

**GENERATIONS IN AN IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT: A STUDY OF R.K.
NARAYAN'S *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS***

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Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami R.K. Narayan is one of the foremost, highly acclaimed novelists who is numbered among the doyens of modern Indian classical writers such as Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Narayan's fiction represents a microcosm of India in its vices and virtues. He has a grave grasp of the Indian traditions as well as its myths and folktales which he does not fail to assert in his fiction. Narayan's purpose is neither to correct the society nor to mock or ridicule it for its imperfections and he exceedingly seems to be a follower of the school "art for art's sake". Narayan has authored many novels, short stories, non-fiction books and has been conferred with awards such as National Prize for Indian Literary Academy, Sahitya Academy Award, Padma Bhushan etc. for his contributions to the Indian Writing in English.

The Vendor of Sweets (1967) is the story of Jagan the father who represents the older generation, an orthodox Brahmin who runs a sweet shop, is a pseudo-follower of Gandhian principles and a champion of tradition in the modern Independent India. He has a predilection for simplicity and abhors anything that challenges his traditional beliefs or age old concepts. Jagan is a staunch follower of Gandhi and has modelled his life strictly like him at least superficially. He wears khadi, eats natural salt, spins charkha, reads *Bhagwad Gita*, wears shoes made of the hides of the dead animals and like Gandhi, renounces caste system etc. But as the reader comes to know Jagan through the leaflets of the novel, his hypocrisy becomes apparent; like he maintains a double account books to save his taxes by misappropriation of the accounts. He emphasizes, "If Gandhi had said somewhere, 'Pay your sales tax uncomplainingly,' he would have followed his advice, but Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere to Jagan's knowledge. (3)

Jagan's greed for money and his claims to follow tradition or the Gandhian ideals prove contradictory in the above statement. Jagan's mind is preoccupied with the teachings of Gandhi and his reading of *Bhagwad Gita* customarily is a manifestation of this influence. His reading of *Gita* is superficial merely a display of spirituality thus he never pays any serious attention to the words inscribed in the holy book but mainly has his focus on the workings in the kitchen of his sweetshop where he observes every single activity of his workers. Even he does not feel sorry for

selling old jalebis and when his cook tells him that the leftovers can be reused, Jagan like a clever businessman proclaims philosophically, “After all, everything consists of flour, sugar and flavours...” (13). Jagan devotes most of his time in his sweet shop reading Gita which is quite ironical as we are told that Jagan sits on his seat, “with a sense of fulfilment on a throne-like chair in his shop placed at a strategic point” so that “he could hear, see and smell whatever was happening in the kitchen” and notices what is going on at the front stall. If any time the frying and sizzling in the kitchen stops, his reading of the holy book would cease and at once would shout ‘What is happening...?’ He supervises every single activity of his shop and at the same time would alert the counter-attendant as well as the watchman at the door of the beggars circling around his shop, and then return to the “Lord’s sayings with a quiet mind” (18). He would continue reading the book in the same vein until the day’s collections reach to him. His greed and thirst for money is totally in conflict with the teachings of *Bhagwad Gita*’s ideals of non-attachment and non-possession.

Prof. Tara Malhotra while commenting on the character of Jagan in her book *Old Places, Old faces and Old Times: A Critical Study of R.K. Narayan’s Latest Fiction*, gives an insight to Jagan’s character:

Jagan is a bundle of contradictions, a professed Gandhian whose high-minded Gandhian principles are soon found to be a smoke-screen. As a result, he is ever playing a hide and seek game with his conscience as freely as he hoodwinks almost everyone he meets producing plenty of fun...An inveterate enemy of sugar in personal life, one wonders how this Gandhian disciple could; without compunction, continue to live on the profits of selling sugared sweets to all and sundry. His frequent protestations that his sweet vending is meant solely to serve the country, particularly the children and the poor, is as hollow as the drum. He could not pass his B.A. from sheer incapacity, he is never tired of declaring unashamedly that was his love for his country which made him give up his college and throw himself headlong into struggle for political emancipation---under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Penetrating beneath these boasts we discover that his noisy altruism is a mask worn to hide a selfish nature. (5)

