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## **Voicing the Voiceless: A Critique of Dostoevsky's *Poor People***

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Poverty, whether actual or political (as an agenda by the ruling class), has always attracted the attention of sensitive souls. Some who have been a victim of this man-made vice, and have traversed through its paths are able to describe its various ferocious forms since they have been blessed with the potential to do so. Dostoevsky is one such writer in world literature who suffered from chronic poverty all his life, and this he inherited from his father, and there are but a few of his stature as a writer who can be paralleled in monetary sufferings with him. The pangs of poverty echo in his writings recurrently and that he does with absolute skill. He is a gifted author who has been blessed by nature to peep into the human psyche with a deep and perfect acumen. He is an unrivalled craftsman as far as the tracing of the functioning of human mind is concerned; he is not a theoretical psychologist making experiments leading to the formulations of psychological theories but he knew by sheer wisdom how a person acts and reacts within given circumstances, the application of this knowledge to his characters makes him stand apart from the plethora of literary artists.

Penury, though not a virtue and hardly ever desired by any living being, is a curse from the point of view of the normal standards set by man to dwell in this world, but many virtues are born out of its womb, especially compassion and love for those who hang on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Dostoevsky has done a great service to mankind by penning what it means to be poor, and how one struggles defying its potency or is coerced by it to succumb before it. *Poor People*, the debut novel of Dostoevsky written by a twenty-four-year-old novice, dealing with the theme of poverty, published in January 1846 created ripples in the literary lake of Russian literature. The then famous and most influential Russian critic Belinsky along with others was highly impressed by the novel as Dostoevsky himself says: "People (Belinsky and others) have detected in me a radically new approach, of analysis rather than synthesis, that is, I dig deep and, delving to the level of the atoms, I reach further down to the heart of the matter." (PP, 192) Belinsky was not only impressed but even

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disturbed by the story, when Dostoevsky was summoned by him he burst out: “ ‘But do you, you yourself, understand,’ he repeated to me several times, screaming as was his habit, ‘what have you written?!’ He always screamed when he spoke in a state of great agitation. ‘You may have written, guided by instinct, as an artist, but have you yourself grasped this dreadful truth which you have pointed out to us? It is impossible that at the age of twenty [*sic*] you could have understood it.’ ”(NFU, x-xi) This reaching down to the heart of the matter is so veracious and vividly presented that the novel, even after an elapse of more than a century and a half has not lost its universal appeal, its artistic persuasiveness, and this is a proof enough to rank it among the classics of world literature.

It is worth giving a look as to what made contemporaries of Dostoevsky to speak about this novel in a highly eulogized manner. The novel is written in epistolary form and that too with a difference, to quote the words of Hugh Alpin: “Dostoevsky ...by turning back further still beyond Romantic fashion and reviving the epistolary novel, simultaneously refreshing the outdated genre by having as correspondents not the customary idle, educated aristocrats, but poverty-stricken tenement-dwellers.” (PP, xiii) The epistles roll on between one Makar Devuskin, an ageing civil servant or to be precise a copying clerk, engaged in a ubiquitous profession in St. Petersburg during the time of Dostoevsky, and Varvara Alexeyevna, an unfortunate, repressed female younger in years, sailing in the same boat of painful poverty and orphan hood. Both of them struggle for survival in the hard heart of a 19<sup>th</sup> century metropolis and Dostoevsky dares to present them before the world in an authentic and artistic manner. In the words of Hugh Alpin: “Perhaps most importantly of all, Dostoevsky gives the humble copying clerk a voice.” (PP, xii) This is what gives this novel a specific meaning. Further, it is seen through the fabric of the novel that mere material poverty is not what crows down a man, man along with material comfort is continuously in search of spiritual peace that comes out of personal dignity, says Alpin: “The welfare state can provide people with a decent income, accommodation, an education, but not with the less tangible factors that arguably contribute still more to contentment such a requited love, the respect of other men, or a sense of personal dignity. “What does honour matter,” asks the hack novelist Ratazyayev, “when you’ve nothing to eat?” The great novelist Dostoevsky would without doubt reply: “It matters a great deal.””(PP, ix-x)

