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## **Analyzing the philosophical features of existential nihilism and emerging topographies of pessimism in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the Existential Nihilism amongst the people during the nineteenth century in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*. The novels centrally focus on the tale of poverty and suffering of Russia and how it triggered the philosophical theory of Existential Nihilism amongst the people during the nineteenth century. The author uses Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov and the anonymous narrator from the underground as the representation of the nineteenth-century existential nihilist from Russia, St. Petersburg. Both of the characters radiate an extreme egocentric and arrogant attitude who prefers alienating themselves from society as they denied abiding by society's requirement due to their disdain attitude towards it. Not only the characters but the city of St. Petersburg as well as the supreme element that significantly features the emerging pessimism in Russia. The city is not merely a backdrop to these novels but an embodiment of misleading radical and moral ideas being introduced in Russia. It embodies the intense pessimism that condemned human existence during that time. Thus, the aim of this research is to explore and scrutinize the reasons and triggering factors of Existential Nihilism in Russia in the novels *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the underground* by scrutinizing Dostoevsky's stand concerning social, political and moral state of affairs in Nineteenth-century Russia, his approach of sketching the characters of Raskolnikov and the underground man through their perceptions, actions and in addition the diction used in these novels.

**Keywords:** existential, nihilism, pessimism literature, nineteen century, Russia

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### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of existence has always been questioned by human minds. It is not once in a blue moon that a person finds himself wondering about the exact purpose of his existence? Often this question frustrates the human mind claiming that they did not choose to be a part of this world, of this society and its miseries, then why were they forced to be a part of it? Sometimes this frustration of not understanding his purpose of existence makes his whole sense of existence collapse. This un-understandable complex urge of the human mind struggles to figure out their existential purpose. These people strongly believe that the world itself serves no meaning of existence and is a place where misery resides for the less substantial minds and only the most intelligent minds can survive through their ideals. The notion behind such a revolting orientation is presumed to be Existential Nihilism. While Nihilism is associated with terms like skepticism and pessimism Existential Nihilism denotes the purpose of the world itself. Strongly believing that human's joy, sufferings, agony feelings are empty. The only sense that they believe in is their intelligence. Existential Nihilism comes from the distorted perception that leads oneself towards their ethical decay and self-destruction. These individuals try to justify themselves with their distorted and dogmatic wit, believing that in a delusional world that serves no meaning they are the only ones born with the privilege to act upon their will without having to explain themselves to the society. Perceiving themselves as the ultimate minds who do not need society's guidance, they claim to be

superior to the people who enslave themselves by abiding by the rules of society.

Although Existential Nihilism entices low-spirited personas who appear as intensely skeptic with the dogmatic attitude towards their existence, As observed, existential nihilists strongly denote the possibility of a meaningful existence because according to them society restricts one's free will, however, they are the same people who impose their will on the society. To elaborate, existential nihilists creates their own rules and adamantly abides by them to survive in the world they find meaningless. These individuals believe as they do not consider themselves to be a part of the society that they are above any law. As a result, they involve themselves to perceive actions without worrying about the outcome and get themselves in unlawful consequences. What makes it more interesting is that the actions they undertake are mostly negative and desire ill for the commoners of society. According to Eagleton (1984), it was Sigmund Freud who introduced this field of knowledge in his epochal work, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Psychoanalysis is, therefore:

“A form of literary criticism, which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in its interpretation of literature. Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy, which aims to cure mental disorder by investigating the interactions between the conscious and unconscious elements in the mind (Barry, 1995).”

They hold the society accountable for their sufferings and nefarious attitude towards the innocent. It can be observed that these self-proclaimed sufferers are the main reason for their downfall. To continue, the contradiction to the nihilist's belief takes place when they claim that feelings are meaningless yet they perceive hatred towards the society they belong to and hatred is a form of feeling. They consciously or subconsciously mention the sufferings they have faced because of the society which brings out their wrath and anger which at the same time represents their sufferings and feelings. As Shakespeare says "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot..." (Shakespeare 72)

