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Beyond the Binary: Moral Ambiguity and Readerly Empathy in Sarah Joseph's Mattathi and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment

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Abstract: Literature often questions the ways in which people are judged and placed into fixed categories. Society usually distinguishes between good and evil, innocent and guilty, or victim and perpetrator. However, literary works present human experiences in all their complexity, showing that such clear-cut divisions do not always reflect the realities of human life. This paper explores how Sarah Joseph's Malayalam novel Mattathi and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment question the conventional divisions between right and wrong, innocence and guilt, and victim and perpetrator. Through the portrayal of human suffering, vulnerability, and moral conflict, both novels reveal that people cannot always be understood through fixed categories. Drawing on the idea of binary opposition and Derrida's concept of deconstruction, this study examines how the two literary works challenge simple moral judgements by presenting characters whose experiences are more complex than the labels imposed on them. In Mattathi, the experiences of a marginalised woman encourage readers to reconsider the social and moral standards through which women are judged. Similarly, in Crime and Punishment, readers are drawn towards Raskolnikov, a man who commits murder but whose inner struggles, guilt, and suffering make it difficult to view him merely as a criminal. By comparing these novels, the paper examines how empathy enables readers to look beyond a character's actions and understand the human experiences behind them. It argues that literature does not necessarily erase the distinction between right and wrong; rather, it questions whether such distinctions alone are sufficient to understand human beings. Through their complex portrayals of characters and their experiences, both novels demonstrate how literature can challenge binary thinking and offer a deeper understanding of morality, individual agency, and human nature.

Keywords: Moral Binaries, Deconstruction, Readerly Empathy, Literary Complexity, Elayamma

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Introduction

As we have come to understand, the world is often perceived through binaries. Whenever something happens, we tend to seek a conclusion, to decide what is right and wrong, who is justified and who is to blame. Literature invites us to look beyond such easy conclusions. It opens up new ways of seeing the world by questioning familiar beliefs, challenging accepted ideas, and revealing aspects of human experience that often remain unnoticed in our everyday lives. This ability to bring hidden complexities and contradictions to light is particularly significant, as it encourages us to question assumptions we might otherwise accept without reflection. While we often judge people and their actions without considering the circumstances that shape them, literature allows us to look beneath these immediate judgements and explore the reasons behind human behaviour. In doing so, literature does not necessarily ask us to justify a character's actions or accept them as morally right. Rather, it invites us to understand the humanity of a character, even when their actions challenge our established ideas of right and wrong.

Structuralist thinkers argue that meaning is produced through systems of relationships and differences rather than existing independently. In other words, we understand things by distinguishing them from what they are not. This idea is often reflected in binary oppositions such as good and evil, right and wrong, innocent and guilty, through which we make sense of the world around us. However, these oppositions are not always equal, as one term is often privileged over the other. For instance, goodness is valued over evil, while innocence is generally considered superior to guilt. Jacques Derrida, through his concept of deconstruction, questions the stability of such oppositions and the hierarchies they establish. He argues that these categories are not as fixed or self-contained as they appear, since the meaning of one term often depends on its relationship with the other. Deconstruction therefore encourages us to examine the tensions and contradictions within these seemingly clear distinctions. When applied to literature, this perspective allows us to explore how literary texts challenge established binaries and reveal the complexities that resist simple categorisation. Characters, for instance, may embody qualities that blur the boundaries between good and evil or innocence and guilt, making it difficult for readers to place them within a single moral category. Literature thus becomes a space where the stability of these distinctions can be questioned and the complexities of human experience can be explored beyond conventional judgements.

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Sarah Joseph's Malayalam novel Mattathi, published in 2003, presents the life and experiences of Luci, a young woman whose struggles evoke a natural sense of empathy among readers. As the narrative unfolds, readers become emotionally connected to her joys, sorrows, and vulnerabilities. We cry with her, laugh with her, and find ourselves concerned about her experiences and fate. This emotional connection develops almost effortlessly, as her circumstances encourage readers to understand and sympathise with her. Her experiences also lead readers to look beyond her actions and consider the situations that shape her life. Consequently, judging her solely through conventional moral standards becomes less straightforward. Readers are encouraged to understand her as a human being rather than reduce her to a particular moral category. Such a response reveals how literature can influence the way we perceive and judge others.

Unlike the sympathy we naturally feel for a vulnerable character, Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky presents us with a rather unsettling experience. The novel tells the story of Raskolnikov, a young man who commits murder, an act that would normally make us judge him as a criminal. However, as we follow his thoughts and witness his guilt, fear, and suffering, we may find ourselves feeling for him despite knowing what he has done. This creates a strange conflict within us: we know that his actions are wrong, yet we cannot completely distance ourselves from his pain. It makes us wonder why we feel empathy for someone whose actions we might otherwise condemn. Thus, by bringing these contrasting emotional responses into focus, this paper examines how literature challenges rigid moral binaries and reveals the complex relationship between judgement and empathy.

