

**Travesty of Gandhian Worldview in R K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets***

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**Abstract:**

This study examines the novel "The Vendor of Sweets" (1967) by R. K. Narayan, with a specific emphasis on the author's depiction of postcolonial India and the accompanying societal turmoil. The novel delves into the inherent fragility of Malgudi, a town characterised by intricate social hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. The primary character, Jagan, who is a small-scale business owner, grapples with a self-imposed illusion regarding the enduring societal framework of Malgudi. The convergence of secular and religious domains primarily centres around the acquisition of material resources, wherein the Gita and Upanishads play a significant role as important references for harmonising the quest for tangible riches with the contemplation of abstract ideas. The explicit adoption of Gandhian principles by Jagan illustrates the intersection of secularism and a simulated austere lifestyle, resulting in tangible economic benefits. This study also investigates Jagan's ideological perspectives and viewpoints, including his endorsement of nylon bristles and his emphasis on the significance of healthy lifestyles. The narrative brings attention to the political and ideological divisions that exist within the Indian milieu, as depicted by Jagan's decision to abstain from using aspirin and instead align himself with Gandhi's non-cooperative campaign. The novel's exploration of modernity is multifaceted and necessitates a rigorous analysis of prevailing viewpoints.

Key words: Travesty, Cultural homogeneity, self-imposed and significance of life style

This paper examines R K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) aiming to shed light on his portrayal of postcolonial India and its social unrest. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to a better understanding of Narayan's worldview. As is commonly observed, it is difficult to avoid mentioning Naipaul when discussing the comprehension or lack thereof of India. Our analysis commences by examining the final part of Narayan's literary career, focusing specifically on *The Vendor of Sweets* and Naipaul's perspectives on this work. Prior to delving into an analysis of Naipaul's perspectives on the novel, it is imperative to provide a concise overview of the aforementioned literary piece. Contrary to popular opinion, Malgudi exhibits vulnerability due to its delicate social structures and cultural uniformity. Narayan endeavours to safeguard his realm against significant disruptions and extensive transformations. The body of his literary works mostly focuses on the evolution of techniques for opposing changes rather than solely addressing the concept of change itself.

However, the protagonist's fervent efforts to protect the world from external forces of alteration and disruption are in great danger as they face the imminent risk of being overwhelmed by the powerful mechanisms of change that pose a threat to the idyllic town of Malgudi and its surrounding rural areas. There exists a subset of individuals, frequently identified as Brahmins, who reside in a state of contentment within a paradisiacal realm, firmly convinced that the events occurring within their sphere are inherently justified and require no external validation. Jagan, the protagonist of *The Vendor of Sweets* exemplifies the predicament of those who find themselves ensnared in a self-perpetuated delusion regarding the unchanging nature of Malgudi's societal structure. The user expresses a belief similar to that of Narayan, asserting that India will persist. When it steadfastly declines to do so, similar to Narayan, he is greatly dismayed. Jagan, a small-scale entrepreneur, exhibits a notable lack of conscientiousness, enabling him to engage in minor forms of self-deception. Nevertheless, there exist actions that he lacks the capacity to contemplate, a characteristic that is intended to be comprehended as the guiding principle of his ontological preoccupations. If feasible and with the reader's consent, Jagan's shortcomings may be perceived as efforts to navigate the obligatory strategies in an indisputably secular society. However, it is challenging to disregard the ongoing blurring of boundaries between the secular and the spiritual and religious domains.

Jagan's challenges within the secular realm are limited to the depiction of food and dietary habits. Seated upon the flat-bottomed chair within his confectionery establishment, the individual experiences a surge of exhilaration as he eagerly awaits the opportune opportunity to commence the task of tallying the accumulated proceeds of the day. The individual experiences a sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of this impressive performance, and as it unfolds, their excitement intensifies in correlation with the scent of confectioneries permeating the air around them:

Sitting there, Jagan was filled with a sense of fulfilment. On one side he could, hear, and smell whatever was happening in the kitchen, whence a constant traffic of trays laden with colourful sweetmeats passed on to the front counter. As long as the frying

and sizzling noise in 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 Bhagavad Gita, but if there was a 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,’ and that would quieten Jagan’s mind and enable it to return to the Lord’s sayings until again some slackness was noticed at the front stall and he would shout, .....(12)

