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CRIME AND THE PSYCHICAL LABYRINTH: DECODING ALCOHOLISM IN DOSTOEVSKY'S CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

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Abstract:-

This paper tries to analyze and decode the interface between crime and alcoholism in Fyodor Dostoevsky's celebrated novel *Crime and Punishment.* The novel, which was initially titled *The Drunkards*, revolves around the criminal activities, persecution, and the turbulent psyche of its protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov against the backdrop of nineteenth-century St. Petersburg, and alcoholism played a significant role in determining the actions and the contours of the personality of Raskolnikov and other characters like Semyon Marmeladov. This paper attempts to show how Dostoevsky represented the contemporary problem of drunkenness in Russia, and how it intersected with the problem of criminal activities, by dissecting the performative actions of Raskolnikov and Marmeladov in the novel.

Keywords:-

Alcohol, Dream, Dostoevsky, Human Psyche, Nineteenth Century

Introduction:-

Fyodor Dostoevsky's seminal novel *Crime and Punishment* is both an indictment and enactment of nineteenth-century Russian society. The novel illustrates the pertinent social issues of 1860s St. Petersburg through the psychological journey of its characters. Dostoevsky intended to write this novel to recount the story of a murder committed by an expelled law student, Rodion Raskolnikov. He described it as a "psychological account of a crime" in a letter to M. N. Katkov, in September 1865 (Dostoevsky et al. 476). However, the earlier conception of the plot was different. It had to go through multiple revisions before it emerged as *Crime and Punishment* in 1866. In his letter to A. A. Kraevesky in June 1865, Dostoevsky proposed the title *The Drunkards* for the novel's earlier rendition, which intended to explore the contemporary problem of drunkenness. As Dostoevsky writes, "Not only is the problem examined, but all its ramifications are represented, most of all depictions of families, the bringing up of children under these circumstances…" (Dostoevsky et al. 476). Nevertheless, in the process of writing *Crime and Punishment*, his earlier intention to write *The Drunkards* and his later motivation for writing about Raskolnikov's crime intersected, and two ideas were emphasized: alcoholism and crime, which were manifested through the characters of Marmeladov and Raskolnikov. This paper would attempt to analyze the interface between alcoholism and crime in the Dostoevskian universe, by dissecting these two characters, it also aims at interpreting the nexus between the human psyche and intoxicants.

Alcoholism in Nineteenth-Century Russia:-

Alcoholism has always had a sinister romance with crime, and the co-relation between alcohol and crime has now been established by researchers; excessive consumption of alcohol can jeopardize a person's faculty of judgement and it heightens the risk of aggressive activities. A study conducted by Dr. Ralph S Banay, the chief psychiatrist to New York's Sing Sing Prison in the year 1942, showed that the "principal difference between the alcoholic criminal and non-alcoholic criminal was the high incidence of assault among the former, while in the latter crime against property took precedence" ("Alcoholism and Crime"). The crimes, which are propelled apparently by the lust for money, are influenced largely by the "increased irritability, irascibility and pugnacity of the protracted alcoholic

state" ("Alcoholism and Crime"). The birth of criminology as a discipline and the Prohibition Movement against alcoholism took place almost concurrently, and two facts have influenced the perception of the role played by alcohol in precipitating crime: "First, the rise of modern criminology accompanied movement toward the prohibition of drinking alcoholic beverages. Second, drinking often accompanies criminal incidents either because crimes occur where victims are drinking or because criminals had been drinking at the time they committed crimes" (McCord 129). It is, therefore, important to understand the scenario of alcoholism in nineteenth century Russia, during the times of Dostoevsky, before the modern constraints that have been imposed upon alcoholism emerged.

