

R. K. NARAYAN'S
"THE VENDOR OF SWEETS"—A STUDY

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"Infinite riches in a little room."

Among the contemporary Indian writers in English, Mr. R. K. Narayan stands supreme, "a star that dwelt apart." As Professor Srinivasa Iyengar says, "He is a rare thing in India, a man of letters pure and simple." Following the traditions of the regional novel, Mr. Narayan's novels deal with *Malgudi* (any growing town in South India) and its people—their joys and sorrows, aspirations, and achievements, feelings and failures and above all their human foibles. Mr. Narayan's *Malgudi* is like Hardy's *Casterbridge* or Hopkin's *Yoknapatawpha*. His novels deal with Indian middle class life unlike Kamala Markandeya's or Bhabani's which deal with the problems of the teeming millions. Mr. R. K. Narayan is the most successful and widely read contemporary writer both at home and abroad. The reason for this is to be found in his ability to translate Indian situations with touches of reality, humour, wit and irony. "He is the most brilliant realist writing at the moment." His art of narration, his ethical problems, his mastery of the medium, his subtle humour and irony and above all his unique style—a style that is pure, simple and unsophisticated—make his novels unique.

His latest novel "The Vendor of Sweets" is an additional feather in his cap. The novel deals with the tragi-comic clash of two generations. The clash deepens with every page and chapter. The old generation comes into conflict with the new generation that sets at nought the cherished notions of marriage and morals. They seem to count for nothing in the new world. "The prosperity and welfare of a country depend upon its adherence to the ancient systems of education and marriage." The novelist presents this clash with a touch of realism, humour, irony and sadness. Humour is ubiquitous, a humour that is strange among the modern English novelists but closer to Cheucer and Chekhov, a humour rich, profound, irresistible, puckish, sane and devoid of spite or cynicism. Like Chaucer, Mr. Narayan reads humour in everyday life.

The entire story revolves around the central figure Jagan, the protagonist, a prosperous and flourishing sweet-vendor in Malgudi. He is a widower and Mali, his only son, is the apple of his eye. Mr. Narayan presents the character of Jagan in a characteristic way. Jagan is high-minded, austere, pious and attentive to the scriptures. He almost leads an ascetic life without attaining Sanyasishood. He is a true follower of Gandhiji. His diet habits are strict and he always boasts of his book, his *magnum opus* on "Nature Cure and Natural Diet" which refuses to come out of the Truth Printing Press. In spite of these merits, his character includes a small flaw for the sake of safety. The spiritual and practical aspects of his life are amazing. With "Bhagavadgita" in his hands, he had an eye on the collections in the shop. What we apply to images, can safely be applied to human beings. If an image is perfect, it cannot be held on its pedestal. So a small flaw is created in every image for the sake of safety and

security. Mr. Narayan presents all his character with appealing human flaws. It is in the true tradition of all great writers like Kalidas and Shakespeare. "Gods give us defects to make us human."

According to our Sastras, everyone has three earthly attachments—Dareshana (wife), Putreshana (son) and Dhaneshana (wealth). Jagan, the widower, lives and earns for the sake of his only son Mali. Mali is petted and pampered and he is like a spoiled horse fresh from the stable. Jagan's deep affection goes unrequited as Mali hoodwinks the presence of his father and in this respect Jagan resembles Margayya ("The Financial Expert"). Jagan has a cousin (how he became a cousin God knows,) who visits his shop daily to taste sweets gratis and to listen to pompous speeches of Jagan. His listening capacity is as great as his nibbling capacity. He is a man about town claiming cousinhood with many. He plays the part of a bridge between the conventional father and the unconventional son.

One day Mali firmly announces his fantastic decision to bid good-bye to education. He expresses his keen desire to go to America to become a writer as he is bored with the Indian educational system. "You can always hit education when there is no other target." Jagan comes to know that his son has reached America and it seems to him worth all the money and pangs of separation. With a touch of pride and vanity, he informs everyone (almost blocking the way) about his son in America. He suffers from talking disease. He receives a series of Blue Air Mail letters with an elated feeling and slowly they take the place of "Bhagavadgita". When he comes to know that his son has taken to eating beef, Jagan receives a shock. In one of his letters Mail advises his father and the nation to eat beef, as it would solve the food problem and the problem of "the useless cows in our country". Jagan feels outraged because the Sastras defined the five deadly sins and killing of a cow headed the list.

The character of Mali is drawn from real life. Narayan visited the U. S. A. in the October of 1956 on an invitation by the Rockefeller Foundation. The fruits of this visit are "The Guide " and "My Dateless Diary". He refers to an Indian friend by a pseudonym in his book "My Dateless Diary". He is Mr. Govind from an orthodox family in Bombay, an austere associate of Gandhiji and a stern practitioner of Gandhian principles. He went to the States for higher studies. He fell in love with an American (or European) girl. He married her much to the chagrin of his father who ostracized him from the ancient family. In order to avoid domestic complexities, he started eating beef. In one of his letters to his old teacher in Bombay, he advises him to adopt beef-eating as a national duty.

