

**CONFRONTATION BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN  
R. K. NARAYAN'S 'THE VENDOR OF SWEETS'**

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**Abstract**

R. K. Narayan is considered to be one of the three best Indian authors writing in English, the other two being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Narayan's novels have a particular fictional locale Malgudi- an imaginary town in South India. Malgudi, the city of Narayan's imagination *is a reality charged with all that is intimate and affecting in human life. It is both a concrete individual place and a miniature India. It is a meeting ground of the ancient Indian culture and the modern modes of behaviour brought into wake by the spread of education, impact of western culture, political awakening, commercialization and industrialization.* Narayan's Malgudi has provisions for a friendly co-existence of both the old as well as the new. The impact of science and technology has spread, yet the old way of life has also got its votaries. There are some thematic aspects which are recurrent in most of his novels. This article is an attempt to throw light on the theme of confrontation between tradition and modernity in Narayan's novel '*The Vendor of Sweets*'.

Published in London in 1967 by The Bodley Head Ltd. R.K.Narayan's '*The Vendor of Sweets*' has East-West conflict, the confrontation between tradition and modernity as the major theme. A tradition is a belief or behaviour passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Traditions can persist and evolve for thousands of years—the word "tradition" itself derives from the Latin *tradere* or *traderer* literally meaning to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping. In 1981 Edward Shils in his book *Tradition* put forward a definition of tradition that became universally accepted. According to Shils, tradition is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. In the social sciences, *tradition* is often contrasted with *modernity*, particularly in terms of whole societies. This dichotomy is generally associated with a linear model of social change, in which societies progress from being traditional to being modern. Tradition-oriented societies have been characterized as valuing piousness, harmony and group welfare, stability, and interdependence, while a society exhibiting modernity would value individualism with free will and choice, mobility, and progress. Anthony Giddens, discussing tradition in relationship to modernity, sees tradition as something bound to ritual, where ritual guarantees the continuation of tradition. Gusfield and others argue that tradition is dynamic, heterogeneous, and coexists successfully with modernity even within individuals. Every age witnesses a clash between tradition and modernity. The new generation of every age has regarded tradition as outdated. Therefore, tradition is considered unnecessary to the need and the ethos of the modern times. On the other

hand, the older generation of every age criticizes and condemns modernity. They feel that it is out to corrupt the new generation and, hence, remain traditional in outlook.

Narayan's fictional world Malgudi is the microcosm of Indian society revealing all variety. As Nanda, Bijaya Kumar holds, "From the appearance of Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) to the recent, *The World of Nagaraj* (1990), we are made aware of the steady encroachment of modernity and the resultant conflict between modernity and the traditional Malgudi life"<sup>1</sup>. The present novel 'The Vendor of Sweets' is a conflict between a genuine Indian or Eastern father Jagan and his Western-bred son Mali. They represent two opposing aspects, "tradition and modernity"<sup>2</sup> respectively. Jagan, the protagonist of the novel, is by profession a vendor of sweets. He is a typical Gandhian and follower of the Bhagvad Gita both in theory and practice. Throughout the novel, he refers to the Bhagvad Gita, the Puranas and other Hindu scriptures as his ideals to guide him. Though he grew quite rich as a sweet-vendor, his main interest and concern was his only son, Mali. Mali's mother died of brain tumor many years ago. In his parental house, Jagan grew from his childhood with his brothers and sisters in a typical joint family under the loving care of his parents. After his marriage, he lived with his wife in that very house. He was often torn between his loyalty to parents and his loyalty to his wife. At the same time, Jagan's love both for his wife and his son was deep and solid. The tragedy is that when he lost his wife, he lost also any affection that his son might have had for him. The barrier between the father and the son came into being the day the mother died. It is because Mali felt vaguely that in some way his father was responsible for his mother's death. Hence Jagan's love for the son was so much that he returned home early from his shop in the evenings thinking that the boy would be lonely. He lived entirely for the sake of the son who never feels grateful to him for his loving care. Mali usually preferred to be alone and isolated. It led to a total separation between the two.

