

Swami's Childhood Jaunty – A Panorama of Indian School Life in R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*

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Pablo Picasso writes "The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls." *Swami and Friends* makes our souls serene devoid of any dust of daily life. The spark of fun and excitement is ignited from the moment one steps on to understand Swami's character, his joy and joviality spreading over whole of Narayan's canvas. Set in the imaginary South Indian town of Malgudi the novel *Swami and Friends* captures the bubblyness and boisterousness, fun and frolic of Indian school life against the backdrop of British colonial period. Graham Greene rightly observes "Narayan 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." (Narayan) It was Graham Greene who suggested the title *Swami and Friends*, changing it from Narayan's *Swami, the Tate* to resemble it to Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Company*. The novel is all about Swaminathan and his gang who indulge in all kinds of mischievous activities i.e. playing pranks, bunking classes, loafing around the blistering Indian summer, scheming to convince their fathers for due and undue demands. Swami's impishness is, however, harmless rather there is innate innocence and puckish delight in his activities. *Swami and Friends* attributes its popularity to Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan's humour, irony and minute observation that has immortalized the work.

The novel is a nostalgic ride to one's forgotten childhood. Swami is a ten year old boy living with his authoritarian father and dotting mother and grandmother along with a new born sib. Swinging like pendulum between fearful respect of father and his turbulent teachers at Albert Mission School the child faces a really messy situation and the author captures the emotional psyche of Swami with great irony and subtle wit. The poor fellow gets relief when he hangs around with four pals Somu, the monitor of the class, Mani, the strong, good for nothing fellow, Sankar, the most brilliant boy and, Samuel, known as the Pea due to his pea size.

Spotlighting the child psyche of a school boy the author illustrates the growth of Swami from a timid, scary, and weak boy into an adventurous, bold one. He humorously brings out Swami's averseness to strenuous arithmetic exercises, dull maps, in fact to all subjects except sports. His hangover for Mondays is beautifully highlighted in the opening lines – "It was Monday morning. 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 the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school." (7) He enumerates endless excuses, tries to win favour from granny and mother but he feels that it "was easier to squeeze milk out of a stone than to get permission from father to keep away from school." (104) He always grumbles "even if I die, I am sure father will insist on sending my corpse to the school." (104,105) One is reminded of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in which Tom feels Monday as miserable – "because it began another week's slow suffering in school." (Twain, 7) Tom plots ways to avoid going to school. He groans and moans, pretends to be dying but finally succumbs to his aunt's pressures. Swami is scared of his father and whatever he studies it is because of his father's terror. Though we know his father shows a marked authoritarian streak but he is soft inside. Exams are really a trying period in his life.

Swami and his friends are totally gripped by exam fever. Mani's hilarious offering of fresh brinjals to clerk for question papers, Swami's making of list required for exam, father's advices and admonishments are daily doses that one comes across in childhood. The study of maps, arithmetic, staying indoors in the evenings is quite unbearable. Swami's restlessness, distaste for exams are remarkably penned down " he had seen a supervisor observing him, and had at once pretended to be busy with the answer paper.... He read a few lines of the first question and was bored – He had to pretend that he was revising..."(51) Swami's joy knows no bounds post exams. He decides to use his books 'as fuel in the kitchen.' They destroy each stationery item and Mani wrenches the ink bottles. The school stays shut. The whole of Malgudi becomes a deserted place in blistering sun except Swami and his friends. "They found the noon and the afternoon the most fascinating part of the day.... The same sun that baked the earth so much that even Mr. Retty, the most Indianized of the 'Europeans', who owned a rice mill in the deserted bungalow outside the town... screamed one day when he forgetfully took a step or two barefoot – the same sun made the three friends loath to remain under a roof."(64) His euphoria, however, soon ebbs out when the father chides Swami for lazing around. Any kind of request goes haywire to his fumed father's deaf ears .The poor child cannot understand "if one has got to read even during holidays, I don't see why holidays are given at all."(69) On his father's admonishment he has to stay put inside the house to shake off the dust of covers of the books. Innocently he asks "should I read even when I have no school? (68)

