

Raskolnikov and the Murder: A Deleuzian Reframing of *Crime and Punishment*

¹**Dr. Shivshankar Rajmohan AK**, Assistant Professor of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, V.I.T. University, Vellore (Tamil Nadu), India.

shivshankarrajmohan.ak@vit.ac.in

²**Aiswarya Sureshan**, Research Scholar, Dept. of Humanities & Social Sciences, N.I.T. Warangal (Telangana), India. as21hsrer01@student.nitw.ac.in

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Abstract

The paper attempts to provide a detailed and systematic analysis of one of the most celebrated characters of Dostoevsky, Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment. It examines the act of crime committed by Raskolnikov through the theoretical frame provided by Deleuze and Guattari. To be precise, the paper employs the notion of rhizome and paranoia to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of Raskolnikov's motivations for his nerve chilling acts of crime. The paper intends to study the notion of crime in detail. It juxtaposes the fictional text with the actual discussions on crime and punishment that happened in Russia during and after the publication of the novel. It also intends to analyse the nature of 'repentance' experienced by Raskolnikov.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Deleuze, Crime and Punishment, rhizome, paranoia, territorialisation

Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky in a letter addressed to M. N Katkov in September 1865 describes *Crime and Punishment* as “a psychological account of a crime. A young man expelled from the university, a bourgeois by origin and living in extreme poverty...has surrendered to several strange, ‘unfinished’ ideas which are in the air... He decided to kill an old woman, a Titular Councillor’s wife, who lent money on interest” (qtd. in Gibian 477). Raskolnikov’s maniacal outburst does not seem to end with the chilling execution of a woman who could not possibly defend herself against his physical might. Finding it necessary, he chops down her sister too! In one of his monologues Raskolnikov states: “If it had all really been done deliberately and not idiotically, if I really had a certain and definite object, how is it that I did not even glance into the purse... Then why have I undergone these agonies?” (Dostoevsky 205). To paraphrase the emotional rhetoric of Raskolnikov, he is raising a fundamental question: “why did I kill those two women?” A question that finds its expression in several of Raskolnikov’s soliloquies, but remains unanswered or continues to provide new and multifarious answers, making it extremely perplexing for readers.

The singularity of the novel emerges from the perpetual and bewildering indeterminacy on the part of the murderer regarding the cause of the murder he had committed. Critics have been

vehemently arguing that Raskolnikov, striding the path of salvation laid down by his love Sonia, confesses and accepts his crime towards the end of the novel. They have also reiterated that, realizing the ferocity and cold-bloodedness of the act of violence he had inflicted on two women, he leads a life soaked in remorse and repentance behind bars. During the course of analysis, this paper intends to problematize this observation by posing a question: “Did Raskolnikov repent?”

Dostoevsky has been observed and even scrutinized by critics and readers from a wide variety of angles, but it is desirable to have newer, viable modes of thinking to comprehend the world of perplexities and nuances offered by his texts. Dostoevsky and his characters continue to surprise literary enthusiasts as every act of rereading seems to offer a breathtakingly fresh string of challenging perspectives to the reader. As Colebrook observes in his seminal work, “abstract thinking of universals, such as truth, justice, freedom, right, [angles from which a vast majority of critics read Dostoevsky’s texts] cannot answer the questions required of critical or creative thinking in the movement of our times” (6).

Theoretical Framework

This paper intends to approach the novel *Crime and Punishment* using the theoretical framework developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. It aims to provide critical insights into the character of Raskolnikov and the novel. One of the central concerns of the paper lies in exploring the idea of “crime” developed by Dostoevsky through Raskolnikov. It is possible to problematize the rationale behind the choice of a Marxist thinker in delineating what Dostoevsky himself calls a “psychological account of a crime” (qtd. in Gibian 477). Deleuze is relevant for “at the heart of all Deleuze’s thought is his insistence that our relation to the world is dynamic, not just because our ideas about the world change, nor because the world is a thing that goes through change. Life itself is constant change and creation” (Colebrook 51). In order to study a text that deals with a character who undergoes constant and perplexing psychological changes “we need... a philosophy that works with change rather than in opposition to it” (Colebrook 7). The theoretical underpinnings of the argument lie in the notion of “rhizome.” The concept of “rhizome” was formulated by Deleuze and Guattari in their monumental work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. A rhizome is a subterranean stem which is different from roots and radicles. It is a structure in which each point is necessarily connected to each other, in a way which permits no location to become a beginning or an end. For those people who believe in the notion of “metaphysics of presence” or the “arborescent” perception of life, the rhizome would be a difficult idea to internalize, for “there are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree or root. There are only lines” (*Thousand* 6).

