

**R. K. Narayan's *Mr. Sampath*: A Study in the Dialectic of Being and
Becoming**

Dr. Raman Kumar

Assistant Professor of English

Govt. P.G. College Una

Himachal Pradesh, India

rmn.jaswal@gmail.com

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (1906-2001) popularly known as R. K. Narayan, an award winning novelist, essayist and storywriter 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 alongwith 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.

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 *Mr. Sampath* so distinct is its characterization. The characters of the novel 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 world. 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 flux. 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 same is true of the novel by R. K. Narayan entitled *Mr. Sampath* (American title *The Printer of Malgudi*). *Mr. Sampath* is one of the most delightful earlier novels of R. K. Narayan. It moves around three main characters- Sampath, Srinivas and Ravi. But among these three characters the central pivot is Sampath, the printer, and the novel is named after him, though we come to know of his name on the sixty seventh page of the novel. All the characters of this novel are a study in the dialectical tension which gives these characters a peculiar nature and temperament and individuality. *Mr. Sampath* is a delightful story of the

rise and fall of a confident “upstart” (“Upstartism” 200), a term used by R. K. Narayan himself for the deviants in his novels.

Sampath is a genial printer who is an ‘optimist in life’ and believes in ‘keeping people happy’. He has a wife and five children. He is a pragmatist, more an opportunist and a trickster who tries to make the best use of every opportunity. He is a self-seeker who uses others and can dupe anyone in pursuit of his aim and desire. C.P. Sharma observes of Sampath:

He is a knave, a liar who never loses his self-confidence. He is, as it were, born with an ability to defy the accepted norms and customs. Unlike Srinivas he is neither puzzled by moral considerations nor by pricks of conscience. (67)

Sampath determines his relations with others and even with his own wife according to the convenience and expediency of his own. The couple lives mechanically without any human understanding and mutual attachment. He performs the social roles of a husband, a father and a social participant but without any real conviction. He has a keen desire to win name and fame in society and for this he helps whoever comes to him. He says to Srinivas on his first meeting with him, “There are no strangers for Sampath” (67). Further he says, “Customers are God’s messengers, in my humble opinion. If I serve them aright I make money in this world and also acquire merit for the next” (68). Because of this nature of him, he gets ready to print the weekly of Srinivas, the journalist. Sampath is a strange fellow and is weird in his character and behaviour. For example, he does not want that somebody should enter into his press and he does not give any hint of the number of workers he is having in his press, but always calls them as many. Whenever Srinivas offers to help him in his work by entering into his press, he brushes aside his offer at once and considers it an act of intrusion which he does not like at all.

Sampath is largely under the influence of, what Freud terms as, Id. All his actions are motivated by his over-developed 'libido', a term used by Freud for the sexual energy in man. Libido, according to Freud, "is a prime psychic force" (qtd. in Guerin 128). So, an over-developed libido makes Sampath sensual and worldly in his outlook and behaviour. It makes him act against the social norms through his ways and manners. When his press is locked, Sampath makes foolish plans of making a film and engages many people in his nonsensical idea. He selects Shanti, the glamorous widow from Madras, as the heroine of the film and falls in love with her. He does not care for the moral and ethical norms of society to which the people like Srinivas are attached. He is already married and has five children, but he is not ready to bother for them either. He does not care for anyone and runs after Shanti and plans to marry her. He is already married, but still decides to marry Shanti. He says, "Religion permits us to marry many wives" (180). He is ruled and driven by the 'pleasure principle' and does not give way to reason and commonsense. Lust has made him blind and he fails to see reason in things. He throws all social norms to the winds and does what he likes. This is how he rationalizes his scant respect for the sanctity of marriage and other social institutions:

Some people say that every sane man needs two wives- a perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life... I have the one. Why not the other? I have confidence that I will keep both of them happy. (179)

