

INTRODUCTION TO SWAMI AND FRIENDS

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Swami and Friends is a school classic in which the exploits and adventures of Swami and his friends are narrated. Swami and his friends are about ten years old. The story moves around Swami who is the central figure of the novel. Swami is a happy-go-lucky sort of boy who dislikes the school homework and relishes wandering about in the noon and after noon with his bosom friends, Rajam and Mani. His happiest and lively days begin when the examinations are over and the school breaks up. It is time for Swami for revelry and merry-making.

Plot

The plot of *Swami and Friends* is causal, integral, complex and organic. The plot and character help each other to feed, grow and develop each other. There is inevitability about the events. The dropping out of a single event will destroy the plot-structure. But Dr. Baghat calls the plot of *Swami and Friends* episodic. Strangely enough even Narayan calls it episodic. P. S. Sundram disagrees from both these critics. If the novels of Virginia Woolf, who uses the stream-of-consciousness technique, cannot be episodic, Narayan's novel including *Swami and Friends* cannot be episodic because Narayan uses like Virginia Woolf, the stream of consciousness technique.

Characterization

The characters in *Swami and Friends* belongs to the middle class and are Malgudi an Narayan says nothing about Rajam and Sankar when they go out of Malgudi. Most of the characters except Mani, who later becomes an angel, are unheroic. Even Swami, the so-called hero of the novel, is unheroic. Ordinarily there are no angels or villain in the novels of Narayan. But Mani is an angel. The doctor Kesavan and the Forest Officer, Nair act like villains when they deceive Swami. The Board Highschool Head Master is, like *Kans* and the Albert Mission School Head Master is like Ravan. Most of the characters are static. But three characters Swami, Mani and Rajam undergo change and therefore, they are dynamic. Though most of the characters are so static yet they are life-like and have a life of their own. Even the tiny character like the

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Albert Mission School, Jeon, the doctor Kesavan and Nair, the Forest Officer have change the course of the story. As the characters act in accordance with what they are and what they, if ever, dynamically become, they are realised.

The characters change the course of the story, and the events reveal characters. Therefore, there is, in *Swami and Friends*, the intermingling of plot and character.

Narration

Narration is the art of story telling. Narayan possesses the capacity to hold the children from play and the chimney sweepers from their work. He arouses in *Swami and Friends* a constant curiosity to know for the readers what will happen to Swami. When Swami undergoes a series of misfortunes and the pangs of grief, Narayan keeps his readers on tenterhooks to know what will happen to him. Their curiosity reaches its climax when Swami is in the Meempi Forest under the threat of death.

Description

The descriptions of Narayan in *Swami and Friends* are picturesque. The description of the examination hall with a supervisor drowsing the scratching of mice and the rustling of the papers through the brooding silence of the hall, is master piece of the pictorial art. The description of Swami treading, the dangerous path of the Meempi Forest where he meets Yam, the god of death at every step, is an awe-inspiring picture conjured up in the imagination of the readers.

Dialogue

The dialogue reveals character. The dialogue between Rajam and Swami in Chapter XIII 'The M.C.C.' reveals the fallen character of Rajam and the refined character of Swami. The dialogue between Rajam and the Board Highschool Head Master reveals that the latter is a mad cap.

Themes

We have in *Swami and Friends* themes like education, religion, superstition, economic problems, struggle for India's freedom and Indian culture but the most significant and perennial theme is loneliness consequent upon change and separation. Where there is sorrow there is holy ground. The heart of Swami is a ground made holy by the tears fallen on it from his eyes. Swami suffers from the pangs of sorrow throughout the novel. Rajam, his her friend, gives him the cruellest blow by breaking all friendly ties with him.

Title

The title of the novel *Swami and Friends* is appropriate because it narrates the exploits and adventures of Swami and his friends, especially those of Swami, Rajam and Mani.

Humour Here are a few examples of humour.

