

better; and we are entitled to think that the theme and treatment fall considerably short of the solidity which forms the undeniable merit of his best work.

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### On the Theme of Paternal Love in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

Paternal love is a significant theme in R. K. Narayan's fiction. From his earliest stories, for example "Forty-five a Month"<sup>1</sup> in which the usually servile Venkat Rao decides to defy his irascible boss in order to spend his evenings with his child, fatherhood is highlighted as one of the most beautiful experiences in life. Two novels that explore this theme in depth are *The Financial Expert*<sup>2</sup> and *The Sweet-Vendor*.<sup>3</sup>

The parallels between Margayya the financial expert and Jagan the sweet-vendor are numerous, but the differences are more significant. Whereas Margayya remains the same despite various experiences, Jagan finds himself both as man and as father. Critics have opined that Margayya reaches a higher plane by the end of the novel. Rajeev Taranath says, "At the end of the novel, he is apparently back at the position he started from; but with an altered and enriched kind of awareness. In other words, he has ceased to be anonymous to himself."<sup>4</sup> I feel this reflects the sensitivity of the critic more than any pattern present in the novel. Margayya undergoes no change. Affluence does not go to his head; nor does it rid him of his miserliness. He learns nothing from Balu's flight, supposed death, and return. He is a little more generous about Balu's allowance, but these experiences do not teach him anything about values or human relationships or suffering. Even the birth of his grandson, the one unflinching soft spot in dynasty-loving egoists, does not move him. At this point he has lost all paternal love. I do not see his attack on Dr. Pal the way Panduranga Rao does; Rao says, "He punishes Pal and thunderously exhibits his resentment against lewd life. But the beating he administers to Pal is something more; it is a revolt against a world that ever keeps him unhappy."<sup>5</sup> I disagree because I do not see any evidence that Margayya is unhappy or caught "between the two civilizations of modern India."<sup>6</sup> Margayya is blissfully happy in his profession right from his banyan tree days to his financial wizardship. He is a very practical businessman as his deft manipulations show, especially the astuteness with which he divests himself, with a huge profit to boot, of the notoriety of being known as the publisher of *Domestic Harmony*. He does not sell his partnership out of any sudden moral awakening but because he had three very practical reasons—he detested running a modern office, sales were falling off, and it hurt his dignity to be associated with such a book.

As for his revolt against Pal's moral turpitude, let us not forget that Margayya's conscience has never been troubled by Pal's questionable ethics at any time though he has been cognizant of this from their very first meeting

at the idyllic pond. He says at one point that his "instinct was right in choosing Dr. Pal as his tout" (*FE* p. 158).

Margayya works his own ruin, sure enough, but not due to any change in his values, nor does he go without regret into the limbo of bankruptcy. We are not told much about him after the loss but two points emerge clearly—one, Margayya plans to start all over again, and two, he says nothing about changing his methods. Rather, he speculates "who knows what might happen" and also questions regretfully if he should have shared his property with Balu for "that would have saved him at least the rest of it" (*FE* p. 174). Neither as a man nor as a father does Margayya find himself. A sequel would essentially be a copy of the same script.

But Jagan is different. Like many other Narayan characters, Jagan is an eccentric. Narayan's use of ambiguity has advanced considerably in this, his tenth novel. We never come to know whether Jagan's philosophy is genuine or a mere rationalizing of his thrifty nature. Whereas Margayya's miserliness is repulsive at times, Jagan's thrift is wrapped up in ambiguity and his virtues and his sense of lostness are shown so clearly that he never loses the reader's sympathy. Shylock places equal stress on his child and his ducats, and Margayya lays more stress on his ducats, but Jagan is concerned only about his child, his ducats becoming purely incidental. Even when asked to provide the capital for a two-hundred-thousand-rupee project, he is more concerned about his son's rashness than about the money. And when, at last, he awakens to the futility of profit-making, he reduces the price of the sweets, and later he leaves his entire fortune without a backward look. His genuine love for his shop prompts him to ask his cousin to keep it going, but he himself is through with the whole dreary routine of being "a money-making sweet-maker with a spoilt son" (*SV*, p. 122). It considerably enhances Jagan's stature and the author's that the change of heart precedes Mali's arrest.

