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Universalizing Swami's Learning through Empirical Experiences: A Critical Analysis of *Swami and Friends*

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Abstract:

Childhood is considered the most blissful period of life where every individual wishes to gratify one's fancies without worrying about the world. Children seek instant gratification whatever they feel or desire. Rational parents either approve or disapprove of their children's fancies as per their experiences in the material world. R.K. Narayan, in his Children maestro, *Swami and Friends* projects the children characters chasing their dreams in the fictional setting of Malgudi. This research paper explores how children easily get attracted to external temptations and how their adamant, introverted or secretive nature like Swami traps them into a world of endless miseries. The paper mainly highlights the need for parents' open dialogue with their wards that can help in eliminating the children's fear instead of disciplinary rods imposed on them, so that the children can share their worries without hesitation. If it does not happen, the naive children will learn by exposing themselves to this world following their fancies while risking their lives like Swami, the novel's protagonist. The paper also showcases the innocent hearts of children and the true value of friendship through the character of Swami. Moreover, the

book becomes an ageless and deathless source of inspiration while universalizing the wisdom and moral values drawn from the adventures of Swami.

Keywords: Empirical experiences, external temptations, disciplinary rod, naive children, wisdom, moral values.

R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) is considered one of the most significant and leading Indian novelists writing in English along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao in the 20th century (Pandey 527). He is primarily known for setting his novels in the fictional setting of Malgudi. In *Swami and Friends* (1935), Narayan projects Swami, a ten-year-old boy as the central character who along with his friends Somu, Mani, Sankar, Samuel and Rajam plans and undertakes various adventures which are hardly approved by their parents. Disciplinary rod of the father, Swami's involvement in the protest leading to his expulsion from the school, the over-tight schedule in the new boarding school and his commitment to Rajam for MCC, his cricket team compel Swami to run away from his home. The sufferings during this period refine Swami and he realizes the value of his parent's commands, the teacher's norms, and his friends' absence and becomes a more innocent, humble and noble human being.

The moral-philosophical approach is an old approach like classical Greek and Roman critics. For example, Plato emphasized moralism and utilitarianism whereas Horace stressed that literature should be delightful and instructive. The most popular examples are the commentators of the age of Neoclassicism (1660-1800) in English literature, especially Samuel Johnson. The basic position of such critics is that the larger function of literature is to teach morality and to prove philosophical issues. They interpret literature within the context of the philosophical thought of a period or group. In this respect, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus can be read

profitably only if one understands existentialism. Likewise, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* may be grasped only if one understands the meaning and the role of reason in eighteenth-century thought. In the larger sense, all literature teaches something. The Critic who employs the moral-philosophical approach insists on ascertaining and stating what is taught. If the work is significant or intelligible, the meaning will be there. For example Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" suggests that duty and responsibility take priority over beauty and pleasure. Matthew Arnold, the Victorian critic insists that a great literary work must possess "high seriousness". In the moral and philosophical approach, the important thing is the moral or philosophical teaching. But it does not mean that the critics working from a moral bent are not unaware of form, figurative language and other purely aesthetic considerations rather they treat them to be secondary while their primary purpose is the moral or teaching of a literary work. (Guerin 78-79)

Aswathy Cheriyan writes that Swami wants to get attention and recognition through friends and in this respect he chooses his friends thoughtfully to make his circle self-reliant in all respects. Somu, Mani, Sankar, Samel and Rajam are the examples of these (pp. 575). Mandeep Kaur and Dr. Manoj Kumar Pathak explore childhood innocence in *Swami and Friends* (pp. 91-104) whereas Piyush B Chaudhary presents the contradiction of the Gandhian way of education in *Swami and Friends* (pp. 134-142). Further, Dr Indu Sharma explores the longing for the rejuvenating time of childhood through her research paper (pp. 235-238) and Abhisek Upadhyay traces the impact of colonial education on the development of children in his article (pp. 187-201).

The novelist acquaints the readers with Swami's choices of friends like how he is cautiously apt in befriending the boys having special calibre what he lacks in his personality and

how he can envision the helping hands of his friends in difficult times to ensure his survival, but he is honest, innocent, not selfish as the ultimate purpose of Swami and his friends is to derive pleasure from the outdoor activities amidst nature collectively. R. K. Narayan writes about Swami's friendship:

He [Swami] honoured only four persons with his confidence. Those were the four that he liked and admired most in his class. The first was Somu, the monitor, who carried himself with such an easy air. He set about his business, whatever it was, with absolute confidence and calmness. He was known to be chummy even with the teachers. No teacher ever asked him a question in the class. It was believed that only the headmaster could reprimand him, He was more or less the uncle of the class.

