



## DOSTOEVSKY AS A SOCIAL SATIRIST: THE EVOLUTION OF THE DOSTOEVSKIAN SATIRE THROUGH THE THREE SHORT STORIES: “AN UNPLEASANT PREDICAMENT”, “THE CROCODILE” AND “BOBOK”

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides a close reading of the three short stories of Dostoevsky, the Great Russian novelist. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* makes some attempts to analyse features of the short stories written by Dostoevsky. Still, there are unexplored aspects which require our concern. The presence of satire and its development is such an area of study. In order to illustrate the growth pattern of the satiric elements, three stories are taken for study here. So, this is a diachronic study of “The Unpleasant Predicament”, “The Crocodile” and “Bobok”.

Apart from providing a livelihood for the author, these stories serve the purpose of reducing the complexity of his serious works. They provided the much awaited relaxation to him. These stories were the sole medium of self-expression for Dostoevsky during his immediate post-exile period and most of them were created around simple themes. They did not reflect any of the complications of his real life. But later, his stories began to gather more depth. The seemingly silly fantasy about a man swallowed alive by a crocodile turns out to be the clever reflection of the moral degradation of the contemporary society. The gradual improvement in the position of the narrator too is noticeable here. In “Bobok” the third story, under survey, the protagonist is the most important character who reports the extraordinary incidents in a lighter vein. So, this brief study establishes the pattern of the development of unique satiric elements in the three short stories of Dostoevsky.

Key words: Satire, humour, interiorization, fantasy, anarchy, dark comedy

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### INTRODUCTION

Dostoevsky, the Russian literary genius, is less known for his treatment of satirical themes. He is often categorized as the writer of great ideals and the proponent of profound theories. Most of his writings portray an empathetic approach towards the victimized hero or heroine. Caustic remarks and

occasional glimpses of comic references often lose their punch under these highly serious negotiations. Still, this article attempts to excavate the lighter themes of Dostoevsky, emphasising on his three short stories, written during the three different periods of his literary career. Elements of Menippean satire, like ridiculing “pedants, bigots,

cranks, (...) incompetent professional men of all kinds" are clearly discernable in these stories ("Menippean Satire" Wikipedia). In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin explains the descent of Dostoevskian satire as a true offshoot of this Greek master (*Problems*, "Chapter IV Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition" 116).

The post-exile writings of Dostoevsky exhibit his thirst for newer themes. Due to the constant vigil kept by the authorities on the literary involvements of their former political exile, he fell into the disadvantage of choosing politically neutral themes. This resulted in his timely diversion towards less serious themes such as social satires. The element of lampooning persisted through these stories often created an effect of caricaturing. The writer seems to laugh at the social hierarchies and false pretensions, though he does not dare to make any direct comments about these in person. Let us analyse the short stories in their chronological order.

#### **"An Unpleasant Predicament"- A Simple Comedy**

This is the story of a high government official, Ivan Ilyitch Pralinsky, who wanted to break the class images existing in the society. This young officer proposes great ideas in order to save humanity from the clutches of class divisions. He tries to make social transformation through some topsy-turvy attempts, which misfires and ends up in great calamity. Through this story, Dostoevsky satirizes the aristocratic conceits prevailing in the contemporary Russian social life. Each character remains as the prominent representative of the social class to which he or she belongs to.

The story is narrated using the simple, third person voice. In spite of his lengthy narrations about the life and customs of the different circles of Russian community, the narrator does not appear anywhere in person. He remains obscure, even if omniscient, throughout. Yet, it is through his timely intervention that the reader comes to know about the inner thoughts and ambitions of the characters.

The story begins with a housewarming scene. Stepan Nikiforovich, a high government official and a chronic bachelor, is celebrating his birthday in his new house, with his two friends. The style of the narration reveals their pomposity and

ambitious nature. Dostoevsky describes their conversation as "a staid and edifying conversation on a very interesting subject" ("An Unpleasant Predicament" 36). A humorous punch is provided to this introduction through the narrator's comments like, "He was honest, too, that is, it had not happened to him to do anything particularly dishonest; he was a bachelor because he was an egoist; ..." (37). The three friends gathered there are almost alike in their ideas and opinions. Still, Mr Pralinsky, the youngest among them, seems to be more high-spirited. During their grave discussion about humanity and the future of Russia, which they carry out while drinking champagne profusely, makes this young liberalist more and more excited. He pours out weird suggestions and attempts really hard to gain the recognition of his friends.

