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Cultural Clash and Colonial Legacy: A Postcolonial Critique of Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*

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Abstract

R K Narayan is a canonical writer in the category of Indian writing in English. In fact he is one among the founding figures of Indian Literature in English along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Narayan has portrayed the lives of ordinary Indians living in the southern part of the nation and the onslaught of colonial rule is conspicuous in his narratives. His stories are focused on complex lives of middle class people caught between the conflict of modernity and traditional ways of living. The quiet struggles, moral dilemma and tragic flaws of the commoners are well depicted in his narration. His novels *Swami and Friends*, *Vendor of Sweets*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* reflect the deep impact of colonialism. *The Vendor of Sweets* is a rich text for exploring postcolonial themes. The novel clearly addresses identity, cultural conflict, mimicry, hybridity and the impact of colonial modernity. The novel centers on Jagan, a sweet vendor who is a staunch follower of Indian traditions, and his son Mali, who is an embodiment of Western values. The present study explores the allegorical conflict of father-son that actually represents India's postcolonial struggle between tradition and modernity, native identity vs. Western influence. Mali becomes a cultural hybrid and a hyphenated personality who belongs to India but adopts western ideology. His language, behavior and attitude reflect distorted adoption of Western ways of living. He becomes an alcoholic; lives with an American girl and follows live-in relationship system which was completely against the norms of the India's of the 1960's. He follows impractical and half-baked business ideas that actually belonged to the fragmented, imported and distorted American lifestyle. He disowns and discards Indian values. Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry applies in this text as Mali becomes a "mimic man," adopting the colonizer's behavior but never fully belonging to it. Mali's desire to study creative writing abroad and his rejection of Indian education reflect the internalization of colonial attitudes that prevailed in subjugated colonies. His education alienates him from his own cultural roots and from his father who is a representative of Indian way of living. Thus the novel is a fertile text that showcases how Narayan himself has become a tool of colonial masters though unknowingly.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Hybridity, hyphenated personality, mimicry

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Cultural Clash and Colonial Legacy: A Postcolonial Critique of Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*

INTRODUCTION

Imperial impact on the representation of Indian ethos is highly conspicuous in the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*. Although it is an immensely popular Indian-English novel but it has not been critiqued from the angle of cultural hegemony. Its narrative style is flawless but it is highly flawed in terms of bashing Indian culture and its ethos. The socio-cultural life of a typical South Indian village is well reflected in this novel. The artistic representation of life of a common south Indian village is remarkable but the traces of inferiority complex of a colonial subject are also highly prominent in the entire narrative. The subaltern is highly critical of his own native culture because he is looking at his own country through the lens of his colonial masters. The victory of hegemonic rule of the imperialists is strewn throughout the story. Not only the ways of life has been criticized but also the fundamental ancient philosophy of Bhagwat Geeta is contrasted throughout the novel through the poor example of the protagonist Jagannath, the vendor of sweets.

Thankfully, the world came to recognize the ill-effects of cultural hegemony through the writings of Italian critic Antonio Gramsci. He raised some valid issues like how the ruling class tries to maintain power through subtle means of attacking the culture of the natives. He had to pay the price of raising valid issues by remaining imprisoned for a great period of time. His essays on the ulterior motives of the regimes to maintain power is well illustrated in his famous book, *The Prison Notebook*. A study by Engenio-Enrique further explores his concept, "cultural hegemony is much broader than that of ideology, because it refers to the construction process of the collective experience, of the modeling of meanings, from the development of values, the creation of world conceptions and of the moral, cultural and intellectual direction of society through education." (EEC Ramirez)

Cultural hegemony is a strong tool that helps in maintaining the colonial power and the subjects remain unconscious of it because direct force is not used to maintain this kind of covert power. So this invisible tool produces better visible and long lasting effects than the use of violent military force. Like in the writings of Narayan one can clearly observe the impact of this subtle force. Due to the impact of English education Narayan who was himself a Tamil Brahmin became critical of Brahmanical ways of living. He did his formal education in Missionary Schools. Later on, he became a voracious reader of English literature. The reading of the novel *Vendor of Sweets* shows the influence of his early education. The author has nullified the importance of ancient Indian wisdom by making the protagonist accept his defeat against the modern ways of living that includes his

son's live- in relationship with a Christian girl and his son's alcoholism too. Mali disturbs him so much that finally Jagannath had to give up the world and join an ashram. Thus showing the Indian representative to recede in the background and accept defeat in front of cultural onslaught of the colonial powers.

