



## Autobiographical Element in R.K. Narayan's novel

### *Swami and Friends*

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### **Abstract**

R.K.Narayan, one of the most distinguished Indian novelists writing in English, brings out autobiographical element in his novel, *Swami and Friends*. It is the first novel of Narayan published in 1935. This is really creditable for a first attempt. The novel, *Swami and Friends* is an autobiographical in nature which owes much of its realism and authenticity that is rooted in Narayan's personal experience as a boy at school. The autobiographical element is unmistakable. Swami's experiences in the Albert Mission School seem to be based on Narayan's own experiences as a school boy. Indeed, Swami is only the second half of Narayan's original name, Narayanaswami, and the shortened form "Swami" was adopted out of deference to the novelist's publishers, "not wanting the novel to be confused with an autobiography". This paper describes the autobiographical element of Narayan and it recalls his childhood and boyhood scenes in this novel.

Keywords: autobiographical, authenticity, childhood, boyish adventures.

### **Introduction**

Narayan is an Indian literary giant credited with establishing the Indian English novel genre and introducing the Indian sensibility to the world at large. Narayan's literary output was amazing. He wrote fifteen novels, five volumes of short stories, a number of travelogues, non-fiction, English translation of Indian epics, and memoirs. The backdrop of nearly all his Papers in **11th National Conference on Nature, Culture, Language and Literature: Narratives and Critical Practices** can be accessed from

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fiction is an imaginative town – Malgudi - which grows from a sleepy, dusty, unnoticeable town to a bustling hectic urban centre with the passage of time as the writer adds to this imaginative landscape, novel after novel.

*Swami and Friends* was published in 1935, is largely autobiographical though the incidents are so filtered that the personal is universalised. It is located in a small imagined town – Malgudi, and its protagonist a lad - Swami, studying in a primary school in the British era. Swami's life has its little blitzkrieg when he is fired with the *Swadeshi* zeal and goes about vandalizing his school run by the British missionaries only to be rusticated from it. The novel is a paean to childhood – its innocence, bungling, friendships, breakups and its own non-duplicable unique world. Narayan is the greatest Indian writer who has marvelously crafted a world of childhood for his readers, a world to which each one of us relates irrespective of our national trajectories. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly says, “R. K. Narayan successfully achieves a universal vision” through his non-metropolitan situations.

*Swami and Friends* which deals with the hero's growth into maturity through a number of adolescent audiences. Being a child across the globe comes with its own set of problems and more or less has to do with the formal academic system which treats childhood as a phase through which a child has to be forcefully forded across. In Narayan's time the use of cane, the degrading and humiliating nature of the 'stand-up-on-the-desk' punishment, the heavy workload - all are exposed for what they really are: a cruel education which mass-produces unimaginative clerks and subordinate staff to serve the British administrative machine. Childhood is never encouraged per se: children are always encouraged to grow out of their mould of innocence. Freedom to a child is far and between, snatched in between classroom and homework – when free play becomes possible – freedom for which a child is at times held criminally accountable. But the beauty of childhood, *Swami and Friends* tells us lies in its resilience and innocence. *Swami and Friends* begins with the sentences: “It was

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Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant...

After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday”.

The novel’s first chapter titled ‘Monday Morning’ where the writer takes us into the world of children and in a non-didactic, un-acrimonious tone paints for us a world where children and their little tragedies and sorrows are consistently overlooked by the adults. His efforts merely earn him rebuke. Narayan was a life-long critic of the Indian educational system and he crusaded against academics’ burdening the child with homework and regimenting his life. As a child, Narayan disliked going to school - the novel is interspersed with autobiographical details. It is Narayan’s forte that he selects, alters and filters the autobiographical – Swami’s world enjoys “an objective existence... responsive to... things outside” the writer’s immediate life.

Swami was especially close to his grandmother who is described as a “benign and ignorant old lady”– a widow with a kind attitude towards her grandson who adores her and still finds her a social embarrassment. Unlike her son, this old lady is not judgmental and critical of Swami. She has a genuinely magnanimous attitude towards Swami. She knows that children do not share the adult world’s social duplicity and that they speak their hearts without malice. As such, when Swami brings home his friend and asks his grandmother to give him a warm welcome but keep away from them, the elderly lady remains good humoured over the entire affair.

