

**Myth in R.K.Narayan's selected Novels 'Swami and Friend' and
'Bachelor of Arts'**

1.SK Abdul Salam

Ph.D Scholar, English Dept.North Orissa University, Takatpur, Baripada,
Mayurbhanj, Odisha

2.Dr. Ajit Kumar Mohapatra

M.A. Ph.D, HoD English, R.D.S. Degree Mahavidyalaya, Kundabai, Mayurbhanj,
Odisha

Paper Received on 28-06-2026, Accepted on 30-07-2026
Published on 31-07-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.07.348

Abstract:

Myths are stories, usually concerning superhuman or gods, which are related to accompany or to explain religious beliefs: they originate far back in the culture of oral societies. Generally speaking, myth is expressive of a holistic vision of the human situation, human destiny, human inspiration and apprehensions. It is an aesthetic channel to redirect, ventilate, explore and recreate the experience of the self in relation to the past. In fact, by living the myths we are transported from "chronological" or "clock-time" to "sacred" or "primordial" time. Modern literature has consciously renewed its interest in myth, ritual and romance to serve multiple purposes. Myths can be used for compression as well as for expansion. Use of myths helps in telescoping the vast canvas of the theme within a 340 short space. T.S.Eliot uses myth as an "objective-correlative" which serves as a mirror reflecting his emotions and ideas. Greek tragedy is nothing but the artistic fulfilment of the myth itself. Indian English novelists make an extensive use of Indian myths to express modern concerns, to control, to set in perfect order, to give shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which prevail everywhere. The Indian novelists in English make a liberal and extensive use of the myths and legends in their novels because the Indian psyche is moulded and transformed by our mythological and legendary tales and conditioned by the stories from the *Panchatantra*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her *The Twice Born Fiction* observes that "there seems to be two distinct ways in which myths have been used in Indo-English novels as part of digressional techniques of which Raja Rao is the most outstanding exponent and as the structural parallels where a mythical situation underlines the whole as part of a novel." The outline of myths, drawn from ancient narratives or from Hindu epics and scriptures, provides modern Indian writers in English the required framework of fictional narratives. There is discourse galore on the use of myths by Indian English writers. But I want to focus on the study of myths in Narayan's selected novels because it is of vital importance.

A research work or discussion available on the use of myth in the selected novels of R.K. Narayan is a micro discussion. So without discussing myths resorted to by R.K. Narayan, a proper study of his novels cannot be done. Moreover there is a dearth of a full-fledged work on the use of myths, legends and puranas in the selected novels of R.K. Narayan. It still remains almost an unexplored area. My objective here is to focus on myths in particular in the novels of R.K. Narayan and to show how Narayan's purpose is served by the use of myths.

Here I make a proper use of primary and secondary sources of the myths used by R.K. Narayan in his selected novels. As secondary sources, I have read a lot of critical works on R.K. Narayan and his treatment of myth in his selected novels. All the texts under the reference have been thoroughly read by me before preparing this paper. I have gone through the novels of R.K. Narayan all of which have gone into the making of this article.

Keywords: Myth, Novels, R K Narayan, Greek, Malgudi.

Introduction:

Myth' is a very baffling and complex term to be defined. In conventional sense the term 'myth' means something false. No body accepts falsehood. Everybody likes truth. How is then myth believable? This is a vexed question. The point would be clear if we take into consideration different types of truth. There are various types of truth. They are distinguished by their subjectivity, objectivity, intuitiveness, logicity, universality, evidence, faith and so on and so forth. Myth is that type of truth which is based on faith, subjectivity, culture and intuition. To Greek thinkers of antiquity 'myth' signified 'mythos'. They made a distinction between 'mythos' and 'logos'. From mythos' originated 'intuitive narration' and from 'logos' reasonable deliberation. It is 'logos' that gave rise to science and mathematics. Myths are basically stories that are devoid of logicity and plausibility. Hence they lack veracity and credibility. That is why the term 'myth' signifies something fictitious. In his selected novels Narayan tells the tales of South Indian life. But he is found to base his narrative on the story-lines of Indian epics and puranas in such a way that the readers find in his narratives a re-telling and re-creation of the stories of India's epical, mythical and oral traditions invested with Vedic truths of spiritual and moral significance. By story Narayan does not mean a mere fictitious tale or a collection of incidents. For him it has a wider significance. Narayan looks upon story as a generic transfiguration of all that matters and hence essential for a complete understanding of human existence.

