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A FEMINISTIC READING OF DOSTOYEVSKY'S *THE IDIOT*

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ABSTRACT

Dostoyevsky is remembered by the world as a creator of unique characters in his novels which are essentially the novels of psychology. In *The Idiot*, too he follows the track and creates two exceptional characters- Prince Myshkin and Natasya Fillipovna. Though the title suggests it to be the story surrounding the life of Myshkin, a male character, Natasya is the one who dominates the story and lives of other characters including the hero. She is the dominating force who forces one to know more about her and that has been attempted in this research paper.

Keywords: Feminism, religion, psychology.

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In a letter to his niece Sofia Alexandrovna Dostoyevsky writes: "Three weeks ago I attacked another novel, and am working day and night. . . The basic idea is the representation of a truly perfect and noble man" (Dostoyevsky, *Letters* 142). The novel was entitled as *The Idiot* by him. The novel, however, has eluded the grasp of the readers and critics alike who hold varied and divided opinions. With Dostoyevsky, however, it has remained an all time favourite. Writing to a correspondent more than ten years after finishing *The Idiot* remarks: "All those who have spoken of it as my best work have something special in their mental formation that has always struck and pleased me" (qtd. in Frank 577). Sarah Young labels the novel as "perhaps the strongest and most problematic of Dostoyevsky's major fictional work" (1). Dostoyevsky though intends to present a Christ like figure in this novel seems unable to hold the chords of his creation and what Yeats said in one of his poems in some other context, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" holds equally good for *The Idiot*. It is foolishness of the extreme degree to consider that Dostoyevsky did not know what he was doing but it is the beauty of the script which wonderfully wavers from the hero to the heroine and to other major as well as minor characters that one is forced to believe that something is going wrong. The text is a complex one and with every page the creator and the created get more and more entangled making the readers bewildered. As Sarah Young says, "the central story and relationships are sidelined" (1) and the hero gives way to the heroine. To some readers and critics the novel may be cumbersome and complex but it is a valuable text to understand human mind and motives that Briggs states: "Whatever its flaws, this novel became the personal favourite of its author" (75).

While approaching and making his hero grow, Dostoyevsky makes him interact with the female characters that hold a significant position in some or the other way. The objective of this paper is to study the

role of Natasya Fillipovna one of the most significant female characters, in relation to the hero, and offer a critical understanding to her thoughts and acts for a better appreciation of the novel.

Prince Myshkin 'the idiot' of the novel is in the story surrounded by nine female characters who influence his life in some or the other way. Of these women characters, Natasya Fillipovna Barashkov is in the lead while close to her is Aglaia, both who strive for the Prince's affiliation but strangely enough discard him, thus making a true 'idiot' of him. The rest of them play their roles either in making or marring Myshkin.

Critic after critic has been at a loss to formulate the character of Prince Myshkin but equally interesting is the character of Natasya, the heroine of the novel. She has a strange manner of thinking and behaving that eludes all logical arguments. It is not only Prince Myshkin who dominates the story but Natasya Fillipovna too has an equal share of importance, and her significance increases all the more for the reason that her presence is more conspicuous by her absence in person in the story for most part of the text. Sarah Young observes: "Natasya Fillipovna's role is not simply an important one, but that she is central to the plot: 'In reality N[atasya] F[illipovna], perhaps, plays the main role' (ix 226). Fridlender notes that Dostoyevsky considered her to be the second hero of the novel" (28). Natasya's outraged suffering has only one parallel in the novel and that is Myshkin's compassion. Unlike other characters, the novelist introduces her not directly in person, but through a series of conversations taking place among three persons entirely unknown to each other at this juncture of time and have met for the first time, Prince Myshkin, Parfyon Rogozhin and Lebedyev, the first two interestingly grow to be her suitors. She is again referred to by Gavril Ivolgin and General Ivan Epanchin in their conversation. Natasya, a woman of strong thoughts and actions was very difficult to deal with as is observed by Totsky whose mistress she has been for a long time now: ". . . She prized nothing in life and so could not be tempted" (46). This is how we come to know of her personality through her physical absence but mental presence in the thoughts of other characters. Dostoyevsky has drawn her character with such a force that her absence from the real scenes is hardly noticed by the readers. Her details of inner and outer qualities are brought to the readers through Rogozhin initially in a cursory manner but Totsky expands and elaborates as he is the one who is responsible in moulding her consequent upon the death of her parents. Even in the very beginning pages of the text we have comments from the narrator such as, "The look in those eyes seemed dark and mysterious; they seemed to be asking a riddle" (47). This suggests that Natasya is no common woman. Again and again Totsky presents his fear of not being sure of her temperament as is noticed in the matter of her marriage with Gavril, which has been tailored by Totsky and General Epanchin, where the novelist captures Totsky's mind and says: "To his great and (such is the heart of man!) somewhat unpleasant surprise, he was convinced by something that happened that even if he made the offer, he would not be accepted" (48). Natasya was difficult to comprehend. Dostoyevsky in her character has for the first time in his novels created a new woman who not only knows how to revenge the wrong done to her but even has the courage to make her adversaries tremble with fear for they know not the power of an "offended and fantastic woman" (48). Totsky together with General Epanchin try to cow down Natasya by making her marry a man of their choice for a married woman is after all not so much harmful. Both speak to her earnestly (even though it is posed for earnestness allows not dwelling along with shrewdness) and she repays in the same coin convincing them that she would consider their proposal and respond accordingly. After the long conversation while General Epanchin felt the matter to be settled, Totsky could not take the things on their face value and was "afraid that there might be a snake under flowers" (52). Such is the personality of Natasya that she is undecipherable to anybody. She in a way is like the ultra-modern liberated woman who is at par with man on all the issues related to life and death. Her outraged suffering puts her at par with Prince Myshkin's compassion and thus the text gains significance as a feminist reading. It is also strange that she is introduced to the readers not in relation to the hero but the villain or to borrow Briggs phrase "One of the Dostoyevsky's darkest villains" (AB 75) Rogozhin who relates his infatuation with her who has favourable responses to his advances and the ultimate ouster of him by his father owing to the extravagance bestowed upon her. Thus at the very outset she is presented not as a positive but a negative character. Regarding the introduction of Natasya in such a shady manner by the novelist makes Sarah Young say "even before the main characters and

