
THE PHILOSOPHY OF 'KARMA' IN R.K.NARAYAN'S

THE VENDOR OF SWEETS

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"To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots – both in religion and family. I have these things." Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan (1906-2001), one of the founding pillars of Indian Writing in English, is an institution in himself. Born and brought up in a traditional South Indian family, Narayan is a true Indian both in spirit and thought. Much has been said about Narayan as an outstanding and unassailable storyteller. He is often applauded as a painter of a vivid 'Malgudi', a microcosm of Indian social milieu.

Born in a family of "the purest Brahmin stock" Narayan's roots in religion and family were strengthened by his maternal grandmother who was instrumental in introducing him during his childhood to classical Indian and Tamil cultures, languages and literature, defining the traditional Brahmin values and ways of life.

Narayan's traditional family and social background thus initiated him in early stage of his life in the knowledge of Hindu philosophy, religion and culture. In one of his interviews with Susan E. Craft, Narayan remarks, "There are so many stories, so much symbolism, so much imagery. That's where we should start."

Narayan has translated and published shortened prose versions of the two great Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and a few Hindu mythical tales in *Gods, Demons and Others*. It is his profound knowledge of religion which leads to incorporation of the philosophical principles of 'Karma', 'Punarjanma', 'Moksha', 'Maya' and 'Dharma' in his novels. R.K Narayan's fiction reiterates the doctrine of 'Karma'(action) in the Indian philosophical systems. This innate trust in life and the capacity of its renewal in the face of a threat of its existence is the central principle of his fiction. The Indian philosophy regards

this life which functions in a cyclic order subjected to various ups and downs as medium of realizing the true self.

This doctrine attempts to solve the great riddle of the origin of suffering and diversity of human conditions. Man's happiness, suffering, talents, virtues, his birth in the given family with its social status- are all traced to his actions in the previous life. According to Hindu philosophy, 'Karma' is often described as causal law operating on the moral and spiritual planes. The law of 'Karma' is the law of cause and effect, the result of an action is hidden in its performance. Moreover, the fruits of all actions may not be enjoyed or suffered in one's life but punishment or reward for the action is the eternal truth which makes the world moral or ethical. "Karma induces in us a mood of acceptance and understanding as we know that there is no dark fate that governs us. We move by our deeds."

According to Bhagvad S. Goyal, *The Vendor of Sweets*, the tenth novel of R.K Narayan is a sojourn into the theme of man's quest for identity and self-renewal (158). The fifty five year old Jagan, a fervent disciple of Gandhi and a devotee of the Bhagvad Gita explores the meaning, and mystery of life cycle through Indian philosophy. B.F Macdonald also pinpoints the conceptualization of 'Maya' and 'Karma' in the novel (113).

Narayan presents a realistic picture of the personal forces which make the final stage of retreat a natural part of an Indian's life. The novel has some autobiographical elements as there are some striking similarities between the author and the protagonist. Like Narayan's, Jagan's wife dies at a very young age when his child is also very young. The age sixty corresponds to both of them (117). In his novel, Narayan depicts a hero of his own age who shares some of his ideas, experiences and philosophy of life. He writes in the novel: "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self" said Jagan to his listener, who asked "Why conquer the self?" Jagan said, "I do not know, but all our sages advise us so" (13).

This statement of Jagan and the question of the listener are typical of an average Indian's philosophical stance. Like Krishnan in *The English Teacher* and Margayya in *The Financial Expert*, Jagan goes through an internal transformation from materialism to spiritualism. It is within this transformation that the novelist has tried to explore his cyclic vision as depicted

in the Indian scriptures. Jagan, the sweets vendor follows a philosophy which is an amalgam of all kinds of ideas and maxims, picked up from the 'Vedas' and the 'Bhagvad Gita'.

The first half of the novel draws him as a comic figure who pretends to be an ideal follower of the Indian ethics, at the same time concerned more about the familial and material aspects of life. Jagan is a hybrid of a 'Yogi' and 'Bhogi'. He reads the Bhagvad Gita in his sweet shop, and has given up salt and rice. He has never possessed more than two sets of clothes spun with his own hands and leads an austere life. But he replaces sugar by honey. He has a maternal obsession about his son's food and is exceedingly devoted to him. Similarly, his attitude towards money is also ambiguous. Money has no personal use for him. He calls money an evil but at the same time justifies its accumulation. When his cousin asks him, "...why you go on working and earning, taking all this trouble?"(10); he replies in a typical philosophical tone, "I work because it is one's duty to work"(30).

