

From Advaita To Orthodox Redemption: A Comparative Philosophical Reading Of Raja Rao And Dostoevsky

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Abstract

The branches of literary genres are like the ever expanding branches of a tree always opening up into various new other genres with time as nature moves on. Philosophical genre of literature is one of the oldest forms of literary genre because it's obvious to find references to philosophy of work and life intending mankind to look into how a person should live or could live for attainment of self perfection and self realisation. This genre branched out into various other genres including philosophical fiction in which a philosophical idea is employed in a fictional narrative to make the reader understand the underlying philosophical opinion. Redemption is often considered as a path to move away or to be saved from any evil deeds committed in the past. Such ideas on redemption have actually been analysed into two different perspectives which are western and eastern. This paper analyses how Raja Rao and Fyodor Dostoevsky in their works employ the eastern and western perspective on soul and redemption respectively unifying at the same conclusion called "redemption". The work *the Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao employs largely the eastern philosophical idea of Advaita Vedanta. Even though the work *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky remains philosophically ambiguous, this paper aims to interpret this work through Hegelian Dialectics and Cartesian Dualism to identify a unifying path along with the work of Raja Rao. This paper aims to analyse the underlying ideas in these works, which are divided into bipolar eastern and western philosophical ideas to show how both the perspectives at the end unify at the same end goal which is aspired by protagonists of both the selected works which is redemption and self realisation.

Key Words: Advaita Vedanta, Cartesian Dualism, Hegelian Dialectics, Philosophical Fiction and Redemption

How to cite this article: Meenu R, Binu VS. From Advaita To Orthodox Redemption: A Comparative Philosophical Reading Of Raja Rao And Dostoevsky. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(58s): 457-463. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.58s.47

Introduction:

Thomas De Quincey, an English writer, essayist and literature critic in his essays *Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected* (1823) and *The Poetry of the Pope* (1848) divides literature as Literature of Power and Literature of Knowledge (Snyder, 1986). Literature of knowledge means understanding literature as a medium to obtain knowledge and another perspective is literature of power which means understanding literature as something which gives an individual who indulges themselves in a literary work a sense of "aesthetic pleasure" (Patel, 2019). But, always literature as a stream does not fix itself with such stark purposes but rather act as an infotainment catalyst providing both information or knowledge and entertainment (Marinov, 2021) because either of the extreme genre might not end well with the readers as the readers need more information through an interesting read. Philosophical Genre of literature is defined by its contemplation on fundamental existential issues which includes any aspect of human conditions like nature and motivation of human behaviour, the purpose of life, ethics or morality, the role of art in human lives, role of experience or reason in advancing knowledge, the existence of free will and any other philosophically significant subject (Sergeyevna, 2025). With respect to philosophical genre of Literature this hypothesis on infotainment reasons well because it provides to simplify the most complex ideas into simple form. This

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simple form can be understood through philosophical fictions, which is a derivative of philosophical genre in which characteristic elements of a fiction is used as a vehicle for the exploration of philosophical questions and concepts (Cunningham, 2010).

Philosophy is expressed in literature in most of the times and for this reason is fully made real within a definite literary genre leading to philosophical genre being considered as a separate genre. Mark D. Jordan in his study to Philosophical Genres notes that "It is not to look for connections between philosophy and something else. It is not to feel the surface of the text as an afterthought. It is, rather, to ask about the shape of the work and what might it mean for the discourse of philosophy "in" it. Might it be that a work of a certain shape is the only one possible for certain thoughts?" (Lavery, 2007). As Mark notes, the philosophical discourse is embedded in fiction to understand it clearer and easier. For an instance, if Krishna had revealed his discourse, "*Bhagavad Gita*" just as a standalone philosophy from nowhere as a moral teaching, it would have been difficult to comprehend and interpret them. But once, since it is presented in the mythical epic, it is easier to understand this complex discourse with reference to the story of the great epic *Mahabharata*. Thus, literary fiction is used as a tool to understand complex philosophical structures. This can be identified in the works of Raja Rao and Fyodor Dostoevsky who used their fictional narratives to explain various dimensions of eastern and western