This outwardly serious discussion comes to a comic end when the host puts an end to it abruptly, to keep his punctuality. Leaving aside their great ideas as well as their mutual hostility, the guests come out. Then, Mr Pralinsky finds that his coachman is nowhere to be found. He forgets his previous declarations of equality and speaks about thrashing the servant. The wine he had drunk makes him feel more elated and quite accidentally, he finds that one of his subordinate's wedding party is going on in a nearby house. He decides to declare his magnanimity to the world by paying a visit to Pseldonimov, the poor clerk, on this special occasion. This will be an opportunity to experiment with the higher ideals of life, proclaimed by him at the housewarming party.

The intimate thoughts of Mr Pralinsky appear to be more conceited and clever. He believes, "...But morally, morally, it is a different matter; they will understand and appreciate it... My actions will evoke their nobler feelings..." (50). Thus the hero enters the house, where he plans to show off his fellow feelings for his subordinate. The visit leads to more hilarious incidents. The supercilious manners of the guest frighten the poor bridegroom. The man almost gets frantic at this sudden visit of his officer and with much difficulty, procures some champagne to serve him befittingly. The drink goes directly to the head of the guest, and he begins to

quarrel with the others. The party gets spoiled and the poor clerk rushes back and forth to save his face.

Then the hero falls unconscious and they take him to the bridal chamber, the only available room in the house. The pathetic, horror-stricken bridegroom is dishonoured publically. Here, the narrator describes the circumstances that led to the marriage. The penniless bridegroom is actually the victim of his sadistic father in law. The sudden appearance of Mr Pralinsky, who, "opened his arms to embrace all humanity, all his subordinates" (73) makes his situation worse. The story reaches its climax when they carry him to the bridal chamber to the utter dismay of the bride. The hilarious incidents almost subside with the falling down of the bride and the bridegroom from their nuptial bed arranged on chairs.

The next morning was rather a gloomier one for all the characters. The officer escapes almost unnoticed, from his subordinate's house, obviously leaving behind his liberal ideals. He stays away from the public for a short while, and on his return, proves to be a strict taskmaster. Pseudonimov evades him cleverly for the convenience of both. The whole incident thus ended up as an educative one for Mr Pralinsky.

The story uses traditional modes of storytelling and the writer does not attempt to include any controversial ideals into it. Instead, he mildly attacks liberalism and the pretensions of the aristocratic liberals. The narration is rather simple and direct. The contradictions that occur between the characters' deeds and words often create humorous situations. Simple motives and uncomplicated presentation distinguishes this story from the other works of Dostoevsky. The absence of hidden conceits makes the story more comprehensible. Thus, the work ends up as a direct attack on the ludicrous attempts of the aristocracy to preach liberalism to the less-privileged classes in society.

#### **"The Crocodile"- A Satire on the Private and Public Life**

A few years later, Dostoevsky wrote another short story titled, "The Crocodile". This story adopts a more compact style of narration and avoids all kinds of hilariousness. The sharp satire

proves to be of lashing effect and is aimed at the upper, cultured stratum of society. The writer unfolds the foolishness and lechery lying behind the outwardly smooth relationships. Here, he brings together satire and fantasy, the elements which are rare to find in a realistic author like Dostoevsky.

The subtitle describes the major incident in the story and thus the writer denies all chances for suspense from the start. It goes like this, "A True Story of How a Gentleman of a Certain Age and of Respectable Appearance was Swallowed Alive by the Crocodile in the Arcade and of the Consequences that Followed" ("The Crocodile" 3). The elevated style of introduction of the narrator and his friends, the couple, increases the comic effect. The lady's initial enthusiasm to visit the crocodile and her feeling of regret at finding an ordinary beast poses some intellectual queries to the reader. The boredom of her routine life and her desire to witness something extraordinary lie behind this regret. They were all expecting "something different" (3). The slight suggestion of a romance between the narrator and Elena Ivanovna makes the trio more comical.

