

R.K. Narayan's Swami and Friends: A True Representation of Childhood Life**Dr. Neetu Baghel**

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Abstract: R K Narayan is one of the best Indian writers in English sharing his status with Raja Rao and Mulkh Raj Anand. A highly acclaimed writer, master story teller, his characters and his portrayal of 'Malgudi' with coruscating virtuosity are testament to his enduring appeal to the readers and critics alike. He is one of the very few writers in those times who delved deep in the world of children to find his own childhood in them. His stories containing the child characters firmly establish his status as a writer with rare insight into child psychology. This insight, however, is rooted in Narayan's own experiences as a child. *Swami and Friends* (1935) is the main novel of Narayan which manages the little and guiltless children.

The aim of this paper is to the plight of the children which generally goes unnoticed by the so called wise adult world and how the pure uncorrupt mind has to face harshness on the part of the elders in order to carve out a gentleman out of them.

Key Words:- Swami, Children, Malgudi, School, Friendships

Introduction: R. K. Narayan was born on 10th October 1906 and passed away in 2001. In his long career he has published fourteen novels, over two hundred short stories, a memoir, two travel books, innumerable essays, and two plays. His first novel is *Swami and Friends* (1935). His last published work is *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), which in many ways reinforced the concerns and motifs of his writing in his long career—themes like exile and return, education (in the widest sense of the term), woman and her status in the society, myths and the ancient Indian past, tradition and modernity, Malgudi and its culture, appearance and reality, the family and so on. These have been Narayan's consistent concerns in a career spanning over nearly seventy years.

Widely regarded as one of India's greatest 20th-century English writer, R.K. Narayan is as relevant today as he was during the early days of Indian-English literature. Reckoned as the painter of modern India, R. K. Narayan is a storyteller with a sharp convincing outlook. The unabridged realities of life are appropriately painted by the great maestro R.K. Narayan in every novel and short story he penned. A masterpiece as it has been stated, *Swami and Friends* is the very first work of R.K. Narayan set against the backdrop of the fictional city of

Malgudi. In Narayan's world of fiction *Swami and Friends* clearly illustrates the surmounted pinnacles of simplicity and imagination, from a child's point of view.

R.K. Narayan, one of the master story tellers, among the Indo-English writers paved his way through the eyes and mind into the hearts of the Indian readers by creating an imaginary world of Malgudi where realistic characters in a typically Indian setting lived amid unpredictable events. Narayan wrote at that time when India was in a transitory phase struggling hard to move from slave hood towards a free nation. Amidst so much turmoil, he managed to stay away from politics and focus on the portrayal of a typical Indian life. Narayan was born and brought up in a south Indian family in Madras. But the most fascinating feature of his personality is that he is a pure Indian both in thought and spirit despite his preference for English over his mother language for the expression of his creative urge.

In the present novel the plot is straightforward with different themes, for example, parents-child relationship, friendship, and orthodoxy and so forth. The characters of Swami, Sankar, Mani and Rajam present the sharp observation and information on human and child psychology of Narayan. The manners, by which childhood is socially developed, just as culturally and truly arranged, will clearly vary here and there. 'Swami and Friends' unmistakably outlines the unskilled statures of creative mind, from a child's perspective, in Narayan's universe of fiction. Narayan's accounts, cossetting with children, investigated their psychology plentifully. The element of innocence also their deeds that causes mental anxiety and dread complex in their delicate minds is portrayed in unmistakable style in his classic story *Swami and Friends*.

Swami and Friends may be read as an episodic story of school-boys, realized through their typical psychology and characteristically dramatized misadventures. The school-boy's epic has the most striking and all all-encompassing ring of innocence about it. Though all the boys in the novel seem to be dramatizing innocence, it is basically Swaminathan, the central consciousness in it, probably inspired by the child-God, Balasubramania Swami through whom it is chiefly realized.

Swami, the young hero in *Swami and Friends* is the central consciousness of the novel. What he notices and especially what he does, constitute the stuff of the novel. Although he is a mere school-boy type, Swami stands out remarkably as a bouncing and enlivened character. Narayan projects the boy's innocence through his overall psychology exemplified mostly in his misadventures. This treatment of innocence on the face of it may indeed appear plain and straightforward. Narayan delineates the boy's milky innocence, his character and his imagination at every conceivable instance. Swami's different modes of innocence exhibit the inherent trait of the children's world. It may also be pointed out that through Swami, Narayan seems to install a typically average and ordinary hero belonging to the middle class realized through a family frame and overall influence of the Hindu cultural ethos.