One morning Jagan receives a cable "Arriving home another person with me." Jagan has terrible misgivings regarding the latter part and his mind is in a turmoil. He receives his son and "another person" with tears in his eyes and trembling in his bones. Mali introduces "another person" as Grace, his half-American and half-Korean wife. Jagan is completely perturbed by the sight of the alien girl, his supposed daughter-in-law. He faces a new world in which his cherished notions of marriage and morals are dwindling at cosmic or supersonic speed. He is brought from illusion to reality, his airy castles crash to pieces and he remains a ruined piece of nature. His house becomes hell and he walks with downcast eyes avoiding people in the street lest they should ask about his daughter-in-law.

Mali starts a project of selling story-writing machine which is like a radio with American collaboration. He wants to drag his father into the field. Mali says that it is essential for every Indian home. Jagan keeps himself aloof from all these activities. He finds an invisible barrier between himself and his son. Though living under the same roof, they are in two different worlds. "East is East, West is West, the twain shall never meet." "The more he tries to understand his son, the more he is mystified. Mali whose mind is fresh with American memories, finds everything backward and awkward in his country.

Slowly “Bhagavadgita” comes to its original place with a sort of revenge. Evidently, it indicates the agitated mind of Jagan. Throughout the novel Mr. Narayan uses the two symbols—“Bhagavadgita” and the Charkha which are prescribed by Gandhiji for any deep agitation of the mind. One day, Jagan comes into contact with a hairdye-cum-sculptor. He takes him to a secluded place where his master carved figures. He shows the image of a Goddess and needs the help of Jagan in order to instal the image. He also requests Jagan to purchase the garden where he can spend the last days in meditation and tranquillity. It is a reposeful memory for Jagan and the man has revealed a thrilling vision. Jagan does not come to any conclusion as he is not yet ripe for retreat.

Jagan comes to know that Mali did not really marry Grace. He wants to send her back as his project has completely failed. Jagan is completely at sea and he is unable to enter his own house as it is tainted and polluted by the presence of an unmarried couple. Even though his grandfather’s brother practised lechery, it was of a different kind. “I can’t understand how two young persons can live together like this without being married.” He finds himself torn between his love for his son and his love for the cherished and embalmed notions of marriage and morals, his hatred for disorder and loose living and his love for order, simple living and high thinking. Finally, he gets rid of the entanglement. He wants to retire from the new world which has no reverence for the old traditions. He comes out of his house with a little bundle of clothes and Charkha. He is sixty and in a “new Janma.”

On the way he comes to know that his son is imprisoned as a small bottle of liquor is found in his car. After the initial shocks, Jagan has attained extraordinary clarity. He is least perturbed by the news. He tells his cousin that truth ultimately will win and a dose of prison life is not a bad thing. He hands over the keys of his shop to his cousin which will ultimately reach his son.

“Jagan’s final escape from the galling chains of paternal love comes as an unexpected twist” and it is a supreme sacrifice in the case of Jagan. But it is in the true Indian tradition requiring renunciation at some stage. A person becomes a Sanyasi when he gets rid of the earthly attachments. Jagan’s entire love (including his love for wealth) is concentrated on Mali. When once he comes out of it, he becomes a Sanyasi. “It is tinged with the appealing human flaw. He does not forget to take his cheque book.” This is characteristic of Mr. Narayan’s sensibility. Perhaps he wants to indicate that one may get rid of anything but not money. He wants to point out that human beings after all are human beings and not gods.

Mr. Narayan’s greatness lies not in making Jagan renounce the world but in bringing this change in various degrees and making it plausible. “Jagan has to renounce three areas—Malgudi and its surroundings where he spent his life; his sweet shop, a world of confectioneries where he is doing a set of repetitions for sixty years; and above all his only son Mali.” After the initial shocks he attains spiritual enlightenment and realises that he has come to a point at which all struggle and all the comedy of friction are irrelevant. The conclusion of Mr. Narayan’s novel “The English Teacher” is realised by Jagan at the end. “Wife, children, parents, brother, friends—we come together only to go apart again. It is one continuous movement. They move away from us as we move away from them. The law of life cannot be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother’s womb. All struggle and misery in life are due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. The fact must be recognised. A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life. All else is false.” This profound philosophy (perhaps Mr. Narayan’s own outlook on life) is realised by Jagan fully. He makes a retreat to assist an image maker in making images for others to worship. He feels that his life is complete and there is an inward urge to retreat.

Perhaps, Mr. Narayan wants to point out the necessity of preserving the rich traditions and moral values. Jagan's love for "Bhagavadgita" and the ancient traditions is so great that he does not hesitate to sacrifice his paternal love. When Dharma is at stake, one should not hesitate to sacrifice everything and anything.

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