
Between Gandhian Ethos and Western Modernity: A Study of Conflict in *The Vendor of Sweets*

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Abstract

Indian English Literature places itself among other literatures in English as prominent with international appeal. It starts with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's venture, which was followed by a large number of writers who have produced a bulk of Indian English literature. R. K. Narayan, among others, is one of the prominent and renowned writers who played a significant role in creating an international readership. Malgudi, like Wessex, Yoknapatawpha County, and Macondo, is Narayan's imaginary niche with its population, culture, nature, and environment, and resembles India in miniature. Narayan made his debut with *Swami and Friends* and remains a staunch propagator of Gandhian philosophy. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan, an orthodox character, remains confined to traditional values, reads the *Bhagavad Gita* every day, but his ears remain vigilant on his workers, which show his hypocrisy. On the other hand, Mali, his son, embraces modernistic advances of his time. Thus, the ideological difference between the son and the father aggravates, which results, at the end of the novel, in Jagan's abandonment of the world. This paper discusses the relationship between the father and the son and how they endorse their own set of ideologies to oppose each other. Furthermore, the generation gap and its impact are touched upon to show the conflict between a Western-bred son and a typical Indian father.

Keywords: Ideology, Malgudi, Modernity, Orthodox, Tradition.

R. K. Narayan's novels are based on humanitarian notions of living, where the quest was of attaining peace and tranquility. He endorsed remaining faithful to the outside world, where change was an inevitable phenomenon. R. K. Narayan stressed the creative pre-condition of being rooted in the culture one describes. "He (Narayan) is of India, even of South India: he used the English language much as we used to wear dhotis manufactured in Lancashire—but the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India..." (Iyengar 359). His oeuvre is full of characters imbued with the Indian system of beliefs, through which he draws a real picture of India. His thrust in fiction was to explore the problems of middle-class people in Indian society and the interaction of characters in a changing environment. His artistic endeavor helped him to portray the life of various cultures in a secular manner. He didn't endorse any particular ideology and believed that every person lives his/her life accordingly and finds a way out when entangled in a catch-22 situation. He also believes in divine intervention in solving the inner conflict of a person.

R. K. Narayan differs from other Indian English writers as he felt himself comfortable in the English language because he felt at home using the language more than Tamil or Kannada. English for him was his first language, and he expressed his feelings more poignantly and clearly because of his command over it. John Thieme argues, "It was not then surprising that English became

Narayan's language of choice" (9). Very instinctively, Narayan started writing in English just as one starts in his/her mother tongue. In an interview, Narayan said about his choice of English as the medium of his writing that, "I never had any idea that I was writing in another tongue. My whole education has been in English from the primary school, and most of my reading has been in the English language... I wrote in English because it came to me very easily" (qtd. in Sundaram 1988).

R. K. Narayan creates Malgudi as a microcosm of India, where middle-class families get exposure to the modern world and the East-West conflict reflects the strong imprint of colonization. The British rule had a tremendous influence on the minds of Indian people as they established schools and colleges which propagated Western ideologies and ideas among the natives to make their rule firm. But at some points, it proved beneficial for Indians. Different philosophical ideologies like Marxism, Rationalism, Atheism, Pragmatism, and Skepticism, etc., made a strong impact on Indian thinking that endorsed a change in attitude towards the world. Narayan's characters in his novels are also influenced by one or the other philosophy.

Rationalism and spiritualism are the two contrary forces in the modern world, where the inclination is more towards Rationalism than Spiritualism. Rationalism, in its broadest sense, is any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification. Characters like Mali and Grace (*The Vendor of Sweets*), Raju (*The Guide*), and Raman and Daisy (*The Painter of Signs*) are typical examples who follow reason and strive to follow the modern contours in their lives. Narayan portrays different stances of Indian modernity. He does not only reflect upon India's social and cultural evolution but also shows the wavering attitude of his characters while adopting Western modernistic ethos alongside traditional set notions of society. Narayan seems to ridicule the exclusive orthodoxy of Indian conservatism and is clearly sympathetic towards modernity. His ironical attitude itself is largely Western; it has few parallels in pre-modern Indian authors. He presented India with a realistic flavor of life and vigour that seems ordinary to some critics. His style of telling stories in a bewitching way compels Graham Greene to place him on par with Leo Tolstoy, Henry James, Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, and Joseph Conrad.

R. K. Narayan, in *The Vendor of Sweets*, creates two different characters—Jagan, an orthodox Hindu who lives his life on set notions, and Mali, who strives for the modern way of life. Jagan, a college-educated man in his late fifties, has made a success of his sweet shop. He grew rich in his business as a vendor of sweets. His only concern after his wife's death is his son, Mali. His wife died because of a brain tumor, and his son believes Jagan to be the cause of her death. Jagan believes in nature cure, which his wife loathed. Mali feels that his father is responsible for his mother's death because he did not opt for allopathic treatment, and the gap between father and son starts widening from this very incident. But Jagan's love for his wife and son was very deep, and that's the reason he did not remarry. He hastened every evening after the death of his wife to reach home soon to look after his son, but Mali did not yield to his father's love and care. This led to estrangement between them. This attitude made them indifferent towards each other. Jagan remained loyal to his emotions by allowing his son to live his life freely. He was happy with his life as he prospered in his business. He was astonished at his son's visit to America after stealing money. When his son wrote letters to him and informed him about the American way of life, Jagan felt elated and read the letters with pride in front of the villagers to make an impression on them. But the happiness of his letters faded when his son once wrote to him that he ate beef, which was a

