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## **Ego versus Individuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Idiot is the most personal and autobiographical of Dostoevsky's novels. As the title goes, it is about a man whom the world would call an idiot; a person who does not fit in to, or is ignorant about the reality and expectations of society (like being shrewd, being masculine). In Freud's perception, he would be a person who is of Id (as a biological human being) and a strong super ego (believes in morals, love, sympathy). Thus, a person without a proper, balanced ego and representation. He is a perfect and good human in terms of ideals and a ridiculous and gullible person in terms of society. He is mocked for his impracticality and innocence. His 'egolessness' can be identified in the title itself. His name is Prince Myshkin but he is labeled as an idiot. He has no practical identity for himself but carries out his role in contributing to society successfully. According to him, paradoxically, to be an individual is to lose one's individuality, which hinders one to be sacrificial and live for the wellness of others; to be the fully developed 'ego' is to annihilate that ego in favor of others. In one of his letters he writes "the law of individuality on earth binds. The I [ego] obstructs" (Dostoevsky 20).*

*This article focuses on the psychological structure of Prince Myshkin's personality, which according to Freud, usually has a proper Id, Ego and Superego while Myshkin's personality has the Id and a superego that has overgrown into his Ego making him imbalanced and egoless. The study also contrasts the tripartite personality (Id, Ego and Super-ego) with Myshkin's personality. The article further studies the background of the novel and the reflection of Dostoevsky's entire persona in Prince Myshkin.*

**Key-Words:** *Dostoevsky, Egoless, Freud, Idiot, Myshkin, Psychoanalysis, Psyche, Persona, Self*

Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of the Russian writers whose works are still relatable to the modern world. His writings include *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Notes in Underground*. He is also known for some of his short stories. Though the novel *The Idiot* was published nearly 200 years earlier in 1869, its ideas on humanity and human psychology are still relevant, relatable, and were closely studied by Sigmund Freud in his *Dostoevsky and Parricide*. The novel can be understood on different levels and perspectives. It is considered that *The Idiot* is the most personal novel written by Dostoevsky, bearing the physical and emotional signatures of his life. The character Prince Myshkin has been taken up for research based on Freud's personality theory that every self has three parts: the Id, Ego and Super Ego. A normal human being, according to Freud, in order to function and be a part of a society must balance between the Id and Super ego. Ego is the representation of the self, shown to the society as a person. Id is the part of the Psyche which represents the basic biological urges and instincts common to all living beings and works based on the 'pleasure principle'. The Superego represents the morals taught by the society and works on the 'ideal principle'. A differentiation within the ego itself is explained by Freud in his work *The Ego and the Id*. The ego can further grow on to the next level named 'ego ideal' or 'super ego'. The three parts are classified based on their levels of exposure and influence by social morals and ideals. A particular trait in the ego can seep into the instincts (Id) of a person when continued for a very long duration and become inherent.

The origin of a person's Superego is the Father, who is assumably the first person who restricts and guides; the role is then taken up by a teacher and then by the society where it becomes the conscience. According to Freud, in his *The Ego and the Id*,

The self-judgement which declares that the ego falls short of its ideal produces the religious sense of humility to which the believer appeals in his longing. As a child grows up, the role of father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship. (33)

So, a clear reading of Freud's *The Ego and the Id* shows that the tripartite structure is fluid and differs with people. If a person is instinctual or lives only based on his Id, he cannot be a part of the society and is considered animalistic. If a person is living only based on his Superego (morals) he becomes unable to cope up with the real world which expects a person to be charismatic, manly and practical. Thus, there should be a properly developed ego to balance between the two: the instinctual and the moral. The ego of Prince Myshkin is more influenced by his ideals and his high Christian morals. Figuratively, his ego is mostly made of his ego ideal (superego) and does not work on the reality principle but by the ideal principle. His perception of the world is through a highly Christian ideology.

*The Idiot* follows up the life of a young man named Myshkin. He is a gullible, highly moralistic person who is seen as unfit to live in an Elite society and therefore called as an Idiot. He does not have a proper representation in his society, which is the ego. He is all good and innocent. Looking at the structure of his personality, as a living person he has an Id and as a highly moralistic person who is 'perfect' according to his morals and society he has a very strong superego which eclipses his ego and becomes his original personality. Myshkin believes in a paradox that being selfless is the way to reach a full self. As Frank observes in the book *Lectures on Dostoevsky*, "The highest use which one can make of his individuality, of the full

development of the ego, is to seemingly annihilate that ego, to give it wholly to each and everyone whole-heartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness” (134).