Quite unexpectedly, a strange twist occurs in the story. Ivan Matveitch, the husband of the beautiful Elena and a very cultured officer, gets swallowed alive by the crocodile. The incident is rendered in a satirical fashion through the voice of the narrator who witnesses it. He comments, "- there was something so comic about it that I suddenly quite unexpectedly exploded with laughter" (5). The bedlam that follows this incident reveals the ludicrous intensions of the victim's wife to impress others by manipulating the occasion. The German, who is the proprietor of the beast, turns out to be an incarnation of greed itself. He objects the idea of tearing the crocodile, even to save the man. Simultaneously, Ivan, the man inside, interferes and informs them that they should take decisions according to the "principles of economics" (8).

As Ivan begins his exploration in the entrails of the animal, his wife tries to better her circumstances in the external world. The narrator is sure about her charms and notices her coquettish nature. He goes to consult a mutual friend who is

already aware of this strange circumstance. Their conversation brims with conceits and connotations. This friend, a thorough conservative, deploys the incident to criticize the liberals. He says, "It was always 'progress' and ideas of all sorts, and this is what progress brings people to!" (11). He suggests that it is a better option, than going abroad and advises Ivan to stay there for a few more days. After making a lengthy oration on the futility of progressive ideals, he sends the narrator away. Still, he does not forget to add that "the value of the foreign crocodile has been doubled and possibly even trebled" (14). The mention about Ivan's bereaved wife softens this practical minded man and this adds more humour to the sarcastic narrative style. He too seems to be a victim of her charms as it is evident from his apparent change in tone.

The narrator returns to Ivan and explains to him all the developments in the outer world. By this time, the man inside the crocodile has made more detailed plans for future. He wants to manipulate the incident for economic benefit and even prepares himself to stay permanently inside the beast. The narrator feels that the latter is feverish. But the captive urges his friend to rush to Elena Ivanovna to make her ready for the future ventures. He seems to be in an edifying mood and speaks eloquently about various subjects. Dostoevsky makes an occasional dig at the prevailing pseudo-patriotic ideals through the adverse comment made by Ivan about the low quality of his dress material which is of Russian make. He laments that if it were an English dress, it would have lasted more. Then he assigns his friend to read him the newspapers from the next day onwards.

The next day, the narrator visits Elena Ivanovna. She informs him about her plan to get divorced. She says, "A husband ought to live at home, and not in a crocodile..." (26). Her views get refuted very soon by the family friend, who pacifies the lady by offering her the assured position of a celebrity's wife. Still, she denies the possibility of going inside the crocodile, with her husband near her all the time. Thus the family situation remains as ridiculous as it was in the beginning. The somewhat relaxed narrator goes to his office. There too,

people continue to talk about the strange incident. Newspapers are publishing articles on it. Most of these articles sympathise with the crocodile as it should be done in the progressive manner.

The story ends at this juncture with the narrator stands in his confused status about his role in the whole incidents. The humorous effect originates mainly from his sincere, subjective style of narration. So, the story retains the direct tone of narration and restricts the number of characters to the minimum. This is typical of the Dostoevskian style of storytelling and it proves to be of great use in revealing the comic facts lying inside the intricate human relationships.

#### **"Bobok" - The satire of the World Beyond**

The short story "Bobok" is written by Dostoevsky at the later age of his literary career. So, this work possesses a much more compact structure and thematic unity. The characterisation is very typical of the writer. The narrator, a failed literary person as usual, stays as an indifferent observer throughout the story. He feels so dejected one day and decides to leave his familiar circle for a while. Most comically, the place he chooses for the revival of his low spirit is a cemetery. There, he sits on a tomb in a melancholy manner, thinking about the transience of life.

All on a sudden, he begins to hear feeble mutterings. Someone beside him begins to chant "bobok" to him ("Bobok" 4). He begins to contemplate on the voice. As he remains there for a long time, he listens to certain "muffled sounds as though the speakers' mouths were covered with a pillow" (6). Slowly, he learns that it is the dead who are talking from their tombs. The dead seem to be living their afterlives under the earth. They continue their past business on the earth in the netherworld and enjoy the ranks given to them in the living world. They talk, quarrel and even gossip, while many more are waking from their temporary sleep of death. As in the very Dostoevskian way, the narrator remains outside and overhears the exchanges that take place underneath. He stays indifferent and at the same time, attentive. The humorous factor lies in the fact that, in spite of resting in peace, as it is given in their epitaphs, all these dead are engaging in the trivialities of life and

enjoy all kinds of pleasures without any restraints of the moral rules posed by the society. They seem to be in a hurry because they know that they all will end up in the same bobok state. Then they have to yield to complete silence.

