

Jagan (Narayan's novel *The Vendor of Sweets*) Confused

Character A small-time businessman nearing retirement, Jagan is the main character in Narayan's delicate portrait of how a man comes to terms with his ideals. Jagan is a widower, with one son, whom he spoils, in an attempt to make up for the absent mother. Jagan is a confused and eccentric idealist, who participated in Gandhi's struggle for Indian independence but who now assiduously counts his profits every evening. As he nears old-age, he wishes to reach a purer spiritual state by renunciation, but his efforts are somewhat comical. He starts by giving up salt, sugar and rice—the staples of an Indian diet—but not his desire to make more money. He writes a book promoting an unusual diet as the path to enlightenment but he can't find a publisher. We also learn, through a long flashback, that he did not live up to his ideals in his youth. He was a failure as a student and sometimes treated his wife with cruelty. These revelations serve to undermine his strictures toward his son, who rejects everything his father appears to stand for and adopts western materialism. Jagan is again conflicted in his relationship with his son, Mali, whom he loves but gradually comes to disrespect. When Mali returns from America with Grace, Jagan assumes they are married, and when he discovers they are not, he feels that his house has been sullied. Later, he comes to appreciate Grace and feels more affection to her than to his own son. At the end of the story, Jagan's eccentric spiritual quest is demonstrated when he meets another man, a dye-maker, who has committed his life to making a statue of a goddess. The man asks for Jagan's support in buying a small plot of land on which to prepare and build the statue. Jagan agrees, saying that he, too, needs a 'retreat,' a reference to the final stage of a person's life in traditional Hindu philosophy.

Activities As a vendor of sweets, Jagan spends his day in a small shop and evenings doing his accounts. In the evening, he reads and chants Hindu spiritual texts, even though their esoteric meaning escapes him. He often passes time in reflecting on his past, his failed youth, his slightly more successful marriage and his glory as a participant in Gandhi's movement.

Illustrative moments

Confused Jagan's confusion is exposed early on in the novel, when we watch him count his profits from the day's business and, at the same time, tell himself that he must purify himself. Some might consider this hypocrisy, but his spiritual aims are only loosely-held ideals.

Conflicted Another discrepancy in Jagan's character is his conflicted attitude toward his son, Mali. While he loves his son very much, he becomes so disillusioned with his materialistic behaviour that he actually contrives to keep him in prison (after being sentenced for drunk driving) in order that the boy learn the error of his ways.

Kind Despite these imperfections, Jagan is basically a kind man, who wishes to do good. This trait is displayed in his relationship with Grace, the half-American, half-Korean woman whom his son brings back with him from America. At first, Jagan is horrified at the fact that she is not married to his son and blames her for ruining his life. However, in the end, Jagan learns to respect her and even buys her plane ticket so that she can return to her home.

Discussion questions

The Vendor of Sweets is a meditation on the conflict between Indian traditional culture, especially spiritualism, and western materialism. And Jagan's relationship with his son is the embodiment of that tension.

Do you regard Jagan's life as successful or not?