

# Exploring The Themes in R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*

Dr. Sheelu Singh Bhatia

Former Professor, Jazan University

R. K. Narayan is undoubtedly one of the front ranking novelists of pre-independent India. His choice of interesting themes, narrative skill, use of natural and lucid expression and smooth and powerful language have made him an extremely popular novelist, especially among the middle class society which he himself hails from. In the whole range of Indian English fiction, "he is a phenomenon," writes Uma Parameswaran, "and in his work whole is very much greater than the sum of the parts." His genius is that of fantastic wonderment, which challenges intellectual elucidation and critical analysis. It is an art which does not startle after effects. It spontaneously sinks into the reader's sensibility. Warren French, in the "Preface," places Narayan among other contemporary novelists and says Narayan, like Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Thornton Wilder, is a humanist; Narayan sees the fragmentation of society but creates an artistic order that transcends fragmented society. (Atma Ram, ed. PERSPECTIVES ON R.K. NARAYAN. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1982. Pp. xxxii + 222.)

In R. K. Narayan's novels, quest for identity, greater reality and self realization seems to be the major theme. He is rich in handling the quest theme through real life situations. His hero usually sets out in quest of self identity in keeping with certain psycho-spiritual assumptions which form the very matrix of his fiction. The central concern in *The Vendor of Sweets* is the journey in to the self. The novel bears a uniform quest pattern in the narrative structure and motif explication. The quest is pursued on two planes: on the physical plane and on the spiritual plane.

In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan is the protagonist. The theme of the novel is best unraveled through its protagonist. He is a maker and seller of sweets. He is not intellectual as the other characters of R. K. Narayan. He has not read the ten principles of Upanishads. The Gita provides him with all the wisdom he needs. Yet, he is fully conscious of traditional goals prescribed for human life by the Hindu religious thinkers and traditional ordering of life in terms of Ashramas. The novel opens with a brilliant definition of Jagan's nature for comprehensive Hindu wisdom, "Conquer tests and you will have conquered the self," said Jagan to the listener, who asked, 'Why conquer the self?' Jagan said, 'I do not know, but all our sagas advise us so.' (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 7)

Jagan connects the self with the control of one's senses. He is a kind of Karma Yogi, that he has abandoned taking up salt because, 'One must eat natural salt'. For Jagan sagas are a real presence. He looks at the stars and wonder: "Who lives in these? We are probably glimpsing the real heaven and don't know it. Probably all our ancient sagas are looking down at us." (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 34)

Jagan is a prosperous house holder, who pushes wealth, the Purushartha proper to the Grihastha. When called upon to justify his amassing of wealth, he takes recourse to The Gita: "I don't accumulate it, it grows naturally..... What can I do? Moreover, I work because it is one's duty to work" (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 18). His reliance on traditional wisdom often in an attempt to rationalize his natural instincts and impulses, is shared by others in his community. For example, this is evident in the scene where the bearded man and other customers in Jagan's shop discuss his extraordinary measure of reducing the prices of sweet packets drastically.

I can help you to get the supplies if you like. As Lord Krishna says in The Gita, it is all in one's hand. Make up your mind and you will find the object of your search. 'The bearded man sitting on the platform butted it to remark, 'Ah, The Gita is a treasure, truly a treasure house of wisdom.' 'I never spend a moment without reading it.' 'One can go on reading it all one's life.' 'The Gita also says everyman must perform his duty in the right spirit and the right measure'. (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 21)

The fact that Jagan throughout his transaction uses The Gita more as a decoy rather than a religious authority accounts for the controlled irony in the passage, but it does not prove that Jagan's relationship with The Gita is self-deceiving. The same is true of his practice of Gandhian principles and precepts. When he decides to fight his son's designs on his money, he draws his moral authority from The Gita, the value to fight at the proper time. "Narayan seems to suggest the BhagwadGita ideal of life renunciation and acceptance, impersonal sympathy and detached action for human happiness and progress," but the weapon he used is the Gandhian Satyagraha. The ideas, Satyagraha and Karma, are here misused by Jagan, but it cannot be denied they have a tremendous hold on his consciousness.

