

# Cultural Perception in R.K. Narayan's Novel the Vendor of Sweets

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## ABSTRACT

**The conflict between human emotion and culture is clearly depicted in R.K. Narayan's novel The Vendor of Sweets. The conflict between the father and son, who have opposing ideologies, cannot be resolved. By rejecting the spiritual and moral Indian way of life, Mali, Jagan's son, ruins his father's ideal. The sorrow and misery in Jagan's life are directly attributable to his extreme adoration of Western culture. Jagan is helpless while his kid adopts the individualistic, materialistic, and isolated lifestyle of the West. Mali's inclination is to follow his heart rather than his father's strict Indian cultural norms.**

**Key words: Culture, Emotion, Perception Lifestyle**

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## INTRODUCTION

Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* is based on the dialectics between the old and the new, the east and the west, the familiar and the unfamiliar. Of course, "Narayan's aim is not to praise ancient or modern values but to show how the indigenous values are being corroded under the heavy impact of the western culture" (Singh 53). He doesn't present himself as some enlightened Indian guru under pressure to prove the east is better than the west that Sanskrit knowledge is superior to all other forms of knowledge. The picture he paints of India portrays the country not via promotion but through unwavering honesty. They embody a distinctive outlook on Indian life that springs from long-held values. Narayan has tackled an epidemic of our modern society in this work. He has investigated the generational divide between a traditional father and a kid who wants to embrace modernism without giving it any thought. Several common Indian tenets—self-discipline, renunciation, the law of Karma, nonviolence, etc.—all find some kind of expression in *The Vendor of Sweets*. Besides, we also find a number of Indian superstitions, religious ceremonies, traditions, customs, ideas and ideals. "A perceptive interpreter of the contemporary Indian society and its middle-class dilemmas, his art represents his acceptance of moral and cultural values that connect his ethos to that of Indian classical heritage" (Saxena 395-306).

In the novel, Jagan, the elderly candy merchant, and his young son Mali play significant roles. Jagan sells sweets, is a Gandhian, and a practising Hindu who is well-versed in the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu texts. He embodies the triad concept, as he possesses the qualities of each of the three main archetypes. He's in his mid-fifties, a widower. He's got a great physical persona. Describing his appearance, Narayan writes: "At fifty five his appearance was slight and elfin his brown skin was translucent, his brow receded gently into a walnut shade of baldness, and beyond the fringe his hair fell in a couple of speckled waves on his nape. His chin was covered with brightening bristles as he shaved only at certain intervals, feeling that to view oneself daily in a mirror was intolerable European habit" (Narayan VOS 8-9).

Jagan is a true Indian at heart, and as such he views western culture with suspicion. He follows Gandhi's teachings with religious zeal. Abstaining from food is a way of life for him, and his diet is as basic as it gets: stone-ground wheat, honey, and greens. He wears a khadi dhoti and a jibba that he has loosely tied over it. He spins for a whole hour every day. He is shown here sporting a pair of sandals crafted from the leather of a senile animal. Jagan is deeply spiritual.

Every day he begins his day by praying to Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. His attitude on life is informed by his extensive daily reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which he does even while sitting at his shop. He has been endowed by his study of Sanskrit classics with lofty ideas, many of which he quotes without fully appreciating their meaning. Jagan, like many other Indians, is devout and respects the ancient texts known as *Shastras*. Since eating beef is considered the worst of the seven deadly sins in Indian *Shastras*, Mali's letter about it leaves Jagan scratching his mind.

Jagan and his son Mali are at odds, and the tension has disrupted his otherwise peaceful life. Jagan adores Mali like no other. Since his wife Ambika passed away long ago, he has taken on the role of both mother and father. Jagan's sole other priority in life is providing for his kid, Mali. Unfortunately, his doting son is so self-absorbed that he gives zero

thought to his father's sentiments. Although they share a house, Jagan and his son are barely in touch, and the latter is frequently forced to use the "cousin's" (a man about town) good offices to find out what his son is up to.

