

**R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*: A Social Middle Class Painting
with the Colour of Childhood**

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, which is set in a fictional town Malgudi, deals with Swami, his friends and the middle class characters. It reveals the middle class mentality and psychology. It depicts Swami's relationship with other characters. His quarrels, his idleness, his home work and his running from home are instincts which are mostly found in the middle class children of the family. Narayan has invested almost all his characters with the same religious devotion which is evident in the middle class people of India. Here lies the greatness of R.K. Narayan in painting the picture of the middle class with various colours, particularly the colour of childhood.

Keywords: Middle-class mentality, Joint family, Psychology, Childhood, Malgudi, Myth

Indian Novel in English is a river that flows rhythmically and thematically. This river passes through many known and unknown places marking some significant landscapes right from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) to the present scenario—Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh via three big signatures—Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. When it comes to its own, it creates one more stream and makes its feminine water flow in. Its feminine waterflows while marking fair view that seems to be alluring in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. As it moves on, it attracts the world's attention towards the famous fertile lands which appear in the novels of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Chetan Bhagat and Manju Kapoor.... The novels written in the post-Independence era breathe in new environment which offers them technique, style and language, with which

the novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao gave a new name, locale and identity.(Arora, 2016, pp. 1-2)

R.K. Narayan (1906-2001), along with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand has given a new height to Indian Novel in English. He has chosen a social middle class atmosphere and also pioneered the regional novel by creating a region, named Malgudi in his novels like *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), *Mr Sampath*(1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for Mahatama*(1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man Eater of Malgudi*(1962), *The Vender of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1976), *A Tiger of Malgudi*(1983), *Talkative Man* (1986), *The World of Nagaraj*(1990), and *Grandmother's Tale* (1993).

Narayan uses irony and paradox and reveals the comic vision of life. He knows the art of story-telling which illustrates the graph of his characters right from innocence to wisdom through experience. He is known for the use of psychological realism which makes the reader spell bound. He is unparalleled in his presentation of the unique cultural characters of the middle class. It is Narayan's artistic attitude which brings him popularity and enforces his genius.

Narayan communicates Indian sensibility very sensibly. The language he uses is the language of middle class. His language is quite moderate. He does not use epithet and intricate metaphors. He gets success with the smart blending of Indian words which are interspersed with regular narrative and do not create any jarring effect. Reality is one of the characteristics of his description of characterization.

Swami and Friends is Narayan's first novel which is set in a fictional town Malgudi. It deals with Swami, his friends and the middle class characters. Narayan peeps into their characters and reveals the inner patterns which reveal the middle class mentality and psychology. C.P. Sharma (2007) writes:

Swami and Friends offers an interesting study of the problem of growing indiscipline and unruly behaviour on school campus. Swami and his schoolmates are innocent boys who need constant guidance and patronage. The crude and unpsychological methods of enforcing discipline through caning, chastising, and flogging, cancelling attendance and imposing heavy fines makes the matters worse. (p. 16)

One of the important features of Indian middle class society is the love and affection for children. All the members of the family shower their love and care on the children. Children are not looked-down upon. In *Swami and Friends*, when Swami becomes late at night, his mother stands at the door waiting for him and gets anxious. His grandmother does not sleep due to anxiety and keeps waking to and fro in the lobby. Father, the head of the family is all in all in the patriarchal society. The father in *Swami and Friends* is the traditional father. Grandparents are also given a higher place in Indian middle class society. The grandmother plays the vital role in the joint family. Swami grows young under the eye and care of grandmother. She is very sympathetic, loving and garrulous lady. The relation of Swami with his loving grandmother, his annoyed father and his friends is indicative of the middle class milieu. His quarrels, his idleness, his home work and his running from home are instincts which are mostly found in the middle class children of the family.

In British period, the level of education was nominal. Now people give more importance to it. Everybody is seeking career through education. If someone fails in the examination, it is regarded as a disgrace. This is one of the characteristics, described in Narayan's novels. One who gets success in the examination is regarded as the hero and one who does not pass the examination has to suffer grief, scolding and disgrace. In *Swami and Friends*, the Father is so anxious about Swami's preparation of the examinations that he becomes nervous. Narayan has realistically presented the nervousness of Father in his conversation with Swami thus:

Why are you so nervous about my examination?

