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Dostoevsky, Women, and the Gospel: Mothers and Daughters in the Later Novels

The novels of Dostoevsky have long provided a rich field of study for theologians and literary critics, but these studies have generally focused on the male characters. In recent years, feminist theologians and literary critics have begun to examine the presentation of Dostoevsky's female characters, and to ask whether, in literary terms, the women be seen as characters in their own right, rather than merely as symbols or consorts for the men; and whether, from the viewpoint of feminist theology, the writer gives serious consideration to the experience of women in terms of their family relationships and work, Christian faith and spiritual development, and striving against personal and institutional evil. This study takes account of relationships between mothers and daughters, considering the role of the mother as protector and model for the lived experience of Christian faith and values; also, the concept of spiritual motherhood, where a motherless girl develops a spiritual relationship with Mary, Mother of Jesus, and where the icon provides a symbolic focus for her devotion.

According to King, all theology is originally grounded in experience and the human desire for a 'spiritual dimension to life'.¹ She proposes the formulation of a feminist research methodology which is inclusive of all human experience, both male and female; and questions the theology through which men have assigned women their 'traditional roles in church and society'.² Slee says that feminist theology is 'rooted in the religious experience of women', and is concerned with examining the 'language about God and human beings' including the language of the Bible, church

¹ Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, 156.

² *Ibid.*

liturgy, and teachings about Christ.³ Hudspith says that the Christian concept of community is related to the Russian concept of *sobornost'*, in which 'each is responsible for all',⁴ and which reflects the solidarity of the poor in their care for each other, and in their efforts to alleviate suffering related to exploitation by the rich and powerful.⁵ Feminism is not exclusively a female concern and King argues for a more inclusive approach in which 'anyone who works for the abolition of women's subordination and oppression may be considered a feminist'.⁶ By this definition, Dostoevsky's novels could be considered as feminist works, and such a view may be supported by information in Anna's *Reminiscences*⁷ about her husband's empathy with women.

Hudspith says that Dostoevsky attached great importance to the figure and teachings of Christ; and that, given his background, highly sensitive character and choice of reading matter, he would have been looking for 'some practical application of Christianity'.⁸ His upbringing in a devout Christian family would have set the example. His mother was a kind and affectionate Christian lady, and her children 'knew the Gospel from our earliest childhood'.⁹ Dostoevsky's sympathy with women is a natural expression of his adherence to the teachings of Jesus, in his concern for the sick and oppressed—the 'insulted and injured'. Through the female characters in his novels, Dostoevsky explores the ways in which women may transcend the role in society traditionally ascribed to them by their male relatives and priests of the church, a role 'circumscribed by their

³ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003: x.

⁴ Sarah Hudspith, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness: a new perspective on unity and brotherhood*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004: 202, defines the concept of *sobornost'* as 'togetherness, free unity in mutual love and voluntary submission to the whole'. The biblical memory is from Galatians 6.2: 'Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ'.

⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell makes these points in her first 'industrial novel' about the sufferings of the urban poor. *Mary Barton* was published in 1848, around the time Dostoevsky was writing *Poor Folk* and *Netochka Nezvanova*, and there are many points of correspondence. Dostoevsky published the first Russian translation of *Mary Barton* in his journal, *Vremya*, 1861.

⁶ King (1993) op.cit, 4.

⁷ Anna Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky: Reminiscences*, trans/ed. Beatrice Stillman. New York: Liveright, 1975.

⁸ Hudspith (2004) op.cit, 18.

⁹ Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer, 1873* trans/ed. Boris Brasol, Vol.I. London: Cassell, 1949, 152.

biological function of producing children and the associated tasks of nurturing and caring for the young, the old, and the sick'.¹⁰

In her discussion of 'female bodily existence' as a source of women's experience, King perceives motherhood as a 'rich experiential source' for theological thinking, and 'mothering' as an experience which includes 'spiritual relationships' as well as the biological process of giving birth and nurturing dependent family members.¹¹ The titles of 'mother' and 'father' are also applied to the celibate religious, as a means of denoting respect for their spiritual authority, and, perhaps, of distancing them from the sexual and reproductive elements in human relationships.¹² Dostoevsky's exploration of Christian attitudes to motherhood and the role of the father may be considered in the light of his own family life and friendships with women,¹³ and through his work as both journalist and novelist. His sympathetic portrayal of women's experience through the female characters in his novels resonates with the experience of modern feminist theologians, who perceive Mary, the Mother of God, not as a cult figure of perpetual virginity, but as a woman who loved and suffered on behalf of her child, and whose experience offers consolation to those who grieve.¹⁴