With Mali's declaration that he will no longer be attending school, Jagan has experienced some sadness. His son's expression at breakfast has never been more solemn. He says: "I cannot study any more" (VOS 23). Jagan's dream of seeing his son a graduate is soon shattered. He says to cousin: "I was always hoping that he'd be a graduate and that's the basic qualification one should have..." (VOS 27). When he asks his cousin about Mali, he finds out that Mali has decided to become a writer and is currently working on a novel to enter in the International Competition of Novels. But he's severely let down when he visits Mali and finds her ruminating instead of producing new work. Then, Jagan is shocked and enraged to find that Mali is travelling to the United States to study creative writing. He says: "Going there to learn story-telling! He should rather go to a village granny" (VOS 45). Jagan cries out: "No, without my permission or help! Without telling me anything? I thought he was in his room . . . Thinking that the boy had been saving, he had withheld the allowance, hoping to be asked" (VOS 47-48). He gets another shock when he comes to know about Mali's final decision and his preparations — passport, etc., for his journey to America. He remarks: "That's why I never wished to interfere when he suddenly decided to end his education" (VOS 48). Before he realises that 10,000 rupees have vanished from his attic, his son has already made it big in the United States. Following his initial shock, he comes to feel proud of his son. But the bigger surprise came when Mali returned with a girl he introduced as his bride; she was half Korean and half American and they called her Grace. Still more upsetting to Jagan is the revelation that Grace is leaving for America since Mali has broken his pledge to marry her. As a father, he can't believe his son and Grace have been living together for so long without being married. He feels violated in his Hindu home because he believes the young people have tricked him. Despite his efforts to isolate himself from his kid, he is still unable to find inner peace, so he gives up on the world and retires to a wooded cabin. Mali ends up in jail, and the tale concludes with Jagan leaving for the retreat. Thus, Jagan is a typical Malgudian Indian who is stuck in an unchanging culture. He takes the approach of nonviolent, rather than aggressive, resistance toward Mali because he is the father of Hindu children. He has an overbearing father complex and lavishes his son with attention and gifts. Like any doting parent would, he takes remarkable joy in his son's activities even if he has no idea of their legitimacy. When he hears that his son has won the award for his projected novel and will soon become a literary celebrity, he is overjoyed. He says: "He is going to earn twenty-five thousand rupees out of it, and he says he is going to finish it before September, wonderful boy! I never knew that my son was such a genius" (VOS 39).

Now that Mali is in the United States, he spends more time reading Mali's letters than The Bhagavad Gita since he feels superior because of it. He eagerly anticipates his mail and keeps track of the time till his return. Like a good Hindu parent, Jagan tries to rehabilitate Mali after reading a letter in which Mali boastfully describes his habit of eating beef by compiling and mailing him quotations from the Shastras and Gandhi's writings on the cow. Because of this, Jagan's reading of the Gita, preaching of non-attachment, and abhorrence of violence are not just pretence and empty words.

Their significance to India as a whole is unmistakable. Vanaprastha Ashrama, the practise of entering the forest at the proper time and remaining there permanently, and Sanyas, the practise of severing all ties with one's wife as well, are not only terms in dusty tomes; they are real ideas that some people in India still practise.

Mali is a stand-in for the type of young Indian guys who, enamoured by American wealth and culture, dream up unrealistic schemes to better their own lives. In his ideal world, computers would crank out novels and short tales according to predetermined formulas. Together, he and Grace lead an illicit lifestyle. His stubbornness and egotism are his downfalls. He treats Jagan like he is someone other than his father, asking him a variety of questions over and over again.

Grace is obviously not a native, yet she has the disposition of a typical Indian girl: she is mild, submissive, and compliant. She aspires to be a good Hindu daughter-in-law, so she's been reading up on Hindu customs and traditions and helping out around the house. She adopts traditional Indian girl behaviours and finds immense joy in doing housework. Her daily chores include sweeping, dusting, and tidying up Jagan's quarters. She says to Jagan: "Father, you think I mind it? I don't, I must not forget that I'm an Indian daughter-in-law" (VOS 62). She does live in sin with Mali. While she is not directly to blame for Jagan's problems, she helps to amplify them by working with Mali. Thus, we see a little bit of an Indian girl in Grace.

