a woman he hardly knows. It is clear from his this act that he is capable of good; he only needs someone to bring it out of him. He then meets the woman who will save him, Sonia. According to Harold Bloom “Sonia Marmeladova appears as an icon, on which only suffering is expressed”. Sonia is the chosen confidante for the main protagonist Raskolnikov. She shows him nothing but confession.

She never puts herself above anyone, like Raskolnikov does, and always manages to relate to the common humanity of others. Raskolnikov is too egotistical to recognize that she transgresses for others while he only did so for himself. As one of the critic Joseph Frank rightly says that:

“Dostoevsky’s great aim was not only to reveal the disastrous human consequences to which such an ideology might lead, but also to rehabilitate the christian ideal against all its gainsayers”.

Raskolnikov sees Sonia a one who will understand and help him to bear his burden, rather than criticizes him for it. His guilt of the crime shines suspicion upon his claims, but it is only with Sonia that he voices the truth. He is coming closer to the commonness of himself and becoming closer to humanity through the help of Sonia. The guilt he suffers with afterwards is his rebirth into the world as a new person, a common person. Raskolnikov finally, asks Sonia for her advice in the matter:

“Well, what am I to do now?” his great guilty suffering in once again showing physical signs. The guilt and suffering has distorted his handsome face. Sonia is only too happy to answer him: “What are you to do”? She cried, jumping up, and her eyes that had been full of tears suddenly began to shine “stand up! Go at once, this very minute, stand at the cross- roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, I am a murderer.”
(IV.IV. p.269)

This demonstrates Sonia’s dedication to Raskolnikov’s redemption. She wants him to repent, not so he will be sent to Siberia, but his great suffering will end and he will be reborn. Raskolnikov is finally ready to release his guilt and confess to the crime, the cross is his to beat like all the suffering he had endured. From Sonia’s room he goes to the police and makes his statement:

“It was I killed the old pawn broker woman, Alyona Ivanovna and her sister Lizaveta with An axe and robbed them.”(IV.II.p.338)

Raskolnikov's guilt and Sonia's compassion lead him to confess to his crime and accept the punishment. Raskolnikov is at last close enough to humanity to be able to confess, but only one person can truly aid him in shedding his isolation, Sonia. In the Epilogue Sonia has indeed followed Raskolnikov to Siberia. He continues to live as though isolated from society even though his guilt has left him. It is not until he surrenders himself to Sonia and realizes his love for her that he is truly set free. Since Raskolnikov has finally surrendered his heart to another person who has shed his isolation and began his new life. He is transformed from a guilty, isolated man with little respect for other people into a redeemed soul who accepts his own humanity. His journey is aided by his own horrible suffering and the compassion that demonstrates the importance of moral storytelling. Dostoevsky formulated his thoughts about the necessity of suffering. Suffering for him, become a means of salvation with his confession, Raskolnikov begins his journey towards reprieve and free from the burden of evil. Raskolnikov's dark tale of murder and guilt has assumed the status of a religious parable, how a sinner (Raskolnikov) finds redemption through faith in Christ. Indeed, *Crime and Punishment* is a story about grace of God. In the end, Raskolnikov freed from slavery of guilt.

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