Dostoevsky considers the pressures on women in different strata of society, including views of marriage, and what is considered suitable and respectable in their behaviour and education. He also shows the response of a young girl to the loss of her mother at an early age, and the effects of the mother-substitute. The aunts who take on the role of the mother are generally unwilling to accept the responsibility assigned to them, and try to 'marry off' the niece at an early age, without due regard to the suitability of the prospective husband,¹⁵ and Sonya's step-mother (*Crime and Punishment*) sends her out to earn money through prostitution. There are bad mothers who collude with the men and fail to protect their daughters, such as Liza (*Notes from Underground*) and Matryosha (*Devils*); but the mother-substitutes are rarely any better. Some girls find love and support from their maidservants, for example, Fedora (*Poor Folk*) and Lukerya (*Krotkaya*). However, the death of the mother and

¹⁰ King (1993) op.cit, 1.

¹¹ ibid 70.

¹² Zosima (*Brothers Karamazov*) was both monk and priest, and a spiritual father to Alyosha.

¹³ Discussed in Anna's *Reminiscences*.

¹⁴ Sarah Jane Boss ed, *Mary: The Complete Resource*. London/New York: Continuum, 2007, 1.

¹⁵ For example, Krotkaya, and Katerina (*Brothers Karamazov*).

female role-model at an early age is considered significant, and this is echoed in *Mary Barton*, where the protagonist says: 'Mother died before I was thirteen, before I could know right from wrong about some things ... a mother is a pitiful loss to a girl.'¹⁶

Feminist theology is rooted in the religious and spiritual experience of women, and has been likened to process theology in that it is about change and movement, and perceiving revelation in new ways; also to liberation theology in that it arises partly from women's historical experience of suffering and oppression. In recent years, feminist theological interpretation of biblical texts has developed in parallel with feminist literary criticism of nineteenth-century Russian literature. On the one hand, there are post-Christian feminists and post-Tolstoy/Dostoevsky literary critics who perceive ancient biblical texts and nineteenth-century novels by male authors as irredeemably patriarchal, sexist and divisive.¹⁷ On the other hand, there are feminist theologians and literary critics who acknowledge that, in the nature of cultural traditions in ancient societies and in nineteenth-century Russia, where power and authority have resided in the hands of men, insufficient attention has been paid to women's literary achievement and theological thought.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the biblical texts, as well as the works of some of the greatest nineteenth-century thinkers and writers, form part of the common literary and spiritual heritage, and should continue to be re-interpreted for succeeding generations, because their spiritual wisdom has value and relevance for contemporary society. This may be demonstrated through consideration of questions relating to the religious experience of women and the problems they face in their daily lives—questions which were explored by Dostoevsky in his journals and his novels, and which are still being explored by journalists and novelists today.¹⁹

The broad theme of Dostoevsky's portrayal of women in his novels may be seen by some critics as having nothing to do with feminist theology; but those who take account of this writer's biography,

¹⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848). London: David Campbell (Everyman's Library) 322.

¹⁷ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*. London: Women's Press 1986; Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*. Indiana University Press, 1987.

¹⁸ Sharon H. Ringe, 'When Women Interpret the Bible', 1-9, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *The Women's Bible Commentary*. London: SPCK and Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press 1992; Rosalind Marsh, *Gender and Russian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1996 1-37.

¹⁹ Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Feminist Theology*. London: Darton Longman Todd, 2003, 'The grounding of theology in women's experience', 5-6.

examining the interpretation of Christian faith expressed through his journalism and the diaries of his wife, may take a different view. In recent years, the discipline of feminist theology has expanded to include diverse modes of theological thought relating to female faith and spirituality, and this has given rise to use of the term 'feminist theologies'.²⁰ However, analysis of different modes of feminist theological thought would be beyond the scope of this article, in which 'feminist theology' will continue to be used in the more inclusive sense, and in its broader application to literary criticism.