In Indian culture married people accepted the *sanyas ashram* after relegating all their worldly duties and peacefully retire in the complete service of God. It was usually done after attaining the age of seventy five but here the protagonist is compelled to surrender before the colonial ways of living that promotes women and wine culture, which is represented through his son. The south Indian Brahmin is called orthodox throughout the narrative just because he believes in purity of living. He cooks his own food, he didn't marry after his wife died at a young age and he is a staunch disciplinarian just like it was prevalent in the old Indian culture. Somehow the writer, Narayan is a victim of the racialized difference created by colonial masters. P.K. Nayar states that, "Structures of colonial domination were, of course, racialized in the sense that they were created and administered by acknowledging and reinforcing the racial difference between the natives and the colonial masters." (Nayar, 154) In the process of imposing racial difference the subjects consider themselves inferior and their master's ways of living as superior.

The very first line of the novel begins with the instructions from the Holy Scripture Bhagwad Geeta, "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self," Jagan said to his listener, who asked, "Why conquer the self?" Jagan said, "I do not know but all our sages advise us so." (*Vendor of Sweets*, 5) It is now accepted by the world that simple eating habits help in promoting good health and disciplining of mind but the author didn't allow Jagan to give such answers. Jagan is a simple Brahmin, but the author mocks his habit of simplicity. While talking about his physical appearance he says, "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." (6) It's true that before the onslaught of consumerism, Indians didn't believe in looking at the mirror more often but the reason was to live a detached life from their own bodies because the body is considered as a garment of the soul that we keep on changing according to our earthly karmas. Too much attachment to our body only promotes narcissism and materialism like it is prevalent these days and as a result, modern living has reached to a point where people are not happy with their looks and go for extreme surgeries like plastic surgery, botox, fillers, implants to look good and in this process sometimes they play with their lives too.

As the readers move on to the third page of the novel, they witness another scathing attack on the dressing sense of Jagan. "He wore a loose *jibba* over his dhoti, both made of a material spun with his own hand, every day he spun for an hour, retained enough yarn for his sartorial requirements, he never possessed more than two sets of clothes at a time," (7) This was true about majority of Indians till the 1970's. People were satisfied with two pair of neat set of clothes.

One set was meant for special occasions and another set for daily use. Now the society has reached a stage where the moment one opens one's wardrobe the over stacked clothes seems to bump onto one's face but still people wonder, 'What should I wear today?' Consumerism has brought us to a point where we will soon be having seminars on awareness about Fabric Pollution. So the writer has not done justice with Jagan and is promoting the habits of western capitalist and consumerist society. Minimalist living is now catching the fascination of the West while when it was already prevalent in India it was mocked by the West induced education and values.

Moving further, Narayan rips apart the humble ways of living through the articles that Jagan wore, " He draped his shoulders in a khaddar shawl with gaudy yellow patterns on it and shod his feet with thick sandals made out of the leather of an animal which had died of old age. I don't like to think that a living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet," (7) such noble thoughts of not harming the animals for one's own needs is mocked at further in the novel. Instead of praising it as a sustainable practice, the writer makes fun of him. Now the society has reached a stage where they are vehemently talking about Anthropocentrism, Eco-criticism, deep ecology besides the days that are celebrated in the name of saving environment like World Habitat Day, Soil Day, Nature Day, Forest Day etc. Ancient Indian way of life was already eco-friendly but as is the custom; the subjects of the erstwhile colonial masters are celebrating these days under the influence of Eurocentric and Americocentric behavior.

Jagan's habit of natural way of living by making non-violent footwear is completely opposed by his son and his wife. He had to leave his habit of processing leather from the hide of animals that died of a natural cause because it was his wife's last wish. In a way the author has given a message of adopting the cruel method of getting readymade shoes from the market but it is also true that the author is not even aware about the idea that he was unconsciously promoting the Western ways of living. The western ways of living that has now brought us to the threshold of global environmental problems.

This is all due to the over dependence on the market for our basic needs. Capitalists' societies promoted a luxurious labor free life through media. Don't do hard work, buy our products and live a carefree life. Besides science and technology driven societies also promoted a way of life that was free from any physical hardship with the excuse of saving one's time and energy and what the world has done in that saved time and energy is now visible through spending endless hours of consumption of social media. Physical labor and a natural way of living were much abhorred by the capitalistic imperial powers.

