O/L English Literature Support materials by RCF – A model answer on the Novel Vendor of Sweets by R.K. Narayan.

Question:

Had Ambiga been alive, there wouldn’t have been a conflict between Jagan and Mali. Discuss with reference to the Novel Vendor of Sweets.

Narayan’s novel Vendor of Sweets is about a conflict between a father and a son which ends up in the father or Jagan leaving home to become a recluse in a temple. The conflict between Jagan and Mali really begins even before his wife’s death as Jagan refuses to give western medicine for her, being a firm believer in the efficacy of the native remedies. Ambiga’s death creates a permanent rift between the father and the son, which ends up in one leaving home and the other ending up in jail. In fact, wife’s death is a recurring motif in Narayan’s novels, as he also lost his wife when they were still young.

From the beginning of the novel, Jagan’s behavior causes some disturbance in the family. His tanning of leather, for example produces a nasty smell that sends the family happiness into disarray. Ambiga had never become accustomed to the dreadful smell of the tanning leather. This must have caused some resentment in the mind of Mali towards his father.

Unfortunately Ambika did not keep good health. She suffered from severe headaches. Jagan believed in Gandhian “Nature cure” and used a twig of neem made into a brush each morning and it was most unwillingly that he gave an aspirin tablet to his wife to relieve her of head-ache. But her life could not be saved. It was a case of a rare kind of brain-tumour, and it ultimately caused her death. Mali was too young at the time to understand the real cause of her death, and unconsciously felt that his father’s principle (nature cure) had killed her.

Thus the reasons of Mali’s hostility were psychological and they went back to the remote past when he was hardly more than a child. Jagan lost not only his wife but also his son at one stroke. A barrier seemed to have grown between them after the tragic event. The scene of his wife’s death remained fresh forever in the minds of Jagan as well as Mali.

Had Ambiga been alive, there wouldn’t have been such a conflict between Jagan and Mali. For example, had she been alive, Mali wouldn’t have started having his meals from outside as son’s love to eat meals prepared by their mothers. He also wouldn’t have given up his studies. His tearing up his books and set fire to them suggest his deep –rooted resentment towards his father and what he likes. Also, had Ambiga been alive, it is highly unlikely that Mali would go to America to learn about novel writing. Mother’s love would have prevented him from taking such a drastic action.

Even Mali’s attitude to towards his wife Grace, seem to be frozen with psychological trauma as it turns out to be somewhat strained relationship which finally ends up in Grace leaving for America. Had his mother been alive, he would probably have married a Hindu woman and lead a normal married life. As a father Jagan feels ill –disposed to handle such problems. Further, the strained relationship between Mali and Grace seem to parallel the similar relationship between Jagan and his wife.

Thus, it is possible that if Ambiga had been alive, the conflict between Jagan and Mali wouldn’t have gone thus far. She would definitely have intervened and provided some solution to it. Sons are naturally more close to the mother rather than to the father. Thus, she would have provided him love and security which would certainly have a healthy influence on the father- son relationship as well.