

Nature and Treatment of Innocence as Perceived in R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*

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Abstract:

Innocence is a quality or fact of being innocent, and is realized in a number of connotations. This frame of meaning serves as a point of reference, in analysing the nature and treatment of innocence in R.K.Narayan's *Swami and Friends*. Narayan underlines several faces of innocence located in his child characters. The basic theme of illusion versus reality has been deceptively dramatized through the misadventures of Swami and his cronies in *Swami and Friends*. The nature of innocence in Swami and the other characters are analysed in this article as perceived by Narayan.

Key Words: Innocence, illusion versus reality, cronies, rite de passage etc.

Introduction: Innocence is chiefly defined as the quality or fact of being innocent, and is realized in a number of connotations. According to the Oxford English Dictionary innocence means, "freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, or unacquainted with evil; moral purity; freedom from specific guilt; the fact of not being guilty or that with which one is charged; guiltless; freedom from cunning or artifice; guiltlessness, artlessness, simplicity; hence want of knowledge or sense, ignorance, silliness; and of things: Harmless, innocuousness." It may be pointed out that the above mentioned frame of meanings may serve as a point of reference, in analysing the nature and treatment of innocence in Narayan's *Swami and Friends*.

Almost every character in the novels of Narayan has a nuclear innocence as the generally shared human trait; the typology of innocence intends to focus on three distinct categories of the characters in Narayan's novel: (a) the children, (b) the grown – ups passing through the second childhood and (c) the rustics.

Narayan presents a characteristic spectacle of his innocent characters. Although he underlines several faces of innocence, the markedly telescoped type seems to be located in his child characters. There are several types of child delineations in Narayan but *Swami and Friends*, Narayan's first novel may be considered as a full-fledged study of innocence. It seems logically significant that Narayan, who was to delineate the entire life span of his characters in his later novels, sketches the innocence of a child in this novel. The theme of innocence in *Swami and Friends* may also be taken as the suggestively introduced first stage of the ashrama – system, namely, the brahmacharyashrama (student phase).

Swami and Friends may be read as an episodic story of school-boys, realized through their typical psychology and characteristically dramatized misadventures. The school-boy's epic has the most striking and all all-encompassing ring of innocence about it. Though all the boys in

the novel seem to be dramatizing innocence, it is basically Swaminathan, the central consciousness in it, probably inspired by the child-God, Balasubramania Swami through whom it is chiefly realized.

The basic theme of illusion versus reality – one of the installing features of Narayan’s later novels, has been deceptively dramatized through the misadventures of Swami and his cronies in *Swami and Friends*. Narayan has employed the strategy of two-pronged consciousness for the dramatization of the theme. The entire experience of the school-boys is perceived as their fresh, innocent, untainted and unacquainted awareness, and it is simultaneously filtered through the adult and experienced consciousness.

Nature of Innocence in Swaminathan: *Swami and Friends* unfolds the episodic story – installing yet another structural device in Narayan’s later novels – mostly in the third person narration affording the novelist the desirable distancing for the delineation of the characteristic world of Swami and his friends. The novelist is equipped with a minutely observant eye and the reportorial gift to underline the pre-adolescent psychology of Swaminathan and his mates.

Although the overall nature of innocence in *Swami and Friends* is realized through the school-boy’s psychology, it has been primarily focused through their ignorance. *Swami and Friends* underlines the various stages of dramatization of the inherent ignorance of the school boys world, to note their unacquaintance of the adult experience, to underline their indulgence in the fantastic imagination, and, more importantly, to focus on their imitative faculty to play the adult roles.

Swami, the young hero in *Swami and Friends*, is the central consciousness of the novel. What he notices and especially what he does, constitute the stuff of the novel. Although he is a mere school-boy type, Swami stands out remarkably as a bouncing and enlivened character. Narayan projects the boy’s innocence through his overall psychology exemplified mostly in his misadventures. This treatment of innocence, on the face of it, may indeed appear plain and straightforward. Narayan delineates the boy’s milky innocence, his character and his imagination at every conceivable instance.

Swami’s different modes of innocence exhibit the inherent trait of the children’s world. It may also be pointed out that through Swami, Narayan seems to install a typically average and ordinary hero, belonging to the middle class, realized through a family frame and overall influence of the Hindu cultural ethos.

