R K. Narayan’s The Vendor of Sweets: Tradition versus Modernity

Rafaquat Raja
Research Scholar (PhD), Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University.

ABSTRACT

Indian English Literature places itself among other literatures in English as prominent with international appeal. It starts with Bankim Chatterjee’s venture, that was followed by a large number of writers so far and they produced a bulk of Indian English literature. R.K. Narayan among others is one of the prominent and renowned writer who played a significant role in creating international readership. Malgudi like Thomas Hardy’s Wessex, William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, and Garcia Marquez’s Macondo, is Narayan’s imaginary niche with its population, culture, nature and environment, resembles India in miniature. Narayan made his debut with Swami and Friends and he remains a staunch propagator of Gandhian philosophy. In Vendors of Sweets, Jagan an orthodoxical character remains confided to the traditional values who reads Geeta every day but his ears remain vigilant on workers shows his hypocrisy. On the other hand Mali his son revers modernistic advances of his time. Thus, the ideological difference between the son and the father aggravates which results at the end of novel into abandoning of world by Jagan. This paper will discuss the relationship between father and the son and how they endorse their own set of ideologies to oppose each other. Furthermore, the generation gap and its impact would be touched upon to show the conflict between western-bred son and a typical Indian father.

Keywords: Ideology, Malgudi, Modernity, Orthodox, Tradition.

R.K Narayan’s novels are based on humanitarian notions of living where the quest was of attaining peace and tranquility. He endorsed to remain faithful to outside world where change was an inevitable phenomenon. R.K. Narayan stressed the creative pre-condition of being rooted in the culture one describes. “He (Narayan) is of India, even of South India: he used the English language much as we used to wear dhotis manufactured in Lancashire—but the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India…” (Iyengar 359[1]). His oeuvre is full of characters induced with Indian system of beliefs through which he draw the real picture of India. His thrust in fiction was to explore the problems of middle class people in Indian society and the interaction of characters in changing environment. His artistic endeavor helped him to portray the life of various cultures secularly. He didn’t endorse any ideology and believed that every person lives his/her life accordingly and finds a way out when entangled in catch 22 situation. He believes in the divine intervention also in solving the inner conflict of person.
R. K. Narayan differs from other Indian English writers as he felt himself comfortable in English language because he feels at home using the language than Tamil or Kannada. English for him was first language and he expressed his feelings more poignantly and clearly because of command in it. John Thieme argues, “It was not then surprising that English became Narayan’s language of choice” (9 [2]). Very instinctively Narayan started writing in English just as one starts in his/her mother tongue. In an interview Narayan said about his choice of English language as the medium of his writing that “I never had any idea that I was writing in another tongue. My whole education has been in English from the primary school, and most of my reading has been in the English language . . . I wrote in English because it came to me very easily (qtd. in Sundaram 1988 [3]).

R. K. Narayan creates Malgudi as the microcosm of India where the middle class families get exposure to modern world and the East-West conflict reflects the strong imprint of colonization. The British rule made a tremendous influence on the minds of Indian people as they establish schools and colleges which propagate Western ideologies and ideas among the natives to make their rule firm. But at some points it proved beneficial for Indians. Different philosophical ideologies like Marxism, Rationalism, Atheism, Pragmatism and Skepticism etc. make a strong impact on the Indian thinking that endorse a change in attitude towards the world. Narayan’s characters in his novels are also influenced by one or the other philosophy.

Rationalism and spiritualism are the two contrary forces in modern world where the inclination is towards Rationalism than Spiritualism. Rationalism in its broadest sense is any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification. Characters like Mali, Grace, (The Vendor of Sweets) Raju, (The Guide) and Raman, Daisy (Painter of Signs) are typical examples who follow reason and strived to follow the modern contours in their lives. Narayan portrays the different stance of Indian modernity. He doesn’t only reflect upon the India’s social and cultural evolution but shows the quivering attitude of his characters while adopting the Western modernistic ethos while encompassing the traditional set notions of society. Narayan seems to ridicule the exclusive orthodoxy of Indian conservatism and is clearly sympathetic towards modernity. His ironical attitude itself is largely western; it has few parallels in Pre-modern Indian authors. He presented India with a realistic flavor of life and vigour that seems to some critics ordinary. His stand of telling stories in bewitching way compels Graham Greene to put him on par with Tolstoy, Henry James, Turgenyev, Chekhov and Conrad.