sin in his eyes. He concealed that letter as he was a Gandhian follower and a vegetarian, and he had also been arrested for hoisting the Indian flag when he was young. Thus, he was worried about his son's behaviour. Jagan endorsed living a simple life as he made food for himself, and he never used salt or sugar because he believed that they were detrimental to health. He spun the charkha and wore clothes made of khaddar. He never used a brush because he thought that it was made of pig's tail. He was always carrying the *Bhagavad Gita* in his hands to recite it wherever he found time. This reveals his personality as being nourished and set on traditional values and beliefs. On the other side, his son remained inclined towards modern values and strived to achieve Western ideals. Mali returned home after three years with a Korean-American girl named Grace. Jagan was baffled at his son when he saw a foreign girl with him. Mali announced to his father that she was his wife. The shock did not have a lasting effect on him, and he welcomed them to his house with respect. But later, he came to know about their sinful relationship and Mali's reluctance to marry her. The tension between father and son aggravated more and more, and when Mali was caught red-handed for breaking the prohibition law, Jagan found himself in a state to take a decision and reached a moment of self-realization. He broke away from his son by abandoning the world for spiritual devotion. He arranged bail through a "cousin" and managed to part away from the vicious world of his son, and he did not feel agitated by the news of his son being in jail. He thought that Mali might learn a lesson in jail for his sinister deeds.

Jagan remained evolving in the novel and Mali didn't make such impact as his father made. Mali's presence in the village and in his father's house was regarded as vicious. Sundaram argues:

Twelve of the thirteen chapters of the book deal with Jagan, a widower nearing sixty. He is not likely to celebrate his *shashtabyapurti* as no one seems to care. The last but one of the thirteen chapters in a flash-back deals with Jagan's boyhood, youth and marriage, his begetting Mali after years of waiting and prayer; and this, with other references in the course of the book to Jagan's relationship with his elder brother and the tragic way he lost his wife, completes the picture telling us all we need to know of him. (91)

Jagan was a proud father and he was estranged but also confided with religious values that propelled him to practice a simple living and high thinking. He was very excited about his son's presence in America but a letter shattered him in which he wrote:

I've taken to eating beef; and I don't think I'm any worse of it . . . Now I want to suggest why not you people start eating beef? It'll solve the problem of useless cattle in our country and we won't have to beg food from America. I sometimes feel ashamed when India asks for American aid. Instead of that, why not slaughter useless cows which wander in the streets and block the traffic?" (Narayan 56-57)

Being an orthodox Hindu, it was against the Shastras, in which among the five deadly sins the foremost is that of killing a cow. Mali, a modern man with self-sufficient thinking, didn't bother about his father particularly and religion generally. He didn't even inform his father about Grace or seek the consent of his father, as he was influenced by the modern world where these things have no relevance. But Grace, being a foreigner imbibed with Western culture, tried to fit herself into the

traditional household of Jagan. Jagan, being an educated person, did not force Grace about her whereabouts but asked her in a roundabout way. She remained unmoved by Jagan's protest and cleaned the house and responded to him, "Father, you think I mind it? I don't. I must not forget that I'm an Indian daughter-in-law" (Narayan 62).

After getting to know the truth regarding the relationship of his son and Grace, he was told by the cousin that, "Our young men live in a different world from ours and we must not let ourselves be upset too much by certain things they do" (137). Thus, the clash between tradition and modernity reaches its climax. Jagan felt that it was all because of money, and on the real note the interpretation was right. Jagan kept two diaries to evade tax, and this also shows his hypocrisy in reading the *Bhagavad Gita* while remaining attentive to the work carried on in the shop. Barry Argyle argues, "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 novel's 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 also as a "universal novel." He responded to cousin's remark on Mali's and Grace's relationship:

This sort of thing is unheard of in our family. Even my grandfather's brother, who was known to be immoral never did this sort of thing. When he was not married he never claimed that he was married, although...I can't understand how two young persons can live together like this without being married. . . I feel my home is tainted now. I find it difficult to go back there (Narayan 137).

William Walsh comments on the personality of Jagan as, "Jagan is both a comic and an anguished figure. He is a comic figure as far as he tries to follow the Gandhian principles of simple living and high thinking as also in his commercial sharpness and fiscal duplicity but he is a totally anguished figure in his lacerated relationship with his sullen and brutish son"(175). Thus, Jagan believed that his house had become defiled and he tried to find solace in a place shown to him by China Dorai. As compare to traditional set values to find peace in self-realization and getting back towards religion the modern man like Mali found pleasure in drugs and drinking. The two different approaches to find solace reveals the generation gap and its effect on the thinking of Indian people.

Narayan accept the traditional Hindu way of life with a modest acceptance of western values and advancement. For Mali India was a wasteful country but Jagan's response make a sense that they found it adequate for their purpose. D. S. Philip rightly retorts:

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).

To conclude, *The Vendor of Sweets* emerges as R. K. Narayan's powerful exploration of the conflict between Gandhian ethos and Western modernity, where tradition and change do not merely coexist but remain in a state of continuous tension. Narayan does not present either tradition or modernity as absolute; rather, he critically exposes the limitations of both. Jagan, who embodies Gandhian values, is not free from contradictions, as his moral rigidity and hidden hypocrisies reveal

the inadequacy of unexamined traditionalism in a changing world. On the other hand, Mali represents an uncritical acceptance of Western modernity, which leads not to liberation but to moral disorientation and alienation. The novel, therefore, problematizes the blind rejection of tradition as well as the unreflective imitation of the West. The generational conflict between father and son is not merely personal but symbolic of a larger cultural crisis in postcolonial India, where the negotiation between inherited values and imported ideologies remains unresolved. Jagan's final withdrawal from the world is not a resolution but a retreat, signifying his failure to reconcile these opposing forces. Thus, Narayan ultimately underscores that the inability to balance Gandhian ethos with Western modernity results in fragmentation, making the conflict both inevitable and deeply consequential.

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