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A Study of Childhood Innocence in R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*

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Abstract:

The paper studies the childhood innocence of Swaminathan and his friends through the panorama of a child himself. The adventures, escapades, splits, combats, carefree loafing in the lap of nature encompass a child's naiveté. The ingeniousness and sinless attitude and acts of child characters are delineated demonstrating the translucent concoction of R.K. Narayan. A detailed analysis of all the juvenile characters in the novel and their confrontation with the world around them is anatomized. Swami and his friends are prone to all the conventional demeanor of young children. They are captivated with toys, and they are inquisitive to share their home along with other adventures with one another. The examination anxiety is prevalent among them and the disdain of schoolwork, the love for cricket etc is emphasized to personate the virtues of childhood.

The paper would delve into Narayan's fictional world through the narrative of Swami and Friends and from a child's point of view that illustrates the vanquished pinnacles of simplicity and imagination.

Keywords: Childhood, innocence, school, Swami, Rajam.

Introduction

Swami and Friends was R. K. Narayan's debut novel. The novel had its genesis on an auspicious day of Vijayadashami, selected by his grandmother. Narayan wrote the first sentence of his novel on that day. Looking out of the window, Malgudi entered into his imagination with

its little railway station. He also pictured his character Swaminathan in it. This took him to the definite writing tract and he started writing each day thenceforth. After completion of the manuscript, he sent it to his Indian friend, Purna, who was in Oxford then working with Graham Greene. It was rejected everywhere in London. Narayan was so disappointed by the constant rejections that he asked Purna to cast the manuscript into the Thames if it is not at all accepted. At last Purna approached Graham Greene, who in turn recommended it to Hamish Hamilton. From then onwards Narayan's career as a novelist began. It was finally published in 1935 an era colored with nationalist movements and anti-British sentiments. Graham Greene shared his views in the book *Introduction to Bachelor of Arts*:

It was Mr Narayan with his *Swami and Friends* who first brought India, in the sense of Indian population and the Indian way of life, alive to me.....*Swami* is the story of a child written with complete objectivity, with a humour strange to our fiction, closer to Tchekov than to any English writer, with the same underlying sense of beauty and sadness. (7)

The fundamental theme of *Swami and Friends* is the 'innocence of youth'. Swami is not simply a boy, he is a child of around ten years. His friendships, squabbles, teachers, idleness, homework, examinations, running away from school and home, fascination towards toys, love for playing and loafing around are all a mark of innocence and simplicity of childhood. Swami has a definite set of four friends in school. Somu was the monitor of the class who was very good in studies. Mani was the strongest boy of the class in terms of strength and aggressiveness. Sankar was the brilliant boy of the class, who always had the reputation of bordering 90% marks in the examination. Samuel was fondly called "Pea" on account of his little size by the children. Rajam was the new boy of the class and the son of a superintendent. Swami, Somu, Mani and Samuel belonged to a middle class background whereas Rajam is sketched, possessing a rich and influential background. Swami and his friends demonstrate the same childhood traits irrespective of their status. Their genuine invigorating tale transports us into the children's world. The reader gets lost in the joys and sorrows of childhood and there lies the universal appeal of the novel. The novel is divided into nineteen chapters; each chapter displays a special attribute of childhood innocence.

Swami in School and with his Friends

The first chapter is an exposition of the plot of the novel as it befalls in many of R. K. Narayan's novels. The opening line suggests that it is going to be a novel for children. Swami is reluctant to go to school after enjoying an adventurous weekend. He studies in The Albert Mission School. P. K. Singh in *The Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Critical Evaluation* correctly remarks:

Swami lives in an English ruled atmosphere of Malgudi .He is sent for education in the Albert Mission School where teachers are apt to convert their boys into Christian and are all the time insulting Hindu Gods. (10)

