

Generational conflicts and co- existence of binary opposition in the characters of Jagan & Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets*

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The paper tries to highlight a serious study of the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*. The focus of the paper is on the binaries embedded in the text and how generational conflicts between Jagan and Mali aggravate the conflict in the text. Along with the difference between Jagan and Mali we have also tried to explore the economic thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawarharlal Nehru and how their difference of opinion moved Narayan and how he has used it in the thematic construction of the novel.

To explore the specific ways in which our language determines our experience, Jacques Derrida borrowed and transformed the structuralist idea that we tend to conceptualize our experience in terms of polar opposites, called 'binary oppositions'. For example, according to structuralism, we understand the word 'good' by contrasting it with the word 'evil'. Similarly, we understand 'reason' as the opposite of 'emotion', 'masculine' as the opposite of 'feminine', and 'civilized' as the opposite of 'primitive' and so on. The concept of binary opposition acts as a background force in the thematic construction of *The Vendor of Sweets*. The protagonist 'Jagan' and his son 'Mali' from the beginning to the end of the novel are projected as two opposite characters, contradicting at every point. The conflict between them acquires larger dimensions, signifying ambivalences at various socio-cultural levels. In this context William Walsh says that their difference of opinions range from "the division of East and West, of young and old, of child and parent". (152) In the paper there is a critical analysis of the novel with the aim, to justify the dichotomy that exists as an underlying theme in the plot construction of the novel. Apparently it seems that the novel only deals with the polarized views of two characters – Jagan and Mali but in depth amplification states that the novel tries to unravel the theory of binary opposition intertwined within the text.

The novel begins with the statement, "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self". (07) The sense of ambrosia associated with self victory brings out a strange meaning at the outset. 'Taste' has got a gastronomic connotation and when it comes to 'conquer the self'; it means self – victory, introspection and then final solace. The author here advocates that if human beings can enjoy food then they can enjoy life to their heart's content. This philosophy of Jagan stems up as his profession is selling sweets and he believes in Gandhian ideals of 'Simple living and high thinking'. Jagan's faith in Gandhian theory is pronounced when the author describes his quest for 'truth' and 'simplicity' in the key areas of diet and dress. Regarding Jagan's dress the author comments,

He wore a loose jibba over his dhoti, both made of material spun with his own hand; everyday he spun for an hour, retained enough yarn for his sartorial requirements (he never possessed more than two sets of clothes at a time) , and delivered the excess in neat bundles to the local hand – loom committee in exchange for cash.(09)

Jagan even maintains austerity in his food habits and follows Gandhi's style of relishing simple food. In this context John Thieme says:

Despite his occupation, he has progressively renounced a range of foods as part of a way of life that has both political and psychoanalytic associations. In line with Gandhi's boycott of imported salt, he has on the morning when the novel begins, resolved to use only "natural salt" and as the chapter progress he explains how he has removed sugar and rice from his diet, replacing them with honey and "a little stone – ground wheat". (128)

Jagan portrays his simplicity and his belief in Gandhian ideals in all his activities. He declares in due course that his father initially was very poor, lived in a thatched hut and he had to undergo severe hardship along with his siblings. Whatever Jagan has acquired from his father, he treasures in his later life. From his childhood tradition, customs, rituals are deep rooted in him and he always adheres to it in the later course of his life. It is because of his attachment to tradition and his faith in agrarian life style, Jagan hesitates to accept Mali's inclination towards Western culture. However the cousin puts his view on 'simple living and high thinking' in a contradictory way, rather directly saying, "But what I don't understand is why you should run a trade, make money and accumulate it". (29) The statement seems to be justified because Jagan although he leads a life of penance, austerity, has firm faith in acquiring wealth. However the apparent justification becomes baseless as Jagan's tenacity to carry on his business emanates from Gandhian economic thought. One of the important tenets of Gandhian economics is the dignity and sanctity of manual labour. To Gandhiji labour is the law of nature and its violation is the main cause of present economic ills. In all his writings and speeches Gandhiji made an advocacy for manual labour for all irrespective of caste, qualification and occupation. Gandhiji not only preached this principle but also practiced it in his daily life. Gandhiji himself wrote in this connection 'I do not know whether I am a karma Yogi or any other Yogi. I know that I cannot live without work. I crave to die with my hand at the spinning wheel'. If this is the frame of reference then Jagan cannot be "palavered" (08) for his spiritual manifestations or for leading an austere life. His zeal to do the business can be associated with the economic theory of Mahatma Gandhi- 'Sanctity of Labour or Bread Labour'. Gandhiji believed in bodily labour and so Jagan is highly dedicated to his business as it involves both physical and mental labour. Jagan is absolutely a self – made character in the novel as he does all his household work himself and also runs his business with own effort, without the help of any machines. Jagan is assumed to be against all types of machinery, in other words against the advent of industrialization.

