

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: THE INSIGHTS OF THE INSANE*Sanjay Kumar, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Degree college, Pulwama, J&K***Abstract:**

What actually provoked or inspired Dostoevsky to write 'Notes From The Underground' was it a reaction to the concept of utopian socialism and rational egoism, did writer want to show the fallacy of enlightenment ideas, scientific progress and the idea of determinism, was it a refutation to the advocacy of rationality and human reason as put forth by writers like Chernyshvesky in books like 'What Is To Be Done' or did the writer desire to convey something beyond the prevailing zeitgeist and beyond the reasons which were conspicuous.

There is no doubt about the fact that several factors were at play that led to its creation and this wonderful novella got framed into a certain chronotopy. But besides being a product of its times, the book holds certain universality to it, that impels a reader to delve deep into the pages, and contemplate the profound insights that the writer provides us in his endless ramblings through the abysmal depths of human psyche. In this paper my focus would be to lay bare that aspect of the book, wherein Dostoevsky has endeavoured to show the pathetic situation of an intelligent and conscious human being who on one hand is torn apart by the split in his own interiority; split which is mainly induced by the society and of which he is very much conscious, and on the other hand suffers from the attacks of 'the sublime and beautiful', which surely forms the very essence of his being, but fails to hold to it and paradoxically steeps more deep into the mire of his own inner oscillations. And how the protagonist caught in the whirlpool of his personality, utterly fails to transcend his pseudo-self and gain a permanent access to his real-self.

Keywords: *Personality, inner conflict, neurosis, transcendence, individuality, existentiality.*

Dostoevsky is considered as one of the significant contributors to the philosophy of existentialism and science of human psychology. He dexterously interweaves these elements into the fabric of his writing and magnificently reveals the complex workings of human thoughts and emotions. In the novella, 'Notes from the Underground', the writer conveys to its readers that human rationality is not an infallible tool to create a perfect society and free humanity from suffering. Man is not just a physical or psychological being, he is more than that and irrational is as much an essential element of him as the rational. Man by his very nature is capricious and rebellious; he is a hotchpotch of multifarious strains. In the first part of the book, the anonymous narrator engages us with his embittered monologues, which is actually a long diatribe, regarding human suffering, logic, rationality and free will and in the second part(apropos of wet the snow) relates to us some of his bizarre life experiences. Pertinently, the author presents this novella in 'fragments' which is an indication of the fragmented subjectivity of the protagonist, who communicates with his readers in a correspondingly illogical and incoherent style. The underground man is one of the unique characters ever created, and as pointed out by Richard Pevear, 'one of the most remarkable characters in literature, one who has been placed among the bearers of modern consciousness alongside Don Quixote, Hamlet and Faust'(Pevear,2004, p. ix)

In this novella, the writer basically presents before us, the predicament of an intelligent and conscious man, who shows remarkable introspection and exposes that existential arena where multiple selves jostle together and render him inert and sickened. He is miserably caught in the complexities and

intricacies of his own personality. In the beginning he remarks:

“...these opposite elements. I knew that they had been swarming in me all my life and craving some outlet from me... They tormented me till I was ashamed: they drove me to convulsions and-sickened me.”

The underground man, who speaks to us from the 'underground' of his mind, is acutely conscious and quite aware to analyze every thought and emotion that arises in his being. This consciousness of the chaos and confusion that he witnesses in his own mind renders him inert and makes him to loath his own self.

The underground man has reached to a stage where he is tormented by the ravages of his own personality because as he himself admits- it is his awareness of the things that happen in his mind that causes his suffering. But despite being surrounded by such a chaos and confusion, he once in a while gets the opportunity to encounter 'The Sublime And Beautiful' which he considers as a 'means of escape and refuge'. During those moments, he goes into raptures and overwhelmingly cries out:-

And what loving-kindness, oh Lord, what loving-kindness I felt at times in those dreams of mine! In those flights' into the sublime and beautiful'.....

Such encounters which would have engendered a certain harmony in his being and have helped him to move from the chaos of his personality to the cosmos of his individuality, paradoxically steps him more deep into the mire of his own wavering. This struggle of the underground man to escape his personality and embrace the individuality so as to define the meaning of his life is implicit. But in this struggle, the underground man, explicitly provides us some profound insights which are crucial to the human existence and thus worth understanding.

The underground man, in Nietzschean terminology, is nothing but 'human, all-too-human.' His story is the story of all those human beings who are intelligent, hyperconscious and sensitive to both what is happening inside and outside of them. They consider their consciousness as a disease because it renders them passive and sick. They eventually realize that they are good for nothing and can never become anything; not even an insect. The underground man states:-

.....I did not know how to become anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect.

