

Sonya Marmeladova – Paradox of Female Power?

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Received: July 30, 2017.

Accepted: September 10, 2017.

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to study the character of Sonya Marmeladovova in Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* namely through the prism of feminist literary theory. Almost all relationships in *Crime and Punishment* are determined by the bond of power or let us say unceasing struggle for dominance. Female characters in certain situations resign, Sonya represents the extreme image of this phenomenon, she seems to be untied of that apparently necessary human condition.

On the other hand Sonya's love is said to be the power that saved Rodion Raskolnikov, that is led him to distinct moral principles based on christian faith and ethics. Regarding this verbalization Sonya could be understood as guiding element, leader, the mightier, who enforced her will. However the text indicates rather the situation when every rivalry for the couple is over.

But still Sonya (as probably the most outstanding case of female characters in Dostoevsky's texts) as contrasted to majority of male characters represents person who thanks to strong anchorage in ethic principles and spiritual notions like makefast shows some constant spot in the sea full of rational dilemmas and doubts that torment usually just men in Dostoevsky's works.

Dostoevsky seems to emphasise the power of women, the magnitude of their loyality and love, that has noticeably rather the maternal shapes.

Keywords: F. M. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Sonya Marmeladovova, feminist literary theory, femininity.

Sonya Marmeladova is one of the most impressive characters of Dostoevsky's work of art, and of world literature in general.

She bears many meanings and connotations, and is a being of mystery and paradox. Prostitute and Saint, degraded, humiliated, and triumphant, passive and active, fragile and strong, victim and free personality? When reading *Crime and Punishment*, following the character of Sonya brings inspiring contributions for understanding these notions, as well as to the issue of setting it.

The author of the novel shows Sonya as a character of final victory. Sonya represents the conquering idea. It is her whom Raskolnikov bows to in the end of the book; it is her values and her way that he accepts. In the epilogue, the novel quite clearly discusses the conflict of the two antinomic ideas.

Why should we describe Sonya as “victorious”? The text understands interpersonal relations primarily in the context of binary pairs – weak/strong, defeated/victorious, man/louse, free/dependent. The main protagonist of the novel, Rodion Raskolnikov, wishes to understand himself and the world around him through the prism of this conceptual framework. He finds his poverty and dependence to be oppressive and as signs of weakness, and he aims to examine himself to see if these signs of weakness delegate him to the category of the defeated, of the not completely human. One of the “explanations” of his crime towards the old pawnbroker is that he was trying to discover whether he is human or not (i.e., whether he has free will), and that he is only killing a mere “louse”. *Crime and Punishment* represents

one of Dostoevsky's prime meditations on the leitmotif of his work, i.e. on the issue: What is man?

Encounter and conflict is one of the eminent topical constants of Dostoevsky's work of art, or more precisely, this constant is made up of relationships in the form of the struggle for power (see also Kautman, 2004). In many variations, Dostoevsky convincingly shows the complexity and ambivalent nature of these relations. Power floats from one to the other. One individual takes control of another in a certain sense, while at the same time on another level, is also dominated. Dostoevsky shows cases when even a figure with rather domineering traits also craves to be dominated. Typically, Svidrigailov disposes of various means of manipulating Raskolnikov's sister, Dunia; he has money and an important piece of information for blackmailing her. These are distinctive ways and means for manipulating and dominating someone, as Dostoevsky's texts underline. But the very same Svidrigailov is in love with Dunia, and on that level he is dependent on her, he is aimless as to the emotions he feels for her, which gives Dunia power over him. Dostoevsky very clearly and frequently shows that the relation and proportion of tyrant and victim, master and slave is perplex, problematic. It is symptomatic that this governs behaviour, according to Dostoevsky, not only in the sense of interpersonal relationships, but also in the inner world of many of his characters. Various parts of one's personality seem to fight to assume the dominant role. These phenomena are often interpreted in the sense of the sadomasochist energies present in human beings and their relationships.