Then there was Mani, the mighty Good-for-Nothing. He towered above all the boys of the class. He seldom brought any books to the class and never bothered about homework. He came to the class and monopolized the last bench, and slept bravely. No teacher ever tried to prod him. It was said that a new teacher who once tried it very nearly lost his life. Many bullied all strangers that came his way, be they big or small...

Then there was Sankar, the most brilliant boy in the class. He solved any problem that was given to him in five minutes and always managed to border on ninety per cent. There was a belief among a section of the boys that if only he started cross-examining the teachers, the teachers would be nowhere... He knew all the rivers, mountains, and countries in the world. He could repeat history in sleep...

The fourth friend was Samuel, known as 'the pea' on account of his size. There was nothing outstanding about him. He was just ordinary, with no outstanding virtue of muscle or

intellect. He was as bad in arithmetic as Swaminathan was. The bond between them was laughter... (6-8)

Thus, one can see that Swami's choices of friends cover up almost all shades of personality i.e. Somu stands for a positive aura, Mani for muscle, Sankar for intelligence and Samuel for comic pleasure. Thereafter, Rajam who stands for a combo of power and intelligence whose father is the superintendent of police. This group enjoys the company of each other.

The novel opens on Monday morning presenting Swami's mood and routine before school. The novelist writes:

It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant on 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... (1)

Swami is a flat character in E.M. Foster's sense, his likings and dislikes remains alike throughout the novel as he is introduced in the opening of the novel. He is like a freedom-loving bird. He does not like to be governed by the rules constituted for the sake of his studies either in school or at home. He is made to sit at the study table at 8 O'clock and is compelled to do the two days' homework in two hours including getting ready for school (2). He does not like the classes after classes in the school too.

Swami does not like the disciplinary rod of parents too. Though Swami's father keeps a consistent sharp vigil on Swami's routine and keeps on reminding him not to wander purposelessly. Swami realizes that in April before examinations his father was changing for the

worse. If he does not sleep early, his father would order him to go and sleep as he has to get up early in the morning and revise for the exam. His father makes him realize what will happen if he fails, the very thought terrifies him. (57) In the first week of May Swami's father stayed at home due to the holidays in the court once as swami was stepping out from the courtyard in the afternoon, his father appeared before Swami and said:

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

“Where were you yesterday at this time?”

“Here”

“You are lying. You were not here yesterday. And you are not going out now.”

“That is right,” Mother added, just appearing from somewhere, “there is no limit to his loafing in the sun. He will die of sunstroke if he keeps on like this.” (96)

After this, Swami's father takes him to his room and while dusting his books and clearing the web of spiders between the corners of the table and the pile of books asks him how many days he has not touched his books. As exams are over, this question seems strange to Swami and he asks, "Should I read even when I have no school?" At this, his father satirically says, "Do you think, you have passed B.A.?" Further Swami clarifies his question that when exams are over and there are vacations in the school, should he still read? To this father replies "What a question! You must read." (97) In simple words, Swami does not like the discipline being imposed on him by his parents and considers it a burden.

15th August 1930 proves a turning point in Swami's life as he joins a crowd of about two thousand citizens of Malgudi who were protesting against the arrest of Gauri Sankar, a prominent political worker of Bombay against the British government on the right bank of the river Sarayu (109). Swami gets inspired by the speaker's address to the crowd who reminded them of their glorious past. Shouting of slogans like "Boycott English goods" (111), "Bharat mata ki jai!", "Gandhi ji ki jai!" (112) motivates Swami to contribute to the nation. When somebody asks Swami, "Young man, do you want our country to remain in eternal slavery?" As Swami replies no but the foreign cap he was bearing is interrogated. At this, Swami feels ashamed and removes the cap "flung into the fire with a feeling that he was serving his country" (112). The next morning when he was going to school, a stranger cried that there was no class that day. The self-claimed leaders enter the school and warn the headmaster to close the school, but the headmaster shows reluctance. At this, the crowd shouted slogans there and amongst them, Swami also threw stones at the panes of the building. Thereafter, the crowd moved towards the boarding school and damaged the property there. Finally, the crowd was lathi-charged by the police (118). The next day, the headmaster interrogated the boys who had participated in the protest and damaged the Albert Mission School's property. Consequently, Swami gets expelled from the school. Thereafter, Swami's father admits him to the Board School.

