

Rationalizing the Extraordinary Men: A Study of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

RAVINDRA KUMAR
CCS University Campus, Meerut

ABSTRACT

Fyodor Dostoevsky was undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures in Russian literature. Nietzsche in his "Birth of Tragedy" speaks of two worlds and two orders: Dionysian and Apollonian. The first one is the world of crime, disorder, chaos, disintegration, alienation and moral barrenness while the second one is the world of order, peace, sanity, beauty and harmony. Even a cursory reading of Crime and Punishment reveals that the world of Dionysian dominates the entire book and there is little space for the Apollonian world. Actually Dostoevsky was very passionate for the world of crime. He begins it with Notes from the Underground and takes it to its culmination in Crime and Punishment. Though the book unfurls a multifarious variety of themes and ideas but the theme of ordinary and extraordinary men captures the attention of readers at the very first hand. How far the author has been successful to justify the theory in the book may be very interesting. Rationalizing the extraordinary men theory is the chief aim of the present paper.

Keywords: Dionysian, apollonian, nemesis, hegalian superman, nietzschean superman, haphazard thinking, apathetic, hypochondria, delirium.

Fyodor Dostoevsky was undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures in Russian literature. In producing great creative works he is only second to Leo Tolstoy. Though his themes are quite different from that of Tolstoy; the literary world of Tolstoy is a world of peace, order and stability while the world of Dostoevsky



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is replete with chaos, disintegration and disorder. While the former tries to restore idealistic self even amidst the trumpet of war and peace, the latter brings forth the world of tumult and disharmony. Being psychologically abnormal Dostoevsky showed the symptoms of nervous disorder right from the beginning of his childhood days. Even he was called a hypochondriac. Unsuccessful relationships and a deep sense of isolation turned him into a strange type of idealist. His deep interest in crimes and criminal psychology made him an author of a number of novels, which deal with crime and criminal psychology. His *Crime and Punishment* is an epoch making novel, which deals with a number of issues like free will, ordinary versus extraordinary men, crime, punishment and redemption.

The novel *Crime and Punishment* was first published in the literary magazine *The Russian Messenger* in twelve monthly installments in 1866. The first part of the novel appeared in the January 1866 issue of *The Russian Messenger*, and the last one was published in December 1866 issue. Dostoevsky got the very idea of writing the book in the summer of 1865 when he lost all his money at a casino and became so helpless that he could not even pay his bills or afford proper meals. This was the time when he was in debt and had to take care of the family of his brother Mikhail, who had died in 1864. Initially it was in the form of a novella under the title *The Drunkards* through which he was trying to deal with the issues of drunkenness. Later it was published in form of a novel with the title *Crime and Punishment*. The novel reflects Dostoevsky's personal life also; Raskolnikov, the protagonist of the book, is the creation of the author's preconceptions of his own painful and struggling life. Dostoevsky's exile in Siberia for around ten years and a tough life of pain and suffering spent there also inspired him to knit the web of *Crime and Punishment*.

Nietzsche in his 'Birth of Tragedy' speaks of two worlds and two orders: Dionysian and Apollonian. The first one is the world of crime, disorder, chaos, disintegration, alienation and moral barrenness while the second one is the world of order, peace, sanity, beauty and harmony. Even a cursory reading of *Crime*

and Punishment reveals that the world of Dionysian dominates the entire book and there is little space for the Apollonian world. Actually Dostoevsky was very passionate for the world of crime. He begins it with *Notes from the Underground* and takes it to its culmination in *Crime and Punishment*. Though the book unfurls a multifarious variety of themes and ideas but the theme of ordinary and extraordinary men captures the attention of readers at the very first hand. How far the author has been successful to justify the theory in the book may be very interesting. Rationalizing the extraordinary men theory is the chief aim of the present paper.

