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R. K. Narayan's Humour in
Swami and Friends

S. Gunasekaran, Ph.D. Candidate

Narayan and Humour

Humour and laughter are the greatest virtues that God has bestowed on man. A sense of humour makes one see one's proper place in this world, and teaches him to see things in proportion. Both humour and laughter are universal, though there are national differences on certain aspects. They have their place in all arts and their enjoyment leads to aesthetic experience of a unique kind.

The humour of situation and character represent the higher forms of humour. R.K.Narayan has written stories in which humour arises out of situation or character or stories in which situation and character combine to produce the humorous effect. Narayan has excelled in producing humour of situation as well as of character. He has taken his raw material from the people and events around him.

On Defining and Describing Humour

Humour in a situation depends neither on verbal means nor on characters, but purely on the situation that turns out to be funny due to a juxtaposition of incongruities.

Henry Bergson applies the techniques of repetition, inversion and reciprocal interference of series. By repetition he means a combination of circumstances, which recur several

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times, contrasting with the changing stream of life. Inversion means “topsy-turvy- dom”, where the situation is reversed and the roles inverted. A child trying to teach its parents, a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught, the villain who is the victim of his own villainy—in every case the root is the inversion of roles and a situation which recoils.

With regard to reciprocal interference of series, Bergson observes that “a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (123). An equivocal situation, which provides two different meanings, one plausible and the other real, is a good example. Misunderstanding and mistaken identity also cause the humour of situation. The present article focuses on how R.K.Narayan produces humour effectively through situation and character in the novel *Swami and Friends*.

Realism of Children’s World in *Swami and Friends*

Swami and Friends (1935), Narayan’s first novel, is remarkable for his understanding of child psychology and for his depiction of the buoyant world of school boys in a realistic and convincing manner. About this book Graham Greene wrote:

It was Mr.Narayan with his *Swami and Friends* who first brought India, in the sense of the Indian population and the Indian way of life, alive to me... *Swami* is the story of a child written with complete objectivity, with a humour strange to our fiction, closer to Chekhov than to any English writer, with the same underlying sense of beauty and sadness (28).

A Sixth Grader, His Classmates and Their World of Adventures and Mischiefs!

Swaminathan, the young school student of sixth form is the hero of this novel. His exploits in the school and at home form the basic plot of the novel. Somu, the class Monitor, Mani, the Mighty-Good for-Nothing; Shankar, the most brilliant boy in the class; Samuel, the ‘Pea’ and Rajam the son of the Police Superintendent are his friends. The entire novel deals with the mischief and fun made by these boys. Humour of situation abounds in this novel. The very first paragraph of the novel is rich in the humour of situation and character.

It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday specially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday, it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-

eyed Vedanayagam, his class-teacher; and the headmaster with his thin long cane... (1).

For Swaminathan life consists mainly of having adventures with his friends, avoiding the misery of homework, and coping as best as he can with the teachers and other adults he encounters. His greatest passion is the M.C.C— Malgudi Cricket Club— which he finds together with his friends; his greatest day is when the examinations are over and school breaks up—a time for revelry and cheerful riotousness. But the innocent and impulsive Swami lands in trouble when he is carried away by the most serious unrest of India in 1930. Somehow he gets himself expelled from two schools in succession, and when things have gone quite out of hand he is forced to run away from home.

Beyond Childish Pranks: A World Full of Curiosity and Wisdom

This is far more than simple narrative of Swami’s adventures—charming and entertaining as they are. By the delicate use of detail sympathetically observed, the author establishes for the reader the child’s world as the child himself sees it and beyond the adult community he will one day belong to—in Swami’s case, the town of Malgudi, which provides the setting of almost all Narayan’s later novels.

Swaminathan reaches the class in time and we are introduced to the “fire-eyed Vedanayagam”, the class teacher and also the arithmetic teacher. Swami does not like him. When the teacher was scrutinizing the home exercises, Swaminathan began to think about the teacher’s face:

While the teacher was scrutinizing the sums, Swaminathan was gazing on his face, which seemed so tame at close quarters. 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 the bench, and that he was very bad-looking. His reverie was disturbed. He felt a terrible pain in the soft flesh above his left elbow. The teacher was pinching him with one hand, and with the other crossing out all the sums. He wrote ‘Very Bad’ at the bottom of the page, flung the notebook in Swaminathan’s face, and drove him back to his seat (2-3).

