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Narayan as a Social Novelist-In Swami and Friends

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Abstract – R. K. Narayan's Swami And Friends is a novel written in a socio-economic context when India was still a tradition based country. RK Narayan started his prolific writing career with this novel written in 1935. Set in the fictional town of Malgudi, Swami and Friends is the story of a young mischievous suburban kid. It is full of humor and irony. Despite this, it took time for the budding writer to be acknowledged as an author. Fortunately for him, he had help from many quarters, such as the well-established British author Graham Green. He called Swami and Friends a work of remarkable maturity. "There are writers—Tolstoy and Henry James to name two—whom we hold in awe, writers—Turgenev and Chekhov—for whom we feel a personal affection, other writers whom we respect—Conrad for example—but who hold us at a long arm's length with their 'courtly foreign grace.' Narayan (whom I don't hesitate to name in such a context) more than any of them wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian."—Graham Greene

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INTRODUCTION

R. K. Narayan's view of social realism is essentially Indian. The traditional Hindu family as the nucleus of social structure, has zealously guarded its old norms, mores and values. Its sanctity is inviolable and its violation is nothing sort of a sacrilege. It causes disruptions and unhappiness. The novel is set in pre-independence days in India, in a fictional town – Malgudi, which has almost become a real place in India today, due to the wide recognition and popularity of Narayan's many novels. His novels are known for their 'deftly etched characters, his uniquely stylized language and his wry sense of humor'.

Swami and Friends is the story of a 10-year-old boy, growing up during this particular time, his innocence, wonder, mischief and growing pains. He is a student at Albert Mission School, a school established by the British which gives importance to Christianity, English literature and education. His life is dramatically changed when Rajam – a symbol of colonial super power – joins the school and he and Rajam become friends.

At first glance, Swami and Friends is nothing more than a simple, charming story of a ten-year old boy who lives in a world of (in his eyes) bossy adults – be they parents or teachers at school – and his friends and enemies at school. His life is fairly complex and he has a tough job to do: pleasing both his demanding peers and also the dour world of adults around him. He manages his tough balancing act for a while but then two incidents change his life forever. Finally, he gets out of trouble, but the cost is heavy: he loses the friendship of Rajam, the son of the Police Superintendent and is devastated at his departure at the end.

The central theme of the novel is growing up of young Swami. He is a spontaneous, impulsive, mischievous and yet a very innocent child. His character is a child in the fullest sense of the word. Through Swami's eyes the reader gets a peak into the pre-independence days in South India. The life portrayed in the novel is accurate in its description of the colonial days – the uprisings, the rebellions, the contempt and the reverence the natives had for their subjugator, together with varied elements that have become one, such as cricket and education.

Unlike many colonial and post-colonial writers Narayan does not directly attack or criticize the colonial system, although elements of gentle criticism and irony directed towards the colonial system, are scattered through out Swami and Friends and all his other novels. He has rather directed his creativity at depicting the life of the people at the time. It is almost as if he is charmed by these unsophisticated and simple, yet eccentric people and their lives. It is unclear if he refrained from an all out attack on the British colonial system out of choice or reverence. But it seems at this point in his career, (and during this particular point of India's history), when he is starting out as an author, he would write to the English speaking audience in India and for the vast audience abroad. Hence it would be folly to attack the very system that would sustain him as a novelist, his career of choice. Asked about why he was unbothered about the prevailing political crisis and

other happenings during the time, Narayan replied in an interview thus "When art is used as a vehicle for political propaganda, the mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, the crisis of the individual soul and its resolution and above all the detached observation which constitutes the stuff of fiction is forced into the background." Beyond this, he also had tremendous regard for the English language and literature as an aesthetic pastime, and was not blind to its value in that regard.

The absence of criticism on the colonial system maybe also due to the fact that Narayan simply believed the colonizer and the colonized could live together in harmony, benefiting each other. Most Englishmen and the natives certainly seem to do so in his novels, such as Mr Retty (Swami and Friends) and Matheison (Waiting for the Mahatma). The rice mill owner Mr Retty was "the most Indianized of the 'Europeans'….and was the mystery man of the place: nobody could say who he was or where he had come from: he swore at his boy and his customers in perfect Tamil and always moved about in shirt, shorts and sandaled feet." Mr Matheison feels strongly for Indians and considers himself Indian. "You see, it is just possible I am as much attached to this country as you are." Only Mr Brown seems to be the 'black sheep' in this regard. His Western mind is only capable of "classifying, labeling and departmentalizing…" And the gentle criticism and irony directed towards him was in the same way directed towards his fellow countrymen. In his mind British or Indian, they were all human beings with prejudices, follies, errors, kindness and goodness, each in varying degrees.