A typical introduction of Swami and his four preferred friends, Somu, Mani, Sankar and Samuel is provided and their attributes are enfolded. Vedanayagam, Swami's headmaster who was also his class teacher is introduced with all his brutality. He scourges Swami because of his inattentiveness. The history period is presided by D. Pillai is known for his kindness in school. The scripture teacher, Mr Ebenezar, a Christian keeps on praising the holiness of Jesus and he even scorns the Hindu Gods. Swami cross examines him, landing him into trouble. The teacher twists his ear causing him pain. Swami dislikes the scripture master. He does not accept the harsh treatment meted out to him by the teacher. He discloses the incident to his father, who is an authoritarian lawyer. He writes a letter to his headmaster. However the matter is sorted out diligently by the headmaster.

Swami's friendship with Rajam the new boy of the class originated along the river Sarayu, considered as the pride of Malgudi. Rajam is a fresher in school. He spoke very good English like a European. Mani is uncomfortable by the arrival of Rajam in school because on the very first day Mani jabs Rajam which he returns back leaving him in an insult. All the more he had impressed the whole class by his appearance and countenance. Swami also finds a special interest in him but he is scared to forfeit the friendship of Mani. Swami tries to patch up between Rajam and Mani by acting as a cord of written communication between the two in the geography class. The teacher discerns Swami and charges him with two questions. He is made to stand on the bench when he gives the wrong answers. A meeting is held among Swami, Mani and Rajam near

Nallapa's grove. Mani expresses his innocence in confirming that Rajam is coming devoid of his guards and he cautions him to keep the matter away from his father.

The three arrive at the stipulated spot. Mani carries a small wooden club to break Rajam's head and throw him into the water, although he was hesitant in his plan. On the other hand Rajam appears with an air gun for the combat. When Rajam, fires a shot in the air, Mani gets startled and drops his club. Soon they become friends at the bank of the Sarayu. Rajam offers biscuits to Swami and Mani to celebrate friendship. Here we find the sheer joy of being a child.

Swami's Feats

Swami develops a lovable bond with his old grandmother. He shares his daily adventures at school with her. The grandmother is also full of real-life stories from her experiences. Swami loves to loaf around with his friends during weekends. His Father forbids him to do so but as soon as his father is out he skips out of the house ignoring his mother's call. Granny bribes him of three paise, if he adheres to her call but he turns a deaf ear to them. He escorts Mani and they enter Rajam's place on an invitation. Rajam displays a show of attitude as a superintendent's son before his friends.

Again there is an atmosphere of enmity. Rajam and Mani are absent in the class so Swami loiters around the Infant standards of the school. He finds his other set of friends Somu, Shankar and Pea playing outside. He wanted to join them but they refused to let him in. Instead they make fun of him, ridicule him by calling him Rajam's tail. Swami is not able to withstand this insult and he considers them his enemy. He is plagued with despair and decides not to talk to them reluctantly. This incident leaves him in despair. He took it seriously like any kid of his age.

Since Swami and his friends were free from school on Saturday and Sunday. Rajam and Mani were supposed to visit his house on a Saturday. Swami is all set to manifest his stance as a lawyer's son. With some difficulty, he is able to manage his father's room. Swami is afraid of his father.

Swami had to do a lot of preparation, he instructed the cook to wear clean uniform and serve snacks and he urged Granny not to appear before his friends, especially Rajam. Everything went well according to his plan. He had asked his mother to prepare something good for snacks.

He was doing all this because he wanted to expose an air of importance before his friends. Rajam is excited to meet Swami's grandmother contrary to his plan.