He is prone to flattery. He lies about his academic failure and says in a heroic manner, "I had to leave the college when Gandhi ordered us to non-cooperate. I spent the best of my student years in prison" (33). Jagan, the philosopher, who freely distributes ideals to all the people around him can not advise his young son Mali. He surrenders to his son's whimsicalities and is incapable of exercising parental authority in disciplining him. Also he complies with Mali's demand of import and installation of the writing machine. Reading of the Bhagvad Gita is replaced by the blue airmail from America as Mali goes to America. When Mali returns from America, Jagan accepts Grace, an American Korean girl, as his daughter in law. However on knowing the real nature of Mali's relationship with Grace, he is totally shattered and feels his home has been defiled. So, from the beginning of the novel till Mali's return from America along with Grace, Jagan ends up being a comic creature who manifests in his words and actions a duality of standards.

In the latter half of the novel, Jagan's character is no longer a simple comical creature. The first symptoms of his transformation are perceived when he distributes sweets to small children free of cost, which is an unprecedented action that signals an inner evolution in Jagan. He speaks: "Sit down, all of you [his staff]. I [Jagan] will read to you from the Bhagvad Gita every day for an hour. You will benefit by it"(102).

Reduction in the cost of sweets and profits signifies a Gandhian mode of protest which could also be interpreted as an effort on the part of the protagonist to liberate himself from filial bondage. Once Jagan liberates himself from filial bondage, liberation from materialistic world is rendered easy and Jagan transfers his shop, the centre of his materialistic world in a calm and cool manner to his cousin. The transformation of Jagan from 'Bhogi' to 'Yogi' is true and sincere.

To some extent, Jagan could be described as a 'Karma Yogi' though there are some flaws in his actions. He is a self-made and self-reliant man. His cousin rightly compliments Jagan for abandoning salt and conquering the taste in food. To prepare sweets and sell them is Jagan's 'Karma' which he performs with a deep sense of responsibility, devotion and determination. He provides unadulterated sweets to Malgudians at reasonable prices. Jagan is well aware of the concept of duty. He says: "Whatever it is, one can only do one's duty up to a point. Even in the Gita you find it mentioned. . . "(66).

Jagan is engaged in ordinary duties of a householder which has the effect of binding him in chains of worldly attachment. The novel presents the sequential stages of growth and evolution in the character of Jagan when he transcends from materialism to spiritualism to attain self-realization, which is the goal of a seeker in Indian philosophy.

The ideas of God for Jagan corroborates with the idea of God in the Vedantic philosophy, God is manifested as omnipotent and omnipresent in the form of Soul or 'Atman'. Jagan also announces, "Every soul is God" and this is also endorsed by his cousin (54). This Vedantic conception of God is further emphasized when Jagan is unhappy with the activities of Mali.

Jagan's response to worldly relationships imbibes a philosophical undertone. He expresses his thoughts in a philosophical manner. He says that man is blinded by his attachments and that every attachment creates a delusion which carries him away from the ultimate reality.

After the initial stage of parental attachment to his son, Jagan endeavours to detach himself from his familial attachments and materialistic pursuits. However, he finally succeeds in distancing himself from his son, his stoic acceptance of Mali's fate is a living example of the

philosophy of 'Karma' according to which a person has to individually bear the consequences of one's actions.

R.K Narayan offers another paradigm of 'Guru-Shishya' i.e seeker and teacher, the relationship between Chinna Dorai and Jagan. Chinna Dorai, the sculptor assists Jagan in the process self-realization, his philosophy is related to the concepts of self, illusion, body and God. Chinna Dorai advises Jagan in an abstract manner and asks him to acknowledge his true self. He says, "True, true, you must not lose sight of your real being, which is not mere bone or meat." (120) The scene of the river side when Jagan looks for the stone out of which the Goddess Gayatri was to be carved is memorable. Jagan behaves as though this world was an illusion, where the so-called realities merge into dream.

Narayan offers a realistic and convincing picture of the sort of personal forces that make the final stage of retreat for the protagonist a natural part of his life. Jagan accepts the doctrine of 'Karma' as preached in Hindu way of life. He accepts the death of his wife in the manner of a stoic. Similarly, he overlooks the foolhardiness of Mali and acknowledge these reversals of life as part and parcel of life. This philosophy of acceptance grants a moral and spiritual strength to Jagan. The doctrine of 'Karma' inculcates in him a reiteration of faith in the absolute justice to accept life with equanimity and fortitude. Normalcy is restored in his life. K.R Srinivas Iyengar rightly observes: "There is generally a fight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order followed by a return, a restoration to normalcy" (385).

Through the presentation of his unique cyclic vision, Narayan advocates acceptance of traditional Indian philosophical norms, for the sake of spiritual tranquility and social harmony in this age of multifarious complexities when the entire human race is entangled in the quagmire of materialism manifested in cut-throat competition, rivalries and tensions. And this is how 'The Philosophy of Karma' has been very interestingly woven by him in his work *The Vendor of Sweets*.

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