Back to Sonya. Her affinity for Raskolnikov is one of the central lines of the novel, and we can also say that this affinity is a type of struggle. The encounter between Sonya and Raskolnikov is the encounter between two antinomic ideas. The central core of their relationship is the discordant wording in the dialogues they hold. There is an anticipation that is constantly implied – which idea is stronger? True? Worthy of following?

They are in dialogue up to the very end of the novel, marking the field for the battle of these two ideas. Raskolnikov finds himself in a type of multilateral controversy. He is in core of this dispute. First and foremost with Sonya, the dispute is about his atheism and her strong belief in God. It is from this crucial contrast that other important questions stem, and – which is another important point that I would like to make – these essential questions are formulated and placed by Raskolnikov, the person in the centre of the discourse.

The atheism of Raskolnikov is (like other characters of Dostoevsky – nota bene male characters) the atheism of a human being not able to believe any more, since his intellect (poses such arguments) does not allow him to. He argues with Sonya on the field of rationality, through the dialogue.

Sonya enters the fight quite as a fearless and self-confident contender. It is obvious that she suffers and she indicates this, verbalises this feeling. Nevertheless, she endures. In so doing, she shows a remarkably bright and independent mind.

However, during the dialogue, Raskolnikov is not convinced by Sonya; we can say that quite the contrary. Sonya does not defeat nor overpower Raskolnikov in the dialogue, but rather after it or beyond it. In time of silent presence, proximity. About dignified silence by Dostoevsky's "spiritual" characters cogitates also Heldt (1987).

What happened in that case? What caused Raskolnikov's metamorphosis? What power? Who is the winner? And – is it appropriate to speak in such categories?

Raskolnikov seems to, in a sense, break down in the presence of Sonya (so, she logically seems to be the stronger one); he leaves his old self (or ego), he leaves his atheism, and he sets forward in a new direction – and it is Sonya who indicates this direction. It seems that the categories of winner and loser are not relevant in this new, cheerful, and blessed state. Is it because that the principal winner is Christ? Christ – Sonya’s sovereign, for whom she conquered Raskolnikov?

According to the epilogue of the novel, this may be the author’s intended message, which stands in a quite different discursive form than the preceding text of the novel.

In this light, we can see Sonya as leading, because – note well – she leans on a stronger power, on the strongest victor. Her power derives from the power of the miracle, the power of divine Christ.

As I have said before, Sonya does not win by using words, she wins by actions. And, in this case, her action is a sacrifice. Or is it a victimisation?

Sonya gives, renders, again and again. She became a prostitute to give money to her family. She abandons her family and goes with Raskolnikov to give him the support that she is convinced he needs. She does not put up big resistance to the deal of becoming a prostitute; she obeys and comes to realise this opportunity that is suggested by her entourage. Did not she know about any other options? She was intelligent and skilled enough to go by any other way, which could have also allowed her to stay with her family and could have supported her. It is Raskolnikov himself that calls her deed pointless, even abortive. In his perspective, although she brought some money to the family, she caused larger damage to herself and even to her family (let us merely mention, for example, feelings of guilt). An interesting and important point is that Sonya, however, seems to somehow remain strikingly undamaged.

Sonya’s second remarkable deed of giving is going with Raskolnikov, ready to stay with him, to give everything to support him in a hard situation.

Sonya gives and gives, asking nothing for herself in return, and in that respect, she represents an extreme position, a provocative one. I have already implied that it is impossible to read Sonya beyond the context of her belief, and thus beyond the Christian ethical, and even ontological, concept that gives meaning to her actions.

Dostoevsky repeatedly dealt with the theme of the fulfilment of the Christian ethical maxim of “love thy neighbour”, and presents various inspiring, related statements, maybe also symbols, perhaps idols. He shows paradoxes, hesitations, questions (such as, what happens when love-agapé meets erotic love?); he shows traits tragic and also comic (remember Leo Myshkin standing between two women with his compassionate love – agapé – for them, and thus causing them suffering). Sonya seems not to have solved some big dilemma. With lightness, she poses burning questions and issues that upset others – and in so doing, her image is very impressive, evoking respect and sympathies that are not based in accord with the Christian ethical and ontological context.

