
Children and Childhood in the Short Stories of R K Narayan: An Autobiographical Perspective

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Abstract

R K Narayan is one of the three in the “holy trinity” of Indian Writing in English. A highly acclaimed writer, master story teller, his characters and his portrayal of ‘Malgudi’ with coruscating virtuosity are testament to his enduring appeal to the readers and critics alike. He is one of the very few, writing in those times, who delved deep in the world of children. His stories of ‘Swami and his Friends’ firmly establish his status as a writer with rare insight into child psychology. This insight, however, is rooted in Narayan’s own experiences as a child. His oeuvre can be read as an autobiography of the author himself. Although the autobiographical strain invests all his writings, the present article is an attempt to study his short stories as reflection of his own personal experiences, particularly with reference to his childhood.

Keywords: Indian writing in English; Children; childhood; autobiographical; Malgudi.

R.K. Narayan, one of the best known of the Indo-English writers created an imaginary world of Malgudi where realistic characters in a typically Indian setting lived amid unpredictable events. Narayan was raised by in Madras by his grandmother and an uncle. His grandmother did play a significant role in his life as far as his profession as a writer is concerned. It was she who lighted in him a flame of passion for language and for people. He received the school education from the Christian Mission School, where he said, he learned to love the Hindu Gods simply because the Christian Chaplain ridiculed them. These facts about Narayan’s life have established themselves as the base for much of Narayan’s works there by giving an autobiographical touch to them.

The short stories and novels of R.K. Narayan contain a strong autobiographical element in them. He has given the detailed experiences of his life in his autobiography *My Days*. Published in 1974, *My Days* is an autobiography with a difference. After wading through a few pages one gets an impression that one is reading not an autobiography but a piece of fiction. Indeed in many ways it is very similar to a Narayan’s novel. It certainly brings home to one much of his fiction. The strikingly personal *The English Teacher* is firmly tethered in the detail of his own experience. Narayan’s autobiography, like his novels, is regional in that it conveys an intimate sense of a given place- in the novels, Malgudi; in *My Days*, Mysore- but is not parochial or shuttered.

The plight of the children is the greatest concern of R.K.Narayan. He never talks about or highlights the big political issues like the Indian Freedom Movement in which the whole of India was engrossed, he does not comment on the socio-economic problems, he has no moral advice for anybody. He is much satisfied with his life and knows ‘India will go on’. But the startling revelation is that R.K.Narayan is worried and speaks against the plight of the children which goes unnoticed by the adult world (Speech in the Rajya Sabha). R.K.Narayan highlights the plight of the children in so many of his

short stories. It was possible for Narayan because he himself had felt that plight while growing as a child. That is why most of the characters created by him in his fiction are children who are busy in their own world of innocence and small wishes and keep experiencing and bearing at frequent intervals the indifference and insensitivity of the ignorant adult world. Many child characters bear a strong reflection of his own self which he spent as a child. We can convincingly say on the basis of the analytic study of these child characters and R.K. Narayan's life as described by himself in his autobiography 'My days' that many of these child characters are Narayan himself bearing different names and ages and acting in different settings drawn from his own personal life. For example, 'Swami' in the short story *A Hero*, 'Mani', 'Rajam', 'Swaminathan', 'Samuel', 'Sankar' in the novel *Swami and Friends*, 'Dodu' in the short stories *The Regal* and *Dodu*, 'Leela' and 'Sidda' in *Leela's Friend*, 'Kutti' in *A Performing Child*, 'Sami' in *The Mute Companions*, 'Ramu' in *Flavour of Coconut*, 'Shanta' in *Forty-five a Month*, 'Radha' in *A Willing Slave*, 'Sambu' in *A Shadow*, 'Gopu' in *Hungry Child*, 'Leela' in *The English Teacher*.

Other characters in his fiction are those that were closely associated with him in his own life. For example, the girl child characters like the four years old Radha in 'The Willing Slave', little Kutti in 'The Performing Child', and five years old Leela in 'Leela's Friend' remind us of his own little motherless daughter with whom he was strongly attached. His favourite grandmother with whom he spent his childhood finds her presence in his novel *Swami and Friends* and the short stories like *A Hero*. His strict father is reflected in the novel 'Swami and Friends' and the short stories like 'Father's Help', 'Leela's Friend', 'Dodu'. The presence of a monkey in short stories like 'The Mute Companions', 'Naga' remind us of the pet monkey which was there in the house of R.K.Narayan and with which he was fondly attached.