## 2. Literature and Russia

Many famous names have been associated with this theory over the years, for instance, Albert Camus, Max Stirner, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Seraphim Rose, and Soren Kierkegaard are profoundly admired. However, the core contributor to this thesis is Fyodor Dostoevsky. The particular notion was first introduced by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and his contributions to assembling the notion explicitly interpretable. While he is regarded as the fundamental representation of nihilism Dostoevsky is admired for adding new expositions to nihilism. A sense of curiosity and amusement is aroused by Dostoevsky's works through his formation of delusional, uncompromising and peculiar characters who appear as common as the people of the society yet they are filled with disproportional complexity. These characters are overshadowed by their intellectualism as if cursed and pulled down to the end of their logical reasoning with their nihilistic revolt. He uses the idea of revolt in his works as a socio-political device in the guise of existential nihilism, pointing out the appalling condition of nineteenth-century Russia. He described the barbaric impact on the people who were pushed to the edge of depression, being at a loss of hope and rejecting every aspect of the positivity of their existence. It is praiseworthy, how the author gives equal attention to the role of Russia behind its people and their complex nature. Dostoevsky specifies the increasing tension and dramatic political, economic, and social changes have affected the notion of denial of existence. Their attempt of alienation detaching themselves from the normality of the society rather than suffocating in the decimated lifestyle effectuated by industrialization as well as the Tsarist reform and repression during the 1860s. Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels foreground characters to explore the satisfactory answers to their nihilistic tendencies triggered by the nineteenth-century Russia questioning the existence of morals and values of the institutions as the overpowering animosity swelled during the despotic authority of the Czar. To him, "A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority and who does not accept any principle on faith" because "conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake, independent of any constructive program or possibility is the only escape." (Dostoevsky 75) Moreover, the fact that Dostoevsky himself was a casualty of nineteenth-century Russia. His life consisted of phases where he encountered the crisis of Russia. From his early life to his experience in Siberia he had artistically expressed his views of the panorama of the existential nihilists. Hence, the aim of this thesis will be to focus on the interpretation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the*

*Underground* followed by how Dostoevsky interprets existential nihilism by examining the Russian society through the eyes of these nihilist archetype breaking heroes who are deeply involved in Russia's socio-political ideologies, emphasizing not only on how they view the society but why they are viewing it in that manner, focusing on the degradation of the social, economic and political abhorrence of nineteenth-century Russia. In describing the process by which criminal values are taken over by the individual. Sutherland (1937) says:

"Criminal behavior is learned and it is learned in interaction with others who have already incorporated criminal values and illegitimate opportunities including conditions favorable to the learning of such a role" (Sunderland, 1937).

## 3. Research Objectives

- To understand the real application of the philosophical theory of Existential Nihilism.
- To analyze the political conditions and pressure in Russia.
- To highlight the condition of Russian people during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 4. Research Questions

1. How has Fyodor Dostoevsky triggered the philosophical theory of Existential Nihilism amongst the people during the nineteenth century?
2. How the writer has projected a social reality in *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*?
3. How has Fyodor Dostoevsky presented the political and social issues of Russian society in his fiction?

## 5. Theoretical Framework

This research is qualitative in nature and the electrical method of research is being used in this. It explores the Existential Nihilism amongst the people during the nineteenth century in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*. The novels centrally focus on the tale of poverty and suffering of Russia and how it triggered the philosophical theory of Existential Nihilism amongst the people during the nineteenth century. The author uses Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov and the anonymous narrator from the underground as the representation of the nineteenth-century existential nihilist from Russia, St. Petersburg. Thus, the aim of this research is to explore and scrutinize the reasons and triggering factors of Existential Nihilism in Russia in the novels *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the underground* by scrutinizing Dostoevsky's stand concerning social, political and moral state of affairs in Nineteenth-century Russia, his approach of sketching the characters of Raskolnikov and the underground man through their perceptions, actions and in addition the diction used in these novels.

## 6. Analysis

The common thread in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground* is of the lost existentialists struggling to cope with their emotional anguish arising from their confrontation with nothingness. Dostoevsky portrays the protagonists' journey in expending great energy responding to the question of whether surviving it was possible. The analysis

