Guilt: A Space of Liminality and Dialogism in Dostoevskian Aesthetics

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He with his Thunder: and till then who knew
The force of those dire Arms? Yet not for those
Nor what the Potent Victor in his rage
Can else inflict, do I repent or change,
. . . . . .
What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; th' unconquerable Will
. . . . . .
To bow and sue for grace
With suppliant knee, to deify his power
Who from the terror of his Arm so late
Doubted his Empire, that were low indeed,
That were an ignominy and shame beneath
This downfall; . . . (93-96, 105-106, 111-116)

John Milton apparently had no design to heroise Satan into the Shelleyan Prometheus. However, ever since till this day the presentation of Satan's character by Milton has been unparalleled though controversial. What is it that still makes this presentation unprecedented? Surely, we are not in the Puritan Age and definitely not speaking from England as the central point of reference so, the question of morality, whether Satan is indeed wrong or wronged, is no longer very lucrative in a post-modern futurist era. Yet Milton's Satan lures us repeatedly not only because we can blasphemously identify with him but for a more indispensable aspect – that of perspective. Milton's intention regarding the characters of his epic might have been different from its reception but what he successfully does is to establish Perspectival writing in literature. Satan is no longer a character but transforms into a space of interactions, possibilities and transitions, no longer a dominating presence in the foreground. One can comprehend his feelings of guilt and shame: a portion of his previous self, but at the same time one can also feel his transitioning or 'becoming' his other selves. Milton's Satan, then, may be thought of as a liminal space: liminal because it allows perspective and context, allows interplay of several factors so that both the character and the aesthetics of Milton's epic mutually nourish and embrace each other, abandoning the notion of purity.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is often hailed as the undisputed champion of "the insulted and the injured" much like Milton's Satan. His world is one of crime and punishment, guilt and expiation, God and the Devil. Dostoevsky is intriguing not because he sides with the devil or god, but because he shows the devil in god and god in the devil. Hence, Dmitri Karamazov who is immersed in debauchery is the one who is wronged, guiltless, guileless, is the one before whom the pious saintly priest Zossima reverentially and symbolically prostrated and it is the vile Svidrigailoff who is capable of conquering an idea he always feared, as Raskolnikov broods, "Was the desire to live so difficult to conquer? Did Svidrigailoff, who feared death, surmount it?" (427). The dominant emotion in his novels is guilt and it is on the edifice of guilt that Dostoevsky constructs his aesthetics. This paper proposes that Guilt becomes a liminal, interstitial space in Dostoevsky's aesthetics allowing for the development of both, the emotion as well as the artistry, giving his

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 2022 [88-93]

novels their unique essence. This paper will primarily concentrate on *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* in tracing the formation and consequences of this "third space" which "enables other positions [perspectives] to emerge," as Homi Bhabha explicates in his interview with Jonathan Rutherford (211).

Guilt, in Dostoevsky, is never a conclusive, whole and unalloyed emotion. It is always adulterated by excesses, ambiguities and is not exclusive only to the 'sinful' adults, but 'innocent' children too are equally capable of this intense and complex emotion. Dostoevsky is so pre-occupied with guilt perhaps largely due to his personal circumstances and experiences. Having wished for the death of an abusive father and seeing it actually realized, having shared the inimical savage imprisonment conditions in Siberia alongside hardened criminals, being a part of a brutal and gruelling mock-execution – Dostoevsky could comprehend the unfathomable depths of human emotions, especially that of guilt. Guilt, for Dostoevsky, seems to be a given and inescapable human condition probably more than the Original Sin in Christianity. His views on Christianity or organised religion have always been a nebulous area but the issue of guilt prevails distinctly. Speaking of Christ, Ivan Karamazov, in "The Grand Inquisitor" scene, voices an extremely profound iconoclastic debate:

> Whom hast Thou raised up to Thyself? I swear, man is weaker and baser by nature than Thou has believed him! Can he, can he do what Thou didst? By showing him so much respect, Thou didst, as it were, cease to feel for him, for Thou didst ask far too much from him – Thou who hast loved him more than Thyself! Respecting him less, Thou wouldst have asked less of him. That would have been more like love, for his burden would have been lighter. (261)

Christ's sacrosanct actions are questioned very convincingly but that is an issue of belief, faith, theology and even philosophy therefore relative, subjective and debatable. However, what strikes one as inevitable is the condition of man, his "burden" , his suffering, his guilt is perpetual if not more heightened by the sacrifice of Christ and the sense of guilt seems active on both sides – Christ is, here, guilty of being incapable of loving man as he is unjustly expecting him to rise above his base nature, beyond his ability of comprehension to His stature of love, while man is guilty of misunderstanding and crucifying Christ who loved them so much that he suffered an excruciating death at their hands for their salvation, guilty of being unworthy of Christ's death. Guilt reduces Christ to human fallibility and realizing his unworthiness, his guilt, man is elevated to divine humility. The motives of the actions are secondary, but guilt becomes a necessary threshold upon which agency, activity, transformations, exchange, ambiguities, contradictions, subversions of both parties come into play thereby bringing in perspective, contextualizing and realigning differently, changing the very nature of the aesthetics under consideration. It is from guilt that the whole Dostoevskian aesthetics begins to shape itself.