mysticism and philosophy. This paper delves into identifying such philosophical intricacies present in their fictional works *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky and *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao with reference to the analysis of soul. The idea of soul largely varies from religion to religion and culture to culture, and even though it can divide it into eastern and western versions and within these versions itself exist various different and distinct ideas on the soul (Martins, 2018). Culturally and contextually, the Eastern perspective in this study focuses primarily on Hindu philosophical narratives, specifically Advaita Vedanta, while the Western perspective is confined to Russian Orthodox Christianity, Cartesian Dualism, and Hegelian Dialectics. Ultimately, this paper analyzes how the concepts of the soul and redemption are explored within *The Serpent and the Rope* and *Crime and Punishment*, evaluating how these two textually distinct models of philosophical fiction portray their respective Eastern and Western traditions.

Idea of soul in Eastern philosophy captured by Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope*:

With respect to Hindu Philosophy the novel deals with the philosophy of Advaita and Vedanta. The Advaita Vedanta philosophy largely developed and expounded by Adi Shankaracharya is one of the most famous and prevalent form Hinduism deriving foundational principles from *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahmasutras* (Francis, 2023). According to Advaita Vedanta, every man is a composite of a higher self (atman), which is eternal, and a lower self (jivatman), which is relative by nature (Sivakumar, 2018). The novel *the serpent and the rope* itself, starts with an introduction stating a quote by Sri Atmananda Guru which says “Waves are nothing but the water. So is the sea” (Rao, 2014). The *Katha Upanishad*, another principle work of Vedanta also states a similar verse which says “as pure water poured on pure water becomes verily the same, so also does become the Self of the man of knowledge who is given to deliberation” (Gambhirananda, 1980). This becomes the foundational basis of the novel itself, as derived from the title itself which is “*the Serpent and the Rope*” as Rao wants to clear the boundary between illusion and truth which can be only achieved through self realisation of the path of Advaita Vedanta according to the protagonist of the novel, Ramaswamy (Dahiya, 2023). Set against the backdrop of post-World War II Europe and India, the story follows Ramaswamy's marriage to Madeleine, a French academic, their cultural clashes, and his eventual spiritual awakening. Ramaswamy's quest is not merely personal but emblematic of the broader Indian diaspora experience, grappling with Western materialism while clinging to Eastern spiritualism (Pawar, 2025). As a true epithet to the novel's title Ramaswamy, the protagonist of the novel *the Serpent and the Rope* says to his wife Madeleine “he world is either unreal or real—the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two—and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood” (Rao, 2014), thus affirming his belief in Advaita. The

philosophy of Advaita Vedanta has been clearly established in the following verse from Chandogya Upanishad which provides:

“ekam EvA dviteeyam (There is one without two (brahman)

EkO devaH sarva bhUtAntarAtma (One consciousness in all the hearts)

ekA bAshA bhUtakAruNya rUpa (One shining as form of divine mercy)

ekam lakshyam sAmarasyam samEsham (One aim, to achieve equality among all)

Ekam sarvam chittamAnanda pUrnam (One as ALL and as complete and eternal bliss)” (Sivanu, 2023).

This verse itself clearly captures the protagonist Ramaswamy's quest for self realisation as noted in the novel. The idea of everything is one and oneness without duality which is the core principle of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta perhaps motivates him to marry his first wife Madeleine who comes from an entire different culture and exposure and dreams of uniting both their dreams into a singularity on his journey of self realisation as a single soul (Dave, 2022). Thus, the core fundamental base structure of the idea of soul through this interpretation is inferred from these verses.