Narayan's success as a writer emerges from his portrayal of a unique culture, and yet at the same time a subtle criticism of the alien political power. For this he used the tools of humor and irony. His success in reconciling these two opposing ends is seen in the fact that Narayan's novels are received well both in his native country India and all around the world.
When the novel unfolds, we are told that Swami has four friends. 'He (Swaminathan) honoured only four persons with his confidence' – Somu, the Monitor, who carried himself with such an easy air; Mani the mighty Good-For-Nothing; Sankar, the most brilliant boy of the class and Samuel who was known as the Pea, who had nothing outstanding about him, like Swami, but they were united in their ability to laugh at everything. Swami's relationships with each of these friends were different, but he cherished them all. This harmonious existence is threatened with the arrival of Rajam. Rajam is the colonial superpower that Narayan introduces. He symbolizes the new Indian middle class that Thomas Babington Macaulay anticipated in his now famous 1835 Minute on Education 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.'

"He (Rajam) was a new-comer; he dressed very well-he was the only boy in class who wore socks and shoes, fur cap and tie, and a wonderful coat and knickers. He spoke very good English, exactly like a European; which meant that few in the school could make out what he said." The last sentence in the quotation actually runs beyond its literary meaning. Rajam brought up in a different atmosphere than that of his fellow classmates did in fact speak differently and few understood what he said. Rajam wanted to be better than the rest, to be successful, to impress and to lead. As the novel progresses we see that he is neither affectionate, loyal nor faithful to his friends. At the same time he is confident, intelligent and rarely if ever loses his composure. He has developed the proverbial 'English stiff upper lip.' Swami was greatly impressed by Rajam and wanted to be friends with him. And when he finally does so, this friendship initially creates friction between his earlier friends.

The turning point in his young life comes when impulsively he decides to join a rebellion against the British. He was however, not being patriotic, but rather impulsive, and was enjoying breaking windowpanes by throwing stones. He is punished harshly by the principal and in a moment of desperation runs away from the school. He is later admitted to another school – Board High School. It is during this time that Rajam, Mani and Swami form a Cricket Club and set a date for a match against another cricket club. Swami is now under pressure by Rajam to attend cricket practices; he skips his drill classes in order to do so, and gets into trouble with the drill teacher. In yet another moment of desperation he runs away both from school and home. He gets lost on the road, but is found by a cart-man and is brought home. He learns that he had indeed missed the cricket match, which he took such pains to practice for.

Rajam stubbornly refuses to see him after this, and after a lapse of some days Swami comes to know through Mani that Rajam's father was transferred and was moving the next day. Swami is crushed, but in his innocence, he erroneously thinks that Rajam will relent and forgive. Rajam had decided otherwise and hardened himself against forgiving. There is immense poignancy in the parting seen between the friends. It is heightened by the fact that the reader knows that Rajam has not and will not forgive Swami, while Swami believes that he is forgiven and is grieving for his "dearest friend's" departure:

"At the sight of the familiar face Swaminathan lost control of himself and cried: 'Oh Rajam, Rajam you are going away. When will you come back? Rajam kept looking at him without a word and then (as it seems to Swaminathan) opened his mouth to say something, when everything was disturbed by the guard's blast and the hoarse whistle of the engine.……Rajam's face with the words still unuttered on his lips, receded"

Swami did not have the money to buy a lavish gift for Rajam, but had thoughtfully decided to give him an

English book "Anderson's Fairy Tales" and writes on the flyleaf 'To my dearest friend Rajam'. In this last episode Narayan stresses the difference between the thoughtless Rajam and his devoted two friends Swami and Mani. Rajam was 'dressed like a European boy', his very appearance was alien to them, but it is not only on the outside that Rajam was different, but even within, as the reader sees through out the novel and especially at the end. To Narayan, Rajam's ways and thinking are different, much like the "Europeans." Rajam in his superiority does not feel he owes anybody explanations or farewells. He came, he conquered and he will go as he pleases. This attitude of Rajam's is akin to that of the colonizer who came, conquered, made drastic changes in the lives of Indians and then left just as abruptly as he had come, leaving chaos behind. Rajam was the symbol of that 'class of people' the British colonizer bred, who invariably became alien and even contemptuous to their very own culture.

The novel, first intended for a very young audience, later expanded into a universal one, for its simple narrative and depiction of colonial India. Today in India it is recommended as a textbook or a reference book. One of the most glaring facts about the novel is the similarity of children through out the world, and how they have not changed since the time the novel was written. Children are all mischievous, impulsive and innocent like Swami. They all play and enjoy just like Swami, and try to avoid doing homework by ingenious excuses and methods. Like Swami most children – even today- attend schools that do not nourish their heritage and culture, throughout the world including the US.

The criticism of the educational system and the lack of faith in it is a common theme of Narayan. It runs throughout this trilogy Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher. Narayan's own father who was a principal did not think much of the system as Narayan and his many fictional characters, such as Swami, Chandran, Krishna, Sriram and a host of others. But the educational system comes under grave criticism in this trilogy, and discussed at length in The English Teacher. It is not that Narayan thought that education was useless, but rather that the school and education system founded by the British was irrelevant. He was maybe among the second generation of persons who received a formal education in India during the time, and saw his grandparents and many other of his countrymen surviving, thriving and living as good human beings, perhaps even better than the 'educated folk,' without any education.