This could be explained, among other things, by the suggestion that Sonya’s portrait also draws from her femininity. Or more precisely, from the powerful archetype of MOTHER, as described by Molton, M. D., Sikes, L. A. (2015). Sonya stands quite approximate to the representation of that archetype.

If we have purported that Sonya was victorious through her actions, what exactly was this action? It is often described as a sacrifice. It is remarkable, and perhaps significant, that Slavic

languages understand the concept of sacrifice both as a ritual and as an oblation (obětina), in contrast to Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque languages, which differentiate these meanings with different expressions. The Czech word of sacrifice – oběť – is an expression denoting the religious act of offering – sacrificing (obětovat) – any sort of valuable oblations (obětiny) to God, to the gods, to supernatural beings, or to spirits. Some forms of sacrifice required killing the victim, and we also know of forms of “bloodless” offerings. In Christianity, sacrifice carries a specific meaning – the death of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in which God sacrifices himself, leading to the reconciliation between God and humanity. In English and in French, this ritual act is designated by the term “sacrifice”, in Russian, it is “zhertva”, and in German, it is “das Opfer”. Metaphorically speaking, we can understand “sacrifice” altruistically, as an unselfish act, as doing good for someone else or others at a price. Or, we can also understand it generally as a strategy, whereby one decides to suffer a (small) loss to gain a (greater) profit.

Czech also uses the same term – oběť – to designate the oblation, the offering, the “loss”, that is placed on the altar. In this sense, English and French differentiate sacrifice and victim(e)/victimisation (In Russian, the word remains to be “zhertva”, and in German, it is (das) Opfer/(die) Opfergabe). A “victim” is also the “victim” (oběť in Czech) of accidents, crimes, and thus the originally religious connotations of the word victim are secularised. However, the question of to which “spirits” these victims are sacrificed remains to be urgent.

This short excursion onto the “field of meanings” of the word suggests a quite substantial margin. Depending on a change in perspective (the sacrificer, the god, the offering, the person one sacrifices themselves for...), we again encounter the question of what did Sonya exactly do? Did she sacrifice something to her God? Did she sacrifice herself? Is she a victim? (of God? Of Raskolnikov?)

In his work, Dostoevsky very consistently presents peculiar “case histories” that display the relativity of general terms, e.g. good and evil; he suggests that what is considered to be “good” by someone is not “good” for others. In *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, we can mention the example of the repeated support, advice, and help from Razumikhin, which Raskolnikov rejects, since they are not “acceptable” or “valid” for him. Dostoevsky shows that similar structures have entirely different functions and are steeped in entirely different meanings.

In the introduction to the novel, Raskolnikov labels Sonya’s prostitution (even when taking into account its goals – to financially support her family) as an “unnecessary sacrifice”, as a senseless perversion of her own life, as a “crime” against her very self.

At the end of the novel, he accepts her “sacrifice”, her departure with him to Siberia. This signifies, among other things, that Raskolnikov accepts this situation, in which he “owes” something to someone, which is a situation that he desperately tried to avoid for a long time.

With slight exaggeration, we can say that Dostoevsky’s men deal with the world and themselves (and eventually with women as the object of their desires, and, in general, of their “plans”), and his women primarily deal with “the others”, i.e. usually the men.

Despite their grave destitution, the women of *Crime and Punishment* still have enough to give to others. They are capable of great sacrifices for their men, and are prepared to do things that they would never do for their own benefit – for ethical reasons. (Dunia and pragmatic marriage, Sonya and prostitution...) Also, these women are almost always virtuous. However, the effectiveness of their sacrifice is disputable, even problematic. Dunia’s planned marriage

and Sonya's prostitution make more sense when understood as desperate acts – as a sort of prayer for their endangered loved ones, placing an offering on the altar of a higher power that can save them.