His first novel *Swami and Friend* is about Swami, a ten-year old school boy and his friendship. The novel depicts Swami's habits and activities, giving in the

process a vivid portrayal of Swami's boyish psychology vis-à-vis his friends', and like Dickens' *David Copperfield* the novelist's own experiences as a schoolboy seems to have gone into the making of the novel. The central character, Swami, a student of the First Form of Albert Mission School lives in the fictional town of Malgudi with his parents and grandmother as the very apple of their eyes. He has three friends—Somu, Shanker, and Pea. Attending school is depressing to him. This is specially so after the absolute freedom and enjoyment of Saturday and Sunday. The novel opens on a Monday morning when Swami wakes up from sleep to the depressing thought of the advent of the long school week ahead. After a short time he attends to his home task about two hours ahead of the commencement of the class and attends the opening class which is the class of arithmetic with a feeling of boredom and absentmindedness. Then Swami attends the Biblical scripture class taken by Ebenezer who makes a disparaging remark about Hindu religion and exalts Christianity, glorifying Jesus as the only redeemer of souls while denouncing Lord Krishna as the worker of dirty tricks, condemning in the same breath the Hindu practice of idolatry as a foolish act to the utmost disgust and exasperation of Swami who does not fail to counter instantly against this affront to his religion by bringing in question the issue of Jesus's habit of drinking and eating flesh.

What a strong counterpoint! A 'tooth for tooth' and 'eye for eye' rejoinder from a mere schoolboy taking up cudgel singlehandedly against the disgracing of his religion at the hand of a grown up Christian fanatic. This audacity of the boy provoked Ebenezer to teach the boy a fitting lesson. He grabs Swami's left ear and twists it so hard as if to wrench it out. Humiliated and enraged Swami reported it straight to his father at the earliest who on his turn scribbled a letter to the headmaster of the school seeking justice to this sectarian and bullying treatment meted out to his son by Ebenezer. But it yielded no positive result. As regards his friendship in school, Swami was fascinated by the personality and intelligence of the new comer, his name is Rajam, the son of a police superintendent. Rajam's arrival poses a threat to Mani's dominance in the class. A rivalry rages between the two and Mani plans a fight against him. But ultimately the proposed fight does not take place and Mani and Rajam become friends to the extreme delight of Swami. They prefer loafing about to studies. Swami along with his other friends may visit to Rajam's house which is returned by Rajam a few days later. But crisis arises with the declaration of the schedule for the annual exam. Swami's father turns fidgety over this declaration and commands Swami to prepare for the upcoming examination properly with long hours of study. All of Swami's friends seem to be in the grip of exam fever. There is a rumour that the clerk of the school has full knowledge about the questions. So they tried to elicit some hints about the questions from the clerk and Mani is satisfied with the vague hints he gets from the clerk in exchange for his gift of brinjals to the latter.