Jagan's wife Ambika is introduced to us first as a timid young bride and then as a mature woman taking care of housework. The woman appears to be a stereotypical Indian woman. When Jagan first saw her, "she had a thick wad of wavy hair, plaited and decorated with flowers, and many pieces of jewellery sparkled on her person. She wore a light green sari which suited her complexion" (VOS 154). She may have been a girl with a lot of pride and sensitivity, but she was definitely not a coward. She confronted her mother-in-law with more confidence and courage than the typical Indian wife would. She had the courage to retort: "Why are you so obsessed with the gold belt? Have you ever seen a gold belt in your life?" (VOS 162).

Like most of Narayan's earlier novels, *The Vendor of Sweets* is based in the fictional South Indian city of Malgudi. Malgudi is representative of the urbanisation process in India; it is a place where people like pariahs, teachers, clerks, printers, police officers, and so on go about their daily lives. Since the pace of modernization has been uniform across India, Malgudi can stand in as a proxy for the country as a whole. One may observe the effects of both Mahatma Gandhi and Western culture in the lives of persons like Jagan. And if India's many moods are reflected in Malgudi, then Malgudi is the true protagonist of his books. In classic Malgudian fashion, names like Jagan, Mali, and Chinna all refer to Indians.

Malgudi is located close to Madras since that is where Mali obtains his American passport with the aid of a friend and where he boards his flight to the United States. Malgudi serves as the district capital and is home to the District Magistrate and Senior Superintendent of Police. Mali attends classes at Albert Mission College. Market Road, where Jagan's Sweet Mart can be found, is a popular thoroughfare in the area. In addition, Mali often eats at the Ananda Bhavan Restaurant during the day. After closing up shop for the day, Jagan goes home. He travels down Market Road, past Natraj's Truth Printing Press and the Krishna Dispensary. Mali is among the groups of boys who gather around the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley to talk and gossip. Lawley Extension, South Extension, and New Extension can be found past it. Several colonies have been built up around Jagan's mansion, which was formerly on the outskirts of the city. By walking across Kabir Lane, Jagan reaches his home, where he can frequently observe the goings-on at the Taluk Office.

Several additional streets and locations in Malgudi, including Vinayak Street, are also discussed. The whole story rings true. In the people of Malgudi, the culture, habits, rituals, traditions, language, etc., we may taste Narayan's Indianness.

Narayan has focused on the happiness and sadness, hope and hopelessness, of the Malgudi community.

The Indian philosophy of life emphasises renunciation. It could be anything from giving up material stuff to giving oneself completely to someone out of pure love or devotion. Only an elite few will ever achieve this state. This goal is rarely achieved in practise. A renunciate is someone who lives by the principles of non-attachment, sense-mastery, and unconditional love for all of humanity. Indeed, Narayan's Jagan from *The Vendor of Sweets* represents this way of existence. Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* acts as a free man, but he is nonetheless held in high esteem because to the common concept that a saint can reach the state of being that can vanquish desire for Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* has been acting as a free man. His philosophy of life is: "Conquer taste and you will have conquered the self" (VOS 8). When Mali is put to prison under prohibition laws Jagan comes to a dead stop and screams. He finally breaks up within. He wants to leave out of it completely and to forget all that by going away

After hearing of Jagan's hideout across the river from the cemetery, the cousin is shocked. His final words leave an indelible impression: "I don't care what he does. I am going to watch a goddess come out of a stone. If I don't like the place, I will go away somewhere else. I am a free man. I've never felt more determined in my life. I am happy to have met you now but I'(d) have gone away in any case, everything can go with or without me. The world does not collapse even when a great figure is assassinated or dies of heart failure. Think that my heart has failed, that's all" (VOS 184).

