

POST -COLONIAL READING IN *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS*

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Abstract

R.K.Narayan is the most famous Indian novelist, his reputation as one of the founding figures of Indian writing in English. In this research paper it is observed that—Unlike many colonial and post-colonial writers Narayan does not directly attack or criticize the colonial system, although elements of gentle criticism and irony directed towards the colonial system are scattered throughout many novels of Narayan. Colonialism to the Malgudians is an external phenomenon. Post-Colonial reading formulates a synthesis between both the Colonial the Post-colonial. The Post-Colonial studies are fore most in any programme of literature in English. Narayan explores the inevitable clash of both the colonial and the post-colonial. Therefore, a postcolonial reading of R. K. Narayan's work, especially novel *The Vendor of Sweets* with regard to his attitude to the English language would likely to reveal that he endeavours to formulate a synthesis between the Indian element and the colonial one. Within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is impossible to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition. The work of Indian novelist R.K.Narayan, which has frequently either been regarded as deeply traditional, or as incorporating the ironic perspective of the English literary tradition, illustrates this problem.

Key words : Colonial, Post-Colonial, Reading, Synthesis, Syncretic.

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Introduction

R.K.Narayan is one of the renowned Indo – Anglian novelists is held in high esteem not only in India but also in England and United States of America. He has a special place in Indian Literature in English. He is the first Indian writer in English to receive National and International honours for fiction. Commenting on the world wide reputation of Narayan, Haden Moore William writes, “Probably no Indian writer since Tagore is better known in the west than Narayan” Narayan is one of the very few Indian writers in English, who has achieved such a great eminence and is only second to the noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore. The first Indian novelist in English of International repute was neither Salman Rushdie nor the Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul but R. K. Narayan. He has more than 15 novels to his credit and most of his novels are set in his imaginary World of Malgudi, he has also more than two hundred short stories in his credit. The regular flow of reprints and new editions of Narayan’s vast list of fictions, non-fictions, essays, re-telling and anthologies even now, shows that all over the world people are reading them for pleasure and doing research for probing the hidden themes. It shows the relevance of R.k.Narayan’s writing.

This research paper attempts to explore new perspective that is post colonial reading on Narayan’s novel *The Vendor of Sweets*. Post colonial perspective is a new insight into his novel. Without colonialism there would be no post-colonialism. Colonialism is about the dominance of a strong nation over another weaker one. Colonialism happens when a strong nation sees that its material interest and affluence require that it expand outside its borders. Colonialism is the acquisition of the colonialist, by brute force, of extra markets, extra resources of raw material and manpower from the colonies. The colonialist, while committing these atrocities against the natives and territories of the colonies, convinces himself that he stands on high moral grounds.

As a result of this the white Europeans ventured adventurously into the so-called underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia and dominate a lot of geographical spaces there. They subjugated the natives, imposed their will at large on them. They eroded the natives’ cultures and languages, plundered the natives’ wealth and established their orders based on settlers’ supremacy.

Some of the results and effects colonialism can be put in the following terms:

1. The total or partial erosion of the colonized culture.
2. The mediation of the identity and subjectivity of the colonized.
3. The total rejection by some elements among the colonized of everything western as a form of reaction and protest against the colonizer.
4. The categorization of the world into ranks, such as first world, second world, the West and the rest with all the subsequent stereotyping and prototyping that follows.
5. The emergence of different forms of fundamentalism that aim at purifying their local cultures from the residues of the colonial past.
6. The emergence of bourgeoisie classes in the colonies, modeling themselves after their masters, who endeavor to maintain their status quo by getting closer to Western culture.
7. The emergence of societies with a lot of contradictions and split loyalties.

Post-colonialism

In essence, what post-colonialism, as a movement, does is to expose to both the colonizer and ex-colonized the falsity of their assumptions. The pioneers of Post-colonialism like Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Spivak Gayatri among others, concerned themselves with the social and cultural effect of colonization. They regarded the way in which the west paved its passage to the orient and the rest of the world as based on unfounded truths. They asserted in their discourses that no culture is better or worse than other culture and consequently they nullified the logic of the colonialists.

In their readings of colonial and post-colonial literature and other forms of art, post-colonial critics relied heavily on other available literary theories.

Post -Colonial Reading In The Novel *The Vendor Of Sweets* :A Brief Analysis

Within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is impossible to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition. The work of Indian novelist R.K.Narayan, which has frequently either been regarded as deeply traditional, or as incorporating the ironic perspective of the English literary tradition, illustrates this problem. For both these readings are based on a false dichotomy. The post-colonial text is always a complex and hybridized formation. It is

inadequate to read it either as reconstruction of pure traditional values or as simply foreign and intrusive. The reconstruction of ‘pure’ cultural value is always conducted within a radically altered dynamic of power relations.