Crime and Punishment is a work anchored in guilt and it is quite unquestionably presumed that the guilt is felt for the crime committed and punishment is meted out to atone for the crime and overcome the undesirable feeling of guilt. All of this is of course one way to make sense of the novel. Another way might perhaps be to investigate whether the feeling of guilt is directed towards and follows because of the crime, whether the person considers the unpleasant action (to the other characters or the readers) as 'crime' or whether there is 'the' specific crime to which he attributes his sense of guilt, whether this feeling or emotion of guilt is imposed on him ; what occurs within this emotional space and how this space brings about a metamorphosis. In the most obvious instance in *Crime and Punishment*, that of Raskolnikov's intended murder of an old pawnbroker and the unintended murder of her half-sister, one begins to see how guilt works out in Dostoevskian aesthetics. Through most of the novel one witnesses Raskolnikov's nervous anxiety, restlessness, delirious condition, unsettling dreams as his much required 'suffering' and guilt which endear him to the readers. However, the reader is completely bewildered when Raskolnikov confesses to Sonia that he feels no guilt for murdering a parasitic old woman who in

his eyes was more of a 'criminal' than he is. His guilt is of other things. He says at various junctures of his confession: "I longed to dare, and I committed murder. All I wanted was to do some daring thing, Sonia; that was my sole motive!" (330); "I longed to know if I was vermin, like the majority – or Man, in the full acceptance of the word – whether, in fact, I had the power to break through obstacles; if I was a timorous creature, or if I had the right –[to kill]" (331); "Did I really kill the old woman? No, it was myself I killed! – it was myself I have irrevocably ruined!" (332); "He was ashamed before Sonia; he felt he had acted contemptibly towards her."; " What principally humiliated him was that he, Raskolnikov, should be so utterly lost through an error, the consequences of which he must submit to if he wished for a moment of calmness."(426); "He owned to one fault only – his feebleness in confessing;" (427). If scrutinized these utterances certainly have overtones of guilt – guilt of not being worthy enough a man according to his idea of Man, guilt of being a "vermin", guilt of murdering his being, guilt of not being courageous enough to confess, of losing his sanity due to an "error" and guilt of treating Sonia with contempt due to his own weakness and wounded pride. Guilt is all-pervasive, all encompassing but what one also realises are two other significant dimensions. One is the dimension of perspective and context. Raskolnikov never for once repents his deed or suffers from remorse of taking an innocent life and terms it only as a fault, an "error", an "experiment" (332). He says that if he had been able enough to justify and maintain his power he would have been hailed as one of the great men:

> Undoubtedly, many benefactors of humanity, who have not inherited power, but have attained to it, should have been punished for the very first of their steps; but these people prevailed, and are justified, whilst I have not known how to shape my steps; consequently, I was wrong in making the attempt. (427)

This gives one a perspective, a lens through which one looks at Raskolnikov and cannot but treat him with sympathy as a tragic hero, not a diabolical criminal. Raskolnikov himself perceives that his guilt is an imposed one, a constructed one that he does not feel. In her enlightening book, *How Emotions Are Made*, Lisa Feldman posits and observes that the brain constructs emotions, perceptions or rather concepts that are formed by sifting through past experiences and trying to fit the novel information barging at us into one of the already formed concepts to reduce effort and increase utility. Therefore, when novel unknown impressions confront us, we experience "experiential blindness" (26) before we can fit it in and experience the world according to 'our' reality or what she calls "hallucinations" or "simulations":

> Simulations are your brain's guesses of what's happening in the world. In every waking moment, you're faced with ambiguous, noisy information from your eyes, ears, nose, and other sensory organs. Your brain uses your past experiences to construct a hypothesis—the simulation—and compares it to the cacophony arriving from your senses. In this manner, simulation lets your brain impose meaning on the noise, selecting what's relevant and ignoring the rest. (27)

The guilt we impose on Raskolnikov is nothing better than a convenient construction for us to make sense of his consequent suffering. To think in Foucauldian terms the dominant discourse of guilt gets precedence over the peripheral ones. However, it is discourse that also makes marginal utterances like Raskolnikov's idea of guilt or non-guilt possible. His guilt is a moment in time when we experience "experiential blindness" and a moment when we realise the constructedness of reality, that emotions are not universal and that people feel and conceptualise differently even if exposed to the same phenomenon.