The conflict between Jagan and Mali arises in the third chapter when Mali goes against the system of education and intends to sail across the seas to reach America. Mali's arrogance and his audacity towards his father reveal his nature and his attitude to life. Although after the demise of his mother, his father rears him but his entire attempt to instill in his blood good values of life goes in vain. Mali is an amalgamation of all western values. He abhors whatever is traditional and so he articulates "I can't study any more" (23) which once again reveals his anti – traditional attitude. He is a complete antithesis of 'East' and 'West', thus reiterating the force of binary opposition. A very minute introspection of Mali's character ensconces how Mali is portrayed in the novel. Mali's desire to become affluent after returning to India gives an idea of his lofty ambitions, residing in the repressed state of his mind. Unlike his father he is not simple and does not believe in conventional, archaic style of life. He believes in flamboyance and appreciates western tradition, culture and their life style. The buoyancy of his spirit is due to his western influence. Mali's statement "I can look after myself" (24) clearly evokes his transformation, and his struggle as a modern man to get an individual identity.

As the novel progresses the narrative explores action of a small businessman (Jagan) and his frequent encounter with modernity. The conflict that emanates in the third chapter continues in the narrative of the novel to its culmination. Modernity is internalized in the character of Mali. He intends to sail across the seas to reach America because he wants to learn the art of writing. Jagan's preconceived notion associates 'writing' with the job of a 'clerk' and so he says, "he was trying to shape the boy into an aristocrat with a bicycle, college life, striped shirts, and everything, and he wanted to be a "writer"! Strange!". (28) When his notion is dismantled and he conceives the fact that 'writer' means not a 'clerk' rather a 'story – writer', he feels elated but at the same time could not understand why his son has to go to America to

learn the art of story writing. He even tries to ensure Mali that 'grandmother's tale' and even Hindu mythologies can be of immense help to inbuild the art in him. The overwhelming interest of Jagan in Mali's venture, adds to the existing mental turmoil of his son. Mali proclaims: "Father, you do not understand. I want to write something different". (38) The word 'different' contextualizes the contrapuntal ideas of Mali and Jagan. Jagan's insight fails to conceive the future plans of Mali. In regard to this John Thieme says: "Malgudi of his fiction is always a fractured and transitional site, an interface between older conceptions of "authentic" Indianness and contemporary views that stress the ubiquitousness and inescapability of change in the face of modernity". (03)

Modernity, and especially Westernization, is, however, inescapable facts of Malgudi life.

V.S.Naipaul avers in the "Time" article that Narayan's lack of sympathy with modernity has led him to present modern phenomena in an unnecessarily grotesque fashion. Naipaul's example is from *The Vendor of Sweets*. Narayan, he says, pillories technological advancement and the contemporary fascination with gadgets and appliances through the fantastical instance of Mali and his novel writing machine built with foreign collaboration. (159)

If we consider the import of Narayan's novels and assess his contribution to the society then we may not totally agree with V.S.Naipaul's attacking remark that is discussed earlier. Narayan has never overtly discussed the concept of modernism in any of his text and has given priority to 'human relationship' above everything. However, while delineating the intricacies of human relationships, he has consciously or sub-consciously touched upon those issues in the text, which illuminate another angle in his critical perception. As we move with the confrontation between 'Mali' and 'Jagan' regarding the profession of a 'writer', eventually at the end of the chapter three he succumbs to it and utters an invaluable line in the novel – "No wonder Mali wants to try a new line. There are bound to be changes of outlook from generation to generation, otherwise there will be no progress". (40) The articulation of Jagan itself refutes the statement of V.S.Naipaul and strongly proclaims to the world that Narayan perceived the change that is about to percolate into the society due to modernization and so designs the characters in his imaginary canvass in such a beautiful manner.