As Swami joins the Board School, Rajam comes to meet him in the evening and gives him the idea of making a cricket team. Rajam while suggesting MCC that will stand for Malgudi Cricket Club, asks Swami to suggest a few names and the latter suggests 'Friends Eleven', 'Jumping Stars', 'Friends Union', 'Champion Eleven', 'Victory Union Eleven' (130-131). But they finalize 'MCC' as the name of their cricket team. The MCC assembles at 5:00 PM on the

opening day for practice and they name Swami as Tate as he emerges a good bowler (143). Rajam, the captain of the team, requests all the teammates to practice regularly to win the matches.

The schedule at the new school also adds to the agony of Swami as it is more hectic than the previous one. He used to get free at 4:30 PM in the previous school where his friends are right now (145), but his drill classes start at 4:30 PM here and he gets no exemption from these classes even after requesting the headmaster. He wishes to produce a medical certificate for which he talks to a doctor, but the doctor convinces him that he will talk to the headmaster and manage for him without a medical certificate. As per the oral commitment, Swami does not stay for the drill classes for a few days in the school and, as a result, the drill master complains about this to the headmaster. The headmaster reprimands Swami while refusing such interferences for exemptions denying the doctor's claims and warns Swami if he misses a day even after that day, his admission will stand cancelled with immediate effect.

Thereafter, the novelist presents Swami in a serious moral conflict that compels him to make some crucial decision and though the decision is termed irrational by his friends, parents, and teachers, the novelist intends to set an example for the readers of coming generations to be intelligent emotionally and sets a reminder to rethink their respective roles i.e. children, students, parents, teachers, and society at large. The MCC has unanimously decided a slot i.e. 5:00 PM for practice which is not possible for Swami in any case as per the norms of his new school. Friendship is the topmost priority for Swami and he does not wish to hurt the sentiments of his teammates and friends. As he has already taken a few days of drill off to practice with MCC without informing his parents and being warned by the headmaster Swami decides to leave the home and the school thinking that he will be back on Sunday to play the match (178). When

Swami does not return home, his parents get worried. His mother and grandmother pray and promise rich offerings to god if Swami reaches home well. His father searches for his body on the banks of the river Sarayu and confirms in the hospitals in the locality (180-184). On the other hand, Swami encounters hardships in the forest as hunger becomes unbearable he eats wild fruits and drinks water from the pond, starts missing his home, feels alienated and repents (186), and decides to return but night falls suddenly and his heart starts beating fast (187). He sets the target of reaching the trunk road, even if it happens at midnight to feel more secure (188), but he gets troubled by the frightening cries, and fearful images leave him bloodcurdling. Earlier he has been unable to locate himself, and when he realizes that the trunk road is a distant dream, he starts missing his parents, friends, and teachers, prays to god and collapses unconscious. The novelist writes about what Swami unconsciously envisions:

Now a leopard, a lion, even a whale, now a huge crowd, a mixed crowd of wild elephants, tigers, lions, and demons surrounded him. The demon lifted him by his ears, plucked every hair on his head, and peeled off his skin from head to foot. Now what was this, coiling round his legs, cold and slimy? He shrank in horror from a scorpion that was advancing with its sting in the air. No, this was not a place for a human being. The cobra and the scorpion were within an inch from him. (193)

It was Saturday morning that Ranga, the cart man finds Swami lying on the path cold. When Ranga confirms some warmth in his body, he informs the nearest forest officer who gives him first aid and informs his parents through the police. Swami takes a lifelong lesson from this horrifying experience.

The above analysis showcases that R.K. Narayan presents the most significant issue of education during 1930s British India while depicting the socio-political scenario and the role of its stakeholders through *Swami and Friends*. The novel attempts to reveal the basic nature of children which is pleasure-loving and getting influenced easily by the external world. If the children are students then what should be the degree of burden or freedom or discipline for them the novelist emphasizes the parents must rethink. Further, parents practising emotional intelligence have been suggested to eliminate any communication gap between parents and children resulting from fear or ethical issues. Swami's repentance of hiding his plan from his parents and friends after his dreadful encounter in the forest exhibits his innocence and makes him a nobler creature and makes *Swami and Friends* a significant piece of didactic literature preaching a pearl of readymade wisdom from the adventures of Swami that would be of utmost significance for future generations as H.W. Longfellow says in his poem "A Psalm of Life", "Footprints, that perhaps another, / Sailing o'er life's solemn main, / A forlorn and shipwrecked brother, / Seeing, shall take heart again". (Longfellow 4) In other words, the wisdom of this novel will give direction to the destiny of upcoming generations preventing them from underestimating the issues covered in the novel and thus, will make their lives sublime.

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