The next scene shifts to the school environment. As soon as Swami enters his classroom, he rolls his eyes to glance at the blackboard. He is infuriated to spot the letter 'TAIL' written in huge letters. Then he sets his furtive eyes on Sankar and Pea. Sankar was bent over his notebook and Pea was busy unpacking his bag. Swami's anger was clearly visible and he thrust a tight slap onto Pea's cheek without a second thought. The Pea denies his mistake and he lays the blame on Shankar to make the matter worse. Swami hits Shankar too. Apparently combat starts between the three. Shortly, Rajam, Somu and Mani come for their rescue. Simultaneously, the Tamil teacher enters the classroom but he is helpless to calm the storm in his class. Somu and Mani drive the fighters apart with all their might. All the clangorous boys withdraw outside the classroom and continue fighting in the field. A serious wrangle arises between Somu and Mani. The youngsters overlook everything and run towards the headmaster for relief. Examining the anxiety on the boy's faces, the headmaster at once arrives at the field with the peon to stop the duet. The novel has a picturesque description of this fact:

The fighters, rolling and rolling, were everywhere in the field. The headmaster and the peon easily picked them apart, much to the astonishment of Swaminathan, who had thought till then that the strength that Somu or Mani possessed was not possessed by anyone else in the world. (47)

Friends Forever

The childhood fantasies, happiness and easy going nature further expand. Rajam takes charge of the whole situation. He wanted to unite the old friends, so he invited Swami and a group to his house a few days later. After the playful cat and dog show Rajam began to deliver a threatening lecture on friendship which had a deep impact among the boys. Rajam is finally successful in reuniting the spark of friendship between them by fascinating them with toys. Sankar is proposed to be gifted a clockwork engine, Somu a belt, Mani a pocket-knife, Pea a marvelous little fountain pen if they tie up with each other. Soon the friends are seen meddling with their set of toys shredding the enmity between them. Instead of the fountain pen, Pea is fascinated towards

a small box. A common trait among children is pictured over here. No matter how intensely they fight, they are one again in the end unlike adults.

Family Relationship and Examinations

Swami's relationship with his family is further reinforced. Swami's mother is expecting a baby. She is confined in a room and appears weak and disheveled. Swami sleeps with his granny. This is rather the shortest chapter of the novel. The doctors and nurses arrive at his house and his little brother is born. Swami is very desperate to share the good news with his friends in school the next day. During the Tamil pundit's class, he gives a meticulous description of his newly born brother to Pea.

The fear of examination, the anxiety, curiosity and the tension is portrayed with reference to Swami and his friends. Swami's father presses him to focus on studies that happen even today in most houses. There is a tremendous transformation in Swami's routine. He has to adhere to the timings of his father. All his friends are overwhelmed at school due to the forthcoming final exams. Mani visits the clerk's house with fresh brinjals in the form of a gift to please the clerk and extract some important questions for the upcoming exams. Mani had invested four annas for the brinjals and he finds it worth it when the clerk clarifies some of his doubts. He is advised to give particular attention to geography, practice a lot of map-drawing, complete five problems everyday in arithmetic and to read important lessons of English again and again. Mani enfold this top secret to Swami irresistibly.

Swami's brother is six months old. He shows his fascination and enjoys playing with him. Though he is worried about the examination and starts practicing whatever Mani had asked him to. Two days before the exam he makes a list of stationery items required. He cancels the first list and prepares another. His father is hard towards him. He disappoints his son by shattering his dream of visiting the store and reprimanding the shopkeeper. His father opens his chest and ordered to take whatever he wants. He cancelled the pad from the list and exhibits his denial of not having the clips. One can easily visualize school life and examination atmosphere by interpreting that episode.

The fun and merriment around the school after the finishing off of the final examination is portrayed realistically. Students discuss the tentative answers. There is an atmosphere of excitement. The children, teachers and the headmaster assemble in the school hall. All are enthralled by the vacations. The principal motivates the students to use the holidays fruitfully in reading books. The teachers also appeared polite. The children marked a colourful beginning by tearing the ink-bottles and splitting ink over each other's clothes to enjoy their liberty. Mani was the leader of the group. Swami assisted him. He was so enthusiastic that he dribbled the ink onto his own head and made circles with the dripping ink around his eyes. They planned to dye the school peon, Singharam's turban, who in return dispersed the merry-makers with his upright stick.