The story of the novel revolves around the sensational murders of two women, a pawnbroker and her step sister by Raskolnikov, a rationalistic nihilist. Raskolnikov is an intellectually rich but financially poor man. A student in St. Petersburg, his only ambition is to commit a perfect crime. The murder is committed but soon after the event, the murderer starts crumbling. Crime is always followed by punishment or nemesis. We have seen it in the cases of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; It works well in *Crime and Punishment* too. Raskolnikov tries to clarify the very motif which has forced him to murder and rob the old lady, Alena Ivanovna. But the problem is that he himself is not able to find out a clear cut reason behind his own crime and this makes him one of the most fascinating characters not only in Russian literature but in world literature. Let us try to find out different possible motifs behind the murder.

The first motif may be Raskolnikov's extraordinary man theory. Raskolnikov has unknowingly published his ideas on crime in an article entitled 'On Crime.' Porfiry, the investigating officer, uncovers this article and finds faults in the theory, ultimately leading to the confession of the murderer. Raskolnikov's ideas about ordinary and extraordinary men are based on two different philosophers-Hegel and Nietzsche. Actually parts of his theory are based on Hegel, parts on Nietzsche and some parts are based on his own ideology about ordinary and extraordinary men. Hegel, the German philosopher is well known for writing on general human nature. He has also given his ideas about superman. Analyzing broadly the Hegelian

superman is noble by nature and stands for doing noble purposes for society. It can be elaborated in a way that if ends are noble, means can be justified. The emphasis here is on the ends rather than the means. If we try to apply this theory on Raskolnikov's crime, it seems to be relevant to a great extent. Hegel is of the view that anything that is evil in society should be removed completely. From this view point, the old pawnbroker is an evil element, a burden on the society. She is rich and takes benefit of the poor condition of the poor people. In exchange of money she, in a way, snatches the possessions of the people who usually come to her in the time of distress. She is a greedy woman who is robbing the poor and needy off their precious belongings. Her murder is, from this view point, beneficial for society especially for the poor and helpless. The second thing mentioned in the theory is that if the ends are good, means can be justified. The old pawnbroker is a very rich lady and this money, most probably, will be wasted on her funeral ceremony after her death. But the same money can be utilized for the welfare of society. A number of schools can be built for the education of the depraved children. It also can be utilized for hospitals to serve the suffering humanity. It can also be distributed among the starved destitute families. Raskolnikov can also utilize it for his own education. Later he can help the needy people like him. Thus the Hegelian superman stands above common human beings but works for the benefit of the suffering humanity and mankind.

The Nietzschean superman, on the other hand, is quite different from the Hegelian superman as he is not concerned about the welfare of society. He has nothing to do with any sense of nobility and stands for his own personal gratification. This man possesses the strongest will and is capable enough to impose his will on others. To him his own will is the supreme will and there exists nothing beyond his will. Consequently this superman can do even the worst crime without any iota of hesitation. That's why the Nietzschean superman stands alone simply because the assertion of his own will isolates him from the society, leaving him in complete aloofness. To some extent the theory seems to be applicable on Raskolnikov as he also finds himself isolated from his society. After committing the double murder, his soul is



not at ease and he leaves his mother, sister and friends and finds himself absolutely cut off from the rest of the humanity.

Another motif behind the murder is Raskolnikov's theory of extraordinary man, which is the product of his own haphazard thinking. Raskolnikov holds the view that men can be arbitrarily divided into two groups – ordinary and extraordinary. The ordinary men are submissive by nature and never try to transgress the social rules. They are the people of the present, the now and believe in the societal construction. The extraordinary people, on the other hand, are above the ordinary, normal people and feel that they have a right to transgress rules and regulations set up by the society. Such people are extraordinary as they possess the stamina and talent to create a new world. While commenting on his theory Raskolnikov observes:

I simply hinted that an extraordinary man has the right, that is not an official right, but an inner right to decide in his own conscience to overstep certain obstacles, only in case it is essential for the practical fulfillment of his ideas, sometimes, perhaps, of benefit to the whole of humanity. (Dostoevsky 1866: 36)

They are the prime movers and have the ability to cross normal bounds. Raskolnikov mentions such extraordinary men as Newton, Napoleon and Mahomet. It is the extraordinary people who give way to civilization and take it onward on the path of progress. Raskolnikov feels that Newton had a right to kill people, if need be, in order to bring to the world findings of his experiments. That's why he created a new world of science and knowledge. People like Napoleon and Newton had a right to uphold their new ideas even if it takes the toll of hundreds of people. Raskolnikov further feels that ordinary people preserve the world, while the extraordinary people move the world and lead it to its destination as their achievements are important for the welfare and development of the mankind. Though he believes that both types of people have an equal right to survive and exist. It simply means that all great men capable of doing great things must not submit to the common rules and laws of society because if they do so, they will no more remain great. It also means that being great means overstepping the common laws.

