



**Knowledgeable Research –Vol.01, No.05, December 2022**

Web: <http://www.knowledgeableresearch.com/>

**Motives and Symbols in Fyodor Dostoyevsky *Crime and Punishment*: An Overview**

**<sup>1</sup>Dr Rajshree Ranawat and <sup>2</sup>Harsh Sandu**

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor and <sup>2</sup>Research scholar

Department of English, Jai Narin Vyas University, Jodhpur

Email: [rajshree197808@rediffmail.com](mailto:rajshree197808@rediffmail.com)

\*\*\*\*\*

**Abstract**

*This research article aims to explore the major motives of crime and the use of various symbols in the most celebrated novel Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Motives like alienation, nihilism, utilitarianism and the idea of Superman are explored in this article along with the significance of major symbols like the city of St. Petersburg, dreams, the cross and the colour yellow. This research article explores the various facets, ideas and thoughts of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's philosophy of life, his understanding of suffering, religious beliefs and views on crime and punishment.*

**Keywords:** *crime, punishment, motives, symbols, alienation, nihilism, symbolism, suffering.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**“...aware of the inextricable bond between suffering and providence: the sufferer always raises his eyes toward Heaven, where God always sits in silence.”**

**(Thomas A. Idinopulos)**

## **Introduction**

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky was a 19th-century novelist from Russia. Many a great critic regards him as one of the finest scholars the literary universe has ever produced. His works had a great and everlasting impression on the philosophical development and fiction writing of the 20th century. His works often feature great characters with very unusual as well as bizarre mental states. His works show an extraordinary grip over human psychology and profoundly deep investigations into the socio-political and spiritual conditions of his country Russia during his time. Dostoyevsky was highly influenced by two major philosophies of Orthodox Christianity and Utopian Socialism. A closer look at his oeuvre manifests the significance he devotes to human values and social relevance to Christian love. Many of his well-known works are prophetic, serving as forerunners of contemporary thoughts as well as concerns. Dostoyevsky's country was going through political turmoil and social dilemma during the era of his literary span but Dostoyevsky emerged victorious over his despair by his sheer belief in the Christian faith. He framed his perception of the world through literary parameters, especially the works of contemporary French authors, with whom he studied. He assimilated in his works real-life crime incidents which he read in the newspapers. From Balzac, he learned how class and character interact to form a complex whole, and from Victor Hugo, he received the idea of romantic idealism in the service of social justice. The novel *Crime and Punishment* is about Raskolnikov and the idealistic universe which he has crafted, and also it provides an insight into his thoughts both before and after he kills an elderly pawnbroker. Dostoyevsky, in his letter to Mikhail Katkov regarding *Crime and Punishment*, described it as a piece of psychological report detailing a crime perpetrated by a young guy who was dismissed from a university. He is of petit bourgeois extraction and lives in extreme poverty. Raskolnikov is portrayed by Dostoyevsky as a handsome

and intelligent young man whose obsession with various theories proposed by great names like Napoleon, Hegel and Nietzsche is evident in this novel. He applied these theories in his life before thoroughly examining them, and he committed the heinous crime of murdering an elderly woman pawnbroker. Ultimately, his idealistic thoughts led him to a terrible suffering

### **The novel *Crime and Punishment***

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) is considered as one of the best crime fiction of not only Russian but the all-time world Literature. *Crime and Punishment* was first published in the year 1866 in a literary Journal named "*The Russian Messenger*". Joseph Frank considers *Crime and Punishment* as frontrunner of Dostoevsky's great novels in which his genius can be observed in its purest form. Dostoevsky produced a work whose timeliness increases rather than diminishes with the years, and whose artistic power has rather been scarcely matched since it was published for the first time in the year 1866. This novel is about a young man named Rodion Raskolnikov who lives in the city of St. Petersburg in Russia. In this novel Raskolnikov commits a murder and unlike most crime novels we come to know this fact from the very beginning of the novel. The novel is about Raskolnikov and the idealistic universe that he has crafted for himself. The novel offers an insight into the mind of Raskolnikov before and after committing the murder of an old pawnbroker. Dostoevsky describes Raskolnikov as an attractive and young intelligent man who is obsessed by several theories of extraordinary characters like Napoleon, Hegel, and Nietzsche and applies them before completely examining them and committing the heinous crime of murdering an old lady pawnbroker. Such idealistic thoughts at last lead him towards horrible suffering. The novel deals with a number of motives and symbols, each contributing substantially to the theme of the work. We analyse below some of the major motives and symbols employed by the author in the novel *Crime and Punishment*