The grandmother epitomises an ideal parent figure whose unconditional love lets the child blossom naturally. Her guidance is kind, in glaring contrast to Swami’s father who is autocratic and stern and extremely hard to please. Where Swami can play around freely with his granny, he is not allowed to touch anything that belongs to his father. A tacit hierarchical demarcation exists in Swami’s home. Swami’s father brings strict regimentation to home – he is nearly as stifling as the school. The difference between the school and the father lies in the

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fact that at school Swami is one among the many students and is managed so that the school's discipline remains undisturbed while at home Swami has the privilege of his father attending to his problems and trying to solve them. Despite his father's strictness, Swami holds his father in awe and hero-worships him. Teachers are an altogether different ballgame to Swami – he dislikes them and finds going to school very tedious and boring. The rest of the teachers are not averse to handing out corporeal punishment to them. With his characteristic humour, Narayan balances the bleak with the comic.

Narayan was against formal schooling for small children for he believed “In every teacher there lurks a potential devil”. We are drawn into the vortex of an education system that believes in *dumbing-down* – a child is not allowed to be enthusiastic or expressive but is coerced into being an unthinking cog that is geared to respond to the teacher and never initiate. Examinations and Swami are an incorrigible affair. Swami loves physical activities and has a laid back lackadaisical attitude towards life. He is a proverbial child in whose life there is sheer spontaneity. The gravity of exams is beyond his ken. Once again, Narayan shows us the absurdity of academics' evaluation yardstick which does not account for the individuality of the student – an insistent issue that runs through the novel is the incongruity of schooling where there is no place for children who are not academically inclined but bright otherwise. Swami is not loquacious: he writes an absolutely correct answer which is just a few lines long in comparison to his classmates' half to one page long answers. Swami is badly graded despite being correct. Narayan has rightly observed said “I feel convinced that the... aims of education are hopelessly wrong from beginning to end”.

It is R.K. Narayan's unique forte that his novels reveal the complete picture. We never ever have a world which is all black and bleak – sunshine and happiness radiate from the pages. School has its innocent charm where children get together, play, make friends, plot and learn to cope with various kinds of pressures and develop camaraderie and team spirit. We cannot begin to imagine Swami without his school and school buddies, some of whom are meek and timid while others are bullies or brilliant. Swami's group of friends has children with varying

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temperaments, some of whom are given nicknames like *Pea*. Living and growing up together in a small city with minimal distractions has brought these children very close emotionally and made them socially dependent on each other.

At the end of the novel, Swami is entirely changed. Now he grows mature and tries to understand and perform his responsibilities. He becomes somewhat serious and sincere. He repents on the act of escaping from home and he realises the real essence of life. Now, he understands that life is a total sum of joy and sorrow that one has to face it at the various stages of life. The normal order was temporarily disturbed by his escape, but now, by his return, normalcy is restored once again. His parents and his Granny are happy, and through the efforts of his father matters are set right and he is re-admitted to the Board High School. *Swami and Friends* makes for an easy read which helps us understand the everyday India of the nineteen thirties. The country, especially the South, comes to us through an inverted world where children, not adults, are in focus. Children are heard and their points-of-view matter.

It is an extremely refreshing change from the mainstream novel writing that exclusively concentrates on the world of adults and merely accommodates the world of children. One is humbled by Narayan's extraordinary ability to create an authentic world of children with remarkable ease. Graham Greene understood the difficulty of rendering childhood successfully by adult authors and appreciated Narayan's efforts in *Swami and Friends*. Swami and Malgudi continue with us despite the novel coming to an end. Like Graham Greene, the reader continues to be intrigued: "Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan's. I do not wait for another novel. I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement..." India's premier cartoonist, R.K. Laxman, lent his imagination and skill to sketching *Swami and Friends*, giving the characters an identity.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is a great work of art, and very creditable as a first attempt. As Graham Greene, to whom it was sent for review, said, it is, "a book in ten thousand". R.K. Narayan

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never went to school in England, nor was he a bright student; still he has created a great work of art which must take its place with the great English masterpieces dealing with the school world and boyish adventures.

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