The novel successfully delineates the clash of the old and the new generations. Jagan represents the old generation and his son Mali represents the new generation with the materialistic aspirations. Jagan is very proud of his son but he has no control over him. Mali is a drop out from college. Mali gives up his studies and goes to America. Mali's letters from America only increase Jagan's worries. His stay in America transforms his entire personality. On the contrary, Jagan was an orthodox Hindu, a pure vegetarian and a true Gandhian who believed in ahimsa. He could not think of his son eating beef. During India's freedom struggle he had been arrested for hoisting Indian flag. He lived a very simple life following "...the Gandhian way of life to the minute details- eating natural salts, wearing Khadi, spinning charka, reading the Gita and writing a book on nature therapy"<sup>3</sup>. *The Bhagavad Gita* was always in his hand and he read it whenever he was free. Jagan used ten-watt bulbs in his room to make the light easy on the retina. He believes that light rays should soothe the optic nerves and not stimulate them. He eats food only cooked by himself. Thus Jagan was a model of traditional Indian values whereas his son was a representative of modern Western values. Mali is modern in his dress code, manner and thinking. The other contrasted symbols like the spinning wheel and the type-writer, the Gita and the correspondence, continence and free sex-life etc. suggest contradictory views of the father and the son.

After three years of education in America, Mali returned home accompanied by a half-Korean and half-American girl named Grace. When Jagan went to receive Mali at the railway station, he was worried at the sight of the girl with him. He gets shocked as a father, when his son Mali greets him by extending his hands, instead of touching the feet in the true Indian way at the railway station on his return from America. When Mali announced that the girl was his wife,

Jagan was shocked. 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. He himself selected his life-partner in western style quite against 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. Matters became worse when Mali indicated the girl at his side and said,

“This is Grace. We are married. Grace, my dad.”<sup>4</sup> (Narayan p.58)

Complete confusion enveloped Jagan. He wanted to ask:

“Married? When were you married? You did not tell me. Don't you have to tell your father?” (Narayan p. 58).

The dialogues between Jagan and Grace are also good enough to show the conflict of two cultures—traditional Indian and the modern Western. Since Jagan was educated he showed enough courtesy in asking her whereabouts indirectly and not bluntly as most Indians do. 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.” (Narayan p. 65)

Jagan gets the reply,

“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 p. 65)

As a generous father Jagan allowed them to stay in his house. He accepted Grace as his daughter-in-law. She also behaved well. Of course, it was too much for Jagan when he came to know that Grace was actually not his son's wife and Mali and Grace had been living together without being married. This is an expression of modern outlook on sex and marriage on Mali's part. Jagan, a traditional Indian man who believes in values cannot imagine his son living immorally with a woman in his house:

“I can't understand how two young persons can live together like this without being married.” . . . (Narayan p.137)

He believes that his house is defiled and hence he cannot go back and live there:

“I feel my home is tainted now. I find it difficult to go back there.” (Narayan p. 137)

In traditional Malgudi world, sex relations are confined only to the married couples. Mali stands for “a whole new generation of scooter-riding, alcohol smuggling boys.”<sup>5</sup>

When Jagan complained to the cousin that his son was living with Grace without getting married, the cousin replied:

“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.” (Narayan p.137)

Jagan said,

“This sort of thing is unheard of in our family”. (Narayan p.137)

The ever-growing tension in father-son relationship reached its climax when Mali was arrested for breaking the prohibition laws. Then there came in Jagan's life the moment of decision-taking and self-realisation. He managed to break away from Mali and his vicious world which he could not approve. He abandoned the world and went into the Vanaprasthashram. He

was altogether unaffected to hear that Mali was in jail as the police had caught him with liquor in his car. He thought that a period of jail might be good for the young man.