Narayan employs a strategy to project Swami and his cronies. His sense captures the scene at the tennis court as Swami is seen marvelling at his father’s excellence in the game: “Swaminathan found that whenever his father hit the ball, his opponents were unable to receive it and so let it go and strike the screen”. (90) If this underlines Swami’s utter ignorance of the game, his observation, “that the picker’s life was one of grave risks” (90), creates a ripple of laughter among the readers. But the most charming instance is the one when Swami with the

inborn dread of Mathematics, unable to find the right solution through the mazy and bewildering figures, tries desperately to find some clue to the problem, of all the things in the ripeness of the mangoes. He asks: “Father will you tell me if the mangoes were ripe?” (86) Narayan then amusedly catches his young hero at the pooja-room, as the latter entreats and appeals to god to turn the three pebbles in his box into six pies enabling him to buy the coveted hoop. He pleads with Dr. Kesavan to oblige him with a medical certificate stating that he has ‘delirium’: I have got it, I can’t say exactly. . . But isn’t it some, some kind of stomach ache? (141)

Narayan’s intention of presenting the young hero Swami breathing under the eternal shadow of fear, becomes clear. Swami, as an average type exemplifies the innocence and is realized predominantly as a coward and a mediocre boy. The boy has always been scared of his father, secretly fears the class bully, Mani, feels threatened by the coachman’s ruffian son, has a perennial fear for the headmaster and, finally, after the breach of promise he shows no guts to face his captain. Narayan offers three instances as Swaminathan feels cold sweat; as the coachman’s son grins ‘Maliciously’ and takes “out of his pocket a penknife” (91), Swaminathan pleads: “Don’t kill me. I know nothing” (100), and finally, as he undergoes the nightmarish and nerve-racking experience in the Mempi Forest: “He clearly heard his name whispered. There was no doubt about it. Swami ... Swami ... Swami ... Swami ... and then the dreadful suggestion of a sacrifice”. (58)

The last instance rings remarkably authentic as Narayan reveals the innocent child’s hallucinatory fears. The overall scare-ridden image of Swaminathan and his cowardly behaviour present the nature of the innocent young mind which is suffering under the fear psychosis. It is one of the rare reflections of Swami’s innocence.

Swami’s innocence is reflected when he plays the role of the egoist or perhaps the egoist in the making. It is the manifestation of Swami’s innocent mind that he honestly believes in his mythic stature and feels proud to be called the Tate of M.M.C. (Maurice Tate was a famous English bowler and M.C.C. refers to Malgudi Cricket Club which Swami, Rajam and Mani decided to form on the lines of the Lord’s based Marylebone Cricket Club). It is in this context that the influence of Mani, the boy with the club and his devil may care attitude and, Rajan the super snob, assume great importance. Swami’s middleclass psychology accounts for his egoist’s role. Unknowingly he begins to imitate Mani and Rajan. Swami’s reference to the infants as he literally manhandles them on the day of the strike, his excitedly breaking of the window-panes and his own contribution to the harassment of the cartman’s poor son show the mischievous nature of a young boy.

Narayan’s young hero is endowed with all the negative attributes unbecoming of a real heroic figure. But he has also been offered the most redeeming quality: the inherent goodness among others. The novelist offers three distinct illustrations of Swami’s good behaviour: as Swami desperately tries to save the ant after its ‘death by water’ and prays for the departed soul; as he,

does not buy a lemon for his Granny, feels guilty and ashamed of himself, returns home thinking her to be dead with a repenting soul; and as he secretly tries to preserve the spider as a pet and stealthily pockets it without the knowledge of his father. Thus, the subtle understanding of the school-boy's psychology is reflected in the last instance where William Walsh pays a glowing tribute to Narayan.

It is the parting scene in *Swami and Friends*. Swami, feeling guilty and yet anxious to restore the treasured friendship of the most valued Rajam, offers him a present through Mani. The entire scene has come out vividly. But more than the authentic portrayal of the parting and the tearful Swami, what is subtly and unmistakably underlined is the nature of human discrepancy. The innocent Swami believes that the receding figure of Rajam was in fact waving a goodbye to him alone. But he is not quite sure whether Rajam had been really given his address by Mani and the author comments: "for once Mani's face had become inscrutable." (179)

Narayan's first ever characterization of pre-adolescent boyhood also happens to be his first ever study of innocence. Considering the portrayal of the boyhood innocence, what stands out is the novelist's unsentimental attitude coupled with his detached view and objective stance. The episodic structure of the novel underlines several instances focusing on different shades of Swami's innocence. Narayan certainly seems to have grasped the school-boy psychology reasonably well. Narayan's realistic portrait of the school boy Swaminathan has made him a living character.

It may also be pointed out that Swami's innocence seems to have been viewed through the writer's bi-focal vision of comic irony. Narayan has also employed the strategy of the *rite de passage* as the erring boy realizes his folly and returns to the commonplace world of reality. The subtle suggestion of the dawning of his realization suggests that Swami is not a mere flat character.