Beyond the Binary: Moral Ambiguity and Readerly Empathy in Sarah Joseph's Mattathi and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment

One of the interesting things about Sarah Joseph's Mattathi is how easily readers find themselves feeling for Luci. As we follow her life and the experiences she goes through, we gradually become attached to her and begin to share her joys and sorrows. We feel her pain, hope for her happiness, and become concerned about the struggles she faces. Her vulnerability and the situations she encounters make it easier for us to understand her and connect with her emotionally. What is particularly interesting is that we rarely stop to think about why we feel this way towards her; our sympathy seems to develop on its own. This makes us wonder whether our empathy comes simply from Luci's character or from the way the narrative brings us closer to her experiences. In this sense, the novel shows how literature can draw us towards certain characters so naturally that we hardly question the feelings they evoke in us.

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Since Luci has neither parents nor siblings, she grows up under the care of Brijitha, whom she calls Elayamma. However, the relationship between them is far from one of affection and care. Brijitha, a stubborn and controlling woman, treats Luci more like a servant than a member of the family. Instead of providing her with the warmth and security that a child would normally expect from a family, she subjects Luci to restrictions and denies her the freedom to make choices about her own life. Luci's existence becomes one in which even her basic needs and desires are repeatedly pushed aside, leaving her with little control over her circumstances. The absence of parental affection, combined with the treatment she receives from Brijitha, makes her situation particularly painful. As readers follow her experiences, it is difficult not to feel sympathy for her. We become concerned about her suffering, feel distressed by the unfairness of her situation, and wish that she could experience the love and freedom she is denied. We cry with her, worry about her, and gradually develop an emotional attachment to her life and struggles. Such a response seems almost instinctive; readers do not need to make a conscious decision to sympathise with Luci because the circumstances of her life naturally draw them towards her. Her vulnerability makes her suffering understandable, while the unfair treatment she receives strengthens our emotional connection with her. Consequently, we tend to view her not through the rigid categories of right and wrong but through an understanding of the circumstances that shape her life. Our sympathy emerges not from a careful moral assessment of every action she takes, but from our awareness of the suffering she experiences.

Luci's relationship with Brijitha and her silent love for Sethu play an important role in shaping the reader's emotional connection with her. While Brijitha's treatment makes Luci's life difficult and leaves her with little freedom, her feelings for Sethu reveal the softer and more vulnerable side of her character. Sethu, who has the qualities of a Byronic hero, becomes someone Luci loves deeply, although she never openly expresses her feelings for him. This unspoken love adds another dimension to her character, allowing readers to see the emotions and desires she keeps hidden within herself. Her feelings remain unexpressed, existing as a private longing rather than developing into an openly acknowledged relationship. The contrast between the hardships she faces in her everyday life and the affection she quietly holds for Sethu makes her story even more touching. Readers come to care about not only the suffering she experiences but also the love and happiness she longs for but cannot fully express. Her silence allows readers to sense the depth of her feelings and imagine the emotional fulfilment that remains beyond her reach. As a result, Luci is not seen merely as a young woman who suffers at the hands of others; she becomes someone with her own desires, dreams, and emotional needs. Her difficult circumstances, together with her unfulfilled love, make readers wish that she could find the affection and happiness missing from her life.

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Thus, our sympathy for Luci grows not only from the hardships she endures but also from our understanding of the feelings and longings that make her human.

Although Luci often feels isolated and is treated more like a servant than a member of the family, she finds comfort in the relationships she develops with people outside her immediate household. One such person is Cherona, a woman who comes to Brijitha's house to wash clothes. Luci shares a special bond with her, finding in her someone with whom she can laugh, cry, and express her feelings freely. At a time when her own home offers her little affection or emotional security, this relationship becomes a source of comfort and companionship. Her connection with Cherona shows how deeply Luci longs for someone who will listen to her and understand her feelings without making her feel unwanted. Similarly, Luci's emotional attachment to Saleena, a member of Brijitha's family, reveals another side of her longing for connection. When she meets Saleena after several years and discovers that she now has a husband and a child, Luci becomes excited and curious to know about their lives. Her interest goes beyond ordinary curiosity; it reflects her desire to experience the kind of family life that has always remained beyond her reach. Having grown up without the love and security of a family of her own, she looks at

Saleena's life with a sense of wonder and emotional longing. This becomes particularly evident when Luci secretly feeds Saleena's baby. The moment suggests a deep, unspoken desire within her to care for a child and experience motherhood herself. It allows readers to glimpse the family life, affection, and sense of belonging that she longs for but cannot openly claim. Such moments make Luci's character deeply moving because her desires are not extraordinary; they are the ordinary human wishes to love, to be loved, and to belong somewhere. Readers can easily connect with these feelings because they are familiar aspects of human experience. Her loneliness, her need for companionship, and her longing for a family naturally evoke sympathy, making it difficult for readers to remain emotionally detached from her story. In this way, the novel creates an empathetic connection with Luci through the simple yet powerful desires that shape her life.