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The locale of the novel i.e. St Petersburg is equally significant as Alpin states: “Complex psychological insights accompany acute social observation in an oppressive urban environment.” (PP, xiii) This must have been in the mind of Dostoevsky who as a student at the Military Academy in St. Petersburg had savoured the miseries and delights of this city through and through. The story spread over a hundred and seventy pages is divided in fifty five letters in all and the entire exchange taking place in some six months period. The letters pass between the two lovers and though they may thus be referred to as love-letters, the content is a mingled one. We have in them the glimpse of the overflowing love for each other, and at the same time the poverty-stricken day to day struggle for survival, the concern for the other more than the self, the inhuman conditions which they have to face owing to their lower status and much more. However, the dominating force is love, which has been dealt with by Dostoevsky with master strokes. Dostoevsky has successfully portrayed the purity and sanctity of love, love which is the greatest gift of nature, shows Dostoevsky, may bloom anytime, anywhere and for anybody, it looks for no reason or purpose, social or financial status, it is an unalloyed state of spirit, and thus Makar knowing very well that he is hoping against hope falls desperately in love with Varvara. His growing age and chill penury do not send signals to him not to involve in any such intimacy with Varvara, on the other hand, the more he is denied of age and money the more he hooks his hopes on the comfort to be derived from the solacing words of Varvara. This is his only hope in his already hopeless and helpless life.

The novel opens with Makar’s letter of 8<sup>th</sup> April to Varvara and at the very outset we get the glimpse of how much he is attached to her, he writes: “And how upset I was, sweetheart, that I couldn’t get a good look at your pretty little face!” (PP, 5) These words may seem to be an outburst of a novice pleading before his young beloved and may appear awkward for a man well advanced in years, but it must be borne in mind that love is such a tender passion it knows no bar of age or any other social factor. In fact, love is a great solacing and supportive agent in the very moments of adversity as can be seen in these words of Makar: “I even did quite a nice little bit of dreaming today, and all my dreams were about you, Varenka. I compared you with a little bird of the heavens, created for the delight of men and the adornment of nature. And then, Varenka, I thought that we too, people who live in care and

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worry, should also envy the carefree and innocent happiness of the birds of the heavens □ well, and all the rest likewise, and the same; that is, I kept making such remote comparisons.” (PP, 6) Makar is relieved of tensions and troubles of life though for a moment as he dreams of Varvara. This cannot be called an idle dreaming in an ivory tower but grounded in hard reality, he writes in the same letter about his miserable habitat, which he is forced to occupy due to his inability to rent something more decent which confirms that life for him would have been more miserable had he not been blessed with the soothing effect of Varvara’s love: “Well, and what a dump I’ve ended up in, Varvara Alexeyevna! Well, what accommodation! ... Imagine something like a long corridor, utterly dark and dirty. Along its right-hand side is a blank wall, while on the left there’s door after door, like hotel rooms, all stretching out in a row. Well, and people rent these sort of hotel rooms, and in each of them there’s a single room, and people live sometimes two, sometimes three to a room. Don’t ask about for any order it’s like Noah’s ark!” (PP, 7) He further adds: “I live in the kitchen, although it will be much more correct to put it like this: there is one room here alongside the kitchen (and you should note that our kitchen is clean, bright and very nice).” (PP, 8) Chill penury does not allow him a handsome accommodation, to quote him again: “The worst room here, with board, costs thirty-five paper roubles. I can’t afford it! But my accommodation costs me seven paper roubles, and board is five silver roubles: that’s twenty-four roubles and fifty copecks, whereas I was paying exactly thirty before, but had to deny myself a lot of things; I didn’t always drink tea, but now I’ve saved enough for tea and sugar.” (PP, 8) These outpourings not only prove well enough that he is not an idle lovelorn novice, but a man with all the wisdom of world, and only searching some solace in the love of Varvara amidst the unbearable miseries of life to find some space to breathe. He further clears it to Varvara, “Put it like this: will there be much left for pocket money – and you always need some: there’s boots and clothes? And that’s my whole salary. I don’t complain, I’m satisfied. It’s enough. It’s been enough for several years now.” (PP, 9)

Eugene O’Neill the famous American dramatist believed that tragedy has an ennobling effect on man, he found the world full of tragedy, in an interview in 1922 he declared: “Sure I’ll write about happiness, if I can happen to meet with that luxury.” (O’Neill, 168) Both Makar and Varvara who have attained peace of the spirit after great turbulences in their respective