Ultimately the exam is over with a lot of joy and excitement of Mani and his friends on the last day. Vacation in the school follows. Swami and his friends pass many a happy time loafing about in the hot summer afternoons. A further crisis arises. Reacting to the arrest of a social activist the boys take to strike. Swami rampages the windowpanes of his school and also of the Board High School. The headmaster of the Albert Mission School expels Swami and this terminates his career in the school. Next he is admitted to Board High School. But Swami gets little time out of the heavy study schedule there for loafing about or for playing after the school break. In the meantime M.C.C. is formed under the leadership of Rajam. On the very first day of their practice match Swami performs well as a bowler getting Rajam out at the very first ball of his spell. Since the day Swami comes to be called the Tate of their team. Then a friendly cricket match is scheduled to be held between M.C.C and Y.M. U. on a Sunday two weeks later. So to brace up for this impending challenge the M.C.C. takes to daily practice in the afternoon to which Swami fails to join because of his compulsory attendance to the drill and scout classes at the Board High School. Rajam and Mani are worried over the performance of their Tate on the day they take on Y.M.U. Now only one week is left for their further practice. Now to get at least a week's practice time Swami went to their family physician with a request for a medical certificate on ground of his physical unfitness for attending drill and scout classes for a week. The doctor promises to convince the headmaster. Swami remains absent from the school for a few days and attend the practice session of his team regularly. But the doctor fails to keep his word so Swami now has to face the headmaster who calls Swami to account for his absence from the school without permission. For this daring and lapsation on his part the headmaster thrashes him hard besides humiliating him with a cane. Failing to bear all these Swami snatches away the headmaster's cane and runs away from the school scared of facing the fury of his father Swami slips away from Malgudi towards the Memphi forest where he falls unconscious out of exhaustion and hunger. A cart driver fortunately traces him and leaves him under the care of a kindly forest officer wherefrom Swami is ultimately taken back home by his father. Mani comes to see him and Swami is utterly disappointed to learn from him of their team having lost the match. The story ends on note of further disappointment on the part of Swami when news comes to him of Rajam's leaving Malgudi for good because of the transfer of his father elsewhere. Swami goes to the station accompanied by Mani to see Rajam off with a gift of Anderson's *Fairy Tale*. But Swami does not find any scope to talk to Rajam because the latter remains surrounded by his parents, policemen and other officers. The train begins to move and Mani hands over Swami's parting gift to Rajam running with the moving train. The train speeds up its movement. Swami and Mani are left standing in the platform looking fixedly at the train heavy hearted with Mani consoling Swami that surely Rajam will write to him.

Though the narrative of the novel is not grafted on any mythical stalk, the novelist makes scattered references to typical Indian beliefs and faiths as well as Indian mythical figures and deities. While upholding Jesus as the true God, Ebenezer, the scripture teacher, refers to the habits and activities of Lord Krishna in a blasphemous manner: "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 practise dark tricks on those around him?". Ebenezer's disparagement of Lord Krishna and Swami's sharp and strong rejoinder raising question against Jesus's crucifixion and His taste for flesh and wine reflects the clash between the two cultures and conflicts prevalent in the domain of their faith. A Brahmin boy Swami's staggering rejoinder against the sacrilege of Lord Krishna may be taken as the voice of crusade raised through his alter ego by Narayan himself, a man born and brought up in a satvik South Indian Brahmin Family. Narayan! Narayan! Again, the very name Swami has the echo of the name of the legendary Subrahmanyaswami who performed many miraculous feats in his childhood. Swami believes in the myth that God can turn sand into money. It is in this hope that in his urgent need of six pies to buy a hoop that Swami puts two pebbles in a cardboard box and puts it before the brass image of their Puja room praying to the images for their boons so that the pebbles may turn into six pies. In the same pursuit he also makes reference to the legendary Ayodhyan King Rama: "Oh, Sri Rama! Thou hast slain Ravana though he had ten heads, can't you give me six pies?". Again, when Swami is disillusioned in his pursuit of divine grace i.e. when Swami opens the box and finds to his utter disappointment the selfsame pebbles in place of the expected blessing i.e., coins worth six pies, he kicks at the box but the very next moment the apprehension of inciting divine ire for his sacrilegious behaviour towards gods prompts him to make amends for his wrongdoing:

"He was afraid that it might offend them. He might get on without money, but it was dangerous to incur the wrath of the gods; they might make him fail in his examinations, or kill Father, Mother, Granny, or the baby. He picked up the box again and put back into it the sand, the leaves, and the pebbles, that were crushed, crumpled and kicked a minute ago. He dug a small pit at the root of a banana tree and buried the box reverently."