In the Indian setting, the subject matter discussed does not align with the typical content found in social comedies. To accept this form of universal wisdom as a form of harmless humour is to consciously participate in the societal transgression that erodes Indian society. The intersection between the secular and religious realms, particularly among the Indian elite, is primarily focused on material wealth. *The Gita* and Upanishads prove to be valuable resources for the ambitious endeavour of reconciling the pursuit of tangible wealth with the contemplation of abstract concepts. Gandhi's presence is evident throughout this entire activity aimed at facilitating and enhancing the pursuit of a more convenient and profitable way of life. Jagan's overt embrace of Gandhianism effectively delineates the convergence of secularism and a faked asceticism. The Brahmin's success can be attributed to his remarkable skill in reconciling conflicting academic and ideological perspectives, ultimately leading to tangible financial gains. Mali, the son of Jagan, who lacks a mother figure, poses a persistent challenge to his father, who is driven by business and claims to follow the principles of Gandhi. The paternal figure experiences a significant internal conflict as he finds himself torn between his indulged offspring and the accumulation of material prosperity. Jagan is purportedly striving to embark on the third phase of vanaprastha, a stage that every Hindu is obligated to traverse prior to embracing sanyasa. Identifying the origins of Jagan's steadfastly held opinions is a considerable challenge:

Regularly at five in the morning Jagan got up from the bed, broke a twig from a margosa tree in the backyard, chewed its tip, and brushed his teeth. He was opposed to the use of a toothbrush. “The bristles are made of the hair from the pig’s tail,” he declared. “It’s unthinkable that anyone should bite a pig’s tail first thing in the morning. “It was impossible to disentangle the sources of his theories and say what he owed to Mahatmaji and how much he had imbibed from his father, who had also spent a life time perfecting his theories of sound living and trying them on himself, his coconut trees, his children, and wife. Even after the advent of the nylon bristles Jagan never changed his views, maintaining that nylon had an adverse effect on the enamel. (20)

Narayan exhibits a deeply intricate perspective on modernity, a sentiment that resonates throughout all his main characters. Living in former colonies can be a distressing experience within the postcolonial cultural context, particularly due to the challenge of relinquishing one's enduring interest in the legacy of the past coloniser. The influence of the

Western world has deeply and extensively permeated the consciousness and psyche of the formerly colonial nations, to the extent that notions perceived as native to Indian culture frequently prove to be deceptively European in origin. Within the realm of Indian cultural and literary creation, the concept of modernity is intricately intertwined with the idea of nationhood in numerous multifaceted ways. Jagan perceives his profound aversion to toothbrushes as not being fundamentally disconnected from his commitment to Gandhian principles. The author consistently places the peculiarly political concept of nation as the focal point of their extensive discussions. In his analysis of modernity, Jameson argues that it can be understood as a specific form of storytelling that revolves around the notion of an illusory origin that predates any non-European events. Postcolonial theorization has consistently focused on persistent inquiries around modernity and its complex association with the concept of country. *The Vendor of Sweets* can be interpreted beyond a simple engagement with many discourses of modernity, as it encompasses intricate discussions and disputes regarding the existing perspectives on this subject matter. The primary purpose of the novel is to provoke a critical examination of the overarching narrative of modernity. However, the approach and methodology employed in achieving this objective exhibit significant imbalances and shortcomings. Certain theorists claim that it is not preferable to perceive modernity as a lingering vestige of colonialism.

