

Volume-1, Issue-VI, Sept- 2017

Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

CONFERENCE

of

**Thiruvalluvar University
College of Arts & Science, Arakkonam.**

on

**"EMERGING TRENDS IN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE & LITERATURE"**



Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN NO- 2456-7078 IMPACT FACTOR- 4.520 VOLUME-1, ISSUE-7, SEPT-2017

THE CONTEMPORARY REFLECTION OF RK NARAYAN'S THE VENDOR OF SWEETS

S. A. Annie Swetha

Research Scholar, Stella Maris College, Chennai

ABSTRACT

Literature brings to fore the reality of life that is represented in various genres. It has been known as a mirror of social life. The need to acknowledge literary works becomes inevitable as they reflect the unheard segments of the society. Especially in the case of RK Narayan, his work intends to explore the various dimensions of everyday lives in the Indian society. By using Reader response theory the study intends to examine R.K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* as a novel which has contemporary relevance in the present era and as a text which is open for multiple interpretations.

KEY WORDS:

Literature, mirror of social life, contemporary relevance

INTRODUCTION

R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* was first published in London in 1967. The plot revolves around the story of sixty-year-old widower Jagan who has to confront a new world through his son Mali where his cherished notions of marriage, morality, traditional practices have lost its significance. His final escape comes with his decision to abandon the materialistic world and retired into a life of spiritual devotion.

The *Vendor of Sweets* is often treated as a novel which deals with the trials of relationship and the separateness of generations between a father and his son. For instance, in the words of R.A. Jayantha, the novel revolves around the themes of youth versus age, the generation gap, tradition versus modernity, East versus West, and search or quest. To quote

"While it seems to tell the amusing story of an eccentric and obscurantist father and his upstart son, and the game of hide and seek they play with each other, in point of fact it is built on a few inter-related themes of which the most readily obvious is the father-son motif".

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

In adherence to the above claim, the paper intends to focus on the clash between tradition and modernity using reader's response theory. Reader response criticism is a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader and their experience of a literary work. The experience of a 21st century reader becomes the base through which the novel gets appropriated into the contemporary scenario.

The following are the instances from Narayan's *Vendor of Sweets* to justify the relevance of the novel in the current scenario. The paper will examine how Narayan's work acts a microcosm of the current age of globalisation where hegemonic cultural practice overrules an indigenous one.

We live in an era where most of our traditional practices and products have been replaced by foreign products. For instance, the usage of toothbrush and toothpaste for the maintenance of oral hygiene has become part of our everyday lives. But this has been at the expense of the traditional practices like using neem twigs or charcoal for cleaning teeth. Our indigenous tradition has become "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power." (Frances, 225) The native people are made to mimic a foreign practice which leads to cultural infiltration. For instance, the Colgate-Palmolive company which is based in USA had entered into the Indian market in the early 80s by promoting and advertising themselves as a healthy alternative to charcoal and neem twigs which was used by the people of India during those days. The company started a campaign in which they stated that using charcoal and neem twigs can damage the enamel layer covering the teeth. Colgate thrust an alien product into the Indian market by creating an image that the product gives better protection to teeth than the traditional products that were used by the Indians for a very long time. They eliminated an essential practice which was followed by generations before and placed its product as a better alternative.

The same issue is dealt in Narayan's work which states how certain traditional practices like the usage of margosa and neem twigs for oral hygiene, leaf plates, Khaddi dresses are lost in the age of globalisation. Our indigenous tradition has become "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power." (Frances, 225). However, we are growing to be a generation with increasing awareness of the importance of going back to nature, as exemplified by the character Jagan in the novel. These kinds of instances make Narayan's character Jagan relevant in the contemporary scenario.

Another qualification that makes Narayan's character relevant in the 21st century is their urge for material success. For instance, the character Jagan, who advocates a simple way of living, evades sales tax though he receives a handsome profit in his sweet business. He who claims himself to be strict traditionalist expects his son to write his novel in English to gain universal acclamation. These incidents provide a typical reflection of the hypocritical attitude that anyone may possess, where the laws and morals are prone to manipulation if the situation demands it. It also reflects attitude of the current scenario where the needs of the self, precedes the needs of the society.