## **MOTIVES:**

*Crime and Punishment* represents a society compartmentalised into haves and have-nots. It explores the inhumanity done by man to man. The novel depicts the harsh and inhuman society to the rank and file. The novel does not show any ray of hope but illustrates how suffering and religious belief can be of help. The author delves into various motives to validate his belief

### **1. ALIENATION:**

Raskolnikov feels he is superior to other people in his surroundings. Once he commits the crime he feels alienated from society because of the guilt of the murder. And because of this guilt he almost gets mad. Only after confessing his crime and serving hard punishment in Siberia, he can relate to society. We are forced to think that the only purpose of the crime is to serve as a catalyst for Raskolnikov to confront his despair and his guilt. It is said that by devoting very few pages to the imprisonment that happens only in the epilogue of the novel, Dostoevsky wants to convey that it is not the actual punishment that is scary but the anxiety of waiting for punishment. This was actually experienced firsthand by Dostoevsky when he was imprisoned on charges of illegally selling pamphlets. He was punished with a death sentence but at the last moment, he was told that his death sentence was not to be carried out so he was anxious about being hanged. Therefore this sentiment comes through in the fear of Raskolnikov.

In the novel, Raskolnikov has alienated himself from his family and the society. Although there are many factors accountable for his alienation from the rest of the world but the main reason for this alienation is the narcissistic nature of the protagonist. At the starting of the novel Raskolnikov always tries to avoid making connections with other people around him. He ignores and avoids his family, he hasn't talked to her mother for a long time nor has he remained in

contact with his sister. He tries to avoid his landlady so that he can escape from paying the rent and hearing her nagging about him not paying the rent. The reason for Raskolnikov's isolation lies in his belief that everyone around him is inferior to him. He pays no heed to what is happening around him except one time when he went to a bar and overheard two men speaking that the world would be a much better place without Alyona who is the pawnbroker. This one unusual incident ultimately proves to destroy all his misconceptions. The theme of alienation is quite relevant even in today's time. People grapple with alienation even today. Modern man is more alienated than his counterparts a century ago. The question is why this alienation is happening? And the answer is that modern man has become more isolated because of globalisation. It is one of the main reasons for alienation for modern man. A modern man doesn't even know his neighbours. He has no acknowledgement of the person sitting or standing next to him. In modern times the way people react on the site of a road accident is a scathing example of alienation. A man feels no sympathy or empathy for his fellow human being. Another reason for alienation is the bloated sense of self-ego. People think that they are very important so they don't care about the feelings of other people

## **2. NIHILISM:**

The word 'Nihilism' is derived from the Latin word nihil, which means 'nothing'. A philosophy or collection of philosophical viewpoints, known as nihilism opposes widely acknowledged or essential facets of human life, including morality, values, knowledge, objective truth, and meaning. Diverse nihilist viewpoints assert that some entities either do not exist or are worthless or futile, that existence has no purpose that human ideals are void, or that knowledge is unattainable. In the early years of Tsar Alexander II's reign in 19th-century Russia, a philosophy of moral and epistemological skepticism gave rise to nihilism. Friedrich Nietzsche is credited