concludes their answer to be a devastating "No," advocating a bigot's passionate commitment and impassive stoicism against a developing capitalist Russia resulted in their ultimate doom in their self-created absurdity with absolutely no guidelines. However such passionate commitment to conquest an absurd change in the societal norms is itself meaningless. The novels illustrate the transition of Russia along with two fictional yet realistic demonstration of failed products of capitalism. The city represents the characters and the characters represent the city and altogether the novels describe Dostoevsky's interpretation. The novels are set against the unforgiving sociological decay prevailing in nineteenth-century Russia, as the underground man describes "horribly bloodthirsty". Dostoevsky carefully grounds both the novels in St. Petersburg describing the decay of Russia. It is assumed when the anonymous underground man introduces himself ... "I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man" he is not introducing himself but a spiteful unattractive Russia. This novel was published before the publication of *Crime and Punishment*, the novel's central character Raskolnikov describes his victim Alyona the pawnbroker as a "louse", a bloodsucking parasite living on another's blood like the condition of the bourgeoisie and proletariats of nineteenth-century Russia. Alyona symbolizes exploitation, she is amongst those of the many upper class who have been contributing to class disparity. The novels trace the cramped poverty, disease, and crime behind the artificial beauty of the city. The setting of both the novels creates such a believable atmosphere with such specific detailed descriptions because he knew the city so well the readers could experience similar sights and smells his fictional characters experienced. The novels describe the mind of an individual on the margins of modern society and examines the effects modern life has on that man's personality.

Particularly picking summer as a setting of *Crime and Punishment* as well as emphasizing on the overcrowded streets of Russia with reeked air Dostoevsky aims at describing a physical repulsion triggered by an oppressive environment, the summer is the representation of the heated declining social condition of Russia, it is notable how not for once he mentions the overpopulated, contaminating environment of the city but he describes casually letting the readers figure out the seriousness of the situation. In the novel, we discover a direct and obvious source of Raskolnikov's notion of inferior and superior men: the superior ones having the right to commit breaches of morality while the inferior ones are obliged to mind their own business which is to stay put in the common rut.

"Hegel's world-historical individuals such as Alexander The Great, or Caesar, or Napoleon, the names invoked by Dostoyevsky's protagonist, perform the grandiose task set for him by the "Wettgeist" irrespective of moral considerations" (Rahv, 1978).

By mentioning that it is exactly seven hundred thirty steps from Raskolnikov's house from the pawnbroker's one can forever walk the ways with the protagonist through such concrete physical details emphasizing on the novel's realism. Correspondingly, Dostoevsky's goals with *Notes from Underground* presumes to criticize the intelligentsia by exploring the rising conflict between ideology and experience. For instance,

the Underground Man's outright criticism of rationalist and utopian ideas which he describes

"The only gain of civilization for mankind is the greater capacity for a variety of sensations and absolutely nothing more. And through the development of this many-sidedness man may come to finding enjoyment in bloodshed." (44)

It seems to be, he resents the nineteenth century's unrealistic, over-analytical assessments of human nature. *Notes from Underground* depicts the fact that society's ideologies often end in contradicting its experiences. Similarly, the clutter and chaotic St. Petersburg represents a two-fold symbol. Upholding the prejudices, inequalities, and deficits of artificial Russia it also stresses the victimizing nature of manmade violent civilization. Both the characters are not only jailed to dystopian Russia but to their distorted minds as well. As the 'heat' and the 'odor' distresses Raskolnikov. Dostoevsky specifies the heat and the odor coming from places the protagonist encounters crimes. Let it be the dirty streets of Russian where a teenage drunk girl is followed by a middle-aged man or be the house of Sonia, Raskolnikov's love interest and a daughter who has been forced into prostitution on her drunkard father to support the family. The incidents specify crime was a cardinal issue during the time both these novels were written. Denby describes it as the "city of extremis." (The New Yorker) Likewise, throughout the entire novel the anonymous underground man addresses his imaginary audience, whom he refers to as "you" and "ladies and gentleman" presumably a representative group of educated, Westernized Russians whom he despises. However, his tone is constantly cynical. He purports the flawed western ideologies. The underground man words Dostoevsky's ideas and antipathies of his Slavophil reactionaries towards then capitalizing Russia. The period covered by these novels, nineteenth-century Russia transitioned through the changes of the Industrial revolution. According to Dostoevsky, the changes intrigued a person's moral break down, the intensity of the developing technology and the widening gap between the rich and poor creates mental anguish ending in paranoia, which he describes as an existential crisis. He makes frequent references to how his existence in St. Petersburg, in most ways is not advantageous to the characters, the further describes how the victims of the industrial revolution thrive to discover their identity. The underground man describes the city as expensive and his ill health due to lack of resources, however, his revolt comes out as strong as ever and speaks of the narrator's existential nihilistic nature "I shall not leave St. Petersburg! I shan't leave it because ... Ah well! – it doesn't make a damned bit of difference whether I leave it or not" (6). He describes his life in a city which is "abstract and premeditated in the whole wide world", St. Petersburg as "misfortune". Such statements from the underground man stand correct as nineteenth-century St. Petersburg was labeled as the "city of bones" due to so many tragic deaths in the process of its urbanization and industrialization, these people were buried underneath the foundations of this luxurious city. Dostoevsky brings out the similar sights in *Crime and Punishment* the Haymarket in mentioned in the novels reflects how imperial capital gives way to poverty, squalor, and moral frailty. The city is not merely used

as a backdrop but a reality of the nineteenth century, the disappointment of the founder Peter the Great.