Narayan is a great humorist. Here are a few examples of humour. When Swami's father gives him a sum about the mangoes to be solved, Swami's mouth begins to water at the thought of mangoes. Swami opens his Atlas and wonders how the map-makers find that Europe is like the camel's head. He copies the outline of Europe's map, keeps the original and his copy side by side and congratulates himself for his ability to draw through his outline looks like a strange animal that has parri bull's face and part camel's. He prays to God and requests Him to convert his pebbles to six pie coins. He assures Him that if He obliges him, he will give up biting his thumb for a year.

Pathos

The idyllic bliss which Swami enjoys in wandering about with his friends is short-lived. Soon he undergoes a series of hardships, the buffets of misfortunes and the pangs of sorrow. His parents are unsympathetic, his friends poohpoo him as the tail of Rajam, the doctor and the forest officer deceive him and the two Head Masters cane him brutally. He suffers from the fear of death in the Meempi Forest. He suffers separation and loneliness when his bosom friend Rajam deserts him. He suffers from loneliness consequent upon change and separation.

Blending of Humour and Pathos

There is in *Swami and Friends* a blending of humour and pathos. It is humorous to read that at the thought of the mangoes Swami's mouth begins to water. Swami is under the constraint of solving the sum, his ears are being twisted by his father and, at the end, he bursts into tears. So pathos is mixed with humour. We laugh when Swami promises to God that if He converts his pebbles to penny-coins, he will give up biting his thumb for a year but, when God remains indifferent to him and does not oblige him, he is angry and sheds tears. So there is in *Swami and Friends* a mingling of honour and pathos.

Indianness

Graham Greene has said that whereas E.M. Forster and Kipling disappointed him R.K. Narayan has given him real India, his second home. Narayan has given us geographical, economic, religious, national and cultural India. Though he has written in English language yet what he has written about is India in all its aspects. We find in his novels *Bharat Darshan*.

Malgudi

Graham Greene writes that he found a publisher for *Swami and Friends* and Malgudi was born. The geographical places like the Sarayu river, the Meempi Forest, the Nallappa's Mango Grove and the city places like Trunk Road, Ellmann Street, Albert Mission School, Board Highschool, the clubs and the hospitals give us a feel of what Malgudi is

suffers from the first shock of life. His mind is disturbed. He makes a paper boat and places an ant in it. The boat is wrecked and the ant dies. Swami prays for the ant. Sanka later informs him that he has got a new name, "the tail of Rajam."

Swami is excited because Rajam, his hero friend, is coming to his house. He asks Granny not to slow her senile self to Rajam, requests the mother to prepare nice dishes and instructs the cook to wear new shirt and dhoti and to serve the dishes. Then he requests his father to allow him to use his room, for which his father easily consents. Rajam's visit goes off satisfactorily except that the cook does not wear a clean dhoti. When Rajam asks Swami which his room is, Swami says that it is his room. When Rajam asks him if he reads the voluminous books, he feels embarrassed. Changing the topic he asks Rajam if he will like to see his Granny. Rajam is happy to see the Granny. He tells her about his mother's jewellery. He describes to her Madras, its sea, its trains and its cinemas. Granny gasps with wonder at every item.

One day when Swami enters the classroom he hears a giggle and sees "Tali" written on the blackboard. Infuriated, he sleeps Samuel and Sankar. Soon there is pandemonium in the classroom. Somu, Samuel, Sankar, Mani and Swami go outside the class to a lonely spot. There Mani and Somu fight fiercely. Rajam wants to surprise all his friends. He has invited them. Swami and Mani wonder what the surprise lies in store for them. When they reach Rajam's house, they mimic the blind kitten and the blind puppy respectively, touch the bodies of Somu and Sankar respectively and when they open their eyes and find that they have touched their enemies, they are furious and threaten to go away. Rajam praises their mimicry and calms them down. Then he narrates the story of the dying old man and the laggots the gist of which is that unity is strength. Then he illustrates from the Vedas the intolerable sufferings for those persons who foster enmity. The friends turned enemies are afraid and the enemies turn friends again.

