



**Paper: Indian Writing in English**

**Lesson: R.K. Narayan Swami & Friends**

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**R.K. Narayan (10 October 1906 – 13 May 2001)**

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Iyer Narayan is an Indian literary giant credited with establishing the Indian English novel genre and introducing the Indian sensibility to the world at large. Narayan's literary output was amazing. He wrote fifteen novels, five volumes of short stories, a number of travelogues, non-fiction, English translation of Indian epics, and memoirs. The backdrop of nearly all his fiction is an imaginative town – Malgudi - which grows from a sleepy, dusty, unnoticeable town to a bustling hectic urban centre with the passage of time as the writer adds to this imaginative landscape, novel after novel.

Narayan was born in Chennapatna in Chennai on October 10, 1906. He was the third among eight siblings. He lived in a close-knit joint family which gave him a sense of tradition and family values. He believed: "To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots - both in religion and family..."<sup>1</sup> for the "material available to a story writer in India is limitless". Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations: every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically, but in outlook, habits and day-to-day philosophy. It is stimulating to live in a society that is not standardised or mechanised, and is free from monotony. Under such conditions the writer has only to

**Chennapatna** look out of the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story)."<sup>2</sup> For the first fifteen years of his life, Narayan was brought up by his maternal grandmother, Parvathi, in Chennai, away from the rest of his family residing in Mysore. From her he learnt Sanskrit and mythology. His childhood companions were a peacock and a monkey. Later he moved to Mysore. Here he studied at Maharaja's Collegiate High School where his father was the headmaster. Narayan's father was a strict disciplinarian which made him dislike formal education. Narayan failed his University entrance examinations twice. Finally, in 1930, he graduated from Maharaja College in four years, instead of the regular three years. 1930 led

Factoid	R. K. Laxman, the famous cartoonist was Narayan's youngest brother.
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to Narayan's creative flowering - in September, on *Vijaydashmi*, he scripted the first line of his first ever novel *Swami and Friends* which was published in 1935.

Throughout his life Narayan travelled globally. He visited the United States in 1956 at the invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation. Here he met Graham Greene for the first and the only time in a unique literary friendship that continued over five decades. A memorable travelogue, 'My Dateless Diary', was the result of Narayan's American sojourn. In the Hotel Carlton, Berkeley, California, Narayan wrote the most famous of his novels, *The Guide*, which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960. In 1961 he re-visited the United States and also made a trip to Australia which was funded by a fellowship by the Australian Writers' Group. In 1964, he travelled to the States again where he met the celebrated Swedish-American actress Greta Garbo - she was interested in the Vedanta Society, and Narayan taught her the Gayatri Mantra. During this time he also travelled to Europe, the Soviet Union, the Philippines and Indonesia. In 1967 his novel, *The Vendor of Sweets*, inspired by his American visits and experience of cultural differences, was published. In 1980 Narayan's works were translated into Chinese for the first time and he was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha - the upper house of the Indian Parliament - for his contributions to literature. During his entire six-year term, Narayan's singular focus was on the plight of school children, especially the overload of homework and stifling of a child's natural creativity, which resulted in the formation of a committee chaired by Prof. Yash Pal to recommend changes in India's school educational system.

In the early 1990s, Narayan moved to Madras to stay with his daughter and son-in-law in their apartment. He continued to write, occasionally visiting his grandson in America. T. S. Satyan tells us in an article published in the *Frontline* that Narayan missed Mysore very much: " 'I spend a lot of time reclining in easy chair and thinking of Mysore, which now has become a sort of emotional landscape...' His room had a window overlooking a crowded junction of roads at Alwarpet. Often, Narayan kept gazing through this window to look at the world passing by. 'There's so much happening here. There is so much to see. So interesting' he told me on one of my last visits to him before death overtook him"<sup>3</sup>. Narayan died of cardiac arrest on May 13 2001. N. Ram, one of his close friends tells us that just a few hours before he went on a ventilator and breathed his last, Narayan, the master story teller had to be advised to not strain his lungs and keep quiet, for he continued to discuss his plans to write a novel on the life of his tahsildar grandfather.<sup>4</sup>

Narayan's literary oeuvre spanned a period of nearly sixty years. He was critically acclaimed and honoured nationally and internationally. In 1958 he won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Guide* and in 1964 he received the Padma Bhushan. In 1980, he was awarded the AC Benson Medal by the (British) Royal Society of Literature. He was also conferred honorary doctorates by the University of Leeds in 1967, the University of Mysore in 1976 and Delhi University in 1973. In 2000, he was awarded India's second-highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan. Narayan's novels and short stories were televised and also adapted for movies and the Broadway.