Jagan is a widower and has a son named Mali who represents the younger generation which is at a constant conflict with his father representing the older one. Mali holds Jagan responsible for his mother’s death and bears an indifferent attitude towards him. On the other hand, Jagan is very fond of him, tries his utmost to foster him with motherly love, coming early from his shop for his son’s sake, acceding to his demands whatever he asks for, doing everything to make him happy but his doings are not greeted warmly by Mali. Mali informs Jagan that he is going to leave his college desiring to pursue a writing career and for that he has to take a course in the United States and for which Mali is in need of money. Jagan feels troubled by such decision and not wanting to part with a great sum of his money, tells Mali about Kalidasa, “College or no college, I know Kalidasa was a village idiot and a shepherd until the goddess Saraswati made a scratch on his tongue and then he burst into that song, Syamala-dandakam, and wrote his *Shakuntala*” (32).

Mali very soon decides to abandon his studies and heads towards West for seeking diploma in creative writing fiction which later proves to be a hoax. He steals money from the attic where his father hides the black money for the purpose of going abroad. Failed at stopping Mali

from going to US, Jagan out of attachment and extreme affection for Malisubmits and feels exhilarated as well as optimistic about Mali's decision but later his hopes are shattered when Mali achieves nothing and returns married to a Korean-American girl named Grace and with no real accomplishment. He does not even feel a need to get permission from his father to marry a girl, who is not even from his religion, country or society.

The novel unravels the theme of generation gap and conflict by portraying Jagan as trying his extreme to fill this gap by following his version of Gandhian values and ideals while Mali widens the gap by discarding them altogether. Besides, Jagan is not happy at his son's decision to go to West as he has in his memories the unpleasant experiences of a colonized India which represents the old India. On the other hand the rampant influence of the West on the modern generation of India is seen on the character of Mali who is maniac about the West. The two generations living under the same roof at large project the conflict of the Orient and the Occident.

The novel, through its protagonists, presents a scene in the modern India where tradition confronts modernity; the former is symbolized by Jagan and the latter embodied by his son, Mali. Jagan holds on to his orthodox beliefs and Gandhian notion of 'simple living and high thinking' and Mali on the other hand is a spendthrift, lives a life of sin by eating beef and has a relation with a girl to whom he is not married. He lives in India more like a foreigner and less an Indian with no concern for his cultural ethnicity. Narayan has presented a real picture inside his fiction and portrayed a story of a typical Indian orthodox superstitious family.

Mali's birth is narrated in extreme vigour signifying the superstitious nature of Indian society as he is born only after the offerings are made to the God on the Badri Hills and after his birth an equal quantity of gold, silver and corn is offered to the temple at Badri Hills. Also in Jagan's marriage the dowry is taken from bride's parents though Jagan is against the dowry system fearing that he will lose Ambika, his would-be-wife. However, Mali's thoughts deviate from his father's beliefs as he has a tendency to rationalize his thoughts on the plausibility of facts. He does not bother about the sanctity of relations which is apparent in his promiscuous affair with Grace and whom he does not intend to marry. Jagan's sentiments are hurt when Mali informs him that he has taken a liking for beef meat, which according to the Hindu tradition is a grave sin:

I've taken to eating of beef. Steak is something quite tasty and juicy. Now I 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?" (56-7)

Such an opposite stand of both Jagan and Mali on beef eating especially, which is in vogue in contemporary India, boldly highlights the generation not only at conflict but virtually at war against each other, Narayan beautifully defines the concept that classical literature is always relevant.

