



## Narayan's world of children

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### Abstract

Narayan is at his best when he describes a child. His description of childhood and boyhood is based on his own memories of his childhood and modelled on his peers. Narayan's child hates school and discipline. They are innocently cunning and like him they believe in the existence of gods, demons, and spirits. They also have faith in the powers of God and demons and are superstitious. This paper attempts to explore the fictional yet realistic world of children vividly penned by Narayan.

**Keywords:** school, demons, gods, spirits, arithmetic

### Introduction

Most of Narayan's child characters hate schools and school-teachers. Narayan regards 'the child's and the elder's zeal for it as nature's balance.' (No School Today, Next Sunday 42) Swami (Swami and Friends), Balu (The Financial Expert), Raju (The Guide) and Mali (The Vendor of Sweets) belong to this class of children. Finding school discipline too rigorous and an obstacle to his loyalty to friends and games, Swami plays truant and even flees Malgudi. Balu (The Financial Expert) in spite of his father's best efforts at seeing him through school, fails. When Margayya tries to reason with him, Balu replies, 'Father, if you hate me and want me to make miserable, you will bother me with examination and studies. I hate them.' He tears the S.S.L.C. register, throws it into a gutter, runs away to Madras, serves as a 'miscellaneous things' boy at a theatre, is brought back and the drop out is married off. When Raju's father (The Guide 49) decided that he (Raju) would go to school, Raju thought that the father was 'passing a harsh sentence' on him as he did not like 'to be removed from a place I (he) loved to a place I (he) loathed.' Despite his enjoying the initial fuss that was made before he started for school, he 'soon developed a normal aversion.' Father being a strict disciplinarian, much though he hated school, Raju passed the primary school and was admitted to the Board High School. As his father's business expanded, Raju was allowed to handle the railway station shop, and was happy as it helped him 'achieve a very desirable end - - - the dropping off my (Raju's) school unobtrusively. Mali (The Vendor of Sweets 18) is created after Raju. Though his father is very liberal, Mali one day tells his father, 'I can't study anymore.' When his father wants to know what happened in the college, Mali's 'brusque' reply is: 'Nothing', ---- I do not find it interesting, that's all- I don't want to study-' (The Vendor of Sweets, 29)

A stage comes when Mali leaves the college and consigns his books to the fire saying. "Let us show gratitude to the Great Fire that consumes our horrid books.(38)

As contrasted to the boys, girls in Narayan are more serious in their studies as is clear from the interest Kamala and Sumathi as portrayed in "The Dark Room."

### Aversion to arithmetic

Another remarkable characteristic which most of Narayan's child characters share is their aversion to Arithmetic. Swami hates arithmetic, and yet his father is determined to make a mathematical wizard of him. When he asks young Swami to declare how much money Rama would get from Krishna for four mangoes when he expects to get fifteen annas for them, Swami feels utterly helpless, 'If only father would tell him whether Rama was trying to sell ripe fruits or unripe ones. He felt strongly that the answer to the question contained the key to the whole problem. It would be scandalous to expect fifteen annas for ten unripe mangoes (Swami and Friends 10)

Raju (The Guide) as child also belongs to this clan. When he is left in charge of the shop, he cannot decide how many 'green peppermints' he should give the customer for three-quarters of an anna. He keeps on calling to his father, and when father mentions 'some complicated concession' Raju can never apply it and takes recourse to some trick to 'minimise complications'. The only exception in Sankar who 'could solve any problem that was given to him in five minutes, and always managed to border on 90%.' (Swami and Friends 16).

Games occupy important place in a child's life. Swami and his set love cricket passionately. In "Dark Room", Babu is also a cricket addict much to the annoyance of his father who thinks that Babu misses the classes pretending that he has a headache.

### Belief in supernatural powers and superstitions

Like their creator, Narayan's child characters believe in the existence of gods, demons and spirits; they have faith in their powers and are superstitious. Swami's faith in the gods to convert the two pebbles kept in a small cardboard box into two three-pie coins is a case in point. Chapter XVIII, "The Day of the Match" in Swami and Friends is probably the best example of Narayan's portrayal of the child world, a world dominated by faith in gods, demons and superstitions. Kamala and Sumathi as portrayed in "The Dark Room" are also superstitious. They are afraid of the cook who tells them if they look into his eyes, they would

be petrified. They dare not contemplate being turned into milestones.

### **Innocent and cunning**

Most of Narayan's child characters are innocently cunning. Narayan believes that in childhood fears, secrecies and furtive acts happen to be the natural state of life, adopted instinctively for survival in a world dominated by adults.<sup>5</sup> In spite of father's 'definite orders' to Swami (Swami and Friends) not to 'start loafing in the afternoon' but 'to stay at home and do school work' on holidays and despite granny's liberal offer of 'three pies' if he stay at home, Swami tricks the family and sneaks out saying: '---- but my Drawing Master has asked me to see him. I suppose even then I should not go ---- If I fail in the drawing examination, I think you will be pleased.' (My Days. 21)

Who can say Swami is not to leave the house? The headache that Babu (The Dark Room) has, the cunning that Babu (The Financial Expert) practices to attract his father's attention and to get dolls or later, to avoid studies at home and school, and trickery that young Raju (The Guide) adopts to get at the rusty can that contains sugar or to swallow the 'green peppermints' to 'minimize the complication'. ---- all are subterfuges 'adopted instinctively for survival in a world dominated by adults' (My Days 21).

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