R.K.Narayan's first short novel, Swami and Friends, also provides the setting for his later novels and short stories, Malgudi. Malgudi is the typical Indian middle and lower-middle class town and something that provides a window into the life-blood of South India: its unique culture, its simple people and also its paradoxes.

Swami is a paradox throughout the narration. R.K.Narayan does a wonderful job in bringing out his emotional pysche. While Swami sincerely and innocently believes in the sanctity of his friendship with Rajam, Rajam remains aloof and impersonal. Swami's relationship with his peer group is very complex as so-called 'friends'. The novel is full of irony and subtle wit. And also disturbing. Friendship at that age is nothing more than peer pressure and this is a fact that Swami cannot fathom. He tries to impress his friends and peers. He acts impulsively and loses control of himself on more than one occasion. He gets little emotional support at home or from his peers. School is a place where life is tough. Constant pressure from all directions finally tells on Swami and he bends.

Narayan also gently laughs at the world in which Swami lives. The paradoxes of pre-independence India, the alternating aloof and passionate nature of the people, the confusions that encompass the mind of a child in such a volatile environment: all those things are brought out beautifully. Narayan takes a dig at the educational system too as envisioned by the British masters. The use of the cane, the degrading and humiliating nature of the 'stand-up-on-the-desk' punishment, the heavy workload are all shown up by Narayan for what they are: a cruel way of education which mass-produces unimaginative clerks and subordinate staff to serve in the British administrative machine. The real irony of this is seen when Swami runs away from the Board High school and feels nostalgic about his old school: the Albert Mission.

In the final analysis, Swami and Friends is more than the story of a child. It is the story of a generation of Indians who are born and brought up in the shadow of the British colonial Raj and who inherit the confusions of the cultural and social conflict. This is best seen where Swami is seen alternatively admiring and envying Rajam: the rich boy who walks to school dressed like a 'European'. Swami is caught between two worlds as represented by Mani and Rajam. Rajam who stands for all that is posh and urbane, smooth and unemotional, well educated yet hard and ruthless in a way. The other end is Mani who is rough, untamed, naive, emotional and yet loyal. The masterly irony is seen because these two characters not only meet but (in Swami's eyes) they also apparently get along well. To the end, Swami cannot understand the difference and hence the pathos in the final scene.

Narayan passes no judgement on anybody. He presents Swami for what he is and also the world around him for what it is. His style is smooth and simple. His sentences are crisp, yet unconventional. His use of certain 'Indianisms' might alienate the

foreign reader, yet they convey his meaning adequately. The apparent discontinuity of narration at places serves to enhance, rather than dispel, the overall effect. The cultural aspect is very visible throughout: for example Swami's fearful respect towards his father, his closeness to his grandmother, his turbulent relationships at school and his total emotional isolation in spite of physical proximity to so many people are so typical of Indian life where visible demonstration of love and care are seen as signs of weakness and a thing of shame. Throughout Swami grovels in darkness around him and yet does not see himself as being in the dark: that is the final irony and the one the cuts deepest.

It is a highly readable novel that can be read on all levels. The book can also be read without all this mental baggage. That is what keeps Swami and Friends evergreen and fresh at even this day and age.

NARAYAN AND HUMOUR

Humour and laughter are the greatest virtues that God has bestowed on man.

A sense of humour makes one see one's proper place in this world, and teaches him to see things in persepective. Both humour and laughter are universal, though there are national differences on certain aspects. They have their place in all arts and their enjoyment leads to aesthetic experience of a unique kind.

The humour of situation and character represent the higher forms of humour. R.K. Narayan has written stories in which humour arises out of situation or character or stories in which situation and character combine to produce the humorous effect. Narayan has excelled in producing humour of situation as well as of character. He has taken his raw material from the people and events around him.

ON DEFINING AND DESCRIBING HUMOUR

Humour in a situation depends neither on verbal means nor on characters, but purely on the situation that turns out to be funny due to a juxtaposition of incongruities.

Henry Bergson applies the techniques of repetition, inversion and reciprocal interference of series. By repetition he means a combination of circumstances, which recur several times, contrasting with the changing stream of life. Inversion means "topsy-turvy-dom", where the situation is reversed and the roles inverted. A child trying to teach its parents, a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught, the villain who is the victim of his own villainy-in every case the root is the inversion of roles and a situation which recoils.

With regard to reciprocal interference of series, Bergson observes that "a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (123). An equivocal situation, which provides two different meanings, one plausible and the other real, is a good example. Misunderstanding and mistaken identity also cause the humour of situation. Hence, we conclude that R.K.Narayan uses humour effectively to depict social relaism in the novel ***Swami and Friends***.

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