

# THE SWAMI AND FRIENDS

R. K. Narayan

(1935)

## Story

This novel, like nearly all Narayan's novels, is set in the fictional town of Malgudi, somewhere in the interior of south India. It also has a specific time, 1930, when British colonialism was perhaps at its height, despite a growing independence movement. The novel tells the story of Swami (Swaminathan) and his friends (Somu, Sankar, Mani, the Pea and Rajam). The friendship of Swami and Rajam is the core of the story.

The story begins with the arrival in town of Rajam, the son of the new police chief. Prior to his appearance, the four boys had been close, boyish friends. Now, Rajam splits their unity: Swami and Mani hate the new, brash boy, while the other two make friends with him. Later, Swami begins to idolise the new boy, who then becomes the leader of the group. The drama then kicks off when Swami becomes caught up in a mass demonstration against the arrest of a local Indian politician who advocates independence (the police and their chief are all Indians, but they are subordinate to the British colonial state based in a nearby larger town). Overwhelmed by the emotions of the mob, Swami throws a stone that shatters the windows of his headmaster's office. Rajam's father, the police chief, breaks up the disturbance, but this event will affect many lives. Several people are injured and Swami's involvement in the violence forces him to leave one school and join another.

Most important, his violent action causes a break in his friendship with Rajam, who is repelled by what Swami did. Eventually Swami patches things up with Rajam and then persuades him to start up a new cricket club. Again, tension builds between the two boys when Swami misses several practice sessions and Rajam considers him unreliable. Swami attempts to get permission to leave school early in order to go to cricket practice, but the headmaster refuses, and Swami throws the man's cane through the window. Now, Swami leaves the town altogether, gets lost and only returns to find that Rajam is gone because his father was transferred to a new post.

The novel ends with a touching scene at the railway station, where Swami goes to say goodbye to his friend and brings a book as a gift for him. Unfortunately, the station is chaotic with crowds and Swami is unable to find Rajam. He sees him inside his compartment only as the train is actually leaving the station and thrusts the book into his hand. Rajam does not speak and Swami begins to cry.

## Themes

Colonialism Although Narayan was never a 'political' writer, this novel addresses colonialism more explicitly than any other. This theme, however, is developed through the eyes and experiences of the young boy, Swami. The book opens with Swami in school, a Christian Missionary school (which was not at all uncommon at the time, or even now, since many, many schools were started by missionaries). In this opening scene, Swami is in Scriptures class, where a British missionary, Mr Ebenezer, criticises Swami's Hindu beliefs. As a Brahmin and a vegetarian, Swami questions the Christian sacrament of consuming 'the blood and flesh of Christ.' In fact, the issue of colonialism is present in many of the small incidents that make up this apparently slight novel. For example, the friendship between Swami and Rajam is politicised since the latter is said to speak 'English like a European.' Similarly, Swami's friends mock him as a mindless sycophant of the Anglicised Rajam by nicknaming him 'tail' (suggesting that Swami follows Rajam as a tail follows a dog). Again, Rajam and Swami's love of cricket is seen as aping English culture.

Innocence of childhood Beneath the politicised surface of the novel, Narayan explores the more enduring joys and heartbreaks of boyhood. Whereas the colonialism theme concerns allegiances and loyalties on the national level of allegiances and loyalty, this second theme illuminates the same

problems on the personal level. Indeed, 'Swami and friends' is an apt title because we watch the group form alliances, break them off and reform again. The boys take offence easily, are quick to make fun of others and yet are desperate to be liked. Swami, at the centre of the story, goes through a series of juvenile emotions—he is rebellious, he feels guilty, he is playful, he is cruel, he is afraid and he seeks protection (from his grandmother). In addition, the most poignant scene in the book is the final one when Rajam leaves Swami behind at the railway station. Swami gives him *Anderson Fairy Tales* as a gift, but Rajam says nothing in return, suggesting that he (Rajam) is leaving childhood behind and going out into a wider world, while Swami is left to negotiate the thrills and perils of boyhood for a few years yet.