While acknowledging that modernity in India has been influenced by numerous colonial experiences, it has, within the Indian context, successfully disentangled itself from all European connotations. According to some Indian sociologists, a notable attribute of India lies in its capacity to assimilate specific elements of modernity and adapt them to its own needs. According to these sociologists, India's strength resides in its ability to transform itself into a distinct societal structure that diverges from European models while simultaneously benefiting from continuous Western influences. Narayan endeavours to comprehend the intricate and multifaceted nature of modernity, examining it through the lens of a high-caste Hindu. This individual, motivated by ideological divergences, consciously distances themselves from the Nehruvian perspectives on Indian culture, thereby approaching the subject matter from an alternative standpoint. Mali does not embody a precise antithesis to his father, nor is he intended to fulfil such a role. In accordance with Ashis Nandy's characterization of non-modern India, Jagan symbolises this aspect, while Mali embodies the notion of ultra-modernity in contemporary India. However, it is possible for the reader to identify a clear point of convergence between these seemingly contradictory worldviews. At the core of contemporary society, including its diverse manifestation in India, lies capitalism, a driving force behind the various facets of modernity. The postcolonial condition is frequently perceived as a means to enable the progression of the modernity project, which colonialism was unable to fully accomplish. According to Narayan, the characters of Jagan and Mali are intended to represent the contrasting segments of the wider Indian social structure. However, he argues that there is a dearth of substantive depth in the factors that contribute to their divergence. To bolster our case in this particular trajectory, it is imperative

to incorporate select excerpts from Arjun Appadurai's seminal work entitled *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*:

One of the most problematic legacies of grand Western social science (Comte, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim) is that it has steadily reinforced the sense of some single moment-call it the modern moment-that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present. Reincarnated as the break between tradition and modernity and typologized as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies, this view has been shown repeatedly to distort the meanings of change and the politics of pastness: Yet the world in which we now live-in which modernity is decisively at large, irregularly self-conscious, and unevenly experienced surely does involve a general break with all sorts of pasts. What sort of break is this, if it is not the one identified by modernization theory? (2-3)

This breach, within the Indian context, is conceptualised as politically and ideologically polarising, encompassing, on one side, the embodiment of Gandhian ideas and, on the other side, the values associated with Nehru's legacy and the Leftist bloc. Narayan exhibits a high level of caution over the political and ideological stance he is perceived to align with within the context of post-independent Indian society. This culture remains sceptical of the ideological loyalty of the Brahmin intellectual class. This phenomenon becomes apparent when we proceed to examine the strategies employed by Jagan to navigate a delicate situation without appearing to yield to either of the divisive forces that are perceived to threaten the unity of India. Jagan previously permitted his deceased spouse to consume aspirin for the relief of her headaches, although he personally refrained from its usage due to his perception of it as an unequivocal toxic substance. He is aware that there are individuals for whom this type of toxin can yield substantial financial gain. Despite his worries about the present education system, he desires for his obstinate son to successfully attain a college degree. Nevertheless, he takes pride in the circumstances that compelled him to terminate his educational pursuits, namely, the initiation of the non-cooperative movement by Gandhi. He firmly believes that his son's rationale for discontinuing his schooling is not as compelling as the one he himself had to abandon.

Jagan does not perceive modernity as an inherently repulsive notion that must be deliberately avoided; rather, he views it as a means of neatly excluding unprofitable material aspects from his existence. Jagan's perspective on the evolving world is effectively exemplified through his perspectives on literature and authorship: he experiences great excitement while contemplating his son's decision to pursue a career in writing, while simultaneously failing to comprehend why this choice should impede his educational attainment. The individual consistently experiences disappointment due to his son's lack of evident inclination towards pursuing a career as a writer. Despite its historical affiliation with pre-modernity, writing is argued to be inherently linked to modernity. It perpetually establishes and reestablishes general narrative styles that are characteristic of modernity. The

Indianized manifestation of modernity is shown as enduring the tarnished historical legacy stemming from its European origins and even thriving in the face of adversity. Jagan, who self-identifies as a follower of Gandhi's principles and predominantly uses Indian products, expresses enthusiasm regarding his son's upcoming trip to the United States:

He had never thought that he could feel so superior about it. Now it seemed to him worth all the money and the pangs of separation. "My son is in America," he said to a dozen persons every day, puffing with pride on each occasion. It delayed his daily routine. On his way to the shop he had only to detect the slightest acquaintance on the road, and he would block his path, and instead of discussing weather or politics, as was his custom, would lead the talk on gently to the topic of America and of his son's presence there. (51)