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Readers feel for Luci not merely because she is a young and vulnerable woman, but because they witness the loneliness and emotional neglect that shape her life. The way Brijitha treats her, her close bond with Cherona, her curiosity about Saleena's family, and her unspoken love for Sethu reveal her deep desire for affection, companionship, and a place where she truly belongs.

These are ordinary human desires, yet Luci is repeatedly denied the opportunity to fulfil them, making it difficult for readers to remain detached from her suffering. As we come to understand her life beyond the judgements that society might place upon her, our sympathy develops almost naturally, showing how literature encourages us to see the person behind the labels rather than judge someone solely by conventional moral standards.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, published in 1866, is widely recognised as a landmark in Russian and world literature. It follows Rodion Raskolnikov, an impoverished former student who commits murder and experiences intense psychological turmoil afterwards. Through his guilt, moral struggles, and eventual confession, Dostoevsky examines the relationship between crime, morality, and human nature. The novel encourages readers to look beyond a person's criminal actions and recognise the emotional conflicts and complexities that lie beneath them.

The protagonist, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, believes that certain extraordinary individuals have the right to go beyond conventional moral rules in order to achieve their goals. He develops a theory that distinguishes ordinary people, who are expected to obey established laws and moral principles, from extraordinary individuals, who may consider themselves entitled to break these rules for a greater purpose. Raskolnikov wants to test this theory through his own actions and discover whether he belongs to the category of extraordinary people or is merely an ordinary individual who must remain within the boundaries of conventional morality. His decision to murder the elderly pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, becomes a way of testing his own beliefs, courage, and sense of superiority. However, the unexpected murder of Lizaveta, Alyona's sister, makes the consequences of his actions even more serious.

The novel follows Raskolnikov as he struggles with the psychological and physical consequences of his crime. Rather than experiencing the freedom or superiority he expects, he becomes overwhelmed by anxiety, fear, guilt, and inner conflict. His mental distress affects his physical health, leaving him weak, feverish, and confused. He becomes increasingly isolated from others and finds it difficult to escape the thoughts surrounding the murders. His suffering reveals the gap between the theory he attempts to prove and the reality of his own human experience. Although he tries to convince himself that he can rise above conventional morality, his emotional turmoil suggests that he cannot easily separate himself from the moral and psychological consequences of his actions.

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As readers follow Raskolnikov's experiences, they may initially feel shocked and disturbed by his decision to take two lives. Yet, as the narrative reveals his inner struggles, fear, suffering, and emotional vulnerability, readers may also begin to feel anxious about his condition and develop a sense of empathy towards him. They become involved in his psychological conflict, wondering whether he will be discovered, how he will respond to his guilt, and whether he will eventually accept responsibility for his actions. This response creates a tension between moral judgement and human understanding. Raskolnikov emerges as a deeply complex character whose actions and emotions often contradict one another. Although he initially plans to murder the elderly pawnbroker, the unexpected murder of Lizaveta leaves him deeply shaken. The second murder is not part of his original plan, and the unexpected turn of events intensifies his fear and psychological turmoil. His reaction reveals that he is not as emotionally detached or morally superior as he might have imagined himself to be. Despite his attempt to prove that he belongs to a category of extraordinary individuals who can rise above conventional moral rules, he struggles to cope with the consequences of his actions.

Raskolnikov's complex nature can also be seen in the way he treats his mother and sister. He often behaves rudely towards them and keeps his distance, even though they genuinely care about him. His mother, Pulcheria Alexandrovna, worries about his condition, while his sister, Dunya, tries to support him despite facing difficulties of her own. However, beneath his harsh behaviour, Raskolnikov still has a deep concern for his family. This becomes clear when he opposes Raskolnikov that contrasts with the violence of his crime. Even after taking two lives, he is still capable of loving his family financially. He does not want his sister to suffer for his sake and strongly objects to her decision. This reveals a caring side of and worrying about their happiness. These contrasting qualities make it difficult for readers to judge him through a single moral perspective and may lead them to feel sympathy for him. Rather than asking readers to excuse his crime, the novel allows them to see the emotions, relationships, and personal struggles that exist alongside his wrongdoing.

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The tension between Raskolnikov's crime and his humanity becomes particularly evident in his encounters with Porfiry Petrovich, the investigator assigned to the murder case. During their conversations, Porfiry carefully observes Raskolnikov's behaviour, questions his explanations, and attempts to understand his psychological state. Rather than relying entirely on direct accusations, he often uses indirect questions and psychological pressure to unsettle him. These encounters create considerable tension for readers, who are aware of Raskolnikov's guilt and fear that he may reveal himself through his words or reactions.