The rhizome ceases to maintain the binary of the subject or the self and the object or the other, thus affirming the Derridean deconstruction of the binary logic. The rhizome, in the Deleuzian frame of thinking, needs to be understood as a prototype for social and political networks and relations that shape the lives of social agents. Deleuzian conception of the rhizome is modelled on the botanical sense in which the word is traditionally used. The term rhizome points to a system where any point of the root submerged deep in the soil could be a potential source of origin for a new sprouting. It represents a world of potentials infinitely deferred. Underlying its etymological roots, rhizome in the philosophical sense represents an intricate web of connections that could not be reduced to a point of origin. It jeopardises the cultural desire to

identify a sense of chronology in the apparently random events that mark the everyday social spaces. To put it alternatively, Deleuzian rhizome conceives culture in general and social acts in particular as a myriad field of inexhaustible affinities and possibilities with none reserving the capacity to claim centrality or origin. To quote Deleuze, rhizome “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, inter-beings...” (*Thousand* 23).

Dostoevsky’s text could not be reduced to a mere fictional account of an act of crime committed by a man whose conscience is marred by momentary psychic aberrations and the inevitable trail of guilt and punishments he receives. On the contrary, *Crime and Punishment* represents the tale of Raskolnikov, an agent in the social field, forming unconscious affinities to discourses that structure the very foundation of his capacity to feel and conceptualise. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky creates a textual space where ideas enter into perennial confrontation with other ideas forming a plot that never resolves itself. Bakhtin goes on to argue: “What unfolds... is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather, a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (6). Victor Terra appears to agree with Bakhtin when he observes that “Dostoevsky’s heroes may be perceived as ideas incarnated and his plots as conflicts of [these] ideas” (6). If a perusal of the entire body of criticism on *Crime and Punishment* is attempted, one would certainly be appalled by the sheer lack of noteworthy attempts to study the manifestation of divergent and, at times, mutually contradictory ideas in the textual space.

Raskolnikov, in the later part of the novel, becomes deeply contemplative of the murder he committed in the first part of the novel. Raskolnikov decides to confess his “crime” to Sonia, his love. He begins by stating that he murdered “for plunder.” But when Sonia cries: “You were hungry! It was to help your mother? Yes?” He responds: “No.... I was not so hungry.... I certainly did want to help my mother, but that is not the real thing” (Dostoevsky 330). A little later he confesses that he wanted to be a Napoleon: “I only wanted to have the daring...” and that is why he killed them (331). Yet, later he claims that his desire to be Napoleon is “all nonsense” (331). This indeterminacy lingers around Raskolnikov. He commits the murder, but does not know the reason. Both Raskolnikov and the reader are trapped in a rhizome where an actual beginning or source can never be located.

As stated above a rhizome does not have a beginning or end. All the explanation put forward by Raskolnikov could be the source or cause of the murder, but paradoxically none of them are the actual causes. In such a condition, one of the productive ways to comprehend the psychological process of Raskolnikov is to have a rhizomatic view of life and society, where the question of actual cause of the murder does not arise, for a rhizome is fundamentally a negation of the notion of “origin.” Raskolnikov was punished because he murdered two people. The society, the law and the judiciary locate the “origin” of the crime in Raskolnikov, the individual.

