

THE "FOOLS" PRINCE MYSHKIN & VASSILIIY KNYAZEV



Kunwar Kant

Assistant Professor

Department of Russian Studies
English & Foreign Languages University,
Hyderabad

Abstract: This article is a comparative analysis of the main characters Prince Myshkin of F.M. Dostoyevsky's novel "The Idiot" and Vassiliy Knyazev of V.M. Shukshin's short story "Chudik", respectively. The works are analysed in the light of the concepts of the 'Holy Fool' and the 'Wise Fool'. The work highlights the various genealogical connections and the typological similarities between the two characters.

Keywords: F.M. Dostoyevsky, V.M. Shukshin, Comparative analysis, The Idiot, Chudik, Holy Fool, Wise Fool.

1. Introduction

F.M. Dostoyevsky and V.M. Shukshin are two prominent Russian literary figures. Both of them have uniquely contributed to Russian literature. If Dostoyevsky is famous for portrayal of deep philosophical and psychological characters, Shukshin is known for the depiction of simplistic ordinary village dwellers fighting for their due respect in unfavourable conditions.

In Russian literature, the archetypes of the *holy fool* and the *wise fool* have been widely used by many authors. These archetypes are closely connected with Russian Orthodoxy and the cultural legacy of Russia. They are distinct yet interrelated to each other.

F.M. Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* and V.M. Shukshin's *Chudik* (which can be roughly interpreted as "The Cranky", "The Queer Fish", "The Eccentric Fellow") hold significant positions within their individual literary trajectories.

Through a comparative examination of the protagonists of F.M. Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* and V.M. Shukshin's short story *Chudik* in the light of the concepts of *the holy fool* and

the wise fool, this research paper seeks to trace the genealogical connections and identify the typological similarities between the two works to establish that V.M. Shukshin wrote *Chudik* under the direct influence of F.M. Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.

2. *Idiot and Chudik* – Socio-historical background

Dostoyevsky wrote *The Idiot* during 1867–69. In 1867, he was forced to leave St. Petersburg along with his newlywed wife Anna Grigoryevna, as he was tormented by the creditors of his deceased elder brother and was afraid of being jailed. Dostoyevsky got addicted to gambling, witnessed utter poverty and was evicted several times, since he was unable to pay the rent for their motel stays. He was agonised by frequent epileptic seizures and also suffered the mortification of the death of his first child Sofiya during this very period. For her death, Dostoyevsky always blamed himself. Under such circumstances, he was unable to concentrate on his writing. He took some money in advance for his new book from the publishing house *Russkiy Vestnik* and went abroad. In a letter to A.N. Maykov sent in 1867 from Geneva, Dostoyevsky introduced his new work as *an idea to depict a completely beautiful human being*.

Vassiliy Shukshin (25 July 1929 – 2 Oct. 1974), prose writer, film actor, screenplay writer and film director, too was going through a very difficult phase in his life when he wrote *Chudik* in 1967. It was that Soviet era, when the comparatively growing idea of democratisation and freedom for writing enjoyed by writers during Nikita Khrushchev's *period of thaw* was slowly petering out and the old censorship regime was setting in again.

In a short biography of Vasily Shukshin written by Fyodor Razzakov, Shukshin's companion Lidia Fedoseeva informs us that in order to create a film honouring Stepan Razin, the leader of the peasant rebellion from 1667–1671, Shukshin dedicated nearly two years to preparation. This involved extensive research, including visits to significant locations along the Volga river associated with Razin and reading all the available literature about his life. After receiving approval from authorities for his literary script titled "The End of Razin," Shukshin committed himself fully to the project.

However, Shukshin's hopes were shattered when it became apparent that his project on Stepan Razin did not align with the program for celebrating the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution in 1967. The State Film-making Agency, Goskino SSSR, ultimately rejected his Razin project. He was not even permitted to produce a satirical film based on his own fairy tale "Tochka zreniya" ("A point of view") due to similar reasons.

Lidia Fedoseeva termed these official decisions *killing* and said it was very painful for Shukshin to accept the new reality. After these setbacks and while overcoming the tragedy and gaining fresh inspiration to move ahead in life, Shukshin wrote the story *Chudik* towards the end of 1967. The story reflects Shukshin's despair and lament for unfulfilled dreams of his fellow countrymen.

3. The Concepts of The Holy Fool and The Wise Fool – An overview

Lavendier writes "A holy fool is a character who behaves outlandishly in the name of God, often to the point where others may define him as mad. It is his role to "imitate Christ" and to accept

“suffering and humiliation, which he deliberately provokes by his (seeming) acts of folly” (Murav2)” (Lavendier, 7).