Alcoholism and crime were widespread social evils in 1860s Russia. When tax monopolies over retail trade and alcohol production were abolished in the Great Russian provinces and the western and southwestern cities, the "free trade" market accelerated alcohol consumption to a tremendous amount. J. Abbott describes drunkenness as "the Achilles' heel of the 1861 reforms" (89-90). As described by Abbott, the enactment of the 1861 legislation launched an alcohol regime in 1863 that allowed "anyone to engage in distilling and wholesale or retail trade upon payment of an alcohol excise and purchase of trading license" (89-90). According to the official data of the State Statistical Committee of the Russian Federation, the consumption of alcohol augmented to "6.2 liters per person per year in European Russia," (Nemtsov et al. 89), which was the highest per capita consumption of alcohol recorded in Tsarist Russia. Russian free trade was based on the principles integral to England's alcohol controls in the early nineteenth century, which aimed at curtailing the pernicious influences of the taxes imposed upon the farmers, the local monopoly over exorbitant prices, and poor standards of liquor production. However, these reforms crippled public order and triggered an "incredible increase of crime" according to the report presented to the Ministry of Internal affairs in 1864 (Abbott 91). Besides, the number of arrests increased to 50000 in 1864 than that of the last few years (69,000 in 1861, 73,000 in 1862, 124,000 in 1863), and police "attributed the rise to increased arrests for drunkenness and other offenses committed under the influence of drink" (Abbott 89). This atmosphere of civil disorder sets the tone of Dostoevsky's literary venture.

Semyon Marmeladov: A Paradoxical Character:-

Semyon Zakharovich Marmeladov is one of the most significant characters of the novel, who illustrates an alcoholic's predicaments in nineteenth-century Russia. His alcohol addiction snowballs into a critical situation for his humble family. He is drawn as an uncouth character, whose "face was bloated with continual drinking and his complexion was yellow, even greenish" (Dostoevsky 9). A. Kosciolek rightly points out that alcohol incites "Mameladov's confession, memories and implements profound feelings of existential crisis from his atrocious realities" (170). The reason behind his addiction, Marmeladov explains to Raskolnikov, was his sudden dismissal from his duty due to "reorganization in service" (Dostoevsky 10), and partly because of his unhappy conjugal life. His failure to negotiate with reality and penury eventually made his daughter Sonya choose prostitution to make ends meet. Moreover, he miserably fails to sympathize with his daughter's suffering, he is oblivious to his wife Katerina's ordeals and does not protest when Lebezyatnikov assaults his wife, saying instead, "My wife, you must understand, is not at all the same thing as myself" (Dostoevsky 10). A husband's responsibility towards his wife is diluted in this self-defeating dialogue. Thus, Richard M. Eastman comments, "Marmeladov is merely a scrap of social refuse, a zero" (145). Christianity allows reasonable drinking, and this becomes his excuse for justifying his suffering and seeking salvation from Providence, "He [God] shall judge all men, and forgive them, the good and the evil" (Dostoevsky 27). He represents the grim underbelly of St. Petersberg, which is teeming with those who are abhorred by the genteel class, like beggars, prostitutes, and drunkards, and who have been alienated from the rhetoric of modernity. Dostoevsky, therefore, sympathizes with the beleaguered Marmeladov family, "…the sentimental theme may be detected in Dostoevsky's treatment of the various members of the Marmeladov family- a subplot that Wasiolek considers "almost a paradigm of the sentimental situation" (Peace 4).

Ironically, Marmeladov acknowledges that his alcohol addiction is reprehensible and obnoxious. His paradoxical approach toward alcohol can be understood through the psychiatric concept called 'instinctive monomania,' formulated by J.E.D. Esquirol: "An individual suffering from monomania, although overall lucid, finds himself subject to an

impulse his reason rejects, which nevertheless turns out to be stronger than his will" (Chaperon 276). Marmeladov's philosophical exhortations, such as "poverty is no crime", "drunkenness is a virtue" and "beggary is vice" make him a Christ-like sagacious figure. He does not feel humiliated about his destitution, however, he abhors beggary, and he befriends alcohol to transcend his poverty and invite a higher dimension of bliss. Alcoholism hiked the mortality rate and debilitated the drunkards' brains and nervous system, which could be connected to his inebriated state before he is mowed down by a carriage. Alcohol, which gave him momentary blissful phases, now acts as his executioner and confirmed his punishment for his domestic nonchalance.

Marmeladov remains a paradoxical figure, who is plagued with guilt, poverty, and addiction, yet he is very logical from his core. However, his self-piteous utterances are not enough to exonerate him; for him, death is the only salvation. Dostoevsky unfolds the horrific consequences of alcohol consumption treating it as a disease through this alcoholic character, it echoes Sikorskii's comment on unbridled alcoholism in Russia, who described the condition as the "disease of our country" (Herlihy 132). His character is, therefore, a force-field of contrapuntal attributes.

