Appreciation of the Artistry of Dostoyevsky

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to unravel the uniqueness of the literary style of F. M. Dostoyevsky with the objective of better appreciation of his artistry. F. M. Dostoyevsky is a Russian writer whose literary works explore human psychology in the socio-political and spiritual context of 19th-century Russia. This article gives a brief account of the socio-political background of the author and the peculiarities of his literary creations. His literary works are known as philosophies in action. The unique literary style adopted by him led to the misconception about his ideological position. Though he used his literary works to expose the danger of the prominent 'western ideas' prevailing during his time he was often considered as the supporter of those very ideas which he opposed vehemently.

Key words: Dostoyevsky F. M., Russian Literature, Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, The Possessed, The Brothers Karamazov, Slavophile, Merezhkovsky, Shestov. L. I., Maxim Gorky, Leon Trotsky, Stalin, Bakhtin M.

Russian Literature and Dostoyevsky

According to the Romantic tradition of the Russian literature, poets and writers are prophets singled out by God to carry the truth to the people. Such a commitment to truth combined with deductive function of literature is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of most of the Russian writers. In this context F. M. Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) is considered as the 'Most Russian' among the Russian writers of his time.

Dostoyevsky was born in an atmosphere highly fertile with abundance of philosophical ideas and literary styles. Russian literature of XIX century, especially of the second half, is a mixture of philosophy and literature. The reason can be cited as that, since, Russia did not have any great philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Engles etc. as Germany had in the end of the XVIII and in the beginning of the XIX centuries Russian literati such as Karamzin, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy played the role of philosophers in Russia. Hence the philosophical ideas of Kant, the left Hegelians, George Sand, Feuerbach, Marx Stirner, Proudhon, Kierkegaard, Marx, Engles etc are reflected in Russian literature in various forms. A. M. Gorky rightly noted; "Our literature is our prestige. Our spiritual impulses and our philosophy are imbedded in it."

Westernization of Russian Literature

Though Russia was part of Europe it could not inherit multifaceted growth of Europe in the fields of philosophy, art, science, economics and politics till the eighteenth century. Peter the Great initiated Westernization process as a solution to overcome Russia's backwardness. Russia's encounter with the science and culture of Europe transformed Russian elite into Western by the beginning of the nineteenth century. French language almost replaced Russian as the language of educated society. Russian intelligentsia have become accustomed to uncritical acceptance of ready-made ideas born in the West as solution to their own historical problems, and lost vital connection with their own cultural entity. "I do not understand religion. I understand nothing in Russia, and at once one is lifted to lofty heighest" This is how Dostoyevsky describes the intellectual atmosphere prevailed during his time in The Diary of a Writer.

Russian Literature introduced western ideas to the common people through the living life of literature. As a result, these ideas, which remained only as a matter of discussion among the intellectual circles of the West became a matter life and death for Russian intelligentsia and the mass who considered them as panacea for their social ills! Russian intelligentsia did not merely discussed or
studied these ideas but lived through them mediating with passion, and wanted to apply these new ideas into real life immediately. If Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Feuerbach, Marx and Hegel remained as philosophers in the west, for Russians they emerged as the designers of their destiny.

**Slavophilism**

The western ideas which are in essence centered around individualism ran counter to the peculiar historic heritage, the community living (sobornost) of the Russian peasantry, and lead to the alienation of Russian intelligentsia from the mass. As a result a section of Russian intelligentsia started a national movement called Slavophilism in the 1830s to counter the Westernism. Slavophiles considered the medieval Russian patrimonial monarchy centered up on sobornost, which found its expression in the mir and other institutions of peasant-collectives as the answer to the problems of egoism and individualism inherited in the western ideas. At ideological plane if westernism advocated individualism and materialism, slavophilism stood for the social spirit and brotherhood for the harmonious growth of the individual and society.