The present day urgent sentiments were shared by Lorenzo Milani, in 'Pedagogy against Empire'. He asserts, "for an approach to learning for social justice," (Milani) emphasizes the collective dimension of learning and action, and reflects the struggle for school and social reform. "This education will combine instruction or a purely technical approach with a humanistic education, breaking

no differentiation or social division between manual and intellectual work where the union between theory and action is perceived as key to understanding reality and, at the same time, to transform it." (E.E. C. Ramirez) Narayan satirizes Jagan's ways of independent living through the character named, Cousin. He says, "You have simplified your life so completely, and made yourself absolutely self-dependent." Jagan says, "I have discontinued sugar... I find twenty drops of honey in hot water quite adequate, and that is the natural way of taking in the sugar we need." (8) The novel was written in 1967 when Narayan disliked the idea of eating natural sweeteners through the character Cousin. In the twenty first century the world has come to a full circle where people are now trying to live a sugar free life by consuming honey and natural brown sugar. The cousin criticizes Jagan by saying, "I cannot understand why you go on working and earning, taking all this trouble." (8)

Mathew Arnold, a British imperialist advocated the idea of converting all the Philistines into one culture, the one that was followed by the White man, in his canonical work, *Culture and Anarchy*. Terry Eagleton calls it an attempt to, "convert all the Philistines into a truly hegemonic class." (Eagleton, 104) The novel *Vendor of Sweets* bows to the demands of the White masters. Jagan had to make arrangements of polished chairs and polished floors because he had to make the District Collector, Mr. Noble feel comfortable, "Normally he would not have bothered polished floor, but he had frequent visits from one Mr. Noble, the District Collector, who came for lessons in astrology and found it painful to sit on the floor, and found it even more painful to extricate himself from the sitting posture at the end of the lessons." (Vendor of Sweets, 9) The irony of the situation surprises the readers even more that the colonial master wants to learn ancient Indian system of knowledge that is astrology but as per his own conditions and comfort. This is what cultural hegemony does to even a so called great author and intellectual like R K Narayan.

The term hegemony is not a new term. It has its roots in Greek vocabulary, it has come from the term, *eghesthai* that actually means, to drive, to be the guide and its political definition would be, "to be the boss." (Ramirez) The term later on came to be known as *eghemonia* that was referred to the supreme army commander. So, the commanders or the rulers need to be kept in good humor like Narayan has done by removing the tradition of sitting on the floor which actually has many health benefits, by adapting to European custom of sitting on the chair. Bhumika Padhiyar and Rajesh Singh also observe that, "the multidimensional conflicts experienced by individuals navigating the ever-changing landscape of post-independence India. Depicting the challenges and complexities of generational, societal, economic, and personal identity shifts, the novel provides valuable insights into the human struggle for balance amidst rapid progress and shifting values." (Padhiyar and Singh)

In the twenty first century, there's another rage for organic, herbal and Ayurvedic products whereas the same products were being abhorred under the

rule of the British. In order to introduce Allopathic ways of treatment, the British sabotaged the traditional and indigenous methods of treatment calling them as obsolete and unscientific. Quick healing through modern allopathic medicines was also a tool of influencing and befooling the subjects. It was also used as a tool of making the subalterns reject their traditional means of healing. Victor Turner has accepted this fact in his seminal work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. He admits that in order to influence the African tribes the British people used medicines like ointments for burns and other things for showing quick healing properties of their medicines. This was also a means of showing superiority over the natives.

In the novel *Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan wants to publish his book on Nature Cure but Jagan is waiting endlessly to get it published. Look at the resistance and criticism against Indian methods of healing, "A light was still seen under the door of Truth Printing although it was shut in the deference to the Shopping Hours Act. Jagan knew that Natraj would open the door, and he could always have the excuse of asking if the book was ready. The book had been in the press for years out of count, his magnum opus on Nature Cure and Natural Diet, Jagan knew that Natraj would say again that he was waiting for the types..."(12) So the natural way of healing is gathering dust thankfully now after several decades people are realizing the importance of natural way of living and herbal and ayurvedic products are becoming a rage among people in India as well as abroad.

