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# A Critical Study of The World of Peer-Group in R.K.Narayan's Swami and Friends

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**Abstract**

*The novel, Swami and friendsof R.K. Narayan charts out the various episodes in the life of Swami as a young school boy, who seeks the identity in the company of his friends, like Mani, Rajam and Sankar. These urchins are daring and enterprising lads, the so-called 'peer group' represent the youth power of Malgudi. They are all endowed with lively imagination. Their qualities and attitudes, innocence, energy, simplicity and spontaneity impressed the readers. Their lives were filled with joy and gaiety. The Malgudi youths, with their sensitive minds and hearts find themselves pitched against oppression, injustice and exploitation at different stages. This paper critically traces the "The World of Peer-Group in R.K.Narayan'sSwami and Friends.*

***Keywords:*** identity, oppression,peer-group, urchins

## Introduction

"India's greatest writer in English in the 20th –century", "absolutely authentic sans pomposity", a lean, lucid and understated but wonderfully expressive style", such phrases were used to describe the man who created the immortal town of Malgudi by R.K.Narayan.

The great writer was born on October,10,1906 in Chennai, he was the third son of eight surviving children of Rasipuram VenkataramaKrishnaswamiIyer, who was a provincial Head-master. His full name was Rasipuram KrishnaswamiAyyarNarayanaswami. The short name of

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R.K.Narayan was suggested by Graham Green, a close friend and admirer of Narayan, who arranged to publish the novel, *Swami and Friends.*

Many of Narayan's works are rooted in everyday life. His writing style was simple, unpretentious and witty, with a unique flavor as if he were writing in the native tongue. He passed away at the age of 94, on May 13, 2001, due to cardio respiratory failure.

*Swami and Friends* is R.K.Narayan's first and autobiographical novel dealing with Swami's dreams, friends, cricket and a typical boyish world, full of innocence and humors.

Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes on Monday morning. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar as it is the first school-working day in the week. Swami goes to railway-station to watch the trains arrive and depart which was his hobby that gives him peace to his wavering mind.

In school education system introduction by colonist who were called liberal bourgeois and was used as cultural capital, where pedagogic principles were used to dominate and suppress the innocent students.

R.K.Narayan's debut novel, *Swami and Friends* published in 1935 was a modest beginning of his career as a novelist. This novel affords a brilliant critique of educational system that was operating under the British rule in India.

There were certain complex network of contradictory cultures that characterizes the society. The schools were social sites constituted by dominant subordinate cultures. The specific views of reality were sought by the various cultures prevailing in the educational institutions. The dominant culture functioned at all level of schooling that disheartened the cultural experiences of innocent children. Academic institutions in India were more than just sites of social and cultural reproduction centers where Indian traditional knowledge were playing their roles.

**The Protagonist, Swami**

The novel *Swami and Friends* of R.K.Narayan is something like an adventurous story of a boy, W.S.Swaminathan and a group of his classmates and friends. The author invests his

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character with a social consciousness as an anti-colonial campaigner. As an aspect of colonization, the protagonist's protest is focused in the educational system.

Right in the first paragraph of the novel we can understand the atmosphere, the dismal yellow cultured school-building, the fire eyed class-teacher, Vedanayagam and the Headmaster with his thin long cane. Life in the classroom is monotonous. Swami was terribly bored,"he felt sleepy"(Narayan, *Swami and Friends*4). His non-involvement in studies induced him to participate in the Gandhian movement in 1931, in which his friends too mingled.

One can come across petty quarrels of the boys, their rivalries and skirmishes with the school-master who lacks the culture specificity. The cricket-ground where the peer-group played cricket was something like a unifying sites that brings the narrative elements of a specific colonial inflection and looked at that Swami is far more politically innocent.

Swami, in one sense accepts the adult world into which he is being socialized through the so-called colonial curriculum as a form of alternative ideological position in the text.

**The dominant culture of the educational system**

The peer group wanted to embrace the life of complete freedom and to break the bonds of habitual living and the new changes that whipped up their passion. Swami's father was so stern and harsh in expecting his son to learn well and to attend school without showing reluctance and dullness. The dominant culture of the educational institution and the prejudices showed by Mr.Ebinezer, the frantic scripture-master against the Hindu religion in the class-room and to have used derogatory versions for the Hindu-gods:

**'Oh wretched idiots! The teacher said,**

**Clinching his first, 'Why do you worship**

**Dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and**

**Stone-images? Can they talk? No**

**Can they see? No, Why? Because they**

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**have no life. What did your gods do**

**when Mohammed of Gazni smashed**

**them into pieces, trod upon them, and**

**constructed out the steps for his history?**

(Narayan, *Swami and Friends*5)

Thus the teacher in bourgeois educational institute plays the role of an agent for the incorporation of dominant-culture. The teacher's authority in the class-room is one of a dictator whosuppresses the freedom of the children and controls their activities. The teacher has the power to decide what type of punishment he should give to the student-offenders. Neither misbehavior nor dishonesty is allowed. No such student shall escape the eyes of the teachers. There was a strict draconian discipline. The teacher only decide when should the children ask questions and when they should keep quiet.

The novel, *Swami and Friends* is set in pre-independence era and revolves around a preadolescent boy Swaminathan living in Narayan's fictitious town Malgudi. The novel describes the life of boys in South Indian schools, and high lights much of R.K.Narayan's personal experience of his childhood.