Photography, pets and above all, the local streets figured largely in Narayan's early experiences. Whether he walked them as a small boy hand in hand with his uncle, or a little later on his own, sneaking out of the house unnoticed, the streets offered boundless material to this precociously alert observer, nutrition for the imagination, education for the feelings, provocation to wonder, as well as reminders of the harshness of life and the proximity of death:

Over all that hubbub one heard the tramcar grinding the rails at its terminus in the street of shops two furlongs away. Eastward of our home were shops and the tram terminus, where one boarded to get to the wide world and the sea-coast beyond, whereas the west side, where the corporation caravans went, seemed full of sinister possibilities. From that direction, one heard bickerings and curses and affrays from an unseen tavern. Corpses were borne in funeral processions in the same direction. I shuddered to look that way, but longed to see the shops and tramway at the other end. (R.K. Narayan 9)

The strong, personal and very familiar setting of the different places—be they house's compound or garden, streets like Vinayak Mudali Street, Kabir Street, Mill Street or Lawley Extension, Missionary schools like Albert Mission School or the Board School, the river Sarayu, Nallapa's grove, the Chamundi hills and the Mempi hills, the city of Mysore—in the fictional town of Malgudi seem quite autobiographical. Such familiar settings for the actions of children and adults could not have been created, had R.K.Narayan not been personally familiar with them. His personal familiarity with most of

these places has been affirmed by him in his autobiography 'My Days'. The other creators of the fictional towns like Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner were successful in creating the mesmerizing setting of their fictional towns simply because of the fact that these writers had themselves lived and experienced in those personally familiar settings. One of the important reasons for the tremendous success of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is its strong, familiar and personal setting with which a reader can easily identify himself.

No doubt, Malgudi is the product of Narayan's mind but Narayan has delved into his immediate personal surroundings as a child or a young man to create that fictional world. The streets, the schools, the river Sarayu, the hills around have been taken from his real life into the imaginative world. Malgudi resembles Mysore as far as the location of its physical landmarks is concerned and like a hero it is present in all the stories of Narayan. This town does resemble the provincial towns of those days, complete with a Taluq Office, a municipal building, clock-tower, and a central statue with steps leading to it on which young and old sat of an evening, while hawkers peddled their wares. In fact, it is a fictitious South Indian town which is depicted in delicate impressions. It is a dusty little town, with winding lanes, tenement houses with one water tap for all the families. The people are by and large gentle and nervous, while some of them are always looking for easy ways to become rich.

For the creation of his characters, particularly the children, Narayan must have delved deep into his own life. In the early novels of R.K. Narayan, P.S. Sundaram says, "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" (P.S. Sundram 27).

The autobiographical element is so dominant in his novels and short stories that his own childhood can be easily reconstructed from them. In his works, Narayan must have reconstructed and reflected the scenes of his boyhood as well as those of his children which must have left a deep impression on his mind. Narayan hated his school like Swaminathan, Balu and Raju of *Swami and Friends* and had "wept in fear" (R.K. Narayan, *My Days*, Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1979, p.9) on the first day in the school. If Swaminathan's experience in a Christian school was unpleasant, so was Narayan's own :

The teachers were all converts, and towards the few non-christian students like me, they displayed a lot of hatred. Most of the Christian students also detested us. The scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu Gods, and violent abuses were heaped on idol-worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus." (R.K. Narayan 12).

Besides his own, Narayan closely watched the childhood of his daughter, Hema who was under his care and protection especially after the death of his wife in 1939. It is natural to have the scenes of childhood fresh in his writings due to the close contact with his daughter whom he tried to give a great deal of company so that she doesn't remember her mother. Narayan with his characteristic empathy puts himself into the personalities of his children, understands them fully and delineates them exquisitely.

Narayan spent much of his childhood days with his maternal grandmother and so the grandmother figures in many of his stories making them autobiographical. The grandmother, as already mentioned, had an important role in his life as well as in his stories. Grandmother held a very important

position in Narayan's life. He was sent to her as his own mother had grown too weak after his birth to look after all the children all alone. Living with Granny was altogether a more settled and, so far as Narayan was concerned, a much to be preferred arrangement. His grandmother played a very important role in framing his life what it became actually. The tender period of childhood was spent with her and she worked hard in shaping it to the best of her efforts.

My grandmother examined my slate when I returned home and remarked, 'They don't seem to teach you anything in your school.' Every day she commented thus and then ordered, 'Wash your feet and hands under the tap and come into the kitchen.' When I had accomplished these difficult tasks, she would have coffee and tiffin for me in the kitchen. She would have interrupted her gardening to attend to me, and resuming it, go on until late in the evening. From her gardening, after changing into dry clothes, and chewing betel-nut and leaf, she came straight for me. She would place an easy chair in the garden for herself and a stool beside it for me, fix up a lamp, and attempt to supplement with her coaching the adequate education I got in the school. She taught me multiplication; I had to recite the tables upto twelve every day and then all the thirty letters of the Tamil alphabet, followed by Avvaiyar's (an ancient Tamil poetess) sayings. (R.K. Narayan 10)

And the same old, brilliant grandmother figures in many of Narayan's short stories. In *A Hero*, when Swami gets into a dreaded situation of sleeping alone at nights, he remembers that he had always slept beside his granny. In order to evade the issue of showing his courage by sleeping alone, he silently gets up and lies down besides his granny. But the father rolled up his bed and took it under his arm to his office room. At that time also he looks at his grandmother for some kind of relief. Granny appears in *Swami and Friends* also where she is the one to whom Swami narrates all the incidents of the day. Talking about the stories like *Dodu*, *Father's Help* and *Hero*, it is seen that the role of father is prominent. The portrayal of father in the short stories of Narayan also gives an autobiographical element to them. In the short stories named above, the father is figured to be an extremely rude, strict and highly disciplined individual. At the same time he is unsympathetic towards the innocent feelings of the children. This image of the father is highly autobiographical as his own father bore the same attitude and personality. Narayan has depicted the experiences from his own life while framing the character of the father.