Mali diligently composes an extensive array of correspondences originating from various locations spanning the world's oceans, each of which is meticulously safeguarded by his paternal figure. The patriarch establishes a repository of these invaluable correspondences, originating from a distant geographical location, which he subsequently realises were authored by Grace. In one instance, much to his father's disappointment, he discloses his newfound consumption of beef. Jagan experiences a strong sense of indignation, although he exercises self-restraint, recognising that the gastronomic practices he has long regarded as sacrilegious differ when his son begins to partake in them. The introduction of Grace, Jagan's daughter-in-law from America, initiates a gradual transformation in Jagan's perception of purity and the sacred. Narayan allocates a substantial portion of his work to the comprehensive elucidation of the dialogues revolving around the topic of food. Grace extends an invitation to prepare a meal for her father-in-law. Jagan tactfully discourages her, asserting that he is prohibited from consuming meals prepared by others on his behalf. The individual responsible for the production of confectionery for the entirety of Malgudi holds the belief that consuming food prepared by an individual from outside their community is contrary to their religious principles:

One day grace said, "I wish you would let me cook for me."

"Oh, that is impossible. I'm under a vow about that." He explained how he ate to live only on what he could cook with his own hands.

Grace cried, "Oh, you sound thrilling!" This was the first time someone had had a good word to say about his habits. Encouraged by her enthusiasm he expatiated on his own creations of salt-free and sugar-free food, and concluded by saying that she should really look forward to reading his book when Truth Printing let it out of the press. (62-63)

A Brahmin's obsession about his culinary purity is closely associated with his incontrovertible sense of superiority. The hierarchised divisions between the castes have constantly reinforced very rigid taboos about the commensality. The passing of cooked food



between different castes is strictly forbidden. Here is what Louis Dumont says about the religious connotations of the passing of food in his book *Homo Hierarchicus*:

It is (preparation of food) not only a question of avoiding contact with polluting agents (even of the same caste) but of general precautions. Among the Brahmins the eater must be pure (he has bathed and his torso is bare) he must be sheltered from any impure contact. He eats alone or in a small group in a pure 'square' in the kitchen or a nearby part of the house carefully protected from intrusion. Any unforeseen contact, not only with a low caste man (sometimes going as far as his shadow) or an animal, but even with someone from the house ( woman, child, the man who is not purified for eating) would make the food unfit for consumption. It is thought that ordinary cooked food is vulnerable, and so is the eater, who, texts tell us, is in any case less pure when he finishes his meal than when he began. True, the rules are less strict for non-Brahmins. The fact remains that one can scarcely ever eat side by side with any but one's equals ... (138-139)

The rationale behind including this extensive quotation is readily apparent. The social and religious conduct and customs inside the world inhabited by Narayan and Jagan exhibit a subtle complexity and an unpredictable sensitivity that distinguishes them from the prevailing norms observed by the majority of Indians. Jagan's worldview revolves around the notion that one's dietary and culinary practices play a significant role in determining the outcomes, both positive and negative, in various aspects of life. The individual frequently neglects to acknowledge and elucidate the manner in which his gradual abandonment of extravagant and wasteful cuisine aligns with his occupation as a confectionery merchant. Gandhi always incorporates his concepts with a persistent emphasis on the significance of simplicity, asceticism, and abstinence. The Gita and Gandhi serve as the primary sources of inspiration and motivation for his commitment to leading a modest, unassuming, and frugal lifestyle. The individual's resourcefulness is evident in his ability to prevent his self-proclaimed minimalistic approach from conflicting with his pursuit of financial gain. However, Jagan appears to be oblivious to the disparity that exists between his chosen lifestyle and his professional occupation. The implications of Gandhianism extend beyond the surface level when analysing Jagan's activities. Despite his reservations, Jagan is compelled to ascertain his son's future plans. Subsequently, a series of requests ensue, with Mali expressing a primary interest in establishing a manufacturing facility dedicated to the production of narrative writing machines. Jagan's aversion to machinery, rooted in his adherence to Gandhian principles, does not solely account for his decision to withhold financial support for his son's project. Rather, it is his general disapproval of any venture requiring monetary investment that serves as the primary deterrent. Moreover, the current proposal necessitates a sum of fifty-one thousand dollars, a notion that evokes a profound sense of trepidation within him. As the intensity of his son's financial requests escalates, Jagan experiences a growing detachment not only from his worldly responsibilities but also from his inherent and

unstoppable drive to accumulate greater wealth. The confectioneries available at local establishments are offered at very affordable rates, prompting the residents of Malgudi to eagerly flock to these shops in order to procure them. Upon learning that Mali and Grace are not married, Jagan makes the decision to sever all connections with the ordinary world and cease his engagement in worldly affairs.