**Swami and Friends as a Universal Epic**

A reader gets a vivid portrayed of the thoughts, emotions and activities of school boys. The plot revolves round Swaminathan, the hero, and his friends Mani, Shankar, Samuel and Somu the most intelligent boy of the class, Samuel and Rajam, a late entrant to school, brilliant and charming, the son of a Police Superintendent. The writer's understanding of child psychology and for his depiction of the carefree, cheerful world of school boys in a most realistic and influential manner is appreciated much by the critics. Swami is one of Narayan's immortal creations. One can agree fully with K.R.SrinivasaIyengar, who wrote:

**It is as though everyday actuality**

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**has taken Narayan's pen and written**

**out this universal epic of all our**

**boyhood yesterday that are now**

**no more. (R.Srinivas)**

**Psychology and the innocent Swami**

School and school boys constitute the whole charm in this novel. One can see life both external and internal in it, episodic and psychological. And this particular age-group of school boys has been rightly called**" the world of peer group….important in terms of emotional interplay and conflict"**(Narayan's *Swami and Friends*).

There is a creative beauty in this novel based on the routine daily school-life of the adolescence with their romance and nostalgic appeal. Both the inside of a student's psychology and the outside of his career are presented as a fun whose relish is appetizing and whose charm endures. Narayan's patron, Graham Green appreciated the novel for it's "beauty and sadness", calls it "one in ten thousand".

A.V.KrishnaRao's evaluation is basically enumerative rather than analytical. He calls it a "hilarious tragic-comedy".

**The Tabula rasa principle according to John Locke**

The children were born passive "blank slates" (tabula rasa) and were formed through their experiences in the environment, Swami innocently observes the happenings around along with his suppressed thoughts that he dares not share with his friends for the fear of mockery reflect the usual thought process of a child which has been intelligently traced by the author. The entire novel focuses on the life of school boys. The school boys have their own joys and sorrows, fears and hopes, expectations and dreams which may seem small things to the peer groups, but which are 'much exaggerated by their imaginations and seem much more important . They cannot tolerate even simple and deepest frustration. A normal situation may give them heavenly joy. The cricket match becomes a matter of life and death for the boys in the life.

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Swami and his Friends carried away by the patriotic fervor and in a mood of defiance they shed down the customary habit of discipline and obedience on 15 Aug, 1930. When the British Government arrest one Mr.Gowrishankar, a prominent political worker in Bombay. As a result the students of Albert Mission School joined the procession with thousands of other citizens of Malgudi, they shouted slogans like, "Gandhi Ki Jai, Bharat Matha Ki Jai" ( Narayan's *Swami and Friends* 97). The peer group of students observed a hurtle at the school gate and pelted stones at the window panes of knew no bound and he himself pelted stones and broke certain glasses of the school ventilators. He had a thrilling experience in doing so. (Narayan, *Swami and Friends.*88)

When the Headmaster scolded him for his misbehavior and threatened Swami:

**"I will kill you if you keep on staring without answering my question".**

(Narayan, *Swami and Friends*. 105)

Swami wanted to leave the school once for all, rushed out muttering,

**"I don't care for your dirty school".**

(Narayan, *Swami and Friends*. 106)

**The Peer Group of Friends**

Among the peer group of students, Swami moved with four good friends. We get detailed pen-portraits of these friends. One of them is Somu, the monitor of the class. He worked with confidence and calmness. He was very frank with his teachers and no teacher asks him any question. There was a rumor that only the Headmaster could scold him if he was in fault. He was considered as an elder of his class. There is another friend Mani, the Mighty-Good for nothing. He wanted to bully the other boys in the class and is feared and admired by all. He boasts himself and says that his strength lies in the two clubs, he has at home and with which he can easily break the neck of those who offend him. Swami was proud of his friendship. When all others used to shiver on seeing him, Swami keeps very intimacy and often called him 'Mani' with gusto and patted on his back familiarly.

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Shankar is the third friend, the most brilliant boy of the class. He gets more than ninety percent of marks in all the subjects and can answer to any question that the teachers ask him. One evening Mani and Rajam the new comer to the school met and conversed in the evening sun near the Sarocyu River on the sands of the river bed and suddenly they broke out fight, Swami stood as a mediator to tackle their problem. As a token of friendship Rajam offered biscuits to Mani and wanted him to be his friend. Mani gladly accepted his offer. Mani and Swami visited Rajam's house and had snacks and coffee. Rajam permitted to play with the toys and things whichever they wanted. Swami was strayed by the other friends quarrel is a part of love. Mani might pretend to hate but in the depth of his heart he likes him. After this humors and dramatic meeting all the three friends, Swami, Mani and Rajam are found to be together everywhere. Children have special feelings for their Grandparents support their grandchildren in trouble; fulfill their wish. Sometimes they are more important than parents for their children. Narayan depicts this relationship very delicately.

**Conclusion**

The ending of the novel is very dark in many ways. Swami was dismissed from the Board High School. He had now nowhere to go. His reminding of his house also reminded his stern and strict father and the tyrant headmaster that forced him to leave Malgudi to Mempi Forest Swami misses the cricket match which caused a failure to their team. He felt lonely at the dread of night when his mind was gripped with fear. He was completely exhausted when he had strange voices calling by name. His mind turned towards divine help. He prayed all Gods to make him out of that forest area. He fell unconscious and was brought back to Malgudi with changed heart of submission and regret for what he has committed. His parents became unnerved when Swami ran away from the house.

The entire episode is full of humor and child psychology, which reflect the deep study and knowledge of R.K.Narayan. Boys are optimistic and so were Swami and his Friends.

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