Narayan has done extensive research into the Hindu doctrine of Maya in his novel *The Vendor of Sweets*. Maya, the difference between outward appearance and the truth of human nature, is the driving force behind much of the action in the book. In his own unique way, Jagan's actions draw him deeper into the wider war. He claims to be guided by the universal principles espoused by the Gita and Gandhi, but in reality must attend to the specific requirements of his own situation. That's why it's so funny when his "non-violent foot-wear" generates a ruckus at home, or when he spins in obedience to his promise to Gandhi and accidentally (and humorously) drowns out his chat with his son Mali. His decision to eat nothing but "natural salt" with the cousin's disagreeable assumption that it must be "the salt that dries on one's back when one has run a mile in the sun" (VOS 8), is in the same category. Jagan's life oscillates between the extremes of the ideals of the scriptures and the imperfection he must live. Thus, his ideals of charity for the poor are in comic juxtaposition to his "free-cash", "a sort of immaculate conception, self-generated, arising out of itself and entitled to survive without reference to any tax" (VOS 110). Jagan's dilemma is summed up in memory of how the decaying bathroom came to be built. The larger conflict is between the celestial and the earthly.

In this tone of acceptance of all things as aspects of divine emanation, *The Vendor of Sweets* is really an orthodox Hindu novel, "at least to the extent that a rebel can be orthodox" (Atma Ram 154). The Gita and The Puranas are referred to as guides to action. In cases of infertility, people often go to the gods for advice. A decade passed with no problems for Ambika. Since Jagan and Ambika wanted children, they travelled to the Santana Krishna temple in Badri Hills for divine favour. Because of the divine favour, it was assumed that Ambika would have a son, and it was via this favour that Mali was born. Malgudian residents, like most Indians, place a high value on religious religion.

Narayan has accurately depicted Indian customs and superstitions, including religious practises. They are a blended family, and Jagan remembers that when he was a young boy, his older brother showed him how to collect grasshoppers, despite his sister's protests that they would go to hell for killing so many helpless creatures. Mali's introduction of

Grace, a Christian girl, causes Jagan's family to shun him. He is no longer welcome at family gatherings after being disowned by his older sibling and other relatives. His sister writes him a harsh letter in which she cuts all ties with him.

She writes: "We are ashamed to refer to you as a brother. Even when you joined Gandhi and lost all sense of caste, dining and rubbing shoulders with untouchables, going to jail, and getting up to all kinds of shameful things, we didn't mind. But now it is a fact that you have a beef-eating Christian girl for a daughter-in-law I can hardly call you a brother in the presence of my in-laws. No one can blame Mali, with a father like you ..." (VOS 141-142).

The elder brother of Jagan, who resides close on Vanayak Street, frequently speaks ill of him in a blaming and derogatory tone. "and he never invited him to join him in performing the anniversary ceremonies of their father. He was an orthodox man who managed the headquarters of a religious order, established ten centuries ago with a million followers, and he had begun to disapprove of Jagan's outlook long ago" (VOS 142). Due of Jagan's knowledge, the relationship between Mali and Grace is seen as immoral. He feels unclean in his own home. He closes himself off in his private area of the house. He closes all doors and windows and turns out the lights in his apartment to keep the disease out. "Jagan barricaded himself in completely. He derived an excitement in performing all the actions of a purificatory nature. He shut the communicating door between his part of the dwelling and Mali's and locked it on his side. He did everything possible to insulate himself from the evil radiations of an unmarried couple living together. There was a ventilator between the two portions of the house; he dragged up on old stool, and with the help of a long bamboo shut it tight" (VOS 140). So it is intolerable for him to accept as daughter-in-law a non-Hindu, an American beef-eater.