Ramaswamy's illusion and duality portrayed in the *Serpent and the Rope*:

Further the Vedantic idea of the permanent singular soul can be identified in the opening lines of the novel in which Ramaswamy, the protagonist stands at the ghats of Varanasi exclaiming on his ancestors “But when they died – for they did ‘die’ – they too must have been burnt by tank or grove or meeting of two rivers, and they too must have known they did not die (Rao, 2014)”. This is similar to the explanation of Advaita Vedanta by Ramana Maharishi, the sage of Tiruvannamalai who explains “Just as the waking, dream and sleep states are phenomena, so also birth, growth and death are phenomena in the Self. which continues to be unbroken and unaffected. Birth and death are only ideas. They pertain to the body or the mind. The Self exists before the birth of this body and will remain after the death of this body. So it is with the series of bodies taken up in succession. The Self is immortal” (VS Ramanan, 1955). Further Shankaracharya in his *Nirvana Shatakam* mentions “I am not bound by Death or the Fear of death nor influenced by the rules of Caste and its Distinctions, I have no Father or Mother, nor do I have Birth, I do not have special Relations nor Friends, a Spiritual Teacher or Disciple, I am the Ever Pure Blissful Consciousness; I am Shiva, I am Shiva, The Ever Pure Blissful Consciousness” (Deshpande, 2025).

The Fundamental crux of Advaita Vedanta rests on the proposition that since soul and self is considered as a part of the same Brahman, self realisation can be attained only by searching for and attaining “jnana” thereby removing “ignorance” or “Avidya”, uniting the singular consciousness of the self with the ultimate consciousness through “jnana” (Sing, 2024). On his relationship with Madeline, Ramaswamy exclaims

“Something had just missed me in life, some deep absence grew in me, like a coconut on a young tree, that no love or learning could fulfil” (Rao, 2014). Truly Ramaswamy felt that his marriage to his wife Madeline is creating a barrier in his spiritual quest as he is well aware of the Tantric principles that a woman in life is important for both Bhoga and Moksha (pleasure and worldly pleasures), but her different cultural identity which he accepted earlier has now become a barrier for him (Ram Sebak Thakur, 2024).

Even though Ramaswamy considers Madeline as a part of Maya, he fails to understand the fact that Maya is considered as a part of Brahman which Ramaswamy wants his soul to attain through self realisation, because when it comes to Brahman or ultimate consciousness of the soul there is no distinction or any plurality but only singularity which exists within Brahman which includes Maya and Avidya (Biswas, 2024). This realisation dawns upon Ramaswamy only after Madeline embraces Buddhism completely to which he exclaims “Did I love the Self in Madeleine?, I knew I did not”. Rao brilliantly connects this perception with his idea on Brihadaranayaka Upanishad which states that every being in this world irrespective of being a part of Maya and Avidya, must be loved for its true self or itself and not for any other distinctive features (Madhavananda, 1950), which has been understood by Ramaswamy only after Madeline leaves him. This is much evident with his statement “Strange, as I myself go away from Buddhism it is Madeleine who gets deeper into it” (Rao, 2014), showing Ramaswamy’s regret on not bringing his self towards Brahman or enlightenment due to his confusions, while Madeline has entered the spiritual path and made a significant achievement on another path (Gimmil, 1973). Finally, Ramaswamy now understanding between “serpent and the rope” which is The entire point of Vedanta on soul or self is that the true liberation is attained when one transcends the illusion of duality and sacrifices the ego into the Atman, realizing the non-dual Truth while still alive as a jivanmukta (Gurpreet Singh, 2017). Maya or illusion is considered as an outer covering to truth which must be removed to reveal ultimate truth or Brahman which should be the ultimate goal of a soul or self (Ven Candima, 2019). This idea of the soul’s journey was broken down in such an easy manner by Rao through the portrayal of the tale of Ramaswamy.