Hudspith considers Dostoevsky 'both as a religious thinker and as an artist', and studies 'the areas in which his ideology and his poetics converge'. She concludes that his faith is 'consistent and firmly within the Orthodox tradition', and that 'many of Dostoevsky's concerns are still relevant today'.²¹ Dostoevsky was raised in the Orthodox Christian tradition, and his whole way of life was based on his Christian beliefs. He expressed his faith in Jesus Christ in a letter to Natalya Fonvizina;²² and his way of writing about the challenges facing women in their daily lives relates directly to the work of contemporary feminist theologians writing about their commitment to the liberation and empowerment of women.²³ The portrayal of women in journalism and imaginative literature is a major formative influence on the perception of their role in society today, just as it was in Dostoevsky's day; and this is now acknowledged as a legitimate concern for feminist theologians.²⁴

Novelists write about different aspects of human experience, and literary critics try to find new ways of reading them. For example, Andrew²⁵ and Kelly²⁶ discuss the mother/daughter relationship in Russian literature of the early nineteenth century, and suggest this as one aspect of

²⁰ For discussion of the development of various 'dialectical theories' in contemporary feminist theology, see Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate Publishing, 2004: 25-7.

²¹ Hudspith (2004) op.cit, 199-201.

²² Letter to N.D. Fonvizina, 20 February 1854, in which he says that if it could be proved to him that Christ was 'outside the truth', he would still prefer the way of Christ. *PSS* 28:1, 175-7.

²³ Slee (2003) op.cit, 7.

²⁴ Diane Oenning Thompson, *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, G. Pattison and D.O. Thompson. eds, Cambridge University Press, 2001: 12.

²⁵ Joe Andrew, 'Mothers and Daughters in Russian Literature of the First Half of the Nineteenth Century' in *Slavonic and East European Review* Vol.73. (1995) No.1, 37-60.

²⁶ Catriona Kelly (2001) 'Educating Tat'yana: Manners, Motherhood and Moral Education (*Vospitanie*) 1760-1840' in Linda Edmondson, *Gender in Russian History and Culture*. CREES: Palgrave 2001, 1-28.

women's experience which has attracted little critical attention so far. Analysis, from the perspective of a Christian feminist theologian, of one of the closest and most intimate of female relationships, as portrayed in the novels of Dostoevsky, shines a new light on a substantial body of classic literature. Enrichment of contemporary understanding of Dostoevsky's own Christian faith is a different matter. He viewed his faith as personal and private; but he discussed it with women such as his wife, Anna, and his friend, Natalya Fonvizina. Kirillova says that, from the evidence of his markings, the Gospel of John had 'particular significance' for Dostoevsky;²⁷ and this gospel has particular significance for feminist theologians, on account of its emphasis on the apostleship of Mary Magdalene.²⁸ Dostoevsky's Christian faith is constantly expressed, both implicitly and explicitly, through his journalistic writings, letters and novels. In her diaries and published reminiscences,²⁹ Anna also considers the ways in which his relationships with intelligent and powerful women influenced his understanding of faith and spirituality.

Many generations of Christian women have prayed to Mary, mother of Jesus, in her maternal role as *theotokos*,³⁰ and as intercessor and protector,³¹ and have claimed her as their 'spiritual mother'. Daly says that, for many women, Mary has been their only symbol of hope, not least when they have been on what she calls 'spiritual starvation rations'³². In the novels of Dostoevsky, Krotkaya and Sofia Karamazov offer examples of young women who have existed on 'spiritual starvation rations', and found their situations intolerable. Krotkaya lost her mother at an early age; and the manner of her death, embracing an icon of the Mother of God suggests a spiritual mother/daughter relationship.³³ The embracing of the icon by a suicide was a controversial (possibly, blasphemous) idea in Dostoevsky's own time, and would still be considered so by some Christians today. Both Krotkaya and Sofia (*Brothers Karamazov*) were unhappy in their marriages, and suffered cruel treatment by their

²⁷ Irina Kirillova, 'Dostoevsky's markings in the Gospel according to St John', in G. Pattison and D.O. Thompson, *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2001: 41-50.

²⁸ John 20.

²⁹ Anna Dostoevsky, *op.cit.*

³⁰ Sarah Jane Boss (2007) *op.cit.*: 'The Title Theotokos', 50-55.

³¹ *Ibid.*: Trevor Johnson, 'Mary in Early Modern Europe', 363.

³² Mary Daly (1986) *Beyond God the Father*—quoted by Ann Loades, 'The Virgin Mary and the Feminist Quest' in Janet Martin Soskice, ed, *After Eve*. London: Marshall Pickering, 1990: 162.