On the website *The Catholic Reporter*, Rich Heffern writes, “*Iurodstvo* is the Russian word for the idea of “holy foolishness” for Christ’s sake. It’s a form of asceticism that has been practised within the Russian Orthodox church for centuries” (Heffern).

As per the list given on the website of the literary journal “Idiot”, starting from St. Simeon Salus (6th century) through St. Basil the Blessed (16th century) and further up to the October Revolution in 1917, there exist in Russian society numerous accounts of the presence of holy fools (Novikov).

Since medieval hagiographic texts, Russian literature witnesses a literary tradition that deals with depiction of characters based on the above-mentioned old Russian saints and holy men.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Idiot*, pivoted on its central character Prince (Knyaz) Myshkin, is famously considered one of the most prominent works in world literature that deals with the concept of the *holy fool*. And, naturally, it had a profound influence on many later authors.

Chudova assesses that “*The works of B. Pasternak, G. Gazdanov, V. Sorokin and D. Galkovsky revealed the characterological and narrative imitations of Dostoyevsky’s novel “The Idiot”* (Chudova, 1158).

As far as the concept of the wise fool is concerned, *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* in a dedicated section to the topic “*Wisdom of the Fool*” proclaims that the most advanced and comprehensive of those primitive notions with which man has questioned his own potential and accomplishments is the concept of the *wise fool*, which contrasts self-acquired wisdom with wisdom that is natural or divinely given. It also asserts that the paradoxical notion that a fool could possess wisdom originated very early in the process of civilization (Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 516).

The concept of the *wise fool* has fascinated numerous writers. Starting from the 16th-century work by Erasmus, there exists a whole gamut of literary works that deal with this idea, including the works of authors like Thomas Murner, Cervantes, John Skelton, Francois Rabelais, Teofilo Folengo, Thomas Nashe, Hans Sachs, Cornelius Agrippa, Michel De Montaigne, William Shakespeare and many more. In Russian literature, characters akin to V. Shukshin’s famous *Chudik* are often characterised as the *wise fools* by many critics.

4. Literature Review

There are many works dedicated to the study of the influence of the 19th-century Russian classics on Vasiliy Makarovich Shukshin’s creative writing.

The deep connection between Vasiliy Shukshin and classic writers like Lev Tolstoy and Feodor Dostoyevsky has been explored by V.I. Korobov in his book *Vasiliy Shukshin: Veshchee Slovo*. Korobov writes that Shukshin read the collected works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Leskov, Gorky among others when he was still a student. In his own words, Shukshin read them “so carefully that some episodes, some images of Russian classics, against his will, unconsciously passed, as involuntary literary reminiscences, into his own works”(Korobov). He asserts that “there

is a deep connection between the moral and philosophical searches of Dostoevsky and Shukshin" (Korobov).

Valeriya Novodvorskaya categorically states, "Shukshin's world is actually Dostoyevsky's world with some adjustments to Soviet reality" (Info).

G. A. Belaya dwells on the affinity between the writings of the two authors as both of them in their works depicted the "destructive potential of the small man" (Sapa, 32).

O.G. Levashova in an article titled "The strange hero of F.M. Dostoyevsky and the Chudik of V.M. Shukshin" affirms that "Researchers constantly emphasise not only the typological but also the genetic proximity of the Shukshinian freaks to the heroes of Dostoyevsky". (Levashova, 291) She draws several parallels between Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* and Shukshin's short stories *Chudik* and *Borya*.

Olga Chudova quotes Yu.I. Sokhryakov, while discussing Dostoyevsky's *Idiot's* influence on 20th century Russian authors, *The righteous heroes who embody the ideal of meekness and humility, like Myshkin, can be called: V. Shukshin's "cranks" ("Alyosha Beskonvoyny", "Bright Souls", "Crank", etc.), Ch. Aitmatov's Obadiah ("The Scaffold"), B. Vasilyev's Yegor Polushkin ("Do Not Shoot at White Swans"), A. Solzhenitsyn's Matryona Timofeevna ("Matryona's House"), A.Vampilov's Valentina ("Last summer in Chulimsk"), N. Narokov's Evlampiya ("Imaginary values")* (Chudova, 1158).

5. Comparative Analysis

Taking cue from previous research, we further provide an up-to-date comparative analysis of the two works. We will first discuss all the instances of genealogical connections which include historical, cultural and literary influences and then we will identify the typological similarities such as character archetypes, narrative structures and recurring themes.

5.1. Genealogical connections

As discussed in the previous section on the socio-historical background both *Idiot* and *Chudik* were written when their authors were going through very hard times in their own life: they were broke and struggling to keep their muse alive.

Both the works contain autobiographical events. Dostoyevsky famously depicted the autobiographical event of his being pardoned by the emperor minutes before his execution by the firing squad. Shukshin too includes the autobiographical event of his losing a 50-rouble banknote in a shop!