The Western counter part through Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment:

When it comes to the Western perspective on the idea of soul and redemption, it is to be noted that Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment comes into a perfect analysis with Rao’s Serpent and the Rope as in a striking similarity both the protagonists Radion Raskolnikov and Ramaswamy are portrayed as having a very ambiguous moral opinion in the novel until the very end. Raskolnikov, the protagonist who murders an elderly lady (a pawnbroker) and her sister to prove his theory that he is not bound by the norms of the society, since he believes that certain people are extraordinary and exempted from the consequences of their crimes

because it is committed for general good. Therefore it is his moral obligation to serve society even by transgressing the law. But at the end Raskolnikov himself realizes the flaws in his theory (Saklani, 2024) and confesses his deed. Ramaswamy’s dualistic tendencies of being with his wife Madeline for pleasure and moving towards spiritual enlightenment actually is in stark contrast with Raskolnikov’s dualism which is torn between Western ideals that leaned toward secular humanism which motivates him to murder someone and Slavophile views that stressed the importance of faith and the people’s spiritualism towards his redemption (Movsesian, 2020). Even though the aspects of dualism remain similar as both have their own arguments in the nature of an opposite pair contrasting or contradicting their first thought with the second one. His western perspective of “extraordinary” men can be better explained through his own explanation in which he says “I only believe in my leading idea that men are in general divided by a law of nature into two categories, inferior (ordinary)... and men who have the gift or the talent to utter a new word... if such a one is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can, I maintain, find within himself, in his conscience, a sanction for wading through blood—that depends on the idea and its dimensions, note that” (Dostoevsky, 2025). This dualistic version is very much present all over the novel, where he is portrayed as having bipolar characteristics, being on one hand a careless cold blooded murderer and on another hand a warm and sympathetic person (Yadav, 2021). This is evident from the scene where Raskolnikov in a very sympathetic manner gives away the copper coins he received from pawnbroker in return for his own valuables, to the family of Marmeladov. But, immediately he exclaims “What a stupid thing I have done.....they have Sonia and I want it myself” (Dostoevsky, 2025). Raskolnikov is seen to have two sides—one external and one internal: the one conflict is between the estranged individual and his own hostile universe and another is the clash between his isolated soul and his aesthetic consciousness (Kaman, 2019).

The philosophical idea of Cartesian Dualism by noted philosopher Rene Descartes divides the mind or soul and body or matter as two distinct units which itself was built upon Aristotle’s idea of the forms (Camarago, 2025). Further the nature of both mind and body as different entities, in life is better depicted when the narrator explains at the beginning “He had become completely absorbed in himself, and isolated from his fellows” (Dostoevsky, 2025), showcasing that he has stopped physically relating to his friends and at the same time mentally also stopped thinking about them. But later in a contradictory manner he moves towards interacting with his friend Razumihin but later calls it off as a bad idea, exposing his emotional instability in connecting with the society outside., showcasing his dualistic tendencies. To compare and relate Ramaswamy with Raskolnikov, it is necessary to search for a replacement to Advaita Vedanta in Dostoevsky’s literature which can be successfully

interpreted by understanding the final way of confession and surrender to almighty in Russian Orthodox Christianity which can be substantiated using Hegelian dialectical method.

Understanding Hegelian Dialectics in the interpretation of Raskolnikov's psychology:

To understand this complex analysis it is necessary to understand Hegelian Dialectics at first. The Hegelian dialectical process is a method of finding reasoning through argumentative methodology developed by German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Boukhatem, 2022). This method begins with a first part argument called "thesis" which is countered by a counter argument named "antithesis" and through conflict and deductions between both these counter arguments finally the individual arrives at a synthesis (Ma, 2018). This synthesis again becomes a thesis thus starting the process all over until the ultimate truth is achieved (Yang, 2024). Dostoevsky knowingly or unknowingly uses this dialectical method in the arguments of Raskolnikov to finally reach his "synthesis" which is his own redemption by confessing to his crime and accepting punishment. For example at the beginning of the novel he states "I want to attempt a thing like that" mustering his courage to murder a person but later after visiting the old pawn broker as a sort of rehearsal before the deed he exclaims "how could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of. Yes, filthy above all..... loathsome" (R Ramya, 2017). His motivation to kill the old pawnbroker lady is the thesis of Raskolnikov where he upholds the idea for the benefit of larger public who are actually exploited by the pawnbroker, it is better to murder the lady (Sood, 2023). On the other hand, his antithesis is followed by his moral dilemma post the murder scene and both of this shows the dualistic tendencies which Raskolnikov meets with. With respect to Raskolnikov's psychology, he always has an idea as a "thesis" and a corresponding anti – thesis. This is evident from the scene where after trying to substantiate his deed later he exclaims "Did I kill the old woman? No I killed Myself" (Dostoevsky, 2025). Now, the soul in western counterpart has to move towards self realisation which is now done through attaining Synthesis at the end which is the final confession of his crime and his surrender to the police. Now the Cartesian Dualism is unified with a single consciousness similar to how Ramaswamy tries to attempt the same through Hegelian Dialectical method. His rationalistic mind set which motivates him to murder at first is used by Dostoevsky to criticize, condemning and denouncing Nihilism, Utilitarianism and the Rationalism arising from such tendencies (Osita Igwenagum Ijeoma Lena, 2016). It is plausible to interpret this condemnation in the nature of "Avidya" as exclaimed in the realm of Vedanta. Since, Raskolnikov himself is not being able to attain the stage of self realisation or in Hegelian terminology "Synthesis" of his soul, he gets his required motivation as a part of antithesis through his love Sonia Marmeladova's devotion and suffering. In fact

Dostoevsky uses his narrative to oppose and denounce Cartesian Dualism and Western rationalism. Dostoevsky for the part of this synthesis gives us a narrative image of a theological truth—it is a paradisaical vision, rooted in the very resurrection of Christ, the one who suffered for all, who gives communion to those he sanctifies, and who promises resurrection for all who believe (Schubert, 2013). The relationships with Sonya as divine wisdom and redeeming love and Svidrigailov as the incarnation of nihilistic despair reveal in Raskolnikov's life is the victory of Orthodox Christianity over Western rationalism and theories of the extraordinary individual (Badhana, 2024). This synthesis or an alternative to self realisation or Brahman can be noted by how Dostoevsky portrays the silhouette of a saintly martyr similar to the self-sacrificing Sonya helps the twisted and confused Raskolnikov, reading to him from the gospels of the resurrection of Lazarus to show how resurrection is possible even for a murderer like him (Bartel, 2024). The Soul which is considered at first in the perspective of Cartesian duality as having an identity distinct from the body which Raskolnikov tries to achieve through his belief in Rationalism and Utilitarianism forgetting the unity and singleness in his soul. Now through the dialectical Hegelian method, the soul and body which are separated in Cartesian Dualism now achieves a single identity. This is because, as a strong and valid synthesis, Russian Orthodox belief in the embodiment of Christ as both true God and true man fosters an understanding of the soul-body relation as an interpenetration—one that preserves the mystery of their union and avoids objectifying distinctions (Turcan, 2025). Corinthians 6:19 of the Bible mentions that "Don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and who was given to you by God?" (Mathis, 2025). This further solidifies the idea that the soul and body which has a dual identity does have a singular identity when it comes to Russian Orthodox Christianity according to Dostoevsky.

Conclusion:

Swami Yuktswar Giri, in his book the Holy Science exclaims "Ignorance is the source of all troubles. In order to understand how this Ignorance is the source of all other troubles we should remember (as has been explained in the previous chapter) that Ignorance, Avidya, is nothing but a particle of Darkness, Maya, taken distributively, and as such it possesses the two properties of Maya" (Giri, 1990). Both Ramaswamy and Raskolnikov on the same pattern tries separating ignorance from soul which is considered principally wrong in both Advaita and Russian Orthodox Christianity which rejects dualistic understanding of the soul which can neither be separated nor be interpreted as a dual personality from body or matter. Ramaswamy's misunderstanding of non dualism leads him to view his wife Madeline from the non dual soul in his path to Brahman or self consciousness, which ultimately at the end of the novel leads to his failure in personal and spiritual life due to which he begins a new

