

**R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*: A Study in the Dialectic of  
Being and Becoming**

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Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (1906-2001) popularly known as R. K. Narayan, an award winning novelist, essayist and storyteller is generally considered one of the greatest Indians writing in English. He shares this honour with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. D. S. Maini has observed in this regard: "Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R. K. Narayan- brought the Indian novel to the point of ripeness". But R. K. Narayan enjoys a place of rare distinction among these great writers too and it is partly because of the rare setting of his novels, his close association with the traditional Indian society, his simple language, his humour and irony, and his characterization, which is so varied and colourful. Many critics have praised R. K. Narayan for his literariness and for his aestheticism. V. Y. Katak has observed, "...when we come to weigh Indian writing of fiction in English to date, Narayan with his penny whistle seems to have wrought more than most others with their highly pretentious and obstreperous brass" (21). R. K. Narayan has fourteen novels to his credit along with a large number of short stories. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) won him great fame and was widely acknowledged as a masterpiece by the world's literary community. It also won him the much-coveted Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960. Another novel which is considered one of his much acclaimed novels is his *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967).

R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* is largely considered and praised for its theme- the theme of generation gap between the people of second and third generation, between traditionalism and modernism. This theme of generation gap is represented through Jagan and Mali, the two central characters of the novel. Jagan is the loving father of Mali, who is a spoilt motherless son. Jagan is a second generation character and is an advocate of the traditions and customs of Malgudi

society. Malgudi represents the traditional Indian society which is largely moralistic and spiritualistic. But Mali feels fed up of such traditions and customs and wants to leap-frog into an age of materialism and sensuality. A conflict takes place between the father and the son when Mali refuses to accept any restraint and follows his own wishes and desires which are largely anti-social and immoral. The novel in the treatment of its theme brings home the readers to the conflict of values of 1960s and 1970s because of the difference of ideas and behaviour patterns of the second and the third generation.

What makes *The Vendor of Sweets* so distinct is its characterization. The characters of both Jagan and Mali are so unique and peculiar that they leave an indelible impression on the minds of the readers. Though these characters are very lifelike and ordinary as they seem to be found at every nook and corner of the Indian society, but they have something very unique and peculiar about them. Now what is so extraordinary about them? The answer is that this uniqueness and peculiarity lies in the dialectic of their being and their becoming. It is the dialectic of being and becoming which gives them their peculiar nature and temperament and makes them so memorable.

Though the term 'Dialectic' owes its origin to ancient western philosophy (Greek philosophy), but its roots can be traced in eastern philosophy as well. The principles of dialectic were followed in ancient times in both western thought and eastern philosophy (Indian spiritual concepts). The concept of dialectic is based on two basic principles: First, everything (whether living or non-living) is in a continual state of change and second, this change comes because of the opposite or contradictory nature of things. So according to the philosophy of dialectic, everything is made of certain opposite things and the conflict of such opposite things results in the change or transformation of that particular entity. Even the modern psychoanalytical critics believe that one's self, his/her personality is made of opposite things and these opposite aspects bring about some change in him or her.

The terms Being and Becoming are used both in spiritual manner (as in Indian philosophy) and in existential way (as in western thought). According to the Indian spiritualistic philosophy, being is the innermost part of one's self, one's true self. It is the Atma with which all living beings are born into this born. This being is purely selfless and is devoid of all worldliness. William Wordsworth's glorification of the earliest childhood in his famous "Immortality Ode" is nothing else, but affirmation of his faith in that pure being with which all humans are born. Wordsworth

has talked of this pure being in the following terms: “Mighty prophet! Seer blest! / On whom those truths do rest, / Which we are toiling all our lives to find” (511). Even the western philosophers like Jean Jacques Rousseau have said a great deal about such a pure being and have warned against the harmful effects of becoming which corrupts and deforms one’s being. Becoming stands for one’s existence in society, one’s worldliness which gradually swallows one’s innocence and selflessness. This happens when one moves ahead on the earthly journey called life and starts learning the tricks of this materialistic world, but in this process loses contact with his/her true being. With every single step on the path of becoming a social participant, an individual moves away from his being and loses contact with it. The only way to escape from the disastrous and soul-destroying effects of becoming, as suggested by Rousseau, is to “Return to Nature”, which means returning to the natural simplicity of being.