The man of action, declares the underground man, is 'pre-eminently a limited creature' because he displays a particular character but a man of consciousness is and must be a person without any character. 'Character', which is an expression of personality traits, developed over a period of time limits a man existentially. The man of consciousness cannot be limited within a certain character frame.

The underground man has become schizophrenic. He suffers from identity crisis, is alienated from society and is quite unsure about his own motives, desires and impulses, even he is uncertain, about what ails him. And more importantly, it shows us that for an intelligent human being it is going to be a life long struggle entangling him into ever an unresolved conflict. Pevear and Volkhansky in their introduction to the 'Notes from the Underground' make an essential remark:-

“I am a sick man... ..I am a wicked man”. In the space of that pause Dostoevsky introduces the unifying idea of his tale: the instability, the perpetual “dialectic” of isolated consciousness.

Pevear hints at what Bakhtin calls as the, 'interior dialogisation'. The underground man displays an intense interior polemic while confessing to his reader about his troubled consciousness.

There are moments when the underground man feels a certain sublimation and refinement of his self and he begins to appreciate 'the sublime and beautiful' but unfortunately he fails to hold to it and ultimately stops to struggle against his own depravity. He is pulled back to the underground of his unconscious and rendered hopeless. He knew well that he has been degraded and hit rock bottom, there is no escape from this state of being and there is no possibility of any change. This realisation of his position fills him with joy and so he remarks:-

---the enjoyment, of course of despair; but in despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of hopelessness of one's position.

This realisation of the underground man is significant not because man is being degraded to lowliest position or his condition is deplorable but because he has become hopeless to come out of it, he fails to find any escape route and more importantly, he considers it as his normal condition and is complacent with it. Same is the situation of a modern man who is surprisingly complacent with his wretched condition, more so his situation is worse than the underground man as the later, to some degree, is conscious of his wretchedness.

The underground man makes a very keen observation when he compares himself- i.e. a man of acute consciousness with the man of action which he considers as normal, but stupid and an antithesis to himself. He says that man of acute-consciousness is created as a retort to this normal man who comes purely out of nature. A normal man still lives instinctually and not consciously. According to him, a normal man takes secondary causes as primary and makes it a basis for his action, however, behind every primary cause there are other innumerable motivations, and thus no cause is primary. So if there are no primary causes, the underground man then presumably, acts out of spite, but, since underground man lies about being spiteful, and is unable to deceive, by acting like a normal man, he fails to do anything. The underground man cries out:-

Oh, gentlemen, do you know, perhaps I consider myself an intelligent man, only because all my life I have been able neither to begin nor to finish anything. Granted I am a babbler, a harmless vexatious babbler, like all of us. But what is to be done if the direct and sole vocation of every intelligent man is babble that is the intentional pouring of the water through a sieve.

The underground man strikes a comparison to bring home the point that how normal men act mechanically. His (normal man's) consciousness is enough to fulfil his everyday needs but for a man of acute consciousness the matter is not so simple. He not only sees but sees through while as a normal man is unable to understand the intricacies with which the human mind works.

In the second part of the book we see how the underground man points out that people at his office were ugly and contemptible but quite unconscious of the fact that they were loathsome and stupid. He wishes and eventually believes himself to be a coward and a slave and declares that a decent man in all ages must be both coward and slave and it is only donkeys and mules (the normal men) that are valiant. In this contrast, the author rips open the psyche of a hyperconscious man who is reduced to a mouse in presence of a normal man. Unlike this normal man he does not find any justice in revenge. The normal man laughs at his inaction and humiliates him. So he crawls back to his underground, broods over his idea of revenge, fleeces the idea in hundred and one ways and thus causes suffering for himself. The hyperconscious man in his brooding will churn out endless doubts, resentments and imaginings about his inaction thus giving birth to more and more suffering. In his revenge to the officer he saw in the tavern, the underground man wished to go for a duel, but he was not even noticed by the officer so he began to harbour the resentment and let it to build and build thus creating much frustration for himself.

The underground man's transactions with the outer world; be it his behaviour with the office colleagues, or the dealings with his friends or his encounters with the prostitute Liza or his behaviour towards the servant Apollon, lets us know and understand him more deeply. He recalls his days of youth and rambles in tracing his identity, sometimes as a romantic or the cynical and sometimes wants to befriend people. He couldn't socialise normally. He deals with his friends in a peculiar fashion and shows tremendous wavering in thought and action. He simultaneously hates them and demands respect from them. His encounters with Liza are particularly significant. He first delivers sermons to her, and in a

George Sand fashion wants to redeem her by marrying her, but when she visits him once, he humiliates her and tells her that he was just exercising his power and will. Despite his realisation as what he has done with Liza, he doesn't allow himself to seek her forgiveness. He wished to let the feeling of insult linger in her heart and cause a great suffering, which he believes will elevate and purify her. He later on reflects:-

I am now asking an idle question of my own: which is better- chief happiness or lofty suffering? Well, which is better?