School Vacations

Now that the school has been shut down, Swami is excited because he didn't have to study. He was free from the shackles of time. There was a scholastic attachment between Swami, Somu, Shankar and Pea. It remained intact till school only. Mani and Swami shared a human attachment. Here is the mentioning of childhood fantasy which every child must have gone through. Swami yearns for a cycle wheel known as a hoop. Swami is in need of six paise desperately to procure the hoop from the nasty coachman's son. Swami begs before granny, then his parents and then Mani. Nobody is capable of lending him the amount. His innocent mind goes to the extent of searching for some coins which might have dropped by chance underneath his father's heavy wardrobe but to no avail. Last option left was to prostrate before God for help being a Brahmin child. He fills a small box with pebbles, covers it with fine sand and leaves and keeps it in the pooja room hoping for some magic. He is enraged when the pebbles didn't transform into coins. He kicks the box at first. The next moment he buries it inside the Earth digging a pit at the root of the banana tree respectfully.

The coachman's son intrigues Swami and is successful in extracting two annas from him. Swami reaches Rajam for assistance. He asks for a policeman to trash the culprit. They, along with Mani, plot against the coachman's son to get him kidnapped but end up driven away by dogs and stones. Moreover, the nasty boy snatches the red shining top from Mani and flees away endangering their lives.

The next episode is a further extension of Swami's holiday adventures. He loves to spend time with his friends finding the slightest opportunity. Summers in Malgudi are fiercely hot. Swami never bothers about the heat and he loiters around. One summer day, Swami, Mani and Rajam were lazing on a short culvert on the Trunk Road discussing the incident at Keelachery. They spot a bullock cart driven by a little village boy. The three are soon on their toes with their new raid. They resist the cart driver from crossing the culvert. They ask him to produce a pass. After a series of cross questions, they let the driver move, handing him a pass signed by all the three.

Soon Swami's father is at home for his vacation. He wants him to study in the vacation too which irritates Swami. He produces several valid excuses to avoid touching his dust ridden books. His father turns a deaf ear to all his tantrums and sets him to clean his study table and solve the sum in simple proportion. He becomes the victim of his father's anger by not being able to quickly find an answer to the problem. He twists his ear. Later in the evening Swami accompanies his father to the tennis ground in his friend's car as an indemnity for the harsh treatment meted out to him.

In the justifying words of William Walsh in *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*:

We can see here Narayan's delicate feeling for the boy's fleeting attention, and his understanding of the gap, between the concrete poetic attention of the child and the formidable abstract arithmetical dryness he is supposed to be mastering. The psychological quickness, the nimbleness of perception, the cool, untroubled scrutiny of the child's nature and mind which can issue into pure fun can also develop into a poetic sense of the intensities of the boy's experience and the depth of his personality. (34)

Political Disturbances

The Civil Disobedience Movement hit Malgudi on the 15th of August 1930. There is a vigorous protest against a political leader. He observes a strike on reaching school. Swami takes part in the anti-British agitation overpowered by a spirit of patriotism. In order to disburse the mob, the policemen are forced to lathi charge. Swami joins the group of panic-stricken runners. He gets badly hurt in return. Sarbani Putatunda in *R. K. Narayan: Critical Essays* asserts:

The Indian freedom movement had overpowering impact upon the consciousness of all the common citizens of our country. And even the school boys were not exempted from the tide. (161)

The headmaster seeks an explanation from all the students absent on the previous day, making them stand on the benches. Swami is doubly accused of bunking class and breaking the window panes. The peon becomes the eye witness of his mischief. Swami is caned vigorously by the headmaster. He holds back his tears and evinces his vengeance by quitting the school.

