



The Representation Of Women In 19th Century Russia And In Dostovoeksky's Writings "A Meek One" And *Crime And Punishment* Vis-À- Vis The Roles Of Women In Victorian Society And In The Writings Of Victorian Writers

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Abstract:

The subjugation of women in 19th-century Russia, as well as in Victorian society in England, is an important and evident issue. The power dynamics between men and women were crucial at both times. Dostovoeksky's famous short story "A Meek One" (1876) overtly portrays the situation of women in 19th-century Russia and also depicts how the anonymous heroine in "A Meek One" subverts the social convention of an androcentric society. "Androcentrism" defines the male domination over females. Women are relegated to household duties by male domination. Similarly, the subjugation of women in the Patriarchal society is also very much evident in the Victorian era (1837-1901). Many writers like Mary Chevelita Dunne, famously known as George Egerton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Charlotte Brontë in the Victorian era subvert the "Victorian Morality" and emancipate their heroines through their writings. My paper aims to delineate how Dostoevsky's writings parallel the writings of Victorian writers such as Charlotte Brontë and how the women's situation coexists with the situation of women in Victorian society.

Index Terms: Victorian morality, subversion, women's emancipation, kenoticism.

Introduction:

"Victorian Morality" that was emerged in the 19th-century Victorian era, proposed that females do household chores, take care of their family members, and constrain themselves to the household. The parallelism between the representation of women in 19th-century Russia and in the Victorian era is strikingly recognized. The marginalization, the subjugation, and the subordination of females are evident in both these times. In the short story "The Meek One", Dostovoeksky delineates that the wife is not the "Decembrist" wife who can accompany her husband, but she is a ruler of her own mind. "Decembrist wives" were the ideal woman who accompanied their husbands into exile. The Decembrist Revolt, which occurred in 26th December 1825 in Russia. "The Women's Question" emerged in 19th-century Russia, and it leads to the male to overthink the role of women in society. Apart from that, the Victorian writers emphasize that women are not the "angel of the house," but they are the devils of their own rules. The parallelism between the anonymous wife in "A Meek One" and Sonya in *Crime and Punishment* is very much evident in the sense that these two women become the figure of Mary Magdalene in the sense of Kenoticism.

Dostoevsky's *The Crime and Punishment* (1866) helps to define the concept of "Kenoticism" and how it is very much related to the anonymous wife in "A Meek One". The Victorian writings like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", and Egerton's story "A Cross Line" help to comprehend the female position in Victorian society and how women subvert the social standards and become the subject of their own wills, like the anonymous wife in "A Meek One".

I wish to divide my paper into two parts. The paper's focus will be on women's representation in 19th-century Russia as well as in the Victorian era, and how the anonymous wife subverts the rules, regulations, and conventions of the society in Dostoevsky's short story "A Meek One". I would like to discuss the parallelism between 19th-century Russia and the Victorian era in terms of the restriction, marginalization, and subordination of women. To emphasize my argument, I would like to discuss the writings of Victorian era *Jane Eyre*, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and "A Cross Line" to delineate that they are also victimized by society as women are victimized in 19th-century Russia. How the women shatter the barrier of patriarchy will also be described in this paper. In the second part of my paper, I would like to discuss the comparison between the anonymous wife in this short story, "A Meek One," and the character of Sonya from *Crime and Punishment*. I would like to describe how the two women become the figures of Mary Magdalene in the sense of Kenoticism.

Part One:

The representation of women in 19th-century Russia, as well as in the Victorian era:

Women in 19th-century Russia were victimized by their husbands for their slight disobedience. As G. Muravyeva remarks, they are too much dominated by their husbands, and even sometimes they are raped by their father-in-law (G. Muravyeva 209). When the "Woman Question" awakens in 19th-century Russia, it leads to the male to overthink the role of women in the contaminated society. Women oftentimes are relegated to the household chores (G. Muravyeva 209). Many historians like Seraphim Shahkov and Aleksandr Zagorovskii describe the social abuses made by men because of "the low status of Russian women and the society's patriarchal attitudes towards the family" (qtd. in Muravyeva 210). In 19th-century Russia, husbands thought of themselves as the masters of the family. Even the civil law has not given proper justice to women if they disobey their husbands. It is to be noted that the famous women become the victims of "spousal violence" (G. Muravyeva 209). As Abby Schrader argued that "despite the enlightened attitude of Russian officials to domestic violence in the 1860s, their desires to reinforce Patriarchal relations and to the dominant position occupied by householders outweighed their concerns about spousal abuse" qtd.in Muravyeva 212). Here in Dostoevsky's famous short story "A Meek One", the author portrays the oppression of an anonymous wife by her husband, the pawnbroker. The story is basically about an anonymous girl who was 16 years old, had been going through poverty and misery, and desperately searched for a job but did not get one. Being suffered from extreme poverty, she has to marry the pawnbroker who is much older than her. Though she was suffering from being poor and being a girl, she did not lose her individuality at all. She continually revolts against the oppression of her husband through her "silent attitude". Her "silent attitude" is like the act of revolting against male domination. The anonymous wife's mother was dead when she was twelve years old, and then she stayed with her aunt. As the pawnbroker utters, "she had been living in slavery at her aunt's for those three years" (Dostoevsky, "The Meek One" 272). Her aunt forces her to marry, and she decides to choose the pawnbroker to marry. It is to be noted that the pawnbroker paid some amount of money to the aunt in order to marry her. It's like the bitter truth of society that he pays something to get the girl. Women are presented here like a commodity to buy. As the pawnbroker articulates, "I even made the creatures a present of a hundred roubles each and promised more .. (Dostoevsky, A Meek One 279). Jane in *Jane Eyre*, like the anonymous wife in "A Meek One," is also victimized by their aunts and by the Patriarchal society. Here, the pawnbroker wants to dominate his wife, but he is unable to do so. It's like his outbursting rage and incapability to dominate his wife that he utters; "I knew that a woman, above all at sixteen, must be incomplete subordination to a man . Women have no originality " (Dostoevsky, "A Meek One 281). The resistance of a woman against her husband is very much evident in the fourth chapter when she goes away with a man called Effimovitch and thereby shows her power to defy the patriarchal rules of the society. Her daring attitude is somewhat similar to the unnamed woman in George Egerton's short story "A Cross Line" . Being a victim of the household, the unnamed woman went to meet with her lover, and she also broke the convention of Victorian society. As Sarasvati Sri remarks, Victorian society addresses women as "cultural baggage" that restrains the development of the society (Sri 1). The Victorian society thinks that women can not be able to increase society's development (Sri 1). Women

are identified as those who are made to do domestic work, and they are defined as “narrow-minded” (Sri 3). Apart from that, many feminists and theologians acknowledge that “power and authority have resided in the hands of men, insufficient attention has been paid to women’s literary achievement and theological thought” (Ringe 1). Katherine Briggs argued that in Dostovoeksky’s “A Meek One”, the writer invites the reader to participate “with female suffering under an oppressive social and political regime which fails to protect its most vulnerable members” (Briggs 120). Dostovoeksky also sympathizes with women and emphasizes women as warriors in his novel *Crime and Punishment*, in which Sonya Marmeladova struggles and hence is forced to take up prostitution to feed her family members. Sonya helps her sister polenka from “the disgrace of prostitution by living independently of them , by visiting them stealthily at night, and by not wearing the clothes of her profession, as a rule, when interacting with them” (Blake 260). As Dostovoeksky assures “the readily public in an 1877 entry to *Diary of A writer*, such models of Russian womankind, e.g, *the samootverzhennitsa* (self- abnegator) or *the muchenista* (matyress) ...will encourage Russian to improve social and economic condition for women by extending to them equal access to education and employment”(26). In “A Meek One”, the gentle woman revolts against the institutional evils and turns into a ferocious woman who could resist the oppression of her husband. At a moment, she takes up the revolver in front of her husband. “She was looking straight at my eyes, and the revolver was at my temple” (Dostovoeksky, “The Meek One” 290). The Terra incognita of women is explored throughout the short story. Her act of taking up the revolver simply defines her resistance against her husband because she doesn’t want to be dominated. It is worthily noticeable that her husband banishes her from his bed. This incident suggests that her husband tortures her both mentally and physically. “She had brain-fever . She was in bed for six weeks” (Dostovoeksky, The Meek One 278). Her brain fever might be happening due to the domination, the restriction, and suppression of her husband, and she could not cope with her husband's rules. As the pawnbroker utters “the thought of her inequality pleased me” (“The Meek One 295). Her act of protest is very much evident when she committed suicide by jumping out of the window. This act of committing suicide delineates her individuality and personality, not to be dominated by anyone. She becomes independent in her own choice. The Social oppression is strikingly recognized when the workman describes the anonymous wife's death as “only a handful, a handful, and he pointed out the blood on a stone” (Dostovoeksky, The Meek One 209). She does not want to accept what her husband prefers her to be and chooses to die. In a way, she breaks the institutional evils by committing suicide. As Katherine Briggs remarks, “the novels of Dostovoeksky offer a perceptive and sympathetic portrayal of the experience of women in terms of their spiritual development and their striving in the face of moral, personal and institutional evil” (Briggs 120).

