

Rejuvenating Times of the Yearning Childhood in R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*

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Abstract: Happy minds always think good things and are optimistic. Books are one such source which makes a child happy provided, they are devised for pleasure reading. Every society believes that children are the future and they should be moulded in order to make them ready for their adulthood. So, there comes a dire need for such books which can provide information along with knowledge to the students and at the same time are appealing to the adults. The literature which portrays the alluring world of children mesmerized both the children along with the adults by their portrayal of adventurous world of children which makes the adults reminiscent about their innocent life of boyhood. The world of children being the microcosm of the world of both the children and the adults are enthralled by the children literature. R. K. Narayan is one among those writers who talks about the juvenile world which is characterised by their love, friendship, petty quarrels with peers, their hatred towards school, their skirmishes with the teachers, fear from examination and the problems they face due to their involvement with the adult world. Narayan in his novel, *Swami and his Friends*, firstly introduced the place Malgudi which is considered as the microcosm of India. The novel can be considered as the classic chronicle of the adventure of a boy named Swami and his friends. Thus, the main motto of this paper is to find out those elements in the novel that makes it a part of classic literature bringing a feeling of universal appeal for children and adult.

Key Words: Juvenile, Children literature, adventurous, reminiscent.

Children literature is a part of imaginative literature that talks about the world of children and childhood throughout the globe, but being a recipient of a very little attention. However, in recent years, a stream of attention is sweeping through the intellectual world, marginal arenas and sensitive people towards the necessity of literature with which children can associate themselves. The world of children being the microcosm of the world of both the children and the adults are enthralled by children literature. R. K. Narayan is one among those writers who talks about the juvenile world which is characterised by their love, friendship, petty quarrels with peers, their hatred towards school, their skirmishes with the teachers, fear from examination and the problems they face due to their involvement with the adult world. He is the rare example of a pure artist, who writes for the sake of art, and not out

of any ulterior motives. This is one school of the reason that his works have been translated into a number of languages of the world.

R. K. Narayan's first novel, *Swami and his Friends* is set in a fictional town of Malgudi during the British rule in India is a delightful book about childhood and children. It was published in the year 1935 and a tele-series in 1987 was also made on it. B. Parvathi in her essay, "Revisiting Childhood in *Swami and Friends*" commented:

Swami and Friends will continue to fascinate readers in print and also viewers of the small screen because of the visual impact created by Doordarshan. The novel's place among classics to the world about children is well assured. (40)

The novel can be considered as a classic chronicle of the adventures of a boy named Swami and his friends. The novel *Swami and his Friends*, talks about the rainbow world during childhood means juggling around between classes, homework, playing mischief with friends, strolling in sun, drenching in rains and making strategies to convince parent for the permission to play. This is the only time in the life of a person, when there is purity of thoughts and actions. It appears while reading the novel; the readers get a vivid portrayal of the thoughts, emotions and activities of school boys. C. D. Narasimhaiah in his book *The Swan and Eagle* commented that we get the life of all boys seen through an adult vision, and registered for the first time in respectable creative writing.

It is a story of Swami and his whole gang of friends and their adventure in the school. It beautifully captures the perspective of a ten year old boy towards school, adults and stuff around. Children, just like adults have inhibitions, period of chaos and tensions in their live. The first hurdle that a child faces is the problem of adjusting to the custom-bound life in school. In order to get way from such custom-bound and strict life, Swami wants to abscond from school and becomes the ring leader of his group.

The narration of the novel is autobiographical in nature and seems that Narayan's personal experience at school has gone into making this novel. Like Narayan, Swami the protagonist of the novel shuddered at the very thought of the school. The atmosphere of the school of the Albert Mission School and the Board High School which together with the strict home discipline under the orthodox father, forced him to leave Malgudi only to return day or two after, with a remarkable change of heart. The inability of the child to cope with the examination system, his inadequate involvement in the process of learning is shown to be due to unreal and mechanical system of education. In the life of child, congenial atmosphere should be adopted instead of torturous system that makes him unfit in the society. Prof. K. R. Srinivasa in his book, *Indian Writing in English* wrote, "*Swami and Friends* is a tale of 'growing up' difficult for the boy but delighted for the reader who is led into the by lanes of harmless hassles and memories of childhood."