It is loud and clear that Dostoevsky directly accuses capitalism to be the significant reason behind existential nihilism. He suggests the effects of civilization has directly impacted on human nature. Raskolnikov believed Alyona's wealth could be of best use through him, according to the measurers of the class is knowledge, as he describes Raskolnikov "Existence alone had never been enough for him; he had always wanted more. Perhaps it was only from the force of his desires that he had regarded himself as a man to whom more was permitted than to others." (135) He lost his purpose of existence in the greed of attaining more than his capabilities. On the other hand, the underground man describes a palace built out of crystal in London back in 1851. He disputes each and everything the building represents. From the industrial capitalism to its scientific rationality that robotizes human morality, similarly, as Sartre describes capitalism "All materialist philosophies create man as an object, a stone." The underground man claims human nature to be unfathomable. He exemplifies by claiming if given the chance they would deny the obvious two and to makes four. As he claims the mere right to dominate their perception is way more important to them than agreeing with the normality, because they want to be superior, be it through denial and resistance. In the words of Raskolnikov "That's just the point: an honest and sensitive man opens his heart, and the man of business goes on eating - and then he eats you up." (79) Greenberg in his book *Crime and Capitalism* emphasizes the similar prospect of the possible involvement between praxis and Marxist criminology. The city of St. Petersburg demonstrates such extremist Marxist urban crimes attempted by Raskolnikov and other fellow Russian and described by the underground man. Engels describes such corrupted Political and economic lust came into being as a natural activity of daily life due to the expansion of trade; developed a system of licensed fraud, an entire science of enrichment. As the underground man comments as a result of the quest for civilization, man "has certainly become viler in his quest for blood than before" (22)

St. Petersburg serves an imperative role to describe existential nihilism because Dostoevsky's wanted to express the man's suffocation lacking the sense of freedom. The acute narration of the poor and unsanitariness slum areas of St. Petersburg was due to his own experiences. The analytical outcome of the city foreground the precise methodical and modern analysis of existential nihilism of Fredrick Nietzsche. Raskolnikov and the underground man appear to be representatives of his claims "all people should strive to be a superman with the guidance of their power, let it be knowledge or resistance" and the inspiration to his profound analysis happens to be Dostoevsky. After reading *Notes from the Underground* Nietzsche remarked Dostoevsky as the only person who has been able to enlighten him elaborately about psychology and clarify his doubts regarding existential nihilism. The underground man and Raskolnikov determine the mental state that pressurizes man to think ill and commit a crime in search of freedom. The author carefully brings in how these characters are unaffectionate, they are rarely seen to care about what their surroundings will feel or how it will affect them rather than just taking their belief to be the utmost reality. Raskolnikov and the underground man is used as an existential nihilist's transition from a primitive to a full-grown adult. Raskolnikov

exhibits the early traits of a person who seems to have lost all hopes in life, his actions appear to be arrogant and nonsensical. The character of Raskolnikov appears to dogmatically claim that his actions are for improving his and his family's fortune however these actions are mostly unappreciative. While his act of kindness towards Sonia and the anonymous teen girl makes him look like a kindhearted man however it can be assumed that his empathy towards them was because they were related to his emotions. He fell in love with Sonia and therefore wanted to impress her and that's why he invested his last kopecks to help her family perhaps latter he developed empathy for them. Again, he anonymously helped the teenage girl because she was almost the age of his sister Dounia, he saw her reflection in the young girl. Being aware of the fact that his sister was trapped in a relationship with a man who disrespected her and wanted her merely as a trophy to show, also to mention Dounia had been a victim of molestation by her master where Raskolnikov could not do anything to help her. Perhaps that's the reason he wanted to make sure the young girl does not fall to be the next victim. The assumptions can be justified because there were hundreds of people around this man suffering from similar issues however he chooses to help these two particular people because they appeared to be important to them and that's why he particularly helped them and not others.