Analyzing the murder motif from this angle we find that the initial flaw in this theory is the artificial and arbitrary distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary men. Raskolnikov believed that being an extraordinary man he could commit any crime, even the crime of murder, and walk away from it indifferent, apathetic and without any sense of guilt. But the question is whether Raskolnikov is an extraordinary man or not? Though he includes himself in the category of the extraordinary men, he displays no extraordinary traits. What we notice in him are depression, paranoia, rage, pride, nightmares, hypochondria and delirium. The reality is that Raskolnikov is a split personality; he is not even an ordinary man. The way he behaves after committing the murders reveals the truth of the fact that he is a man of ordinary stuff. In a letter to his publisher, Dostoevsky outlined the plot of this novel and termed his hero as a young man confused by certain incomplete ideas espoused by the members of his social milieu. It is true that Raskolnikov believes, or wishes to believe that he is an extraordinary man, living beyond any concept of good and evil. He forgot the very fact that no matter what, man suffers. He thought he could avoid this truth of suffering; he wanted to prove himself to be a strong man beyond pain and suffering. But the very text of the novel does not prove this fact. He committed the murder to see, "Do I dare commit this murder and therefore, prove myself to be a man by proving that my will is strong" (Dostoevsky 1866: 321). It is Porfiry, a psychologist, who finds faults in this theory of Raskolnikov. He also gives a chance to Raskolnikov to reconsider the ethical grounds of this theory and does not arrest him immediately even though he is well convinced of his crime of murder. The very questions of Porfiry frightened him, a symptom an extraordinary man does not possess. This exposed the very truth in his character. He was trying to be a Napoleon but killed a wretched, skinny old woman.

A Napoleon crept under an old woman's bed! ugh, how loathsome! I am an esthetic louse and nothing more. I am perhaps viler and more loathsome than the louse I killed. (Dostoevsky 1866: 345)

Actually Porfiry was a well wisher to Raskolnikov and wanted him to reconsider his unethical theory of extraordinary man, which was ethically unsound. Meanwhile Raskolnikov was also melting down and wanted to share his secret with someone reliable in order to release himself from the continuous mental pain. Sonya was the best option to him as in her he found a fellow sufferer. When Sonya insisted on knowing why he had murdered, he tried to confuse her by telling that he did it for the sake of money. He keeps giving excuses but it was not easy to befool Sonya, a good angel of God. Finally he uttered the truth, "I wanted to be a Napoleon, that is why I killed her" (Dostoevsky 1866: 412) Now he realizes that he was not an extraordinary man, but a simple ordinary man, "Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her! I crushed myself once for all, forever...but it was the devil that killed the old woman, not I" (p. 415). This was the moment when Raskolnikov was shedding his ego and came out of his world of illusion. When Porfiry asks him if he believes in the Biblical miracles like the raising of Lazarus from the grave, he answers positively. With the help of Sonya, he is now on the way of becoming Lazarus. It is, perhaps, necessary for his salvation as without evil and death there can be no resurrection. It shows that the evil represented by the novel becomes the instrument of Raskolnikov's salvation.