Rodion Raskolnikov:- The Alcoholic 'Superman'

Raskolnikov's dream of the killing of an innocent mare by the drunken peasant Mikolka underscores the fact that how alcoholism can unleash the primeval instinct of violence in humans. The Holy Bible categorically distinguishes between drunkenness and restraint associated with alcoholism. The Gospel of John articulates how Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, which was the manifestation of Jesus's glory. However, the scriptures condemn intoxication: "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the spirit" (*Bible Hub*). Therefore, divine intoxication associated with the Holy Spirit stands vertically opposite to the excesses of drunkenness in the novel. Alcohol, an important ingredient of Christian libation, fuels Mikolka's sadism; it assumes both divine and monstrous dimensions. The dream equalizes the God of the Old Testament and Mikolka, the divine and the profane; in Job 1:8, God torments his "servant" Job, similarly, Mikolka also

commodifies and torments the mare, and yells, "She's my property" (Dostoevsky 55). Mikolka projects himself as the sadistic, authoritarian God, and tests the mare's capability to draw a loaded wagon, in a manner analogous to God testing Job's endurance. Therefore, alcohol can obfuscate the moral core, and Mikolka emerges as a narcissistic psychotic, who suffers from a delusion of supremacy and transgresses moral parameters, and tortures lesser beings, just as the Divine Providence showers misery on the humans, as reflected in Earl of Gloucester's speech in *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, they kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare et al. 4.1. 37-38).

Alcohol boosts the neurotransmitter *gamma*-Aminobutyric acid (GABA), which increases non-Rapid Eye Movement (non-REM) sleep frequency, and suppresses REM sleep when dreams occur. With the drop in the blood alcohol level, sleep becomes shallower with frequent waking episodes and triggers REM sleep as vivid dreams and nightmares invade the brain (Lewis). The intoxicated Raskolnikov thus awakens in terror, "as though it was *he* who had been flogged to death" (Laing 108). He witnesses the murder from an innocent boy's perspective and attempts to shield the mare, but the situation is reversed in his imagination and reality, where Alyona Ivanovna, the mare's projection, is murdered by Raskolnikov. This reversal and the juxtaposition of terror, benevolence, belligerence, and innocence underscores the schism in his character, as R.D. Laing argues, "[i]n the modality of his phantasy, *he* is the victim, whereas 'in imagination' and in 'reality' he is the executioner" (108).

Four incidents occur before this vital dream: Raskolnikov visits Alyona's house, he meets the intoxicated Marmeladov; receives his mother Pulkheria Alexandrovna's letter, and encounters a disheveled and intoxicated girl on the streets of St. Petersberg. In the words of Ruth Mortimer, "the four preceding scenes are associated in Raskolnikov's mind by the conscious theme, the state of poverty and degradation into which he has fallen…That they have another, an implicit, connection is evident from the mode of their convergence and translation into the dream of the beaten horse" (108). It is possible to argue that the Russian working classes sought intoxicants to cope with their destitution, a point that Dostoevsky underscores in the novel by showing that those who drink do not derive pleasure from