There are a number of illustrations of verbal confrontation between tradition and modernity in the novel. The dialogues of conflict occur between Jagan and Mali frequently. Modernity is represented through the industry of story writing machine, which Mali wants to establish in Malgudi. Jagan denies promoting the project, against the expectation of his son for ethical and ideological reasons. This results in the clash between Jagan and his son, which represents traditional and modern values respectively. The arrival of story writing machine was a quite strange thing for Malgudi people. Mali eagerly waits for the parcel of machine to come. He enthusiastically shows several operative systems of the machine to Jagan:

“You see these four knobs.... One is for characters, one for plot situations, the other one for climax, and the fourth is built on the basis that a story is made up of character, situations, emotion and climax, and by the right combination...” (Narayan p.76)

Mali explains that one can work on the machine like a typewriter. As such it aims to produce creative writing like an industrial product, to be sold like consumer goods. Gracy too informs Jagan that now-a-days most of the best sellers are products of machines. Jagan is not at all convinced by the logic of Mali and Grace, expressed in favour of the machine. Jagan who himself is a sort of writer, believes Mali’s effort as perversion of art. He regards creative writing as aesthetic experience. He strongly holds that books must be treated respectfully, as they are “...being a form of the Goddess Saraswati.” (Narayan p.137) For Mali creative writing is a mechanical process, whereas for Jagan, it is an artistic experience. 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. Jagan refuses to invest his money in such a perversion of art as well as his tradition.

Through Mali and Grace Narayan projects a commercial and mechanical society. Machines and computers have taken the place of human labours in every field. Mali’s story writing machine signifies the creeping corruption in the field of art and literature. Thus, cultural difference is quite obvious in their attitude towards creative writing.

With the divergent outlooks and ideologies, Jagan and Mali belong to two different worlds. Jagan is a traditionalist with a solid background of Indian culture. At the age of fifty five, he has maintained a very good health. As a true Gandhian he is quite active, dynamic and smart. He follows the Gandhian principle of simple living and high thinking. Committed like Gandhiji to truth and non-violence he likes to use ‘non-violent footwear’. He could not use tooth brush as he feared that its bristles were made of pig’s tails. He holds that twigs of trees make ideal tooth brushes. He is a devoutly religious man, offering his prayers to the Goddess Lakshmi every morning. As Narayan narrates:

“Jagan sat under the framed picture of the Goddess Lakshmi hanging on the wall, and offered prayers first thing in the day by reverently placing a string of Jasmine on top of frame; he also lit an incense stick and stuck it in a crevice in the wall.” (Narayan p.7)

Jagan and Mali hold contradictory opinions even in the matters of their business ethics. Jagan takes his business as a sort of duty in line of the Karmayoga of the Gita, which has a humanitarian value also. This becomes clear when he says,

“I just keep the business so that these poor fellows may not be thrown out of employment.” (p.80)

He whole heartedly believes that *money is an evil* and that is why in business he has no motive to amass wealth:

“I do not accumulate, it just grows naturally.” (p.39)

The money he earns he does not waste in purchasing materialistic comforts for himself. Also he wears khadi spun by his own hands. He has an idealistic approach in the matters of business, too. On the other hand, Mali represents western craze for money, which is non-humanistic. He is a young man with an inclination to Americanism. With his rude behaviour and uncivilized manners with his father he represents the arrogance and impudence of the Americanized young men, who under the pretence of straight-forwardness shed all traditional obedience and respect. Mali perfectly fits himself in American culture by arrogant behaviour, insulting language and deep dislike for the elders and aged parents. One day when Jagan humbly tries to know about his son’s literary progress, he is replied with the rude words, “It’s not like frying sweets in your shop.” (Narayan p.35) Mali also represents the Indian youths who forgetting their own cultural heritage, blindly copy the western culture and claim that they are progressive. Mali’s visit to America to learn the art of story writing widens the gulf between father and son.

R.K. Narayan’s ‘The Vendor of Sweets’ is an important contribution to literature from the point of view of the theme of tradition and modernity. From the beginning to the end, it depicts the clash of tradition and modernity through characters and incidents. On the whole, it displays that despite the corroding influence of modern forces from all sides, the traditional forces have the ultimate triumph.

#### REFERENCES:

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4. Narayan R.K., *The Vendor of Sweets*, Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, Reprint, 2008, p.62. (All parenthetical references of the text are to this edition).
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