His passion for bicycle makes him beg everybody for five rupees. His child psyche wonders what his father did with all the money that he took from his clients. "Swaminathan stood before the gods and with great piety informed them of the box and its contents, how he expected them to convert the two pebbles into two three-paise coins, and why he needed money so urgently. He promised that if the gods helped him, he would

give up biting his thumb. He closed his eyes and muttered: 'Oh 'Sri Rama! Thou hast slain Ravana though he had ten heads, can't you give me six paise?' (57) To his utter shock God does not convert pebbles into even 6 paise. Tears roll down his cheeks and he shows anger by kicking cardboard box full of pebbles. He tries Mani and Rajam and fabricates a story to Rajam. He makes a plan to kidnap coachman's son. His fabricated story, however, takes unprecedented turn .He knows not how to control the mess. The whole locality comes to support coachman and his son. They have to run away to save themselves from chasing dogs. In another episode he is asked to sleep in his father's office room after his father has read a newspaper article how a boy fought bravely against a tiger. His father feels Swami is being spoilt by his granny. He dreams of devil coming to him and uses his teeth to combat. Unknowingly he becomes instrumental in catching a notorious house breaker. He becomes a hero and every one praises his bravery.

The story, thus, moves around the adventures and misadventures of Swami and his friends. Rajam's induction in to class changes the equation. Rajam's class forbids the boys to befriend him. The classmates feel awe of Rajam as "their fund of broken English being small. Only Sankar, the genius of the class, had the courage to face him, though his English sounded halting and weak before that of Rajam." (16) Rajam epitomizes colonial class who is class apart because of his father's post, his mannerisms, his English. He becomes a new 'power in the class' a new menace especially to Mani. Swami does not want to annoy Mani so he keeps an arms' length. One day Mani challenges and after heated arguments they decide to meet near Nallapp's Grove to settle their fat egos. But Rajam's diplomacy saves the situation and the initial animosity between Mani and Rajam oozes out and three of them become best of pals. Swami and Rajam are like chalk and cheese but there is undeniable chemistry between the two that consolidates with practice sessions of cricket. Their visit to Rajam's house opens a new

world to them. They jell well with each other sharing his toys, witnessing his position, his aristocratic life style that is a manifestation of British Colonialism in India. To his utter dismay next day he finds written blackboard in huge letters 'TAIL' followed by a scuffle over this insult that ends with headmaster's intervention. This friendship gets cemented and they become thick friends when Malgudi has to witness a friendly match and Y.M.U. is pitted against M.C.C. Swami is the 'Tate' of the team, 'a dark horse' Amidst mounting pressure Rajam rests all hopes with Swami's bowling skill to win the match. But the latter is not able to make it to daily practice session as his authoritarian school master forbids leaving school before stipulated time. Narayan presents a hilarious account of Swami's escapades from school drilling and scouting. On Rajam's request he screws up courage to give lame excuses. Stealing the sight of family he visits the doctor for medical certificate to exempt himself from drilling exercises. But he is shocked when Dr. Kesvan becomes a villain "He would teach that villain a lesson, put a snake into his Table –drawer; he would not allow that villain to feel his pulse even if he (Swaminathan) should be dying of fever." (115) He knows not what he is doing. He snatches the cane from the headmaster's hand, throws it out of window, takes out the books, crosses many hurdles to reach market road. The next moment he realizes its repercussions – what would be his fate when he will not be admitted to any other school.

Narayan paints beautifully the psyche of a ten year old boy. "So he would have to work and earn....He might get some rupees – and he could go to hotels and buy coffee and tiffin as often as he pleased. What divine sweets the Bombay Anand Bhavan made! (115) His absconding sends cold waves and his family and friends make a mad search but he is not able to reach before Sunday match. Rajam loses the match and his father's transfer gives no time to patch up. Swami sinks in to shame, a sense of guilt and fear. "The world seemed to have become blank all of a sudden. The thought of Lawley Extension without Rajam

appalled him with its emptiness.” (139) Amusingly also ten year old Tom, after failure in his attempt to win Becky Thatcher’s love, his friend Joe Harper who is punished by his mother for eating up the cream, escape to Jackson’s island. Huckleberry Finn joins them in their woes. Done with adventures three of them grow homesick. They learn that everyone is considering them as dead. They attend their own funeral but feel guilty. Unknowingly he becomes a hero in school. “What a hero Tom had become now! The smallest boys flocked at his heels, proud to be seen with him. And the older ones were consumed with envy at his sun-tanned skin and sudden fame.” (*Twain*, 139)

