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**CULTURAL CLASH AND DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES IN
R K NARAYAN'S *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS***

Romika Sudan*

Abstract

The Vendor of Sweets is Narayan's tenth novel based upon the relationship between a stingy or economical father and his completely spoilt son. The father is confronted by the new world shockingly personified- a world where his cherished notions of marriage and morals seem to count for nothing. Central to the story is the generation gap and the crumbling of values of the older generation under the influence of western culture represented by Mali. The new culture brings with it materialistic development but it has brought decay and degeneration of social and cultural values as well. India under British rule underwent conflicts and tension to retain her own spiritual culture but Britishers left the legacy of Individualism over selflessness, English over native language, pragmatism over idealism which left an indelible impression upon the young generation. The present paper focuses on the degrading effect of west on native culture and problems arising out of it and triumph of Indianness and selfless way of life. It is analyzed as post-colonial work of art which believes in the assimilation of best of two worlds.

Keywords: Crumbling of Values, Generation Gap, Degeneration, Spiritual Culture

Introduction

R K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* is a classic example of Indo- Anglian fiction. All of his novels concern themselves with questions of identity and a quest for equilibrium, but behind these questions and themes lies an implicit faith in the transcendental nature of God and human fate. He drolls at the exclusive orthodoxy of Indian conservatism and is benevolent supporter of modernity. His novels were written in a bi- cultural perspective, i.e., clash between modern western values on the one side and the ancient Indian tradition and values on the other side.

R K Narayan deliberately creates Malgudi as the microcosm of India to highlight the impact of colonization on the life of young generations. It is the platform where the middle class families get exposure to modern world and the East-West conflict reflects.

* Government College of Engineering and Technology, Jammu, India.

The vigorous influence of British ideologies. The British rule had a tremendous influence on the minds of Indian people by establishing schools and colleges on the pattern of inferiorization of native thoughts and philosophy which propagated only western ideologies and ideas among the natives to make their rules firm. Narayan maintained a superior stance vis-a-vis western cultural dominance. He is interested in looking at the extent to which cultural life of the past can be viably integrated with the post-independence reality of India. After the impact of imperialism, a new kind of subjectivity and society emerged in India. He believes in Indian modernity which includes enlightenment, rationality, science and western knowledge. Without exhibiting the anger, resentment, or self-consciousness of cultural rationalism, he was considered a genial, smiling and representative postcolonial novelist of India. The *Vendor of Sweets* is considered as a postcolonial work of art as it looks at the issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony. Postcolonial literature is the literature of the countries that were colonized, mainly by European nations. In simple words, it is basically the anguish of the colonized who have to deal with the aftermath of colonization.

The term Post-colonialism was first coined in the 1960s to designate the period of extensive decolonization after second world war. It gained momentum in the closing decades of the twentieth century and eclipsed terms like Postmodernism, Post structuralism and so on. Despite the progress that is brought to countries under European colonialism, there is usually a resentment towards the Europeans who have conquered and subjugated the native people, leaving them to feel that they have lost their voices in their own land as a result. This conflict of identity is often an issue that postcolonialism is deals with as in Albert Camus's story "Guest" in which the main character's loyalties are between the native culture and the French Colonial government. Post-colonial theorists are also interested in the intersections of race, gender, and colonialism as processes of oppression. Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) is considered the foundational work on which post-colonial theory developed. His book depicts the imbalance between the West and the East by showing the superiority of West over the East. Said applied terms and concepts as 'orient', the 'other' and 'accident' to show the relation between two distinct cultures - West and East. The focus point of *Orientalism* is to create awareness in continental literature and banning the marginalization through the effective use of Eastern literature.

The factors like irrationality, sensuality, primitiveness, despotism and idleness are attributed to the East to establish dominance of the West. This process of attribution marginalizes Eastern literature. Binary opposition of East and West suggests that the valley of discrimination among them is wider. Bertens advocated that: "West and East form a binary opposition in which the two poles define each other, the inferiority that orientalism attributes to the East simultaneously serves to construct the West's superiority. The sensuality, irrationality, primitiveness and despotism of the East construct the West as rational, democratic, and progressive and so on"(205). As Barry pointed out; "...postcolonial writers evoke or create precolonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and, the contemporary which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries...the first characteristic of post-colonial criticism - an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral "other"(194).