The turmoil in Jagan's life is reflected in his behaviour and his body language. Narayan creates the character of a 'cousin' in the novel but his background is never unraveled, only his presence is observed in every nuances of action in the novel. Whenever Jagan is disturbed and he happens to discuss with someone regarding any issue, he discusses it with the 'cousin'. The cousin appears to be an alter ego of Jagan. The concept of alter ego is associated with psychological matters, which has no overt expressions in the novel; but still whenever Jagan is in deep thought, worried, it is the 'cousin' who plays a significant role to proceed with the actions in the novel. If we take for example Chapter three when Jagan advocates the philosophy of Gandhi: "Simple living and high thinking", (39) then the cousin replies: "True, true. But what I don't understand is why you should run a trade, make money and accumulate it". (39) In this reference we can cite another example from chapter four, when the cousin finds Jagan looking restless and disturbed then he says: "Every gift of life you are blessed with: what ninety out of a hundred people crave for – money; and what a hundred out of a hundred crave for – contentment. Yet you have not mastered one thing, that's the art of looking happy. You are always looking careworn". (39) At this Jagan replies: "If one looks worn out by cares, God knows one must have sufficient cause. Do you see Mali at all?". (43) From the examples we have discussed, we can consider, the 'cousin' as another self of Jagan. It seems as if Jagan is questioning and his 'other self' is defending the statements. Here the cousin's speech, behaviour intentionally represent those of Jagan. If we try to dissect the novel from the point of view of a scholar, keeping in mind the assumption we have discussed earlier, we will find plenty of examples in the novel where the cousin's

reply seems to be the reply of Jagan's another self, of whom Jagan is unaware. Like Marlow, alter ego protagonist of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or the characters Doctor Jekyll and Master Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* where the characters represent an exploration of the concept that good and evil exist within one person, constantly at war; we can situate the character of the 'cousin' in a similar manner for the psychological exposition of Jagan. The simplicity of Jagan, philosophical and practical disposition, adherence to Gandhian ideals acts as an alternative to Mali's characterization. Mali is an epitome of modernization, product of industrialization and he examines man and his social institutions with intellectual courage and shrewd, irreverent insight. He tries to challenge the traditional heritage of Jagan and opposes him in every single step of his life.

Mali's sojourn ends in chapter five and he comes back to India. In the words of Kanhaiya Jee Jha:

His stay in America transforms the entire orientation of his personality. In his attitude and outlook, he shifts from one extreme to another – a conversion of all Indian traits into an American mode of life, various stages of his complete deviation from his tradition have been made explicit through his letters, in which he passes shocking information to his traditionalist father to have "taken to eating beef". (58)

He cultivates the habit to splurge, displays behaviour like a trained American professional and expresses his desire to make quick money even at the cost of human values. Besides his monetary pursuits and exhibition of a completely different character, detached from the roots of his tradition; his marriage with 'Grace' slams the tender heart of Jagan. The conversation between Jagan and Mali regarding the word 'marriage' drags the novel to the hot bed of discontent and confusion –

This is Grace. We are married. Grace, my dad". Complete confusion. Married? When were you married? You didn't tell me. Don't you have to tell your father? Who is she? Anyone she looks like a Chinese. Don't you know that one can't marry a Chinese nowadays they have invaded our borders... or perhaps she is Japanese. How was one to find out? (58)

Jagan is completely wrecked as he worships his tradition and his own blood relation, while Mali, turns out to be an iconoclast. In the words of John Thieme, "The novel responds to central tensions in South Indian society in the third quarter of the 20th century, particularly ways in which changing value – systems give rise to inter – generational conflicts". (130) The theme of East and West conflict also encapsulates the entire novel. Jagan symbolizes oriental culture where as Mali communicates occidental culture. Although Mali is of Indian origin, his disregard for his cultural roots and equal affinity to American mercantile attitudes, bewilders Jagan, hence their attitudinal difference aggravates the situation in the novel.

Narayan is always appreciated for his study of human characters and for his humour in the character delineation. It seems he plays a neutral role in the growth of his characters and he deliberately gives opportunity to his readers to deduce different interpretations of his texts. A closer inspection reveals several critical insights deeply submerged in the context of the novels. If we consider the exemplary characters like Raju in *The Guide*, Daisy and Raman in *Painter of Signs*, Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*, and many more we can certainly claim that besides human relationships, several other issues have also been discussed. The theme of 'East' and 'West', scathing attack against caste system and touch of modernism is what we perceive as we go through the beautiful novels of R.K.Narayan. In this context we can quote the words of Rudyard Kipling who is exposed as the arch-colonialist. His lines from *The Ballad of East and West* (1889), 'OH East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'. These lines are a proof of a permanently unbridgeable gap (to the point that it has become as Gayatri Spivak puts it, ' "an old slogan", even though the poem continues: "Till Earth and sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;/ But there is neither East nor