New School and the Cricket Match

Swami is admitted to Board High School in Second C by his father. He loses contact with his three dear friends. Sankar's father had been transferred to another city. Somu was detained in the same class. Pea was absent from school due to his illness. He comes to know about their whereabouts through Rajam and Mani. He is separated from his favourite circle of school friends. Nonetheless he manages to keep the friendship between Mani and Rajam intact.

Rajam plans to create a cricket team. Swami is ignorant about the game. Rajam boosts his morale. They name the team as Malgudi Cricket Club (M.C.C). They prepare a list of the requirements and send the order list to Messrs Binns. The children are excited to receive a letter from their former friend Shankar after a long time. After ten days of desperate waiting for the cricket goods, Rajam decides to start the practice with whatever means available without wasting time. He selects a few deserving members of his class to become the member of the M.C.C team. Rajam brings some used tennis balls. The base of a deal wood case turns out to be three good bats. The Pea out of his sheer habit forgets to bring real stumps causing a look of grief on every face. The idea of utilizing the compound wall as a wicket was unanimously accepted by the crew and they marked the wall with charcoal. Swami acquired the title 'Tate' after his first successful attempt at bowling.

Now the involvement of three friends is based on the infatuation for cricket. They forget other things and dream only about cricket. Swami appears when everybody is tired and the sun begins to set. Swami is pestered by his drill master for the drill classes in his Board High School. He is overburdened with studies in school. Swami wants to participate in the match practices. He

is impatient to go to the field as soon as he reaches home. His Granny coaxed him to bring some lemons from the market in return for some money.

Swami is willing at first but when a time limit is imposed on him, he eludes his patience and starts off to the field declining the offer as he was already late. This shows how enthusiastic he was for the match. He realizes his rude behavior towards his granny on the way back home. He is laden with guilt. He is jubilant, when he learns that his grandmother is relieved of the stomach ache and the lemons were available in the house. Swam enlightens granny about his cricket adventures. Rajam is upset about Swami's irregularities. He and Mani proceed to speak to the wizened spectacled headmaster to seek permission for Swami. The headmaster is arrogant to free Swami from the drill classes.

Preparations for the Match

The M.C.C challenges a friendly match to the Young Men's Union (Y.M.U). It is accepted by them after some strict terms and conditions. Swami wants to attend the practice by any means. He tries to take the drill master into confidence by declaring that he is unfit but to no avail. His adolescent mind strikes an idea. He approaches the family doctor T. Kesavan in his dispensary and requests a Medical Certificate for the grant of leave from the drill class. He reveals the truth before the doctor who refrains from producing a fake medical certificate as he would be prosecuted by law. He promises to visit his headmaster and grant an approval instead. There is just a week left for the match. Swami neglects his drill class and reaches the field on time, trusting the doctor. On Friday the headmaster arrives with a cane in his hand in the geography class presided by Mr Rama Rao to look for Swami. Swami was questioned for his six days absence from the drill and other classes. He finds no way to escape and begins with his excuses. The headmaster canes him brutally like a beast squeezing his neck. Swami is overpowered by emotions; he plucks the cane and throws it out of the window out of rage. In this manner he quit the school for the second time.

Swami refuses to get back home for the fear of his father. He is damn sure that his father will beat him. He will not get admission to any other school because Malgudi had only two schools. He decides to run away and live his own way but before that he plans to meet his friends in The Albert Mission School. With great difficulty he is able to meet Rajam. He confides the

whole thing to him but Rajam asks him to come for the match practice regularly. This incident depicts a serious study of a child's predicament in this world. Children are overburdened with studies by the elders irrespective of their interests. Narayan asserts in *A Writer's Nightmare: Selected Essays*:

Until we adopt the view-point of a child and re-organize our education system, our schools will continue to repel children. (31)

