

# The Trials of Relationship and The Separateness of Generations in R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*

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**Abstract—** *Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, popularly known by Graham Greene's sobriquet R. K. Narayan, is noted for his remarkable gift of story-telling, extraordinary depiction of the ordinary oddities and angularities of the masses, and above all, penetrating portrayal of Indian social reality rooted in tradition, customs and rituals. The world of Narayan's writings reflects the ideals and values he cherishes and wishes to treasure as the precious heritage of Indian culture. While depicting life as he sees it as a cavalcade of social life passing every day, he finds that it is deep-rooted in the soil of the place. It has its values, mores, norms, customs and conventions followed, preserved, nurtured and protected by people. Narayan presents his concept of traditionalism which is the fountain-head from which his other philosophical concepts such as orthodoxy, superstition and the role of fate in life flow as its inseparable channels, through the middle class life of Malgudi which is his only locale.*

**Indexed Terms—** *civilization, culture, modern, relationship, tradition, values, western*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Narayan, through his novels, manifests that success and happiness in life lie in submission to and acceptance of the Shashtra-approved traditional values. Human life is a journey in quest of self-identity or emancipation from the miseries of life. But influenced by man's modern outlook, ego and karma and governed by fate and chance, human life moves in a meandering way and eventually comes to the same state from which it starts but with man's self-realization of his puny stature and the truths of life in the tradition-bound social setup. In the novels of R. K. Narayan, there is a rebellion in the characters who violate the social norms but this rebellion is followed by a return, a renewal and a conformity to the social set-up. Violation of traditional norms leads to disruption, misery and unhappiness. Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* protest against their family tradition.

But sufferings and hardships force them to conform to the social set-up. Shantha Krishnaswamy rightly puts: "Narayan seems to point out, overtly and obliquely, the values of a heritage, of a past. What the Shastras have prescribed is good for everybody."

Narayan suggests that faith is the foundation stone of family life, particularly married life. Conjugal happiness subsists on marital faith and fidelity, love and loyalty. Despite its drawbacks and defects, marital faithfulness is regarded as the most precious and lasting element in Indian culture.

R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* was first published in London in 1967 by The Bodley Head Ltd. Its seventeenth reprint appeared in 2006. East-West conflict is the major theme of the novel. It is the conflict between a genuine Indian or Eastern father and his Western-bred son.

Jagan is the most vibrant character of the novel from the first page to the last. Mali, his son who returned from America with a half-American half-Korean girl whom he reported as his wife and later said he never married, had been something of a sensation disturbing the placid waters of Malgudi. But Mali is insignificant when compared to his father.

Instances of verbal conflict between tradition and modernity are many in the text. The dialogues of conflict occurred between Jagan and Mali, Mali and Grace and Jagan and Grace.

Mali, Jagan's son returning from America arrived at the railway station. There was a girl with him. Jagan was worried at the sight of the girl. "Matters became worse when Mali indicated the girl at his side and said, "This is Grace. We are married. Grace, my dad." Complete confusion. Married? When were you

married? You didn't tell me. Don't you have to tell your father? Who is she? [. . .]" (Narayan 58). Mali was influenced by the modern, western civilization and as a result he did not find it necessary to ask his father's permission to get married. The selection of his spouse was also done by himself alone. This western style is in contrast to the traditional Indian style of arranged marriages. Love marriages are very rare even at present in India. Jagan had none in the world except his son for whom he devoted his life. He thought it improper and impolite to ask his son why he had married without his permission. That showed the intensity of his love towards his son. Naturally when his son did not return that love and reverence to him, one can imagine his mental conflicts.

Grace, though a Western, wanted to be a true Indian daughter-in-law to Jagan. Hence she wore sarees and did all household works. She started cleaning Jagan's room and washed the vessels in his kitchen. Jagan's protests were unheeded. "She clutched the broom and raked every corner of the floor saying, "Father, you think I mind it? I don't. I must not forget that I'm an Indian daughter-in-law" (Narayan 62). As to please her father-in-law, Grace had to trouble and take much pain. She was not used to kitchen work in her own country.

Jagan wanted to know the whereabouts of Grace. Hence he told her, "It is a custom in this country to inquire where one was born and bred and who is who generally, and then we go on to other things."

"Only the passport and income-tax people ask for such details in other countries. However since I am also an Indian now, I might as well get used to things, and tell you something" (Narayan 65). The conflict of two cultures—traditional Indian and the modern Western—are expressed in this dialogue. Since Jagan was educated, he showed enough courtesy in asking her whereabouts indirectly and not bluntly as most Indians do.

Jagan, a traditional Indian man who believes in values cannot imagine his son living immorally with a woman in his house. He believes that his house is defiled and hence he cannot go back and live there.

The protagonist or the narrator of the story is only 'the listener.' In the conventional manner of story-telling, comedy is reinforced here.