So, being is the natural self of an individual, whereas Becoming is his attempt to adjust himself in the social set-up and the resultant involvement in the worldly materialistic or carnal pleasures of life. The character of every human being living in society is characterized and determined by that particular point between the extremes of being and becoming at which the pendulum of his/her personality rests at that particular point in his life. The dialectical tension or conflict takes place when a human being living in society tries to grow by learning and getting exposed to the social milieu in order to acquire the skills required to play the roles in society in accordance with the social norms and demands. While trying to fulfill the demands which the society makes on his personality he may become a normative member of society, perfectly adjusting himself to the social roles he is expected to play. But his complete identification with his social roles without any sanction from his real being, the inner centripetal, leads to an alienation from his own-self, resulting in a schism in his personality. Eventually, one part of his self leads him to one direction, while the other part pulls him into some opposite direction. Because of these pulls and pressures and complexity of inner forces, man remains in a state of fix. He behaves in an unpredictable manner and the pendulum of his life wavers between the two poles of spiritualism and sensuality, asceticism and carnality. At one time, he touches the pinnacles of glory and spiritualism and at the other he falls into the bottomless pits of sensuality and carnality.

The characters of both Jagan and Mali, the two main characters from *The Vendor of Sweets* can be studied and shot through the Dialectic of Being and Becoming. It is this dialectic which

gives them their peculiar nature and temperament and makes them look so unique and extraordinary. It gives Jagan his peculiar odd and eccentric nature and behaviour, and eventually gets him transformed at the end of the novel, and makes Mali a social deviant. While Jagan's oddities and eccentricities of character arise from his alienation of being from his becoming, and transformation comes only when he realizes the real nature of things, Mali's deviation occurs during the process of the unbridled fulfillment of his individual desires and personal wishes.

Jagan, the protagonist of the novel is an odd and eccentric fellow. It is his peculiarities and angularities of character and behaviour which actually make Jagan so memorable. He leaves a deep impression on the hearts and minds of the readers by way of his oddities and eccentricities of character which become a source of great humour and laughter in the novel. This is what Shiv K. Gilra observes regarding the comic aspect of the novel, "THE VENDOR OF SWEETS is richly comic in the incongruities of its central character, Jagan, the ageing Sweet-vendor. The theme of juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, a recurring source of comedy in Narayan's fiction, is treated here in a comical-fantastic manner" (102). Jagan is a selfish businessman who uses his Gandhian principles and eccentricities to justify his meanness and selfishness. P. S. Ramana has observed about the personality of Jagan, "Jagan is a curious mixture of an uncanny business sense, a few Gandhian fads and some eccentric theories" (107).

Jagan is a second generation character who is a sweet-vendor and has accepted his social role. He leads a calm and peaceful life in the Malgudi social milieu. He fulfills all the demands which the Malgudi society makes upon him. He passively performs the role of a son, a brother, a husband and a father and does what his society desires of him. He had strong desire to see his future wife, but he was strictly told to behave sensibly and "not to be too communicative, as a certain mysteriousness was invaluable in a son-in-law" (133). He had married according to the wishes of the society and had suppressed his individual urges for the sake of his adjustment in the social milieu. He curbs his being while undergoing through the process of becoming a useful member of society, but this unconscious suppression of being, the natural core-self, leads to a schism in his personality. He becomes neurotic and out of this neurosis arises his abnormal behaviour. Because of the split in his personality, he starts believing in things without having his inner sanction to them. His beliefs are mechanical and lack any deeper conviction.

Jagan poses to be a regular reader of *Bhagavad Gita*, but his reading of the sacred book is mechanical like many real people of society and it is without any of his real belief in it. He talks of conquering the self like the old man of *Mr. Sampath*, but does not know the purpose behind it. He claims that he is on the way to rise above everything by conquering his self and for this, he tells, he has lost all sense of taste: “Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self,” said Jagan to his listener, who asked, “Why conquer the self?” Jagan said, “I do not know, but all our sages advice us so” (1). To impress others he tells that he has given up sugar and salt and that he would take only natural sugar and salt, but fails to explain the real meaning of it. He behaves in an odd and eccentric manner and keeps on beating the drum of nature cure. He has his own philosophy of life and nature. He believes that one should not use tooth-brush in life because its bristles are made of pig’s tail and “It’s unthinkable that anyone should bite a pig’s tail first thing in the morning” (12), he says. Jagan further feels that his son has grown weak because he keeps on wearing footwear all the time and his body does not come in contact with the current of the earth which, in Jagan’s view, is a life-giving element and is a source of great mental and physical energy, in the absence of which a person may suffer heart-stroke. This is how he justifies his views, “Socks should never be worn, because they are certain to heat the blood through interference with the natural radiation which occurs through one’s soles, and also because you insulate yourself against beneficial magnetic charges of the earth’s surface” (53). Thus, Jagan turns out to be a boundless fountain of natural health theories, but his theories do not have any practical relevance and are the results of his odd and eccentric character.