The comic element of the story begins to appear prominently from the first conversation between the dead general and his subordinate. Even after death, they are not ready to leave the hierarchical rules of the living. Another character, a lady, who enjoyed all the comforts as well as sensual pleasures in the world, is still in pursuit of it in the netherworld. A regular shop-keeper, a youth and a privy councillor join the group subsequently. They all seem to wake up soon after their burial. A girl too is giggling among them. They all know about the transience of time and make themselves ready to enjoy all the sensual pleasures for the time being. One voice explains that the same 'bobok, bobok' stage is awaiting them all. After that, there lies the days of complete silence. The person who explained these things to them is rotting there, under the weight of his past misdeeds.

The narrator describes the festival of anarchies they plan to host under the earth. He stands helpless outside. The ineffectiveness of the laws of the living world in judging the citizens of the netherworld increases the sarcastic aspects of the story. The sudden hushing up of the sounds denotes the secretive nature of the existence of this alter-world of unbridled passions. The two worlds remain mutually exclusive of each other and any kind of intrusions are not permitted in between these two. The narrator himself begins to listen to the soft murmurings, which he now identifies as bobok, the final state of forgetfulness. The failures in his literary career have made him more dead than alive in the world itself. In the end, he decides to eavesdrop again at the tombs with a hope to elicit the tales of the dead. The story brims with the excessive use of dark humour. The presence of the disinterested narrator increases the effect of this technique very much.

The fantasy world of the dead lies complimentary to the real world, which is lacking in sincerity and the expression of true emotions. The dead ones are unrestrained and unusually frank in

their speech. They seem to be compensating the shortcomings of their past life. They are in a hurry to satisfy their hitherto forbidden desires. This kind of an unleashing of sensuality after death is contradictory to the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. Christianity denies the existence of the physique after death. The story remains as the unique psychological comedy in the whole literary span of Dostoevsky. Through this story, the writer unravels the hidden desires of the seemingly cultured gentle folk, laughs at them for their hypocrisy and makes a wild guess that they may not carry over these restraints beyond their graves.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the occurrence of the satiric elements in the three short stories of Dostoevsky reveals the gradual development of intellectual satire in his writings. These stories stand as landmarks through this evolutionary process. The first story, "An Unpleasant Predicament" remains more crowded in its characterisation and hilarious in its style. The omniscient narrator does not get involved in the narration and he is not introduced to the reader on any circumstances. The settings are described in detail as in the case of the party hall, bridal chamber and the newly made house. This restriction made on the place of action creates a sense of unity of place, a feature of the conventional comedies.

"The Crocodile" marks a significant deviation from the much trodden paths of storytelling. The role of the narrator turns to be of more significance and here, it gets equated with the roles of the characters. The action takes place through a few characters, though their numbers get restricted to a minimum. The settings of the story can be differentiated into external and internal. The city Arcade, the house of the couple and the office of the narrator form the external setting. Still, a major portion of the action is taking place in the minds of the characters. The thoughts of the hero, as well as his plans for future constitute a major segment of the action. The narrator's feelings too play its role in the forward movement of the story. So, the comedy gets shifted to the internal actions here. Dostoevsky laughs at the follies and greed lying deep in human psyche through this story.

The third story shows the culmination of this interiorization. The writer portrays what happens to these hidden emotions once these persons pass away. Their hidden passions are no more prohibited by false hypocrisy. Instead of the rehabilitation of the human soul after death, Dostoevsky allows the body an opportunity to enjoy the unbridled pleasures of the senses. This seems to be a parodic representation of an anarchic world. The narrator, whose identity is well-revealed as a failed writer, stays outside these carnal celebrations and reports it to the reader. The external setting is a cemetery but as in "The Crocodile", a major portion of the action is taking place inside the minds of the characters.

Thus, the three stories represent the evolution of interiorized comedy in Dostoevsky. Instead of creating huge guffaws of laughter, his satires are capable of imparting a knowing smile on the lips of the reader after a close perusal. These smiles will remain there as the reminders of good literature while the other ones may pass onto oblivion very soon.

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