
AMALGAMATION OF CULTURE IN THE NOVEL 'THE VENDOR OF SWEETS'

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan in his novel 'The Vendor of Sweets' (1967) has portrayed that Indian culture is a mixture of traditional ideals and modern spirit. The juxtaposition between the two worlds – the traditional and the modern is represented through the father and son characters, Jagan and Mali respectively. Jagan is a man of simplicity who wants to preserve his traditional culture whereas his son Mali is a man of complexity, because of his visit abroad tries to bring the western culture into the land of tradition. Mali's living in relationship with a foreign girl named Grace, starting a new business, his curiosity in technology and living a life of luxury creates tension in Jagan. The focus of the paper is to portray that Indian culture is an amalgamation of traditional principles and modern life.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Culture, Technology, Living-in relationship, Generation-Clash

Traditional culture is something that has been enjoyed by ancestors and passed on to their generations. Modernity is a concept which emphasizes on individuality, self-centeredness and refers to modern life. In R.K. Naraya's *The Vendor of Sweets*, both tradition and modernity go parallel.

The protagonist, Jagan is a sixty-year-old widower, and is a successful sweet vendor. Jagan is a disciple of Gandhiji and an ardent follower of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Jagan has made success in his business and he has deep and unwavering affection over his wife and son, Mali, whose mother dies of brain tumor when he was a young boy. Mali has the feeling that his father is responsible for his mother's death because he failed to give her the treatment as he is a man who has a belief in natural cure. An impenetrable barrier between the father and the son has grown after the death of Jagan's wife. Silence reins the house where the two of them live. The father and son seldom talk nor do they meet or share each other's feelings and ideas. So, they both

use Jagan's cousin as their mediator. Mali decides to abandon school and leave for America to become a writer when Jagan's fatherly feelings are thrown into still greater confusion. A year or two later, Mali returns with a half-Korean, half-American girl and a grandiose scheme for marketing a novel-writing machine. The living in relationship of Mali with Grace creates apprehension in Jagan and he is utterly at sea.

Jagan wants to preserve the tradition of the house and he wishes that his son also should maintain the sacredness of the house and the culture. Mali is always against the wishes of his father. Mali being an educated man, does not think of the ways and means to earn his living, but instead tries to find ways to make his father retire from his job in order to spend his father's money to live a luxurious life. This thought of Mali shows that, the modern generations is educated, imbibe the western culture, know about the world better than their parents, but are unable to lead an independent life. They desire to live an affluent life by not following the traditional ways of life.

Jagan being a follower of Gandhiji wears only Khadhi dress and lives a life of simplicity. He adheres to the traditional ways – walking bare foot but Mali wears socks and shoes inside the house, which hurts Jagan because the house has *apuja* room where the deity's statue or pictures are kept. So, it is a custom in the Hindu culture, that the person who enters the house should wash their feet before entering the house. Though Mali knows about these practices, he fails to follow them because of the influence of the western culture.

Jagan plans to retire from the sweet business and tells his son to take over the business. It is a tradition that the father's business is looked after by the son after the father's retirement. Mali aspires to become a writer and so hesitates to take up the offer. He values that business to be a cheap one and says "You expect me to do that? I have better plans than to be a vendor of sweetmeats." (92). Mali is not ready to hear what his father tries to tell because he believes that technology will help him reach great heights in life.

Mali stops his father with a gesture of disgust and says, "Oh, these are not the days of your ancestors. Today we should compete with advanced countries not only in economics and industry, but also in culture." (80). The words of Mali express his thoughts, as he feels that the path of ancestors is outdated. He tells his father that, "Ultimately, you may have to give up your sweet making and work in our business. I'll give you a nice air-conditioned room with a couple of secretaries" (81)

Mali tries to create awareness about his new business to his father. He brings home a story-telling machine so that the father will have an idea of his new business and will be ready to give the capital amount for starting the business of manufacturing the story-telling machines through which he can earn lakhs and lakhs of rupees. Jagan has a weird notion of these machines and he wonders as to how these machines can produce an original piece of writing and even if it does so, he knew that the essence of originality in writing will be lost. Mali is not worried about the loss of values by producing

stories through machines, instead he sees the machine as a golden duck that will make him rich and he fails to respect the art of writing. Mali tries to establish the business with his father's money and so he includes his father's name as one of the principal promoters of 'Mali enterprises'. Jagan is annoyed to know that his son has made him a part of his business without his approval. He starts to isolate himself in his house by immersing his thoughts in prayers. He opens the *Bhagavad Gita* for a while to make his mind calm and free from thinking about his son's new business proposal.