Dostoyevsky grew as writer-philosopher side by side with great writers like Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy etc. and progressive revolutionary critics like Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Pisarev. When young Dostoyevsky resigned his commission and decided to dedicate himself to literature his intention was to unravel the nature of man. "Man is a mystery. It must be unraveled, and if it takes a whole lifetime, don't say that it is a waste of time. I am preoccupied by this mystery because I want to be a human being." Wrote eighteen-year old Dostoyevsky to his brother. The characters of his Pre-Siberian works such as Devushkin, Gal'yadkin, Murin, Ordinov, and heroines such as, Varenka, Katerina, Netotchka, Princess Katya and Princess Alexandra Mikhailovna are remarkable for his in-depth psychoanalyses.

The publication of his first novel "The Poor People" dealing with the psychological aspects of the poor people gained unprecedented recognition to young Dostoyevsky, and admittance to intellectual circles of Petersburg such as those headed by Belinsky, Petrovsky, Beketov, and Palm-Durov. In 1849 he was arrested for his involvement with the Petrovsky Circle and was condemned to death but at the last moment the sentence was commuted to four years' hard labour in Siberia. After his release, Dostoyevsky was forced to serve as a soldier, but was discharged from the military due to his ill health on 14 February 1854.

When he returned to the civic life after ten years of exile in Siberia, he was surprised to see the negative impacts of those very rational ideas (western ideas), which he once considered as panacea for the social ills. Subsequently he became a supporter of Pochvennik and remained as a defender of Slavophiles.

He criticized the radicals and liberals charging that they were assuming artificial and theoretical positions, which are not in conformity with the human nature, especially that of the rustic nature of Russians. His close association with criminals in Siberia enabled him gain deep knowledge about human psychology. In his post-Siberian works he combined human psychology with the prevailing philosophical ideas of the time. He put various ideas into the heads of his characters and observed what emerges from them. Hence, his works are considered as philosophies in action. He was interested in the impact of the 'ideas' on human psychology rather than its socio-political aspects.

**Post-Siberian Works**

In his post-Siberian works he depicted a galaxy of heroes and heroines such as Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov, Sonya and Dunia (Crime and Punishment); Prince Myshkin, Hippolite, Natasha Filippovna (The Idiot); Stavrogin, Peter Verkhovensky, Kirillov, Shatov, Shigalov, Liza, and Mariya Lebyatkin (The Possessed); Ivan, Alyosha, Dmitri, Zosima, Katerina Ivanovna, and Grushenka (Karamazov Brothers) representing western ideas and Russianness. His post Siberian novels are battle fields where the western ideas and the Russianness come to head on collision and shatter the dreams of the so called designers of mankind to restruct society on reason devoid of religion and moral values. The
murders and suicides of Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, The Possessed and The Brothers Karamazov are the consequences of the implementation of various Western ideas into real life.

**Artistic Style of Dostoyevsky**

The peculiarity of the artistic style of Dostoyevsky is that 'Dostoyevsky-the philosopher' is always overshadowed by 'Dostoyevsky-the artist'. This often led to misunderstanding of 'Dostoyevsky-the philosopher'. Often the characters, who are close to the ideological position of the author are eclipsed by the imposing characters enjoying prominence in the overall setting of the novels. The Crime and Punishment is considered as the novel of Raskolnikov and his ideological murder and not of Sonya whose transgression and salvation through suffering is so dear to 'Dostoyevsky-the philosopher'. The Idiot is emerged as a novel of Prince Myshkin, the positively good man but the attempt by 'Dostoyevsky-the philosopher' to expose the bankruptcy of the 'environmental doctrine of the westerners' of his time could not catch the attention of even serious readers of the novel. Similar way, in The Possessed the amoral nihilists such as Stavrogin, Peter Verkhovensky and Kirillov cast Shatov, the representative slavophile ideas to oblivion. In his last novel The Brothers Karamazov, the main idea of Dostoyevsky was to expose the bankruptcy of Ivan, the rationalist and to juxtapose his ideals such as Alyosha and Zosima as an alternative to Ivan, but both Alyosha and Zosima shattered in front of the rational arguments of Ivan.