Swami and Friends presents socio-economic conditions of pre-independence era, along with the different stages of school age which marks the life of its central figure, Swaminathan. Swami is critical of his teachers' physical appearance that his eyes were too near to each other, there were more hair on his chin and he was very bad looking man. The whole novel is full of comic absurdities of little school boys. Graham Greene calls this novel "a book in ten thousand". It is a book for children with school life of swami, Mani, Samuel and Rajam. All the main characters are not older than 12 years whose pranks, quarrels, cricket games and inevitable conflicts with teacher and parents are described with humour and sympathy.

Purity and innocence of childhood in R. K. Narayan's novel *Swami and Friends* examines how childhood not only embodies fun and laughter, purity and innocence but also equally self-centeredness, snobbery, vanity, callousness, cruelty and jealousy that can be seen among adults. The entire novel focuses on the life of school boys. The schoolboys have their own joys and sorrows, jealousy, fighting, fears, hopes expectations and dreams which may seem trivial to adults, but which are much exaggerated by their imagination and seem much more important to them than they would to an adult person. Even simple or normal situation may give them heavenly joy or deepest frustration. The cricket match becomes a matter of life and death for the boys in the novel. Approaching childhood from a cultural perspective Raymond Williams (1961, 1989) who famously claimed that 'culture is ordinary', referred to culture as a 'way of life' that makes sense to individuals in a particular community. This perspective also sees culture as a form of action, it is not just something that people have, it is also what they do (Kehily and Swann 2003).

The novel opens with unpleasant Monday routines of Swaminathan, getting up in the morning, doing his homework, getting ready and going to Albert mission school. Characters like swami's headmaster, fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his History teacher, D.Pillai known for his kindness. And his scripture masters Mr.Ebenezer a fanatic are introduced. It is in Scripture class his swami's blood is heated up, as his teacher criticizes his religious faith in Hinduism. It was British India and so Christianity was imposed on the students by teaching it as a subject (religious imperialism). But the Brahmin Swami did never accept Christianity as eating flesh and drinking wine was permitted in it, Swami's friends are also introduced – some the monitor, Mani the mighty, good for nothing Shankar the most brilliant and Samuel the pea (based on his size).

"It was Monday, Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday it was difficult to get into Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanarayan, his class teacher and the Headmaster with his thin long cane". (p.1)

Narayan employs a strategy to project Swami and his cronies. His sense captures the scene at the tennis court as Swami is seen marveling at his father's excellence in the game:

“Swaminathan found that whenever his father hit the ball, his opponents were unable to receive it and so let it go and strike the screen”. (p. 90) If this underlines Swami’s utter ignorance of the game, his observation, “that the picker’s life was one of grave risks” (p. 90), creates a ripple of laughter among the readers. But the most charming instance is the one when Swami with the inborn dread of Mathematics, unable to find the right solution through the mazy and bewildering figures, tries desperately to find some clue to the problem, of all the things in the ripeness of the mangoes. He asks: “Father will you tell me if the mangoes were ripe?” (p. 86) Narayan then amusedly catches his young hero at the pooja-room, as the latter entreates and appeals to god to turn the three pebbles in his box into six pies enabling him to buy the covetous hoop. He pleads with Dr. Kesavan to oblige him with a medical certificate stating that he has ‘delirium’: I have got it, I can’t say exactly. . . But isn’t it some, some kind of stomach ache? (p. 141)

Narayan’s intention of presenting the young hero Swami Breathing under the eternal shadow of fear becomes clear. Swami, as an average type exemplifies the innocence and is realized predominantly as a coward and a mediocre boy. The boy has always been scared of his father, secretly fears the class bully, Mani, feels threatened by the coachman’s ruffian son, has a perennial fear for the headmaster and, finally, after the breach of promise he shows no guts to face his captain. Narayan offers three instances as Swaminathan feels cold sweat; as the coachman’s son grins ‘Maliciously’ and takes “out of his pocket a penknife” (91), Swaminathan pleads: “Don’t kill me. I know nothing” (100), and finally, as he undergoes the nightmarish and nerve-racking experience in the Mempi Forest: “He clearly heard his name whispered. There was no doubt about it. Swami ... Swami ... Swami ... Swami ... and then the dreadful suggestion of a sacrifice”. (58)