Narayan was profoundly affected by Gandhi's dedication to honesty. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, the protagonist Jagan emulates Gandhi in every way. As with Gandhi, he is committed to nonviolence and the truth. Although Gandhi is not explicitly presented in the book, his presence is felt throughout. It's clear from the fact that Jagan often engages in Gandhian practises like spinning the charkha and adopting a minimalist lifestyle in order to reflect more deeply. He is a true believer in the teachings of Gandhi. Twenty years after promising the Mahatma he would spin every day after cracking his head trying to tear down the Union Jack from a Government building, he still spins every day. He only uses pure ghee, manufactured from butter made from cow's milk, to prepare sweets at his shop and will not tolerate any kind of adulteration. He has taken Gandhi's words to heart and incorporates them into his daily life. That's why he goes to such lengths to source hides from cattle that died of natural causes rather than slaughter them for use in making shoes. "I do not like to think that a living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet" (VOS 9). So, like his master he will use "non-violent footwear".

Narayan's innate Indian-ness is on display in his devotion to family and religious values. The Jagan family is a nuclear one. Narayan gives an account of Jagan's marriage and his wife's life in the joint household in chapter twelve. This film demonstrates the norms that are upheld in a traditional Indian household. We notice the elders' nagging, invasions of privacy, and general meddling. On the other hand, there is a mutual feeling of care and community. The husband and wife should not be the only ones to show affection to or brood over distant relatives.

It's clear that *The Vendor of Sweets* is primarily concerned with a crisis of family values. It's because of this that many Indian families are struggling to find a comfortable place in society. This causes a rift in the relationship between Jagan, his older brother, and his kid, Mali. Only one family is shown in the entire novel. The struggle between a father and son escalates into a confrontation between generations, one rooted in custom and the other blindly chasing progress. Mali plans to use machines to produce books and short tales according to predetermined guidelines. Along with Grace, an American-Korean beauty, he leads a life of immorality. Both the father and the kid are set in their ways and refuse to consider an alternative viewpoint. A lack of harmony develops as a result. In both the father and son's stories, we see the tension between ideals and realities. Their differing worldviews are represented by contrasting icons like the charkha and the typewriter, renunciation and the correspondence industry, abstinence and sexual freedom, etc.

Mali was tactless, superficial, and egotistical, while Jagan was all too earthy underneath his façade of idealism. Jagan was money-minded, selfish, and short-sighted. Because it contradicts his ideals of Nature care, Jagan watches his wife die without giving her any medical attention. Mali also upsets his father by never consulting him about important life and career choices. As a result, the bond between a father and son takes on new significance and greater depth.

There is a nice harmony between the fantastic and the real in *The Vendor of Sweets*. The depiction of Malgudi and its inhabitants, as well as the narrative of Jagan, are grounded in realism. Mali's wish to open a factory to produce novel-writing machines introduces a fantastical element. He thinks it's all just a question of permutations and combinations that can be simply programmed into a computer. It's great to see something like this. Like his "retreat," his enrollment into Vanaprastha Ashram, Jagan's abrupt decrease of the price of his sweets to one fourth of the original amount is incredible. However, he always has his chequebook with him. He is ready to bear the expenses of securing a bail for Mali, though he considers that "a dose of prison-life would be good for him" (p. 184). He is also ready to pay for an air-ticket for Grace's return to America because "she is a good girl" (p. 185). All this seems to us to be a queer mixture of realism and fantasy till we remember that Jagan has entered only Vanaprastha Ashram and not the fourth and final Ashram, that of Sanyas.

## CONCLUSION

Because of the complexity of *The Vendor of Sweets*, a number of ideas and themes are particularly striking. Conflicts between generations, between a father and his son, between fantasy and reality, between the East and the West, between the characters' ideals and their actual accomplishments, between good and evil, between order and chaos, etc., give this work a sense of Indian atmosphere. As a result, the novel's protagonist, Narayan, has a very Indian view of art. He demonstrates that dishonesty and corruption can't last forever. The force of good always wins out in the end, and equilibrium is always restored whenever it has been disturbed. Narayan's ability as a honest writer of post-colonial Indian realities are on full display in this novel. Even though he is a man of the past and therefore tends to support the forces of tradition, he does not ignore the inexorable advances in technology and other areas of modern life.

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