Dostoyevsky's artistry is unique and 'Dostoyevsky-the artist' never allows 'Dostoyevsky-the philosopher' to gain prominence. This often misled the readers to have distorted picture of 'Dostoyevsky-the philosopher'. Even today Dostoyevsky remain in the centre of controversies. During his lifetime he was criticized as a writer as his literary style, both the content and form did not conform to the prevailing literary styles of Naturalism and Realism. And he was stamped as an orthodox by the leading critics of his time as his Weltanschauung did not fall in tune with that of theirs. Later in the Soviet era those critics, who followed the legacy of Belinsky, Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky judged Dostoyevsky as an artist thinker in the light of the philosophical ideas found in his fiction. Mikhailovsky. N.K. in his famous article on Dostoyevsky Shestoki Talent 1 (A Cruel Talent) criticized Dostoyevsky's preoccupation with pain and suffering. He pointed out the lack of proportion in his works, the atypicality of his characters and a general lack of motivation. The expression Cruel Talent has been widely misused by ideological opponents of Dostoyevsky during the Soviet era to discredit him. Merezhkovsky in his book "Dostoyevsky, Prorok Ruskoj Revolutsii" elevated Dostoyevsky to the level of a prophet and described him as a symbol of the spirit and depicted him as a great Christian. Shestov. L. I., discovered the features of Existentialism in Dostoyevsky's Notes from the underground and considered him as the forerunner of existentialists. In his book "Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. The Philosophy of Tragedy" reveals, that both Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, considered that evil and good are inevitable parts of the human condition, and no social reforms will eliminate tragedy or suffering from life.

During the early days of the Soviet era, those who occupied the helm of literary affairs demanded ideological purity and refused to tolerate opposite ideologies found his works socially obnoxious and detrimental to the cause of socialism, and banned the publication of his works for many years, and discouraged studies on Dostoyevsky. Maxim Gorky described him as a Chauvinist, anti-cemist, preacher of suffering and submissiveness. For him, "Dostoyevsky is a genius, but an evil one". Leon Trotsky considered him as a "Genius with an incurably pinched soul... and a voluptuous poet of cruelty and commiseration." Stalin, who read Dostoyevsky with enthusiasm considered his works as useless for educating the working class and adopted a hostile attitude for obvious political reasons.

**M. Bakhtin on Dostoyevsky**

Study of Dostoyevsky by M. Bakhtin enabled the modern world to understand the intricacies of the form and content of the fiction of Dostoyevsky in a better way. In the first edition of 'Problema poetiki F.
M. Dostoevskogo. M. Bakhtin revealed Dostoyevsky as the founder of polyphonic novels. But later in the revised edition he placed Dostoyevsky's novels into the tradition of Menippae. He considered Dostoyevsky as an artist, first and foremost, and not a philosopher or a journalist. Interestingly his book serves as the best tool to understand Dostoyevsky, the philosopher.

According to Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky's novels are polyphonic in nature. Hence all character get equal right (often negative ones get even more), and Dostoyevsky never silences a character with ideological hammer. He created "Free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him." Often this leads to misunderstanding of the ideological position of the author. The crime and punishment is a novel of the superman theory of Raskolnikov, which the author does not subscribe to. The Possessed is a novel of Stavrogin, Peter Verkhovensky, and Kirillov, not of Shatov, who is ideologically close to the author. In the same way, the Karamazov Brothers is a novel of Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor, not of Alyosha, the ideal of Dostoyevsky. Hence, often the readers and critics are misled and arrive at a wrong judgment of Dostoyevsky in the light of the prominent ideas present in the novels which in reality the author opposes vehemently. For example, Rozanov in his celebrated essay on Dostoyevsky 'Legenda O Velikom Inkvizitore F.M. Dostoevskogo' made false assumption that the ideas of Ivan Karamazov are Dostoyevsky's own ideas. While, in fact the whole plan of the novel is aimed at refuting the ideas of Ivan. Later, of course, Rozanov changed his views. Bakhtin rightly says, "The consciousness of critics and scholars is today still enslaved by the ideology of Dostoyevsky's heroes. The author's artistic will does not receive clear theoretical recognition. It seems that everyone who enters the labyrinth of the polyphonic novel loses his way, and cannot hear the whole for all the individual voices. Often even the vague outline of the whole goes unnoticed; the artistic principles of the combination of voices are simply not captured by the ear. Everyone interprets Dostoyevsky's final world in his own way, but they all interpret it as a single world, a single voice, a single accent, and therein lies their basic mistakes."  

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