Essentially Jagan, the father, is naive, naive to the point of stupidity at times, whereas Margayya is never naive. But as a sweet-vendor Jagan is certainly not naive. He handles the Bombay Anand Bhavan merchant and the delegation with seeming naiveté, but it is actually suavity par excellence that makes him repeat many banalities and trivia without committing himself in any way. And later, if he does reverse his decision about the price of sweets, it is not because he is intimidated by his compeers but because of his new awareness that his own peace of mind is more important than anything else. This is the "awareness" that Jagan reaches, the philosophy the novel embodies—let each man work for his own salvation, his own, nobody else's. Thus Jagan passes through several stages of perception. In the beginning his focus is on his son, Mali, and on his business. Then the son moves out of focus once he walks out of Albert Mission College, and Jagan endeavors to place him back in focus through a subjective process with the help of letters. When Mali returns from America, Jagan realizes that the lens of communication is completely fogged over and he tries to clear it through Grace. Even so, the focus is irreparably blurred, and then he concentrates on his business though Mali and Grace still form part of the composition. Then his son's constant nagging tilts the camera in a completely new direction and Jagan suddenly sees a whole new vista. This is the point at which he reduces the price of his sweetmeat packets. The visit to the ruined garden with the hair-dyer stirs a desire in him to focus on this new landscape. It is only a

desire, and at this point the lifelong habit of focusing on his son still binds him.

His unpremeditated reminiscence at the foot of Lawley Statue is when he emerges from behind the black-cloth of his camera and sees the landscape with the naked eye, and thereby gets the correct perspective. He relives his bachelorhood and his marriage, the long years of marital orgy while books lay unread, examinations unpassed; then the longer years of barrenness resulting in a kind of emasculation when he "felt fatigued by all this apparatus of sex, its promises and its futility, the sadness and the sweat at the end of it all" (SV p. 172); then the hours of prayer on Badri Hill at the Santana Krishna shrine, and then at last the shoot gladdening a long-barren earth.

The shoot had become a sapling, the sapling was now a tree. And he, Jagan, the sower, had thought himself the gardener personally responsible for its growth. He had assumed it was his duty to get Mali out of scrapes, and that he could put everything right. Now, at the foot of Lawley Statue, he realizes that he was not the gardener; there was no need to rebuke himself for having thought otherwise because it was immaterial now, just as it was immaterial to judge whether he had been a good gardener or a bad one; the tree had grown, it would probably have grown anyway, perhaps better, perhaps worse, and that too was immaterial because it was past. The sower and the seed were two different units. Jagan was now responsible only for himself, and Mali for Mali. "Who are we to get him out or to put him in?" (SV. p. 190). "I am going somewhere, not carrying more than what my shoulder can bear. . . . I am a free man" (SV. pp. 190-191). With these realizations Jagan ascends to a new level of perception.

He was responsible only for himself. He had neglected his foremost responsibility—his salvation—all these years. He had to find the right focus. Whatever the focus should be, it was neither the shop nor Mali. Perhaps it should be the five-headed goddess Gayatri coming out of the stone that had lain in the river at the foot of the ruined garden. Perhaps not.

Jagan is nowhere near completing the composition. But he has perceived the framework, somewhere within which is the object that ought to be focused upon. And the day is clear and bright.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. K. Narayan, "Forty-five a Month," in *Dodu and Other Stories* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1943), pp. 9-17.

<sup>2</sup>R. K. Narayan, *The Financial Expert* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1963). The novel was first published in 1952. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and bear the page reference in parentheses after the abbreviated title *FE*.

<sup>3</sup>R. K. Narayan, *The Sweet-Vendor* (London: The Bodley Head, 1967). Subsequent quotations are from this edition and bear the page reference in parentheses after the abbreviated title *SV*.

<sup>4</sup>Rajeev Taranath, "The Average as the Positive: A Note on R. K. Narayan," in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (Dharwar: Karnatak University, 1968), p. 366.

<sup>5</sup>V. Panduranga Rao, "The Art of R. K. Narayan," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (July 1968), 34.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*