The underground man is a more detached and cold-hearted persona than Raskolnikov. The anonymous man's character expressed his inner emotions that he experienced during the end stage of his life. Interestingly, Sigmund Freud's investigations of a person's psychological states of mind that instigate man to commit certain crimes. These researches were published followed by Dostoevsky's works of *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*. At least Raskolnikov attempted to sustain something from his life but the unnamed narrator shows interest in survival, he has completely given up on his life. He declares "I am a sick man ... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man." (1) He refuses treatment for his ailing liver, he also acknowledges the fact that by doing so he is harming no one else but himself. This acknowledgment refers to his loss of purpose. He claims that he is a "wicked man" and he does not want to be treated out of his wickedness, he has reached a point of ennuui where he finds pleasure in solitary. He speaks out of extreme spite, he mentions his gains of only nastiness, anger, and depression. Through this character, Dostoevsky rejects the central claim of existentialism existence precedes essence, according to his judgment the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped. But that is not all that is not his worst defect; his worst defect is his perpetual moral obliquity..." (33)

Significantly, the description of Raskolnikov and the underground man's appearance can be considered as Dostoevsky's witty approach towards his presumptions of an existential nihilist's transition. Raskolnikov is a charismatic man, his appearance makes him look socially desired. Dostoevsky describes him as "exceptionally handsome" nevertheless, the author also describes his ramshackle attire as "he was so badly dressed that even a man accustomed to shabbiness would have been ashamed to be seen in the street in such rags." (5) His attire symbolizes his necrotizing morals caused by economic inequality. Morals are perceived to be proper and honorable alike his handsome appearance vice versa his shabby clothes are the decaying morality that makes him appear less acceptable, alienating him from the society. Dostoevsky sketches him as a

primitive existential nihilist. Frank writes, Falling under the Influence of the strange, unfinished ideas that float in the atmosphere, he decides to break out of his disgusting position at one stroke by killing an old pawnbroker. (346) In contrast, the underground man is severely misanthropic. Unlike Raskolnikov, he describes his appearance. He describes him as an "unattractive man", supposedly socially unattractive, he mentions his alienation from the society for twenty years. He has a disrupted rationale, his ability to rationalize logically reversed into absolute denial of reality. In the words of ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, he has experienced a split of consciousness, therefore, he rejected society.

## 7. Discussion

The plot of *Notes from Underground* developed upon two essential dramatic scenes from the experience of the underground man. Firstly, the experience that highlights his engulfment with the rising nihilism of the sixties and secondly, he appears to demonstrate the social romanticism of the forties. So, a reverse chronological time lapse in the novel can be noticed. The contradictions of new ideals with the then social structure of Russia are prominent. It images a particular psychological aberrant condition due to the contradictions. Dostoevsky's aim in *Crime and Punishment* was to establish sufferings as a price of redemption. He explored the neutralizing results of self-loath and guilt. He resembles the great Napoleon, for whom any act is justified if he deems it right. He believes himself to be superior and further thinks that a superior man cannot be held tied for the morality given by a common man. "The novel reflects Dostoevsky's concerns about the generation of new men and the rise of nihilism." (Sosnak 156) Dostoevsky uses him as an Ubermensch. During the French Revolution, a rise of the Ubermensch, a philosophy by Friedrich Nietzsche, an attitude in Europe emerged amongst the people. They perceived themselves to be Supermen and made justifications to their sinful actions, then claiming the offenses to be a goal for humanity to set for itself. Though Dostoevsky, thoroughly sketches Raskolnikov as an Ubermensch. His intention was not to hail the philosophy but to assess whether the rising nihilism amongst these self-acclaimed supermen is a solution or not. Dostoevsky created the character of Raskolnikov to demonstrate the varieties of layers of man's psychology. A man's elemental struggles of what is good for him and what is bad, he shows how death as capital punishment and murder is almost the same. Both cannot be justified. He shows man's struggle of belief and reason which makes them take foolish decisions. He exposes the split personalities that can be found in men, Raskolnikov is a modern representative of young modern Russia whose "fate is reshaped by his superior ego and nihilism as the skeptical young youths of the nineteenth century" (Sosnak 159). He describes the character as a handsome young and intelligent man with very ill health. He despises human company yet craves someone to talk to at times. As can be seen in part one chapter two where he is seen to develop an interest to talk to Mr. Marmalov. He is severely victimized by poverty yet suffers more from his ego which is a result of his higher education which makes him take himself as an extraordinary man superior to others. His preposterous theory behind the murder comes from his absurd belief that every extraordinary man existing in the world is born with the right to commit any sort of crime against the common man as being an