Walter Schubart claims that Raskolnikov is a sinner full of grace who passes from crime through repentance to rebirth. We have a number of evidences of his piety as a child and his benign acts as an adult. His concern for Marmeladov and his family, his affectionate behavior to Sonya, his love for his sister and mother and his assistance to the young girl about to be raped by the stranger are some examples revealing the bright side of his personality. These manifestations of good combined with his evil fascination toward crime make him a complex and susceptible character. But the journey of salvation cannot be completed without moving on the road of pain and suffering. He can climb the heights of spirituality only through suffering. He is well aware of this fact and that is why he is ready to go through suffering with the help of Sonya and her divine love. Sonya guides him by saying:

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Stand up! Go at once, this very minute, and stand at the crossroads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled, and then bow down to the whole world, to all four sides- and then say to all men aloud, I am a murderer! Then God will send you life again...Suffer and expiate your sin by it. (Dostoevsky 1866: 433)

In doing all this, Raskolnikov is performing symbolically a non-rational act; the rationalist is reflecting the beginning of his change into a complete, organic living human being, respecting others in his community. Thus, Sonya plays a crucial and decisive role in bringing about the regeneration of Raskolnikov. It is she who has brought Raskolnikov the message of Lazarus and his resurrection; she has given him the Cross and urged him to kiss the earth at the crossroads. But the efforts of Raskolnikov also cannot be entirely overruled. He also realized his sins and was ready to repent. It shows that his theory of superman has shattered into pieces; the victim is ready to go to the shelter of the Divine presence.

Svidrigailov is another character in *Crime and Punishment* who, like Raskolnikov, considers himself to be an extraordinary man. But the difference between the two is that while Raskolnikov had Sonys to save him, Svidrigailov had none. He is also a victim of isolation like Raskolnikov and turns to Dounia. But she rejects him and the result is that he sinks into a deep pit of darkness without any possibility of resurrection and salvation. Dostoevsky gives an idea through the book that Svidrigailov was already dead, before his coffin was nailed down. And the rejection from Sonya serves as the last nail in his coffin. The two characters believing in the theory of superman failed. T Lloyd remarks:

In any case for Dostoevsky the roar of the Blond Beast (Superman) would have meant precisely that blood thirsty roar of Western Europe against which he continued to warn his compatriots for the greater part of his life. Far from being akin to Nietzsche, he was his antithesis, and Raskolnikov was equally the antithesis of that mass-murderer-the Blond Beast. (1985: 110)

David M. ... the view that the crime committed by Raskolnikov ... seen as a result of direct or indirect

intervention of some supernatural fate i.e. God. The text shows a number of evidences indicating towards the fact that the murder is planned and planned by God. He quotes some chance happenings in order to prove his view. It is by chance that he hears a conversation that Lizaveta, the half-sister of Alena Ivanovna, will be away from home and Alena will be alone in the apartment; it is by chance that he hears a conversation between an officer and a student talking about the utter futility and harmfulness of Alena's existence; again it is by chance that Raskolnikov is brooding over such ideas. All these chance happenings make him feel "that neither his reason nor his will were free anymore and that everything had been settled for good" (Dostoevsky 1866: 52). From the very beginning of his idea to the murder of the pawnbroker Raskolnikov sees the "presence of certain special influences and coincidences" (p. 52). This becomes clearer at the very moment of the murder as Raskolnikov feels "as if someone had taken him by the hand and pulled him, irresistibly, blindly, with supernatural force, without objection. It was just as if the wheel of a machine had caught a clump of his clothing and begun to pull him in" (p. 58). Fate seems to favor him again at the time when he enters the gate of the house of the pawnbroker, a hay cart passing from there conceals him from the eyes of the people on the street. Fate seems to assist him even after the murder. He takes shelter in a vacant apartment on the second floor where some painters had been working earlier, but now they have left "as if on purpose" (p. 69). Thus, everything before and after the murder happens in a way as if he was being assisted at every step by some supernatural power. But this theory cannot be absolutely valid; it simply can be an excuse to diminish the crime of the criminal. Here, we can compare Raskolnikov with Shakespeare's Macbeth, who according to some critics, murders King Duncan under the influence of the prophecies of the three witches. The reality with Macbeth is that he already had something evil in his mind; the witches merely provided more fuel to the fire of evil which was already present in his mind. The same can be said about Raskolnikov who was already possessed by the idea of committing a perfect murder. The coincidences mentioned above