Suppose you fail?

I won't

Of course you won't if you study hard and answer well... Suppose you fail and all you classmates go up, leaving you behind? You can start doing just what you like on the very day your examination closes.'

Swaminathan reflected: Suppose the Pea, Mani, Rajam and Sankar, deserted him and occupied Second A? His father was right. And then his father drove home the point,

Suppose all your juniors in the Fifth Standard become your class mates?

Swaminathan sat at Decimals for half an hour. (Narayan, 1971, pp. 51-52)

Narayan has kept distance between the high class society children and the middle class society children. In the delineation of the middle class society children, he has distinguished them by keeping them deprived of the privileged which the high class society children enjoy. The upper class children are given their separate rooms but the middle class children which Narayan has depicted in his novels do not have study rooms to study. They pass their nights sleeping with their parents. Swami also does not have his own room and study room. He is also compelled to sleep and study in his grandmother's room where emit different kinds of smells of incense, cardamom, clove etc. He finds an intimate friend in old and illiterate grandmother with whom he exchanges experiences of life. He talks to her about school events and of cricket ground. In response she tells him true stories from Indian Hindu mythology. He has become so habitual in listening to them that he cannot sleep without them. Every aspect of Swami's family has the reflection of the middle class milieu. All their conventions, traditions, faiths, activities and habits all reflect the middle class society. Swami belongs to the middle class Hindu society where all the family members are devout worshippers of god and disciplined and well behaved civilians. Swami's grandmother is rather fairly religious and conventional in this regard. At night she has made a rule to inculcate the religious messages in her grand children. So, she narrates Swami the stories from Hindu myth and religion.

The family of Swami is a typical middle class family. All the members are too much religious rather they are credulous. Even the mother of Swami is an ideal middle class woman who knows that she has to be duty bound to the family and its members. So, she busily performs her household duties and responsibilities. She is always seen in the kitchen. She cooks the food for the whole family and prepares dishes of Swami's choice. Swami's father, who sometimes appears hard on Swami about his study, is really a kind hearted and gentle person. That is why, he does not forget to take Swami to his club and becomes much offended when he finds Swami's shabby clothes.

Swami hails from the middle class society and his family is a typical Hindu middle class family. He studies in the Albert Mission School of Malgudi, which is a typical South Indian town. Malgudians are the middle class people. They all live in a traditional joint family. Swami is not good at study at school. He enjoys thoroughly. Every Monday becomes a black Monday for him after the sweet rest and tasteful wondering of Saturday and Sunday. He does not want to go to school.

It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday specially 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: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class teacher; and the Head Master with his thin long cane... (Narayan, 1971, p. 3)

Once he is in the class-room, he is rebuked, punished and insulted as he is careless in his study and his homework is not complete. Even, at home also he eagerly waits for the time when his father leaves home. As soon as the father goes to the office, he comes out and starts vagabondage. In the middle class family of India fathers are the head of the family. They have the authoritative nature. They control all activities in the family. Swami is much frightened with his father. This is one of the characteristics of typical middle class Indian family. Swami wanders about in the company of his three friends- Swami, Mani and Rajam. Swami and his friend harbour only those desires in their hearts which are mostly seen among the children of middle class society. Swami, in his heart, always keeps a desire for rolling a hoop. So, the coachman easily befools him by the story that he can change twelve paise into six rupees. Later on Swami's friends come to help him and want Swami's money back from the coachman. They hatch a plan and play a trick to allure the coachman's son. So, they pretend to be hostile to Swami. A gun shot is heard from the back side and the top which the coachman's son has robbed but now Swami is much afraid. Here he shows the coward instinct of the middle class boy. He is so afraid of the coachman's son that later on when he comes across him at the Tennis club, he gets frightened even when his father is with him. He is frightened by the threats which the coachman's son hurls on him. He remains all the time under the fear of life. He has the fear that he will retaliate and may stab him in his back and thus assassinate him. Such fears of the middle class show the credulity of the middle class child. His blind faith in the multiplication of money by trick is the indicative of the belief of the middle class society.