*The Vendor of Sweets* derives its core from the transformation which Jagan undergoes in the course of his action: his passage from the Grihastha Ashram to the Vanprastha Ashram and his rejection of Artha in search of new values. The conversation between Jagan and the bearded man which takes place at the crucial moment in Jagan's life, dully supports this critical formulation. This takes place in Jagan's first visit to the Big Master's garden across the river Sarayu:

God knows I need a retreat. You know, my friend, at some stage in one's life one must uproot oneself from the accustomed surroundings and

disappear, so that others may continue in peace. It would be in the most accredited procedure according to our scriptures – husband and wife must vanish ‘into the forest at some stage in their lives leaving the affairs of the world to younger people’. (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 21)

In the first phase of his life, Jagan is shown to be a man of frugality. He is satisfied with the few worldly things of life. He leads the life of an ascetic in the world of multifarious activities. Jagan is a fit character chosen by Narayan for expanding and analyzing his quest theme. The important phase of Jagan’s life begins with the straining of his relations with his son. Jagan does everything possible to give his son proper education. But his son leaves his studies and plans to go to America. He returns three years later with a half American and half Korean girl friend. This time Jagan is greatly taken aback to learn that his son is unwilling to pursue his studies further. He fails to find his identity in his son Mali. The father- son relation becomes central in *The Vendor of Sweets*. “Underneath its simple surface,” writes Som P. Sharma “the protagonist Jagan is unconsciously questing for a new relationship with the world. This new relationship with the feminine is embodied in his relationship with Grace, his son’s Mali’s Korean- American girl friend, and by revealing through flashbacks his relationship with his wife and mother.”

The old man Jagan leads a very limited existence; his existence may be divided into two parts. A part of his life is spent in running his confectioners shop. Outside his involvement in terms of time and energy with the shop, Jagan is passionately involved with his son Mali. However there is hardly any communication between the father and the son.

Jagan is a very kind and graceful father and strives hard for an understanding with Mali, and even adapts to the situation. He accepts Grace as daughter-in-law. She also behaves respectfully towards Jagan. But the cracks appear in the relationship not only between Mali and Jagan but also between Mali and Grace. Perhaps this was due to Jagan’s refusal to liberally provide handsome amount for Mali’s project of establishing a story writing machine. It is too much for Jagan when he learns that Mali and Grace are living together without formally marrying. The ever growing tension of father-son relationship reaches its climax when Mali is caught red-handed, breaking the prohibition law.

Jagan finds domestic life tiresome and irksome. He loses the peaceful joy of reaching his own house. He feels pushed unpleasantly to his old days and the ancient house. The great loving father who once was prepared to sacrifice his all for his only son Mali and who ever craved for his look, is now afraid of meeting him face-to-face. He is a lovely man, though his inner shyness prevents him from accepting the fact. He feels utterly shattered and broken. His cherished notions of marriage and moral, all seem to count for nothing. Then there comes in Jagan a moment of self-realization and also of decision. He manages to break away from Mali and his scheming and vicious world, which he cannot approve. He escapes from the chains of paternal love. He leaves home and becomes indifferent to his son; ‘I am free man. I’ve

never felt more determined in life,’ he tells his cousin (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 74). This is the moment of his triumph. He is ready to reject the burden of the unrequited love.

He plans to retire across the river where the statue of a goddess is being fashioned. At the end he tells his cousin, “If I don’t like the place, I will go away somewhere else. I am free man” (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 80). He triumphs over himself by accepting the inevitable loneliness voluntarily. Giving an insight into this loneliness Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

And if this is spiritual feet, its reference is entirely to this life and its problem, and we are grateful that Narayan recognizes the fact that spirituality is not altogether a matter of the life to come. Jagan’s becoming a self possessed-self involved neither superhuman powers nor willful renunciation. Its purpose is to live one’s life in this world with some measure to tranquility by shaking off emotion when emotion has become false in substances and faltering in effect.

Jagan’s contact with the mediumistic man China Dorai, in the third phase of his life, plays a significant role in the realization of his self. He voluntarily decides to reduce the price of his sweets, which create a real turmoil in the business of Malgudi. Others in the trade come to see him and along with them come China Dorai a bearded sculptor who tells Jagan about the idea of retiring to a secluded, with a blue lotus in it.

