

Into the Abyss of Nihilist Absurdism: Critical Analysis of Dostoevsky's The Dream of a Ridiculous Man

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Abstract

This paper explores the impacts of nihilism and absurdism in Fyodor Dostoevsky's short story *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* which was originally written in Russian and mostly dedicated to the philosophy of nihilism and absurdism. This research is based on the notion that this whole universe is meaningless and purposeless; without any true meaning, but still, one must not inculcate the thoughts of suicide in mind. Searching for meaning is the meaning itself. This research highlights the events of nihilism and absurdism in the story and mainly focuses on the internal character of the Ridiculous Man and his psychological conflicts that attracted him to nihilism first and then to absurdism. Brain Gilbert's *Nietzsche and Nihilism* (1999) and Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) have been used as a theoretical framework for this study.

Key Words: Nihilism, Absurdism, Psychological Conflict, Suicide, Optimistic Nihilism, Meaninglessness, Horrible Ideas, Destructive Philosophy.

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Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of the greatest novelists and finest short story writer in the world lived in Russia and famous for his dense writings that gives deep psychological penetration into the human mind. Dostoevsky's novels and short stories are mostly known for deep psychological insights, and sometimes he is considered as one of the best rational psychological thinkers in the history of world literature. He was a specialist in exploring the psychopathological states of the human mind that leads to madness, suicide, irrationality, murder, and in the exploration of the humiliated emotions, self-destruction, cruel domination, and homicidal rage.

The Dream of a Ridiculous Man is a story of a lonely man, who is fed up with his life and does not care about his biological existence. He decides to commit suicide and bought a revolver and placed it in front of him on a table while sits on an armchair. He falls asleep and has experienced an interesting dream

in which he has killed himself and then transported to a place similar to earth in space. The idea of isolation as far as The Ridiculous man is concerned is quite obvious; he sits alone, walks alone, and having no company to talk to. Furthermore, the people were making fun of him and called him a ridiculous man which is also one of the prominent reasons for his physical and psychological alienation. As there is a reference to the failed suicide attempt of the Ridiculous Man, this paper is going to explore the reasons behind suicidal thoughts which is constantly compelling for ending his life and also highlights his resistance and coping mechanism for survival. Nihilism is a depressive philosophy that denies any meaning of life and claims the purposelessness of the whole universe. Fredric Nietzsche a German philosopher is the pioneer of the nihilistic school of thought and most often gives the example of nihilism which is directed to destruction and depression.

“Nietzsche attempts to not give up on empirical reality...but to attack philosophic abstractions” (Gilbert, 1999). He is denying any kind of objective reality or truth and is of the view that philosophy constructed problems that could be solved only through death and paves a way for committing suicide which urges all human beings.

Absurdism means something nonsensical, purposeless, foolish, and confusing. The absurd is of the view that though life is meaningless and purposeless but human is still longing and searching for meaning. Albert Camus a French philosopher is the pioneer of this school of thought, which is somehow related to existentialism. “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus, p.4). Camus has discussed his philosophy of absurdism in his famous essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). He is of the view that one must not commit suicide in this meaningless life but will try to enjoy the limits of this life.

Nihilistic thoughts often lead to depression and end in suicide, which results from the feeling of isolation and alienation combined with the thinking of meaninglessness and purposelessness of life. In Dostoevsky's story *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* the protagonist is experiencing the same situations, and his thoughts are constantly compelling him to end his life which leads him to a state of a psychological conundrum. Although much research has been conducted on the issue of suicide the scholar is unable to find any related work to the selected text. This research endeavors to achieve the research objectives of highlighting the thinking patterns and reasons behind the nihilistic views of Ridiculous Man and analyzing the absurd ways adopted by him for preventing himself from committing suicide. The research paper attempts to answer the following research questions. How the Ridiculous Man does was obsessed with depressive and destructive ideas of nihilism, and influenced by the meaninglessness of life? And secondly, in what ways does the Ridiculous Man fight with the horrible idea of suicide, and what is the role of absurdism in his life? This study is significant because it draws attention towards highlighting depressive and destructive thinking patterns of nihilism in the story *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. Further, it will bring forth into people's consciousness the efforts of standing against such destructive thoughts and give insights into Camus's philosophy of Absurdism as a coping

mechanism for dealing with suicide. Nihilism can be easily dealt with absurdism. This paper is an attempt for exploring the grim issues of nihilism and suicide. The study is delimited to only one literary text i.e., Dostoevsky's *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. The theoretical framework used for the analysis has been taken from Albert Camus's essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and the book of Brian Gilbert *Nietzsche and Nihilism* (1999).