Ebenezar the scripture master was a fanatic who always attacked and lampooned the Hindu gods, as a prelude to glorifying Jesus. He asks: “Did our Jesus go gadding about with dancing girls like your Krishna? Did our Jesus go about stealing butter like that arch-scoundrel Krishna? Did our Jesus practice dark tricks on those around him?” (4). Swaminathan got up and asked, “If he did not, why was he crucified?” (4). Swami puts one more question and his ear is severely pulled and pinched.

Rollicking Fun in the midst of Dreary Home Work

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The school scenes are full of rollicking fun, entirely natural and convincing. Swami considers Rajam as his hero and follows him so much so that he is nicknamed “the tail”, Rajam’s tail. There is rivalry between Mani and Rajam for domination in the class. Pieces of slips are passed in the class such as, “Are you a man?” or “You are the son of a dog if you don’t answer this” (14).

Punishment and Penance in Classroom

The teacher asks Swaminathan to stand up and asks one or two questions: “What do you know about the Indian climate?” Swami answers, “It is hot in summer and cold in winter” (15). He was given the punishment of standing on the bench. He was glad that he was given this supposedly degrading punishment instead of the cane. His mind began to wander: “Standing on the bench, he stood well over the whole class. He could see so many heads, and he classified them according to the caps: there were four red caps, twenty-five Gandhi caps, ten fur caps, and so on” (15).

Language of Business and Children’s World

The most humorous part of the novel is the one given to the cricket match. They begin by making an album of filched pictures of cricket players. The excitement and wrangling over the naming of the club is very interesting. There was no end of suggestions. Finally they decided on Malgudi Cricket Club (M.C.C). A catalogue of sports goods of a reputed firm in Madras, Messrs Binns was arranged for and an order was placed with it by captain Rajam. The reply came with a large catalogue and they were happy that they got recognition as founder members of the M.C.C.

However it was not clear whether they would send the goods or not. The firm has asked for an advance amount of twenty five percent, but the three friends failed to understand the meaning of words like ‘obliged’, ‘remit’ and ‘25 percent’. They then decided that the letter had been sent to Rajam by mistake and hence it was returned with the following covering letter: “We are very sorry that you sent me somebody’s letter. We are returning this somebody’s letter. Please send our things immediately” (120).

The whole episode is highly amusing and another tribute to R.K.Narayan’s knowledge and understanding of children’s world. The boys waited eagerly for days together. But there was no response, no bats, balls and stumps. Rajam made three bats out of the bottom of a deal wood case and also obtained three old tennis balls from his father’s club. A patch of ground adjacent to Rajam’s house was to be used as the field. Pea promised to bring the stumps but could not even after a long search. A part of the wall of Rajam’s house was marked as the stumps and so they began to play.

Cricket in Life

The rest of the novel deals with cricket practice and the match which was played and lost. Swami had to be absent in the drill class for which he gave various excuses. When the Headmaster exposes him and punishes him, Swami runs away to Madras, but collapses on the outskirts of Malgudi. This is followed by prayers and offerings to gods if they descend from their heights and rescues him. Finally Swami returns home.

Excellent Narrative with Lively Descriptions and Conversations

Comedy also results from the novelist's insight into the gap between the perceptions of a boy and the perceptions of the adults. Narayan's awareness of such discrepancies and incongruities is seen in the passages in which Swami's father tries to teach him.

Swami, come here.

Where are you going?

Nowhere.

Where were you yesterday at this time?

Here.

You are lying. You were not here yesterday. And you are not going out now.

How many days is it since you have touched your books? Father asked as he blew off the fine layer of dust on Swaminathan's books, and cleared the web that an industrious spider was weaving between a corner of the table and the pile of books.

Swaminathan viewed this question as a gross breach of promise.

Should I read even when I have no school?

Do you think you have passed the B.A.? father asked.