plot are established the ground of *The Idiot* is shifting under the reader's feet" (32). Natasya is beyond the comprehension of other characters in the novel as well as the readers, and remains so from the first to the last.

The life of Natasya is a glowing example of how women particularly belonging to the weaker sections of the society are treated by the wealthy and the mighty. Totsky who takes Natasya in his custody owing to her orphan hood, uses her to satisfy his carnal desires and when he finds her becoming a threat to his glorious name, plans in consonance with General Epanchin to marry her off to Gavril. But Natasya is not the stuff to be licked off so easily and though she does not openly go against the plans of Totsky, manages to play the game on her own terms and conditions and thus not providing him the much sought solace. Totsky confesses that "she had given him such a scare five years before that he could not feel quite safe even now till Natasya Fillipovna was herself married" (50). It was with this intention that he managed the affair of Gavril being introduced to her and lurked him to enter in conjugal relationship with her with a sum of seventy five thousand roubles as bait which he promised to Natasya Fillipovna for her safe future. Natasya, here, appears not to be an individual as Sarah Young points out: "important though Natasya Fillipovna is to these characters, in their eyes, she is not a human being but a 'circumstance'" (35). She, however, on her part tries again and again to maintain her individuality and thus on the point of marriage with Gavril she insists that "she would not bind herself in any way; that she reserved for herself till the marriage (if marriage there were) the right to say 'no' up to the very last moment" (53). This she proves again and again in the course of the novel. She keeps the power to utter the final word to herself not only in the case of Gavril but even with Rogozhin and Prince Myshkin, both who are in real love with her unlike Gavril who wishes to marry her to ease his poor pecuniary position. Natasya, thus, asserting her identity and individuality facing the adversity of fate and social position emerges as a new woman hitherto unknown in the fiction of Dostoyevsky in particular and literature in general. She has the daring to face the challenges of life in spite of the fact that she has not a single soul in the entire universe upon whom she can rely as her own self. Her situation is beautifully understood and explained by Prince Myshkin when he says looking at her portrait:

"It's a wonderful face, . . . and I feel sure her story is not an ordinary one. The face is cheerful, but she has passed through terrible suffering, hasn't she? Her eyes tell one that, the cheek bones, those points under her eyes. It's a proud face, awfully proud, but I don't know whether she is kind hearted. Ah, if she were! That would redeem it all!" (38-39).

Natasya eludes the thinking of all the characters in the novel save Myshkin and he too can only guess at her acts and thoughts owing to his skill of reconstructing imaginatively the state of mind of those that he is examining as he has done fantastically in the case of the man awaiting execution. To borrow the words of Sarah Young:

"Natasya Fillipovna's actions, even before she appears in the novel, are aimed at promoting her script in order to establish herself as a conscious human subject, retain the last word about herself, and escape objectification and finalization by others. In doing so, she frees herself from the control of others in order to direct her own existence, and script her own future" (39).

