



East-West Conflict in *The Vendor of Sweets* by R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

East-West conflict is one of the central problems of today. R.K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* deals with the tragic-comic clash between the two generations. The novel portrays the conflict between the Indian or Eastern father and his Western bred son. R.K. Narayan's fictional world Malguadi is the microcosm of Indian society revealing all its diversities. The East-West theme figures prominently in Indian novels in English, particularly those written after independence. The English ruled over India and there were conflicts and tensions, for Indian patriotism and her pride in her own spiritual culture could not tolerate British domination. India must assimilate the best that is in the Western way of life, in Western science and technology. It is in this way that India will be transformed and modernised and the two will come together.

Keywords: Indian, tension, conflict, *swadeshi*, attachment, westernized

Introduction

R.K. Narayan is highly acclaimed as a detached observer of life. He is keenly aware of the fundamental, irremedial incongruities which life and world are constantly confronting with. He is also active to the facts that there is no possibility at all of reconciling the opposites, which every facet of his experience brings to his knowledge. He accepts the reality as it presents before him. In the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*, Narayan presents an eccentric widower of sixty with his high-minded Gandhian philosophy who is totally distressed and disgusted with his son. The most absorbing character of the novel is Jagan. He is no doubt the vendor of sweets of the title, but he is also a devout Hindu, a thorough-going nationalist and a staunch Gandhian philosopher. He is an Indian through and through and as such he is suspicious of western ways and habits. He spins his charkha every day, believes in nature cure through natural diet, and had his skull cracked during the Satyagraha movement of Gandhi. Since then he has believed in non-violent, non-cooperation or passive resistance of Gandhi. Also he believes in Nature cure, he did not allow his wife to take aspirin and Mali, too young at the time, always thought that his father had killed his mother, though actually she died of a rare kind of tumour for which there was no cure. Mali is a college dropout lured away by the west. Stealing ten thousand rupees out of his father's hidden saving, Mali goes to United States, and returns a few years later with new-fangled ideas and contempt for Indian ways. Since then there was a barrier between the father and the son and Mali always spoke to his father in short clipped sentences and generally avoided him.

Then he refused to go to his college, went instead to America to learn novel-writing which could be learned only in America and returned home from there with his American-Korean wife, Grace, who it later came to light, was not married to him. The story had its origin in a law suit in actual life brought by a wasteful son against his indulgent father, a sweetmeat vendor

to get more money from him. Narayan dilated at some length to his friend, Mr. Sharda Prasad, on the possibilities of the story. But the novel, as it turned out, is concerned more with character than with plot. It thereby gives the lie factually to Narayan's statement regarding how his novels arose, but emphasises the truth of its basis – viz, that to Narayan the important thing in a novel is not the story but a character who comes alive and holds the interest of the author and the reader by oddity and eccentricity.

Between Jagan and Mali, there are further complications. One is a devout and staunch nationalist, the other is thoroughly westernized. He eats beef and demands over two lakh rupees from his father to set up a factory for the manufacture of a novel-writing machine. A westerner would ask, "Why does not the old man simply kick his westernized and disobedient son out and lock the door, when he is so sinful and wicked?" But Jagan is a Hindu father and a Gandhian follower and so he adopts the way not of confrontation but of passive- resistance in dealing with him. Jagan's reading of the Gita, his preaching of non- attachment, his abhorrence of violence is not mere pretence and empty words. Vanaprasth Ashrama, going into the forest at the appropriate time never to return, and *sanyas*, cutting all connection with his wife also, are not merely phrases in old books but concepts which a few people in India act on every today.

The novel presents through the character of Mali shows that the social values have been fast changing. And Jagan, that Gandhian disciple has been made totally, incapable to compromise with the world, the end being Jagan's retreat from the realities, which is nothing but a kind of death to him. Jagan's renunciation of the world is in keeping with the Indian tradition. But he is also pushed into it by his personal circumstances. When Jagan finds that it is his wealth which is the root of all evil and has led Mali into his wicked ways he decided at once to go to the root and give it up with ruthlessness worthy of his master Gandhi. He orders that the

price of the sweets shall be reduced to a fourth so that there will be no further making of money in his shop. This leads to a rush on the shop, the sweets are sold out in no time at all, there is panic among the competitors, and they wait on him in a deputation to see if this quixotic action cannot be checked. Only when Jagan is told that some of the sweets might have been bought by the other sweet – vendors at the new absurd price to be sold by them in their own shops at the usual rates does it occur to him that his action may have other and less desirable consequences than the ones he had intended.

The discovery that his son and his American- Korean companion, Grace are not really married came to Jagan as a shock. His house had become contaminated, a moral plague spot; and since it is not in his nature to burn it down, he must do the next best thing- run away from it. Chinna Dorai, the sculptor turned hair- dryer helps him to do this. There is peace waiting for him, on the other side of the river among brambles, snakes and monkeys. All he has to do is to shake the city dust off his feet, take his *charkha* and go there.

Grace, of course, is a foreigner but she tries to learn the ways of a Hindu family and perform his duties expected from a Hindu daughter-in-law. So daily, she sweeps, dusts and cleans the part of the house in which Jagan lives. She does live in sin with Mali. It also appears that she had come to India with the purpose of setting up a factory for making short writing and the two were in league. They proposed to rob the old man of his hard-earned money. This was the lure which had brought Mali to India. So it is difficult to agree with Jagan that Grace was a good girl. When Jagan refuses to cough out the money, she is left with no other option but to return to America, or take up petty jobs in India and continue to live in sin either with Mali or with someone else.

The *charkha*, the *swadeshi*, and Jagan's retreat are symbolic of India and the East. The telephone, the novel writing machine, type writer, beef eating Mali, symbolise the West. In between both stands Grace. Grace has her faults but we also feel that with a little love and affection and with considerate behaviour she would have become a good girl. This is the only way in which the East and the West can come together. The Vendor of Sweets is a good example of contrast of East-West conflict as far as situation, characterisation and culture is concerned. Through this novel the novelist imparts the superiority of Indian culture. Narayan's Indian sensibility stands in his immense knowledge of Indian mythology, which forms the rich source of his narrative fiction. He carves out an ideal Indian Society that is pervaded by karma (duty), rebirth and transmigration. He provides a touch of traditional influence, a soul of spirituality and a life of religious and philosophical beliefs to his so-called imaginary town Malgudi

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