I mean, father, when the school is closed?, when there is no examination, even then should I read?

What a question. You must read.

But father you said before the examinations that I needn't read after they were over. Even Rajam does not read. (83-84).

Irritants of Compulsory Learning after Class Hours

As he uttered the last sentence, he clearly remembered Rajam's complaint of a home-tutor who came and pestered him for two hours a day in thrice a week. Father was apparently deaf to Swaminathan's remarks. He stood over Swaminathan and set him to dust his books and clean his table. Swaminathan vigorously started blowing off the dust from the book covers. He caught the spider carefully, and took it to the window to throw it out. He held it outside the window and watched it for a while. It was swinging from a strand that gleamed in a hundred delicate tints.

Look sharp. Do you want the whole day to throw out the spider? father asked. Swaminathan suddenly realized that he might have the spider as his pet and that it would be a criminal waste to throw it out. He secretly slipped it into his pocket and, after shaking an empty hand outside the window, returned to his duty at the desk. Look at the way you have kept your English text! Are you not ashamed of yourself? (84).

Stream of Thought or Stream of Consciousness? Complex Child Psychology

Swaminathan picks up the oily red-bound Fourth Reader, opens it, and bangs together the covers in order to shake off the dust, and then rubs violently the oily covers with his palm. His father asked him to get a piece of cloth. Swami wonders, “If one has got to read even during the holidays, I don’t see why holidays are given at all” (85). He was worried that Rajam and Mani are waiting for him. If father cannot find any work to do, why shouldn’t he go and sleep. Finally he pulled out a piece of cloth under the baby and was off. Mother came with the baby and complained to father, “Look at that boy, he has taken the baby’s cloth. Is there no body to control him in the house. I wonder how long his school is going to be kept closed” (86).

Half an hour later Swaminathan sat in his father’s room in a chair, with a slate in his hand and pencil ready. Father dictated a problem:

Rama has ten mangoes with which he wants to earn fifteen annas. Krishna wants only four mangoes. How much will Krishna have to pay?

Swaminathan gazed and gazed at this sum, and every time he read it, it seemed to acquire a new meaning. He had the feeling of having stepped into a fearful maze.

His mouth began to water at the thought of mangoes. He wondered what made Rama fix fifteen annas for the ten mangoes. What kind of man was Rama? Probably he was like Shankar. Somehow one couldn’t help feeling that he must have been like Shankar, with his ten mangoes and his iron determination to get fifteen annas. If Rama was like Shankar, Krishna must have been like the Pea. Here Swaminathan felt an unaccountable sympathy for Krishna (86).

Swami wanted to know from his father whether the mangoes were ripe or not. He felt strongly that the answer to this question contained the key to the whole problem. He told his father that he could not do the sum because they are not taught this kind of thing in the class. But the father persisted:

Father seemed to delight in torturing him. How could he know? How could he know what that fool Krishna would pay?

Look here, boy. I have half a mind to thrash you. What have you in your head? Ten mangoes cost fifteen annas. What is the price of one? Come on. If you don't say it—I am not going to leave you till you tell me how much a single mango costs at fifteen annas for ten.

Give me the slate, Father. I will find it out. The price of one mango is three over two annas.

Very good, simplify it further.

It was plain sailing after that. Swaminathan announced at the end of half an hour's agony: Krishna must pay six annas, and burst into tears (89).

A Novel of Episodes Strung Togher!

The various episodes in the novel show that like other young characters of Narayan, Swami is also witty and intelligent in everything except in his studies. Children enjoy acting like adults and Swaminathan is no exception. Rajam poses as a big officer and scolds the cook in order to impress upon his friends. Swaminathan shows himself off by entertaining his friends in his father's room and claims it as his own.

Mani, Rajam and Swaminathan act like police inspectors and hold a cart driver on the charge of trespassing. They ordered the boy to get down, and said that they were the police, and that the culvert was weak, they will not permit him to move on, unless he showed them his pass. The boy had no pass, he was frightened, and begged and prayed to them to let him move on. They asked him a number of questions:

What is your name? asked Rajam

Karuppan answered the boy.

Age?

I don't know, sir.