Belief in the saving grace of god is common Indian belief. Narayan's Indianness is well marked in reflecting this belief in the space of his novels. For example, when Swaminathan loses his way and finds himself at night in the jungle he prays fervently to Ganapati for his safe exit from there and he promises an offering of two coconuts daily to the deity. The novelist shows that the saving deity listens to his prayer and grants it. Again, to ensure Swami's safe and sound returning home, his grandmother prays for the intervention of Tirupati, another saviour to the religious minded people of Malgudi, promising the image of the deity rich offerings. Besides, Swami too

promises to pay penance to Tirupati in terms of begging alms and making an offering of it to the divine image and rolling bare-bodied on the earth before the image. References have also been made to lord Ganesha as the saviour of the people of Malgudi in their distress. The people of Malgudi prays for the help of the deity in their moments of wretchedness with devout promises of different appeasing offerings if the deity grants their prayers. Being a scion of Tamil Brahmin family and born and brought up in an ambience of Indian ethos Narayan can't help reflecting in his novels the beliefs and practices of the people of Malgudi who turn out to be the metonym for the entire nation. The novelist gives us a peep into Swami's psyche when the boy finds himself helplessly alone in the Memphi forest at night where he has strayed taking wrong turn from the Trunk Road in course of his flight from the headmaster of the Board School. Terror struck in the course of his accidental sojourn in the forest with none else to beg help from, Swami supplicates to Lord Ganesha with a humble oath of oblation in terms of two coconuts besides self-immolation before the image of Ganesha. Narayan thus delves deep into the psyche of the school boy and brings out quite convincingly its currents and cross currents: his mental crisis arising from his sense of guilt in dealing with the headmaster of the Board School which compels him to flee from the school out of a fear of facing consequence and move towards the Memphi forest where he loses his way in the darkness of the night and craves for divine aid to get out of the danger lurking there. Swami thus exemplifies his creator's faith in the efficacy of prayer to avert danger.

Swami's granny who is a repository of Indian myths and legends makes a reference to the mythical tale of Raja Harishchandra: "Granny expressed her approval of this attitude and then begged leave to start the story of Harishchandra, who, just to be true to his word, lost his throne, wife, and child, and got them back in the end."4. Swami's granny narrates to Swamy this mythical tale to inculcate in the latter the lesson of truthfulness and steadfastness of resolve.

With sprinklings of mythical references in the school-boy narrative what Narayan is found to achieve is to make an exploration of the balance between the narrative and India's oral tradition. Swami is more interested in the heroics of his class-mates than in the mythical tale of Harish chandra as narrated by his granny and this shows how mythical element is subtly overshadowed by the schoolboy narrative which again is ultimately subverted by an inescapable encapsulation of the novelist's experiences of Malgudi. Thus juxtaposition has been made between India's oral tradition and English readership. And this results from the novelist's need to cater to the native taste as well as to that of the West at the same time.

Narayan also makes reference to traditional beliefs about Hell that give the novel a mythical dimension. Such beliefs have become ingrained in Indian culture as well as in other culture. Being a man of Indian sensibilities, Narayan can't help referring

to these beliefs. In the novel Rajam designs to reconcile Somu, Shanker and Pea with Swami and Mani after an inimical phase between the former ones and the later ones. Before executing this on a solid foundation Rajam lectures on friendship and gives in the process a lurid account of what penal consequences one has to undergo in hell if one fosters enmity against another this life. Rajam claims to have learnt from the *Veda* that one harbouring animosity in mind is liable to be “locked up in small room after death. He would be to stand, stark naked, on a pedestal of red-hot iron. There were beehives all around with bees as big as lemons. If the sinner stepped down from the pedestal, he would have to put his foot on immense scorpions and centipedes that crawled about the room in hundreds—
(A shudder went through the company.)

—The sinner would have to stand thus for a month, without food or sleep. At the end of a month he would be transferred to another place, a very narrow bridge over a lake of boiling oil. The bridge was so narrow that he would be able to keep only one foot on it at a time. Even on the narrow bridge there were plenty of wasp nests and cactus, and would be goaded from behind to move on. He would have to balance on one foot, and then on another, for ages and ages, to keep himself from falling into the steaming lake below, and move on indefinitely”

Narayan thus becomes a school boy again in exposing the workings of their mind, their animosities, their effort to make peace again by a very clever means, making reference to scriptural text, thereby authenticating their views and winning one another's belief. Narayan thus shows how belief in hell or in the prevalent idea of sufferings lying in store there after one's death became ingrained in a schoolboy's mind besides in an adult mind, and how it acts as a potent force for disciplining them. Narayan thus gives us a peep into the psychological drama being performed in a school-boy's psyche. Thus Narayan's observation of boyish psychology, his ability to delve deep into the depth of their psychology and bring out its queer workings lend his schoolboy narrative a fidelity to fact.