### **R. K. Narayan and the Literary Scene**

The twentieth century in which Narayan wrote is an extremely charismatic age, nationally and internationally. This period witnessed cataclysmic events that altered hegemonic structures globally. There were two major world wars, widespread apartheid, anti-apartheid movements, and the settlement of Jews in Israel. It was in 1947 that India won *Swaraj* after a consistent struggle against the British and gave its indelible legacy, *Ahimsa*, to the world at large: a young nation with a unique cultural blend fascinated the globe. Contemporary Indian writers writing in English had the daunting uphill task of coming from a multi-lingual spool and splicing a non-indigenous language, English, with Indian tones. The result was, and has been, remarkable: the language of these literary pioneers is masterly in its simplicity, fluidity and naturalness. The first Indian novel in English *Rajmohan's Wife* was written by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in 1864. However, novel writing in English gained a steady momentum with the famous trendsetting trio - Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan who wrote effortless English which had an Indian sensibility and addressed an Indian audience: they are the "forefathers"<sup>5</sup> of Indian fiction in English. This novel form was a "twice born fiction" - an "organic product of the concrete socio-political-cultural environment of the epoch"<sup>6</sup>. C.D. Narasimhaiah observes that these three literary giants' "essential literary sensibility" had a "distinct flavour... native and alien at the same time"<sup>7</sup>. The period from the 1930s to the 1950s is hailed as Indian Renaissance. The novels written during this period have a revolutionary fervour. There is a strong preoccupation with Indian problems and Gandhi's ideals. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchables* deals with the exploitation of the lower castes and is largely inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. Instances of young men caught at cultural crossroads teem the pages of these novels where humour and distress inextricably intertwine. Thus it

is a funny and embarrassing moment, in *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand when a well-to-do Indian family goes overboard in its hospitality to an inconsequential British who cannot understand why he is feted by the Indians who do not think twice over making fools of themselves. Families and filial politics source the fictional material of these novelists, at times creating tragic and poignant situations and at times humour. In *Swami and Friends* a schoolboy makes a ridiculous alibi to excuse his absence in class saying that his grandmother had died but no one could warrant her death since she had an extended line of relatives who were either missing from home or out of reach.

This period of literary flowering is conspicuous in its indifference to Europeans who are largely absent from the pages of the Indian novelists writing in English. Also, no comparison is made between them and the Indians. Suresh Kumar's analysis of this period leads him to conclude that Europeans are generally caricatured or casually mentioned<sup>8</sup>. De la Havre in Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Two Leaves and a Bud* is an exception. He is a well-rounded European character who is humane and sympathises with the cause of the coolies under his charge. We come across many Anglo-Indians who are limned as social misfits and an unhappy lot. Swami's teacher, Ebenezer belongs to this category.

India is vitalised in the pages of the Indian novelists who do an incredible service to the world at large by introducing it to a country which is multi-faceted, complex and philosophically rich. The clash between the old and the new, the problems faced by the indigenous population and the undying belief in the intrinsic goodness of the human race are the major concerns of the novelists of the nineteen thirties. It is due to these stalwarts that today the Indian authors are an international rage. Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan had an extremely trying time getting their first novels published. Anand had become desperately suicidal but his novel, *Untouchables* finally did get into print in 1933. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* was rejected umpteen times till one of his friends, Kittu Purna intervened on his behalf and the book reached Graham Greene who sponsored its publication. While Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose worked towards ousting the British from India, the Indian writers gained a formidable reputation.

### **Narayan's Critical Reception**

Writing under the Empire's shadow, R.K. Narayan is a remarkable literary personality who used the language of the colonialists and made it his own. It is extremely commendable that Narayan's entire education took place in India and still he wrote in lucid English which was not his mother tongue. Narayan's choice of words and syntax was dextrously arrived at. The easy, readable style for which Narayan has been critically acclaimed was the result of disciplined drafts and re-drafts of novels and stories. Narayan's themes are simple and profound at the same time. He has explored the complex emotional quicksand of the average middle class Indian who finds himself/ herself at odds with traditional values – values which are cherished and revered but gradually imprison and scaffold an aspiring, ambitious individual. The simple subjects of Narayan's novels and their day to day concerns strike a chord in readers across the globe. One is humbled by the fact that non-Indians have empathised with the tragedies and comedies in the lives of Narayan's characters. India and its vibrant middle-class, and the nation's multifarious cultural complexity is palpably alive in Narayan's pages, which for the first time became familiar to the world at large despite its singularity and peculiar Indianness. At times, Narayan's language is piquantly Indian which adds to the unique charm of his writing. One is impressed by the writer's astuteness, his ability to observe the common and glean the ordinary to create an enriching rewarding experience that subtly educates us. Each and every novel by Narayan is steeped in humanism which inculcates in us a faith in the universal goodness of human society which Narayan believes will continue to be the backbone of individuals despite its circumscribed morality which rebels will have to gradually come to terms with. According to Narayan, no man can be an island unto himself and life has meaning only when one learns to accept and come to terms with limitations.

Narayan has continued to have his share of detractors like Shashi Tharoor and Shashi Deshpande who find Narayan's English pedestrian and pidgin<sup>9</sup>. Narayan's themes have always been simple and profound. He took up average people as his subjects and delved into their ordinary lives and simple day to day problems that gradually reveal a profound stoic faith in humanity, God and the goodness of mankind – a typical Indian philosophical stance. This thematic simplicity is the result of the writer's painstaking accurate observation of people around him. Narayan is an artist whose pages are peopled by persons we come across in our daily concourse. To read a text for the first time and feel an affinity with it is not trivial but a soul connect that can only happen because the text sublimates the particular into a universal. If this is done in a language that strikes a chord in its readers it is no mean task. And if critics belittle an author who has a firm control over a language it speaks volumes of acerbity against simplicity. "Narayan stands for the immense flexibility, adaptability and élan of English... without any discernible twang of the foreign, with a sense of disarming familiarity"<sup>10</sup>. According to Srinivas Iyengar, he "uses the English language much as we used to wear dhotis manufactured in Lancashire— but the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward



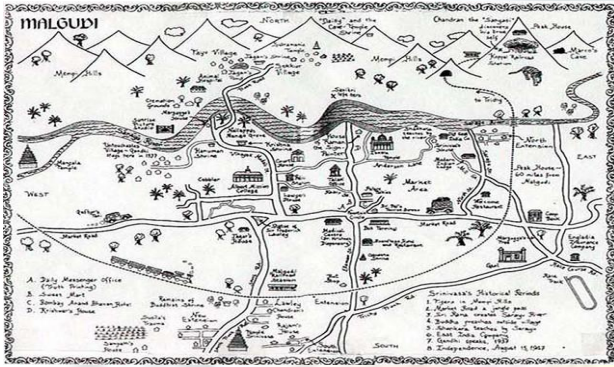
movements of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India". Anthony West of 'The New Yorker' considered Narayan's writings realism to be of the variety of Nikolai Gogol.

Narayan's fictional oeuvre is a tribute to "lives of 'ordinary' men and women... who remind us of our own neighbours, or our own siblings – or ourselves"<sup>11</sup>. These people have "modest and hopeful expectations", fight against denials and "wrestle with existence" – a "grand salvaging operation" that is an "adventure"<sup>12</sup> trail to self realisation. This journey to self realisation is fraught with tensions and frustrations that have a tragic-comic element to them. The characters are simple-minded and their aspirations commonplace but their serious intent has an element of humorous incongruity to it. In *Bachelor of Arts* Chandran consistently chalks out study schedules and plans to strictly adhere to them, it is a bitter sweet comedy that his sincere intentions are thwarted. This comic vision is Narayan's forte. His ability to engage with the mundane intimately and still maintain an objective distance all the while seeing in it "the miracle of transcendence and the renewal of life, beauty and peace"<sup>13</sup> is the reason why Narayan's stories leave an ever lasting impression despite their simplicity.

Narayan's works are never overtly didactic or moralistic. His writings have been described as "table talk"<sup>14</sup> which has earnestness but not revolutionary fervour where the routine and the everyday captivate the readers who are drawn into the relaxed vortex of lives that are ordinary yet refreshingly beautiful and dependable. The stories ravel through lively, sparkling dialogues not staid and prosaic descriptions. In this respect he has been compared to Jane Austen. The stories build through anecdotes and action where the authorial voice remains in the background. Narayan is a "dramatist" and less of a "pure describer". As such, except for "a few introductory words... We then do not know how Mr. Sampath looked like, nor Rosie's husband nor Vasu..." whom Narayan "leaves... to our fancy"<sup>15</sup>.

Narayan's fiction is realistic but this realism is rarely stark or brutal. Narayan's stories are blanketed with serenity. At times this serenity camouflages society's callousness but the promise of potential calm remains. The *status quo*, howsoever obdurate and painful, is never disturbed. It asserts the author's conviction that traditions and community are integral to the survival of humanity. There are no hardcore villains here. We find charlatans and tricksters who are glib and make quick buck by using their charm and eloquence to dupe the gullible. But these men are invariably drifters and passive – things happen to them and they are at destiny's receiving end. The world that Narayan creates is a world where villainy lies in chasing the mirage of dreams and trying to create a castle of wishful fancies with indifference to, not in defiance of, traditions. Dreamers can never be irredeemable. Narayan empathises with all his characters irrespective of their level of goodness. "In his sympathetic hands they turn into interesting and amusing figures such as make the earth very colourful..."<sup>16</sup> And inevitably when the denouement occurs and there's a clash of values the imposter rises to the occasion and becomes one with his dream which is always to create a world where the masses idolise him. In Narayan's world breach occurs but the edifice of universal humanism and brotherhood remains steadfast. *The Guide* is Narayan's masterpiece where he creates a lovable lout, Raju, who follows his heart recklessly as a child and an adult, trying to gratify other people's expectations by framing them into believing his lies to be true. His recklessness lands him in prison. However, Raju remains true to his nature. Once he is freed but without work, hungry and homeless, he lets people mistake him for a

*sadhu* till events catapult to a miraculous climax where a drought stricken village is inundated with rain and the villagers credit Raju for God's benevolence. Despite his littleness, the protagonist - an anti-hero and a fraudster - remains true to his inner self because of which irrespective of his deeds he realises the truth of *atman*, which is - in typical Narayanesque fashion - service to humanity. The beauty of Narayan's fiction is in its irrevocable camaraderie where no man can be an island unto himself. However, Narayan's rogues have been described W.J. Harvey as "Cards"<sup>17</sup> who are static and do not evolve or change with time.



