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It's A child's *play*: Swinging to the past with R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

The English phrase 'it's a child's *play*', is often used for a task which is easy to accomplish or an act which is effortless. However, in the discipline of Child Development the word '*play*' has a serious connotation. *Play* is considered a significant area to measure age-appropriate progress of a child. Children learn and develop through different types of *play*, such as, Associate *play*, Co-operative *play*, Physical *play*, Social *play*, Constructive *play*, Fantasy *play*, Pretend *play* and Role *play*. These are used by CD experts to give a nod to the multidimensional facets of Child Development. The inability of a child, to engage in *play*, is seen as a red flag in the course of development and is suggestive of the need for early intervention. This research paper, revisits Swami's childhood in R.K. Narayan's novel Swami and Friends (1935) and reviews his learning through *play*. Literary texts of R.K. Narayan are a historical mirror to many aspects, including *childhood* history of modern India. The paper reflects upon the importance of *play* and its positive effects on Childhood Learning. *Play* as a measure for developmental milestone crosses the barrier of time. Tools of *play* may change with time, but the importance of *play* remains constant for the child's cognitive, emotional, motor, language and social advancement

Keywords: Children, History, literature, play, RK Narayan

1. Introduction

The English phrase 'it's a child's *play*', is often used for a task which is easy to accomplish or an act which is effortless. However, in the discipline of Child Development the word *play* has a serious connotation. *Play* is considered a significant area to measure age-appropriate progress of a child. Children learn and develop through different types of *play*, such as, Associate *play*, Co-operative *play*, Physical *play*, Social *play*, Constructive *play*, Fantasy *play*, Pretend *play* and Role *play*. These are used by CD experts to give a nod to the multidimensional facets of development in a child. The inability of a child, to engage in *play*, is seen as a red flag in the course of development and is suggestive of the need for early intervention. There are several definitions of *Play*. The term can be used as a *noun* or a *verb*, but for each of its applications, *play* stands out for its ability to measure the progress of a child. *Play* is instrumental in a child's multi-dimensional development- cognitive, emotional, motor, language and social - since time immemorial. '*Play* is the work of children in the early years. *Play* activities are a natural and essential part of childhood. (Singh, 2015) ^[10]. *Play* helps children explore, create, learn and understand their environment. Vygotsky (L, 1993) believed that children developed social competence through *play*, which helped them to re-*play* the cultural norms, expectations, and values of a society. Through *play*, they discover the workings of the worlds, and negotiate their way through their surroundings. *Play* teaches children about themselves, others, rules and consequences, and how things go together or come apart (Klein, T.P.D. Wirth and K. Linas, 2004) ^[4]. *Play* is how children learn to socialize, to think, to solve problems, to mature, and most importantly, to have fun. *Play* connects children with their imagination, their environment, their parents and family, and with the world. Parental involvement in a child's world of *play* is extremely beneficial for both the child and the parent. Parent-child *play*, establishes and strengthens bonds that opens doors for the sharing of values, increases communication, allows for teachable moments, and resolves differences, as well as family-related concerns and issues (Singh, 2015) ^[10].

Years ago, children had opportunities for *play* throughout their entire primary school education [in England], but *play* has been under considerable threat as concern over 'standards' and

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and 'basic skills' has been enlarged by political and media debates around the world and this has often led to the marginalization of *play* (Carruthers, E & Worthington. M, 2011) [1]

The question which may arise is that as parents we certainly understand the benefits of *Play* in childhood, but can we pitch *play* as a safe substitute for a structured routine conducive for development? The answer is a Yes! Let me elaborate it by revisiting the childhood of the protagonist, Swami, as curated by R.K. Narayan (Narayan, 1935, 1974) [7] in his maiden novel *Swami and Friends* way back in 1935. Narayan himself tells us in his autobiography, *My Days* (Narayan, 1935, 1974) [7], that some of the experiences which he narrates in the novel, are his own. The narrative, thus created, underlines the importance of *play* and proposes deliberation on the stringent system of academics impacted by colonisation. Several decades later, the topic of debate and its impact on Child development still remains open for discussion.

2. Objective

To understand the significance of play in Early Childhood Development. Different kinds of *play* empower the child towards holistic progress. The paper is useful for all stakeholders working in the area of Child Development to include *play* in the scheduled/curriculum/routine designed in schools, childhood centres and at home for healthy enhancement of children.

3. Hypothesis

Play is an essential area for Child Development and not a mere waste of time.

