

# THE VENDOR OF SWEETS

R. K. Narayan

(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.

## 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.

## 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.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**JAGAN** (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 know 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?

**MALI** (Ambitious)

**Character** Mali is another one of Narayan's spoiled sons, though with a slightly darker tone to his character. He is the polar opposite to his father, Jagan. While Jagan is a traditional man and a Gandhi follower, who believes in non-violence, manual labourer and herbal medicine, his son becomes an ambitious, modern, westernised man who believes that technology is the future. Mali

leaves India, saying 'I can't study here,' and goes to America for his education. When he comes back, in order to implement his entrepreneurial dream, he is a beef-eater with a foreign wife. The gulf between Mali and his father, however, begins early in life. When Mali's mother dies at a young age, Mali believes that his father has killed her, or contributed to her death, by his unwillingness to give her conventional medicine; Jagan, instead, uses only herbal medicine. Differences between father and son are nothing remarkable, but in this case Mali is not just alienated but sinister. He steals thousands of rupees from his father's savings in order to get to the US and he returns with a scheme to cheat his father out of more money in order to finance a factory that will build 'novel-writing' machines. Even the art of creating stories will, in the hands of this ambitious, Americanised son, become industrialised.

**Activities** Mali does not spend much time at his studies in Malgudi, finding the educational system 'backward.' Rather, he concentrates on escaping from the town, his father and the whole country. He shuts himself in his room at home, where his father can't reach him, and plans how to leave. He says that he wants to be a 'writer,' but when his father peers through the keyhole to his room, all he sees is a young man 'brooding.'

### **Illustrative moments**

Petulant Mali's petulance is displayed in an early chapter, when his father tries to placate him. For some time, Mali has remained bad-tempered and uncommunicative, feeling estranged from his father's traditional world and trying to find a path for himself in the backwater of Malgudi. Mali wants to become a writer, but his father thinks that is impractical. Then, one day, his father speaks to him kindly, asking if he has what he needs—pens, table, paper? Mali, however, takes offense and says, 'What's this? Are you examining me?' His father then asks about what he wants to write, and Mali tells him it's novels. 'How is it going?' his father asks, and Mali snaps back, 'I don't know. It's not like frying sweets in your shop. It takes thought, a lot of thought.' This insult silences his father for a minute before he asks when it will be finished. Now Mali explodes at him and the rift between them widens further, never to be healed.

Ambitious Mali's ambitions are obvious from the very beginning when he leaves India (with funds stolen from his father) for America to enrol in a 'creative writing' course. When he returns, his father expects to greet a famous novelist, but instead Mali has further designs on the savings his father has built up with his sweet shop. And now we see the extent of his ambitions. Sitting his father down in a comfortable chair, Mali walks up and down, explaining his idea. He will not write novels. No, he will build a factory that will produce machines that will write novels. Yes, he says, this is possible. He will get the financial backing of an American firm, but he needs his father to give him 'seed-capital' to get the scheme off the ground. 'Eventually,' he says in bursts of enthusiasm, 'India will produce more stories than any other country in the world.' When his father expresses disbelief, Mali ploughs on, 'Yes, father, it's true. Nowadays, electricity is used for everything—washing machines, grinding, powdering, everything!' How does it work, his father wants to know, and Mali explains, 'You see these four knobs....One is for characters, one for plot situations, the other one for climax, and the fourth is built on the basis that a story is made up of character, situations, emotion and climax, and by the right combination.' Jagan is horrified, but we readers delight in this sly satire of American boosterism (and a parody of optimistic claims about the Indian economy at the time).

### **GRACE** (Outsider)

**Character** Grace is Mali's partner, whom he brings back to India with him and presents to his father as his wife. She is not a major character, however, and serves mainly to reflect the changed nature of Mali. Neither is she a complex character, but Grace (like Mali) is a mixture of two cultures, in her case, Korea and American. In fact, we can say she is a female double of Mali: ambitious, entrepreneurial and focused on financial gain, even when that undermines family harmony. Her role as a female Mali is made literal when she writes his letters home to his father; the disguise is perfect and Jagan believes that he is reading letters written by his son. And, just as Mali entered a different culture (America) and had to adjust, Grace finds herself changing after living in India. Unlike Mali, however, Grace is practical and efficient, as shown when she takes charge of the household in India and when she uses subtlety (unsuccessfully) to persuade Jagan to invest in their new project to produce novel-writing machines. She is also a self-reliant and independent woman, who does not feel the need to marry Mali. As part of her transformation in the Indian cultural context, though, she begins to adopt the role of a daughter-in-law to Jagan. In the end, after Mali fails as a 'husband' and as a businessman, Grace retains her dignity and returns to America.

**Activities** As a minor character, we see little of Grace except in scenes with other people. In America, she is a hard-working manager in a PR company. Once in India, she lives with Mali in his father's house, goes about with him and plans their project. Slowly, she spends more time with Jagan, talks to him, listens to his memories and anxieties and learns to feel affection for him. At the end, she begins to do household chores, such as sweeping and washing vessels.

### **Illustrative moments**

Outsider The most prominent element of Grace's character is that she is an outsider. This cultural 'otherness' is built into her role from the very beginning, when we learn that she is not simply American, but actually Korean-American. But her alienation is dramatised more painfully when she accompanies Mali back to India. In the scene where Mali introduces her to his father, Mali says, 'This is Grace. We are married [not true]. Her name's Grace, dad.' With Grace standing silent and smiling sweetly, Jagan is taken aback. 'Married?' he thinks to himself. 'When were you married? You didn't tell me. You should tell your father. Who is she? Looks Chinese. Don't you know that you shouldn't marry a Chinese now that they have invaded India.' [The year is 1961, when Chinese troops crossed the border into India's Northwest Frontier Agency.] Grace is ostracised through no fault of her own. She has left America, where living together did not necessarily mean marriage, and come to India, where marriages are business, social and family transactions. Jagan cannot fit her into a category. She's not a daughter-in-law, she's not just a friend, she's not even simply American and she's definitely not India, let alone from Malgudi.

Accommodating Caught between cultures and thrown into the crossfire of a father-son conflict, Grace lives up to her name and slowly accepts her situation without fuss. Although she is part of the scheme to influence Jagan to invest his money in the factory project, she slowly develops an affection for the old man and begins to play the role of daughter-in-law. This accommodating part of her character is illustrated in a scene that occurs a few weeks after her arrival. Following her stormy and confused reception, Grace appreciates Jagan's kind and quiet outlook on life. One morning, Jagan comes back from bathing and finds her cleaning his room. He politely asks her to leave, but she clutches the broom and says, 'Father, I don't mind. I really don't. I must not forget that I am your daughter-in-law.' These words soothe the confused and puritanical Jagan. Even if she is not actually married to his son, her demeanour earns his respect.