R.K. Narayan was a consummate artist who worked intensively "with his little bit of ivory just so many inches wide"<sup>18</sup>. In 'The Average as Positive', Rajeev Tarnath says "Narayan's writing becomes an 'oeuvre' in the peculiarity of location..."<sup>19</sup>. "A geographical place becomes for him a prototype of the entire world"<sup>20</sup>. We find him returning to his small imaginative city, Malgudi which altered with the passage of time and

the stories that shaped out in its topos. One continues to speculate on the location of Malgudi but it remains a speculation since the author never gave it a specific geographical location. This ambiguity adds charm to the fiction since it universalises the specific. Malgudi has been compared to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Dr James M. Fennelly, a scholar of Narayan's works, created a map of Malgudi based on the fictional descriptors of the town from the many books and stories<sup>21</sup>. One feels that Malgudi is ageless and is a microcosm of India which continues to exist despite a bewildering variety and endless change. "...it is difficult to shake off the feeling that you have vicariously lived in this town. Malgudi is the single most endearing 'character' R.K. Narayan has ever created"<sup>22</sup>. Narayan wrote in the Introduction to *Malgudi Days* "the material available to the story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations: every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically, but in outlook, habits and day-to-day philosophy. It is stimulating to live in a society that is not standardised or mechanised, and is free from monotony. Under such conditions the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character and thereby a story"<sup>23</sup>.



Rambling with Bellur

# Malgudi Times

Monday, October 10, 2009

**Some in Malgudi**  
...a happy holiday...  
...a happy holiday...  
...a happy holiday...

**In Brief**  
Load Shedding  
Oct 10: There will be load shedding between 8 am and 10 am in various parts of the Malgudi from October 10 till 15 due to shortage of power supply.

**Book Exhibition**  
Oct 10: The Prime of Malgudi is holding book exhibition commencing at the Market square from October 10 till 15 at discounted rates. The latest release is 'R.K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation' by William Malgudi. Malgudi Press is the book's sponsor.

**MCC wins 1st run**  
Oct 10: Malgudi Cricket Club defeated their arch-rival, Bellur, by a solitary run in a match played on the 10th. The match was a close contest, with the clock in 6 weeks for the winner.

**Rain lash Malgudi**  
Oct 10: In what is an all-time record, Malgudi experienced unexpected showers on Monday (Oct 10) on Page 1.

**Malgudi all set to celebrate Narayan's 99th Birthday**  
Oct 10: Malgudi is all set to celebrate the 99th birth anniversary of R.K. Narayan, the literary chronicler of small-town life in South India and one of the first Indians writing in English to achieve international acclaim.  
Long before writers of the independence broke free of the penman and ideologue of the independence movement and Parnassus, Mr. Narayan explored the value of village traditions and the lives of ordinary people. In the 1950s, he created a town in South India that he called Malgudi and populated it with characters who could be found widely, humbly, intelligently or philosophically... but who were always believable. Mr. Narayan would return again and again to Malgudi in many guises to create a world of his own.  
Although Mr. Narayan's writing may strike many foreign critics as dated, his books accurately portray an India that heaves between the unchanging rural and the newly industrial, that is still filled with individualistic, often eccentric personalities that recall his imagined universe.  
Mr. Narayan's biography, *Swami and Me*, has been noted that Malgudi "commenced with a rural landscape, and people and land are never far away." They added "This town seems to live, abounds with color, to wander any street, pore through a window or push open a door to its encounter a character."  
Mr. Narayan published a memoir and countless other stories during his life.

**Scraps on R.K. Narayan**  
A collection of great and little bits of the life of the author, as well as the life of the town, is available in the form of a book, *Swami and Me*, by the author himself. The book is a collection of letters, diary entries, and other personal documents. It is a treasure trove for those who love the author and his work.

**The master from Malgudi**  
Few authors are remembered more than the chronicler of small-town life in South India, R.K. Narayan. He was a master of the art of storytelling, and his books have been translated into many languages. His work is a testament to the power of the written word.

**Narayan & Greene: Friends forever**  
R.K. Narayan and E.B. White were close friends and colleagues. They both wrote for children and adults, and their work has inspired generations of writers. Their friendship was a testament to the power of the written word.

**Just a story-teller**  
Critics praised his style as being unpretentious and natural. He wrote with humor and tenderness about the struggles of ordinary people. He was a close friend of the late British author, Graham Greene, who is said to have described him as one of the greatest contemporary writers in English. Narayan described himself as a story-teller.

**No better way to be taught English**  
The students of Lakshmi Narayan High School have used the story-teller's words to inspire their writing. They have found that the best way to learn English is to read and write stories. The school has a collection of Narayan's books, and the students are encouraged to read and write stories.

**Malgudi Silks**  
The Malgudi Silks are a collection of stories and essays by R.K. Narayan. They are a testament to the power of the written word, and they are a source of inspiration for writers everywhere. The silks are a collection of stories and essays that are both entertaining and thought-provoking.



Though the variety of characters in Narayan's novels is noteworthy, all of them barring a few exceptions are from the middle-class or the lower middle-class firmly rooted in age-old customs and traditions. In Narayan's own words: "My characters were simple enough to lend themselves for observation; they had definite outlines – not blurred by urban speed, size and tempo"<sup>24</sup>. They have "a marked potential for the uncommon" though the significance of their lives lies in their journey from the "average to the extraordinary and back again to a more poignant state of average". The "majority of his protagonists are... self-complacent" with "small occupations which they manage more or less single handed"<sup>25</sup>. C.N. Srinath draws our attention to Narayan's heroes who are mostly "identified with a profession or a role, e.g. the *Bachelor of Arts*, the *Vendor of Sweets*, the *Financial Expert*". The titles of these novels suggest that humans are destined to play their pre-ordained role – their Dharma. Inability to do so results in irony since these characters are defined by their ideals and aspiration.<sup>26</sup>

