

Universal characterisation of Narayan's novels – A Study of Swami and Friends

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Abstract:

The society comprises of both men and women and any society is incomplete without any one of them. There have been various movements and revolutions whereby women have continuously attempted to break free the barrier of domination of men in many fields, yet we still find that men is the dominating figure since time immemorial, though the weightage differs from time to time.

R.K.Narayan's novels, set in Malgudi, are dominated by male.

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The male characters of Narayan's novel "Swami and Friends" can be divided into three broad categories. The simple characters like Swami, Krishna, Chandran, Nataraj and Srinivas belong to the first category who are all friendly and kind, but they are also feeble and hesitant characters. They don't possess the requisite self-confidence and determination and are unable to assert themselves. Such type of characters can be seen in every societies and around us.

Secondly, characters like Ramani, Raju, Mr.Sampath, H.Vasu and Margayya are more complex characters. These characters are unpredictable and difficult to understand. They are unkind and selfish in all their doings and actions. For them money and sex are most important and to achieve their objectives, then can go to any extent and can sacrifice anything. Because of their such obsession, they brought turmoil in the lives of many. These characters are not unredeemed villains as they do not harm others intentionally, but they have much good in them. They realise their mistakes and are repentant for their misdeeds. They are all dynamic characters, both intelligent and cunning and who make determined efforts to achieve their objectives. Such type of characters can be found in every society.

Third types are the uncommon and grotesque characters, which are very funny and entertaining. Characters like Marco in "The Guide", Kailash the drunken debauch, the adjournment lawyer etc. are all such types. Similar to Dickens, Narayan does not fail to entertain his readers with such type of fascinating characters.

In the novels of Narayan, "Swami and Friends", "The Bachelor of Arts" and "The English Teacher", there is a clear pattern of development in the central characters. All these novels have a universal significance. Though there is a variation in name of the characters from novel to novel, one can clearly observe a chronological account of experience of an individual from the sinless and innocent fun of childhood to the sorrow and wisdom of adult life. The characters of Swami, Chandran and Krishnan shows the three successive phases of an individual's life – childhood, adolescence and adulthood respectively. Also we have a world of pathos and redemption achieved through experiences represented by characters like Margayya, Jagan and Raju in the novels "The Financial Expert", "The Vendor of Sweets" and "The Guide" respectively. Their experience contains the experience of many of us.

The novel "Swami and Friends" describes the schools and home life of Swaminathan, a middle class boy dwelling in the place of Malgudi. The novel depicts as a whole the universal story of Indian school boys through characters of Swami, Mani, Shanker and Rajam. Here most of the troubles of Swami arise from the school- school masters and the necessity to pass examination. The emotional centre of Swami's life in the novel is the friendship with Rajam, a comparatively brilliant boy and the game of cricket. Mani is the huge and thick-headed boy who always threatens to harm others with his club. Swami possesses both a love and fear of him. Rajam, who is a new comer, is clever and a good cricketer displaces Mani as leader of the group. This caused enmity between Rajam and

Mani. Swami is the most sensitive and humane in comparison to Mani and Rajam. In Swami's world he has his parents, grandmothers, teachers, police-men, friends and his gang, a world absent from sexual complications. The fictional town of Malgudi is a symbolic of whole India and is seen through the eyes of Swaminathan or Swami. The opening paragraph of the novel depicts the child's world through Swami:

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 headmaster with his thin long cane... (p.1)

Majority of the Indian students are day-scholars. Swami spends more time at home than school still, every Monday is a Black Monday and Narayan describes Swami's natural feelings and emotions, games, his mind and thoughts as:

.....gulped down the cold coffee that was waiting for him, and sat on the pyol, vacantly gazing into the dark intricacies of the gutter that adorned VinayakaMudali Street. A dark volume of water was rushing along. Odd pieces of paper, leaves, and sticks floated by. A small piece of tin was gently skimming along. Swaminathan had an impulse to plunge his hand in and pick it up. But he let it go. His mind was inert. He watched the shinning bit float away. It was now at the end of the compound wall; now it had passed under the tree. Swaminathan ran in, got a sheet of paper, and made a boat. He saw a small ant moving about aimlessly. He carefully caught it, placed it in the boat and lowered the boat into the stream. He watched in rapture its quick motion. He held his breath when the boat with its cargoneared a danger zone formed by stuck upbits of straws and odds and ends. The boat made a beautiful swerve to the right and avoided destruction. It went on and on. It neared a fatal spot where the waters were swirling round and round in eddies...The boat and its cargo were wrecked beyond recovery. He took a pinch

of earth, uttered a prayer for the soul of the ant and dropped it into the gutter. (p.2)

Swami and Friends depicts a universal picture of a child gradually getting groomed to the complex ways of life. Swami through different stages gets acquainted with different schools and also with cricket and politics. The world of innocence is visible through the characters of Swami and his friends. The novel lets us peep into their innocent minds and observe their activities. The children's participate in the Freedom movement without any mature understanding of burning clothes and breaking of glass in the schools. The formation of the Malgudi Cricket Club with an implicit reference to the world famous Marylebourne Cricket Club, the letter to Messrs Binns and many such episodes shows the children's innocent attempts to enact different roles of an adult world. Narayan through his characters of Swami, Mani, Shankar and Rajam depicts the innocent world of children in such an objective way that they become universal characters. In the process of stepping up from childhood to adulthood, Swami needs to be first initialled into working of this world; he needs feel of 'some natural sorrow, loss or pain'. The feelings of separation from his friends, make Swami move away from the simple pleasures of his childhood years and brings him closer to maturity. Swami and Friends is a study of Indian milieu during the early thirties to the twentieth century with its main character as Swami. Swami's father takes special care of him:

It was his father's definite orders that Swaminathan should not start loafing in the afternoon and that he should stay at home and do schoolwork. (p.3)

A close and deep study of Swami and Friends reflects that Swami's father has a dominance in the house and runs the house according to his own desire. Thus the character of Swami's father represents the true image of a husband and a father in the Indian households and is a universal character.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Narayan, R.K.

Swami and Friends

(Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 1935) p.36

Ibid: p.25

Ibid: p.1