The mother of Swami is bed ridden. She and Swami show concern and love for each other. When the examination is in the offing, Swami's father has become fussy and is harassing Swami for studying. All the classmates of Swami suffer from the examination fever and are studying hard. Mani goes to the school clerk with a bundle of brinjals and asks him to tell him the questions set in the different papers. The clerk gives him only a few hints for studying different subjects. Mani wants to share the hints with Swami. Like Mani, Swami is not serious about his studies. He gossips with Granny and fondles the babe. He opens the Atlas and finds that Europe is like the head of the camel. Two days before the examination he prepares a list of articles needed for the examination. His father scores out every item of the list, flings it out at Swami and says that money does not drop from the sky.

Swami comes out of the examination hall twenty minutes before time. He thinks that the time allotted for the examination is much more than required. He is happy to think that now he will loaf about and listen to the endless tales from Granny. At the ringing of the last bell the examinees come out of the examination hall, ask one another what they wrote in different questions and what they will do during the vacation. The Headmaster advises the students not to waste their time during the vacation. Swami develops a passion for a hoop. He expresses his passion to a coachman who demands from him first five rupees and afterwards six pices immediately. Neither Swami's Granny nor his parents give him to a coachman who demands from him first five rupees and afterwards six pices. He then puts pebbles into a cardboard box, covers it with sand, goes to the pooja room, lies prostrate before the images of the gods and requests them to convert his pebbles to six pices. He promises them that if they oblige him he will stop biting his thumb for a year. But the gods do not oblige him. He is filled with rage and bursts into tears. He feels like cursing the gods but fears that they may make him fall or kill his father.

After the gods disappoint him he goes to Mani for the pices, but Mani says that he has no money because nobody gives him any money. Two weeks later Swami and Mani approach Rajam. Swami requests him to lend him a policeman. He tells him that a coachman denies recognising him after taking money from him. Rajam makes a plan to decoy and kidnap the coachman's son. But the coachman's son is too clever to be decoyed and kidnapped. Rajam's plan fails. Malgudi is very hot in summer. Persons generally do not come out from their houses in noon and afternoon. But for Rajam, Mani and Swami noon and afternoon are the most pleasant time for wandering about. One day they sit on a culvert. They lease a bullock cart driver who is a mere boy, and then allow him to go away to his village.

To Swami's displeasure his father's court closes in the second week of May. Swami fears that this will curtail his freedom of wandering about with his friends. This does on the third day of the closure of the court. His father asks him to solve a sum about the mangoes. At the name of the mangoes Swami's mouth begins to water. Swami finds it difficult to solve the sum. His father twists his ears. By the time Swami solves the sum he bursts into tears.

Seeing his son Swami woe-begone his father feels sorry for having worried him all the afternoon. In order to change the sullen mood of his son he asks him to accompany him to the club. A car of a friend of his father arrives and he is asked to sit on the back seat of the car. He feels proud in sitting in the car and wishes that his friends may see him. He feels by his opponents, who is the best player of tennis balls cannot be returned everyone at all the four courts. All of a sudden he sees the coachman's son who is the ball picker at the court. He is utterly terrified when the

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of their work. Narayan's heroes rise from the average to the extraordinary status.

The Concept of the Heroine

The heroine in *The Guide* is also typically Indian. She is dominated by the hero both emotionally and economically. She is unlike Becky Sharp of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* or the heroine of Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. Most heroines shine in the pages of fiction because of their sexual role or appeal. But Rosie is of a different ilk. She indulges in sex momentarily; but later on she devotes her life for the sake of art and culture. She is a typical Indian woman who is dominated by man both emotionally and financially.

Absence of Traditional Villains

Similarly the traditional villain in the novel is absent. The hero himself commits certain acts of villainy, but he is open to correction or penance.