Prince Myshkin is referred to as an *idiot* in the novel quite a few times. He himself once says, "I am often called an idiot, and at one time I certainly was so ill that I was nearly as bad as an idiot; but I am not an idiot now. How can I possibly be so when I know myself that I am considered one?" (Dostoyevsky, tr. by Martin). The narrator on the other hand always calls him *prince* (knyaz) except in the very end, when he calls Prince Myshkin an idiot: "Evgenie Pavlovitch took the deepest interest in the fate of the unfortunate "idiot" and, thanks to his influence, the prince found himself once more with Dr. Schneider, in Switzerland" (Dostoyevsky, tr. by Martin). (Schneider is a doctor in a Swiss mental hospital -KK.)

Shukshin, on the other hand, reverses this sequence! In the very first sentence of Shukshin's *Chudik*, we are informed that "His wife called him "Quirky". Sometimes affectionately" (Shukshin, tr. by Daglish, 106). Throughout the story, the narrator calls the protagonist *Chudik*, revealing his actual name only at the end of the story: "...His name was Vassily Yegorich Knyazev" (Shukshin, tr. by Daglish, 117).

This is Shukshin's hint that *Chudik* (Vassily Knyazev) is a kind of reincarnation of Prince (Knyaz) Myshkin, placed in a clueless Soviet society of the 1960's. Indeed, Shukshin acknowledges Dostoyevsky's influence in many other ways too. For instance, *Chudik* is fond of dogs and detectives and wanted in his childhood to become a spy. It is now a well-researched fact that both dogs and detectives play an important role in the life and works of Dostoyevsky. Quite famous is the story of Dostoyevsky being saved by a dog during his exile years, which is portrayed by him in his novel "The House of the Dead". Similarly, his novel "Crime and Punishment" has a profound detective character in Porfiry Petrovich.

Shukshin actually goes a step ahead. He not only gives *Chudik* the surname Knyazev (alluding to the word knyaz "prince"), but also his own first name - Vasiliy! The "quirky" *Chudik* has the first name of the author Shukshin himself!

In the light of the above discussion and after knowing that Shukshin was well versed with the works of Dostoevsky, it cannot be a mere coincidence that Shukshin published *Chudik* in 1967, i.e. practically 100 years after *The Idiot*!

6. Typological Similarities

6.1. Character archetypes.

The protagonists of both works belong to the archetypes of the Holy fool and the Wise fool.

6.1.1. Knyaz Myshkin as the Holy Fool

Spending 10 years in imprisonment changed Dostoyevsky's world view completely. While he revealed in advance to Maykov that *The Idiot* is an *idea to depict a completely beautiful human being*, at another place he has written that there is only one beautiful person in this world and that is Christ himself. Indeed, Dostoyevsky's later works including *The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Devil* and *The Karamazov Brothers* certainly have evangelical characters and a deep religious foundation.

Volkova et al. assert that "Dostoyevsky's novel "The Idiot" has fully set the theme of Orthodoxy. Perhaps it is difficult to single out another similar work, imbued with a Christian idea. And although the novel was not of a direct religious nature, it is still closely connected with faith in God" (94, Volkova et al.).

Russian intelligentsia of Dostoyevsky's era was completely under the influence of West European ideological and philosophical thoughts. Dostoyevsky wanted Russian people not to get carried away too far and, in fact, he considered it dangerous for Russia's future. Prince Myshkin is performing the role of Christ when he says, "One can't understand everything at

once, we can't begin by perfection all at once! In order to reach perfection one must begin by being ignorant of a great deal. And if we understand things too quickly, perhaps we shan't understand them thoroughly... I'm afraid for you, for all of you, for all of us together... Let us be servants in order to be leaders" (Dostoyevsky, Tr. by Martin). Prince Myshkin wanted to redeem all from the path of lack of morals and move them in the path of the Christian faith. That is why Myshkin can be called a *holy fool*.

6.1.2. Vasily Knyazev as the Wise Fool

Unlike Dostoyevsky, Shukshin did not have any religious task to fulfil. He was living in a country where religion was officially banned. Churches were destroyed or abandoned and holy fools devoted to Christ were ostracised. Nevertheless, on the eve of the 100th year of publication of *The Idiot*, Shukshin too planned to write a story about a completely beautiful human being: to put him among the contemporary Russian people and show what happens to such a person. Through his encounters with various people along the way, the protagonist could demonstrate the many shortcomings in the then Soviet society. This brings Chudik close to Don Quixote-like characters and he falls into the category of *wise fools*.