This brings us to the second dimension - it is because one has acquired perspective does one begin to view guilt as being an emotional space which makes way for other emotions/concepts to constitute it. Guilt is a liminal space where the transition is still in progress, where the process of 'becoming' is still underway. In feeling guilty Raskolnikov has traces of his prior self which committed a certain deed for which he feels guilty as well as traces of his evolved other self who

acknowledges the trangressive acts hoping for a sort of redemption. It is in this in-between-space that Raskolnikov is actually thrusted into activity, into agency, into the assertion of his own volition as Janko Larvin astutely observes: " . . .what man is after is not "rational" happiness, but the intensity of life he obtains from the affirmation of his will and of his own ego, even if he had to distort the whole of life for such a purpose" (45). This ego or volition cannot be asserted without suffering or guilt. It is in this space that he acts , decides, takes upon himself the task to come out of the mire, to participate in his own 'becoming'. His guilt, we must remember, is not the murder of the pawnbroker but the murder of himself, of his being a "vermin", of not having the courage to either confess his fault or to continue walking on his chosen dignified ideology. Unless he feels the guilt of all of this, he could not have been stirred into the confession he makes to Sonia and the imprisonment he suffers in Siberia which are necessary to his resurrection, to his salvation. This vigorous activity on the protagonist's part, necessitated by the 'third space' of guilt, is essential for mutual and ceaseless construction or development of the plot simultaneously bringing alive the characters – both of which are indispensable to the aesthetic understanding of narratives. A liminal space is also a vague space of ambiguities, contradictions, incoherence and subversion. Raskolnikov's utterances, as mentioned above as well as his other verbal and non-verbal utterances, reveal the contradictions, ambivalence, subversions and incoherence he exhibits. While confessing to Sonia he says his motive was to provide a better life to his mother and sister and come into possession of some money required direly. Soon, he contradicts himself that the sole motive was the longing to "dare". Again, he knows he has behaved contemptibly to Sonia yet he continues to remain peevish and distant to her during his incarceration in Siberia. Previously he thinks that confessing is cowardly but later he says his only fault lay in his "feebleness" to confess. It is also in this phase or space of guilt that he subverts conventions and makes room for the excesses of his motives and ideas. His dreams, deliriums, confessions all manifest the incoherence, or 'rootlessness' if you will, that living in this interstitial space elicits. The issue of ambivalence within this space brings about a significant departure from the way we conventionally understand emotions. For many, emotions are water-tight compartments categorised and named (perpetuated within discourse) meticulously and arduously into rational cabinets though the ones naming them insist on their 'irrational' 'illogical' nature. Here, Dostoevsky shows his genius as a psychologist-artist who builds his entire aesthetics on emotional experiences and brings in through his characters not only a polyphony of voices organically evolving, each having its own validity, with relative non-interference of the author but also demonstrates dialogism within emotions thereby breaking hierarchies, divisions and particularizations, making emotions spaces of plurality. Raskolnikov's guilt is not just a single blob of emotion, rather a complex. There are numerous strands (intercourse and interaction of the several 'Others') of diverse sensations, emotions that constitute his guilt. His guilt is constituted of shame, humiliation, failure, cowardice, anger, conviction, indifference, hope as well as different physiological states of being like dreaming, convulsions, deliriums. He feels all of this because he is continuously pitched against changing contexts, be it social, political or personal.

The Idiot is steeped in guilt. Not only does each character exhibit unique reasons of guilt but each consciousness of guilt itself consists of scissions and multiplicity. Two important characters and a few other minor characters will be discussed to better comprehend this dialogism prevalent within emotions. Afanasy Ivanovitch Totsky, "loved and prized himself, his peace and comfort, above everything in the world, as befits a man of the highest breeding. No destructive, no dubious element could be admitted into that splendid edifice which his whole life had been building up" (38). However, he is a paedophile and sexually abuses an orphaned child of sixteen who grows up to become Nastasya Fillipovna, his mistress. Yet Nastasya was this chaotic "dubious" element in his life, the Medusa who petrifies him with her gaze of ridicule, loathing, spite and erratic calculative behaviour so that he is afraid of her, wants to get rid of her, marry an honourable woman and