Homi K Bhabha, a postcolonial theorist in his book "*The Location of Culture*" (1994), puts major emphasis upon the concept of hybridity that all cultures are confluenced in each other and they cannot be separated. He also uses the term mimicry to indicate the Westernization of native cultures. Native cultures are imitating blindly the Western culture without knowing cultural demolition of natives. Resistance, subversion and reconstruction are the significant features of postcolonial literature. In postcolonial studies the writing center changed from the middle aged Europe to world over and diminished not only the complexities of the colonized world, but its legitimacy as well.

Discussion

The novel takes us through the tensions integral to the family in which two generations belong to two different cultures. Jagan, a follower of Gandhi and a veteran of the wars against British Imperialism, is representative of the older generation and his son Mali stands for the new generation with the materialistic aspirations which the English medium schools have produced. Jagan had been arrested for hoisting tri-colored Indian flag during India's freedom struggle. He lived an extremely simple life by following the Gandhian way of life to the minute details-eating natural salts, wearing khadi clothes, spinning charka, wearing footwear of leather of animal hide which dies a natural death, reading the Gita and writing a book on natural therapy. He

was perfectly fit even at the age of fifty years. He wholeheartedly believes that money is an evil and says "I do not accumulate, it grows naturally"(*The Vendor of Sweets*, 39).

Jagan is a man with a duality of self. He belongs to a space that bears a syncretic concoction of a balance between the claims of tradition on the one hand, and the contrary pulls of a rapidly urbanising and commercialising postcolonial reality in the society of Malgudi on the other. Krishana Sen finds in this existence of Jagan, Narayan's ironic hint at the 'presence of amultifarious strata within a single personality'(182). But this trait of ambivalence, according to Krishana Sen, is not to be regarded as 'deliberately hypocritical and sinful', but 'as a lower stage in the character's spiritual development'(182). Jagan's quest for truth begins with his misadventure with his son Mali who betrays a propensity for the lures of a wayward Westernism that repudiates the call of one's inherited culture. His way of thinking is completely baffling and unintelligible and (his) Jagans reaction shows a helplessness and indeterminacy coupled with filial weakness. Later, when Mali runs away to America after stealing away his hidden money, Jagan, instead of getting angry over this act of his son, pleads before his cousin, "Please tell him to go by steamer. It's safer. Let him be safe. I don't like aeroplanes"(37).

Mali does not care for the concerns of his father and does not listen to his advice. He feels fascinated by the showiness and gaudiness of American materialistic culture and doesn't think of anything else. The Malgudi town and culture also look abhorrent to him, and he feels obsessed with the idea of going to America. His sojourn in America consolidates his disliking or disenchantment with the traditional life of his country. 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. He suggests his father in a letter written to him, "after three years' experience of America, I've taken to eating beef and I don't think I'm the worse for it. Steak is something quite tasty and juicy. Now I want to suggest why not you people start eating beef?"(56). Mali talks of killing stray cows to solve the problem of hunger and starvation in the country without caring that "the

Shastras defined the five deadly sins and the killing of a cow headed the list"(57). He didn't even inform his father about Grace or the choice of his father as he was influenced by modern world where these things have no relevance. But Grace being a foreigner and imbibed with western culture tried to fit herself in the traditional household of Jagan. She persistently unstirred by Jagan's dissent and cleans the house and replied to him "Father, you think I mind it? I don't. I must not forget that I'm an Indian daughter-in-law"(62).