Part Two

The parallelism between the anonymous woman in “The Meek One” and Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*:

In “The Meek One”, Dostoevsky delineates how a motherless girl “develops a spiritual relationship with Mary, Mother of Jesus, and where the icon provides a symbolic focus for her devotion” (Briggs 109). Dostoevsky portrays Christianity not in a divine sense but in a kenotic sense. The presence of Christ is more humanized rather than divinized. Apart from that, Sonya is portrayed as a figure of Mary Magdalene from *the New Testament*. It is heard that Mary Magdalene was present when Jesus was crucified, and she was one of the companions of Jesus and helped Jesus. She was the witness of Jesus's burial and His resurrection. Here in *Crime and Punishment*, Sonya is the soulmate of the novel's protagonist, Raskolnikov, and she constantly helps him and tries to get him out of the crime that Raskolnikov committed. She was one who accompanied Raskolnikov when he was going to Siberia. Sonya gives him the book of *The New Testament* in order to get salvation. She told the story of Lazarus and thereby encouraged him to confess his sin. As Elizabeth Blake remarks, “Her (Sonya) connection to this authoritative reference point external to Raskolnikov’s aggressive argumentation allows Sonya to express herself independently of Raskolnikov’s words, thus enabling the reader to read her not as a religious fanatic but as a woman struggling to reconcile her belief in God with acute personal suffering” (Blake 263). As Hudspith utters “...Dostovoeksky would have been looking for some practical application of Christianity” (18). In “A Meek One”, the woman committed suicide rather than accepting the domesticity of women . But it is interesting that she holds on to “the icon of Madonna” in her hand when she jumps out of the window. “... had seen her stand with the ikon in her hands and jump out of herself...what if she did pray before the ikon?”(Dostovoeksky, “A Meek One” 294). This incident suggests that the woman still keeps faith in God and, as O Brien remarks, “ she throws herself on the mercy of God as

protector and intercessor” (O Bien 530). Here, the icon of Mary Magdalene is related to the figure of a woman who suffers so much throughout her entire life. Both the anonymous wife and Sonya have been going through much suffering and pain in their entire lives, but they never lose faith in God. Their faith in the Mother of God demonstrates that they are religious in the true sense. As Jane Boss remarks that Dostoevsky represents Mary, the Mother of God, not “as a cult figure of perpetual virginity, but as a woman who loved and suffered on behalf of her child, and whose experience offers consolation to those who grieve”(Jane Boss 1). Both the anonymous woman and Sonya have lost their mothers at an early age. They choose to be independent in their own choice. On the one hand, the anonymous wife was searching for work without wanting any accommodation in order to become independent. On the other hand, Sonya is forced to engage in prostitution in order to survive her life. The anonymous wife loved her maid, Lukerya, just like a mother loved her child. Katherine Briggs remarks that after the anonymous wife's death, Lukerya utters that her love for Lukerya is like a motherly love for a child (Briggs 115). Apart from that, Sonya protects her sister Polenka from going into prostitution just like a mother forbids her child to do unscrupulous work. Here, Sonya is depicted as a shield who protects her family from any difficulties. Though Sonya is a prostitute on the outside, she is chaste inside. Because her inner self is completely pure, and she is a Virgin in the moral sense. As Elizabeth Blake remarks that Marmeladov seeks “forgiveness, recalls his vision of Christ extending forgiveness to the unworthy. By so placing his daughter’s prostitution within the context of a salvation history, Marmeladov fixes for both Raskolnikov and the reader, the image of Sonya forgiven by Christ because of her self-sacrificial love and fearless compassion for others” (qtd.in Blake 257). It is to be noted that the transformation of Sonya’s behavior changes from the beginning of the novel to the end of the novel. As Blake argues that the transformation of her behavior is very much evident when “Raskolnikov reminds her (Sonya) of her narrow escape from ruin” (Blake 267). Sonya replies to Raskolnikov, “only don’t talk with me as you did yesterday” (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 313). As Briggs articulates about Dostoevsky's notebooks; “Sonya’ transforms from her previous state; I myself was the dead Lazarus and Christ resurrected me” (qtd.in Briggs 269) Apart from that, In “The Meek One”, it is to be noticed that at a time, the anonymous wife’s husband fell down at her feet” (Dostoevsky, “A Meek One” 300). The husband changed his behavior and took care of her when she had been suffering from bed fever for six months.

To conclude, Dostoevsky ornately represents the representation of women in 19th century Russia as well as the marginalization, oppression, and subordination of women in “A Meek One” and *Crime and Punishment*. The story also depicts how the women revolt against the institutional evils. The similarity between the suppression of women in 19th-century Russia and in Victorian society is very much evident. The parallelism between the conditions of women's plight in both 19th-century Russia and Victorian society is recognizably noted. The anonymous wife in “The Meek One and the figure of Sonya in *Crime and Punishment* have been going through much pain in their lives. They are portrayed as the figure of Mary Magdalene in the sense of Kenoticism. Dostoevsky depicts the figure of Christ as one who suffers like a human being. Dostoevsky depicts Christianity in a more radicalized sense rather than in a more typical religious sense in this short story, “A Meek One,” and in *Crime and Punishment*.

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