
**Childhood as Resistance: Negotiating Colonial Authority in R. K. Narayan's
*Swami and Friends***

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Abstract

Childhood in R.K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* is not a passive or innocent phase as it seems to be on the superficial level but a space of negotiation under colonial authority. The figure of Swami, positioned in the midst of institutional and familial structures, is repeatedly subjected to discipline, regulation, and moral control just like the colonized figures in the novel. The classroom, particularly in his Albert Mission School, serves as a colonial space functioning as a site where authority is not only imposed but also internalized by Swami and his classmates. Drawing upon the idea of discipline and surveillance as articulated by Michel Foucault, the paper argues that childhood here is conditioned through fear and obedience, yet it does not remain entirely submissive as in *Swami and Friends*, Swami's small acts—his truancy, hesitation, and emotional withdrawal—exhibit subtle forms of resistance to the authority. Notably these acts do not overthrow the authority but reveal a continuous negotiation with it. The study thus reads childhood as a fragile and dynamic space where power is imposed and quietly contested as well.

Keywords: Childhood, Colonial Authority, Resistance, Discipline, , Negotiation , Michel Foucault

1. Introduction

Childhood has often been perceived as a phase of innocence, spontaneity, and freedom. Such a superficial view tends to disregard the ways in which childhood is moulded, regulated, and even controlled by larger social and political structures. In colonial contexts, this control becomes more layered, as institutions such as schools and families act as carriers of authority and discipline. In this regard, R.K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* offers a significant narrative where childhood is not merely an innocent and playful stage but also a complex phase of continuous negotiation with the dominant agencies.

The novel *Swami and Friends*, set in the fictional town of Malgudi, presents the everyday experiences of Swaminathan, a young boy navigating the pressures of school, family, and friendship. Beneath the surface of light and humour, the novel contains persistent tension between authority and the child's response to it. Swami is repeatedly exposed to the authoritative structures that demand obedience without any question—his school with its rigid discipline, and his home with its expectations and moral codes. Notwithstanding, Swami does not entirely accept these structures without resistance.

This paper argues that childhood in *Swami and Friends* is best understood as a site of negotiation, where authority is neither fully accepted nor completely rejected. Instead, it is expressed through subtle acts that reveal both compliance and resistance.

2. Theoretical Framework: Discipline and Surveillance

The functioning of authority in the novel can be understood through the concept of discipline as discussed by Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, modern institutions operate not merely through overt force, but through systems of surveillance, normalization, and internalized control. The individual gradually begins to regulate oneself, anticipating authority even in its absence (Foucault, 1977).

In the context of childhood, such disciplinary mechanisms become particularly effective, as the child is more vulnerable to structures of control. The school, in particular, acts as a space where discipline is systematically enforced. It shapes behaviour, regulates time, and establishes norms that the child is expected to follow. In *Swami and Friends*, the Albert Mission School functions precisely in this manner. Authority is not only external—through teachers and punishment—but also

internal, as Swami begins to experience fear and anxiety even before any direct action is taken against him:

‘His father’s face , the Headmaster’s face with the cane in his hand , and the faces of the teachers at school , haunted him . He felt that he was in a world of ghosts and shadows . ’ (Narayan 158)

Here Swami is no longer running from any physical person , the fear of punishment and authority is so much deep-seated that he is being haunted by them even when he is in the middle of a forest, far away from the inhabited area. It suggests that the intimidating authority has moved beyond the physical domain and has penetrated into his psyche . This internalization of authority becomes a crucial aspect of the child’s experience.

3. Colonial Authority and the Institutional Space

The colonial classroom in the novel is far from being a neutral site of learning for the children . It operates through rigid discipline, surveillance, and the constant possibility of punishment. Teachers exercise strict control, and the environment leaves little room for spontaneity or deviation for the students:

‘He was a thin , tall man with a long , thin nose and a sharp , metallic voice . He never smiled and was a terror to his pupils. His presence in the class always produced and atmosphere of fear. ’ (Narayan 1)

This oppressive atmosphere of the Albert Mission School is intensified through the depiction of Vedanayagam , one of the teachers in the school and for this fearful atmosphere Monday appears to Swami as ‘ unpleasant in the calendar’.