Mali defies all spiritual and moral norms to which his conventional society is so deeply attached. In his attempt to fulfill his reckless individual desires, he recoils back from the social milieu of Malgudi and consciously rejects all the mores so dear to the people of older generation. He finds fault with everything that is Indian. He seems to be much at war with Indian traditionalism and spirituality. Jagan's frustration about his son's motive in abjuring the safe and time-tested traditional way of life, further deepens as he learns from the cousin, of Mali's future plan- to adopt the career of a writer. Jagan's confused reaction reflects his inefficiency to adjust with the freedom to choose one's career. Mali's unconventional approach to profession, points to a veritable phenomenon in the social reality of postcolonial period, brought in by globalisation of culture. He is firmly rooted in the stratification of profession as prescribed by India's traditional Barnashrama system. He expresses his conservative outlook while talking about them. For him "Writer meant in his (Jagan) dictionary only one thing, 'a clerk'-- an Anglo-Indian, colonial term from the days when Macaulay had devised a system of education to provide a constant supply of clerical staff for the East India Company"(28). He tries to convince his son that "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 'Sya-mala-dandakam', and wrote his Shakuntala (32). Jagan's reaction to the very idea of learning the art of story -telling from America questions his faith in the time-old oral tradition of literature in India; where the idea of of story is rooted in the indigenous in the epics and puranas: "Going there to learn storytelling! He

should rather go to a village granny," he said, all his patriotic sentiments surging"(45).

Jagan shows a range of acculturation, with his own world of a confused perception and a vague, unclear pull of social distinction in the modernising society jointly project a cultural fluidity' in his life. He wants to improve his relationship with his son. For that reason, he reconciles himself to the possibility of Mali's writerly life and makes self-adjustment when he sees his son "seemed to be mopping in dejection and boredom. It was time to pull him out of it. (He) had realised that the time had come for him to forget college education and get completely identified with Mali's fantasies, at least until he came out of his gloom"(33). He makes an earnest effort to strike a better understanding with his son, but fails to draw a feeling reaction from him and the following exchange between them ironically serves to illustrate the point: "What are you writing now?" asked Jagan with the humility of a junior reporter interviewing a celebrity.

"A novel", the boy said condescendingly

."Oh, wonderful. Where did you learn to write novels?"....

What story are you writing?"

"I can't tell you now...

said the boy haughtily. It's not like frying sweets in your shop".

This was completely mystifying to the junior reporter. (35).

Mali feels ashamed of his father for being a sweet-seller. He advises his father to stop selling sweets and join his business of establishing a factory of story-writing machines. According to him, a story writing machine, if used on a large scale, would surely dispel the cultural backwardness of this country where there has been no modern work of literature except those old stories like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Jagan's firm faith in the oral tradition of Indian culture and its surviving receives a snobbish reaction from Mali who appears to be lured by the cultural iconisation of the West; "Oh, these are not the days of our ancestors. Today we have to compete with advanced countries not only in economics and industry, but also in culture" (78). While on the one hand Jagan felt delighted at the way his

son seemed to be blossoming after years of sullen silence, he was "at the same time saddened by the kind of development he noticed in him now"(78). The impact of colonialism upon his personality is quite clear when he discards Indian tradition and severs the umbilical cords of his native culture. Without making an adjustment with the gradual changes that India was making soon after independence he wants to transform country rapidly. He says to his father "They (Colonizers here means West) do everything with machines now a day...grinding, powdering, or calculating "(82). All the time he is seen boasting and appreciating the advancement of the Western world and undermining his own country, people, myths, beliefs, eating habits and its philosophy. For him India is a wasteful country. His father tries to take him out of his self-conceited world by bringing him face to face with Indian heritage so that he can take pride in the philosophy of his culture "Why do you blame the country for everything? It has been good enough for four hundred million, "Jagan said, "You were not born in those days"(88-89). But his exposure to the outside world has corrupted him morally. He went to America to learn novel-writing but returned home with his American-Korean partner, Grace. He introduced her to his father as his wife. But later Grace tells him the truth of their relationship: "we are not married..." (135). His soul is terribly shaken at this immorality and cries out in deep pain "What breed of creatures were these? he wondered. They had tainted his ancient home"(135). He doesn't perceive "how two young persons can live together like this without being married"(137) but Mali has neither any pricks of conscience nor regrets of the wrong done. He cries out, "This is a miserable place with no life in it. She was used to a good life. She came here to work, and she is going back because she has no work to do"(127). Jagan can see the devastation taking place in the young generation who, in the name of advancement, was going nowhere. As C. P. Sharma observes, in his ways and manners Mali represents "those Indian youths who, being oblivious of their own cultural heritage, ape the alien culture blindly and think that they are progressive" and become socially and culturally deviant.