The next instance is Mali's story-writing machine which can be compared to the changing trend in the human perception of art in the age of technological development. He intends to manufacture a "story-telling machine" which provides a combination of plots, characters, climaxes, situations and emotions. Therefore an author is no longer needed for a story rather, they are replaced by machines. In the words of Nanda,

"Mali tries to introduce the final depersonalization in an Americanized, mechanical concepts of art. Even the critical and evaluative process is to be mechanized with "a little fixture, by which any existing story could be split up into components and analysed"

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

(Nanda 93).

Though it was an imaginary machine in Narayan's time, today we have a lot of paraphrasing software's, online story generators and ghost writers in our contemporary times.

Throughout the novel, it can be observed that Mali's only intention is to technologically create a book which he wants to be a bestseller. He pays no attention to the uniqueness or the individuality involved in writing a novel. This incident seems to be a reflection of the current publish or perish culture, where the number of publications matters more than the quality of the published works. In today's scenario novel writing has become a rat race where publishers and PR departments market exaggerated claims while hard-pressed authors are bound to repeatedly publish their works.

Mali's decision to learn story telling through a course offered by an American University has a lot of contemporary relevance. Though India is a country with rich oral tradition the character Mali decides to go to an American University to learn story telling. This reflects the glorifying attitude of the current generation towards the Western fascinations.

And important theme that makes Narayan's work relevant in the present age is his discussion on caste. Though in this era we exhort to bring down caste based oppressions, we cannot rule out its presence in the Indian soil. The conversation between Jagan and Grace in the novel serves as a testimony to this. When Grace enquired if the caste system was completely erased in India Jagan gave an appropriate reply, "It's going". This statement holds true in the current era where India still stand as one of the country practising honour killing as per the UNICEF report mentioned in a MOOC course titled Social Norms, Social Change I created by the University of Pennsylvania, Unicef.

The character Mali's who returned from America with a half-American half-Korean girl whom he reported as his wife and later said he never married, had been an issue of sensation not only in Narayan's time but also of the present times. Inter caste marriages, pre- marital affairs, extra marital affairs are still facing considerable resistance in our country. Jagan, a traditional Indian man who believes in values, cannot imagine his son living immorally with a woman in his house. He believes that his house is defiled and hence he cannot go back and live there. "...I can't understand how two young persons can live together like this without being married," (62) Even today any relationship outside marriage is looked down in our country.

Another significant issue of discussion arises with regard to the eating habits. Jagan felt outraged when he read Mali's letter stating, "I've taken to eating beef; and I don't think I'm any worse of it" (53). Jagan being an orthodox Hindu was shell-shocked by this. This is one of the ongoing debates in our country whether to completely accept Hindu nationalism, which treats beef eating as one of the deadliest sins.

Jagan was an advocate of naturotherapy. He was a true Gandhian and a vegetarian, who lived a simple life. He never used sugar or salt since he believed that they were detrimental to health. He used only Khadi clothes and completely avoided western medicines. This is something that the modern Diabetic-ridden Indian people can chew upon, a call to revive our natural way of life.

An overall analysis of the Naryan's novel reveals how in the current era certain alien cultures are normalised over and above the indigenous. Individuals like Jagan who fail to adopt the new culture, their identity is constructed as different and as other within the categories of knowledge of the West. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, 'power/knowledge'.

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

In conclusion, the novel may be treated not only as a "generation novel" or a "national novel" but as a work with universal ideas and themes. Thus, Narayan's fictional family of Jagan and Mali can be viewed as a microcosm of the contemporary Indian society. The scope of this novel can be extended beyond the ideas discussed in the paper as each reading of it opens a new avenue for interpretation.

WORKS CITED

1. Frances, Angela. *Identity: community, culture, difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London:
2. GHAI, T. C. "Pattern and Significance in R.K. Narayan's Novels." *Indian Literature*, vol. 18,
3. Kain, Geoffrey. "Review: R.K. Narayan: A Study in Transcendence" *Journal of South Asian*
4. Singh, Satyanarain. "A Note on the World-View of R.K. Narayan." *Indian Literature*, vol.
5. Wood, Brennon. "Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies and the Problem of Hegemony." *The British*
6. *Literature*, vol. 28, no. 1/2, 1993, pp. 355–356. 14 February. 2017
7. Lawrence & Wishart, (1990): 223-237. Web. 14 February. 2017.
8. no. 3, 1975, pp. 33–58. Web. 14 February. 2017
9. 24, no. 1, 1981, pp. 104–109. Web. 14 February. 2017
10. *Journal of Sociology* 49.3 (1998): 399-414. Web. 14 February. 2017