Jagan is devastated after knowing the details of the letter sent by Mali because *shastras* consider the killing of cow as an unholy act and Mali, his son is eating beef and favouring the killing of cows. He cannot bear this for he is an orthodox and a devout Hindu, a true vegetarian and a follower of Gandhi. The modern customs and values are incomprehensible to Jagan because these generate a great deal of conflict with his traditional beliefs. Jagan feels regretful at his predicament which is exacerbated after his son's coming back to India with a new

vision and perception of the West which are excruciatingly irritating to Jagan. Mali does not feel sorry for he has turned a knife on the trust of his father and corrupted the pristine culture of Malgudi, behaving less like an Indian, fashioning his conduct more like an American. Mali's undergoes a transformation under the influence of the West identifying more with them, then the people of his homeland. Bijaya Kumar Nanda offers a deep insight on the attitudes of Jagan and Mali representing the spiritual and the material aspects of both the characters. To quote his words:

Both Jagan and Mali experience the opposition between traditional Indian values and the modern Western values. Mali, with all his national, progressive modern attitudes ends up in prison and Jagan for all his faith in the traditional Indian culture becomes a modern sanyasi. (91)

Jagan abhors the use of socks and detests Mali's wearing of them which also designate the symbol of modern influence of the West on him. Jagan conceives socks to be bad for health and wanted to shout to his son about its harms but is unable to do so. He contemplates:

Socks should never be worn because they are certain to heat the blood through interference with the natural radiation which occurs through one's soles, and also because you insulate yourself against beneficial magnetic charges of the earth's surface. I have argued in my book that this is one of the reasons, a possible reason, for heart attacks in European countries. (68)

Narayan has painted this scene ridiculously portraying the superstitious beliefs of Jagan about socks and the harms of using them but scientifically his claim is obsolete. Narayan's efforts to depict the physiognomic traits are accomplished in delineation of the character of Jagan and his behaviour. Mali rejects the traditional beliefs and notions adored by his father when he says, "Oh these are not the days of your ancestors. Today we have to compete with advanced countries not only in economics and industry, but also in culture" (9). Mali is aware of his father's dishonesty. When his father tries to advocate the Gandhian philosophy of living in poverty not riches and calling himself a poor man, Mali reacts to his statement saying, "And yet you earn your thousand rupees a day" (8).

Barry Argyle in a journal namely *Narayan's The Sweet Vendor. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* remarks:

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)

Mali's supposed wife Grace, a half Korean-American girl is able to win the affections of Jagan. She immediately adopts into the culture of India, manages the household chores and the presence of Grace brings peace in the house which Jagan has missed after his wife's death. Initially, Jagan finds it difficult to accept her as his daughter-in-law and ignoring those questioning about Grace and Mali and once when the unnamed cousin asks him about the dietary preparations in their house, he gives a vague reference to *Gita*, "I can only provide what I am used to. If they don't like it, they can go and eat where they please... One can only do one's duty up to a point. Even in *the Gita* you find it mentioned. The limit of one's duty is well-defined. (66)

Jagan's trauma is intensified as both his son and daughter-in-law coax him to give the money for their project of story writing machine and as a result he begins to doubt the loyalties of

both. He outrightly tries to ignore them through the Gandhian version of “non-cooperation” (92). But this does not work for a longer period as they get hold on him to seek an answer. Jagan wants Mali to run his sweet shop, but Mali finds this job detestable. He exclaims, “I have better plans than to be a vendor of sweetmeats” (96). Further, his reading of *Gita* finds him a way to fight the evil as Krishna goads Arjuna to fight his own brothers. Jagan identifies himself with Arjuna engaged in a fight with his son Mali. The passage reads, “Then God himself...explained to him to fight for a cause even if you had to face your brothers, cousins or even sons. No good has been achieved without a fight at the proper time”(103).

All of a sudden, Jagan becomes suspicious of the relation between Mali and Grace that leads to his discomfort and he loses his interest in the reading of *Gita*. Before he goes to meet Grace to know about their relationship, he remembers the teachings of Gandhi and how a man should behave in various circumstances like a Satyagrahi, “Once a Satyagrahi, always a Satyagrahi. If one was not acting for truth against the British, one was acting for truth in some other matter, in personal affairs, in all sorts of things...” (138).