³³ In the words of the *Ave Maria* from the catholic liturgy: 'Hail, Mary, full of grace: pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.'

husbands. Sofia had two sons, but was made ill by her husband's attentions; whereas Krotkaya was denied the possibility of children by her husband's banishment of her from his bed. *Krotkaya* is the feminine of the Russian adjective meaning meek or gentle. O'Toole writes:

A Gentle Spirit turns out to be central to Dostoevsky's moral and aesthetic philosophy, for the crucial symbol in the story is an *obraz* (obraz) [an image or icon] which is a symbol of holiness, purity, inviolability, healing ...³⁴

Neither the 'gentle girl' nor her husband is named, so we can only refer to them as Krotkaya and the Pawnbroker. Her mother died when she was about twelve, a very significant age for a girl, and she passes into the care of a couple of avaricious aunts, who treat her like Cinderella and begrudge her the food she eats. The aunts try to force her into a marriage which would have been financially advantageous for them—with a neighbour, described as a fat shopkeeper of fifty. She chooses the Pawnbroker—a younger man with better prospects—as the lesser of the two evils. The quality of her character is attested by the servant, Lukerya, who loyally follows her to the establishment of the Pawnbroker. It is significant that Krotkaya's last moments before her suicide are observed and described by Lukerya, the only woman who really loves her, and whose affection might be described as maternal.

The icon of the Mother of God is significant in the story of Krotkaya. It is the only item of value she possesses—an ancient icon of the Madonna and child in a silver-gilt mounting. It is a family heirloom, possibly inherited from her mother. The Pawnbroker places it in the icon case, under the lamp which he has kept permanently lit since he opened the business. He is not a believer, but he shows respect for the icon and for her feelings in this instance. When her married life becomes intolerable to her, Krotkaya physically holds on to the icon as she falls from the window to her death—as she spiritually holds on to her Christian faith and throws herself on the mercy of the Mother of God as Protector and Intercessor.³⁵

The veneration of icons is a distinctive feature of Russian Orthodox spirituality, which sees the icon as a symbol of spiritual beauty and a window from the human world into the divine, symbolic as the interface between God and his creation. For Dostoevsky, the icon of the Mother of

³⁴ L.M. O'Toole, *Structure, Style and Interpretation in the Russian Short Story*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982: 42.

³⁵ Catherine O'Brien (2007), 'Mary in Modern European Literature: Icon and Intercessor', 526 (521-531) in Sarah Jane Boss, op.cit.

God represents the embodiment of the Russian spirit which is founded on love and compassion.³⁶ One of the functions of the icon in the Russian Orthodox tradition is to celebrate the concept of humanity made in the image of God. In the story of Krotkaya, her icon is a symbol of that part of her which is beyond the reach of the Pawnbroker, both in life and in death. The writer is exploring the links between material and spiritual poverty, and the integrating power of love.

Brothers Karamazov contains references to absent, unfit or unwilling mothers, mothers lost through death or desertion, the role of substitute mothers, worried mothers, and prayerful mothers. In contrast to Matryosha's mother (*Devils*), Madame Khokhlakova entirely devotes herself to the care of her daughter who is described as the 'Little She-Devil'. Liza tries to dominate her mother, who seeks spiritual comfort and guidance from Father Zosima—one of the group of devout and prayerful mothers who flock to the monastery to ask for his blessing on their children. Liza is disturbed by bad dreams and fantasies which she confesses to Alyosha. Self-mutilation by a young girl is now recognized as a sign of severe psychological distress—an attempt to punish herself for what she perceives as her own sin or propensity for evil, or to displace emotional pain (which cannot be controlled) by physical pain which, because it is self-inflicted, can be controlled. It is often a symptom of the trauma of physical abuse,³⁷ and while there is no suggestion of this in the case of Liza, the emotional disturbance caused by early sexual experience drives another motherless girl, Nastasya Filippovna (*Idiot*) down a self-destructive path which also has tragic consequences for the men in her life.

The possibility of redemption³⁸ through acceptance of suffering (whether arbitrarily imposed or willingly entered into on behalf of others) is balanced by consideration of the Christian ministry of healing and care for those who suffer. This is offered through Zosima's words of comfort to Fyodor Pavlovich and Dmitri (implicit), and his care for the peasant women and the noble ladies who appeal to him for help (explicit). The women show greater humility, and are more articulate and direct in asking for help. Dostoevsky's narrator describes the distressed condition of the 'shriekers', women who were suffering from a kind of nervous

³⁶ Ibid, 65.

³⁷ Alexander McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. Cambridge University Press, 2000: 57-79.