The Vendor of Sweets (Narayan 1967) tells the story of a small shopkeeper, Jagan and his relationship with his society and its traditions, traditions which his son Mali (who has studied in America) is determined to change and modernize. Early in the novel we are told how the sweets-vendor, Jagan, collects his money in two separate containers, one representing the sales for the official day ending at 6.00 P.M. on which he pays sales tax, and one for money collected ‘out of hours’ on which he pays none. This money, we are told, he viewed as ‘a sort of immaculate conception, self-generated, arising out of itself and entitled to survive without reference to any tax. It was converted into crisp currency at the earliest moment, tied into a bundle, put away to keep company with the portrait of Mr. Noble, the District Collector, who at one time had come to Jagan’s father for lessons in astrology, and for whom a chair had been built especially:

“A signed portrait ripening yellow with time was among the prized possessions dumped in the loft; but at some point in the history of the family the photograph was brought down, the children played with it for a while, and then substituted in its glassed frame the picture of a god and hung it up, while the photograph in the bare mount was tossed about as the children gazed on Mr. Noble’s whiskers and giggled all the afternoon. They fanned themselves with it, too, when the summer became too hot; finally it disappeared back to the loft amidst old account – books and other obscure family junk”. (8; emphasis added)

Within a metaphoric reading of this trope, the children’s action in removing Mr. Noble from the frame would seem to serve merely as an ironic device reflecting on the transience of power and the inevitable return of the ‘eternal’ Indian values, which colonialism merely overlaid. This is how many such ‘ironic’ moments in Narayan texts are read by nationalist critics who then have some difficulty in reconciling the ‘ironic’ tonalities within a reading of the text as ‘de-colonized’ fiction. This is because in Narayan not all the ironies work to the benefit of the Indian verities. Critics have expressed irritation with Narayan’s comic if sympathetic treatment of Indian traditional institutions and have found his tone too complex and too ambivalent. Those who seek

to totalize the text and read it as an extended metaphor in which Narayan's mythical town of Malgudi functions either as a universal 'great stage of fools'. or as a setting for the parable of Man from the Indian point of 'view', will inevitably be forced to 'edit' the text to make it fit such readings. The production of such a stereotype from either perspective must reduce the text to a mere revision or reversal of the colonial perspective and epistemology. Any readings of the trope of the picture frame as total metaphor must reinforce such dependent and colonized practices.

If the trope is read as metonymic and repetitive (Bhabha 1984a) then a different significance is revealed. This early reference to the transition from Mr.Noble to household god in the exchange of icons and the 'frame' is repeated in the tale of the 'immaculate money'. When Mali determines, without his father's knowledge, to go to America, and appropriates the air fare from the 'immaculate' undeclared money which, Jagan has hidden in the loft 'to keep company with the portrait of Mr.Noble', Jagan through approving of his son's enterprise' considers 'transferring' what is left of the untaxed hoard:

'It must be very costly,' said Jagan like a prattling baby.

'But he has doubtless found the cash for it,' said the cousin. 'Naturally, What is the cash worth to me? It's all for him. He can have everything he wants,' said Jagan, making a note mentally to count at the earliest moment his cash boarded in the loft. He also considered transferring it all, in due course, to a casket behind the family gods in the puja room. (37, emphasis added)

At the level of narrative this transference has the immediate effect of restoring Jagan's economic control, as we discover subsequently when, on Mali's return from America with suitably 'enlarged' horizons he demands 2.5 lakhs of rupees (50,000 dollars) to start his company to manufacture his novel-writing machine. When Jagan refuses Mali is not disturbed. As the cousin reports.

'... he also says he knows where you keep cash not sent to the bank'.

He says so, does he?' said Jagan, laughing within himself at the fact that he had changed the venue of the immaculate cash.

‘Money us an evil,’ he added with great feeling. (6I)

But in the novel’s larger repetitive insistence on the possibility of appropriating power from the organization and techniques of the colonial and neo-colonial world, the function of the trope is to radicalize the significance of the replacement of Mr Noble by the god’ in the frame. Rather than a mere substitute of symbols within an unchanging pattern of underlying structures, it signifies an active employment of the symbol to regenerate and reactivate an alternative practice within the historical present. The frame remains but what is empowered within it can now be the product of an active choice. The trope is useful for demonstrating the fact that the processes of abrogation (the rejection of Mr Noble) and appropriation (the retention of the ‘frame’) inevitably concern the dynamics of power. In this particular example there is a concern not with what is contained within the frame as much as with the way in which reality itself ‘framed’ and ‘authorized’ by the structures of power.

