



PORTRAYAL OF CHILDLIKE INNOCENCE IN R. K. NARAYAN'S 'SWAMI AND FRIENDS'

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Abstract

Narayan published his first novel, Swami and Friends, in 1935 and this novel was hailed by competent critics and scholars as a great work of art. This novel is one of the most enjoyable novels. It is a full-fledged study of child-like innocence and the hero's struggle for maturity. It portrays the life of boys in South Indian schools, and Narayan has described his personal experiences in the texture of the novel. Thus, the autobiographical element in the novel is unmistakable. We get a vivid description of the thoughts, emotions and activities of school boys. Swami is the central figure in the novel, and the action of the novel has been looked at throughout from his point of view. The plot revolves round the activities of Swami, the hero, and his friends, Mani (the Dada), Shanker, the most intelligent boy of the class, Somu, the monitor, Samuel, the short -statured, and so called the Pea, and Rajam, a late arrival, intelligent and charming, the son of the Police Superintendent. The paper deals with R.K Narayan's portrayal of childlike innocence in the novel.

Keywords: Childlike, innocence, portrayal, central-consciousness, attributes.

Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao are the three great writers who have written so many novels and short stories in English. Mulk Raj Anand has been championing the cause of the oppressed and the down trodden with great vigour and conviction. He may be a propagandist; he may indulge in sermons and preaching; he may be a Gandhian or a Marxist or both; the fact, however, remains that he is a humanist who ardently believes in the sanctity of spirit, the dignity of the individual, in human equality and in the healing quality of love and affection, compassion and human tenderness. Raja Rao is a metaphysical and philosophical writer who is interested in Gandhian values of non-violence and the philosophy of the East and the West.

R K Narayan, like Mulk Raj Anand, is a prolific writer and has naturally written a large number of novels and short stories. Narayan, it is generally pointed out to us, is a powerful ironist and he is frequently compared in this respect with Jane Austen, but besides this he is also an interesting story-teller. As such, his narrative art assumes a certain kind of importance in the whole process of his artistic creation. His narrative art is a curious combination of communication and withdrawal, subjective exposition and objective commentary, meaning digression and expected concentration on details. As a novelist Narayan devotes his attention to the treatment of general human weaknesses and foibles, Malgudi life's little ironies, knots of satiric circumstances, and tragi-comedies of mischance and misdirection. Like Raja Rao, he has hardly any

interest in the larger philosophical, moral or religious issues of life. His domain of creative operation is individual human character, and it is chiefly through this restricted area of exploration that he makes the fullest and perhaps the sharpest use of ironic talent. He is a master of comedy, but he is also aware of the tragedy of the human situation.

Narayan published his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, in 1935 and this novel was hailed by competent critics and scholars as a great work of art. Graham Greene called this novel "A book in ten thousand", and Compton Mackenzie said, "I have never read any other book about India in the least like it". This novel is one of the most enjoyable novels. It is a full-fledged study of child-like innocence and the hero's struggle for maturity. It portrays the life of boys in South Indian schools, and Narayan has described his personal experiences in the texture of the novel. Thus, the autobiographical element in the novel is unmistakable. We get a vivid description of the thoughts, emotions and activities of school boys. Swami is the central figure in the novel, and the action of the novel has been looked at throughout from his point of view. The plot revolves round the activities of Swami, the hero, and his friends, Mani (the Dada), Shanker, the most intelligent boy of the class, Somu, the monitor, Samuel, the short-statured, and so called the Pea, and Rajam, a late arrival, intelligent and charming, the son of the Police Superintendent.