Rebellions do occur but, like Chandran's in *Bachelor of Arts*, are ineffective against society's collective force: the rebels "accept defeat... and they find happiness... in submission". Narayan is not a reformist; his "work contains no scalded sense of social injustice, no anguish, no colonial indignation". V. Pandurang Rao correctly sums up that "Narayan's vision is essentially moral... the problems... are largely ethical". Conflict in Narayan's novels is between the old and the new generations within the family's "immediate context in which the novelist's sensibility operates"<sup>27</sup> – Swami in *Swami and Friends* is a child who runs away from home; Chandran is a young adolescent who becomes an ascetic; Ramana's aunt in *Painter of Signs* goes on a pilgrimage when Ramana plans to marry a Christian. However, these "novels are not vehicles of mass propaganda" where "the sense of kinship is always strong"<sup>28</sup> and "at the end there is always a... restoration of normalcy... Narayan's heroes ultimately accept life as it and this leads them towards their spiritual maturity" and "acceptance" of life's "absurdities"<sup>29</sup>. This acceptance contributes to the novel's irony and humour which is gentle.

Exclusive to every other concern, Narayan was creative, not didactic or moralistic though his fiction was a foray into spiritual self-realisation. Narayan always wanted to be a story-teller and to entertain through his works. He picked up ordinary lives and ordinary incidents as elements to build his stories on. However, they "are focussed on in an amazingly extraordinary manner". Graham Greene thought this to be the "riskiest kind of fiction-writing". The greatest tribute to Narayan's fictional oeuvre comes from Greene himself: "It was Mr Narayan with his *Swami and Friends* who... first brought India... alive to me"<sup>30</sup>. Narayan is without doubt a writer whose crisp images and vivid storytelling are at par with Maugham. He has been hailed as the 'Indian Chekov' by critics at large.

Today as we move on into the second decade of the twenty first century the world continues to be perplexed by the Indian government's treatment of R.K. Narayan. The country does not have a single memorial raised to this writer's name. Even his house which ought to have been declared a national heritage is in shambles. It is wonderful though that the University of Delhi continues to include the author in its syllabi. One hopes that Narayan's vision to have a nation with a child-centric education is thoroughly realised and the country does honour him the way intellectual across the globe are honoured.

### **Swami and Friends**

*Swami and Friends* had its genesis in September 1930 on Vijaydashmi. The novel is largely autobiographical though the incidents are so filtered that the personal is universalised. Its locale is a

sleepy town – Malgudi, and its protagonist a lad - Swami, studying in a primary school in the British era. The novel was published in 1935, a time coloured with nationalist movements and anti-British sentiments. Swami's life has its little blitzkrieg when





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he is fired with the *Swadeshi* zeal and goes about vandalizing his school run by the British missionaries only to be rusticated from it. The novel is a paean to childhood – its innocence, bunglings, friendships, breakups and its own non-duplicable unique world. Narayan is the greatest Indian writer who has marvellously crafted a world of childhood for his readers, a world to which each one of us relates irrespective of our national trajectories. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly says, "R. K. Narayan successfully achieves a universal vision"<sup>31</sup> through his non-metropolitan situations.

Being a child across the globe comes with its own set of problems and more or less has to do with the formal academic system which treats childhood as a phase through which a child has to be forcefully forded across. In Narayan's time the use of cane, the degrading and humiliating nature of the 'stand-up-on-the-desk' punishment, the heavy workload - all are exposed for what they really are: a cruel education which mass-produces unimaginative clerks and subordinate staff to serve the British administrative machine. In itself, childhood is never encouraged per se: children are always encouraged to grow out of their mould of innocence. Freedom to a child is far and between, snatched in between classroom and homework – when free play becomes possible – freedom for which a child is at times held criminally accountable. But the beauty of childhood, *Swami and Friends* tells us lies in its resilience and innocence. *Swami and Friends* begins with the sentences: "It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant... After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday". The novel's first chapter is aptly titled 'Monday Morning' where the writer takes us into the world of children and in a non-didactic, un-acrimonious tone paints for us a world where children and their little tragedies and sorrows are consistently overlooked by the adults. Swaminathan's *work-a-day* begins with completing an overload of homework for which he is not appreciated. His efforts merely earn him rebuke. Narayan was a life-long critic of the Indian educational system and he crusaded against academics' burdening the child with homework and regimenting his life. As a child, Narayan disliked going to school - the novel is interspersed with autobiographical details. It is Narayan's forte that he selects, alters and filters the autobiographical – Swami's world enjoys "an objective existence... responsive to... things outside" the writer's immediate life. According to Susan K. Langer, Narayan gives a "slant" to his life to "turn fiction into fact"<sup>32</sup>. This is done with subtlety and in an expressive, lucid and simple style which comes home to the readers. William Walsh says "What happens in India happens in Malgudi and whatever happens in Malgudi happens everywhere"<sup>33</sup>. Narayan was extremely fond of walking: "Every day I would like to meet a new person". "He came across a variety of people - hawkers, lawyers and their clerks, printers, shopkeepers, students and professors who became characters in his hands and he fitted them into Malgudi - his 'beehive'"<sup>34</sup>.