Dostoevsky once said in the novel that "beauty will save the world" (The Idiot 701) and he meant the beauty of Christ. In Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky created a Christ-like character who represents the perfect love of Christ on Earth. It expresses the way Christ would be treated when he returns to earth. Myshkin is an absolutely beautiful person who has profound love and compassion for other human beings. He is honest in a kind and humble way. His last name Myshkin is derived from the Russian word- 'a mouse' that possibly implies the downtrodden. Many of his actions do not make sense because he operates from a different level of consciousness; the ideal. He does not separate himself from others, he sees himself in others and becomes one with them. He cannot say no even to those people who abused him; he is one with them. He does not love Nastasya Filippovna but he feels her pain and wants to save her. He loves Aglaya but chooses to marry Nastasya Filippovna, yet he wants Aglaya to know that he still loves her and hopes that Aglaya will understand his choice. He admits that he loves both of them. His mind is chaotic and egoless. This "insane" behavior happens because it is simply not possible for Myshkin to make his firm choice as a single personality. His imbalanced personality is taken over by his superego almost fully.

The character Myshkin is a morally perfect and naive person who tries to be good to others. In the first scene, he innocently answers the two men in the railway station without understanding the sarcasm in it. His identity is too transparent and light to be seen by anyone as a single solid self.

‘Hey! that’s it! You stumped up your money for nothing, and we believe in those fellows, here!’ remarked the black-haired individual, sarcastically. ‘Gospel truth, sir, Gospel truth!’ exclaimed another passenger, a shabbily dressed man of about forty, who looked like a clerk, and possessed a red nose and a very blotchy face. (Dostoevsky 06)

The Prince’s character is noble and even too good that he was treated as a joke. He was respectful, noble and very fine but lacked the art of situational and clever communication to represent himself to people, with the expected charisma and liveliness in an elite society. An old man passes the following comment in the novel that “Judging from the fact that the prince blushed at this innocent joke, like a young girl, I should think that he must, as an honorable man, harbor the noblest intentions” (258).

In the novel *Crime and Punishment*, the character Rodion Raskolnikov was a man who tried to ‘create’ a set of ideals (Super Ego) for himself. He *tried* to be an extraordinary individual that he had a particular yet unique identity in the novel. Even though a murderer, he was a character who had weight and recognition for his personality. On the other hand, Myshkin does not have a proper identity for himself; he was simply dissolved into the characters of others. Even his name is not singular and clear in the novel. Prince Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin, sometimes called the Prince, the Swiss patient, orphan, Myshkin and the titular Idiot. He was raised by different people from his childhood and ends up with Professor Schneider who treated him for his Epilepsy. Thus, his identity in the society was also fluid and imbalanced. In a nutshell, as mentioned earlier he is too good for the real world; always overshadowed by his superego. The following lines from *The Idiot* prove this: “You are shockingly naive, prince, said Lebedeff’s nephew in mocking tones... ‘Prince, you are not only simple, but your simplicity is almost past the limit,’ said Lebedeff’s nephew, with a sarcastic smile.” (491)

His personality is designed as one which has an Id, a strong super ego and an eclipsed ego which makes him a human who is too moralistic, less sensible to a level where he is completely selfless in the society. He is treated as only a presence in most situations and not a personality. He is just a *being* and not an identity. If he is at a party he becomes the talk itself and not the one who stands up for himself when abused or mocked. This needs a clear analysis to understand the difference between his presence and persona. He exists everywhere as a perfect, innocent person but nowhere as a person with a proper ego. According to Freud, the superego is the moral side of the personality. In the book *Theories of Personality* by Duane P. Schultz and Sydney Ellen Schultz, the superego is defined as “a powerful and largely unconscious set of dictates or beliefs— that we acquire in childhood: our ideas of right and wrong. In everyday language we call this internal morality a conscience. Freud called it the superego”(46).

Similarly, Myshkin is morally perfect but is impractical in following his ideals. He always follows his morals whatever the situation and fails to understand and reply accordingly. Thus, the study brings out that Myshkin is a man whose ego is eclipsed by his superego making his representation egoless and selfless. To explain further, his superego often disturbs his ego such that it becomes invisible.

Prince Myshkin’s portrayal in the novel as an epileptic is autobiographical. Dostoevsky narrates his life in Siberia, his treatment for epilepsy and instances of severe convulsions in the novel through the novel. This has been mentioned multiple times in *The Idiot*: “Next moment he was absolutely unconscious; black darkness blotted out everything. He had fallen in an epileptic fit”(424). Another reason Myshkin was labeled as an Idiot was his epilepsy. There is a significant connection between the disease and his personality; Myshkin’s personality is unique not only because of his superego but also because of his epilepsy, which distorts his recognition in the

society. The ideas of Dostoevsky on humanity, psychology, communism and society are so unique and deep that it is still a template of study in both Russian and English literature.

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