Swami’s character gradually transforms becoming more energetic and entertaining. Narayan’s characters move in the time period when India is in the thick of freedom struggle. A silent revolution is brewing in the small hamlet called Malgudi. Swami does not understand big words – freedom, independence. He is, however, swayed away when the leaders give inspiring speeches to protest against the arrest of local political leaders. He throws away his Lancashire cap at Bonfire though later on he understands that it was khaddar. A timid Swami experiences a sudden flood of courage. Amidst chaos he recollects ink-bottles and throws at ventilator of school headmaster’s room. Swami is censored for breaking glass panes but this mob scene transforms him intensely. The revolution outbursts within Swami as well as in India and he outrageously rushes out of school uttering “I don’t care for your dirty school.” (86) He is ready to face the wrath of his headmaster and defies him without support of Rajam and Mani. He joins Board school though it is ironical when Swami runs away later on from the Board school and feels nostalgic about Mission school.

Swami and his friends’ adventures are not plotted and planned rather they are spontaneous mischief acts. They enjoy these risk taking deeds. Like any other ten year old boy, they are allured to toys, distaste books, school work. Swami is perfectly

an epitome of innocence. In the beginning he is a timid, a face of the crowd but in the mob scene (Chapter 12) he matures. Spending and loitering his idyllic childhood around Malgudi, a fictitious town, its Sarayu River, the Mempi forest, the Nallapa's grove, the market road, Swami unknowingly steps in to a changing new urban world in form of government bungalows, missionary school. Initially he cannot take the Christians especially his school teacher but he is also fascinated by the new world in the form of Rajam, the police officer's son, his toys – far different from the world of Malgudi – a world of colonial advancement. The game of cricket plays a crucial role in transforming his personality. Though overshadowed among his self-confident peer group especially Mani and Rajam, Swami grows in the course of the novel. Narayan is not judgmental. But he has an eye for the mode of punishment, degrading and humiliating nature of 'stand – up on the desk', heavy workloads which produce only unimaginative clerks to serve in British machinery.

In today's era the computer age has stolen the innocence of kids and extra loaded books and huge syllabi are snatching their childhood. The cartoons, video games have zeroed down the physical activities. Reading Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, Ruskin Bond's short stories and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* one is rejuvenated and relishes the energy, enthusiasm and adventures of children. Ruskin Bond's short stories for instance take us back to the days of kite making, buffalo riding, swimming in the pond and cycling. Bond's innumerable childhood experiences and anecdotes of Gadhwal region are deeply etched in our mind. In Mark Twain's Tom is unbridled sort of boy who dispunges any kind of discipline. He complains widow Douglas that he will die of the certainty of knowing in advance what one will eat and when one will eat. His gang love to experiment and explore. They are always bent upon doing things that is 'forbidden fruit'. They visit a grave yard as told by friend that 'swinging of a dead cat in graveyard can cure warts. While R.K. Narayan captures

the simple pleasures of childhood, Ruskin Bond plays the role of moral policing. His concern for depletion of natural resources finds reflection in *Dust and the Mountain*. *The Cherry Tree* underlines the reward of patience when a boy's efforts make the cherry blossom and he exclaims "just one small seed, I wonder, is this what it feels to be God? (Bond, 605)

Narayan presents a rainbow world of childhood immortalizing his creation. Perhaps reminiscences of his old childhood days at school and his minute observations have contributed in vivid portrayal of the actions and emotions of childhood. After his wife's death Narayan devoted all his time in the company of his daughter. He took keen interest in her childhood and in real understanding of child psychology that no other writer perhaps may equal him, in the depiction of childhood. The genius of R.K. Narayan is in understanding the child psychology, their escapades from home work and schools; their little maneuvering to avoid assignments. The best part of childhood is their innocent world where no worry is too long for them unlike adults. By their innocent, impish behaviour and giggling mischief readers break into peals of laughter. He does not indulge into the exploration of any good or bad characters in his novels. Human nature, nourished in Indian culture is presented as it is without condemnation or praise. *The Spectator* gives a befitting tribute "The hardest of all things for a novelist to communicate is the extraordinary ordinariness of human happiness. Jane Austen, Soskei, and Chekhov: a few bring it off. Narayan is one of them." (Narayan)

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