His *The Bachelor of Arts* unfolds the story of irony in the life of an educated (a graduate) but unemployed young man in India. The novel chiefly deals with traditional marriage norms and parents-son relationship in India. The novel is named after Chandran, a B.A. final year student of Albert Mission College in Malgudi. He has finished his academic course at the college and is waiting for the exam. He is a bachelor not only in his academic field but also in marital status and experiences of life. He is depressed to think of his life after passing B.A. because of the lack of job opportunity in colonial India where British education system turns India into a moronic nation. While wandering hopelessly he meets Malathi on the bank of the Sarayu, falls in love with her and decides to marry her without taking into consideration her caste and creed and thereby dares to break away from the traditional

limitations associated with one's marital choice and makes his choice of the same on the basis of emotional considerations. To Chandran's proposal of marriage with his sweetheart his parents initially object but finding the woe-begone state of their son they ultimately decide to reconsider their decision on condition of horoscological match but here too luck does not favour Chandran. The horoscological mismatch leads Chandran's romantic affair to a fiasco. Frustrated in love and marriage Chandran seeks solace in the spiritual world by feigning the role of a sadhu but he fails to adjust himself to his feigned role and feels himself a fake after all. So he renounces playing the role of a sadhu and returns home where through the marriage with the bride of their parents' choice (Susila) settles down to a life of serenity and peace.

Narayan in his *Bachelor of Arts* does not make any notable mythical parallel or allusion. Here Narayan plainly introduces us to the fact of how the barriers of caste and astrological sanction frustrate romantic love, limit and determine one's marital choice. Notwithstanding the mythical 'purusha-prakriti' (male-female) may be read in Chandran-Malathi romantic affair. K.V.S. Murthy finds in the narrative a mythical parallel to the story of Tara and Sasanka. Sasanka, the moon-god fell in love with the wife of his guru, but on ethical ground Sasanka's love proved futile. So failure and frustration in love was writ large in Sasanka's destiny. The same is the case with Chandran in his infatuation for Malathi. Again, shortly after his renunciation of the material world in his monkish role Chandran once again comes to terms with the familiar world and settles down to a happy and serene life through nuptial tie with Susila. In mythical light we may interpret it in terms of Ramachandra's eventually winning Sita. The novelist highlights very little scope of love-marriage in the contemporary Indian society without parental consent and astrological sanction and caste barrier.

Conclusion:

Born and brought up in Indian milieu and ethos with full exposure to India's oral tradition, her epics, and scriptures, myths, legends and puranas Narayan's vision was moulded by purely Indian sensibility in which all his novels are saturated. Narayan has exploited the artistic resources and potentials of Indian tradition and has used Indian myths and legends as a potent and efficacious strategy for an impressive art of story-telling in his novels. Myth is Narayan's forte in his novels. He does not make a literal translation of ancient Hindu myths and legends rather he artistically transcreates them in the twentieth century Indian context and makes a mingling of myth and realism, giving them a fresh lease of life and highlighting their enduring relevance. Thus Narayan revives an unswerving faith in Hindu mythical deities, imparting thereby a supra-terrestrial force to the proceedings of the plots of his novels.

RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.576 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 3 (July, Aug & Sept;2026)

Works Cited

- Narayan, R. K. **Swami and Friends**. Edited by S. Krishnan, Penguin Books, 2002.
- Narayan, R. K. **The Bachelor of Arts**. Penguin Random House India.
- Das, Manoj. **Myths, Legends, Concepts and Literary Antiquities of India**. Sahitya Akademi.
- Ruthven, K. K. **Myth**. The Critical Idiom Series, Methuen & Co. Ltd.; Cambridge UP, 1976.
- Eliot, T. S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." **The Dial**, reprinted in **The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature**, Oxford UP, 1965.
- Narayan, R. K. **An Anthology of Recent Criticism**. Edited by C. N. Srinath.