Another major eccentricity of Jagan’s character is his belief in the Gandhian ideals of non-violence and non-cooperation. He cherishes many Gandhian fads and R. K. Narayan has given an impartial description of them. Jagan claims to be a great follower of Mahatma Gandhi, but lacks any real faith. He boasts of his Gandhian ideals not because he has any real faith in them, but because he wants to cast an impression upon others by citing them. This is how he uses his Gandhian eccentricities to impress others, “Being a follower of Gandhi I do not like to think that some living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet” (3). Jagan wants to have his footwear made of the hide of an animal which has died a natural death and has not been killed intentionally by someone (butcher or cobbler). Such eccentricities of Jagan cause a great trouble to his family members and his whole household is disturbed by them.

Jagan uses the same Gandhian incongruities to hide his crime and justify his meanness. He is a selfish businessman and makes a lot of money every day from his sweet-shop, but does not pay due taxes to the Government. This is what Ron Shepherd observes about such selfish and hypocritical nature of Jagan, “Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* hypocritically preaches the virtues of selflessness while he proceeds to centre his own life on the acquisition of wealth...” (79). He evades taxes by having two collection boxes; one kept for Government record and one which he does not show to the world. He does a theft of taxes, but ironically he does not hold himself guilty of tax evasion. This is how he justifies his theft of sale tax through Gandhian excuse, “If Gandhi had said somewhere, “Pay your tax uncomplainingly,” he would have followed his advice. But Gandhi had made no reference to sales tax anywhere, to Jagan’s knowledge” (88).

Jagan turns out to be a cowardly father in the course of the novel and uses his Gandhian eccentricities to hide his cowardliness, or rather to justify it. When Mali refuses to study any more, Jagan, though wants his son to be graduate, fails to press his wishes on him. 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). When he comes to know that Mali has started taking beef in America, Jagan’s morality is shaken to its root. But he is unable to scold his immoral and ruthless son even in this situation. He tries to evade this mental tension by his reading of *Bhagvad Gita*. Jagan’s cowardliness comes to the fore once again, when Mali brings home a foreign girl named Grace and introduces her as his wife. Though, he feels disturbed of having a daughter-in-law who is of different caste and ethnicity, but fails to tell of his grudge to anyone. The same Gandhian eccentricity comes to his rescue. He consoles his own-self by telling this to Grace, “Well, we don’t believe in caste system these days, you know. Gandhi fought for its abolition” (51). Jagan adopts the same policy of non-cooperation or escapism when he comes in conflict with Mali on the issue of establishing a factory for the manufacturing of story-telling machines. He avoids the company of his own son and tries to evade even his shadow. The same Gandhian eccentricity comes to his help when Grace tells him that she and Mali who are living like a married couple to all appearances are not married actually. His morality is shaken to its roots, but he does not have the courage to say anything to his son. He decides to insulate himself from the evil effects of the tainted couple.

He shuts the middle door of his house and evades even their shadow. So his Gandhian eccentricity again comes to his help in this state of utter shock and humiliation.

But later in the novel a transformation starts taking place in Jagan which too results from the dialectic of his being and his becoming. Earlier in the novel, Jagan's sense of judgement has been eroded by his blind love for his son, but now the light of reason dawns upon him. He undergoes great psychological and spiritual transformation. The theme of the novel, as Bagwat S. Goyal observes, is "of man's quest of identity and self-renewal, which is portrayed ... through its protagonist Jagan... His entire outlook is conditioned by Gandhian thinking, with all its contradictions and unadorned impulses" (158).

Jagan feels so much disgusted of the ungratefulness and immorality of his son that he says, "Money is an evil. We should all be happier without it. It is enough if an activity goes on self-supported; no need to earn money" (73). Jagan had been doing all that money-making only for his son and the same money has now made the relationship of the father and the son bitter and poisonous. Jagan feels so much depressed that his existence of a sweet-vendor appears meaningless to him, "In my next life I'd like to be born ... Pet dog? Predatory cat? Street-corner donkey? Maharaja on an elephant? Anything but a money-making sweet-maker with a spoilt son" (93).