³⁸ Redemption as freedom from the tyranny of selfish concerns, and with the emphasis on altruism.

hysteria, and were calmed and comforted by a priestly blessing³⁹ and administration of the Eucharist:

I do not know how it is now, but in my childhood I often used to see these 'shriekers' in villages and monasteries. Taken to the Sunday liturgy ... when the chalice was brought out and they were led up to the chalice, the 'demonic possession'⁴⁰ would immediately cease and the sick ones would always calm down for a time. (I.2.III)

Some landowners believed that this was 'all a pretence in order to avoid work', but the narrator later learns from medical experts that this condition was 'a terrible women's disease' caused by the hard lot of the peasant women, and brought on by 'exhausting work too soon after difficult, improper birth-giving without any medical help' and by 'desperate grief, beatings and so on, which the nature of many women ... cannot endure'.

It seems likely that Dostoevsky, as the son of a doctor, would have heard this condition of women discussed by his parents at home, and, through his depiction of Alyosha's mother, he shows that this disorder is not confined to peasant women, but can afflict any woman suffering from what would now be recognized as domestic violence, post-natal depression, and exhaustion, whatever her social class. The term 'shrieker' which is generally used to translate the Russian word, *klikusha*,⁴¹ for a hysterical woman, and to describe someone suffering from this type of disorder, is used by Fyodor Karamazov to describe his second wife, Sofia Ivanovna, and used in a derogatory sense which belittles the suffering of women. Dostoevsky's narrator,⁴² on the contrary, gives the impression that he has found it necessary to revise his earlier opinions, and shows sympathy for the women.

Fyodor Pavlovich later⁴³ talks to Alyosha about Sofia Ivanovna, mother of Ivan and Alyosha. The father makes a number of crude and sexist remarks about his views on the treatment of women, which relate to his presumed violation of Lizaveta Smerdyakova; and the inference is that it was his rough and intemperate sexual demands on Sofia which caused

³⁹ Christian ministry of healing—signified by prayer and the laying on of hands.

⁴⁰ *besnovanie* = possession, frenzy, raging, raving (*bes* = demon, devil, evil spirit) *PSS* 14:44. Gospel references to cases of 'demonic possession' healed by Jesus include Mary Magdalene and other women in Luke 8, 2-3.

⁴¹ *klikusha* = hysterical woman (*klik* = cry, call {poet.}; *klikat'* = to call)—cry for help?

⁴² Dostoevsky's impersonal narrators are generally assumed to be male: when the narrator is female, this is clearly stated – the first-person narrator in *Netochka Nezvanova*, for example.

⁴³ I.3.VIII.

her nervous illness: 'I knew that was how her sickness usually began, that the next day she'd start her shrieking again'. Yet, he can still say: 'But, honest to God, Alyosha, I never offended my little shrieker'—and then proceeds to describe how he gave the gravest offence to a devoutly religious woman:

She was praying too much, she especially kept the feasts of the Mother of God, and on those days she would drive me away from her to my study. I'd better knock this mysticism out of her, I thought. (I.3.VIII)

He would take her precious icon of the Mother of God and spit on it to show his contempt. This tale of blasphemy and sacrilege produces much the same kind of nervous collapse in Alyosha as it did in Sofia, a 'hysterical attack of sudden trembling and silent tears'; and the father is struck by the remarkable resemblance to the mother. Fyodor appeals to Ivan, who responds in angry contempt: 'She was my mother too!' Fyodor's desecration of the icon of the Mother of God demonstrates his contempt for spiritual and religious beliefs, and his lack of love and tenderness in his relationship with his wife.⁴⁴ However, following a furious row with Dmitri, he repents sufficiently to give the icon to Alyosha, a gift which Alyosha would naturally treasure, both for its spiritual significance and as a memento of his mother. It is possible that, as in the scene at the monastery, Fyodor's bluster may hide feelings of shame at his own behaviour. This portrayal of family relationships demonstrates the concept of spiritual motherhood through Sofia's veneration of her precious icon of the Mother of God; and her prayers to the Mother of Jesus for the protection of her own son are present in Alyosha's memories of his mother.⁴⁵

Analysis of the lives and relationships of the three young women, Grushenka, Katerina and Liza, confirms that Dostoevsky viewed the absence of or neglect by the mother as a serious loss to a daughter, a loss which leaves the young girl vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by men. Grushenka and Katerina are motherless girls. Grushenka, an orphan like Nastasya Filippovna (*Idiot*), has matured under the 'protection' of a male mentor, and her character has been formed, to an extent, by her