4. Methodology

The novel *Swami and Friends* by R.K. Narayan has been researched extensively and the importance of play has been traced to pre-colonial times. The relevance of play for children is beyond the boundaries of time, culture, countries or societies.

5. Findings and Discussions: Narayan and the many facets of *play*

R. K. Narayan, one of the leading figures of early Indian literature has contributed to Indian writing in English fiction over several decades. His writings are a historical mirror to many aspects, including *childhood* history of modern India. Narayan's writing skill is simple, with a natural element of humour in it and focuses on ordinary people, reminding the readers of their next-door neighbours, relatives and Friends. *Swami and Friends* is a story of a child, Swaminathan, living in the fictional town of 'Malgudi'. The entire story weaves itself in the fabric of *Play* between Swaminathan and his Friends to create a rich tapestry of Swami's emotions, learning and social connect. Narayan's narrative is full of Swami's several kinds of *play*, such as Associate *play*, Co-operative *play*, Physical *play*, Social *play*, Constructive *play*, Fantasy *play*, Pretend *play* and Role *play*.

Swami, the protagonist of the novel, just like any child going to school is 'reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially 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' (Narayan, p.1). The importance of *play* as an observing tool is highlighted by Narayan very early in the novel when he writes 'To Swaminathan existence in the classroom was possible only because he could watch the toddlers of the Infant

Standards falling over one another, and through the windows on the left see the 12.30 mail gliding over the embankment, blooming and rattling while passing over the Sarayu Bridge' (Narayan, p.2).

In modern English, the word *play* has many connotations: make-believe, having fun, engaging in a game, competing in a game, taking a role in a team, taking a role on stage, performing music, operating a device for recorded music, describing light or water when moving irregularly, teasing, gambling or speculating in some enterprise. Some definitions may describe children when they are playing, though many explain activities that are only part playful; some describe actions that have nothing to do with the *play* of children (Else, 2014) [2].

Swami's time, during interval, at school, is spent 'in running round the school or in playing the Digging Game under the huge tamarind tree' (Narayan, p.5). Social development in childhood focuses on *play*, interaction and relationships with Friends. Among Swami's Friends, the first is Somu, 'the monitor, who carried himself with such an easy air' (Narayan, p.6). Then there was Mani and Sankar (Narayan, p.7). The fourth friend was Samuel, known as the Pea' (Narayan, p.8). Narayan brilliantly carves out the importance of laughter in *play* when he writes about the bond between the Swami and 'the Pea'. 'The bond between them was laughter. They were able to see together the same absurdities and incongruities in things. The most trivial and unnoticeable things to others would tickle them to death' (Narayan, p.8).

Early years' educators and researchers need to focus on the relational aspects of young children's identity development and observe how they develop gender identities in relation to identities of ethnicity, class, sexuality, age and (dis)ability. Children's play practices and schooling practices often encourage gender differences and heteronormativity, and thereby contribute to inequity. Initial training and continuous professional development programmes are needed, to help staff think and act to promote equity in early years settings (Martin, 2011) [6].

The novel *Swami and Friends* was published in 1935. However, the scene narrated by Narayan between Swaminathan and Mani where they sit 'aloof on a river-step, with their legs dangling in water', crosses the barrier of time. We can get a whiff of Associative *play* when Narayan writes about 'the *peepul* branches overhanging the river rustled pleasantly. A light breeze played about the boughs and scattered stray leaves on the gliding stream below. Birds filled the air with their cries. Far away, near Nallappa's Mango Grove, a downstream, a herd of cattle was crossing the river. And then a country cart drawn by bullocks passed, the cartman humming a low tune. It was some fifteen minutes past sunset and there was a soft red in the west (Narayan, p.13-14).

Utmost feeling of comfort, joy and belonging, in *play*, is described beautifully when Narayan writes:

The river's mild rumble, the rustling of the *peepal* leaves, the half-light of the late evening, and the three Friends eating, and glowing with new Friendship-Swaminathan felt at perfect peace with the world (Narayan, p.21).

Play leads to social progress and increase in the periphery of emotions. Feelings of jealousy and being possessive of a friend are common traits in the child's personality in the journey of child development. This is portrayed beautifully when Rajam, a new admission, is labelled as a 'fresh arrival

in the First A' (Narayan, p.13-14). Feelings of 'belonging to a group by imitation and the security achieved thereof, is portrayed by Narayan when he writes 'if Mani jabbed, Rajam jabbed; if Mani clouted, he clouted; if Mani kicked, he kicked. If Mani was the overlord of the class, Rajam seems to be nothing less... There were sure indications that Rajam was the new power in the class (Narayan, p.15).