extraordinary person they have more to offer than the regular people. Similarly, Dostoevsky shows Egoism to clarify the underground man's self-created suffering. His enhanced sense of self is at once his greatest strength and most powerful weakness, his sufferings are caused by his paradox of need to belong. He oscillates between the struggles to attain a sense of connection with the outside world, simultaneously demanding complete autonomy to execute his free-will. The underground man illustrates an existential nihilist's arrogance during his infinite unsuccessful struggles to exist, to define his existence, to define the universe around him, and to belong. According to Dostoevsky a social misfit, the diary of a social misfit is the window of the ultimate stage of the true nature of existential nihilism. Ubermensch and egoism are the opposite ends of the same coin. Suchlike Raskolnikov, even though the underground man's ego prevents him from functioning in a proper societal manner he expresses in his enhanced sense of consciousness, stating,

"But gentleman, whoever can pride himself on his diseases and even swagger over them?... ?... Though after all, everyone does do that; people do pride themselves on their diseases, and I do, may be, more than anyone." (6)

He compares his ego to illness perhaps a parallel between him and the social beings who suffer from the same disease of egoism. It can be said that he is a fully conscious man, therefore inherently superior to those that blunder foolishly throughout life. Raskolnikov and the Underground Man place themselves upon a pedestal, therefore giving themselves the power to dominate physically, emotionally and to manipulate. As Raskolnikov physically dominated old pawnbroker Alyona, he derived her from her right to be alive while the underground man emotionally abuses Liza, whom he mocks- stating that her dream to escape prostitution is ridiculous and naive. According to Scanlan, the spreading idea of egoism in the West into Russian society disturbed Dostoevsky thus he frequently attacked the philosophy of nihilism as a whole and particularly existential nihilism. He states - In the 1860s Dostoevsky's interest in the phenomenon of egoism was powerfully fed by his conviction that a narrow focus on the ego or self-something he considered endemic in Western civilization was a plague that increasingly threatened Russia. We know from many sources that he regarded the spread of egoism in his homeland as a direct consequence of the Westernization of Russia and a prime moral, even mortal, danger. Therefore, it can be claimed that Dostoevsky sketched the characters of Raskolnikov and the underground man as a parody of the Russian ideal of egoism accompanied by the nihilistic traits of the characters in the novels seems accurate. As the protagonists serve as a critical demonstration of a system of beliefs that Dostoevsky found appalling and lackluster. Dostoevsky found egoism to be solely based on his irrational, and dogmatic viewpoint, dictated by his enhanced sense of consciousness. Raskolnikov and the Underground Man's actions are due to their enhanced sense of ego. Besides, a sense of subconscious inferiority complex can be traced in these characters. They happen to find people staring at them mockingly or purposefully trying to humiliate them. However, in reality, it does not include the other party trying to scathingly critique their character nor any attempts to outright wrong them. This is exemplified in the

Underground Man's encounter with the nameless Officer in Part I of the novel where he is convinced that the officer purposefully pushed him in a crowded street. While it appears to be funny but rather indicates towards the Underground man's inferiority complex and egoism that The Underground Man goes out of his way spending several years plotting to right the wrong that the officer committed, an officer that did not even know him personally though he wanted his revenge. Meanwhile, Raskolnikov is a victim of poverty and a higher education degree that did not bring him any fortune. He is a very proud man who believes his knowledge should bring him wealth and prestige and he is the only one worthy of respect. He stands out from the crowd because he is a person who breaks the law for a very foolish belief being a student of Law. "The novel reflects Dostoevsky's concerns about the generation of aspiring new men and the rise of nihilism." (Sosnak 156) They completely failed to comprehend the true nature of being. Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the pioneer of existentialism, defines the aura of existence, 'man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards' (345) however they failed to encounter themselves. Both novels illustrate their depression, disparity, and loss.

