

The Vendor of Sweets (1967)

Story Set in R K Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi, this novel is a gentle reflection on achieving equanimity in old age. The main character is Jagan, the titular seller of sweets, who is 55 years old, widowed with one son, Mali. We learn that in his own youth, Jagan was a follower of Gandhi and joined the non-violent movement for Indian independence. He is more or less content, except that his son, Mali is not following in his father's sober and practical footsteps. He wants to be a writer, which Jagan at first misconstrues as some kind of clerk (in colonial times, a minor bureaucrat in the British Raj was called a 'writer'). Although Jagan dotes on his son, he shows no interest in formal education and leaves the country to study creative writing in America (the author taught creative writing in several US universities). Without even telling his adoring father, Mali gets his passport and visa and departs. Jagan is upset but not angry and treasures each letter that his son writes. After two years, Mali returns with Grace (a half-American, half-Korean woman) as his partner. As Jagan realises the widening gulf between him and his son, he grows more and more affectionate toward Grace. Mali fails as a writer and asks his father for money to invest in a factory, a hair-brained scheme that Jagan reluctantly rejects. Jagan retires from the sweet vending business and devotes his time to completing a statue of a goddess. Jagan slowly withdraws from life, living more and more in the past, recollecting happy times with his wife. As the story draws to a conclusion, Mali is arrested for drunk driving and Jagan makes sure that he is not released early from prison, so that he can learn from his mistakes. Finally, Jagan buys Grace a plane ticket so that she can return to the land of her birth.

Characters

Jagan This is Jagan's story, told in Narayan's inimitable style mixing humour and pathos. Jagan is a simple, kind, loving man, for whom selling sweets to children is the appropriate job. His journey is one of renunciation, which by the end he has largely achieved. He begins the novel by saying, 'Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self.'

Mali His son is the polar opposite. Although lovingly cared for by his father, Mali shows no interest in the traditional values of Hindu that Jagan embodies. Returning from America, he becomes an ambitious (but unsuccessful) businessman who attempts to 'modernise' his old town. Even his American girl-friend, Grace finds his annoying and without principles.

Grace Grace is Mali's partner, whom he brings back to India with him. Like many of Narayan's female characters, Grace lacks the complexity of Jagan and Mali. She is half-Korean, half-American, a symbol of the cultural mixture that is found also in Mali, but not in Jagan. When she first comes to India with Mali, it appears that she might act as a bridge between cultures, and between father and son. In the end, however, she is alienated by what she finds and returns home.

Themes

Spiritual fulfilment Jagan's story illustrates the difficulty but also the supreme happiness to be found in spiritual fulfilment. His life is a long process of withdrawal from money, family and sensory (especially taste) pleasure. In someone else's hands, this story might be cloying and mawkish, but Narayan has a lightness of touch that makes it not only believable but also palatable.

Femininity Jagan's loss of his wife pains him throughout the novel. His companionship with her, a balance of his business mind with her instinctive generosity, is the perfect example of happiness. Jagan often reflects on their worship of a goddess who, they believe, gave them the gift of a son. And later Jagan spends time helping a sculptor complete a statue of another goddess, who is associated with wisdom.

Culture clash The estrangement between father and son is a dramatization of the wider tension between tradition and modern India (itself represented by the US). When the son returns from the US and plans to set up a factory that will produce novel-writing machines, it is not hard to see this as another example of the gulf between tradition and modernity.