**Caste** Again, while Narayan's fiction is nothing like the social realism of many of his contemporaries, his novels are highly detailed in their depiction of social realities. That includes caste, which was a powerful determinant of people's lives in the small-town context of this novel (and others). Swami is a Brahmin, Rajam his adored friend is a Brahmin and so are two other friends (Somu and Mani). The boys are not always kind to themselves, but they are cruel to low-caste boys, whom they fear. In one episode, the friends harass a low-caste boy who is driving a cart near town. It is comic because the young boys pretend to be policemen and treat the incident as an 'official case,' with interviews and written statements, etc., but the cart driver boy is genuinely terrified. On the other hand, Swami is afraid of a low-caste boy who acts as 'ball boy' at his father's tennis club. Although this boy shows him no malice, Swami contrives to believe that his 'unsightly' facial expression is evidence that he wishes him harm. Caste divisions, Narayan seems to suggest, are perhaps even more raw and cruel in childhood than in later life.

## Characters

**Swami** Swaminathan is the young boy (perhaps 10 or 11 years old) at the heart of this story. Son of a prosperous lawyer in a market town, he is a somewhat rebellious youngster, likened to the anarchic Krishna in Hindu mythology. He stands up for his Hindu beliefs in his missionary school and refuses to learn the maths that his father tries to drum into his head. He loves cricket, his father and his grandmother, and gets swept up in anti-colonial politics. He makes and loses friends with great regularity and eventually runs away because he acts violently in his headmaster's office.

**Rajam** Rajam is the 'new boy,' whose arrival in Malgudi stirs the pot and kickstarts the drama. He is the son of the new police chief, whose family is more sophisticated than Swami's (although Swami's father is a lawyer) and has assimilated more of colonial English culture. He dresses as if he is from 'Madras or some other big city' and he 'speaks English exactly like a European.' He is also a year older than Swami, is more self-assured and settled in his opinions.

**Grandmother** Swami's grandmother is a more influential person than his mother. She is described as old yet still retaining her inner beauty. Although she is also a little eccentric and says things that embarrass Swami in front of his friends, he adores her. Her character allows the reader to enter the typical world of a joint Indian family. Granny sings lullabies, feeds the children and offers support when the parents scold the children.

**Mani** Mani is Swami's best friend, at least before Rajam arrives. This is somewhat unusual as Mani's family is several rungs lower than Swami's on the economic ladder. He regularly cuts school and pays little attention when in class, but he is an essential member of the 'gang' because of his physical strength and bravado.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

SWAMI (Imaginative)

**Character** Swami (Swaminathan), the young boy at the centre of this novel, is both a typical and atypical south Indian youngster. He has the rebellious nature of most boys, he loves cricket, adores his father and grandmother, hates the stern discipline of school and doesn't understand 'girls.' He is also, however, a boy with a powerful (and at times, dangerous) imagination. He likes to tell stories and to lose himself in fantasy, legends and mythology. And, more seriously, he gets swept up in the political movement of the day, which brings out his anti-authoritarian streak. More than most boys his age, he is prone to outbursts of violence, which almost ruins his life.

**Activities** Swami spends a lot of time doing his homework and then enduring the long hours in school. He then gets into different kinds of mischief with his friends, visits their houses or sits by the bank of a famous river and makes up stories. At other times, Swami practices and plays cricket. We also see him at home, undergoing criticism from his father and receiving shelter from his grandmother.

### **Illustrative moments**

Imaginative Swami has a rich imagination and likes to tell stories. A good illustration of this power appears in a scene when he is eager to tell his grandmother all about his new friend, Rajam. Not content to merely say that Rajam's father is the new police chief and that Rajam has an actual police uniform at home, or that Rajam speaks excellent English and plays cricket well, Swami also tries to impress his granny by telling her about the tigers that Rajam has killed in the forest. Although the grandmother gets rather bored and nods off several times, Swami is not discouraged and goes on to invent a rich tale of manly courage. Swami's imagination also enables him to absorb the stories told to him by others, especially the local legends of a famous river.

