

**A Subtle Representation of Child Life in R. K. Narayan's
*Swami and Friends***

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Abstract

The ways in which childhood is socially constructed, as well as culturally and historically situated, will obviously differ from place to place. '*Swami and Friends*' clearly illustrates the unscaled heights of imagination, from a child's point of view, in Narayan's world of fiction. Narayan's stories, cossetting with children, explored their psychology abundantly. The element of innocence as well their deeds that causes mental anxiety and fear complex in their tender minds is

depicted in very distinctive style in his classic story *Swami and Friends*. This paper attempts an analysis of Swami's character within the Indian milieu of childhood and adolescence.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, *Swami and Friends*, childhood, Swami, Malgudi, school, adolescence, innocence.

R. K. Narayan

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. *Swami and Friends*, the novel of innocence, "offers us a pure escape into irresponsible boyhood" (Morning Post). *Swami* remains to this day Narayan's illustrious literary creation.

***Swami and Friends* and Psychology**

Swami and Friends, when perceived from contemporary understandings of child psychology, illustrates remarkable characteristics of R. K. Narayan's skillful composition. Within the discourse of *tabula rasa*, the child is always in the process of becoming an adult-in-the-making with explicit learning requirements that grownups have to adhere to effectively.

The disciplines of psychology and sociology have made a significant contribution to contemporary understandings of childhood. In general, psychological research has concentrated upon the individual child, whereas sociological research has been involved in children as a social group. A contemporary US-based study elaborates upon the theme of childhood by indicating that children's contribution to the family in western contexts is economically worthless but emotionally 'priceless' (Zelitzer 1985). Drawing upon the Romantic discourse French philosopher Jean-

Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), claimed that children embody a state of innocence, purity and natural goodness that is tainted when they start dealing with the corrupt outside world.

John Locke believed that children were born passive “blank slates” (tabula rasa) and were formed through their experiences in the environment. Swami’s innocent observations about the world around him along with his suppressed thoughts that he dares not share with his friends for the fear of mockery reflect the usual thought process of a child which has been skillfully captured by the author's attention to detail and description. The novel is set in pre-independence era and it orbits around a pre-adolescent boy Swaminathan living in Narayan's fictitious town Malgudi. The novel paints the life of boys in South Indian schools in pre- independent India, and highlights much of R. K. Narayan's personal experience of his childhood. The plot revolves round Swaminathan shortly called Swami by his family and friends, the hero, and his friends Mani, Shankar, Somu, the most intelligent boy of the class, and Rajam, a late arrival, brilliant and charming, the son of the Police Superintendent. The reader is led very smoothly through a vivid portrayal of the thoughts, emotions and activities of the school boys’ life. For the readers this novel is a breath of fresh air that takes them into nostalgia of their childhood memories.

Innocence of Childhood

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, 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).

Tabula Rasa Discourse

The *tabula rasa* discourse draws upon the philosophy of John Locke who developed the idea that children come into the world as blank slates who could, with guidance and training, develop into rational human beings. Children lack the power of authority as they occupy a powerless position in society from a sociological perspective. They tend to rebel as a consequence of this social embodiment during their adolescent days. This understanding about children and childhood is so well engaged by R.K.Narayan to illustrate Swami's innocence, vivid imagination and natural tendency of agitation. The characterization of Mani and Rajam illustrate Swami's swinging moods of a young adolescent caught in no man's land. There are some acts wherein we find Swami openly exhibiting the natural tendency of rebellion which can be perceived as a fragment of growing up period. In one such act standing fully exposed to the Head Master of Board School for bunking drill practice, Swami, sensing the looming punishment, gets primed:

“He hardly knew what he was doing. His arm shot out, plucked the cane from the Head Master's hand, and flung it out of the window.” (Swami and Friends, 144)

Social Learning and Cognitive Development

Vygotsky (1978) argues that social learning precedes and directly influences cognitive development. This understanding regarding adolescents in research studies can be applied to Swami's association with his family, friends and teachers very aptly. The usual traits of a ten year old who loves loafing about in the sun and as any other child despises examinations makes Swami a natural personification of a school boy in our social milieu. The novel is noteworthy for the author's understanding of child psychology and for his depiction of the carefree, cheerful world of school boys in a very natural and realistic fashion. Narayan pens the characters and their actions as they appear at the school stage. The intricacies of a child's innocent world is classically portrayed and expressed in the character of Swami.

Swamy and Friends – Inevitable Sad Music of Growth!

Graham Greene says: “It (*Swami and Friends*) is a classical school boy story of a child, written with the same understanding sense of beauty and sadness”. The novel deals with the

inevitable sad music of growth from dreary childhood onto a contemplative adolescence. Psychology studies reveal that teenagers or adolescent children indulge in taking risks that proclaim their status within their peer group. In fact, teens might notice that being accepted among friends and positioning themselves socially is exceptionally important to them. It might even become more important than family relationships. Swami's relationship with his mother, grandmother and father are succinctly echoed on these realistic trends of a growing boy.

Antics of Swami's Character

In his writing he lucidly pens the antics of Swami's character amidst a turbulent social context very realistically. Narayan is situated within a culture so different from Mark Twain yet they both define the contemporary cultures of human psychology. In their creation of two much popular characters namely Swami and Tom Sawyer we savor the perception of William Wordsworth's famous line "Child is the father of Man."

Vulnerability is another trait of the child that remains so centric in the novel *Swami and Friends*. Narayan shows incredible insight into the psychology of the boy Swami, and his thought process while running away from home. As he runs away from home to avoid the repercussions of his act at school Swami is lost Mempi Forests at some distance from Malgudi. His terrors when caught in a quagmire as his thoughts became incoherent. In depicting his vulnerability a natural consequence for a child hallucinating R.K.Narayan subtly embodies the manifestation of the complex dominant and emotional or psychological distress, anxiety, or confusion of an adolescent youngster.

Ironic Effect

Children assuming the role of adults have been exploited by Narayan for at times ironic effect. In many short stories R. K. Narayan has explored adolescence from various other human perspectives. *Ishwar* is a story of how the built-up stress in the mind of a school boy takes him to madness and how it results into his death. This is no doubt it is still a contemporary issue of education which Narayan grappled in a simple yet grim portrayal. *Naga* is another short story by Narayan about relationship of an adolescent boy who longs for affection and this affection is

substituted by his association with animals. His stories are unpretentious and accessible to all; his lucid style and sense of humor that could canvas a wide range of emotions embraces the uninitiated instantly.

A Unique World of Boyhood

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 enthral 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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Swami is a quite different child than the present day children. He lives in a village and he is extremely innocent which sometimes makes him look mischievous as well. His fate lands him in trouble in whatever he does. He has his own perception of the world and tries to be the conqueror in spite of his own shortcomings like fear, innocence, etc. Circumstances make him a mis-fit to any school in Malgudi. On the other hand, his friend Rajam is a city-born child who acts beyond his age quite similar to the present day children. He is very ambitious and courageous with least respect for the elders....Â It would be wrong for me to reveal anything more, reading them in Narayanâ€™s own words is definitely more recommended.