Mali complains repeatedly that the old house where he grew does not have modern facilities like the telephone and lights which he considers to be essential for his business. But these cannot be attained unless the father approves of it. This shows that, the elders hold great power in an Indian family. The children in Indian family cannot cross limits in totally reversing the ancient tradition. If the children constantly rebel against their parents in India, they will be consoled by their parents by teaching them how to be happy with what they possess.

The modern generation is carried away by the luxuries and the latest technologies. They feel that without technology life is nothing. The new advancement in science and technology has made the modern generation dependent on them in every walk of their life. The impact of technology is such that, the modern generation feels that possessing such new advancement is an enormous success in life. The modern generation cannot compel the traditional people to adapt to changes. The father, who is traditional, accepts his son's changes, but he refuses to inculcate changes in his life. This is because the people who are traditional give more importance to the values and if they are likely to adapt to changes, they think about the ideals behind it. Traditional culture is successful without any technology, in spite of which a father like Jagan adjusts with his son in all aspects.

Mali's relationship with the half-Korean, half-American girl, Grace, is also a reason that brings clash in generations towards the attitude of marriage. Jagan comes to know from Grace that, they are not married. Jagan is not able to accept his son living together with a foreign girl before marriage, since it is totally against the culture and tradition. The traditional man like Jagan finds it uncomfortable to accept a foreign girl as his daughter-in-law, but he does not reveal his dislike. Jagan does not fail to respect and treat her well, which shows that, in Indian culture nobody is treated with disrespect. Though a traditional man like Jagan cannot change himself to other culture, he does not disregard the culture of Grace.

Jagan slowly tries to learn more about Grace, gets to know her identity and her place of birth. Grace is puzzled at Jagan's questions for which she replies, "Only the passport and income-tax people ask for such details in other countries. However, since I am also an Indian now, I might as well get used to things, and tell you something..." (67). Jagan says, "It is a custom in this country to inquire where one was born and bred and who is who generally, and then we go onto other things." (66). Grace pretends to

adapt to Indian culture but at one point when she comes to learn that Mali's ambition of starting his new business by investing his father's hard-earned money is not going to be fulfilled, she leaves the house without hesitation.

Though Grace is out of the house, Jagan does not fail to think of her and tells his cousin, "If you meet her, tell her that if she ever wants to go back to her country, I will buy her a ticket. It's a duty we owe her. She was a good girl." (191). Jagan's words show the greatness in him and are worried of her life though Grace is not his daughter-in-law. He finds fault with his son who is the cause for the girl to move out of her house from a far-off land.

The son like Mali, who is well educated, creates lot of problem and anxiety to their parents because of the attitude of bringing in the western culture into the traditional society. The idea of bringing in the western culture may be good for the modern generation but they fail to think that it provokes lots of delinquent situations in life where at some point of time the relationships within a family get shattered. The modern generation by pursuing their studies abroad may get groomed well, but they produce lots of chaos in the name of bringing changes in the society.

Thus, in India, though there is conflict between the tradition and modern culture, there is a mutual adjustment within the relationships in the society. Western culture has not purely incorporated itself into the Indian traditional society because the traditional ideals are still respected for its sanctity. Indian culture is a blend of traditional values and the modern spirit. Modernity in India has not replaced tradition largely or decisively. Indian tradition is ancient and long. Modern Indian society cannot completely break itself from the long-standing tradition and no society does it. Indian society continues to live in two worlds, the traditional and the modern, at the same time.

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