I felt afraid of my father and decided to avoid his presence. As a person he had a commanding personality ('He has the personality of a commander-in-chief rather than a headmaster,' people used to remark), a stentorian voice, a sharp nose, and a lionlike posture- a man who didn't fuss about children openly, and never sat around and chatted with the members of the family as was the habit with others. (R.K. Narayan 32-33.)

Narayan feared his father for the strict disciplinarian approach of his, giving no way to the tenderness even while dealing with the innocent sentiments of a child. He did not expect any kind of softness from him as he is not ready to hear to any excuse which the child wants to give for not going to the school as in *Father Help*.

Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* is a portrayal of his own childhood recaptured with a thorough knowledge of child-psychology- reluctance to school and discipline. The activities of Swaminathan and his friends in Malgudi appear to be a dramatization of the activities of Narayan and his friends during his early life in Madras described in his *My Days*. Swami is a little boy of an orthodox middle-class family who has already changed two schools. He is shown not only through the dimension of child-psychology but in his full range of being even at the beginning of the novel.

Any child- a Swami, a Mani, a Rajan or a Samuel- experiences that early part of its life with enthusiasm- ignorant of the after-effects of its childish deeds. Thus the work is about everyday's childhood. Graham Greene says: 'It is a classical school boy story of a child, written with the same understanding sense of beauty and sadness.' The novel thus deals with the inevitable sad music of growth from dreary childhood onto a contemplative adolescence.

From the school boy Swami to the college youth Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* is a natural transition. Here Narayan appears reminiscing his own youth and adolescence experience. This Transition deals with a critical phase of life, adolescence, which everybody has to pass through in his last year at the college and the first year in the world. Chandran is the student of history like Narayan himself. In his essay 'Green Sari' Narayan relates how he fell in love with a girl and how he was disappointed when the horoscopes failed to match. In *My Days* Narayan describes how after graduation he passed through a phase of impossible love-sickness, falling in love at first sight with all. In Coimbatore especially he espied a girl drawing water from the street-tap near his sister's house,' and that 'after a number of hitches, particularly astrological; the marriage took place.' Narayan has dramatized this experience.

The 'Bachelor of Arts' depicts in general terms how youth continue their lives taking their strides and shocks and tremors of the past, and how the carefree graduates through rough experiences change and fit themselves in stable professions in life, like Narayan himself.

Raja Rao also deals with childhood and youth and manhood but in a diffused and disjointed way which is natural and necessary to the narrative technique and religio-comic tone of his novels. But they do not form the main themes of his novels. It is Mulk Raj Anand who had first dealt with childhood and manhood enchantingly in a subjective-objective manner. His range is wide, vast and he dramatizes the three stages of life at all levels in a general in a tragic-comic manner. Narayan has chosen only one-slice of humanity, the middle-class society, confined to a single town Malgudi : his range is narrow thus and of 'resolved limitations' just a few inches wide like Jane Austen's. Anand's picture of the three stages of life is typically North-Indian in colour: Narayan's portrayal is supremely intensive and profound, serio-comic and sympathetic, perfect and grand.

In fact, all children are not mischievous and to say so would mean to falsify the infantine race. In Narayan's works, there are some who are simple to the point of being stupid. Their nature is represented in their simplicity, gullibility and idiocy. Narayan was influenced by Mark Twain. The difference between Swaminathan and Huck Finn is the difference between an Indian and an American boy. This simplicity and gullibility lead them to disillusionment, to disappointment and then to the awareness of sense of reality, maturing them in the process. At other times, however, the ignorance of

children turns them to petty deceptions and trivialities. Occasionally, Narayan's children smart up and in their attempt to show off their cleverness reveal either their innocence and simplicity or their stupidity.

Narayan's autobiography *My Days* (1974) begins with an amusing narration of his childhood experiences and life with Ammani, and with the bachelor uncle who strove to make a living by printing and editing a local magazine. We learn of his pet monkey and parrot, his view of the first school he attended, the Lutheran Mission School, Madras. Narayan had told Ved Mehta that his first fictional work *Swami and Friends* grew out of his childhood days at Ammani's. This is also borne out by another of Narayan's own testimonies. When asked why he chose to make his first novel describe the world of a typical South-Indian schoolboy, Narayan's answer was similar to that of the impossible Headmaster in *The English Teacher*. Narayan had given him a rare perception of the child, for to the question : How did you get the idea of the school-going children? And he answered:

The memory of my own young days. Most of us forget that grand period. But with me it has always been there. A time at which the colours of things are different, their depths greater, their magnitudes greater, a most balanced and joyous condition of life; there was a natural state of joy over nothing in particular. (Narayan 246)

Thus the portrayal of 'children' and 'childhood' is profoundly personal and autobiographical for Narayan and it is this that kind of lends a layered authenticity to his stories of children that have enchanted the readers across all age groups.

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