## 8. Findings

Dostoevsky foregrounds Free will and the rising rational egoism in the nineteenth century Russia through Raskolnikov and the Underground Man. Rational egoism claims free will to be fictitious. This refers to every action taken by an individual to be predetermined by the complexities of society or one's self, similar to Raskolnikov's actions. From the very beginning of the novel *Crime and Punishment*, it can be witnessed that Raskolnikov is not like one of the common lead characters of literature who either sticks to good deeds and pitiful incidents takes place in their life or is a complete vindictive lead character whose aim is to harm others for their gain. It seems like, he is a fusion of these two traits. His dual personalities contradict with each other. As if he is the Russian version of Jekyll and Hyde. Vice versa, the Underground Man is seen rejecting the idea of rational egoism, the entirety of the novel consists of the protagonist's struggle to exert control over his ego and self. Dostoevsky used him as a satire against rational egoists of westernized Russia. Sosnak describes his behavior to be 'involuntary'. He suggests that the Underground Man is well aware of his inevitable hateful reactions of the society is an outcome of his failure, the hatred is of his compulsions, which he longs to escape. According to the literary critics his character is crafted of parodies and satires against the westernized flawed ideals. His behavior exhibits traits of delusion and free will. His actions are inappropriate and irrational because that's how he chooses to behave. He acts upon his free will. Through both of these characters, Dostoevsky expresses his view on how misuse and misunderstanding of free will can never yield positive results. They are the ones who are making their own life spiteful by complicating it. Interestingly, both of these characters are crafted as archetype breaking characters. According to the Cambridge dictionary, an archetype is a typical example of someone or something or the original model of from which others are copied. Archetype is a term that is formed from Greek words that mean imprint or type. This particular word archetype means "model" or "prototype," as in

the following statements: "Levittown, Long Island, is the archetype of the modern American suburb"; and

"In the motion picture *Shane*, Alan Ladd creates the archetype of the cowboy-gunfighter. In both statements, archetype denotes a first model or prototype of that which has often been made or imitate" (Davis 28)

Therefore in literature, an archetype hero is someone who is always a good man whose goodness is always challenged by the cruel society. The hero's ability to endure the cruelty and stay true to his morality is what certifies them as a hero. These characters are generally the mentor type who is an idol for others with a pure and innocent nature, though often surrounded by a complex, troublesome situations these characters take wrong decisions which results in their downfall. These archetype heroes are often seen in a contradiction with villains or in the terms of literature the antagonist. Diversely, Dostoevsky has designed the character of Raskolnikov and the Underground Man to break the norm of archetypes in the world of literature through their appearance and mental description, their crude personality and mostly from their actions and perception towards the society. They are heroes with severely flawed ideals. What makes these characters stand out in front of any other protagonist is the way Dostoevsky has sketched both their appearance and dual persona in front of the readers. He describes Raskolnikov as

"He is morose, gloomy, proud and haughty, and of late - and perhaps for a long time before he has been suspicious and fanciful. He has a noble nature and a kind heart; he does not like showing his feelings and rather do a cruel thing than to open his heart freely". (Scanlan 127)

*Notes from the Underground* can be labeled as an archetype breaking novel because of its protagonist. The Underground Man's consciousness is the sole substance of his character. The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes it with the term "artistic dominant".

Bakhtin describes artistic dominants to be a governing construction of a character that denies any other features of their image, it absorbs the societal features of the character depriving them of any power to define and finalize the hero. Through utilizing the trait of artistic dominant in the Underground Man Dostoevsky creates a new philosophical aspect to describe existential nihilism. Where the idea of truth is a foreign aspect while the protagonist's consciousness is the only reality. But of course, both of these characters cannot be described as melodramatic villains because their actions and crude behavior are fed by their egoism and of course the westernizing Russian. The novels rather disclose Dostoevsky's firm belief that no human depravity is so profound that it extinguishes all conscience and all recognition of morality. The readers come across quite a few confessions by the Underground man and actions by Raskolnikov to further reinforce his claims. Dostoevsky's works reflect his life experiences. *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground* are amongst those novels that project his understanding of an existential nihilist's life and nature. His focus on the social and psychological aspects of these people experiences he gained in Siberia. The voice of Raskolnikov and

the Underground Man is the voice of his inner conflict. Dostoevsky started working on *Crime and Punishment* after his return from exile, he had a deplorable state of mind at that time. Frank mentions, Dostoevsky's desperate need for money due to his brother's early demise and the debt brought within. The novel was a hasty work beside, in the works of Sosnak it can be found that the newspapers published similar crime records of educating young men who engaged themselves into absurd crimes in search of fortune. From the analysis of the book and the author's life, it can be claimed that As Dostoevsky experienced the prison environment and observed the prisoners' behavior formed a ground for exploring the psyche of the criminal before and after the crime.