R. K. Narayan in The Vendor of Sweets creates two different character- Jagan, an orthodox Hindu who lives his life on set notions and Mali who strives for the modern way of life. Jagan, a college-educated man in the late fifties has made a success in his sweet shop. He grew rich in his business as vendor of sweets. His only concern after his wife’s death is his son, Mali. His wife died because of the brain tumor and his son believed Jagan to be the cause of her death. Jagan believed in nature cure which his wife loathed at. Mali felt that his father was responsible for her mother’s death because he didn’t go for allopathic treatment and the gap between the father and son widened from the very incident. But Jagan’s love for his wife and son was very deep and that’s the reason he didn’t remarry. He hastened every evening after the death of his wife to reach home soon to look after his son but Mali didn’t yield to his father’s love and care. This led to estrangement between them. This attitude makes them indifferent towards each other. Jagan remained loyal to his emotions by allowing his son to live his life freely. He was happy with his life as he prospered in his business. He was astonished at his son’s visit to America after stealing money. When his son wrote letters to him and inform him about American way of life, Jagan felt elated and read the letters in pride in front of the villagers to make impression on them. But the
happiness of his letters faded when his son once wrote him that he ate beef which was a sin in his eyes. He conceals that letter as he was Gandhian follower and a vegetarian and he had been also arrested for hoisting Indian flag when he was young. Thus, he was worried at his son’s behaviour. Jagan endorsed to live simple life as he made food for himself and he never used salt or sugar because he believed that they are detrimental to health. He spun charkha and wore clothes made of khaddar. He never used brush because he thought that it was made up of pig’s tail. He was always carrying The Bhagawad Gita in his hands to recite it wherever he found time. This reveals his personality being nourished and set on traditional values and beliefs. On the other side, his son remained inclined to modern set values and strive to achieve Western values.

Mali, returned home after three years with a Korean-American girl named Grace. Jagan was baffled at his son when he saw a foreign girl with him. Mali announced to his father that she was his wife. The shock didn’t make a lasting effect on him and welcomed them to his house with respect. But later he got to know about their sinful relation and Mali’s reluctance to marry her. The tension between father and son aggravated more and more and when Mali was caught red handed for breaking prohibition law Jagan found himself in a state to take decision and reached a moment of self-realization. He break away with his son by abandoning the world to spiritual devotion. He arranged a bail through ‘cousin’ and managed to part away from vicious world of his son and he didn’t feel agitated by the news of his son in jail. He thought that Mali might get a lesson in jail for his sinister deeds.

Jagan remained evolving in the novel and Mali didn’t make such impact as his father made. Mali’s presence in the village and in his father’s house was regarded as vicious. Sundaram argues:

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)

Jagan was a proud father and he was estranged but also confided with religious values that propelled him to practice a simple living and high thinking. He was very excited about his son’s presence in America but a letter shattered him in which he wrote:

I’ve taken to eating beef; and I don’t think I’m any worse of it . . . Now I want to 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?” (Narayan 56-57 [4])

Being an orthodox Hindu it was against the Shastras in which among the five deadly sins the top most is of killing a cow. Mali, a modern man with self-sufficient thinking didn’t bother about his father particularly and religion generally. 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. Jagan being an educated person didn’t force Grace about her whereabouts but in a roundabout way asked her. She remained unmoved my Jagan’s protest and cleans the house and responded to him “Father, you think I mind it? I don’t. I must not forget that I’m an Indian daughter-in-law” (Narayan 62).
After getting to know about the truth regarding marriage of his son and Grace he was told by cousin that “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” (137). Thus, the clash between tradition and modernity reaches its climax. Jagan felt that it’s all because of the money and on the real note the interpretation was right. Jagan kept two diaries to evade tax and his hypocrisy to read the Bhagvat Gita while remaining attentive towards work carried on in the shop. “Narayan” Barry Argyle argues, “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 novels theme, which is the search for real values among many that are spurious or outworn” (35 [5]). Thus, this novel may be treated not only as a ‘generation novel’ or a ‘national novel’ but a ‘universal novel.’

He responded to cousin’s remark on Mali’s and Grace’s relationship:

This sort of thing is unheard of in our family. Even my grandfather’s brother, who was known to be immoral never did this sort of thing. When he was not married he never claimed that he was married, although….I can’t understand how two young persons can live together like this without being married. . . I feel my home is tainted now. I find it difficult to go back there (Narayan 137).

William Walsh comments on the personality of Jagan as, “Jagan is both a comic and an anguished figure. He is a comic figure as far as he tries to follow the Gandhian principles of simple living and high thinking as also in his commercial sharpness and fiscal duplicity but he is a totally anguished figure in his lacerated relationship with his sullen and brutish son”(175 [6]).

Thus, Jagan believed that his house had become defiled and he tried to find solace in a place shown to him by China Dorai. As compare to traditional set values to find peace in self-realization and getting back towards religion the modern man like Mali found pleasure in drugs and drinking. The two different approaches to find solace reveals the generation gap and its effect on the thinking of Indian people.

Narayan accept the traditional Hindu way of life with a modest acceptance of western values and advancement. For Mali India was a wasteful country but Jagan’s response make a sense that they found it adequate for their purpose. D. S. Philip rightly retorts:

The purport of all this is clear: The West, enchanting as it may appear, threatens to destroy that given traditional life its values. The West, Narayan, says, is not a model Indians must imitate indiscriminately. This results in disruption rather than contentment (qtd. in Nanda 92-93[7]).

To conclude, The Vendors of Sweets is Narayan’s endeavor to show how the tradition and modernity complement each other and seems to make his point that by avoiding one on the expense of other can cause a great loss. Jagan having assonance with Narayan is portrayed as the typical character who meets the end by resorting to fallible ways of life. Mali with an exposure to outside world has been corrupted morally by foreign values. He negates Indian life and on the contrary Grace bestows herself to follow the Indian culture. Thus, the generation gap is not because of Western influence but lack of exposure or handling of the pressure exerted by that culture. Jagan fails to bridge the gap with his son that results in his abandoning the world.
Works Cited