Impressionable Akin to his rich imagination is Swami's tendency, or perhaps desire, to be impressed and influenced by others. The dangerous potential of this quality is demonstrated in the central scene of the novel. When a local politician has been arrested for advocating Indian independence, a mob gathers to demand his release. During the demonstration, some people burn their foreign-made clothes as a symbolic act of liberation from Britain (the boycott of foreign goods was an essential element of Gandhi's strategy). Narayan captures the young boy's fascination with the excitement this way: 'It was already dark. Suddenly the darkness was lit up by a red glare...Coats and caps and upper cloth came whizzing through the air and fell with a thud into the fire, which purred and crackled and rose high, thickening the air with smoke and a burnt smell. People moved about like dim shadows in the red glare. Swaminathan was watching the scene with little shivers of joy going down his spine.' When someone sees that Swami is wearing a British-made cap and asks him if wants his 'country to remain in eternal slavery,' Swami feels ashamed and flings 'his cap into the fire with a feeling that he was saving the country.'

Vulnerable As a young boy, Swami is also vulnerable and prone to self-doubt. He is less mature and skilled than his hero, Rajam, against whom he constantly measures himself and falls short. This is most excruciating in a scene where Swami fails to arrive on time for a big cricket match. Rajam is a talented player and has almost single-handedly established a cricket team, but Swami is unable to leave school early enough to arrive in time to practice or to play a match. On this particular occasion, although Swami runs all the way from school to the cricket pitch, he arrives only after the game is over and Rajam (and his) side have lost. When he gets there, out of breath, and discovers what has happened, he cannot face Rajam. Instead, he hides himself behind a tree and cries.

RAJAM (Arrogant)

**Character** Rajam is the most important of Swami's four friends. As son of the new police chief, who comes from a more sophisticated background than the others in Swami's world, Rajam becomes the hero's hero. He comes to school in a car, speaks excellent English, is mature and a superior student. All of this gives him a confidence and self-respect that contrasts with the boyishness and self-doubt that makes the 'friends' more endearing. On his own terms, however, Rajam is less likable than Swami. He is conscious of his superior status in society and often acts and speaks with disdain to people in a lower position. This arrogance earns him the anger of the other boys, one of whom plans to kill him (though this is more boastful than believable). He is, though, an avid and skilled cricket player, which earns him esteem with all the boys. He is also one of the best students—a 'seventy-percenter' as they call him.

**Activities** Rajam, like the other boys, is seen mostly in school and at home with his parents. He also goes to the houses of the friends and invites them to his house. Some afternoons, he walks with them by the famous river or plays games, especially cricket.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Arrogant** Rajam's arrogance is shown in one scene when he mocks Swami's traditional religious beliefs and Swami's admiration for a new Muslim friend. The boys are walking toward the cricket field one sunny afternoon, when Rajam asks Swami about his new school and Swami mentions his friend, Ali Akbar (an obvious Muslim name). Suddenly, Rajam shouts at him that Muslims destroyed Hindu temples and that Swami should show more self-respect by not befriending him. Rajam, now aroused, goes on, paradoxically, to condemn the observance of traditional Hindu holidays in Swami's house. Then he says that all 'this backward mentality' is the result of Swami going to a public (as opposed to private) school. His final condemnation of his friend is his participation in 'dirty politics and strikes.' As a high-ranking civil servant, Rajam's father cannot take sides in politics. What Narayan is gently showing here is the sometimes contradictory nature of arrogance, especially in a young boy.