In the beginning of the novel we come to know about Swaminathan or Swami, the child-hero, about his school, the Albert Mission School, about his teachers and his friends. The action of the novel takes place in the town named Malgudi, situated on the bank of the river Sarayu. Swami is the student of the First Form (Section A). It is Monday morning, and Swami does not like Mondays because on Mondays he has to go to school and he has to do a lot of work and he has to maintain discipline and decorum. He enjoys very much on Saturdays and Sundays and goes into a life of inactivity and passivity. He feels bored and tired and does not like to do his homework. On Monday he goes to school in time and enters his class room. The fire-eyed class teacher, Vedanayagan who is also an arithmetic teacher, enters the classroom and Swami does not

like him because he is weak in mathematics and he is often punished by his teacher. Then comes the history period, and Dr. Pillai teaches history. His style of teaching is interesting, but not inspiring. A fanatic Christian named Ebenezer teaches scripture and constantly criticizes and abuses Hindu Gods who, for him, are merely so many pieces of stone. When Swami puts a question, his ear is severely pulled and pinched. Swami tells everything to his father, and his father requests the Headmaster to take action against the teacher, but things remain unchanged.

Swami is the central consciousness of the novel. What he sees and specially what he does, constitute the substance of the novel. Although he is mere a school-boy type, he stands out remarkably as a bouncing and enlivened character. The novelist projects the boy's innocence through his overall psychology exemplified mostly in his misadventures. Being a child Swami's imagination is highly excitable and poetic. He exaggerates petty and insignificant things and gets prone to hero worship. For him Mani and Rajam are heroes, and he admires and follows them. He really believes that Mani can and will break heads with his club, that Rajam is a super being having many merits. He has all the credulity of a child. He believes that the coachman can multiply money by his tricks. He thinks that if he prays to gods, they will turn his pebbles into coins. He is terrified by the purely imaginative terrors. He is frightened by the threats of the coachman's son. He imagines that the coachman's son would kill him. Thus, the novelist shows remarkable insight into the psychology of a child and his analysis of a child thought process is really commendable. This treatment of innocence, on the face of it, may indeed appear plain and straightforward. The writer gives a pen picture of the boy's milky innocence, his character and his imagination at every conceivable instance. Swami is not a good student but his life at school is not entirely unhappy for he has four good friends. In the company of these friends he cracks jokes, plays pranks, wanders to and fro, and also sometimes, is engaged in friendly fighting. Narayan gives us detailed pictures of these friends. Swami's friends may be viewed from two points of view: their individual delineation may be taken as the projecting medium of different shades of innocence and

treating them as the psychological projection of Swami's mind. One of them is Somu, the monitor of the class. He seems to lead the friends. He exemplifies the figure of confidence and is known as the uncle of the class. He is not a brilliant student, and no teacher ever put to him a question in the class. He takes things easily, but once he fights with Mani over a simple episode, and soon becomes friendly with him. There seems to be a subtle suggestion of the egoist, a ring of innocence in Somu. Somu fails in his examination, so he is excluded from the group of Swami, and plays no further role in the life of Swami. He however ends up as a thumb-nail character.

Mani, the most dynamic of Swami's friends, is the class bully. He is the mighty good-for-nothing. He towered above all the other boys of the class. He was very careless, he was not interested in bringing any books to the class, he never completed his homework. He came to the class, commanded his monopoly over the last bench, and slept bravely without caring for anyone. No teacher ever dared to rouse him. The boy with the club is the chronic repeater. Although he bullied everybody and it was said that when a teacher tried to prod him, he "nearly lost his life." He bullied all strangers that came his way. People usually did not like to face him; they went aside when he passed. He wore a cap at an angle, took a Tamil novel under his arm, and had been coming to the school ever since the old peon could remember. In most of the classes he stayed longer than his friends did. Mani was Swami's confidant. Swami was proud of his friendship with him. While other boys were afraid of Mani, Swami addressed him as Mani with verve and pat him on the back with familiarity. Swami often asked him regarding the source of his power. Mani answered that he had a pair of wooden clubs at home and that he would break the backs of those with the clubs who tried to disturb him. Mani is the hero of Swami. His friendship with Mani shows that Swami wants to keep on the right side of youth power. When Swami is given a nick-name "The tail", Mani supports him, and fights with Somu toughly in the school compound. Their friendship is personal and human, and continues even after school hours and during holidays and vacations. They visit each other at