It would be apt to recall Bakhtin and Terra’s observation that Dostoevsky’s heroes are “ideas incarnate” in this context. Ideas can never have its origin in an individual, it is, on the contrary, the product of the discourse in which the individual lives. There are innumerable factors that influence the process of decision making. Personal accountability, including individual morals, emotions and perception of right and wrong originate never in an individual but they are the products of the society or discourse. Each and every individual in a particular society can be identified as the “originary” point of a particular thought or idea, but paradoxically an

individual can never be held solely responsible for a particular idea or concept since it does not originate from an individual. In Deleuzian conception, the whole of the society and mankind, thus, form a giant rhizome, where individuals are forced by discourse to attain the unattainable “origin,” a search that ignites the existential angst. Glimpses of this rhizomatic vision could be seen in Russian radical thinkers of early and middle eighteenth century. One of them is Robert Owen who presented an alternative conception of ‘crime’ and ‘punishment.’ Owen presents the idea that the act of crime could not be located in the individual who seems to commit it, on the contrary, every act of crime must be understood as a direct and unmediated consequence of the network of hierarchies and vectors of power ingrained in the foundational organisational matrix of the society itself. Owen wrote, the “poor and uneducated profligate among the working classes... are now trained to commit crimes...Withdraw these circumstances which tend to create crime in the human character, and crime will not be created” (Peace 122). It became habitual in the 1860s, in Russia, to conceptualise an individual’s behavioural disposition and propensity for social action rather categorically as a direct outcome of the social space in which these individuals find themselves, though not always out of sheer will. Dobrolyubov stated that “any crime is not a consequence of man’s nature, but a consequence of the abnormal relationship to society in which he is placed” (Peace 122). It appears that Dostoevsky approves such radical ideas of his contemporaries.

Discussion

Raskolnikov explains to Sonia, at first, that he murdered a pawnbroker because, to him, she personifies systemic poverty. This idea does not have its source in Raskolnikov. Both the reader and Raskolnikov overhear a discussion on similar lines that unfolds between a student and an officer. The conversation reaches a heated point at which the student states: “I could rob and murder that damned old woman and I assure you I would not have a twinge of conscience.... This old woman’s money... could beget a hundred, a thousand, good deeds and fresh starts. For one life thousands of lives saved from ruin” (197). Interestingly, even the student and the officer are not the originators of this concept. A.D. Nuttall discusses the nineteenth century “Russian Utilitarian context of morality” in the work *Crime and Punishment: Murder as Philosophic Experiment*. In accordance with this notion of morality, individual actions are motivated and, at times, orchestrated by the social networks which enframe them. It, therefore, becomes possible and necessary to atone acts of crime for these are not born out of the evil intentions of a pathological subject, but a manifestation of the systems that embed them. The “murder of a thousand people can be justified if it prevents the murder of a thousand and one (other) people” (Nuttall 27). If we go by the first explanation of the murder by Raskolnikov, he cannot be morally held responsible for the murder, because he was following the dictates of the utilitarian context of morality and was able to free those who owe her money. Chernyshevsky observes that “the interests of mankind in general stood higher than the advantage of an individual nation, the general interest of a whole nation stood higher than the advantage of a single class, and the interest of a numerous class stood higher than that of a numerically inconsiderable group” (qtd. in Peace 128). Dostoevsky’s student in part one of *Crime and Punishment* believes in the endorsement of the interests of the many at the expense of the pawnbroker and may be “expressed simply and indisputably in the form of an equation: ‘What do you think, wouldn’t one tiny little crime be cancelled out by thousands of good deeds? For one life—thousands of

lives, saved from rotting and decay. One death and a hundred lives in exchange” (qtd. in Peace 128). It is not the intention of the paper to make value judgments on the influence of these ideas on the psyche of the individuals based on the binary logic of good and bad.

During Raskolnikov’s first visit to Porfiry, Razumikhin makes a reference to an intense deliberation that had taken place the night before, in which someone had expressed the view that “crime is a protest against the abnormality of the social order—and only that, and nothing more, and no other causes are admitted,” a perception that all crimes would ebb away once society was organized normally (Peace 124). It is an opinion which even Porfiry seems to ratify: “‘environment accounts for a great deal in crime; I can assure you of that’” (Dostoevsky 461). Derek Offord observes in “*Crime and Punishment and Contemporary Radical Thought:*” “When Razumikhin asks him whether ‘environment’ could be said to explain the seduction of a ten-year-old girl by a forty-year-old man, he replies ‘with surprising gravity’.... ‘Well, in a strict sense it very probably is environment,’ even a crime committed against a little girl may very well be explained by ‘environment’” (125).