A traditionalist at heart, Jagan shows a philosophic tolerance in justifying Mali's unorthodox ways of thinking: "No wonder Mali wants to try a new line. There are bound to be changes of outlook from generation to generation. Otherwise there will be no progress"(40). But deep in the heart he knows "there was always an invisible barrier between them"(36). His recollections of how he got married to Ambika under the inflexible protocols of his family, how they enjoyed hours in a world of their own, how he spent time in love making leading to consequent failure in the intermediate, how the absence of a child created a tension in the family which finally relaxed with the birth of Mali after Jagan and Ambika both were taken by Jagan's parents to Badri Hills to offer Puja to the Gods, help Jagan rediscover his continuity with the past. His rumination of the past, in particular of his experiences as a married man in joint family, confirms his conviction of his own cultural roots in community-affiliation and allegiance to tradition. Standing on the pedestal of the Lawley statue, where Jagan has just rediscovered his past in a state of trance, he now beholds the unhappy look of his house that has lost "the light and laughter of other days" and feels that "it would be impossible for him to go back to that house"(174). He cries out in pain "Who is there to brighten it? Not my son, nor his so-called--what do we call her, really?... They are both alike. They are not the sort to make a home bright, unlike my mother or even Ambika when she was well. On the contrary they blacken their surroundings"(174). Now he has made up his mind to renounce the world. His sense of judgement has been eroded by his blind love for his son, but now the light of reason dawns upon him. He says, "It is not my house that's tainted. It is his. Who am I to grumble and fret" (174-175). As he steps out with his chakra and also his cheque book, he gets news of Mali's arrest on the charge of carrying liquor in a car. Initially, he felt a writhing pain over his physical discomforts in the prison, but in no time, he reasserts his faith in the omnipotence of truth. Jagan said briefly "If what you say is true, well, truth will win" (183). He says "A dose of prison life is not a bad thing. It may be just what he needs now"(184).

Jagan's decision of retreat confuses the cousin and he tries to dissuade him. Jagan's reply seems to be a clear indication of an

independence of spirit that comes in the wake of the authenticity of his realisation: "I don't care what he does. I am going to watch a Goddess come out of stone...I am a free man.... Everything can go on with or without me"(184). His transformation makes him realize of his own fault in spoiling and pampering Mali. He realizes,"We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it..."(138). He feels himself to be entering into a new phase of life, "I have probably outlived my purpose in this house...At sixty, one is reborn and enters a new janma"(175). As compared, Jagan finds peace in self-realization and getting back towards religion but the modern men like Mali finds pleasure in drugs and drinking resulting in damnation. The two different approaches to find solace reveal the lack of understanding in two different cultures. Though the West appears very captivating but it threatens to shatter the traditional life and its values. The West, Narayan, says, is not a model that Indians must imitate indiscriminately. This culminates in unsettlement rather than fulfilment. 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. Between these two cultures stands Grace as Grace has tried to imbibe the good values of Indian culture despite being outsider. Similarly, assimilation of both the cultures paves the way for better understanding and adjustment. Thus, Jagan devises a solution by imbibing the time-honoured Hindu way of life with a self-effacing integration of western values and expansion.

Conclusion

East West conflict is not new to the realm of post-colonial fiction. R.K Narayan depicts the conflict through two of his main characters in the novel Jagan the vendor and his son Mali. This paper attempted to describe the conflict in the characters and the distance it creates between the father and the son. The bond between Jagan and Mali constantly fails due to the cultural clash between them. Jagan, a believer of Gita and spiritualism, is deeply rooted in his Indian culture and tradition and has aversion for all foreign things. On the other hand, his son, Mali is completely influenced by the Western culture.

When it comes to the issue of tradition and modernity, R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* is a significant literary contribution. Through its characters and occurrences, it portrays the conflict between tradition and modernity from beginning to end. In general, it shows that traditional forces ultimately prevail despite the destructive influence of contemporary forces on all sides.

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