

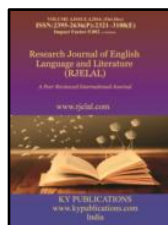


CONFLICT OF THE EAST AND THE WEST THROUGH THE CHARACTERS OF R.K NARAYAN'S *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS*

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ABSTRACT

East West conflict is not new to the realm of fiction. East and west are the two poles which can never meet and there is a constant war going on between the two. R.K Narayan's novel *The Vendor of Sweets* impersonates this conflict into two of its main characters that is Jagan, the vendor and his good for nothing son Mali. This paper attempts to bring out the conflict in the characters and the resulting distance it creates between the father and the son.

Keywords:- East-West conflict, westernization, communication gap..

Jagan is the protagonist of R.K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*. He is a typical Gandhian follower who spins the charka and spends his day entirely on Gandhian lines. By profession Jagan is a vendor of sweets with his little sweetmeat shop in Malgudi.

At fifty his appearance was slight and elfish, . . . his chin was covered with whitening bristles as he shaved only at certain intervals, feeling that to view oneself daily in a mirror was an intolerable European habit. He wore a loose *jibba* over his *dhoti*, both made of material spun with his own hand; everyday he spun for an hour, and produced enough yarn for his sartorial requirements. He never possessed more than two sets of clothes at one time. (*The Vendor of Sweets* 6)

The irony however lies in the fact that although Jagan was a Gandhian yet he had a flourishing business. He was content with two pairs of clothes but wanted to collect more and more money for himself. He was actively involved in the process of money making.

As long as the frying and sizzling noise is the kitchen continued and the trays passed,

Jagan noticed nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the sanskrit lines in a red bound copy of the *Bhagvad Gita*, but if there was the slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out, without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, 'what is happening?' The head cook would give a routine reply, 'nothing' (*The Vendor of Sweets* 8-9).

Although he is seen busy reading sacred *Gita* but his mind is hovering everywhere from his kitchen to the market outside. Jagan is a character who is more concerned about his business but he is equally concerned about his religion and spiritually.

Jagan had a son named Mali and he was deeply in love with his son. He provides him with everything Mali desires but there is a gap between the two that cannot be erased. Mali became distant to his father and used to hide things from him. Mali wanted to live a westernized life which was totally against Jagan's traditional way of living and this thing became a hindrance between developing a healthy father son relationship.

Mathur emphatically states, "It is in *The Vendor of Sweets* that the East West polarization is dramatized powerfully with all its ironies and tragic implications" (Mathur 32). This lack of

communication between the father and son deepens even more after Mali returns from America with a half Korean and half American girl named Grace.

Jagan felt that he was following a stranger. When Mali approached him, extending his hand, he tried to shrink away and shield himself behind the cousin when he had to speak to his son, with great difficulty he restrained himself calling him 'sir' and employing the horrific plural. (*The Vendor of Sweets* 43)

Mali becomes a complete westernized individual who rejects everything that is Indian and traditional. He lives with Grace without marrying her and thereby polluting Jagan's spiritual abode. His clothes, his persona, his way of talking everything is westernized and Mali feels proud about it. He feels that the local people of Malgudi should try and follow western ways of living.

Mathur talks about the difference that has been created between the two, "both of them seem to be alienated beings. Mali alienation is cultural" (32). Mali alienation is cultural. He neither belongs here nor there. He seems to be facing an identity crisis. Another critic Pousse is of the opinion, "there is a new evil in . . . (Mali) because he is aiming at the destruction of the Indian mind . . ." (103).

Mali loses the basic understanding of the paternal relation according to Indian ethos and further distance himself from his father and values. Jagan also tried to find solace in spirituality as he was confused over the entire situation. But towards the end of the novel we find Mali to be arrested by police and Jagan once again performing his paternal duty of protecting his son who does not deserve to be protected. It was his affection and love that resulted in Jagan's providing for Mali's bail and sending Grace back to her county. Jagan finally renounces the world to pursue spirituality and thus tries to solve the problems of his life by choosing the path of spirituality.

The aloofness that entered into the father son relationship was because of Mali's ailing mother's death when Jagan was trying to cure her using his natural treatments on her. Mali believes that his father killed his mother and started getting

distant from his father. Silently the distance grew and this distance moved then away in such manner that one remained in east and the other went to the western part of the world to explore more possibilities leaving his roots and traditions behind and there by becoming culturally altered.

Jagan realized towards the end that his love and his money has spoiled Mali but he was not able to look into the actual problem behind the distance between the two. Jagan decides to reduce the prices of his sweets meats there by making marginal profits so that Mali may not expect any amount of money from him.

Thus east and west confront is the novel is the form of Jagan and Mali. Sara Jeannette Duncan in her novel *The Simple Adventure of a Mem sahib* rightly states, "east and west may gaze at each other but never touch" (162-63) and this holds goods in this case as well. Jagan and Mali move poles apart and so do not want to talk to one another. The conflict of east and west has been beautifully personified by R.K. Narayan in the characters of Jagan and Mali.

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