Grace tells him about their relation that they are not married. Jagan feels distressed at this revelation which according to him has corrupted the sanctity of his house and his traditional morals. This further shows the sinful life that Mali has been living under the influence of the West. Jagan contemplates on the advice of Chinai Dorai who tells him to take interest in making of the goddess’ image and following his adviceverves to seek renunciation in a forest taking not more than what his shoulders cannot bear. The revelation that Mali and Grace are not married perturbs Jagan who perceives it as a betrayal not of his trust but to the very fundamental values of Hindu religion, the legacy, the generation. Also, Mali’s insistence to lend him money for his new project troubles Jagan who has lost faith in his son. Jagan considers this as his attempt to deprive him of his money and refuses to Mali’s coaxes.

Throughout the novel, Jagan follows the Gandhian principle of restraint, disapproving any kind of abuse. He doesn’t indulge in any sort of violence and tries to maintain his temper in every possible way. He adopts Gandhian ways of non-cooperation, not to cooperate with his son’s project and when he advises his son Mali to marry Grace whom he disagrees with, Jagan eventually metamorphoses into a “Satyagrahi” (138). Jagan alienates himself from Mali and Grace in his own house and finally decides to take a refuge from the materialistic world in Vanaprastha Ashrama. He states “I will seek a new interest–different from the set repetitions performed for sixty years. I am going somewhere, not carrying more than what my shoulder can bear” (183). There is metamorphoses in the Gandhian character of Jagan too when Mali is finally arrested for his misdemeanour for carrying and drinking wine and when Jagan comes to know about his son’s escapade, he reflects like a true Gandhian in spirit and content:

If what you say is true, well, truth will win. If it is not true, there is nothing I can do... Who are we to get him out or put him in?... Truth ought to get him out, if what you say is true...leave me out of it completely; forget me and I’ll go away without asking too many questions... I will seek a new interest–different from the set of repetitions performed for sixty years... I am going to watch a goddess come out of stone. If I don’t like the place, I will go away somewhere else. Everything can go with or without me... (190-91).

Jagan’s struggle with his own self and his son leads to a crisis in his life. He becomes obsessed with *Gita* and Gandhi attempting to apply the required teachings to confront his adverse situation. In the beginning, his understandings and application of these ideals is superficial meant

to suit for his own purpose but the conflict in the end leads him to seek a purpose in life. Chinna Durai, a hair-blackener and sculptor, plays a pivotal role in his transformation and Jagan's visit to the grove with him proves fertile as it is here that Jagan finds a ray of light and a hope for solution to his problems. He forgets the errands of his shop, money and all the troubles caused by his son. He begins to understand the hollowness of worldly affairs and Chinna Durai's meeting has a profound influence on him who comes to seek Jagan's patronage so as to finish the image of goddess Gayatri and its fixing on the pedestal. Jagan is not bothered by anything for he seeks to confirm a solution to his problem which seems to vanish in presence of the goddess and he comforts himself like a true ascetic "Such things are common in ordinary existence and always passing" (120). The image of goddess Gayatri five faced "deity of Radiance" has written on it the Sanskrit song called the Gayatri Mantra. Jagan is full of admiration for the picture and it is here that Jagan thinks of renunciation. He tells to Chinna Durai, "Yes, yes, God knows I need a retreat. You know, my friend, at some stage in one's life one must uproot oneself from the accustomed surroundings and disappear so that others may continue in peace" (126).

Mali's deviance from the religion has fatally injured Jagan as he rootlessly, does not feel obliged to Indian ethics. Mali fails to realise the adversities which he is causing in his father's life. Also, he does not bother about the consequences of his actions which are causing rift in his relationship with his father and his girlfriend Grace. Chinna Durai compels him to take a retreat into goddess Gayatri from the ills of the society, to which Jagan easily relents following the path of religion which heals him from his teething troubles. He contemplates on the advice and becomes increasingly motivated to accept a true spiritual life. Jagan's introspection convinces him of his imperfection which emanate from his own realisation and feels encouraged to redeem his moral self for his own betterment.