A brief review of literature has been given to focus on the nihilistic ideas of humans in general and the implication of absurdism as a need of the hour for isolated and alienated folks. Elizabeth Trahan (1959) focused on the step-by-step psychological developments in the life of the protagonist. He has focused on the psychological dilemma; however, he is of the view that the final solution to such problems cannot be given, rather the individual will search for himself to go deep down to his psyche. Furthermore, Trahan discussed the Ridiculous Man's vision of the Golden Age and paradise in which he dreamed to believe in God but also searched for sin. Roger Philipson his article has discussed major ambiguities in the story and the paradoxes of its essential enigma. He further discussed that there are three types of ambiguities inside the story, one exists the psyche of the narrator, the second is concerned with the outside reality and the third is related to metaphysical and moral considerations. Alan Woolfolk in his article *The Two Switchmen of Nihilism: Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* (1989) analyzed the two close related joints of nihilism because they both denied the Christian faith and platonic reason. Both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche are rejecting any objective reality and permitted everything as lawful. Gerald J. Sabo (2009) analyzed the dream in the story from the perspective of Christian hope for the societal setup in Dostoevsky's time and mostly analyzed from a textual and subjective point of view. Denis Crnković (2012) in his article described this story from the perspective of the inner realization of human evil or goodness.

This research is reflexive in nature and qualitative in approach which is based on textual analysis of Dostoevsky's novella *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. As qualitative research is based on personal interpretations of the researcher the same has been used by the scholar as well and also mentioned the opinions, ideas, and researches of other scholars for adding value to the conclusion of the study. For

analyzing the text, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* two major perspectives have been used as a theoretical framework. The First perspective has been used to analyze the nihilistic thoughts of the protagonist, their origin, and their influence upon his psychological state. The book which the scholar used for highlighting nihilism is Brian Gilbert *Nietzsche and Nihilism* (1999). Second is the idea of absurdism which has been embraced by the protagonist and decided not to commit suicide. The framework used for analyzing absurdity in the protagonist's character is taken from Albert Camus's essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

Dostoevsky's *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* is a story about a man who has been alienated from society and passes through a lot of psychological conundrums. At the outset of the story, a nihilistic perspective and a state of meaninglessness have been shown to the readers. "I am a ridiculous man. Nowadays they call me mad" (p.179). The beginning of the story is indeed very symbolic when the man called himself a "Ridiculous Man" and also mentioned. The view of the people that they called him "mad". It shows the nihilistic reflections of his thought to negate his intellect and feelings and considers himself a ridiculous man with no value. It happens mostly with those people who understand life and the universe as meaningless and purposeless and lose every hope in life. One can easily imagine and understand the psychological state of the protagonist from his choice of words, which is certainly a nihilistic stance without any emotions and sentiments. The view of society about the ridiculous man is also clear, and they perceived him as mad because of his complex psychological state. This character of the ridiculous man can be easily explained through the philosophy of Nietzsche. Dostoevsky has greatly influenced the philosophy of Nietzsche because one can easily relate the writings of both canons. Both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky got deep insights into the human psyche and explored the depth of human psychology through their writings. They both are two excellent intellectuals in nihilism and understand it better than any other person.

The Ridiculous Man is showing a kind of empathy to the people and feels pity for them.