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lives seem to be justifying O'Neill. Makar is undeterred by his poverty since it has just become his second nature he very lovingly says to Varvara: "I'm sending you a pound of sweets with this, Varenka; you eat them and enjoy them, and for God's sake don't worry about me and don't hold anything against me. .... I'm saving money, my dear, putting it aside; I've got a little money. Pay no attention to the fact that I'm so quiet, that I look as if a fly could break me with its wing. No my dear, I'm nobody's fool, and my character is absolutely as it should be in a man of a firm and placid nature. (PP, 9) These are no hollow words of one lover to another, rather the echoes of one who is well grounded in all the arts of life in its fullness. Varvara too responds in the same tone: "I swear to you, kind MakarAlexeyevich, that it is even hard for me to accept your gifts. I know what they cost you, what deprivations, and how you deny yourself the most essential things. How many times have I told you that I need nothing, absolutely nothing; that I don't have the power to repay you even for those benedictions that you have scattered upon me up until now?" . . . . Ah, MakarAlexeyevich! Whatever you say, however you calculate your income to deceive me to demonstrate that absolutely all of it is spent on you alone, still you cannot conceal or hide anything from me. It's clear that you deprive yourself of essentials because of me. Whatever put it into your head, for example to rent such an accommodation? After all, people disturb you, trouble you; its cramped and inconvenient. You like privacy, but that's just what you don't have around you there! . . . . Once again I beg you, don't spend so much money on me. I know you love me, but you're not rich yourself." (PP, 10-11) The concern of these innocent beings for other than oneself reminds one of these wonderful words written by Thomas Gray:

To each his sufferings: all are men,

Condemn'd alike to groan;

The tender for another's pain'

Th' unfeeling for his own. (Ode on the Distant Prospects of Eton College)

Makar tries to console her: "I've never lived better than I do now; so why should I be choosy in my old age?" (PP, 14) However, in the core of hearts the things are clear to both the parties.

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Makar tells about his neighbour family, that is an absolute image of poverty and chill penury: “Quiet people! Nobody even hears anything from them. They live in one small room divided by a partition. He’s some sort of civil servant without a post, dismissed from the service for some reason about seven years ago. His name’s Gorshkov. . . He may have been under some investigation or something – I can’t tell you for sure. But they’re ever so, ever so poor – oh Lord God! Their room is always quiet and silent, as if nobody’s even living there. You don’t even hear the children. And it’s simply unheard-of for children not to get a bit frisky and play about once in a while, so that’s a bad sign for sure.” (PP, 20-21) Makar does not observe it from some ivory tower, he is in fact part of it and thus his statement is to be relied upon; people in the same status or profession have the habit of diminishing the miseries of others and exaggerating their own but Makar’s description of Gorskov’s family shows that he is a man of integrity stating the facts as they are. Poverty has played with his life that he has grown to be a crippled being because of it, he confesses: “If I’d a bit of schooling, it’d be a different matter, but after all, what did I get? Not even a poor boy’s schooling.” (PP, 21)

Makar, though born, bred and blooms in poverty never allows betrayal to self-dignity, it is much dear to him and he is all the times very much conscious of his integrity and dignity, people in poverty and misery have been seen bending before the mighty forces of penury but Makar is made of a different kind of mud ever careful to preserve his self-respect, he says: “.... But I’m not a burden on anyone! I have my own crust of bread; true, it’s simple crust of bread, at times it’s even stale, but it’s there, earned by my labours, consumed lawfully and irreproachably. Well what’s to be done? After all, I know myself that I’m doing much in copying things out, but all the same I’m proud of it: I work, I sweat.... I’m now conscious that I’m needed, that I’m essential, and that people shouldn’t put somebody off with nonsense.” (PP, 58-59) At one point he clearly mentions to Varvara: “You’re worried about what people will think of me, to which I make haste to announce to you, Varvara Alexeyevna, that my pride is dearer to me than anything.” (PP, 91) Again, he expresses his feelings regarding self-dignity in the following words: “Well and if you’ll forgive me a coarse word, Varenka, then I’ll tell you that the poor man feels the same shame on this account as you do, to give an example, maidenly shame. I mean, you wouldn’t think of – forgive my coarse word – disrobing in front of everyone, and in exactly the same way the poor man doesn’t like