Bijaya Kumar Nanda emphasises on Jagan's retreat:

In Jagan's retreat, Narayan has given us the sense of the timelessness of his struggle and of the larger social, cultural and religious fabric in which he plays his part. Jagan has turned sixty. At this ripe age, the worldly entanglements appear futile to him, his daily routine monotonous and empty. At this age one has to turn the work of the world to others. Like a true Indian, Jagan decides to retreat to some place of purity. (92)

With the unresolvable conflict with Mali, Jagan realises that he has been leading an unjust life being pseudo Gandhian and semi religious and in order to lament the unjust behaviour and ensure his rest of life's justness he evolves philosophically and withdraws himself from worldly affairs. Jagan comprehends the significance of the advice of sculptor about renunciation and he feels lost in the vision of goddess Gayatri. After coming from Nallapa's Grove, he begins to feel a change in his identity and begins to reflect:

One enters a new life at the appointed time and it's foolish to resist. He was no longer the father of Mali, the maker of sweets and gatherer of money each day; he was gradually becoming something else, perhaps a supporter of the bearded sculptor—or was he really his ward? (129)

Jagan's path towards redemption is ironical as he takes his bank book with him. He buys a ticket for Grace to enable her to return to her country and leaves his shop under the care of his unnamed cousin till his son Mali is released from prison and would take the charge of the shop.

The generation-conflict can be well understood as an offshoot of colonial rule in India as it brought with itself the materialism and greed which ultimately eroded the Indian culture, religion and philosophy. Due to this a conflict arose between the old and the new for survival.

The younger generation began to identify with the new ideas and modern concepts of reasoning and thinking which they took for granted, forgetting the concept that the true philosophy or truth has always been the subject of intellect/imagination against senses/reasoning. Mali is a menacing figure and a weak character who steals money from his father and then without seeking any permission goes to America, then returns with a girl whom he introduces as his wife and later denies. P.S Sundaram rightly observes that:

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)

Although Jagan retreats but he does not forget his duty towards Grace. He tells his cousin, "If you meet her, tell her that if she ever wants to go back to her country, I will buy her a ticket. It's a duty we owe her. She was a good girl" (185). Jagan is aware of the trauma of Grace who also becomes susceptible to the betrayal and arrogance of Mali. She wins Jagan's heart filing the lacunae the warmth of his age old memories of his family. She transforms his house into home. He feels sympathetic for her for all the pain done to her by Mali, who is imprisoned for his illegal rivalry. Jagan is positive about his son's change and trusts his cousin to take care of his shop until Mali takes it from him. To quote Bruce F. Macdonald:

Even Mali, who constantly rejects his Indian past and tries to imitate a spurious Americanism, who lives unmarried with the casteless Grace, and advocates the killing of cows, and who is in jail when the novel closes, seems capable of being reclaimed into the historic process he has spurned. Jail may do him good, as his father anticipates, and the indication seems to be that he will, like his father, be imperfect yet acceptable. (155)

The Vendor of Sweets presents a clash of culture and generations in the Post-colonial India where the characters search for meaning of their lives. The remarkable part of the novel comprises the transformation of Jagan from a hypocrite to a mature and spiritually enlightened person. Like a saint, he recluses from the worldly affairs and takes a path to seek illumination and inward peace. The novel manifests the gradual beginning of clash of the cultural values and moral ethics in the modern independent India. The West is responsible in shaping the ideology of the new generation of India which threatens the existence of the orthodox values of Indian culture. The characters are incapable to decipher the conduct of clashing cultures with different conditioning of their attitudes; for Jagan is inspired by *Bhagwad Gita* and the Gandhian ideology but Mali is influenced by rationalizing and reasoning which are the current features of the Western Ideology. The clash exposed in the novel satirises the Western philosophy of reasoning and materialism as defeated before the mellow, age old Indian philosophy which gives Jagan the undaunted courage to renunciate his worldly belongings for which the West (Mali/Occident) dies and Jagan (Orient) pursues ultimately the permanence, the truth, the beautiful.

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