He becomes so shameless in the pursuit of his animal instincts and carnal desires that he is ready to keep both his wife and his beloved in separate houses. He does not feel the pricks of conscience while doing such a heinous deed, nor does he feel the albatross of guilt hanging around his neck. He seems to have lost all sense of shame and guilt. He wonders, "Is a man's heart so narrow that it can not accommodate more than one? I have married according to Vedic rites: let me have one according to the civil marriage law..." (179). He throws all

social customs and traditions to the winds and follows only his instincts. He craves for Shanti whom he has introduced to everyone as his cousin-sister. When Srinivas tries to make some sense out of him, he declares in the same state of shamelessness:

Here goes my solemn declaration that my wife and children shall lack nothing in life, either in affection or comfort. Will this satisfy you? If I buy Shanti a car my wife shall have another; if I give her a house I will give the other also a house; it will really be a little expensive duplicating everything this way, but I won't mind it. (180)

He lives in, what Sri Aurobindo terms as, the 'lower vital' of his self which is made of individual urges and carnal desires. In the pursuit of his evil desires and in his lust for wealth and woman he has become oblivious of all his obligations towards his wife and children. His bemused and bewitched eyes fail to notice anything, but his own-self and his beloved Shanti for whom he seems mad.

When Sampath comes to know that Ravi is also after Shanti, he loses his control and asks Srinivas to tell him to remain away from her life as he does not want anyone to come between him and Shanti. He seems to have gone crazy for her. Later in the novel, he takes Shanti to the Mempi hills to persuade her for marriage, but on their way back she runs away from him and goes back to Madras from where she had come, leaving her child behind. She warns Sampath not to follow her as she has become fed up with the life she has spent with him in the film studio. She declares in her note written to Sampath:

I am sick of this kind of life and marriage frightens me. I want to go and look after my son, who is growing up with strangers. Please leave me alone, and don't look for me. I want to change my ways of living. You will not find me. If I find you pursuing me, I will shave off my head and fling away my jewellery and wear a white saree. You and people like you will run away at the sight of

me. I am, after all, a widow and can shave my head and disfigure myself, if I like.... I had different ideas of a film life. (218)

At last, Sampath returns back to Malgudi disheartened and Srinivas, the narrator leaves him to his own fate.

Thus, Sampath is a study in the dialectical conflict of being and becoming. He loses his inner being in this process of becoming when he madly pursues his own carnal ambitions and animalistic urges and in this pursuit turns out to be a social and moral deviant. Thus, he is “the typical product of the amoral civilization of the modern age” (Rao 80). He deviates from all codes of social and ethical conduct and pays no heed to his responsibilities towards his family and society he lives in. The feelings and sentiments of others seem to have lost all sense for him and he feels crazy for Shanti. He excels in the art of opportunism and uses everyone for his own evil ends.

Works Cited

- Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Kantak, V. Y. "R.K. Narayan's Fiction: A Poser to Criticism." *R.K. Narayan: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Ed. C. N. Srinath. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000. 21-35. Print.
- Maini, D. S. "The Malgudi Man." *Tribune* 9 Jan. 2005. Print.
- Narayan, R. K. Mr. Sampath. 1949. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1983. Print.
- Narayan, R. K. "Upstartism." *Next Sunday*. Delhi: Orient Paper Back, 1960. 149-203. Print.
- Rao, A.V. Krishna. *The Indo-Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition*. Mysore: Rao and Raghavan, 1971. Print.
- Sharma, C. P. *The Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Perspective*. New Delhi: Prasangik Publishers, 2007. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford: Carendon Press, 1972. 508-513. Print.
- KUMAR, Raman . R. K. Narayan's The Vendor of Sweets: A Study in the Dialectic of Being and Becoming. SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH, [S.l.], v. 2, n. 8, may 2017. ISSN 2582-3574. Available at:
<<https://ijellh.com/OJS/index.php/OJS/article/view/253>>..
doi: <https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v2i8.253>.