People called him "mad" but he doesn't show any more anger to them, rather taking a position where he can easily neglect himself in front of the people. "Sad, because they do not know the truth, whereas I do. Ah,

how painful it is to be the only one to know the truth! But they won't understand this" (p.179). Nihilism is a destructive and depressive philosophy because its consequences are very bad. Here in the story, one can imagine the indifference of the protagonist from the people but he is upset with them because they cannot understand the truth about life which is in his view meaninglessness. "Nietzsche is itself telling about a reality, the more you know about yourself and life the more you will come close to your destruction like Oedipus" (Gilbert, p.81). Indeed, from the words of Ridiculous Man, it is clear that he got trapped in a nihilistic frame of thoughts by claiming to understand the ultimate meaninglessness of life that's why he is upset and dejected from his life. He says "the more I studied, the more it was borne in upon me that I was odd" (p.179). Gilbert has rightly given the example of Oedipus from a Greek tragedy because the more he gets closer to the truth of his origin the more he gets near to his destruction. Similarly, the Ridiculous man said that his behavior was very strange from his childhood but the more he learned and understood life the odder he became. This is where the Ridiculous Man is recognized as an active nihilist and reflects his nihilism in a very disturbing and confusing manner. A nihilist does not care about other people's thoughts, his feelings, and also life in general. Nihilism expresses the character and psyche of the Ridiculous Man for instance in the start when he is describing his childhood and gives several reasons for his oddity and strange behaviors.

One of the prominent reasons which mostly leads to nihilism is alienation and isolation from society. In the story, we see that the Ridiculous Man was marginalized by society and people were laughing at his every action, which arouses a sense of horrible feelings inside him. He says "I was laughed at by everyone upon every occasion. "But no one knew or guessed that if there was a man on this earth who knew better than anyone" (p. 180). Whenever a person feels marginalized in a society so he alienates himself from the crowds and in loneliness starts thinking which shapes his personality either in a positive or negative direction. The contradiction is that the Ridiculous Man suffered great emotional pain at those times. By portraying his emotional thoughts Dostoevsky has shown us that the reason for his nihilism lies in the past though he was a well-learned and sensitive man than the others he was ignored and tortured by society and now he is on stage that he

hates his existence. Gilbert In his book has beautifully mentioned this dilemma of the Ridiculous man as “the most universal sign of modern age: man has lost dignity in his own eyes to an incredible extent” (Gilbert, p.xi). This statement reveals to us that the situation faced by the Ridiculous man is not only limited to his character but many people have suffered and shaped by this preposterous behavior of society. Certainly, some people are strong and can challenge any kind of emotional state but those who are super-sensitive like the Ridiculous Man so will isolate themselves from the whole world. Dostoevsky suggests that such kind of development of a person is neither necessary nor meaningful which leads to a gloomy end as obvious in the character of the Ridiculous Man.

The consequences of the sudden realization of nihilism are very bad for humans. Similarly, we see in the Ridiculous Man that he substitutes all his feelings for intellect, belief for skepticism, and lover for hate that leads him to a decision of ending his life. These psychological contradictions are haunting him very serious time and time again but people used to laugh every time. He states in the text “I was ridiculous to anyone at all, then I think I would have blown my head with a revolver then and there” (p.18). It is very easy to see the indifference and ignorance of society towards him which continuously compels him to commit suicide and blow his mind. Here I want to contradict my argument by putting the statement of Arthur Schopenhauer. He glorified the idea of suicide in his essay *On*

Suicide. He says “The good man should flee life when his misfortunes become too great; the bad man, also, when he is too prosperous” (Schopenhauer, p.2). As a nihilist, Schopenhauer glorified the idea of suicide and considers it good for the prosperity of human beings. He challenged the Christian morality of claiming suicide as a criminal act and posit that if a person wants to live this

World willingly then he must be praised because it’s an act of courage. Gilbert also quoted

Nietzsche in his book that “everything is false, everything is permitted” supports both stances. If the Ridiculous Man is fed from his life and he wants to commit suicide then he must not be stopped by anyone from this act of courage in the view of Schopenhauer. The protagonist states in the text “it was the dawning conviction that in the world at large, nothing mattered” (p.180).