chapter to search for his guru. With respect to attachment Adi Shankara in his work Bhaja Govindam states “Lust at the sight of a woman’s body springs from ignorance, springs from error; inwardly reason, over and over, Bodies are flesh and blood and fat” (Nikhilananda, 1976). It is to be understood that Biologically, nature has made man and woman with a natural affinity for charms of opposite sex, an urge which must be disciplined, controlled, purified and sublimated which can be done only by an intelligent intellect and not an animal (Chinmayananda, 2012). Lord Krishna himself in Bhagavad Gita does not denounce Maya, but rather accepts it as a part of his creation and states “This divine energy of Mine, consisting of the three modes of material nature (Maya), is difficult to overcome. But those who have surrendered unto Me can easily cross beyond it” (Prabhupada, 1981). This has been ignored by Ramaswamy in his journey for attaining enlightenment while living. In an interesting manner, Swami Chinmayananda notes on this particular verse “If a doctor were to come and diagnose a disease and declare that there was no cure for it, nobody will have the faith to follow that doctor’s prescription and advice carefully and cheerfully. Similarly, here, if Krishna’s diagnosis of the world’s sorrows and problems is to be defined by the term Maya, and if the doctor of the universe declares that this Maya – disease is difficult to cure, nobody would faithfully follow such pessimistic philosophy” (Chinmayananda, The Holy Geetha, 1992).

The fact here that Ramaswamy became pessimistic with Maya as an incurable disease rather than understanding the significance of the treatment offered which is nothing but complete surrender which is ignored by him due to his dual treatment of Maya and Soul as two different entities.

On the western perspective, on the analysis of one of Dostoevsky’s most interesting characters Raskolnikov, it is to be noted that he is also stuck with duality of separating his mind and body as two different entities when the Russian Orthodox Christianity identifies it as a singular entity. He believes in the Cartesian Dualism and modern Western Rationalism and due to such belief he suffers internally on the moral basis of his judgement to commit a murder. After committing the murder in the first part of the novel, he spends the rest of the five parts of the novel justifying his actions of murdering Ivanovna on the one hand, and on the other, he searches for the means of redemption (Ali, 2023). His thesis of rationalism at the beginning of the book is now challenged with empathy, guilt and his quest for redemption as an antithesis (M, 2025). Raskolnikov’s character is moulded by Dostoevsky with a conflict between the alienated intellectual and his hostile social environment, viewing his nature there is a struggle between his solitary mind and his own moral consciousness (Evelun DR Melcheja, 2019). True to his nature, Dostoevsky named his protagonist as “Raskolnikov” which itself means 'schism' or split between two opposing notions (Kaur, 2019). Through

the method of Hegelian dialectics, Raskolnikov moves towards his own self realisation and comes to conclusion through his own “synthesis”. This conclusion is nothing but his sincere feeling that he should redeem his sin not only in the eyes of law following the judicial process, but also in the eyes of Almighty, the God after surrendering himself and confessing his crimes (Kaur, 2019).

Dostoevsky himself as a narrator mentions “But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended” (Dostoevsky, 2025). Thus, Raskolnikov begins his new journey of path towards self realisation through his punishment of seven years of penal servitude in Siberia which he takes upon as a “penance” towards his journey of self realisation and redemption from his guilt (Bal, 2009), similar to how Ramaswamy at the end sets out to find out his own Guru in the novel *the Serpent and the Rope* (Karmakar, 2018). Both Raskolnikov and Ramaswamy Both Raskolnikov and Ramaswamy through their own respective life journey finally move towards searching for their path of redemption. In both the cases the classic usage of literature to break down complex philosophical ideas has to be surely appreciated because it is worth of not a simple work to do such a magnificent thing. It is to be understood that such philosophical fiction is the best way of presenting such complex philosophical themes as discussed in this paper by integrating it in the day to day life, expounding the philosophy as a song of daily life.

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