Jagan is further subjected to torture and tension when he comes to know that Mali and Grace who are living like a married couple to all appearance are not married actually. He is utterly shocked and fails to get to the reality. Jagan's plight makes him introspect and realize the gravity of the situation. He realizes his own role in the whole chronology of events. He himself acknowledges to the cousin, "I will have to do a lot of reckoning with concentration. I have left things to drift too long" (74). The dialectic of being and becoming gradually works to bring about a change in the inner self of Jagan. It leads him on the path of self-consolidation. In the company of the bearded man who is a dyer and also a sculptor, Jagan comes at peace with his own-self. His mind which was greatly tensed and disturbed because of the rudeness of his son gets great relief and comfort. "Sweetmeat vending, money and his son's problems seemed remote and unrelated to him. The edge of reality was beginning to blur; this man from the previous millennium seemed to be the only object worth notice" (89). Thus, Jagan gets at peace with himself gradually. He gets united with his being, the center of his core-self, at last. He is rightly told about this realization by

the bearded man, “True, true, you must not lose sight of your real being, which is not mere bone or meat” (91).

Gradually, the dialectic of his being and becoming leads him to self-consolidation. He no longer leads a life of split and disintegration. He realizes the worthlessness of the whole existence and decides to retreat into the life of mental peace and trance, “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” (96). Thus, Jagan comes out to be an odd and eccentric fellow in the earlier part of the novel which results from his too much anxiousness about the process of becoming than being. He feels very much involved in his social roles without the identification of his being, the center of his core-self, with these social roles. Though he fulfills his social responsibilities but no transformation could take place in his personality in the beginning of the novel. He could not achieve that detachment from his social roles which is essential for any self-realization and self-transformation, nor could he harmonise his social roles with his being. His recitation of *Bhagavad Gita* could not help him in coming out of the grooves in which his mind moved. But at the end of the novel, he loses all attachment for money and materialistic objects and, also for Mali, for whom he had cared throughout his life. He enters into the new phase of life which is the phase of self-transformation and he accepts this change with open arms, “One enters a new life at the appointed time and it’s foolish to resist. He was no longer the father of Mali, the maker of sweets and gatherer of money each day; he was gradually becoming something else...” (98).

Jagan’s transformation makes him realize of his own fault in spoiling and pampering Mali. He accepts his own fault in the whole state of affairs. He realizes, “We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it” (111). The dialectic of being and becoming results in the self-consolidation of Jagan and the life of split and divisions which he used to lead earlier comes to an end. Now he shakes himself free of the snares of worldly web of attachment. His whole personality undergoes a complete change. He gets transformed and takes a new birth in the spiritual sense of the word. This ‘rebirth’ of him changes his whole attitude towards life and world. “Rebirth”, as C. G. Jung says, “may be a renewal without change of being, in as much as the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential

nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality are subject to healing, strengthening or improvement” (114).

So Jagan undergoes this rebirth and he decides to retire into the life of forest, or what is called as the *vanaprastha ashram*, “Everything can go on with or without me. The world doesn’t collapse even when a great figure is assassinated or dies of heart failure. Think my heart has failed, that’s all” (151). Now he no longer feels troubled for the well-being of Mali whom he loves very dearly. When he comes to know that Mali has been sent to prison, he does not feel worried about him and leaves him to his own fate, “A dose of prison is not a bad thing. It may be just what he needs now” (151). He realizes that his purpose of life has been completed and 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*” (143).

The character of Mali is a fine study in social and moral deviation which too results from the dialectic of his being and becoming. While going through the process of becoming, Mali loses all contact with his being which is the moral and spiritual self and follows his own instincts and desires and deviates from the established pattern of social behaviour. He feels fascinated by the affluence of American materialism and rationalization and 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 like Jagan. He tries to leapfrog into a new age of materialism and defies all customs and traditions of Malgudi which appear burdensome to him. He does not realize the importance of these customs and traditions and rejects them straightway.

Every society or social group is based upon certain common principles or patterns of behaviour which are adopted, obeyed and respected by all people of that society and these common principles form the culture of that social group and with the passage of time become its life-line. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has depicted the importance of tradition and culture in the following words, “Tradition is not a rigid, hidebound framework which cripples the life of spirit and requires us to revert to a period that is now past and beyond recall. It is not a memory of the past but a constant abiding of the living Spirit. It is a living stream of spiritual life”(145). But some people fail to realize the importance of such traditions and act against them like Mali in the novel, who too does not pay any heed to these traditions and acts against them and becomes a deviant.