The dream Raskolnikov sees the night before he commits the murder could be cited as one of the best instances where one finds the logic of “environment” worked out wonderfully well. Most of the critics agree that it was that dream which forced Raskolnikov to act immediately. In his dream Raskolnikov sees a peasant who kills a mare. In the dream he is seven years old and is with his father on the outskirts of their town. He sees a mare, very thin and old and clearly incapable of pulling a cartload full of people. The owner is insensitive to the plight of the mare: “The mare staggers...is about to try pulling again, but the bar came down full force on her back. She falls to the ground as though all four legs had been knocked out from under her at once” (56). Little Raskolnikov tries his best to attack the owner of the mare but in vain. The manifest content, the part of the dream that Raskolnikov remembers appears to have no connection with the “crime” he had committed. But the latent content of the dream deserves serious attention. As the dream tells clearly, this urge or desire to eliminate a thing which is of no practical use, cannot have originated in Raskolnikov’s psyche. It is the discourse of the nineteenth century Russian utilitarianism that seemingly works through Raskolnikov. The little Raskolnikov of the dream finds it unbearable to witness such an act. But he had to, though painfully, internalize that discourse. It could be argued that it was not Raskolnikov who committed the crime, but the then existing utilitarian discourse, if one believes, could be the second explanation for the murder.

The novel provides a rhizomatic situation where the actual reason for the murder of the pawnbroker escapes even the murderer. It becomes even more problematic when one understands that Raskolnikov, though he is the person who committed the murder, could not be punished. Leo Tolstoy’s words become relevant here: “the mainspring which activates all human life lies not in human beings’ moving their arms, legs, and backs, but in their consciousness. In order for a human being to do something it is first necessary for a certain change to take place in his consciousness. This change which defines all subsequent actions of that person, is always minute and imperceptible” (qtd. in Gibian 487). One may find Raskolnikov as a murderer who deserves severe punishment for the crime he has committed. One could also see him as a visible manifestation of an idea implanted in the unconscious. What makes that change happen is the invisible, “hardly-at-all” change in the conscience for which the entire humanity is responsible to a large extent. The punishment of Raskolnikov proves once again that we see only the tip

and miss the ice-berg completely.

The role of the third person narrator in the novel appears to be crucial. The narrator makes no judgments regarding the “crime” of Raskolnikov. It could be assumed that the narrator has clear insights into the working of the society, its perception of crime, at the same time has an understanding of Raskolnikov’s psyche and his notion of crime. But what makes the narrator unique is the possession of a rhizomatic understanding of the situation or life in general. It could well be argued that such a rhizomatic notion prevents the narrator from making final judgments regarding Raskolnikov’s act. The narrator understands that the “crime” which Raskolnikov is accused of can never be located in its entirety in Raskolnikov alone, but the germinal seeds of the “crime” can be identified in each and every individual who inhabits the discourse in which, like every other individual, Raskolnikov is entrapped.

Another area which most critics have studied and commended upon is the last part of the novel where Raskolnikov repents over his murder. Derek Offord makes the observation that “it is resurrection of the spiritual side of Raskolnikov’s being which offers him his only hope of salvation after he has taken other lives” (Peace 120). Like Offord many critics and readers share this opinion. A scrutiny of the last part of the novel together with some of the interesting concepts of Deleuze may help the reader to disagree with the generally accepted observation that Raskolnikov undergoes a fathomless psychological change and eventually he shows signs of repentance.