Natasya thus proves to be the flag-bearer for modern emancipated woman who defies any attempt by the society to confine her in the image created by it and for its own benefit. Natasya carefully uses the image, which the other characters in the novel have carved for her, to her advantage. She is taken to be a haughty, arrogant, capricious, cruel, and shameless woman, which she conforms, in her actions at various places, on different occasions, dealing with different characters, such as her dealing with Totsky and General Ivolgin, her visit to Gavril's house, meeting with the Ivolgin family, interaction with Rogozhin, etc. However, it is Prince Myshkin alone who has the acumen to realize that Natasya is merely acting the role of the person others believe her to be. The whole drama enacted at Ganya's house where Natasya had come to invite his family for her birthday celebrations, turns out to be a strange mess and when Myshkin finds Natasya trying to behave in the manner others want her, Myshkin retorts: "Aren't you ashamed? Surely, you are not what you are pretending to be now? It isn't possible" (130) to which Natasya cannot stand and is obliged to respond to Nina

Alexandrovna saying, "I really am not like this, he is right" (130). However, Natasya, time and again eludes the grasp of the minds of the characters in the novel and soon after the incident at Gavril's house, in the evening, she again enacts an enormous drama and establishes thoroughly that she is yet the director and has the strength to make others behave according to her own wish and whims, and on her own terms. The episode of her proposed marriage party is another glowing example of the expression of her free-will. She strangely enough poses a highly serious question to Myshkin in the most non-serious manner as is seen in this conversation:

"My old friends here . . . want me to be married. Tell me what you think, shall I be married or not? As you say, I will do" . . . "To ... to whom? asked Myshkin in a sinking voice. "To Gavril Ardalionovitch Ivolgin", Natasya Fillipovna went in the same harsh, firm and distinct voice . . . "N – no don't marry him" he whispered at last . . . " so shall it be then" (171-172).

When she is spoken harshly by Totsky and General Epanchin about being so casual on such a serious issue she responds saying, "Had he said 'yes' I would have given my consent at once. But he said 'No' and I refused. Isn't that serious? My whole life was hanging in the balance. What could be more serious?" (172). This is not a mere refusal to marry Gavril but it is a refusal to Totsky too that she cannot be taken for granted any longer even though she might have once upon a time been his kept mistress. On the other hand it may be safely stated that it was not only foolish but even naïve on the part of Totsky and General Epanchin to propose marriage of a proactive Natasya to the tame Gavril. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was a kind of insult heaped upon Natasya. She is a character endowed with extraordinary qualities by Dostoyevsky. Her kind is not easy to find not only in the real world but even in fiction. She has the art of making herself clear to everybody whatsoever be the status of her opponent and the consequences thereof. She rejects Gavril and crows down Totsky and General Epanchin, this does not mean that she shall allow Rogozhin or Myshkin have their ways while dealing with her. She blatantly tells Rogozhin that though he thinks her to be a whore kept by Totsky, she cannot be taken for granted by him even though he has bid a hundred thousand roubles as he price, if she agrees to marry him. She throws the bundle of currency notes into fire implicating that her free-will is really free and no amount of money can buy it. Also by doing so she suggests that any relationship with Rogozhin will be on her own terms and conditions, even though it is very much clear to her that it is very dangerous for her to enter into an alliance with him. As far as Myshkin is concerned Natasya looks at him as her rescuer, whom she has visualized in her day-dreams in state of loneliness. She seems to be correct in her choice because Myshkin has proved himself to be a redeemer as is seen in the case of Marie in Switzerland. Natasya has seen this quality of Myshkin in the drama that took place at Gavril's home when Myshkin in spite of the fact that a large group of people was present, stood out boldly to hold the hand of Gavril hitting his sister Vera when she abused Natasya. Natasya who has grown wise with every passing day, poses a very relevant and practical question before Myshkin: "What are you going to live on if you are so in love that you, a prince, are ready to marry Rogozhin's woman" (183). And the prince is quick to answer, "Natasya Fillipovna . . . I love you! I would die for you. I won't let anyone say a word about you. If we are poor, I'll work, Natasya Fillipovna . . ." (183). She is just taken by surprise when soon it is disclosed to the group that Myshkin to inherit a million and half roubles from her late aunt and for a moment feels her issue of marriage settled, and listening from the Prince all the accolades showered upon her and says, "Thank you, Prince. No one has ever talked to me like that before . . . They have always been trying to buy me, but no decent man has ever thought of marrying me" (189). Till now the scene gets going like it happens in a normal storyline but Natasya is unpredictable and that is what makes her a woman of true free-will. Her temperament is beyond prediction; she is a glaring example of what has been stated in Sanskrit for a long time now: *Triya charitram, Purushasya bhagyam, Devo Na Janati, Kuto Manushya*, translated as: 'A woman's character and a man's destiny even gods can't gauge...' or in other words basically women are unpredictable and irrational (Wordpress.com). She makes a sudden twist and decides to take on Rogozhin who upon seeing his wish getting fulfilled "was gasping with joy" (191). Gavril passes the test of his integrity by not touching the notes thrown for him in the blazing fireplace and Myshkin simply ponders, "Is it possible? The entire troupe thinks that Natasya is out of her mind but it is Totsky again