The cousin's name is deliberately hidden by the novelist. Jagan shares his sorrows and happiness with him and seeks advice whenever needed. The cousin visits Jagan's shop every afternoon and checks the taste of each item. Jagan and the cousin spend in the shop speaking for hours and hours. But it's very strange that Jagan has never called him by his name. Why his name is concealed is known only to the novelist. Unlike the Quixotic Jagan, the cousin is very mature, rational and practical-minded. The only flaw in him is that he flatters Jagan now and then. Of course it is justifiable since it serves his purpose.

*The Vendor of Sweets* deals with the trials of relationship and the separateness of generations between a father and his son. It is also a modish tale of East versus West. When one reads these obvious contrasts, he should not fail to notice the similarities. In the words of Barry Argyle, "Narayan is interested in the similarities, in states and feelings that might have been the same; but by using a modish vehicle he not only disguises his true concern . . . but also creates a tension between the apparent and the real. This tension duplicates the novels theme, which is the search for real values among many that are spurious or outworn" (35). Thus this novel may be treated not only as a 'generation novel' or a 'national novel' but a 'universal novel.'

Jagan is an orthodox Hindu who tried to live according to Hindu scriptures and traditions. He professed to live by the principles of the *Gita* and Gandhi, but had to live in the particular necessities of his own condition. "He makes and sells sweets, makes a lot of profit, partially evades sales tax, but at the same time he claims to be a follower of Gandhi and the *Gita*" (Nanda 89). Jagan is a representative of thousands of Indians who outwardly appear to be very pious and straightforward, but their actions prove otherwise. To safeguard their selfish interests they find justification in their incongruities as Jagan did.

Narayan accepted the Hindu world view. To quote an example, when Mali told his father that he had never seen a more wasteful country than theirs the author made Jagan retort that they found it adequate for their

purpose. Commenting on this D. S. Philip says, ““The purport of all this is clear: The West, enchanting as it may appear, threatens to destroy that given traditional life its values. The West, Narayan, says, is not a model Indians must imitate indiscriminately. This results in disruption rather than contentment”” (qtd. in Nanda 92-93).

Mali’s story-writing machine when viewed from Indian tradition is the ultimate profanity in the realms of art. “Mali tries to introduce the final depersonalization in an Americanized, mechanical concepts of art. Even the critical and evaluative process is to be mechanized with “a little fixture, by which any existing story could be split up into components and analysed”” (Nanda 93). Jagan refuses to invest his money in such a perversion of art as well as his tradition.

Towards the end of the novel the image carver, Chinna Dorai tells Jagan about the dancing figure of Nataraj which was so perfect that it began a cosmic dance and the town itself shook as if an earthquake had rocked it, until a small finger in the figure was chipped off. To quote Nanda:

This story of the dancing image gives an account of the Indian view of the perfection of art which partakes of the divine nature. The contrast of this view of art with the western conception of art propagated by Mali is instructive. In the Indian view, one had to strive for perfection in art. In the process one may transcend the illusory world of individuation and discord and achieve *Nirvana* suggested by the cosmic dance. (93) Unlike many other novels of Narayan, *The Vendor of Sweets* focuses attention on a limited number of people: Jagan, the protagonist, his son Mali, Mali’s companion Grace, Jagan’s ubiquitous cousin who is not given a name, Jagan’s wife Ambika, his parents, Chinna Dorai, the hair-blackener and sculptor and a few others. As the number of characters is limited it presents greater psychological subtlety and depth of the feeling than many other novels of Narayan (Jayantha 62).

## II. CONCLUSION

*The Vendor of Sweets* is not merely an amusing story which depends for its comedy on the improbable and

fantastic, but it has much depth than the apparent on the surface. To quote R. A. Jayantha, “While it seems to tell the amusing story of an eccentric and obscurantist father and his upstart son, and the game of hide and seek they play with each other, in point of fact it is built on a few inter-related themes of which the most readily obvious is the father-son motif” (62). The other themes are: youth versus age, the generation gap, tradition versus modernity, East versus West, and search or quest. The quest motif in the novel encompasses all the other themes. “Jagan the protagonist of the novel, by virtue of his circumstances of his life, engaged himself in different kinds of search. But he is not a deliberate and self-conscious quester, nor is he capable of sophisticated intellectual inquiry” (Jayantha 62).

In Jagan, the reader may note of an autobiographical element. He can be called an alter ego of Narayan in some aspects. To quote Macdonald, “It may be that Narayan had a special sympathy for Jagan, since they both married at an early age, had one child (Narayan’s was a daughter) and lost their much loved wives at an early stage in the life of their children. And more important, Jagan and Narayan were both sixty years old at the time the novel was written. In Jagan, Narayan has created a character close to his own image” (155).

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