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people looking into his kennel either and asking “what will his family relations be like?” – there. So why did you have to offend me, Varenka, siding with my enemies in encroaching on the honour and pride of an honest man!” (PP, 98)

Varvara, too, loves Makar deeply as she asks him very painfully: “How can I be of even the least use to you? And why am I so essential to you, my friend? What good have I done you? I am simply attached to you with all my soul, I love you very much, deeply, with all my heart, but bitter is my fate! I know how to love and am able to love, and that’s all, but not to create wealth, not to repay you for your good deeds.” (PP,76) Love is the sole energy which keeps moving all and sundry and Makar points it out very significantly to Varvara as he tries to pacify her in the returning letter: “What is it you lack with us then, my dear, just tell me that! You are loved, you love us, we’re all contented and happy; what else is there?” (PP, 77) At one point she does not want to be any more a burden on Makar and she says: “Ah, my friend, misfortune is an infectious disease. The poor and unfortunate should avoid one another, so as not to become even more infected.” (PP, 89) This is a sign of nobility attained by one who is in true love, the kind of caring and sacrificing that a person gains only through true love.

Makar at times seeks refuge in fatalism to seek solace from his social and economic position: “I’m not arguing, Varenka, I don’t dare to argue with you, I’ve fallen a long way and, what is more dreadful than anything, I’m a loser in my opinion of myself, but that was probably written in my stars, that’s probably my fate and you can’t escape from your fate, you know that yourself.” (PP, 95) The society at large holds a strange opinion regarding poor people and this opinion is most felt by the victims of poverty, Makar poignantly sums up the entire viewpoint of the writer on this issue as he says in one of his letters to Varvara: “Poor people are capricious □ that’s the way nature arranges it. I felt it before, and now I’ve felt it even more. He, the poor man, he’s demanding, he even sees God’s world differently and looks askance at every passer-by, and casts a troubled gaze around him, and he listens carefully to every word, as if wondering “are they saying something about me over there?”. Such as “why is he so unattractive? What exactly would he be feeling? How, for example, would he look from this side, how would he look from that side?” And everyone, Varenka, is aware that a poor man is worse than a bit of old rag and can’t get any respect from anyone, whatever they might write □ them those scribblers, whatever they might write! Everything about the poor

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man will be just as it used to be. And why is it that it will be just as it was before? Because the poor man, in their opinion, ought to have everything inside out; he should have nothing at all that's sacred, say, pride of some sort, oh no! Yemelya there was saying the other day that he had a subscription set up for him somewhere, and for every ten-copeck piece he had a sort of official inspection made of him. People thought they were giving him their ten-copeck pieces for nothing but no, they were paying to be shown a poor man.”(PP, 97) Here the protagonist lays bare his heart and soul and allows us to get a peep into his anguish. He, here, rises from the personal to the universal and becomes the mouthpiece of not only Dostoevsky but all the poor people dwelling on this planet. These are the outpourings not imaginary but experienced first-hand. Poverty is a great culprit of human existence it has a strong impact both on the body and the mind. Man ceases to be a being of flesh and blood, his mind can get no joy anywhere, and even the best literary creations cannot help him forget the miseries he has to face moment to moment, in a response to Varvara's letter he writes at one place: “What is it, a book? It's an invented story with characters! A novel is rubbish and it's written for rubbish, just for idle people to read; believe me, my dear, believe my many years of experience. And what if they go on and on to you about some Shakespeare or other, with “you see, literature has Shakespeare” well Shakespeare's rubbish too, it's all utter rubbish, and it's all done just to satirize!” (PP, 99-100)

Apart from the depiction of the poor and painful couple Makar and Varvara, Dostoevsky brings before us two more characters who, too, share the same fate as these two. One is Pokrovsky who is presented in a very touching manner, Varvara gives an account of his personality: “Pokrovsky was a poor, a very poor young man; his health did not permit him to go and study full-time, and it was only out of habit that we called him a student. He lived modestly, meekly and quietly, so you could not even hear him from our room.” (PP, 34) Pokrovsky was son of a little old man, “dirty, badly dressed, small, grey-haired, awkward, clumsy, in short, as strange as strange could be.” (PP, 36) Varvara tells us that this old man had not always been so and at one time he had been a civil servant somewhere but the death of his first wife (Pokrovsky's mother) and his remarriage had changed his life. The new incumbent of the house kept everyone under her thumb. Pokrovsky who was at the time aged about ten had the good chance of getting the patronage of one Mr Bykov, a landowner who