Narayan depicts very acutely swami’s school life; his joys, fear of exams, passion for cricket, agony, friendship, friendly fighting, forgiveness, love for Rajim, pain of farewell with his friend, depression after beaten by his headmaster etc. There are many incidents of swami’s life that can take readers’ mind from imagination to reality. ‘Swami’s life is as real depicted as anyone’s school life. He feels real pressure of examination and realizes that his father is becoming stricter and constantly hounds him about studying more so as to avoid being left behind by his classmates if he were to fail, which kicks Swami into form and he begins to study as well. His father says “‘Suppose you fail?’ ‘Suppose all your juniors in the Fifth Standard become your classmates?’ Swaminathan sat at Decimals for half an hour.” (p. 41)

Everyone at school is subdued and disciplined by the specter of the examinations. Mani comes to the clerk’s house one day and gives him a plate of fresh brinjals and expresses his anxiety about the examination and says “‘You see, sir, I am so worried, I don’t sleep at nights, thinking of the examination.... If you could possibly tell me something important.... I have such a lot to study--don’t want to study unnecessary things that may not be necessary for the examination.’ He meandered thus. The clerk understood what he was driving at, but said, ‘Just read all your portions arid you will pass.’ Mani realised that diplomacy was not his line. He asked bluntly, ‘Please tell me, sir, what questions we are getting for our examination’”. (p.

42) He manages to flatter the clerk into telling him information about what questions will be asked in the exam. Satisfied with his bribing, he shares his intel with Swami.

Finally the day of the examination arrives, and Swami Strides out of the examination hall, exhausted but triumphant. He is slightly uncomfortable because he finished and left the exam earlier than all of his friends. He contemplates the questions in the exam and his answers. One of them asked him to infer a moral from a story about a Brahmin and a tiger. When the bell rings and the rest of the students come trickling out of the examination hall, Swami asks a classmate what he wrote for the last question. Swami is surprised when he replies that he wrote a one-page response, as Swami had only written one line. He realizes that his friends have all written three-quarters to one-page responses. To save face, Swami lies that he wrote about half a page.

“What have you written for the last question?” Swaminathan asked a classmate. ‘Which? The moral question?... Don’t you remember what the teacher said in the class?... “Love of gold cost the brahmin his life.”’ ‘Where was gold there?’ Swaminathan. objected. ‘There was only a gold bangle. How much have you written for the question?’ ‘One page,’ said the class-mate. Swaminathan did not like this answer. He had written only a line. ‘What! You should not have written so much.’ A little later he found Rajam and Sankar. ‘Well, boys, how did you find the paper?’ ‘How did you find it?’ Sankar asked. ‘Not bad,’ Swaminathan said. ‘I was afraid only of Tamil,’ said Rajam, ‘now I think I am safe. I think I may get passing marks.’ ‘No. Certainly more A class,’ Sankar said. ‘Look here,’ Swaminathan said, ‘some fools have written a page for that moral question.’ ‘I wrote only three-quarters of a page,’ Rajam said. ‘And I only a little more than half,’ said Sankar, who was an authority on these matters. ‘I too wrote about that length, about half a page,’ lied Swaminathan as a salve to his conscience, and believed it for the moment”. (p. 50) Generally this incident happens almost with every student in their school life. How critically Narayan has observed the psyche of the children.

It is the parting scene in Swami and Friends. Swami, feeling guilty and yet anxious to restore the treasured friendship of the most valued Rajam, offers him a present through Mani. The entire scene has come out vividly. But more than the authentic portrayal of the parting and the tearful Swami, what is subtly and unmistakably underlined is the nature of human discrepancy. The innocent Swami believes that the receding figure of Rajam was in fact waving a goodbye to him alone. But he is not quite sure whether Rajam had been really given his address by Mani and the author comments: “for once Mani’s face had become inscrutable.” (p. 147)

It is in Swami and Friends a unique world of boyhood elements is created with a creative sincerity which embodies Narayan’s own pleasant memories of childhood as well as his explicit understanding of social entities. His creation of Swami and the world of Malgudi is drawn in subtleness that makes R. K. Narayan an incredible author for all times. With the skilful use of humour, captured in the world of children, their adventure and misadventure in the mythical town of Malgudi Narayan’s boy adventures continues to enthrall readers. Gauri

Shankar Jha in her book *Current Perspectives in Indian English Literature* says Narayan's work like that of Chekov combines realism with elements of fantasy and a melancholy vision of human experience. It is little wonder that R. K. Narayan is one of the most loved writers and probably will be counted as one of the greatest for years to come.

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