His attempts to appear calm frequently conflict with his inner anxiety, making each conversation feel like a struggle between the investigator's suspicions and the suspect's efforts to conceal the truth. Readers may find themselves worrying about Raskolnikov's fate, even though they know that he has committed a serious crime. This response reveals the complicated relationship between moral judgement and emotional involvement: readers may want the truth to emerge while simultaneously feeling anxious about the suffering and psychological pressure Raskolnikov experiences.

Another instance of Raskolnikov's compassion is seen when he gives money to Katerina Ivanovna to help with the funeral of her husband, Marmeladov. Despite his own poverty and the psychological turmoil, he experiences after the murders, he feels deeply moved by the suffering of Marmeladov's family. His willingness to help them reveals a genuine concern for others, even when he himself is struggling with overwhelming personal problems. Although Raskolnikov often isolates himself from society and feels disconnected from those around him, his actions suggest that he has not entirely lost his capacity for kindness and empathy. Such moments reveal the contradictions within his character and encourage readers to look beyond his crime to recognise the humanity that remains within him. Before confessing to his crime, Raskolnikov makes a deliberate visit to his mother, showing that their emotional connection remains strong despite his troubled state of mind. When he assures her that he will always love her, readers glimpse the sensitive and vulnerable side of a man who has committed two murders. This moment may evoke deep sadness and sympathy, even though readers are fully aware of the seriousness of his actions. His inner turmoil and genuine affection for his mother make it difficult to understand him solely through the label of a criminal. Such moments highlight the ability of literature to create emotional connections with characters whose actions would otherwise lead to immediate condemnation. Through Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky reveals how human beings cannot always be understood through rigid moral judgements alone.

Empathising with a character like Raskolnikov is more challenging because he is responsible for taking two human lives. When we look at his actions through conventional moral binaries, he can easily be placed on the side of evil, guilt, and criminality. Murder is an act that cannot be justified simply because the person who commits it experiences suffering or shows kindness towards others. Yet, through the power of storytelling and language, Dostoevsky makes it difficult for readers to see Raskolnikov only as a murderer. By allowing readers to enter the protagonist's thoughts, emotions, fears, and psychological struggles, the novel brings them closer to a character whose actions they might otherwise condemn without hesitation. Readers witness his mental suffering, his conflicting emotions, his relationships with others, and his gradual movement towards acknowledging responsibility for his actions.

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As a result, they may begin to understand his inner struggles even while recognising the seriousness of his crime. However, Raskolnikov's transformation is gradual, and his willingness to confess does not immediately mean that he has achieved genuine moral change. His journey towards accepting responsibility is complicated by his continuing struggle to understand his own actions and the beliefs that led him to commit the murders. This complexity is important because the novel does not present a simple movement from evil to goodness. Instead, it reveals the contradictions within a character who has committed a terrible crime but remains capable of love, compassion, suffering, and change. His wrongdoing does not disappear because of his good qualities, just as his criminal actions do not completely explain every aspect of his personality.

This is where the power of literature to challenge moral binaries becomes particularly evident. In everyday life, we often judge people according to the categories available to us, separating the guilty from the innocent, the good from the evil, and the victim from the perpetrator. Such distinctions may help us make moral judgements, but they can also prevent us from recognising the complexity of individual lives. Literature invites readers to move beyond these immediate judgements by allowing them to experience a character's world from within.

Conclusion

Although Sarah Joseph's Mattathi and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment belong to different literary traditions, historical periods, and cultural settings, both explore the complexities of human nature. While Mattathi emerges from the Malayalam literary tradition of India, Crime and Punishment belongs to nineteenth-century Russian literature. The differences between their settings and characters are significant, as Luci and Raskolnikov experience different struggles and occupy very different positions in the eyes of society. However, despite these differences, both novels encourage readers to move beyond their immediate judgements of the characters. In Mattathi, Luci is presented as a vulnerable and marginalised woman whose loneliness and longing for affection naturally evoke the readers' sympathy. In contrast, Crime and Punishment presents Raskolnikov, a psychologically conflicted character whose responsibility for two murders makes it more difficult for readers to empathise with him. Yet, by revealing his inner struggles, emotional conflicts, and suffering, Dostoevsky invites readers to understand him beyond the label of a criminal. The contrasting responses these characters evoke demonstrate how literature can challenge conventional moral binaries such as good and evil, innocent and guilty, and victim and perpetrator.

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Rather than asking readers to ignore wrongdoing or abandon moral judgement, both novels reveal the limitations of reducing human beings to fixed categories. Even in our technologically advanced world, the power of literature lies in its ability to expose these limitations, deepen our understanding of human experience, and encourage empathy beyond established moral boundaries.

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