who concludes the character of Natasya as he says, "That woman has some first rate points . . . some brilliant qualities . . . My God what might not be made of such a character with such beauty! But in spite of all effort, in spite of her education even – it's all lost! She is an uncut diamond"(196-97). This statement of Totsky that 'Natasya is an uncut diamond' is significant in many ways; firstly, it suggests, that she is innocent at heart. Next, she has the immense possibility of rising to any heights of value. Another thing that can be deduced is that there is every possibility of her being destroyed in process of her growth i.e. the polishing of the diamond. Ultimately it also suggests that Natasya is beyond comprehension and the statement holds true to the last page of the novel. She switches from one situation to another and from one place to another in search of a happy satisfied life which, however, eludes her just as she betrays the understanding of herself in the novel to other characters and may be even to her own self.

Natasya's character is so central to the novel that it appears as if the entire narrative is oriented towards Natasya's quest for freedom and selfhood. Her struggle to identify herself is not an issue of liberty from intellectual point of view rather it is a much larger matter dealing with the practical problems of freedom as part of human condition. She is not a heroine who can be classed with other heroines of Dostoyevsky; she has to be classed with his ideological heroes as Ivan Karmazhov, Raskolnikov, the underground man, etc. She like these great characters is thoroughly in search of Who am I? and finally reaches to the conclusion that her identity is not to be found anywhere else in the society or situations but in one's own self as she states to Aglaia in one of her letters: "In the abstract love of humanity you always love yourself alone" (512).

Her's is a mysterious personality and a totally incomprehensible in which all those who are in some way or the other related with her feel defeated to decipher her doings as is seen in Myshkin's talk with Rogozhin: "The first time 'she' rushed to me of herself, almost on the wedding day, begging me 'to save' her from you. It's her own words I'm repeating to you. Afterwards she ran away from me too. You forced her again and were going to marry her, and now they tell me she ran away from you again here" (233). The capricious nature of Natasya is pointed by mostly all of the characters in *The Idiot*. Mrs Epanchin another significant character observes Natasya's behavior verily when she comments and condemns thus: "A girl grows up at home, and suddenly in the middle of the street she jumps into a cab: 'Mother I was married the other day to some Karlitch or Ivanitch, good bye'" (320). The characters in the novel thus feel puzzled and perplexed at their inability to comprehend even an iota of Natasya's personality. The heroine remains absent from the scene in the remaining portion of the story but this absence is more conspicuous than her presence. She controls not only the story but also the lives of other characters be it Myshkin, Rogozhin or Aglaia 'the prospective bride of Myshkin' who is asked to marry Myshkin by none other than Natasya herself. It is even more intriguing that Natasya finally decides to unite with Rogozhin knowing full well that he will murder her. In fact she writes the entire details of her would be murder in a letter to Myshkin and showing it to Rogozhin to read. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Natasya is the only female character in the entire range of Dostoyevsky's fiction that has full control over her life and death. She lives and dies the way she chooses herself. She is a real mystery to the reader as well as other characters in the novel and thus is an example of perfect achiever of selfhood as Sarah Young says, "even in death she remains unfinalizable, and in this sense achieves selfhood, if of a twisted kind" (71).

Critics are at a loss to define Natasya's behavior at every turn of the story and it becomes all the more troublesome to them in the final scene when she succumbs silently to the knife of Rogozhin. If viewed in totality of the plot there could be not other credible and natural denouement than that which is offered by Dostoyevsky. Readers are shocked at such silent stealing away of Natasya's life, but for the writer it is the only possible ending as he himself says, "If there are readers of *The Idiot*, they perhaps will be somewhat stunned by the unexpectedness of the ending; but, on reflection, they will finally agree that it had to end in this way . . . I have a totally different conception of reality and realism than our novelists and critics. My – idealism is more real than their realism". (qtd. in Frank 575).

The foregoing discussion perhaps successfully brings home that Natasya is a rare female character created by Dostoyevsky through who, as he is wont to do, delves deep in the hidden recesses of human

psyche, traces the unknown paths of mind, and has given a matchless, marvelous and memorable female character.

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