Swami was especially close to his grandmother who is described as a "benign and ignorant old lady"<sup>35</sup> – a widow with a kind attitude towards her grandson who adores her and still finds her a social embarrassment. Unlike her son, this old lady is not judgmental and critical of Swami. She has a genuinely magnanimous attitude towards Swami. She knows that children do not share the adult world's social duplicity and that they speak their hearts without malice. As such, when Swami brings home his friend and asks his grandmother to give him a warm welcome but keep away from them, the

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Factoid	Narayan's grandmother nicknamed him Kunjappa, a name he was familiarly known by.
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elderly lady remains good humoured over the entire affair. She accepts Swami the way he is and does not force him to grow up and grow out of his innocent naiveté. With her, Swami is a quintessential child. He comes to her claiming incredulous feats like having tamed a lion, happy in the tacit assurance that his grandmother would indulge his flights of fantasy and adventure. She is the one who sings lullabies to him. Through the grandmother we are brought into the trove of Indian joint families where women are strong emotional anchors to their grandchildren when parents are busy shouldering responsibilities. The grandmother epitomises an ideal parent figure whose unconditional love lets the child blossom naturally. Her guidance is kind, in glaring contrast to Swami's father who is autocratic and stern and extremely hard to please. Where Swami can play around freely with his granny, he is not allowed to touch anything that belongs to his father. A tacit hierarchical demarcation exists in



Swami's home. Swami's father brings strict regimentation to home – he is nearly as stifling as the school. The difference between the school and the father lies in the fact that at school Swami is one among the many students and is managed so that the school's discipline remains undisturbed while at home Swami has the privilege of his father attending to his problems and trying to solve them. Despite his father's strictness, Swami holds his father in awe and hero-worships him. Teachers are an altogether different ballgame to

Swami – he dislikes them and finds going to school very tedious and boring. We are categorically told by the author that the only teacher whom the students generally liked was the history teacher who was kind and good humoured. "He was reputed to have never frowned or sworn at the boys at any time". The rest of the teachers were not averse to handing out corporeal punishment to them. With his characteristic humour, Narayan balances the bleak with the comic. As such, when Swami is pinched by the teacher, we grin from ear to ear since Swami was the least interested in his homework's assessment. He was engrossed in his teacher's face: "His criticism of the teacher's face was that his eyes were too near each other, that there was more hair on his chin than one saw from

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the bench, and that he was very bad looking". There seems

to be humorous poetic justice in the teacher-student relationship here since Swami returns his teacher's contempt towards him – the teacher treats Swami's homework disrespectfully, giving him zero credit for his effort, scribbling "Very Bad" across his written work and flinging the exercise book into his face. Narayan was against formal schooling for small children for he believed "In every teacher there lurks a potential devil"<sup>36</sup>. We are drawn into the vortex of an education system that believes in *dumbing-down* – a child is not allowed to be enthusiastic or expressive but is coerced into being an unthinking cog that is geared to respond to the teacher and never initiate. As such, when a child answers out of turn to a teacher's rhetorical question over the location of Nile, he is unceremoniously snubbed. Swami's correct even if not a detailed answer to a question about India's climate: "It is hot in summer and cold in winter" does not elicit even a smile from the teacher who punishes him is a telling comment on teaching methodology which stifles creativity and encourages timidity and passive conformity.

Examinations and Swami are an incorrigible affair. Swami loves physical activities and has a laid back lackadaisical attitude towards life – he is non-assertive and happy-lucky-go. He is a proverbial child in whose life there is sheer spontaneity. The gravity of exams is beyond his ken. Once again, Narayan shows us the absurdity of academics' evaluation yardstick which does not account for the individuality of the student – an insistent issue that runs through the novel is the incongruity of schooling where there is no place for children who are not academically inclined but bright otherwise. Swami is not loquacious: he writes an absolutely correct answer which is just a few lines long in comparison to his classmates' half to one page long answers. Swami is badly graded despite being correct. Narayan has rightly observed said "I feel convinced that the... aims of education are hopelessly wrong from beginning to end"<sup>37</sup>.



It is R.K. Narayan's unique forte that his novels reveal the complete picture. We never ever have a world which is all black and bleak – sunshine and happiness radiate from the pages. School has its innocent charm where children get together, play, make friends, plot and learn to cope with various kinds of pressures and develop camaraderie and team spirit. We cannot begin to imagine Swami without his school and school buddies, some of whom are meek and timid while others are bullies or brilliant. Swami's group consists of boys with varying aptitudes and temperaments. What all of them invariably share is a make-believe world and their unwavering love for cricket. Mani, the first friend we are introduced to, is possessive and likes to be looked up to. He enjoys fooling around Swami who adores him and does not mind being pushed around. Mani keeps getting physical with his group but holds no malice even if he is loudmouthed at times and believes that he has a mean and macho image. He loves cowering over his classmates who try to please him. When Swami is unable to bring lime pickles for Mani, Mani calls him "a nasty little coward", which does not dent their friendship. Swami's group of friends has children with varying temperaments, some of whom are given nicknames like Pea. Living and growing up together in a small city with minimal distractions has brought these children very close emotionally and made them socially dependent on each other. Their lives have a predictable pattern that is comforting in its regularity. We are never taken outside Malgudi where the outside world makes its inroads through strangers and visitors who briefly sojourn here. A police superintendent's son, Rajam brings an exciting interlude to their lives. They have their first brush with the pangs of separation when Rajam leaves Malgudi. The novel ends on a bitter sweet note where Mani tries to comfort Swami unsuccessfully: the children struggle to come to terms with the world of grownups where disappointment has to be taken into stride.