maintain his reputation as a charitable man. Again, he does not feel guilt because of how he ruined a child but "might even gratify his vanity and gain glory in a certain circle by means of her" (39). Yet, at Nastasya's twenty-fifth birthday party, Totsky relates an anecdote that reveals his idea of guilt and how his guilt is a polyphony or complex of other emotions and ideas. The episode is about how he railed and abused a vindictive former old neighbour and later learnt that she was infact undergoing the last throes of passing away at the very time he was abusing her and he had walked away not knowing the fact. Then he describes the effect this has on him. He felt guilt and could not overcome it. Along with it fear became associated as he got superstitious and attended her funeral mass. However, with time his guilt only intensifies he declares. He begins to realise the harrowing predicament of the isolated old woman and understands her malicious nature, he reflects philosophically on life and humanity being flies dashed about by fate. Interestingly, he also says that his actions were somebody else's, an Afanasy Ivanovitch that the mature one now seems to abandon and think of as another, his double, "I've long looked at my action as though it had been another man's, I still regret it. So that, I repeat, it seems positively queer to me; for if I were to blame, I was not altogether so." (136) Later he also eases his conscience through charity. So here, we find a fine example of how varied a complex guilt can be. In his case guilt of a worse deed than this is veiled under this narrative through which he tries to be in denial of that perpetual sting that he feels. His guilt involves fear, superstition, the element of time that acquires precedence which controls the intensity of the emotion, philosophical reflection, a splitting of the persona, expiation and ultimately denial. This space becomes a transformative space but is animated with contradictory energies. The other most significant character is of course Prince Myshkin. He is 'the idiot' and is the epitome of selflessness, goodness and infact possesses a keen sense of discernment and articulation unlike an 'idiot'. He is the one who is always suffering (both physically, as he has epilepsy, and mentally) and is almost murdered by his rival, Rogozhin. Yet, he too is guilty. He mutters to himself, "Am I to blame for all this?" (202). Myshkin's guilt is profound and agonizing because he can comprehend and acknowledge it. His guilt is that of unwittingly entering the chaos surrounding Nastasya Fillipova, Ganya and Rogozhin's relationship. Nastasya only loves him because he respects her for who she is. She rejects his marriage proposal, though it would redeem her wretched life, and throws herself recklessly at Rogozhin because she does not want to ruin a child (Myshkin) like she herself once was. Being with Rogozhin was worse than death and she would rather be with him than destroy Myshkin's life. This, Rogozhin knew too well and became the reason he nursed abhorrence towards Myshkin as he says:

> She is afraid of ruining and disgracing you; but I don't matter, she can marry me. . . .She would have drowned herself long ago, if she had not me; that's the truth. She doesn't do that because, perhaps, I am more dreadful than the water." (194-95)

Myshkin soon realizes he is the cause of a lot of suffering, his guilt is his good-ness, honesty, his selflessness at the same time his betrayal, mistrust and indecision that other perspectives bring to light about him. It is because of this liminal space of guilt that Myshkin's character becomes convincing, that allows his 'becoming', that is crucial to the plot progression. It is perhaps imperative to look at a child's guilt as Dostoevsky does not impose 'childhood' on them as adults do and gives children equal dignity and valid perspectives. Ippolit is the eldest consumptive dying illegitimate son of General Ivolgin (who already has a family) and his mistress Marfa Borissovna. Kolya, Ippolit's friend and half-brother, says about him:

> He is frightfully touchy, and I fancied he'd feel ashamed with you because of your coming at such a moment…I am not so much ashamed as he is, anyway, because it's my father but his mother. It does make a difference, for there's no dishonor for the male sex in such a position. But maybe it's only a prejudice that one sex is more privileged than the other in such cases. Ippolit is a splendid fellow, but he is a slave to certain prejudices. (120)

Ippolit's guilt encompasses the universal guilt thrusted on women for being women, his guilt is a space of interaction with the guilt of his mother, his own shame, his invalid condition, his prejudices. It is a complex in which many voices both societal and personal are in dialogue with each other.

Guilt as a liminal space in Dostoevskian aesthetics and as an emotional complex within which dialogism itself is vibrantly functional may be appropriated from Myshkin's own words, "I kept fancying that if I walked straight on, far, far away and reached that line where sky and earth meet, there I should find the key to the mystery, there I should see a new life a thousand times richer and more turbulent than ours." (52) This horizon is the threshold, the space of liminality, of transition, of identity crises and formation, of "turbulence" yet filled with vitality and activity. This is the region of Guilt that "resists any closure or unambiguous expression and fails to produce a 'whole'. It is a consciousness lived constantly on the borders of other consciousnesses" (Robinson).

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