Raskolnikov spends almost a month after the murder before he eventually declares that he is a murderer. Until Raskolnikov volunteered to carry out what Judith Butler would call the “performative” act, he was not troubled by any sense of suspicion against him: “He ends by being forced, even if he should perish in jail, to rejoin people” (Gibian 457). The significant question is not whether he is guilty or not, but his decision to accept crime when nothing could prove his involvement in the crime. This strange state of existence of Raskolnikov can be a situation tantamount to the Deleuzian notion of “territory.” Deleuze holds that one cannot survive in the world without a territory, because the ‘being’ of any “natural body” depends primarily on its ability to locate a territory. He goes on to claim that “there must always be a grid in place, even if the grid is insanity, schizophrenia, or nonsense” (*Towards* 27). The act of murder seems to have deterritorialized him from the territory of the normal citizen. His psychological trauma is not caused by the fact that he has committed a murder. He does not even care to think about the murdered. The death of those two women does not occupy any space in the conceptual map of Raskolnikov. On the other hand, what seems to weigh him down is an immediate and overwhelming experience of loneliness and disconnectedness that followed the act of crime.

This observation becomes even more interesting when we understand that Raskolnikov’s repentance is not an “original,” but a mere mask worn by him to get reterritorialized to the territory of the normal. Denis Zhernokleyev shares a similar thought in “On the Absence of Ethics in Dostoevsky.” Zhernokleyev concludes that Dostoevsky’s characters, particularly Raskolnikov, are wearing “sorrowful masks” and “their confessional outpourings can rarely be trusted” (92). Deborah Martinsen in “Shame and Guilt in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,” further validates this claim. Martinsen goes on to argue that “at the end of Part 6, Raskolnikov finally confesses his crime – an important acknowledgement of guilt, but he does not signal repentance, which is critical for a guilt script, until the end” (43). Raskolnikov

was not experiencing a genuine sense of repentance, on the other hand, he was pretending to be guilty and trying to find a socially agreeable territory to belong. As Deleuze maintains, acts of “deterritorialization” could not exist independently or permanently. Every attempt to exit the ‘territory’ would be met with an immediate and no-negotiable entry into a new ‘territory’ with rigid rules of inclusion. Deleuze describes this process as “reterritorialization” (*Towards* 27). Raskolnikov reterritorializes himself from the territory of a murderer to that of a devotee who repents over his crime, not because God gives him revelation or because he genuinely repents, but because he wants to be part of the normal world where he can meet Sonia. Sonia then is a symbolic representation of the territory of normalcy that Raskolnikov is forced to belong to. In Deleuzian terminology, she belongs to that force which restricts or structures the movements or flows of a given society. Deleuze argues, society is caught between two poles of production: paranoia and schizophrenia. Schizophrenia describes the dissolution of highly coded social structures and a disposition toward unleashed social flows. Paranoia, on the other hand, describes the social urge to contain and project the infinite flows of life in a unified, predictable and premediated form. Paranoia operates as an unconscious mechanism to constrain and channelise social flows by infusing them in particular modes of semantic contingents and behavioural requirements. In the words of Holland, paranoia manifests upon “an absolute system of belief...permanently fixed and exhaustively defined by a supreme authority, figurehead, or god” (3). Dostoevsky’s fictional space is loaded with conformists and paranoids. Sonia could be cited as one of the best examples of paranoids. She not only literally and psychologically forces Raskolnikov to accept that his act was an act of crime but also makes him wear a mask of repentance so as to lead a “normal” life. Paranoids do not allow people to be different, for the “other” is always difficult to deal with.

Conclusion

The concluding remarks of Offord in his essay “*Crime and Punishment* and Contemporary Radical Thought,” could stand well in place here:

“Dostoevsky’s adherence to the new radical *Weltanschauung* had on the whole become clear by the time he came to write *Crime and Punishment* in 1865. Most importantly, it was probably mainly out of a desire to state or at least to clarify these objections that Dostoevsky now raised numerous important questions. Is man’s behaviour determined by circumstances outside his control? Is he bound, if placed in certain conditions, to commit crime? Should criminals be considered blameless for their actions? Is it unjust that criminals should suffer punishment? Is the individual unimportant by comparison with the larger group to which he belongs?” (Peace 143)

The seemingly lesser important conversations and images used by Dostoevsky are replete with intense possibilities of signification. An understanding of Dostoevsky and his positions on socio-political issues requires a radically divergent method of engaging with the writer and the text. This paper that has focused on Deleuzian concepts of rhizome and paranoia in *Crime and Punishment* is only one among the several possible ways of approaching Dostoevsky and his text.

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