The individual's complete disengagement from society is resolute and permanent. He delegated all responsibilities to his 'relative' and withdrawn into a sanyasashram. The individual's engagement with religious texts and adherence to Gandhi's philosophical principles contribute to his notable detachment from worldly matters. Naipaul saw the mindset portrayed in *The Vendor of Sweets* as a natural extension of the underlying attitude evident in Mr. Sampath. The individual perceives it as a manifestation of the ethical perplexity that ensued in the aftermath of Indian independence. Both novels are characterised by the dual themes of action and retreat from his perspective. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, one can observe the moment when the intricately crafted universe created by the author begins to crumble due to its preoccupation with a lifeless society:

Narayan's small town could not easily be insulated from the larger, restless world, could no longer be seen as finished and complete, with well-defined boundaries necessary for his kind of humour. And very soon, after the certitude of 1961, doubt seemed to have come to Narayan. As early as 1967 there appeared a novel in which his fictional world is cracked open, its fragility finally revealed, and the Hindu equilibrium—so confidently maintained in Mr. Sampath—collapses into something like despair. (28)

The novel explicitly explores the constraints inherent within the author's own realm. There exists a point within the story where it transitions from a comedic genre, as Malgudi is shown as a self-contained realm that resists deriving significance from external sources. Jagan experiences an enduring sense of moral corruption resulting from a series of transgressions that have profoundly impacted his personal sphere. Naipaul highlights that these incursions into Jagan's offended realm are also the factors that unveil the vacuity of Narayan's fictitious conception of reality. The fragility and susceptibility of Malgudi can be attributed to the significant extent of violence that modernity has the potential to unleash in post-independence India:

Jagan's is the ultimate Hindu retreat, because it is a retreat from a world that is known to have broken at last. It is retreat, literally, to a wilderness where 'the edge of reality itself was beginning to blur': not a return to a purer Aryan past, as Jagan might imagine, but a retreat from civilisation and creativity, from rebirth and growth, to magic and incantation, a retrogression to an almost African night, the enduring primitivism of a place like the Congo, where, even after the slave-trading Arabs and the Belgians, the past is yearned for as *le bon vieux temps de nos ancetres*. It is the death of a civilisation, the final corruption of Hinduism. (33)



However, Naipaul himself can be situated within the framework of this tradition, which involves the negation of one's historical background. He is a member of a group that exhibits a growing resistance to being actively engaged in the ongoing Hindu cultural heritage. Similar to Narayan, Naipaul appears to acknowledge the potential for transgressing the perceived 'integrity' of a civilization. The sources of contamination can potentially arise from within the enclosed realm of Malgudi. The cohesive force that unifies India is mostly derived from its profound reverence and sacredness, delicately maintained by the perception of its distinctiveness. Naipaul frequently critiques the shallow and vacuous nature of the ritualistic practices that characterise Indian culture and civilization. The individual in question exhibits a remarkable degree of forgetfulness regarding their historical and cultural origins. Narayan's literary universe is confined to the boundaries of Malgudi, a symbolic representation of a microcosmic India, as none of his works are situated in any other geographical location. Naipaul's literary landscape encompasses a vast array of global locales, spanning the entirety of the Earth's geography. One issue pertaining to this cosmopolitan publication is its predominant manifestation of the creator's peculiar notion that India and the rest of the globe are fundamentally separate entities. The implication of this perspective suggests that aligning oneself with Indian civilization does not yield any advantages in the context of the worldwide literary arena. Jagan's decision to disengage from active participation in society should not be misconstrued as stemming from a fervent inclination to reject all worldly entanglements and belongings. The individual's decision to disengage from worldly possessions can be interpreted as a last-ditch effort by a paternal figure whose offspring has experienced significant failure and has become a burdensome responsibility. The probability of Jagan, a conformist and financially prosperous individual, seeking solace in the depths of nature to see the emergence of a deity from a stone is minimal. Therefore, the act of renunciation is not fully comprehensive, absolute, or ultimate.

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