with coining the phrase to define the breakdown of conventional morality in Western culture. Many Russian nihilists believed that violence was the only way to achieve political change. After Dostoevsky's release from the prison of Siberia, he spent several years in the military, which caused him to shift his political ideologies from the youthful Western philosophies such as nihilism and materialism. Raskolnikov's act of murdering the old pawnbroker lucidly demonstrates his nihilism, as he believes that killing her would benefit society, therefore he tries to justify his crime through this statement. Raskolnikov represents nihilism radically. Generally, nihilists do not care about the thoughts, feelings and lives of other people. Besides killing the old pawnbroker, he also kills an innocent, pregnant woman as well. Although he kills her only because she is an unexpected witness of the event of his murdering the pawnbroker, Raskolnikov doesn't even hesitate even for a second before murdering a pregnant lady in cold blood. *Crime and punishment* can be perceived as a social commentary attacking the concept of nihilism. Raskolnikov's inconsistent behaviour and failure to stick to his morals clearly show Dostoevsky's intentions of discrediting nihilism.

### **3. UTILITARIANISM:**

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill were two English philosophers and economists who formulated the notion of utilitarianism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. According to this theory, a course of behaviour is morally correct if it tends to advance happiness or pleasure and immoral if it tends to develop despair or suffering. An ethical philosophy called utilitarianism establishes morality by emphasizing results. It's consequentialism in a form. According to the theory of utilitarianism, the decisions that will result in the most beneficial form for the most number of people are the righteous on the moral parameters. In the book *Crime and Punishment*, one of the main reasons for the murder is utilitarianism. The

mindset that elevates the killer to the role of hero is fostered by utilitarianism. The old pawnbroker, in Raskolnikov's opinion, is a shame.

#### **4. THE IDEA OF THE SUPERMAN :**

The idea of Superman was developed by the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Nietzsche says that now instead of God there should be a man who creates new values in an ever-routed, ever-changing world. He says that the superman should reject external notions of good and evil and he should create his values so he says that this is a parallel extension of God. But there is a danger lurking there which is very clear that a Superman can become a 'Megalomaniad'. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov considers himself a superman far superior to other people. This misconception of Raskolnikov compels him to kill the pawnbroker because he thinks the old lady is like an insect against a mighty Superman of his calibre. He thinks he is doing a favour to society by eliminating an element which is not useful to society. But through the development of the novel Raskolnikov starts coming out of this misconception. After committing the murder his subconscious pricks him and eventually, he has to get down to the level of a normal human being from that of a superman to attain peace of mind. So with this one argument, the whole idea of Superman is rejected by Dostoevsky.

#### **Major Symbols in *Crime and Punishment*:**

##### **CITY:**

The city is depicted as a nightmare by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The city is full of dirt and squalor in the novel, drunkards sprawl in the streets even in the daytime. Hundreds of people are jammed into little buildings all the time. The poverty and squalor that the city of St.Petersburg

manifested, serve a told-fold purpose in the novel. First, it shows the social inequalities of the time, it shows the social conditions that force people like Sonia into prostitution. It also shows social compulsions that make people like Rodion Raskolnikov commit a heinous murder. There is a social inequality that Luzhin is rich while Raskolnikov is poor but ironically Raskolnikov is more intelligent than Luzhin so along with focusing on such social inequalities the city also serves to symbolize Raskolnikov's own warped and deceived mind. So Raskolnikov cannot escape from his chaotic mind and also cannot escape the chaotic city of St. Petersburg. It is very significant to note that only when our protagonist moves out of St. Petersburg and goes to serve his punishment in a prison in a small town like Siberia then he ultimately acquires peace of mind therefore we know the city is a nightmare and to some extent it also serves as a motif for Raskolnikov to murder the pawnbroker.