One of the significant aspects about the Notes is that it digs deep into the human thoughts and impulses which actually drive human actions to certain ends. It highlights the basic working of rationality and free will in human existence. It deeply discusses the fact that the essential composition of human mind includes both rational as well as irrational and in fact irrational constitutes the very foundation and rational is just a gimcrack built over it. At a place, he remarks:-

I agree that two times two makes four is an excellent thing; but if we are dispensing praise, the two times two makes five is sometimes a most charming little thing as well.

It is argued that man always acts in his own best interest, but the underground man rejects such a line of thought and points out that contrarily man will act against his advantage just to prove that he is a creature, born with free will and has the ability to make his choices independently.

The underground man lashes out at those who propose that rationality and human reason can ameliorate the human life by creating 'civilisations' and 'crystal palaces' (an ideal society created in accordance to the 'laws of nature' and as conceived in the communist social organisation) and that every human action can be calculated with mathematical precision and man can live a good life by following the laws of nature. But they forget that man will be crippled by leaving no opportunity for adventure and it will result in ennui. And it is this boredom which made Cleopatra to insert gold pins into her slave girls' breasts, and made people more bloodthirsty and violent. Thus remarks the underground man:-

"Have you noticed that it is the most civilised gentlemen who have been the subtlest slaughterers, to whom the Attilas and Stenka Razins could not hold a candle.... 'In any case civilization has made mankind if not more blood-thirsty, at least more vilely, more loathsomely blood-thirsty...."

There is no doubt, that man is a creative being and wishes to build things but he has the same potential to destroy and never wants to finish things. Life is to be found in the process, in struggling and not in attaining, but all this eventually leads to absurdity. Man is afraid in any sort of endgame and also of the mathematical certainty of $2+2=4$.

The underground man throws much light on dichotomy of mind and heart in human life. He hints upon the fact that human mind, though a good tool has given birth to schizophrenia and history bears testimony to the madness human beings have created through the reason. But the heart is the very source of life which makes us individuals in the true sense of the word. During his student life, Dostoevsky once wrote to his brother:

"Nature, the soul, God, Love. ...is known by the heart and not the mind"

The underground man vehemently argues that reason can never eradicate the human suffering. All the utopian ideals, rationality and calculations and predictions based on science and reason fall flat when it encounters a complex and intricate creature called the man. Moreover, man shall never try to get rid of the suffering because 'it is the sole origin of man's consciousness. And consciousness is a blessing because it makes a man aware about who he is? And why he is?'

The book paints a picture not of a man of any times, but of all times. It tells us something about our own nature. It provokes a man of acute consciousness to contemplate certain crucial questions which are quintessentially existential. It deals with a certain strangeness, a certain chaos, a certain disorder to which, perhaps, the man has been reduced to. It shows the plurality of man's self, the split in which he has been miserably caught. The underground man is well aware of this mess which he has become, but he doesn't

know how to come out of it. He perpetually remains the victim of his own inner disharmony.

Dostoevsky's insights into the human subjectivity are incredible. He knows well the predicament of the man, and has a deep understanding of the desires, fears and anxieties that pop up in the human bosom ad nauseam. He declares to his opponents:-

Excuse me, gentleman, but I am not justifying myself with this allishness. As for as I myself am concerned, I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway....

So in the 'Notes', Dostoevsky makes his readers to understand the fragmentation or dividedness of the human subjectivity and the limitations of one's noetic endeavours. It highlights the disharmony with which a sensitive and intelligent man lives. But he doesn't provide us with any solution to create the required harmony. The underground man seems to be stuck at a point where existential absurdity has rendered him crazy and we find him at the threshold of mysticism. His revelations smell of that individual who is in a state of divine discontent. Like Eliot he is acutely conscious of the hollowness of his inner world but is unable to find out the source of his 'shantiah'. He simply shows us the mirror and faintly conveys to us that humans have the potentiality to achieve this harmony if they can access the sublime and beautiful. The underground man's trysts with the sublime and beautiful were ephemeral but they do provide him intense feelings of happiness, faith, hope, and love. The author laments and tells his reader that he is stillborn and prefers 'literature' to 'life'. Towards the end of his Notes, the underground man leaves us to meditate over the following:-

...for we are all divorced from life, we are all cripples, every one of us, more or less. We are so divorced from it that we feel at once a sort of loathing for real life and so cannot bear to be reminded of it....Look into it more carefully! Why, we don't even know what living means now, what it is, and what it is called?

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