It is certainly no accident that in general, almost all female protagonists in Dostoevsky's work are pious, whereas the men are no longer or not yet able to have faith.

The women in *Crime and Punishment* (and Sonya Marmeladova above all) seem to be some sort of guardians of order in an ethical, religious, and ontological sense. Some forms of power – let us suggest secular power – are out of reach for them (e.g. their chance of becoming financially independent are very minuscule – see also Martinsen, D. A., Maiorova, O. (2015), chapter The „woman question“; and Stites (1990), yet they wield the great power of influence. Furthermore, they even have a sort of miraculous power, the power of grace. Their power, or “influence”, is not “secular”, but “spiritual”. Or, perhaps they have become mediums of this power by virtue of their faith. This phenomenon is best witnessed in the character of Sonya Marmeladova.

The character of Sonya is usually seen in a positive light by both critics and readers. At the XVI. Symposium of the IDS in Granada, the Polish researcher Borowski had a very interesting contribution. He combined literary theory with “hard data”, worked with questionnaires and had a large amount of respondents. His research showed that Sonya is seen in a very positive light. She is a character with evident messianic characteristics. Already the choice of her name – Sophia, or, wisdom – indicates so, as well as other hints in the text... At the same time, she remarkably combines two archetypes. Not only does she have certain childlike features – her sincerity, innocence, and asexuality, but also, and perhaps above all, she embodies the archetype of the Mother, despite of the fact that she does not yet have children of her own. The basic trait of the Mother is that she gives selflessly. Her love is unconditional and unlimited. These strong resources, which are all basically godly – Christ, the perpetual child, the Mother – provide the image of Sonya with a great strength.

Sonya's altruistic behaviour found a clear form – and an evident fruit of her labours – in Raskolnikov's transformation. And so, aside from Myshkin and Alyosha, who, in the later works of Dostoevsky rather cause chaos in their surroundings with their compassionate love, we can view her behaviour as more productive and – which is not without significance – overall more believable; an intriguing cogitations on passivity and activity and effectiveness by Dostoevsky's male and female characters – also Masaryk (1995-6).

The significance of Sonya's femininity in the process of Raskolnikov's transformation is also mirrored in a parallel relationship – that of Raskolnikov and Razumikhin. Razumikhin, also, relates to Raskolnikov with an unseen empathy and supportive faithfulness; however, it is in this point that we see a fundamental difference. Razumikhin did not save Raskolnikov, because he was not able to fully surrender himself. To sacrifice himself, just as Sonya does. Sonya's sacrifice and her submission is, in the eyes of readers, acceptable and perhaps even anticipated, expected. A notable counterpart is the plot line of Dunia and Svidrigailov. Dunia is in a similar situation as Sonya – a disturbed man, who is, in many ways, quite similar to Raskolnikov, is begging for her support and love. He probably also murdered a woman for financial reasons, and is also a “searching”, doubting, and suffering man. Dunia, however, rejects Svidrigailov, she refuses to love him, to be loyal to him, to save his life. She wishes to retain her own. After this rejection, Svidrigailov commits suicide; his life is over. It seems

that love could have saved him, but this was not to be. Dunia, in contrast to Sonya, who harbours love and understanding for all, decided to reject this love.

The positive image and judgement of Sonya's character and her archetypal behaviour is suggested in many ways to readers already in the beginning of the novel. Her name has positive connotations, her appearance is positively described in the text, as well as her manners (from the perspective of the narrator and other characters), and she is beloved by almost everybody (in contrast to Raskolnikov, who is not liked in any of the circles of his acquaintances, e.g. among his classmates, and not even in prison...). In contrast to the first versions of the text, in the final draft of the novel, Sonya is portrayed as an utterly easygoing person that wishes to do good to all people, to benefit them and to comply with them; Dostoevsky, (1972-90). As an extremely paradoxically constructed character, she does great things despite of her abjection; she proves to have great power. Her behaviour is understood as a manifestation of effective, charitable love, which supports and saves her surroundings. (Among others, T. G. Masaryk (1995-1996).