You don't know? Swami, write hundred, said Rajam.

No sir, no sir, I am not a hundred.

Mind your business and hold your tongue. You are a hundred. I will kill you if you say no. What is your bullock's name?

I don't know, sir.

Swami, write "Karuppan" again.

Sir, that is my name, not the bullock's.

They ignored this and Swaminathan wrote Karuppan against the name of the bullock.

Where are you going?

Sethur.

Swaminathan wrote it down.

How long will you stay there?

It is my place, sir.
If that is so, what brought you here?
Our headman sent ten bags of coconut to the railway shed (82).

Swami noted down his name, address, etc., in the notebook which he always carried with him. The three friends signed the page, tore it and gave it to the driver. He was then allowed to move on.

Narayan, Humour, Child Psychology and Socialization

According to S.C.Harrex, Narayan “finds the child a natural medium for humour both because the child has an innate sense of fun and capacity for joy, and because the child is often unconsciously funny, particularly when it is being most serious or when it adopts grossly exaggerated attitudes”(52).

Narayan tries to understand the world of children—their likes and dislikes, whims and fancies and portrays them from a child’s perspective. He makes use of exaggeration as a device to raise the humorous effects. For example look at the following passage with a heightened tone:

Then there was Mani, the Mighty-Good-For-Nothing. He towered above all the other boys of the class. He seldom brought any books to the class, and never bothered about home-work. He came to the class, monopolized the last bench, and slept bravely. No teacher ever tried to prod him. It was said that a new teacher who once tried it very nearly lost his life.

Sometimes Narayan portrays the world of children in a mock-heroic fashion. The description of the fight with ink bottles between Swaminathan and others is a good example.

Mani did some brisk work at the school gate, snatching from all sorts of people ink-bottles and pens, and destroying them. Around him was a crowd seething with excitement and joy. Ecstatic shrieks went up as each article of stationery was destroyed. One or two little boys feebly protested. But Mani wrenched the ink-bottles from their hands, tore their caps, and poured ink over their clothes. He had a small band of assistants, among whom Swaminathan was prominent. Overcome by the mood of the hour, he had spontaneously emptied his ink-bottle over his own head and had drawn frightful dark circles under his eyes with the dripping ink (65).

Even in the quarrel between Mani and Rajam, Narayan adopts a serio-comic attitude. They withdraw all diplomatic relations and talk, as at the international level, through a

third party. In this context O.P.Saxena observes “Narayan’s characters with their quaint behaviour, exaggerated traits of their temperament and clumsy habits come quite close to those of Chaucer and Dickens. But whereas the oddities seem to have been appended to the adult characters of Chaucer and Dickens from outside, they go so well with Narayan’s children” (63).

In the description of Ebenezer’s scripture class, “Tears rolled down Ebenezer’s cheeks when he pictured Jesus before him. Next moment his face became purple with rage” (4). As Cynthia Vanden Driesen observes: “Often it is through the presentation of the exaggerated working of Swami’s over-active imagination that the comic effect is created” (169). A good example is his imaginative involvement with Rama and Krishna, which prevents his working out a problem in arithmetic.

Narayan has shown remarkable insight into the psychology of a child, and his analysis of a child’s thought processes is really creditable. Children are instinctive by nature. They have strong imaginations and vivid sensations. They see life as black or white, bigger than reality and their enemies seem demons, their friends angels, their joys and sorrows are absolute and eternal. The children have a tendency to exaggerate, and it requires great psychological insight and understanding to paint the world from a child’s point of view.

In this respect, Narayan has shown great penetration and skill in depicting the rainbow-world of childhood and early boyhood. There is hardly anything about child-life which has not been depicted in this novel. The readers are told of their hatred of Mondays, their joys and sorrows, their boyish enjoyments, and their petty-quarrels.

Narayan has not only vivified the child’s world, but also rendered the world of the grown-ups as it appears to children. Swami’s friendship with Somu, Shankar, and the Pea is scholastic and impersonal. Swami, Mani and Rajam remain together as friends, and at the end of the novel, Rajam leaves Malgudi. The readers hope that their friendship matured further and they did stand together through thick and thin.

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