R.K. Narayan's writings were never in a social or political limbo. This novel has a comprehensive trajectory where politics makes an impact though not deep and lasting since the town's defining quality is its self-sustaining nature. Swami participates in the 1930s Civil Disobedience Movement. He burns his foreign clothes in *Swadeshi* zeal and vandalizes his school building by breaking its window panes. The frenzy subsides once the nationalists are lathicharged by the sepoy. The events come to a turning point with Swami getting rusticated from school. He joins another school and we find him evolving into a better more rounded individual who has the ability to rise over and above communal differences and



make friends with Muslims. The novel touches the contradictions inhering in the anti-colonial sentiments. Where on the one hand, Swami participates in the Civil Disobedience Movement, he is enamoured with cricket which is a British legacy and to date is played across the Commonwealth.

*Swami and Friends* makes for an easy read which helps us understand the everyday India of the nineteen thirties. The country, especially the South, comes to us through an inverted world where children, not adults, are in focus. Children are heard and their points-of-view matter. It is an extremely refreshing change from the mainstream novel writing that exclusively concentrates on the world of adults and merely accommodates the world of children. One is humbled by Narayan's extraordinary ability to create an authentic world of children with remarkable ease. Graham Greene understood the difficulty of rendering childhood successfully by adult authors and appreciated Narayan's efforts in *Swami and Friends*. Swami and Malgudi continue with us despite the novel coming to an end. Like Graham Greene, the reader continues to be intrigued: "Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan's. I do not wait for another novel. I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement..." India's premier cartoonist, R.K. Laxman, lent his imagination and skill to sketching *Swami and Friends*, giving the characters an identity. *Swami and Friends* caught the imagination of the nation and in 1987 it was filmed in thirty-nine episodes as a television serial, *Malgudi Days* and telecast on Doordarshan. It was directed by Shankar Nag, a Kannada actor and director. The serial was shot entirely in Shimoga District, Karnataka. Swami's role was enacted by the child actor, Manjunath.



[rajivanandblog.blogspot.com](http://rajivanandblog.blogspot.com)

October 10, 1906	Narayan's birth in Chennapatna, Chennai	
1925	Completed high school from Maharaja's Collegiate High School, Mysore	
1930	Graduated from Maharaja College of Mysore.	Started writing <i>Swami and Friends</i>
1933	Married Rajam	Worked with, <i>The Justice</i> , a non-Brahmin paper
1935	Hamish Hamilton publishes <i>Swami and</i>	



	<i>Friends</i>	
1936	Daughter, Hema, born	
1937	<i>The Bachelor of Arts</i> published	
1938	<i>The Dark Room</i> published	
1939	Rajam dies of typhoid	
1940	Narayan brings out a journal, <i>Indian Thought</i>	
1942	<i>Malgudi Days</i> published	
1939-1942	<i>Indian Thought</i> renamed <i>Indian Thought Publications</i>	
1945	<i>The English Teacher</i> published	
1947	<i>An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories</i> published	
1948	<i>Mr. Sampath</i> published	<i>Mr. Sampath</i> adapted for a Tamil movie, <i>Miss Malini</i>
1952	<i>The Financial Expert</i> published	<i>Mr. Sampath</i> adapted for a Hindi movie, <i>Mr. Sampat</i> , by Gemini Films
1953	Narayan's works were published in the United States for the first time by Michigan State University Press, who later (in 1958), relinquished the rights to Viking Press	
1955	<i>Waiting for the Mahatma</i> published	
1956	Narayan travels to the U.S. at the invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation	Narayan meets Graham Greene Travelogue, 'My Dateless Diary' published <i>Lawley Road and Other Stories</i> published
1961	Narayan re-visits America	Narayan travels to Australia. Trip funded by the Australian Writers' Group
1958	<i>The Guide</i> published	
1960	Narayan conferred the Sahitya Akademi Award	
1961	<i>The Man-Eater of Malgudi</i> published	Narayan writes columns for magazines and newspapers including <i>The Hindu</i> and <i>The Atlantic</i>

1964	Narayan receives the Padma Bhushan. He also publishes his first mythological work, <i>Gods, Demons and Others</i> , a collection of rewritten and translated short stories from Hindu epics	Narayan Visits America and meets the Swedish-American actress Greta Garbo. He also travels to Europe, the Soviet Union, the Philippines and Indonesia. Narayan awarded the AC Benson Medal by the (British) Royal Society of Literature
1965	<i>The Guide</i> adapted for a movie starring Dev Anand and Wahida Rehman	
1967	<i>The Vendor of Sweets</i> published	Narayan travels to England, to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Leeds. The University of Mysore also awards him an honorary doctorate.
1968-73	Narayan translates the <i>Kamba Ramayanam</i> into English	
1970	A collection of short stories, <i>A Horse and Two Goats</i> published	
1973	University of Delhi awards Narayan an honorary doctorate	
1974	<i>My Days</i> published	<i>Reluctant Guru</i> published
1977	<i>The Painter of Signs</i> published	
1978	<i>The Mahabharata</i> published	
1978-1980	Narayan commissioned by the government of Karnataka to write a book to promote tourism in the state as part of a larger government publication in the late 1970s	Narayan republished his work on tourism as <i>The Emerald Route</i> in <i>Indian Thought Publications</i>
1980	Narayan is elected as an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is awarded the AC Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature	Narayan's works are translated to Chinese
1980-1986	Narayan nominated to the upper house of the Indian Parliament for a six-year term	
1983	<i>A Tiger for Malgudi</i> published	
1985	<i>Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories</i> published	
1986	<i>Talkative Man</i> published	<i>Malgudi Days</i> serialised for Delhi