**Show-off** Another one of Rajam's less admirable traits is that he likes to impress the impressionable Swami and friends. A good example of this tendency occurs when Rajam invites them to his house, in order to show off his family's prosperity. The boys approach the house timidly and are forced to state their destination by a policeman standing near the house. Once inside, Rajam opens a cupboard full of amazing toys and gadgets that are not available in their small town. Then Rajam orders a policeman to tell 'the cook to bring some coffee and snacks in here.' Hearing this, the boys 'were filled with admiration and wonder' at their friend's authority. It gets worse, when the cook brings in the food and Rajam orders him about like a slave, yelling at him to 'put it there, you dog.' The cook rebels, takes the food away and tells Rajam he can eat it in the back kitchen. Now, the friends are even more surprised that the cook has defeated Rajam, but then Rajam comes back with the food and explains that he has knocked the cook down and he is 'lying unconscious on the floor.'

GRANDMOTHER (Dignified)

**Character** Swami's grandmother (his mother's mother) is a dignified, compassionate and mischievous character. She is old (though how 'old' we aren't told), frail and sleeps a lot. Still, she is said to have retained an 'inner beauty' and has a sly sense of humour. At times, she appears not to understand what others tell her, but we, as readers, know that this is a strategy she employs to avoid doing things she doesn't like. As a teller of tales, she plays an important role in Swami's life, fuelling his imagination and stimulating him, in return, to invent stories to tell her. Despite her physical and mental frailties, she maintains a quiet dignity. It is interesting to add that Narayan himself was very close to his own maternal grandmother, who also told him traditional Hindu stories and regulated her daily schedule according to astrology. Narayan opens this novel with the words 'It was Monday morning,' which his own grandmother had taught him was an auspicious time for 'beginnings.'

**Activities** The grandmother spends most of her time carding and spinning cotton, preparing and serving good, and feeding the sparrows in the garden. As a traditional Hindu woman, she is often seen going to temple, praying or preparing for a ritual ceremony. Early in the morning, she would wake Swami and give him his breakfast and then, when he'd eaten, hand him his slate, pen and ink-pot in a bundle to take to school.

### Illustrative moments

**Dignified** While the grandmother cannot be described as 'elegant,' she does possess an understated dignity, which she displays often in the face of mildly insulting behaviour shown to her. One illustration is her conversation with Swami when he tells her that he intends to invite his best friend (Rajam) to the house one afternoon. Swami begins by mentioning Rajam's name, which grandmother immediately (and possibly deliberately) confuses with another one of Swami's friends. Then Swami rather rudely tells her that she should 'keep out of the way.' She asks why and is informed that she 'is too old.' The grandmother accepts this brutal candour with a gentle smile and replies that Swami is 'too young' to understand what he has said.

**Compassionate** One of the endearing scenes in the novel describes how the grandmother risks injury to herself in order to feed the birds in her garden. It is the hot season, when temperatures can rise above 45 degrees Celsius. Everything is dry, water is scarce and sparrows who normally flit around her flowers in the monsoon are dying. She has found one carcass lying on the ground not far from the bird-bath that she has installed in a corner of the garden. The problem is that she is too short to be able to fill the bird-bath with water and her son (Swami's father), who usually does this for her, is at his office. She borrows an old ladder from a woman neighbour and, carrying a heavy pot of

water, climbs up and fills the bath. In the process, she nearly falls, grabs the ladder and cuts her hand. She returns the ladder with a smile because she now knows a second bird will not die.

Mischievous Although the grandmother fits the role of the 'traditional Hindu woman', she is also a mischievous character. A fine illustration of her mischief is provided midway through the book. Swami is late for cricket practice when he hears his grandmother call him. She says she has pain in her stomach and asks him to go to the market and get her a lemon (for medicinal tea); she even bribes him with a few coins. Swami is in a dilemma: he wants to go to cricket practice and he wants to help his granny, but he can't do both. She has, in fact, engineered this conflict in order to test his loyalty to her. She has no stomach pain, and there are half a dozen lemons already sitting in the larder.