Significantly, of course, the portrait of Mr. Noble proves a useless guardian once removed from the ‘frame’ and consigned to the attic, but the money is successfully protected by the gods who now inhabit the ‘frame’ of power and active presence. Yet their potency is also produced by the appropriation to them of the ‘frame’ of power they have inherited from Mr Noble. The same applies to Jagan, who seeks to live by the laws of the changed and hybridized reality within which such changes can be made effective or otherwise. This is true of both sides of the equation, the traditional prejudices and laws which remain active despite Gandhi’s attempted reforms, and the European influences and economic controls which remain in place despite his successful struggle for ‘independence’.

Thus when Grace (Mali’s Korean – American wife) innocently comments that she had been frightened of prejudice under the caste system before she arrived, Jagan’s comments reveal his awareness of the gap between proposed ideal and actuality:

‘Well, we don’t believe in caste these days, you know,’ Jagan said generously.

‘Gandhi fought for its abolition.’

‘Is it gone now?’ she asked innocently.

It’s going, Jagan said, sounding like a politician. ‘We don’t think of it nowadays,’ hoping that the girl would not cross-examine him further. (49)

Such a metonymic reading, whilst it recognizes the significance of Jagan's loyalty to traditional practices, does not do so at the cost of being dismissive of Mali or of his stand against the inadequacies of Jagan's partial and flawed modernization on the Gandhian model.

The present action of the novel is sharply contextualized by the flashback account of Jagan's own courtship, marriage 'in the Indian way' and subsequent struggle to fulfill the demands of his father, his family, and 'the ancient home' (Hindu practice?) they represent. The account of Jagan's journey to the temple with his wife and parents to sacrifice for a son illustrates the inevitable and continuing friction between 'tradition' and changing practice, a friction which is continued in a different way in Jagan's relationship with his own son. Jagan's father is angry at being overcharged by the coconut-sellers who, by custom, supply the sacrifice material:

'If I had known the price of things here, I'd have brought all the stuff from home,' he cried irascibly. Mother interposed from where she sat, 'That is not permitted. Custom requires. . . .''Yes, yes, it was written in the Vedas ten thousand years ago that you must be exploited on this spot of earth by this particular coconut-woman. True. true,' he said cynically, glaring at his son and daughter-in-law... But for the fact that he was a coward, Jagan would have asked his parents, 'Haven't you enough grandchildren? Why do you want more? Why don't you leave me alone? (131)

In this exchange a continuing dialectical pattern emerges between a traditional insistence on the collective, family, group and society, and the opposed demands of the European ideology of the independent 'individual' whose social inflection is one of the strongest trace marks left by Europeanization on the postcolonial world. It is a trace whose presence marks the novel with an insistent repetition which spans all three generations of the family, irrespective of their personal concerns and histories. It marks the novel below the level of character and theme, revelatory as it is, not of design, or rhetoric, or even of cultural bias or national 'sensitivity', through all of whose action critics have sought to 'elucidate' the fiction, but, rather, of the social and cultural formations which produce both the lives of contemporary Indians and the art-forms which are available to record them.

The conditions of production of the book are thus fully and honestly reproduced at all levels of the text, and when these conditions are recognized by an adequate critical practice, the text can be liberated from the domination of partial models of the neo-colonist or simple nationalist kind and reconstructed as a sign of a distinctive post-colonial practice. We do not have to decide between the generations in a moral way any more than we have to endorse or reject their actions. Such a totalizing moral frame work would demand a simple collapsing inwards of the novel's paradoxes and pluralities, and would be symptomatic of the reduction of the complexities of the post-colonial Indian text into an approximation (or 'mimicry') of an idealized version of European ethics and philosophical categories masquerading as universals (or, as we have suggested, a falsely 'radical reversal of these which simply exchanges one stereotype for another, as in ,nationalist. readings).

Conclusion

R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, in the different ways, and from the very different perspective of the society, illustrate the possibilities of dismantling received epistemological notions one both language and form have been fully appropriated. These become the expression of a society no longer conceived as Other but triumphantly self-defining and self-sustaining, able to reorder the conceptual frame within which power is determined. Symptomatic readings of this kind are not concerned primarily with evaluating one text against another in some privileging hierarchy or canon, nor with 'discovering features of their post-colonial text is itself a site of struggle for linguistic control, as the power which it makes manifest is yielded up to the appropriating discourse. This struggle, as we have shown, extends to the disputes concerning themes, form, gene redefinition, implicit systems of manner, custom, and value. A body of indigenous theory which seeks to address the issued implicit here has emerged in post – colonial societies, and it is to a consideration of this that we want to turn next.

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