provided some sort of support to his confused brooding over his own extraordinary men theory. Moreover, he seems to be a man who has lost his faith in God and the meaningfulness of His world. Robert Jackson remarks in this matter, "The fate Raskolnikov has come to believe in is nothing more than the inevitable consequences of his own behavior, the iron logic of his own inner fatality" (Jackson 1974: 39). It simply shows that the theory of fate is nothing more than a reflection of Raskolnikov's emotional state of mind, the state which is near madness if not exactly madness. The question of fate can also be explained in the context of the problem of good and evil in human life. We know that both good and evil are the very factors which work simultaneously in human mind. Since the path of good is very typical to move on, people often are attracted towards evil quite easily.

It can be stated that the evil fascinates human beings more than the good. Raskolnikov is a man of very simple stuff though he includes himself in the category of extraordinary men. Initially, after committing the crime, he is not even repentant and finds no fault in his crime. This is apparent in his confession to his sister Dounia. When Dounia protests by saying that he shed blood, Raskolnikov states, "Which all men shed...which flows, and has always flowed in stream, which is split like champagne, and for which mean are crowned in the Capitol and are called afterwards benefactors of mankind...I too wanted to do good to men..." (Dostoevsky 1866: 513). But it cannot be absolutely true as he keeps wavering from one excuse to another. The text proves repeatedly that he is a man of weak nerves. When after committing the murder he faces some policemen, he starts behaving strangely as he feels that his crime has been detected. But when he comes to know that the enquiry was for some different matter, he faints, may be due the excess of happiness or the imbalance of emotions. An extraordinary man can never behave in such a way simply because such type of man is very strong by will power. This man is the man of free will who thinks that he is free to do anything without any restriction. Such a man feels that he has a right to do whatever pleases him. To him, like Milton's Satan, "Fair is foul, foul is fair." He is controlled not by



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head but by heart, not by any logic but by impulse and feelings. He defies all established rules and regulations and considers himself to be a monarch. His will is of ultimate importance, and Divine presence and ethical codes and conduct have no place to this man. The problem with Raskolnikov is that he thinks himself to be in this category of people, in actuality he does not use it sufficiently. Had he been true to his ideas of extraordinary man theory or Free Will, he would not have trembled like a terrified child at the summons from the court. Again, his very idea of revisiting the spot of crime indicates that he is not a superman guided by free will. A man of free will must not regret his actions and the consequences of actions. Fear is the mother of morality. It is an emotion only reserved for ordinary men; a superman can have no fear as he is the very epitome of evil and lives only for personal gratification. But the reality is that Raskolnikov lost his sense in fear after committing the crime and fear and superman can never co-exist. It seems as if his theory of superman is dashed into pieces. The real motif behind the murder is quite uncertain; it is neither for money nor to benefit the humanity. He himself declares, "I did the murder for myself" (Dostoevsky 1866: 397).

Raskolnikov represents the conflict between man-God and God-man, the pride of the intellect and the tenderness of the heart. He is a man of split nature and to come out of his illusions he had to pass through the phases of the story of Lazarus for redemption. It is towards the end of the book that he gets away from his romantic tradition of hero worship which prompted him to formulate the theory of extraordinary man. Thus, the novel reveals an enigmatic personality of Raskolnikov as nothing can be said with certainty in relation to the murders committed by him. The act of crime is the result of his ideological intoxication and his disturbed state of mind. The author has tried to explore the moral and psychological dangers of the radical ideology. The book also unfolds the dangers of both Utilitarianism and rationalism. A number of motifs can be held responsible for the crime of Raskolnikov, but no motif seems to fit the character of Raskolnikov absolutely. Raskolnikov is a typical product of the Russian society, particularly St. Petersburg, the

city of poverty, drunkenness, destitution, forgery and all sorts of crime. He is a product of this time, a child of chaos. The book also proves that he reaches salvation because he chooses to, and therefore he survives again because he chooses to. He has been able to do this through his own realization and rationalization.

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RAVINDRA KUMAR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH,
CCS UNIVERSITY CAMPUS, MEERUT.