Narayan has invested almost all his characters with the same religious devotion and religiosity which is evident in the middle class people of India. Swami is as much religious and devout as many persons from the middle class society. Out of his religiosity and devout heart, he tries to save boat and put the ant into it. When the boat is capsized, he takes a pinch of soil and utters a prayer for the soul of an ant which drops into the drain. Even the characters which Narayan has depicted in Swami and his school world all are juvenile characters from the middle class society. Among these juvenile characters, one is Somu who is the monitor of the class. He is quite friendly with the teachers. No teacher rebukes him. It is only the headmaster who

represents him. He is considered the senior most student of the class and that is why he is known to be the uncle of the class. He coins a new name for Swami and calls Swami “Rajam’s tail.” He tries to find out why his being friendly with Rajam is not liked by Somu. After that on an event, Mani and Somu are ready to fight together and for this purpose they go to the lonesome place of the school to fight. Then the headmaster intervenes and puts them apart. All these things are indicative of the mentality of the middle class children.

Some other factors which reflect the mentality, beliefs, activities and psychology of the middle class children are present in *Swami and Friends*. Shankar is the most intelligent student in the class. He is the gem of Swami’s class. He has the knowledge of solving any problem in five minutes and always obtains 90% marks. Some boys with middle class mentality and psychology think that even the teachers will not be able to answer him if he starts cross examining them while some other boys think that he receives 90% marks only by washing the clothes of his teachers. All these tendencies, beliefs and psychology reveal the middle class student mentality, beliefs and psychology. Even Shankar appears to be a middle class boy. In spite of his dressing himself with flowers and braid hair, he has his nose always running.

Swami has a group of friends. One of the friends from this group is Samuel. Samuel is given a nickname ‘Pea’. He is an ordinary boy. He does not have any particular quality or talent. He is apprehensive by nature, weak in body and nervous in temperament. He has many things in him, common with Swami. The sweet bond which makes them one is laughter. Even they have the same view and thinking process. That is why they perceive the same absurdities and incongruities in things. The things which make them laugh remain quite unnoticeable to others.

Another boy from Swami’s group is a bully. His name is Mani who embodies the middle class Indian family. He is good for nothing. He does not bring any book to the school and he hardly cares for his homework. He is sent in the school campus wearing a cap. He carries a Tamil novel tucking under his arm. He always loves to sit on the last bench where he enjoys sleep without any fear of the teacher. The way he behaves with the teachers and the manner he deals with his class fellows all are reflective of his middle class mentality and psychology.

The boy who is quite different from Swami’s group is Rajam, the son of the Police Superintendent. He is different from his classmates in manner and the way he dresses up himself. The thing that makes him distinguished and differentiated from the boys of the other group is his skill of speaking English fluently. Even he has many things which are common with his friends. The things which have similarity with his friends is the way of dealing with his

friends and the manner of showing animosity towards Mani and the desires and yearnings which he shows in founding the MCC and his tendency of binding all his friends in a strand.

R.K. Narayan, being the native of the city of South India, has spared the delineation of the village life in his novels and short stories. He has mostly concentrated on delineating the city life of South India, particularly from the middle class society. The manner in which he has depicted and portrayed his characters is appreciated and loved all over the world in each and every country. Here lies the greatness of R.K. Narayan in painting the picture of the middle class with various colours, particularly the colour of childhood. While appreciating Narayan for his depiction of childhood, Ranga Rao (2004) observes:

In childhood, fears and secrecies and furtive acts happen to be the natural state of life, adopted instinctively for survival in a world dominated by adults... The young novelist presents childhood as an entirely valid experience in itself, without adult condescension, and with immediacy... Narayan has realised the child's world with a child's seriousness and involvement. (Pp. 56-57)

The discussion can be summed up with the comment of Dharmendra Singh (2012), who in his review article, "Humour in R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*," has beautifully offered the child's world and the world of the grown-ups from the child's view. He writes:

Narayan has not only vivified the child's world, but also rendered the world of the grown-ups as it appears to children. Swami's friendship with Somu, Shankar and Pea is scholastic and impersonal. Swami, Mani and Rajam remain together as friends, and at the end of the novel, Rajam leaves Malgudi. The readers hope that their friendship matured further and they did stand together through thick and thin. (p. 5)

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