Swami is out of Sight

Swami's mother, father and granny are perturbed because of his sudden disappearance. Certain assumptions are made by the members. Granny and mother hold the father responsible for his disappearance although the father searches every nook and corner of Malgudi. Swami is nowhere to be found. His father cross checks his behaviour in self doubt. He even reminisced about the past three days but he found nothing that might have embittered the child. He looks for him in the Board High School where he is misdirected by the watchman to wander half the town without purpose to locate the headmaster as it was past 10.00 at night. He couldn't find Mani's house. He went to Rajam's house, on beholding the servant asleep he sensed that Swami had not been there and he thought it useless to wake the people in the dark hour of night. His mother was sobbing and grandmother was hobbling anxiously around the house. His father began to suspect that the boy might have been kidnapped or met with an accident. He resumed his search again past midnight. He walked up the Hospital Road, passed through Ellaman Street and crossed the Sarayu; he went to the Malgudi Railway Station but couldn't locate the boy. This is the exact scenario when a child is missing from home even today for sometime also.

Swami gets lost in the forest. He tried hard to return but couldn't find the way back home. Swami senses danger and falls asleep in a lonely place. He is released by the cart puller Ranga who hands him over to the forest officer, Mr. Nair who escorts him to Malgudi. Swami is worried about the match which was going to be held on Sunday. He is unaware of the day, so enquires from him. He is told that it's a Sunday but comprehending his dejected mood the officer admits a lie that it's a Saturday at once.

The Final Goodbye

The house is crowded with people. Everybody is relaxed to have Swami home. Even his father appeared concerned. He blurted out his story of disappearance without concealing any detail. Mani comes to meet Swami at home. He informs him that the Y.M.U had won the cricket match. He also lets out that Rajam is holding him responsible for the loss. Consequently, he is disappointed to the extent that he may even shoot Swami if he appears before him. Swami is unhappy because he did everything for the sake of the match and Rajam but he lost them both. Swami is confident that Rajam will be alright after meeting him, ingenuously.

Swami learns from Mani that Rajam is leaving Malgudi forever the next morning. Rajam is upset and he has forbidden Mani to convey the news to him. Swami is disheartened, he cannot think of a world without Rajam. He sets off early in the morning with the hope of meeting Rajam and apologizing for the mistake. He reaches the station with a small volume of Andersen's Fairy Tales as a parting present for Rajam. There were police officers and policemen around the station. Swami was unable to approach Rajam. He hands over the book to Mani. Mani is successful in proffering the book to Rajam. Rajam waves his hand as a farewell gesture. Swami is left in tears. Mani pacifies him with all his might. P.S.Sundaram has commented on R. K. *Narayan as a Novelist*:

The central event in Swami's boyhood is his passionate love for Rajam. Without meaning it and merely as a victim of circumstance, he betrays his friend in his greatest need. He is not allowed to explain. He gives the most valuable of his possessions as a parting gift, but he is by no means sure that the gift will wash out the guilt and his friendship will be restored. (22)

Conclusion

Thus from beginning till the end *Swami and Friends* is a simple narrative of Swami's childhood ventures. The author establishes a children's world as the child himself observes it. The typological study reveals that all the children characters in the novel are realized for their divine innocence. It is the only novel by R. K. Narayan which is a full-fledged study of childhood innocence. This gripping story transports us into the domain of children. M. K. Naik in *The Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R. K. Narayan* remarks:

The omniscient narrator approach obviously yields for greater scope for the exercise of irony and Narayan put it good use in revealing several facets of schoolboy psychology with a tolerant smile. (5)

Each chapter of the novel chronologically transports the reader into different phases of childhood. The novel has a universal appeal. Swami became the most distinguished character of Malgudi who evolved with respect to the passage of time in the novels of R. K. Narayan. The novel was a huge success and adapted into television series in 1986. Swami came to be a household name. Narayan captured the convolutions of society and the times he lived effectively in a threadbare prose. Thus this gripping story of Swami and his predicaments written in 1930 has the ability of transporting the reader back to childhood days whenever it is read irrespective of the passage of time. Even today the story has the power to attract the audience because of its simplicity and reliability.

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