regular intervals and roam to and fro and enjoy a lot. Mani is jealous of Rajam and angry with Swami because Swami is very friendly with Rajam, but this rivalry is transitory, and soon Mani becomes quite friendly with Rajam, and henceforth the three are usually seen together. When Swami is deceived by the coachman, it is Mani who goes with him to decoy the coachman's son and teach him a lesson. It is another matter that the coachman's son is stronger than they, and they suffer disgrace at his hands. He is always ready to do anything for Swami, he goes with Rajam to the Headmaster of the Board High School to get exemption for Swami from the drill period and the scout classes. He carries his clubs with him, and Rajam is able to hold out a veiled threat to the Head Master that Mani breaks skulls with his club. Mani is one of the founder members of the M.C.C. and takes an active part in its activities. He does his best to console Swami when he is sad and grieved at the departure of Rajam from Malgudi. The novelist makes a judicious combination of "telling" and "showing" in Mani's characterization. Interestingly, Mani's devilry has an inevitable ring of innocence. Many an instance proves that his reputation as the muscle-man remains a myth. Suffice it to recall his confrontation with Rajam, his demythicizing fight with Somu, and his dread of his own uncle. What seems to be important is, despite playing the proverbial bully, Mani is remembered not for the dark colours in his portraiture but for the deep lines of innocence. Mani may be regarded as a psychological projection of Swami's fantasy. He is a fascinating study of devilish innocence.

Shanker is supposed to be the most intelligent boy of the class. He has been realized as a type-cast, a "Mr. Know All" of the class. He stands out distinctly with his characteristic traits. There are two diagonally opposite images of Shanker. As a scholar-extraordinary, he is always respected for his scholarship. He was able to solve any problem assigned to him in five minutes and always laboured hard to secure ninety per cent. Some students believed that Shanker had been able to outwit the teachers several times. The other image of Shanker creates more amusement. It can be regarded as a type-cast, conceived by the school boy's innocent imagination. To a section of the students he is known

as a sycophant who earns his high percentage of marks by washing clothes for his master. Swami looked at Shanker as a marvel. He was very glad when he made Mani see eye to eye with him and admit Shanker to their company. However, Shanker soon goes away from Swami's life as his father is transferred from Malgudi.

Samuel is better known as the "pea" on account of his short stature. The 'pea' as Rajeev Taranath suggests, exemplifies the average and the ordinary as the recurring traits of the Narayan heroes: "He was just ordinary, no outstanding virtue of muscle or intellect". He was as weak in arithmetic as Swami was. He was as fearful, slow and nervous about things as Swami was. The bond between them was laughter. They often saw together the same absurdities and incongruities in things. The most trivial and unnoticeable things to others would tickle them to death. Like Mani, Samuel too is Swami's close friend and confidant.

Rajam, the son of the Police Superintendent and foreign friend of Swami, is yet another example of innocence. Rajam too is a type- cast, an innocent snob. Narayan's observant eye and the reportorial experience help him to portray this Indian English Sahib's son with all the stock attributes of that class. In the treatment of Rajam's innocence Narayan seems to have stressed some noticeable and refreshingly endearing comic overtones. Rajam is intelligent and has inborn qualities of leadership. He is able to go to the heart of situation, and act with tact and firmness. It is he who brings about a reconciliation between Swami and his former friends—Shanker, Somu and the Pea. He is the founder of the M.C.C. and as its Captain arranges for various items for the team. As the only knowledgeable member, Rajam fails to understand the words like 'obliged' and 'remittance' in the letter sent by Messers Binns from Madras and ultimately returns the letter to the firm stating, "We are sorry that you sent me somebody's letter. We are returning this somebody's letter. Please send our things immediately." (119) His comment on the Willard bat, "there are actually springs inside the bat, so that when you touch the ball it flies," (114) his playing the role of an adult when he invited Swami and Mani and tries to show off by ordering

and humiliating the cook and finally boasting that, "I went in and gave the cook such a kick for his impertinence that he is lying unconscious in the kitchen" (28) have an unmistakable comicality.

Swami and friends remains Narayan's major study of innocence. It may be essential to note certain patterns and issues emerging out of the Narayan's treatment of innocence in the novel. The novelist deals with the adventures and mis-adventures of Swami and his friends. It is Narayan's insight into the rhythms of boyish consciousness and innocence that makes the novel a classic of school-boy fiction.

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