His psychological state is a curse for him and feels disturbed all the time. This precarious situation introduces him to nihilism and he stops caring about anything in the universe. This dangerous indifference of the Ridiculous Man is by no means passive or static but rather brings him to the verge of suicide. He understands perfectly the meaninglessness of life so why he should bother to care about people or the world and no one can provide him an essential view about this life and convince him to take care of himself and other people but he would simply say that “nothing mattered”. The Physical existence of the universe cannot provide any meaning to him. With this Nietzsche formulates aspects of nihilism like the life of Ridiculous Man is only restricted to material things and his moral life is also inclined towards nihilism. He states in the text “that was because that tiny star had given me an idea: I decided to kill myself that night” (p.182).

The way Ridiculous Man posits his argument for ending his life is just the reflections of his dark psyche. Undoubtedly his words show chaos, darkness, disturbance, and confusion which are the prominent traits of nihilism. Nietzsche says that “man wants to arrange all events as accessible to sight and touch” (Gilbert, p. 65). He wants to experience and manage everything by his hand which is not possible. His will to power carries him to the brink of death but death takes him back to life by not committing suicide and starts new feelings in a dream.

Gilbert in his book *Nietzsche and Nihilism* (1999) has given three stages of nihilism and the Ridiculous Man passes through all of them. In the first stage, he was an active nihilist and thinking about the meaninglessness of life by showing an indifferent behavior to anything in the world. In the second stage, he turns into an accomplished nihilist because he understands everything perfectly and decided to end his life by blowing his head with a revolver. The second stage of nihilism is very hard and very few people can survive it but luckily the Ridiculous Man survived this stage. The third and final stage is optimistic nihilism in which a person gets the idea of the meaninglessness of life but still, he strives for meaning and does not want to end his life. This optimistic nihilism is called Absurdism by Albert Camus. He says in his famous essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1943) that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus,p.4). The protagonist is experience in intense

emotional pain that's why he decides to commit suicide but if he was an extraordinary man he would not constantly be obsessed with such negative feelings of loneliness. Although his dream opens a door of hope for him and realizes the deeper significance of his life when he shot himself in the dream. Furthermore, he also understands that his indifference to the universe is creating more basic problems for him like pride and ignorance. After going on a space trip in his dream his behavior changes his arrogance and indifference disappear and he feels humble for worldly things.

As Camus stated that "I have never seen anyone die for ontological argument" (Camus,p.4). The Ridiculous Man gives up the idea of suicide and starts loving the people of the new world. Certainly, he becomes clear about the idea that it is useless to know about the reality of life and this mystery cannot unfold so why should he bother about the meaninglessness of life.

Dreams, as we know, are extremely strange things... and yet what prodigies of complexity did my reason sometimes perform when I dreamed! Absolutely inconceivable things happen to it in dreams. (p.188)

It is very obvious from the above words of the Ridiculous Man that he has understood the lesson of life in his dream. It was like a miracle when his pessimistic thoughts change into optimistic ones and this sudden transformation stops him from committing suicide. He turns into a humble and honest man. He does not afraid of people's laughing no longer he shows his indifference to the world. As Camus says "a world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world" (Camus, p.5). In the first part of the story, he is facing a severe psychological crisis and in the second part, he committed philosophical suicide by surrendering to the unquestionable acceptance of the belief that prevents him from a physical suicide.

To conclude my discussion, Dostoevsky in *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* portrays both the positive and negative traits of his personality which leave the audience in an ambiguous state. We cannot justify the character of the Ridiculous Man as good or bad but it gives us a deep insight into the psyche of a nihilist and explored the darkest corner of his mind. After this dream, his personality transforms into a changed man and he reaches the final stage of nihilism called optimistic nihilism which is also known as

Absurdism. In the end, he rejects logic and reason by devoting his life absolutely to an emotionally charged belief that saves him from suicide. In this story, Dostoevsky presents nihilism as a failure and shows that nihilism goes against the emotional faculty of humans so it can't last longer in this world. Indeed, when one believes that life is meaningless and senseless, he cares less about other people and himself.

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