Swami is the main protagonist of the novel, enjoys complete freedom at home except occasional checks by his father. He loved to enjoy the company of his friends at school except for the geography, arithmetic and Ebenezer, the scripture teachers who made his time during the school a torturous one. The criticism of Ebenezer regarding the Hindus Gods were intolerable for Swami because it was not an attack on gods, it was an attack on the faith of

Swami and his identity, “The teacher was intolerable to-day. Swaminathan’s blood boiled. He got up and asked, “If he was a God. Why did he eat flesh and fish and drink wine? In an answer to this, Ebenezer left his seat, advanced towards Swaminathan, and tried to wrench his left ear off” (2). Hence for him, school was not only a place meant for the company of his friends and play, but also for teachers and punishment. Affections, relationships and discovering life alone preoccupy his mind. Children always wanted to get away from the adult world. As in the novel, Swami’s father was stern discipline man and wanted the same from her. But Swami was not able to adhere to the system and play several pranks to escape from the adult world. They suffer due to avarice and depravity of the adult world. Swami in his summer vacations wanted to freak and roam around with his friends Mani and Rajam. This attitude of the children shows their tendency to leave their home in search of a utopian world which is an aspect of heroism for children. But later came to know that their home is the safest for them and their parents and friends cannot replace anything in the world and love them unconditionally.

The novel from its beginning to end is full of adventures and sluggishness of a school boy. His beliefs in miracles, easy faith on strangers than his father and so on. On account of this attitude, Swami was easily be fooled by a coachman who said that if he gave him only six-paise, he would easily make them into six rupees, by a magic trick and with that amount a hoop could be easily purchased. Instead of six paise, the coachman made the poor boy to pay twelve paise and ultimately refused him to recognise him. Thus, leaving Swami in a pitiful condition as he cannot tell about the incident to his father because then he will be punished by him. Throughout the novel, Swami acts impulsively and tries to escape from his difficulties but he always find himself in some trouble only because of his own actions.

For Narayan, childhood is not only about enjoyment, laughter, purity and innocence but it is also equally about pride, arrogance, thoughtlessness and meanness. Swami in the novel rarely initiates any action himself, but acts upon the suggestions made by others. He is easily be fooled and robbed by coachman. Later to recover his money, he acts upon the suggestion made by Rajam and Mani to decoy coachman’s son by pretending to be hostile to Swami. But, their plan failed, dogs were set upon them by coachman and hence they all had to run for their lives.

Children sometimes tried to act like adults and hide secrets from them ignoring of the fact that they are not mature enough for such acts on their own part. When in Malgudi, the stream of struggle for Independence strikes, people started involving themselves in political activity i.e. strikes and public speeches. Swami also wanted to had his involvement in the ‘political activity’ by breaking the window panes first of his school and then of Board High School. In this activity, none of his friends participated expect him and because of it, he was dismissed from his school. Later during the talk with his friend Rajam, the wisdom dawns upon him that it would have been better for him if he remain himself far from such ‘dirty politics’ or stayed at home on that fateful day.

Rajam who was unforgiving at first, later comes to Swami with the idea of a cricket club, an idea translated into reality which further complicates the simple life of Swami with misery and misunderstanding. He was not at all a cricket enthusiast nor longed to play cricket. Now being a student of Board High School, Swami shows more loyalty to friendship with Rajam and the M.C.C than to the discipline of his new school. Swami along with his friends played cricket till late in the evening that led to the punishment from the drill master.

Hence, once again Swami ran away from the school and home. Finally he lost his way into the Mempi forest to the great anxiety of his family and despair of the M.C.C. which resulted into the lost of match to Y.M.U. The defeat in match led Swami to lose his dear friend Rajam for whom Swami is responsible for the lost of match. After the lost of match, Swami felt as if his whole world had shattered. Narayan possesses sensitive awareness of writing with which a child can relate. Swami was heart-broken. Rajam did not talk with him since his return. But his father treated it all as a petty matter and laughed at his fears. Children have the tendency to make a mole-hill into mountains and Swami is not an exception. He being highly absurd and exaggerated the whole incident and treated himself responsible for everything.

Thus, in the novel *Swami and Friends*, Narayan has shown great penetration and skill in depicting the rainbow-world of childhood and early boyhood for which every adult longs for. Children have the greater imagination, vivid sensations, their fancy bigger than reality, treat friends as angles and enemy as demons, their joys and sorrows are absolute and eternal. Children have a tendency to exaggerate their happiness and sorrows; and it requires a psychological insight and understanding to paint their world. Swami being a happy, sensitive and imaginative boy realised his mistakes in not confiding in his father about the Scripture teacher, his participation in protest, commitment towards cricket, running away from school, his indifference with Rajam may be small incidents in an adult world but these are very real and almost tragic for the sensitive young boy. With all the precision of depicting out the flaws and follies of Swami, *Swami and Friends* continue to fascinate readers whether adult or children and hence become a classic in children literature to the world.

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