#### **DREAMS:**

Raskolnikov has many dreams in the course of the novel and there are two very significant dreams. One occurs just before he commits the murder and that dream is an incident actually that he had witnessed when he was a child and that incident was a mayor being whipped by several people. In this dream, he also sees a young boy who is trying to help the mayor and his father is pulling him away. This is a very brutal and violent dream; this indicates how cruel the very act of murder was. Raskolnikov is able to commit the murder while the cruelty of the act and this brutality of the act is evident to his subconscious mind but Raskolnikov does not accept this. The second dream occurs when Raskolnikov is in prison. The dream is of a virus that has engulfed the entire country and this virus makes people think that they are the sole possessors of truth and so because they think they are right, they think the other people are wrong so this leads to bloodshed and finally everyone is killed. This dream is an indication to the new political and



intellectual ideas. Fyodor Dostoevsky seems to suggest that all these ideas will make people think that they are superior to everyone else so the whole society will be annihilated.

### **THE CROSS :**

Raskolnikov is given a Christian cross by Sonia when he goes to meet her just before confessing to the crime. The cross has always been a symbol of Christian redemption and resurrection. So the act of giving a cross by Sonia indicates her willingness to put Raskolnikov on the path of redemption and this ultimately works as well. The act of giving the cross to Raskolnikov also indicates that by accepting the cross, he starts believing in God and accepts the superiority of God above himself and with this realisation, his notion of considering himself a Superman gets disillusioned because now he accepts that there is someone above him, someone more powerful than him. The acceptance of God destroys the nihilistic mindset of Raskolnikov and finally, he starts proceeding on the right path to attain his inner peace.

### **COLOUR YELLOW :**

The colour yellow has a great symbolic value throughout the novel. For example, Sonia has a yellow ticket to practice prostitution and this yellow ticket is indicative of her despair and of the very desperation that she encounters and experiences. Furthermore is the garret of Raskolnikov. The walls of his garret are yellow in colour and are symbolic of his sickly and criminal mind. The walls of the pawnbroker's house are also yellow and this indicates the crime that is about to take place.

## CONCLUSION:

Dostoevsky's most notorious protagonist Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is a bag of contradictions. He doesn't know what he wants and why he has committed murders. Initially, he plans to elevate himself from poverty but he keeps talking about achieving great things like Napoleon did or perhaps his motivation was to prove that he was extraordinary and better than others. Before committing the murders his mindset is clear but after the incident, he constantly battles internally whether to confess or not. If he knew himself better, he wouldn't have committed the murders in the first place. If Raskolnikov knew himself, he would have sought help before he committed the murders. A close analysis of some of the major motifs and symbols employed by Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* reflects that he approached the concept of suffering in a different manner than the church. The novel is a kind of critique of the times of Dostoevsky and the moral values it preached and practised. Every motif and symbol adds to the myriad themes employed by Dostoevsky. The moral and philosophical themes of the novel have greatly influenced and inspired Camus, Nietzsche, Freud and Jean-Paul- Sartre. *Crime and Punishment* is considered one of the literary classics. The novel delves deep into the uncharted terrains of the human psyche, the concept of crime, guilt, and suffering, in such a lucid and compelling manner that it transcends the barriers of the literary world and age and is relevant even today invigorating the concepts of philosophy and psychology.

## Works Cited:

- Abraham, M. H. *A Glossary of Literacy Terms*. 7th edition, Harcourt College Pub., 2007.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Penguin Popular Classics, 1997.

- "Fyodor Dostoyevsky." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/biography/Fyodor-Dostoyevsky](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Fyodor-Dostoyevsky). Accessed on 16 September 2024.
- Moser, Charles S., editor. *Cambridge History of Russian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Miller, Robin Feuer, editor. *Critical Essays on Dostoevsky*. G. K. Hall, 1986.
- Idinopulos, Thomas A. "The Mystery of Suffering in the Art of Dostoevsky, Camus, Wiesel, and Grünewald." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43, no. 1 1975, pp. 51-61. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1460734>. Accessed 25 September 2024.
- Wasiolek, Edward, editor. *Crime and Punishment and the Critics*. Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1961.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Fyodor Dostoevsky." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor\\_Dostoevsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoevsky). Accessed on 22 September 2024.