		Doordarshan
1987	Narayan's collection of essays, <i>A Writer's Nightmare</i> published	
1988	<i>A Story-Teller's World</i> published	
1990	<i>The World of Nagaraj</i> published	
1992	<i>Grandmother's Tale</i> , an autobiographical novella, on Narayan's great-grandmother published	
1994	<i>The Grandmother's Tale and Selected Stories</i> published	
2000	Narayan awarded India's second-highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan	
May 13, 2001	Narayan dies in Chennai	



**Notes:**

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3. T.S. Satyan, 'Walking With R.K. Narayan', Frontline, The Hindu, Volume 18 - Issue 11, 2001.
4. N. Ram, 'Malgudi's Creator', Frontline, The Hindu, Volume 18 - Issue 11, 2001.
5. 'A Companion to Indian English Fiction', ed. Pier Paolo Piciucco (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2004) p. iv.
6. Farbat Singh 'Indian English Novel Writing: Shifting Themes & Thoughts', International Research Journal , Volume 1, July 2010.
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24. R.K. Narayan, 'My Days', p. 174.
25. S.R. Ramteke, 'R.K. Narayan and his Social Perspective' (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1998), p. 124.

26. C.N. Srinath, 'R.K. Narayan: An Anthology of Recent Criticism' (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000), p. 53.
27. S.R. Ramteke, 'R.K. Narayan and his Social Perspective' (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1998), p. xx-xxii.
28. Ibid. p. 135.
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30. Graham Greene, Preface to R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, (London, 1935).
31. Dr. T. Vasudeva Reddy, 'R. K. Narayan: The World of Malgudi'
32. Susan K. Langer, 'Feeling and Form, The Theory of Art' (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.: London, 1967), p. 292.
33. C.N. Srinath, 'R.K. Narayan: An Anthology of Recent Criticism' (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000), p. 93.
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35. C.N. Srinath, 'R.K. Narayan: An Anthology of Recent Criticism' (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000), p. 100.
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37. R.K. Narayan, *My Dateless Diary* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1969), pp. 189-190.

### **Glossary**

**amnesia:** loss of memory

**Bhagavadgita:** a 700-verse scripture that is part of the Hindu epic Mahabharata

**brigand:** bandit

**Buddha:** Indian religious leader and founder of Buddhism (approximately the sixth century BC)

**Bushy-Eyebrows:** Mani's uncle

**canon:** branch of literature

**Clive:** Robert Clive (1725-774) a British officer who established the military and political supremacy of the East India Company in Bengal

**culvert:** a structure that allows water to flow under a road, railroad, trail, or similar obstruction

**dawdling:** loitering and wasting time

**decoyed:** anything used as a lure

**denouement:** the final resolution of a play

**efficient as tails:** useful only as appendages and is of no importance by itself

**F.A.:** Fellow of Arts – Graduation in British times

**haggle:** petty bargaining

**Harichandra:** Hindu mythological king renowned for his incorruptible honesty

**hartal:** strike

**Hastings:** Warren Hastings (1732-1818) was the first Governor-General of Bengal

**Kalidasa:** classical Sanskrit writer

**khaddar:** a coarse homespun cloth made in India

**Lancashire thumb-cutters:** the British who put Indian weavers out of work to promote the native Lancashire cotton

**Last Supper:** the final meal that Jesus shared with his Apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion

**Lord of the Seven Hills:** Lord Siva

**mail:** cargo train

**M.C.C.:** Malgudi Cricket Club

**Muhammad of Gazni:** The first sultan of the Ghaznavid dynasty in Afghanistan (971-1030) who invaded India seventeen times between 1000 and 1026 A.D.

**Nativity of Christ:** biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus

**Oracle:** a person or shrine through whom a god was believed to prophesy

**Pea:** Swami's academically average classmate, Samuel

**pyol:** (Tamil) sitting area in front of a house

**Resurrection:** the rising of Jesus from the tomb after his death

**Samson:** According to the Bible, a judge of Israel famous for his great strength

**Sankara:** 8 AD Hindu philosopher and a leading exponent of the Vedantic school

**sircar:** archaic sarkar, i.e. Government or bureaucracy

**taluk:** a subdivision of a district or a group of several villages organized for revenue purposes

**Tate:** Maurice William Tate - an English cricketer of the 1920s and 1930s

**Vasco da Gama:** A Portugese who discovered the shortest sea route from Europe to India in 1497

**Wise Men of the East:** Magi, or Three Kings, who came from the East to adore the newborn Jesus

**wizened:** lean and wrinkled with old age

**Y.M.U.:** Young Men's Union



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