Nature of Innocence in other characters: 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. Somu, the Monitor of the class seems to lead the friends. He exemplifies the figure of confidence and is known as the uncle of the class. He has also earned the reputation of being hardly ever questioned by the teachers. Though not a brilliant student, Somu has an easy way of taking things. There seems to be a subtle suggestion of the egoist and a ring of innocence in Somu. Somu however ends up as a thumb-nail character.

Mani, the most dynamic of Swami's friends, is the class bully. The boy with the club is a chronic repeater. Although he bullied everybody and it is said that when a teacher tried to prod him he "nearly lost his life," (8) Mani was Swami's confidant. Narayan makes a judicious combination of the '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. He desperately tries to squeeze the leaked questions out of the school clerk in exchange for the brinjals. The episode underlines the devil's ignorance and naivete and leaves the reader amused. But it is in the parting scene that Mani, the innocent devil exemplifies life's discrepancy and a sense of ambiguity.

Mani may be regarded as a psychological projection of Swami's fantasy. In restoring Rajam's friendship with Swami, he also seems to play a catalyst. He may, however, be taken as a fascinating study of devilish innocence. As for the characterization, Mani, though remains a cardish character, has the potentialities of a round one.

Sankar, reminds us of Narayan's flair for God's names. 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 Sankar. As a scholar-extraordinary, he is always respected for his scholarship and is rumoured to have outwitted even the teachers. The other image of Sankar creates more amusement. It can be regarded as a typecast, 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." (8) He remains a flat character.

Samuel is better known as the 'pea' on account of his size. The "pea" as Rajeev Taranath suggests, exemplifies the average and the ordinary as the recurring traits of the Narayan heroes: "He was just ordinary, on outstanding virtue of muscle or intellect" (9). Like Mani, Samuel too is Swami's close friend and confidant and "the bond between them was laughter." (9)

Rajam, a foreign friend of Swami, is yet another unique example for 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. 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 send 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 actual springs inside the bat, so that when you touch the ball it flies," (114) his playing the role of an adult when he invites 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.

Rajam, like Mani and Swami, has the basically endearing quality: the quality of being good to others. He expresses it on several occasions: his forgiving of Mani’s hostility and accepting him as a friend, his restoring of the valued friendship between ‘enemies,’ and finally his supposedly expressed gestures of forgiving Swami’s ‘crime’ and accepting him as a friend, underline Rajam’s basic good nature. He, however, remains a type with some rare and illuminating traits.

Overall understanding of Innocence: *Swami and Friends* remains Narayan’s major study of innocence. It may be essential to note certain patterns and issues emerging out of Narayan’s treatment of innocence in the novel. By and large, *Swami and Friends* remains a pace setter and, therefore, the patterns and issues to be noted, become a recurring feature in the later Malgudi novels.

Swami and Friends deals with the theme of illusion versus reality. The theme seems to be Narayan’s capsulized notion of life to project what the novelist uses as the lens of innocence. If the traditionally conceived middle-class family frame functions as a sort of a backdrop, the cultural ethos serves as the stage for the ‘central consciousness’ to enact his assigned role. The progress or the spiritual growth of the protagonist may be viewed as a deviating individual realizing the folly and return to the world of reality. The cyclic structure of the novel underlines the protagonist’s journey, corresponding to Narayan’s similar notion of the universe. The innocent boys do not display any marked growth in *Swami and Friends* but, taken symbolically, the deflation of Swami’s ego and his getting chastened, may be regarded as his realization indicating a subtle growth of his consciousness. What one witnesses at the end of the novel is the restoring of the balance, temporarily topsy-turvy, the reconciliation of the warring issues overpowering the entire scene for sometime, and finally the return of the deviator to the world of normalcy. Narayan seems to employ the strategy of *rite de passage* to underline the protagonist’s realization. The novel closes on the suggestion of a positive assertion of the average and the ordinary.

Conclusion: The discussion concerning the nature and treatment of innocence in Narayan’s novels reveals the prismatically realized innocence viewed through a variety of human spectacle, from childhood to second childhood. Significantly, the pervading nature of innocence in Narayan’s novels underlines the equally pervading influence of the cultural ethos, noted in the context of character delineation. As for the treatment of innocence, most of the characters in his typology are minor or secondary characters except Swami who has been dealt mostly with a comic-ironic filter. Almost all the characters in this typology have been revealed as flat characters but they play significant roles like the ficelles, the catalysts and the foils. The typology also marks the characters for their choric and symbolic function. It is in the diversified nature of the roles played by Narayan’s flat characters that one reads their

significance as characters. And it is through them that the novelist underlines the positive assertion of the average and the ordinary.

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