⁴⁴ Jennifer Wright Knust discusses the obligations of Christian husbands and wives in *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

⁴⁵ I.I.IV. See also, Diane Oenning Thompson, "*The Brothers Karamazov*" and the *Poetics of Memory*. Cambridge University Press, 1991: 9; and Sophie Ollivier (2001). 'Icons in Dostoevsky's Works' in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson, eds. Cambridge University Press, 2001. 51.

relationship with him. Katerina has grown up in the company of her sisters and aunts, but neither they, nor her father, have been of much help to her. Unlike Aglaya (*Idiot*), she has no mother to guide or protect her. Liza has no father, but she has a mother who devotes her attention to the welfare of her daughter, and who also offers a measure of maternal support to Katerina.

Like Netochka Nezvanova, Nastasya Filippovna (*Idiot*), and Matryosha (*Devils*), Katerina and Grushenka are deprived of normal parental affection and exploited by men. Dostoevsky's sympathetic treatment of his female characters and his emphasis on the raw deal many women get from society are also demonstrated in *Crime and Punishment* where Sonya suffers through the loss of her mother, the irresponsible behaviour of her father, and the insensitivity of her step-mother who drives her into prostitution. Sonya is forced to adopt a maternal role towards her little step-sister, Polya, to save her from similar sexual exploitation. The loss of the mother in childhood is also seen as a major determining factor in the inability of the adult woman to form mature, loving relationships. Sonya is sustained by her Christian faith and her sacrificial love for Raskolnikov, while his sister, Dunya, finds her loving care for her mother rewarded by Razumikhin's loving assumption of responsibility for both of them. It seems doubtful that the couples in *Brothers Karamazov* will achieve similar success, although Alyosha and Liza would seem to stand the best chance. Liza acknowledges her own youth and inexperience, and admits that she is attracted by Ivan's intellectual conversation. However, the reader senses that, with her mother's guidance, she will come to appreciate that Alyosha's goodness and good sense will make him a better husband and give her the stability she needs.

The 'mothers Karamazov' are dead, but exist as shadowy presences throughout the novel, indicating Dostoevsky's appreciation of the influence of the mother on her sons as well as on her daughters. The prominence given to the concerns of Madame Khokhlakova and the peasant mothers in the early chapters is noted by Knapp:⁴⁶

the grieving mothers of Skotoprigonevsk are intimately connected to Mary, Jesus' mother, whose maternal grief—palpable on icons—has far-reaching theological and spiritual consequences ... *The Brothers Karamazov* is permeated with the presence of the Mother of God.

⁴⁶ Liza Knapp (2004), "Mothers and Sons in *The Brothers Karamazov*: Our Ladies of Skotoprigonevsk", 31, in R.L. Jackson, ed, *A New Word on "The Brothers Karamazov"*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004, 31-52.

In the novels of Dostoevsky, the writer exposes the effects of man's inhumanity to woman, and invites the reader to engage with female suffering under an oppressive social and political regime which fails to protect its most vulnerable members. Daughters frequently suffer through the actions of their fathers or the men who stand in *loco parentis*. Sometimes the mother is able to offer protection (Madame Yepanchina), but if she colludes with the father or ignores her daughter's feelings, (Liza, Matryosha), this betrayal is doubly painful. Poverty may render the mother powerless to protect her daughter (Varvara, Dunya), and where she is absent through death, the girl is especially vulnerable (Sonya, Nastasya Filippovna, Krotkaya). The novels of Dostoevsky offer a perceptive and sympathetic portrayal of the experience of women in terms of their spiritual development and their striving in the face of moral, personal and institutional evil. He gives space for their individual responses to the situations they face and depicts their success, or lack of it, through a variety of mother/daughter relationships. The spiritual relationship with the Mother of God, demonstrated through devotion to the icon, is most significantly developed through the characters of Krotkaya and Sofia Karamazov. Dostoevsky's own personal devotion to the Mother of God seems to have been more significantly expressed through his appreciation of western Madonna portraiture, and Jackson says that the 'cult of the Madonna' is 'clearly felt' throughout Dostoevsky's works.⁴⁷ A reproduction of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* hung over the divan in his study, and Anna often found him standing before it in such 'deep contemplation' that he did not hear her come in, and she would leave quietly, not wishing to disturb his 'prayerful mood'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ R.L. Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of his Philosophy of Art* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, 214.

⁴⁸ Anna Dostoevsky, op.cit, 325-6.