West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, / when two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!"'. The poems of Rudyard Kipling suggest that East and West are self – devastating mental constructs. When we place the characters of Jagan and Mali against the background of these immortal lines of Rudyard Kipling, we can spontaneously conceive the fact why Jagan cannot unite with Mali and bridge the emotional and psychological gap existing between them. This unbridgeable gap starts expanding more from chapter five onwards. In chapter five Mali communicates about different gadgets like – gramophone, Polaroid camera. He divulges his knowledge about “the Grand Canyon and the Niagara and the statue of liberty and the traffic jams in New York.” (61) Mali’s life style, ostentatious nature, self – conceit altogether affect the innocent continent of Jagan. This leads to the fact that Mali believes in modernization. His interest in electronic gadgets, search for European food and inclination towards imbibing western culture makes his instantaneous response to socio-cultural transformation. The ideological difference between Jagan and Mali in reality illustrates the difference in the economic thought process of Gandhi and Nehru. Jagan’s character acts as an alternative to Gandhi’s ideals. In the words of O.P.Misra :

In Gandhi’s thought village self – reliance, “Charkha” and decentralization went together... “Charkha” symbolized his economic philosophy. The spinning wheel, cottage and village industries, were instrumental in making villages self – sufficient and attaining the ideal of decentralization of economic and political power. His firm opinion was that the “Charkha” would act as life – belt to all those drowning in the sea of hunger. Nehru did not agree with Gandhi to such a simple equation, villagism and loin cloth civilization. (124)

Nehru did not vehemently oppose the Khadi movement and hand spinning but he felt that these two movements were an intensification of individualism in production and a return to pre-industrial age. According to Nehru for liberating India from the grip of economic problems, India desperately needed Industrialization and modernization. In regard to this Vishnu Dutt remarks,

For Nehru, on the other hand industrialization, as the spearhead of a program of all round development, was the first necessity in independent India...His belief was that the development, of basic and key industries like steel, machine tools, machine – building plants, fertilizer factories and the fostering of irrigation and power would provide the impetus for an advance on all fronts, enabling the country to cross the economic hump in fifteen or twenty years and attain the stage of self – sustaining growth. (139)

The culmination of the discussion situates Mali as an alternative to the ideals of Nehru. It seems Narayan was also confused and leaves an open ended opinion to the readers after creating the characters of ‘Jagan’ and ‘Mali’.

From Chapter six onwards the aforesaid discussion forms the backdrop of the remaining chapters. Here the cousin takes the initiative to divulge the truth to Jagan that

He wants to manufacture story- writing machines. Mali shows his hatred in his father’s business and tries to divert his attention towards manufacturing machines. Mali exploits the simplicity and innocence of Jagan and tries to convince him to support him in his venture. Mali retorts ‘An American company is offering to collaborate. In course of time, every home in the country will possess one and we will produce more stories than any other nation in the world. (77)

The exasperating speech of Mali is intentionally plotted so that Jagan is tempted to find interest in his adventurous job. Jagan’s initial interest in the venture is an outcome of his inquisitive mind. He is driven highly by his zeal to learn American culture. Jagan is an outstanding character portrayal of Narayan as his inclination to acquire knowledge about

America reminds us of Francis Bacon's essay *Of Travaile*. In the essay Bacon enumerates his philosophy. The essayist thinks:

When a Travailler returneth home, let him not leave the Countries, where he hath Travailed, altogether behind him; But maintaine a Correspondence, by letters, with those of his Acquaintance, which are of most Worth. And let his Travaile appeare rather in his Discourse, then in his Apparrell, or Gesture: And in his Discourse, let him be rather advised in his Answers, then forwards to tell stories: And let it appeare, that he doth not change his country Manners, for those of Forraigne Parts; But onely prick in some Flowers, of that he hath Learned abroad, into the Customers of his owne Country.(07)

In simple terms it should be an augmentation of knowledge not a purposive deletion of one's culture. Jagan strictly adheres to it. Jagan eventually perceives that his son wants to plunder his money and start his business. When the cousin unfolds the discussion about his acquisition of wealth and Mali's knowledge about it, Jagan utters: "Money is an evil". (81)

The statement is a bit confusing and cannot be correlated to Jagan's character. Perhaps the author here tries to project Jagan as a man full of practical wisdom who is well aware of the dark side of monetary pursuits. We assume that this statement is deliberately uttered by Jagan to situate Mali as a contrast to him as Mali is blind in monetary matters. Mali believes in capitalism and Jagan believes in Sarvodaya even though he is interested to accumulate wealth through his business. Perhaps Jagan understands the evil effects of money. The nature of 'money' in reality is multifaceted. Money can make life as well as destroy life. Jagan is sensible and he has used his rationality to make money so that future remains stable. Jagan prophecies 'simple living and high thinking' and he was in disbelief that people knew about his property even Mali also. Since he might be forced to pay two lakhs without knowing the future prospect of the business he articulates this statement.