6.2. Narrative

In both *The Idiot* and *Chudik*, the story starts with a journey. Prince (Knyaz) Myshkin is returning to Moscow from Switzerland, whereas Chudik (Vassiliy Knyazev) is travelling to the Urals from Siberia. They are going to meet their relatives with whom they have lost connections. Prince Myshkin is 26 years old, unmarried, of noble origin, and suffering from epilepsy, while Chudik is 39 years old, married, active, a healthy village dweller.

While travelling, both the protagonists narrate some stories to their fellow travellers. While Prince Myshkin has a candid conversation that moves us, Chudik hardly finds anyone to talk to. Even the lone man that he finds is also sceptical of him and turns away from him coldly. This was the reality of those Soviet times. Something similar happens on Chudik's aeroplane journey too. Shukshin writes, "He even tried to start up a conversation with his neighbour, but his neighbour was reading the newspaper and found it so interesting that he had no time to listen to a living human being" (Shukshin, tr. by Daglish, 110).

Just as Prince Myshkin once says, "How anyone can talk to a man and not feel happy in loving him!" (Dostoyevsky, tr. by Martin), Chudik indeed shows this trait in Shukshin's story, no matter to whom he talks. Whether it is his own wife, fellow villagers, unknown fellow travellers, the lady telegraphist, his elder brother Dmitry, or his hostile sister-in-law, Chudik is candid, open, and clear in his conversation. Like Prince Myshkin, he wants to be friendly with everyone. Rogozin in *The Idiot* and Chudik's sister-in-law Sofya Ivanovna in *Chudik* clearly show hostility towards these heroes, but Myshkin and Chudik show no ill feelings. Throughout the stories, both the heroes try to spread love and affection but fail in their mission.

Just as Prince Myshkin failed to save Nastasya Filipovna, so also Chudik (Vassily Knyazev) fails to turn around his sister-in-law Sofya Ivanovna from an inimical stance to a friendly one. All attempts made by Myshkin and Chudik to find a common language with their fellow humans lead to disappointment. Prince Myshkin, the *holy fool* with little prospect of ever recovering

from his *idiocy*, returns to the Swiss mental hospital. So also Chudik, the failed *wise fool*, returns to his village with a heavy heart.

6.3. Recurring themes

Both Myshkin and Chudik are child-like, acting in a good-hearted and loving manner toward everyone. Goro Cardelian's views about Prince Myshkin's character apply to Chudik as well: both of them *"lack a certain capacity and intention to communicate with adults according to established norms, indicating a lack of social maturity and mental development"*. Indeed Prince Myshkin himself says, *"But one thing is true, I really don't like being with adults, with people, with big ones, and I noticed this a long time ago, I don't like it because I don't know how"* (Dostoyevsky, Tr. by Martin). Introducing Prince Myshkin, General Epanchin says, *"He is quite a child, not to say a pathetic-looking creature."* Myshkin too refers to himself as a child in numerous instances. For example, while talking to the three sisters, he says, *"People may consider me a child if they like"* (Dostoyevsky, Tr. by Martin).

Similarly, the telegraphist's insistence that Chudik change the wording of his telegram to his wife confirms his inability to communicate according to established norms. She says, *"You'd better word it differently. You're a grown-up person, not out of a kindergarten"* (Shukshin, tr. by Daglish, 112).

In *The Idiot*, Dostoyevsky refers to the words child and children a number of times. Not just Prince Myshkin, almost every character at one point or another has been labelled as childlike, including Nastasya Filipovna, Agalya, and others. Referring to children, Prince Myshkin declares, *"How can one deceive these dear little birds, when they look at one so sweetly and confidingly? I call them birds because there is nothing in the world better than birds!"* (Dostoyevsky, Tr. by Martin).

Shukshin too refers to children in his story, but in a very different way. While Chudik was travelling in the aeroplane, the person sitting next to him said, *"Children are the flowers of life. They ought to be planted head downwards"* (Shukshin, tr. by Daglish, 110).

7. Conclusion

Despite the disparity in genre and the passage of nearly a century, it is evident that there are genealogical links between the two works. This period of 100 years witnessed significant transformations in the political, social, and cultural spheres. However, the humanist Russian authors' preoccupation with the human condition, morality, and societal limitations has endured throughout this time.

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«Дураки» – Князь Мышкин и Василий Князев

Аннотация: Настоящая статья представляет собой сравнительный анализ главных героев князя Мышкина из романа Ф.М. Достоевского "Идиот" и Василия Князева из рассказа В.М. Шукшина "Чудик". Произведения анализируются в свете концепций юродивого и мудрого дурака. В работе подчеркиваются различные типологические соответствия и генеалогические связи между двумя персонажами.

Ключевые слова: Ф.М. Достоевский, В.М. Шукшин, Сравнительный анализ, Идиот, Чудик, Юродивый, Мудрый дурак.