drinking, merely a kind of deadening of the senses and oblivion from suffering. In Raskolnikov's case, these four incidents, linked and coloured by his sporadic alcoholic binges, trigger the dream, where Raskolnikov returns to his secure childhood, away from his uncertain present. As Pulkheria writes, "Remember, my dear, how, when you were a child and your father was alive…how happy we all were then!" (Dostoevsky 37). The dream is preceded by Pulkheria's comment on God as the Creator and Redeemer, which equates God with the absent father figure in Raskolnikov's life and symbolizes his spiritual and moral vacuum, as he gravitates toward alcoholism and crime. The mare's murder is the moment of anagnorisis, characterized by intense fear and suffering, and it is exacerbated by the dream's atmosphere, "There was not a single tree anywhere…the dust just here was always black" (Dostoevsky 52). The dream is a visual representation of St. Petersburg's unequal and cruel modernity, which effaces Raskolnikov's innocence, and heralds the dawn of experience, as he metamorphoses into the Napoleonic Man or the Extraordinary Man, who has the right to commit a crime and transgress legal boundaries, which is exemplified by his murder of the pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna and her disabled sister Lizaveta.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the echoes of whose concept of the *ubermensch* or the superman could be heard in Raskolnikov's idea of the Extraordinary Man, condemned Christianity and alcohol in a single breath when he described them as "the two great European narcotics" (Woods). Ironically, Raskolnikov selects alcohol, one of the two aforementioned elements loathed by Nietzsche, to dilute his moral core and transcend his decrepit condition; he cancels the effect of one "narcotic" (or Christianity) with the aid of the other. Although the idea of *ubermensch* might be used anachronistically in this context (Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), which first introduced this concept, was published nearly seventeen years after *Crime and Punishment* hit the literary market), it could be argued in light of Nietzsche's theoretical framework that Raskolnikov shows a shift from the Christian values, towards the formulation of a standard value of his own: "[t]he idea of the Ubermensch fills the void left by the death of God…with his Ubermensch, Nietzsche doesn't just want to provide a *replacement* for decaying, unhealthy Christian values; he wants to provide a template for radical *improvement*" (Maden). He tries to replenish the void created by the absent father

figure (the synecdochic representation of the Christian God and the moral universe) and designs that room for "radical improvement," which allows the transgression of ethical or moral boundaries, and he becomes his own determiner of values. Alcohol acts as the catalyst in this transition and becomes the primary tool in the hands of this aspiring superman. The word "improvement" in the present context only serves to represent the shifting points in Raskolnikov's spectrum of morality; whether or not his journey toward the idea of superman is a quest for perfection and improvement, requires critical examination.

Conclusion:-

Dostoevsky exposes the lethal aftermath of accelerating alcoholism in nineteenth-century Russia through a critique of the novel's characters and the milieu. For Razumikhin, Sadovaya street's drunken soldier, and the greatcoat-wearing man, drinking emerges as an obsessional behaviour and it showcases the contemporary consumerist culture. Afrosinyushka, a respectable working woman, tries to commit suicide by jumping into the canal from the Voznesensky Bridge but the police immediately rescue her. She had already tried to hang herself once under an alcoholic spell, "She's drunk herself to ruination, friends, to ruination" (Dostoevsky 164). This suicidal tendency of the alcoholics is also echoed in William Bynum's assertion that during Napoleon's stay in Russia during the winter of 1812, increasing demand for alcohol resulted in "strong emotions of anger and vexation, feelings of sorrow and grief, uncommon physical exertion" (171) in the alcoholics, and triggered dipsomaniac attacks. Such a situation is portrayed in the novel in a newspaper article that Raskolnikov is reading, titled: "Vodka causes Workman's death" (Dostoevsky 153). Katerina Ivanovna's deranged mental faculties stem from *her* obsessive alcoholism. The novel's preoccupation with the theme of violence against women finds expression in the drunkard men's abusive behaviour towards women. Louisa Ivanovna's scandal is also a case of physical abuse and attack on her household property by an alcoholic: "He is taking Karl and in the eye hitting and Henrietta also is he in the eye hitting, and mine cheek five times he is hitting" (Dostoevsky 94). Dostoevsky offers a critique of the inefficiency of St. Petersburg's disciplinary laws, where the drunkards fight with each other and abuse prostitutes outside the brothels. The theme of violence and abuse is echoed in a singer's song that Raskolnikov can

hear: "Oh, my fine and darling bobby, / Do not beat me so unjustly!" (Dostoevsky 151). Russia in 1863 witnessed strict control on the sale of alcohol, however, in 1865, proliferation in the sale happened, leading to the establishment of taverns and pubs, like the Crystal Palace in the novel. The inebriated citizens visiting the brothels, squabbling and abusing the prostitutes, and playing the piano with their feet testify that the Russian jurisdictional machinery was yet to tame the wayward population.

One might argue, that Marmeladov escapes from his harsh reality through a death occasioned by alcoholism, and Raskolnikov's crime ends with his exile in a Siberian penitentiary, where he finds moral regeneration. These events, therefore, commingle with Dostoevsky's sharp critique of the moral and social issues surrounding the rapid increase of alcohol sale and consumption, against the backdrop of St. Peterburg's inequitable social reality with its ever-increasing suicide, murder, and crime rates.

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