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helped him in his studies up to the university level, though because of his ill-health Pokrovsky was unable to continue his studies at the university. His father, however, did not have the same luck as to have someone like Bykov in his life and as such he was left to the cruelty of his wife and finally landed himself among the drunkards. The impact of his wife's ill-treatment took the toll of his youth and faculties. Says Varvara: "So the only sign of noble human feelings in him was his unlimited love for his son."(PP, 37) The poor man would sometimes visit his son with a certain anxious and meek air being afraid what the son might do finding him in a drunken state. The father was never so happy as when the son approved of his words and deeds.

However, with people like Pokrovsky and his father, Varvara and Makar there is much pain and less happiness in life. Pokrovsky was soon taken by consumption in its cruel clutches; however, he too like all consumptives did not part with his hope for a very long life until his last moment. Dostoevsky graphically paints the picture of the demise of Pokrovsky. His last day on the earth was painful for all the concerned. "Old Pokrovsky spent the entire night in the corridor, right by the door of his son's room; some sort of baste matting was laid down for him there. He came into the room continually; he was dreadful to look at. He was so racked with grief that he seemed completely devoid of feeling and sense. His head shook in terror... Just before dawn, tired out by his spiritual pain, the old man fell asleep on his matting like a dead man. By eight o'clock his son was in the throes of death; I woke the father up. Pokrovsky was fully conscious and said goodbye to each of us. It was odd! I was unable to cry; yet my soul was being torn apart... The dying man looked at me ever so sadly and shook his head. A minute later he was dead".(PP, 53-54)

Life is always larger than death, and riches are always in search of adding something more to itself even at the cost of death and poverty. Varvara sums up the funeral of Pokrovsky in one of the most poignant descriptions that a reader may ever come across: "The simplest coffin was bought and a drayman hired... To cover the expenses Anna Fyodorovna (the landlady) seized all the books and all the belongings of the deceased. The old man (Pokrovsky's father) argued with her, kicked up a row, took as many books as he could away from her, stuffed them into all his pockets, filled his hat and whatever else he could with them, fussed over them all three days, and did not part with them when it was time to go to the church... Finally

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the coffin was closed, the lid nailed down, it was put on the cart and off it went. The old man ran behind him, crying loudly; running made his crying tremble and break. The poor thing dropped his hat and did not stop to pick it up. His head was getting wet in the rain; the wind was strengthening; the frost whipped and stung his face. The old man did not seem to notice the bad weather and ran crying from one side of the cart to the other. The tails of his tattered frock coat fluttered out in the wind like wings. Books poked out of all his pockets; there was some huge book in his arms to which he held out tight. Passers- by doffed their hats and crossed themselves. Some stopped to stare in wonder at the poor old man. Books were continually falling out of his pockets into the mud. People stopped him and pointed to his losses; he picked them up and set off once more in pursuit of the coffin. At the corner of the street some beggar woman joined with him to accompany the coffin.” (PP, 54-55)

Another equally miserable character in the novel is Gorshkov cursorily mentioned in the preceding pages. The same kind or even more severe scene of death is witnessed in the house of Gorshkov. His little boy dies and Makar narrates the whole scene in so deep a moving tone that to read it is an effort in itself: “They already have a little coffin in there – a simple, but quite nice little coffin; they bought it readymade, the boy was about nine; they say he was shaping well. The mother doesn’t cry . . . His father sits in his old, soiled tailcoat on a broken chair. His tears flow, and perhaps not even in grief, but just out of habit, there’s a discharge from his eyes . . . The little girl, the daughter, stands leaning up against the coffin, and the poor little thing is so miserable and pensive . . . Some sort of rag doll lies on the floor beside her – she doesn’t play; she holds her finger on her lips; stands there not moving. The landlady gave her a sweet; she took it, but didn’t eat it.” (PP,63) Gorshkov’s life is more miserable than the two main characters of the novel owing to the fact that these two are single for none else to be supported by them whereas Gorshkov has a family, Makar writes to Varvara: “I’ll say, my dear, that their existence is incomparably worse than mine. Much worse! A wife, children! So that if I were Gorshkov, I just don’t know what I’d do in his place! Well, so my Gorshkov came in, he bows, there’s a little tear, as always, hanging on his lashes like puss, he shuffles his feet but can’t get a word out of himself . . . Ah, to what degradation does poverty bring people!” (PP,135-36) The description is not far-fetched, poverty does succumb men to such lowly state. The pain of the piece is further heightened in the discussion that ensues:

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“Well then, what’s up, old fellow?” I said to him. “Well it’s like this,” he says, “Makar Alexeyevich, my benefactor, show God’s charity, lend assistance to an unfortunate family; that wife and children, nothing to eat; what do you think that’s like,” he says, “for me, a father!” . . . “I know you’ve had some problems yourself, I know you can’t give a lot either, but give me at least something on loan; and the reason why,” he says, “I dared to ask you, was that I know your kind heart, I know you’ve been in need yourself, that even now you’re experiencing calamities yourself—and it’s for this reason your heart feels compassion.”(PP, 136)

Dostoevsky has presented a vivid and wonderful portrait of poverty in these characters all along emphasising the impact of lack of money in human life, the force that keeps our breaths firm in this world, but equal emphasis has been laid by him on the significance and superiority of self-dignity and social honour. Gorshkov who was suspended on some charge of integrity from his job after a long legal battle is completely vindicated. In the judgment it was mentioned that a notable sum of money should be obtained on his behalf from the merchant, and thus restoring him his honour and finances. He comes his home jubilant and Makar records the scene: “My honour, honour, good name, my children” – and the way he said it! . . . Ratazyayev evidently wanted to encourage him and said: “What does honour matter, old boy, when you’ve nothing to eat; money, old boy, money’s the main thing; that’s what you should thank God for!” and at that point he patted him on his shoulder. It seemed to me that Gorskov was offended, that is, it wasn’t that he expressed displeasure directly, but he just looked strangely somehow at Ratazyayev and removed his hand from his shoulder.” (PP,150-51) Poverty doesn’t mean you forget your self-respect is what is meant by this removal of the hand from shoulder, it is a symbol to be felt by those who sail in the same boat as Gorshkov.

Throughout the novel this characteristic feature of mankind i.e. dignity and self-respect is sustained by the writer with great care. In an episode where Makar is summoned by his employer His Excellency, the picture of poverty succumbing to prosperity is most truly and faithfully drawn. Makar while copying a document makes a mess and is required to appear before his employee. He narrates his own situation: “I went numb, turned to ice, lost all feeling, and I went & well, I set off simply more dead than alive.” (PP, 140) However, upon

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meeting His Excellency and getting the admonishing for the carelessness committed by Makar, he attracts the attention of His Excellency not for any other reason but his poverty-ridden personality; this was simply something new for his employer who bursts out: “How can it be? . . . Look at the state he’s in! How can he! . . . What has he! . . .” (PP, 141) His Excellency pities him and hands over a hundred-rouble note to Makar. This gesture of kindness is reported to Varvara: “I swear that, however, I might be suffering from spiritual grief in the hard days of our misfortune, looking at you, at your calamities and at myself, at my degradation and my incapability, despite all this I swear to you that it’s not so much the hundred roubles that are dear to me, as the fact that his Excellency himself was good enough to shake my unworthy hand, the hand of a drunkard, a wisp of straw! By doing so he gave me back to myself.” (PP, 142-43)

Dostoevsky, through the novel establishes one thing i.e. self-respect and dignity has to be kept on the highest pedestal amid all the other issues supporting and strengthening human life. He is more contemporary than any other writer of the present times who has so empathically voiced the concerns of the economically and socially downtrodden and deprived humans. Though the society may not provide food, shelter, and clothing to all its citizens, despite the fact that this is the minimum requirement of a civilized world, it has no right to take away from them their right to live respectfully and dignified. All the characters under discussion in the novel strive hard for survival but strive even harder for keeping intact their identity as a human being, thus voicing their concerns even in the face of hardships through which they have been cowed to be voiceless by the rich and mighty.

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