Swami also experiences in school the fear of the headmaster, the anxiety associated with lessons, and the pressure to conform -- all indicate a system where authority is strongly manifested without sensitivity . The classroom thus becomes a space of mechanical learning and strict discipline discouraging the children to express their free thinking and childish activities.

Noteworthy, this authority is not limited to the school but extending also to the familial space which also contributes to the regulation of the child. Swami’s father, with his strict expectations and emphasis on discipline, reinforces similar structures of control:

‘Swami’s father sat in the easy chair , in the hall , and looked at Swami through his glasses. He looked like a judge . Swami felt that his father was looking into his heart and reading all his thoughts . ’ (Narayan 92)

This silent surveillance of his father restricts Swami’s childlike behaviour , further heightening Swami's anxiety . The authoritative environment of both domains – institutional as well as domestic – made Swami suffocated which in turn reflects the colonial structure.

4. Childhood as Resistance: Acts of Negotiation

Despite being subjected to such structures, Swami does not remain entirely passive. His responses, though not overtly rebellious, indicate a continuous negotiation with authority.

One of the most evident forms of this negotiation is truancy. Swami’s reluctance to attend school, his attempts to avoid classes, and his fabricated excuses suggest a refusal to fully submit to institutional control. These actions, though may appear minor, carry significant implications as they indicate that the child does not simply absorb authority but also actively responds to it.

After joining the Board High School, Swami participated in a political protest for which he is brutally punished by the Headmaster. The pain and physical humiliation suddenly transform his fear into a desperate, tearful defiance bursting into the words ‘ I don’t care for your school ’ reflecting Swami’s rejection of the institutional control over him.

This resistance is also earlier seen in Swami’s emotional withdrawal and hesitation . His fear does not always lead to compliance; rather, it sometimes results in avoidance or delay. Even his engagement with friendship and play—particularly cricket—can be read as attempts to create spaces outside the reach of authority.

However, these acts do not dismantle the system. Swami’s resistance remains limited and fragmented. He continues to be affected by authority, and his actions often lead him back into its fold. This limitation is important, as it divulges the constrained nature of childhood agency within structured environments.

5. The Limits of Resistance

While Swami's actions occasionally incline to the resistance, they do not culminate in any decisive challenge to authority which highlights the fragile nature of the child's agency. When Swami throws a stone aiming the window-pane of the Headmaster's room, he experiences a 'fierce joy' which momentarily delegitimizes the school's rigid authority but later regresses to anxiety. This undoubtedly validates the invincibility of colonial and academic authority. Again, while the child's attempts to evade them are often temporary, the structures of discipline remain largely intact. This suggests that resistance from the child is not about overthrowing power, but about negotiating with it. The child navigates authority through small, everyday actions, which may not transform the system but still hold significance. These acts create moments of tension where authority is questioned, even though it is transient. Thus, childhood in *Swami and Friends* is neither entirely submissive nor fully autonomous. It exists in a state of in-betweenness, shaped by authority yet constantly responding to it.

6. Conclusion

The reading of *Swami and Friends* attempts to move beyond the conventional notion of childhood as a space of innocence, foregrounding childhood as a site where authority is both imposed and negotiated. Through the experiences of Swami, the novel demonstrates how colonial and familial structures shape the child's behaviour, thoughts, and emotions. At the same time, it also shows that the child is not merely a passive recipient of these forces. Swami's actions, though limited, indicate a persistent engagement with authority.

In this sense, childhood emerges as a dynamic and fragile space, marked by both dominance and resistance. The study thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of childhood in colonial contexts, where power operates not only through domination but also through subtle processes of negotiation.

References

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