Vendor of Sweets is a reflection of what Frantz Fanon depicts in *Black Skin and White Masks*, he was highly critical of the psychological effects of colonialism on the masters and the subjects. He claims that, "colonialism destroyed the very soul," (Nayar, 157) of the natives. Fanon's deep observation astonishes the readers," when the colonial paints the native as evil, pagan and primitive, over a period of time the native begins to accept this prejudiced and racialized view as true. As a result the native comes to see himself as evil, pagan and primitive." (157) So in order to get validation from the masters the natives have only one option left and that is to imitate the master as much as possible, "to adopt his language, culture, religion and his ways of living," but in this process all he is able to achieve is wear a white mask as suggested by Fanon. Postcolonial critic Edward Said adds that besides military coercion, the colonial masters also apply, "the discursive component,"(Nayar, 160). The various means of coercion includes representation through, "archaeology, literary, history, music, ethnography, political theory and social contemporary used by the European colonial powers to talk about the East in a certain way."(Nayar, 160) In the colonial scenario, "Culture becomes as much uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementary," (Bhabha 175) as in the case of Jagan.

Some of the sparkling incidents in the novel *Vendor of Sweets* clearly shows the discursive component through the native writer who is an advocate of western living. Jagan, the true representative of Indian culture is shown in poor light, "regularly at five in the morning Jagan got up from 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 hair from the pig's tail." (16) He was against using it because, "it's unthinkable that anyone should bite a pig's tail first thing in the morning." (*Vendor of Sweets*, 16) Not only this after the advent of nylon brushes he still opposed tooth brush because he believed that it will harm the enamel. Narayan subtly attacks Jagan's belief in the herbal properties of margosa. "Jagan had immense faith in the properties of margosa, in spite of its bitterness, he called it amrita, the ambrosia which kept the God's alive; and sometimes called it Sanjeevini, the rare herb mentioned in the epics." (17) Narayan is critical about Jagan's belief in herbal medicine system, he even paints Jagan as a failure in trying natural medicines on his wife. He holds Jagan responsible for not allowing his wife to take aspirin and rather suggest margosa leaves for headache. Latest studies have now shown the side effects of aspirin on human heart besides now everybody can see how *datun* or the natural twigs are considered to be so beneficial for oral health. Amazon is selling natural toothbrushes made up of bamboo sticks and bundle of natural twigs of neem, margosa and twigs of other ayurvedic herbal trees as well.

Throughout the narrative, Jagan is representing true Indian culture while his son Mali is representing the western culture. It can't be an irony that Jagan is shown as meek, docile and easily controlled by Mali. Whenever an issue crops up between the two, it is Jagan who has to surrender before Mali. He leaves his college studies and runs away to America without telling his own father. After the initial shock is over, Jagan feels proud that his son has gone to America to become a writer. When he receives blue Inland letters from abroad he proudly displays it to everyone as if Mali has done something great by running away to America. When Mali comes back he brings an American girl along with him. Jagan gets an utter shock when he goes to the railway station to receive his son. Since the girl is a Christian and a beef eater too it becomes difficult for Jagan to adjust with them. It is a cultural shock for him. His relatives also turn him out of their community. He becomes an outcaste because of his son. He becomes a tenant in his own house. The father is compelled to use the back door of the house for entrance.

Being a doting father he accepts the presence of a daughter-in-law after a few months. As the time passes by he gets another grave shock. He comes to know that both of them are not formally married. They are in live-in relationship. Even in the 21st century India, it is difficult for any common Indian family to accept Live-in relationship but Narayan introduces this concept in 1967 when this was shocking news for any Indian parent. Above that, he projects the idea that if Jagan doesn't accept the situation then he will be at loss. Similarly, another character, the cousin is shown as a mediator between Jagan and Mali who always advocates for adjusting and finding a way for accepting the situation in the best possible manner. He acts as a safety valve between the father and the son thereby between the east and the west. He can be called as what Homi K Bhabha terms

as an ambassador of , "cultural hybridity, the in-between space that carries the meaning of culture." (Habib, 753) In the current global scenario it is important to decolonize the Indian mind and in order to initiate the process of decolonization we must remember Gayatri Spivak's stance, "Who decolonizes? And how?" (Spivak)

CONCLUSION

Thus as a writer, Narayan is a true product of Macaulay. He is an epitome of Macaulay's dubious colonial designs. His notorious minutes on Education prepared in 1835 becomes fruitful in the form of Narayan's negative portrayal of Jagan and his belief system. The idea, "we must at present do our best to form a class who maybe interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." (Habib, 748) is well executed because of the same English education received by R. K Narayan. As a tool of the colonial operator, Narayan's operant conditioning is deep rooted to such an extent that he himself negates his identity and nativity.

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