Objective Characterization

Narayan's characters are not only real, they are also objective. Narayan tries to keep them as much free from autobiographical touches as possible. Precision and not abundance is Narayan's keynote of characterization. He gives only a few details of his characters. His characters are not mere types; they are individuals to a degree. He knows their foibles and social set-up. His characters move in the local atmosphere of Malgudi. He develops his characters very well.

5. INDIANNESS IN R. K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

1. Critics' Opinions

One of the axioms of Narayan criticism is his Indianness. C.D. Narasimhiah categorically asserts, "Few Indian writers have been more truly Indian." Edwin Gerow makes the point clearer when he speaks of Narayan's "unflinchingly traditional outlook." A.N. Kaul, in a well-known essay, "R. K. Narayan and the East-West Theme", takes an extreme stand. He denies the presence of any real East-West theme in R. K. Narayan in whose novels we find, to quote A.N. Kaul, the 'remarkable fact of a static traditional Indian life which the West touches at all points but without real penetration anywhere.' Yet the uncertainty of this type of approach is suggested by H.M. William: "There is something very arch and elusive about Narayan's treatment of India and Indians. The key to the Malgudi cycle appears to me to lie in the complicated nature of Narayan's conservatism. He is typically (an orthodox) Hindu in his celebration of the static. Yet Narayan is ready to admit extreme scepticism about the genuineness of Indian 'godmen' and their disciples and to see comedy rather than tragedy as an appropriate fictional reflector of India's long and frequently catastrophic history."

2. Thoroughly Indian Novelist in English

R. K. Narayan is an Indian novelist to the marrow. It is a misfortune that he came to be recognized in India only after the West had given him

a thumping reception. He has demonstrated the falsity of the notion that typically Indian thoughts and feelings cannot be expressed through a foreign language. It is altogether a different matter whether Narayan writes about the India he knows or the India that the foreigners want to see. He is typically Indian in his thoughts and feelings, in his scenes and backgrounds. He was a teacher of English and a journalist in the native thirties. He wrote in English without ever trying to imitate the native speakers of English.

3. India Symbolised by Malgudi

Narayan's India is symbolised by Malgudi, an imaginary town and locale of his novels. Since the early 'thirties' the town has grown into a good city and gradually has added studios, hotels, a railway station and ultramodern flats in the extension area. It is a town of parlours, potters, printers, lawyers, teachers and small and big businessmen. It has grown from a rural looking, conservative and backward town into a town of tourists' interest. Narayan is called a regional novelist because he does not want to go outside Malgudi locale. Malgudi is his Wessex. He can be compared to Hardy in this respect.

4. Typically Indian Characters

His characters are typically Indian—Swami, Chandran, Krishnan, Sampah, Margaya, Raju and Mali are Indians not only in name but also in character and spirit. They have the notions and feelings, taboos and morals of India with them. They suffer due to Indian traditions and morals. There might be a character or two assuming foreign name, e.g., Rosie, but inside them too are Indians. At one or two places Narayan has introduced some purely foreign characters, i.e., Mali goes to America for professional training and brings an American wife with him.

India's culture is very elusive and complex. It is difficult to summarize it through a few situations or characters. Narayan is neither a social critic nor a photographic artist representing the reality. His chief interest is the study of man and his predicament in this universe. Yet despite all this his characters share Indianness.

5. Indian Symbols and Scenes

Narayan represents Indianness through his symbols too. He uses symbols which represent typical Indian culture or temperament. Temple, charitra, river, excessive credibility and faith symbolise the cultural past of India that not only survives but also shapes the new culture. Similarly, sofa set, studio, typewriter and scepticism are the specialties of new culture. The building of a railway station at Malgudi introduces the hurry and flurry of modern life into Malgudi. "It was in this whirl of activities, skirmishes and clash of feelings that was caught up when Marco and Rosie alighted from the train on Malgudi platform. Raju had hectic life, first, looking after Marco and then Rosie, and eventually had no time for himself, nor was the free even for a second to give second thought to what he did on the spur of the moment under circumstantial pressure. But when he was on the granite slab of the ancient shrine on the bank of Sarayu