Dostoevsky's prison life consisted of extensive terrifying human experience as well as an awful world that categorizes good and evil simply ceased by their perception. Dostoevsky claims that the nihilistic attitude is strongly related to their struggling past and their inability to sustain the challenges of life, in short, they were mentally weak to handle the stress. Dostoevsky in his prison memoir narrates:

“Almost all of the convicts raved and talked in their sleep, and that what they raved about usually had some connection with their violent past. Nor did any of the peasants reject the moral law by which they had been judged; during the Easter services, they all fell to their knees and asked forgiveness from Christ (Dostoevsky qtd in Frank)

It can be assumed that he decided to pen nihilism in his writing to explain its psychic origin that ends in crudity and crime and his experience in Siberia was a step closer to understanding existential nihilism. It can be claimed that the author used Raskolnikov and the underground man as the projection of his observation, his depiction of contradicting psychology and morality. The underground man's view words Dostoevsky's result of his experimentation of the condition of the nihilist anarchism. The attention in the crude bluntness of the Underground man is more of the hatred towards corrupted nineteenth-century Russia and it's favoritism towards the westerners. Dostoevsky Particularly indicates that existential nihilism is a flawed concept for the core claim of this philosophical theory becomes vague through the variety of emotions and perceptions the protagonist erupts in the form of hatred, sarcasm, self-detest. If the existence is meaningless then why associate with emotions? Even after being after from the society the underground man connects with it, be it in the form of abhor. The motives and morals in both the characters which connect them with the essence of existence. Both the characters associate with introspections and a guilty conscience. However, one ends in redemption and the other does not. Both the novels describe how morals, emotions, any form of association with society cannot coexist with existential nihilism, it is a misinterpreted psychological disorder. Dostoevsky demonstrates the drawbacks of a popular Russian philosophy which contradicts its claims.

## 9. Conclusion

In *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*, it is apparent that existential nihilism contradicts human emotions which makes the philosophy fragile. The claim is supported by

Dostoevsky through the character of Raskolnikov's sister Dounia, his love interest Sonia as well as Liza who happens to be the only person the underground man is slightly close to. These characters have undergone way more sufferings, humiliation, and trauma than the protagonists of the novels however their strong moral standings, the virtue of their loyalty and being able to take the right decision is what Dostoevsky wanted to describe the true meaning of existence. Dounia is engaged to an extremely narrow-minded man, whose ultimate goal was to marry a beautiful girl from an underprivileged background. Being treated with utter disrespect she was logical enough to leave this man and move forward with her life looking for a new job unlike her blood brother who did not put any effort to find a job, he mortgaged his family's belongings and ended up murdering a person due to his delusion of being the best. Sonia, on the other hand, was a prostitute. A disrespectful and unacceptable figure of society. Interestingly, Dostoevsky associates her with Mother Marry, and a mother figure to all the held criminals Raskolnikov came across in Siberia. The intention was to portray that if one has the will to work hard and remain in the path of righteousness, life will treat them with the respect they deserve. Liza, a young prostitute from the novel *Notes from the Underground Man*, who had been forced into prostitution by her own family appears to be a character who as well demonstrates Dostoevsky's idea of overcoming the obstacles of life through the path of dignity. Liza dreams of escaping the hell and the Underground man fantasizes to be her savior. It seems like Dostoevsky is mocking crime through his deluded fantasy. A person whom himself is associated with prudence and abhor, who mocks her desire to escape fantasizes to free her. Thus the final finding of this thesis claims that Dostoevsky's aim in both the novel was to describe that existential nihilists are born with the predestined hatred and mindset to harm people who are a threat to their deluded ego. Furthermore, Dostoevsky attempts to stop existential nihilism from spreading into Russian culture by describing the criminal mindset which is being labeled as a philosophical theory. Dostoevsky shows that human emotions cannot be ignored thus it contradicts the claim that life is meaningless and emotions do not exist. The character of Dounia, Sonia, and Liza exemplifies that the balance of rationalism and logical reasoning is the key to remove corruption from if not society but from one's life. Thus the final claims of this thesis appear definite that the perceptions of Raskolnikov and the Underground man were shaped by the radical ideas and perception of a delusional existential nihilist's egocentric mind. The only reason these to individuals are questioning their existential realities is due to their crippled personalities which fail to cope with poverty, illness and most importantly their superiority complex. These individuals can be ascribed as the weak personas of westernizing Russia and with the help of these characters Dostoevsky brutally demonstrates the consequences of being associated with the radical ideas of nineteenth-century Russia.

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