Mali is the spoilt motherless son of a loving father Jagan who is a sweet-seller. Both Mali and Jagan are totally different in their nature and ideology. Jagan, being deeply rooted in tradition, pins high hopes on Mali; whereas the latter, being a product of modern age, has his own notions of things. Jagan wants him to be a graduate, but Mali has different plans regarding his future. He does not pay any heed to the feelings and expectations of his father and drops out of the college without his knowledge. He makes foolish plans of becoming a writer and in order to learn the art of writing he decides to go to America. Jagan is astonished to know about his plan of learning to write story telling from America. He expresses his surprise to the cousin in the following words: “Going there to learn story telling; He should rather go to a village granny... Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to learn to write his Ramayana?” (41)

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 does not think of anything else. He becomes a pastiche being and everything of his own culture and country appears worthless and base to him. The Malgudi town and culture also look abhorrent to him, and he feels obsessed with the idea of going to America. In his ways and manners, Mali, as C. P. Sharma observes, represents “those Indian youths who, being oblivious of their own cultural heritage, ape the alien cultures blindly and think that they are progressive” (129). He steals away Jagan’s money and goes to America to fulfill his foolish dreams. He goes to America and adopts its ways and manners without getting to its roots. His sojourn in America consolidates his disliking or disenchantment with the traditional life of his country. He starts cherishing the American ideals and departs from his own traditional culture. He starts eating beef there and suggests the same to his father. He tells his father in a letter written to him, “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? It will solve the problem of useless cattle in our country and we won’t have to beg food from America” (42). 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” (42).

Mali adopts the western materialism as a pastiche being without getting to its roots and tries to use the same in the traditional society of India without realising that the Indian society is based on a different plane, and is spiritualistic and not materialistic. He gets utterly disrespectful

to the pristine purity of his sacred traditions and openly flouts and decries them. His alienation from “the fixed classical background of India with its complex rules, institutions and customs” (Williams 62) is completely unacceptable and irreparably disgusting for a traditionally and culturally brought up person like Jagan. Later, Mali returns to India with a half-American, half-Korean girl and introduces her as his wife to his father. Jagan feels utterly helpless and ashamed for having such a daughter-in-law. After coming back from America Mali poses himself to be an American, but actually becomes a half-American both in his dress and manners and in his thinking. His vision has become completely materialistic and selfish and all the traditionalism and spirituality of his own country appears useless to him. He finds fault with everything that is Indian and hates the Indian ways and mannerism. He seems to be so much at war with Indian traditionalism and spirituality that his father wishes to tell him, “Why do you blame the country for everything? It has been good enough for four hundred millions ... You were not born in those days” (70).

Mali feels ashamed of his father for being a sweet-seller and says, “I have better plans than to be vendor of sweetmeats” (71). He wants his father to stop selling sweets and join his business of establishing a factory of story-writing machines. But Jagan refuses to indulge in any such plan. Mali still believes that his father, being cowardly, will bow to him and will accept his proposal. But later it is revealed to Jagan that Mali and Grace, who are living like a married couple to all appearances in the Malgudi world, are not married actually. This is how Grace tells him of their relationship, “But we are not married. He (Mali) promised he’d marry me in the Indian way, because I liked it, and brought me here” (108). Jagan’s soul is shaken to its roots at this realization. He has never thought that Mali would bring him to such a state of degeneration. He is unable to believe in such an immorality of his own son. ““What breed of creatures are these?” he wondered. They had tainted his ancient home which had remained unsullied for generation” (109). Jagan feels so much shocked to know of this that he loses interest in everything. He does everything to save himself from the evil vibrations of that unmarried couple living together. But Mali still does not have any pricks of conscience and he plans to send Grace back to America. He receives no restraint, but at last he is found guilty of carrying illegal liquor in his car and is subsequently sent to prison. Thus, Mali is a deviant character. This deviation is the result of his too much preoccupation with the process of his becoming. While moving ahead on the path of becoming, he

cannot hold converse with his being and gets swayed away by his own animal instincts and individual urges. He does not conform to the cultural and social norms represented by his society and deviates from all that for which the Malgudi society stands.

So, the characters of Jagan and Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* result from the dialectical tension of their being and becoming. It is this dialectic which gives both of them their peculiar nature and temperament and results in the oddities and eccentricities of character as seen in the case of Jagan and also gets him transformed at the end and makes Mali a social and moral deviant.

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