The novel proceeds towards the climax when Mali is supported by his wife (Grace) in their collective effort to convince Jagan in investing his wealth in Mali's venture. The reference to "washing machines, grinding, powdering or calculating-nowadays one uses electricity for everything" (82), these tempting words are used by Mali to make Jagan understand the progress of the nation. There is an ulterior motive behind their approach and that is, to trigger passion in Jagan's heart and to make him conceive the fact- how technology has progressed and changed the outlook of the society. Mali epitomizes the socio-economic transformation in his behaviour and he also accentuates on the interest of people in scientific inventions and their inclination towards expanding their boundary of knowledge. Jagan becomes aware of all the schemes of Mali and so he utters,

"Gandhi has taught me peaceful methods, and that's how I'm going to meet their demand. These two are hell bent upon involving me in all sorts of things," he reflected. He was bewildered by his son's scheme and distrusted it totally. He was aware that pressure was being subtly exercised on him to make him part with cash. He was going to meet the situation by ignoring the whole business; a sort of non-violent non-cooperation. (86)

Mali retaliates on every gesture of Jagan and he tries to enforce Jagan to part with his wealth. In his conversation with Jagan he expresses his anti-nation statement: "I really do not know what you mean. You expect everything to be said ten times; no wonder nothing gets done in this country" (88) In the midst of the conversation, Jagan says, "Gandhi always advocated poverty and not riches". (89) In the book *Economic Thought of Gandhi and Nehru*; O.P. Misra observes

Gandhi's love and praise of poverty, suffering and the ascetic is contrasted to the ideals and philosophy of Nehru. In *An Autobiography*, Nehru wrote: Personally I dislike the praise of poverty and suffering. I do not think they are all desirable and

they ought to be abolished. Nor do I appreciate the ascetic life as a social ideal...nor do I appreciate in the least the idealization of the simple peasant life...what is there in the "Man with the Hoe" to idealise over crushed and exploited for innumerable generations he is only little removed from the animals who keep him company. (125)

Mali voices out his dissent in the words "You expect me to do that? I have better plans than to be a vendor of sweet meats". (89) The novel almost reaches the climax here because the clash in opinion between Mali and Jagan reaches the optimum height in these lines. We all know that Narayan is inclined to Gandhi's philosophy and every page of his book is pervaded by Gandhism, here we can witness the dichotomies that always exist in Narayan's character portrayal. Narayan is baffled and leaves to the reader to decide who adheres to right path. We can say that the sudden outburst of Mali inundates the novel with two parallel ideas pacing at same momentum. On one side is the Khadi movement, hand-spinning industries which can be instrumental in making villages self – sufficient and according to Nehru it is an intensification of individualism in production and a return to pre – industrial age and on the flip side is industrialization. In *The Hindustan times*, 30 November 1939 Nehru wrote, "Any attempt to build up a country's economy largely on the basis of cottage and small – scale industries is doomed to failure". (124) Thus Jagan, vendor of sweat meats, is confined in his business, increase the employability of many common people and contribute something towards the industrial growth of the nation, where as Mali's intention; not considering his nature or latent desire; is towards the growth of the nation. Thus Mali follows in footsteps of Nehru who pleaded for industrialization and modernization of India. From the economic point of view of the novel the above mentioned distinguishing points between Jagan and Mali can be well appreciated and evaluated. From the humanitarian point of view Jagan's symphonic generosity towards the children, when he sells the sweets at low price, his simplicity, adherence to values of life, proclaims that he is an embodiment of everything that is traditional and goes through an experiment with truth.

At the end of the discussion we can say that the novel is deluged with multifaceted ideas ranging from east & west encounter to Narayan's empathetic consideration of Indian women in their post marital life. The plight of Ambika, Mali's mother; and Grace, Mali's wife; opens a new dimension in the novel. It shows Narayan's keen power of observation and how he has allocated space for other dimensions besides the main content i.e. Jagan and Mali's ideological difference. In the words of James Dale:

'Perhaps the most valuable element in Narayan's novels for modern man, caught up in the frenzied rush of the acquisitive society, is his rejection of mere materialism, his insistence on the supreme importance of human relationships and the spiritual values which should underlie them'.

To end with the words of Dr. Kanhaiya Jee Jha , "In The ideological difference between Jagan and Mali, thus, signifies the clash between traditional, human, spiritual values and modernity, that promises prosperity by the use of machine' ". (58)

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