Jagan’s experience in this place is a strange one. He feels as if he were “on the verge of new Jamma.” China Dorai stirs the deepest chords within Jagan’s heart, when he tells him, “We should not let the body deceive us to the true nature of our being. One is not really bone of meat.” (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 86). He feels that his identity has undergone a change and that he is being pushed across the threshold of a new personality. He is a different man at this moment; an internal transformation has taken place in him. He is no longer the father of Mali, the maker of sweets and gatherer of money; he gradually becomes something else, perhaps a supporter of the bearded sculpture.

Jagan decide to take a final leave from his house so that he could retire into his chosen retreat. He hands over the bunch of keys and his business affairs to his cousin and tells him that he will always be available for guidance. The news of his son’s imprisonment for breaking the prohibition law disturbs him in the beginning but later on he reconciles. “A dose of prison life is not a bad thing. It may be just what he needs now” (*The Vendor of Sweets*, 90). The novel concludes with Jagan finding a new life or new life in his retreat.

The existential circumstances aided and abetted by Mali’s incomprehensible behavior paves the way for Jagan’s final transformation and retirement to a secluded place. Jagan is sad in his solitariness. His wife is dead. His son cannot understand him. His other relatives and acquaintances look upon him as an outcast:

His decision to retire from the world, to detach him from a set of repetitions performed for sixty years in order to spend the rest of his life being a mystical stone-mason to carve a pure image of the goddess for others to contemplate..." It is of course a decision in the classical Indian line.....But is also pushed into it by his personal circumstances. (*Vendor of Sweets*, 149)

The transformation of Jagan manifests itself from the renunciation of three spheres of life by him. First, the steady encircling routine of the community of Malgudi which confirms his identity; second there is his work as a proprietor of an establishment making and selling sweets. Then, there is the ambiguous and dangerous ground of his relations with his son- the sullen westernized Mali, whose contemptuous explanations to his bewildered father separate the two of them.

The transformation of Jagan conforms to traditional Hindu ethics. The novel derives its form, the transformation which Jagan undergoes in the course of his action, his passage from *Grihastha* ashram to *Vanprastha* ashram and his rejection of *Artha* in search of new values. Jagan records each step of his progress towards renunciation. The multitudinousness of life and miscellaneous-ness of human motives and activities in Jagan is entirely different from the other characters of Narayan. Jagan's transformation is totally based on Hindu ideology and way of life. The Gita provides him with all the wisdom he needs. His transformation takes place in the last phase of his life, when his son Mali returns from America with his girl friend, Grace. Jagan without asking Mali takes Grace as his daughter-in-law. His relationship connects through flashback to his mother and wife. His sorrows and sufferings due to his son Mali are transformed into living realities of life in which he lives.

R. K. Narayan tries his best to take Jagan to the final stage of spirituality but he leaves in the half state of spirituality. Something holds him back from renouncing this life completely. When he moves out of his house towards spiritual realization, he is careful in taking his cheque-book along with him. He does not renounce his stingy nature either. He wants to help his son through legal aid to save from the punishment for violating the prohibition laws, yet, he is not prepared to part with the money for the sake of his son.

Narayan presents the quest theme in his own characteristic way. He knows the shadow which falls between the reality and superficial but he would not deny the reality, because of the problematic gap. The novel describes the effect of double alienation. Jagan is not only separated from his Americanized son but also from the orthodox members of his family and community. Narayan's novels do not attempt a philosophical exposition of life, but his involvement with Indian values and norms is undeniable.

## References

[1] Bhatnagar, M.K. *New Insights into The Novels of R.K. Narayan*. Delhi: Atlantis Publishers, 2002.

- [2] Biswal, Jayant K. *A Critical Study of the Novels of R.K. Narayan: The Malgudi Comedy*. New Delhi: Nirmal Publishers, 1987.
- [3] Holmstrom, Lakshmi. *The Novels of R.K. Narayan*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1973.
- [4] Iyengar, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. Calcutta: Asia Publishing House, 1973.
- [5] Kain, Geoffrey, ed. *R.K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspective*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993.
- [6] Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Twice Born Fiction- Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005.
- [7] Ram, Atma. ed. *PERSPECTIVES ON R.K. NARAYAN*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1982.
- [8] Suryanarayanmurti, K.V. "The Theme of Salvation: Treatment by Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan", *Tribeni*. (vo134) Waltair: Andhra University, 1965.