However, the light of her character also casts a shadow. Her goodness and complicity reminds one of the naiveté of wise Vasilisa before she must set out on her own into the dark forest. Her motherly, selfless behaviour is so oriented towards others that she completely "empties" her own self. Aside from the giving motherhood in her, there is no other type of womanhood, nor humanity. Sonya is so "godlike", supernatural, that she is no longer human. She is no longer a humiliated woman or slave, but she is a woman exalted, a goddess. She is not powerless, but powerful. In terms of Jungian psychology, the idea of the subjugated woman-slave is replaced by the one ideal that a man thinking in line with the logic and rhetoric of the ruler and the slave can respect, the ideal of the beloved mother.

Immediately after murdering the old pawnbroker, who "paid" for having power, i.e. money, Raskolnikov seeks out Razumikhin, who attempts to support him and offers him a job, to translate an article on the subject whether a woman is human or not.

As was implied before, the humanity of man is not a matter of course in Dostoevsky's work, it is not a given by the mere fact of birth or existence, but rather is obviously something that must be fulfilled, and can thus remain unfulfilled, perverted. Apparently, this is also the case with manhood and womanhood. In a time when one epoch was ending and another beginning, Dostoevsky discusses the transformation of women and of womanhood. In his texts, the "old" concept of womanhood encounters the concept of the "new" era. In *Crime and Punishment*, he fairly distinctly reflects these social phenomena related to the emancipation of women and to their increased level of education. In contrast to later texts, *Crime and Punishment* combines the themes of women's issues with a certain irony and ambivalence.

Notwithstanding, all female characters (even the one that apparently most verily reflects the new social conditions, Dunia) display their stability, and especially their piousness, not only as a sort buoy in stormy waters, but as a direct connection with the land of the old world, which is, in the eyes of Dostoevsky, a world that is better than the one to come. Lost men that plough through these unquiet waters firmly attach themselves to the females not only for their own sakes, but also for their abilities of mediation.

Crime and Punishment is an in-depth study of the character of interpersonal relationships and of the issue of "becoming man". It polarises (e.g. weak/strong...), yet at the same time, it questions this very polarisation. It searches for possible interpersonal relationships that are

not based on the principle of power and ownership, and in this effort, it achieves the only truly liberating position. The relationship of the victor and the defeated, of the ruler and the slave is abolished on the basis of Christian love, whereas Dostoevsky emphasises the rather subversive potential of Christianity; its hierarchical and metaphysical contexts are left aside in this sense. With extraordinary sensitivity, Dostoevsky makes a diagnosis about the new epoch, in which he sees the “old order” die, only to be replaced by the “new order”. He analyses the issues of the “new era” in the characters of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov, i.e. the issues of “man”, the issues of the standings of men and women.

In Sonya, he shows the possibility of a synthesis that could overcome any “problems of men of women”.

We can also understand *Crime and Punishment* as a text about “man and God”. In Dostoevsky’s works, it is solely the men who search for God, who lose Him and who find Him. Sonya is perhaps the most distinct example of a woman who mediates this process. Part medium, part mediator. If at the end of the novel, Raskolnikov finds God, then this is only so because of the help of a woman. And perhaps he also discovers humanity – in a woman.

It seems that it is only in finding God (again), in living their life according to Jesus’ commandment to “love thy neighbour” that these searching men can find their freedom, or their liberation. Similarly for women, who can also show the way to these men, rather than aim for the ideal of their own freedom, independence, and social equality: for them, also, a life in concordance with the tenets of Christianity brings spiritual freedom.

Acknowledgement

This paper is published with financial support of grant provided by GAUK nr. 484916 named The feminine element by F. M. Dostoevsky solved in the Faculty of Art Charles University, Prague.

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