Since the novel portrays the life of Swami, it is filled with incidents of his interaction with Friends and the subsequent *play*. The monotony of lessons taught in class cannot hold Swami's attention. His mind wanders and he tries to beat the boredom by engaging in self-*play* and classifying his classmates according to their caps: 'there were four red caps, twenty-five Gandhi caps, ten fur caps, and so on' (Narayan, p.18).

Language development is another very important aspect of *play*. Narayan brings it up very beautifully when he writes of the time Swami spends in the company of Rajam and his other Friends. Narayan says:

In a few minutes they were chatting about odds and ends, discussing their teachers and schoolmates, their parents, toys, and games.

Rajam took them to a cupboard and threw it open. They beheld astounding things in it, miniature trains and motors, mechanical marvels, and a magical lantern with slides, a good many large picture-books, and a hundred other things. What interested Mani most was a grim airgun that stood in a corner. Rajam gave them permission to handle anything they pleased. In a short while Swaminathan was running an engine all over the room. Mani was shooting arrow after arrow from a bow, at the opposite wall. When he tired of it, he took up the gun and devastated the furniture around with lead balls (Narayan, p.29).

Early research on *play* and creative problem-solving investigated play and insight ability. In a series of studies, Sylva, Bruner, and Genova (1976) concluded that *play* in children 3 to 5 years of age facilitated insight in a problem solving task (Russ, 2004) ^[9].

To get included in group activities, i.e., engaging in cooperative *play*, is an important parameter of Child Development. 'Under the huge tamarind tree, they were playing some game. Swaminathan joined them with a low, ecstatic cry' (Narayan, p.33). Teasing is also a part of *play*. Addressing it and resolving it helps in emotional development. When Swami's Friends tease him referring to him as a 'tail of Rajam', Swami's cheeks grow 'hot. He wanted to cry (Narayan, p.34). This was probably Swaminathan's first shock in life. It paralysed all his mental process. When his mind started working again, he faintly wondered if he had been dreaming' (Narayan, p.35).

Yet another aspect of *play* is addressing a Bully. The incident in the novel where Mani 'wrenched the ink-bottles from their hands, tore their caps, and poured ink over their clothes...' (Narayan, p.74), is a prominent incident displaying this trait. Swami finds a reason to imitate Mani, he does the same to himself. Narayan writes:

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 (Narayan, p.74).

Narayan brings out the importance of attachment in Friendship when he writes how 'Swami feels two different attachments: one to Somu, Sankar, and the Pea-- a purely scholastic one, which automatically ceased when the school

gates closed; his other attachments was more human, to Rajam and Mani' (Narayan, p.76).

The journey of Swami's emotions, social -connect, feelings of love, bonding with peer group, continues as Narayan weaves yet another incident of *play* in his life. Now, Swami wishes to 'get a hoop' as a tool for play. He dreams of it day and night. He indulges in Fantasy *Play* when he thinks what would it be 'to get a hoop. Oh, what joy to see it climb small obstacles, and how gently it took curves! When running made it made a steady hum, which was music to the ear. Swaminathan thought that anybody in Malgudi would understand that he was coming, even a mile away, by that hum. He sometimes kept awake till ten-thirty in the night, thinking of this hoop' (Narayan, p.76-7).

Singer (1994) placed *play* therapy in the context of Leslie's (1987) theory of mind. Leslie conceptualized that people manipulate meta-representations to make inferences and predictions, to understand the world, and to distinguish fantasy from reality. The manipulation of meta-representations occurs in pretend *play*. Singer sees the play therapist as helping to develop the child's capacity for *play* (Russ, 2004) ^[9].

So obsessed is he in his Pretend *play* that Swami dreams 'one night that he has crossed the Sarayu near Nallappa's Grove 'on' his wheel. It was vivid dream; the steel wheel crunched on the sandy bed of the river as it struggled and heaved across. It became a sort of horse when it reached the other bank. It went back home in one leap, took him to the kitchen, and then to his bed, and lay down beside him. This was fantastic; but the early part of the dream was real enough. It nearly maddened him to wake to a hopeless morning (Narayan, p. 77).

Cooperative *play* in the novel Swami and Friends is brought to the fore by Narayan when he writes: Rajam had formed a little plan to decoy and kidnap the coachman's son. Mani was his executive. He was to befriend the coachman's son. Swaminathan had very little part to *play* in the preliminary stages. His duty would cease with pointing out the coachman's house to Mani (Narayan, p.85).

Childhood emotions of fun, *play* and social development are narrated by Narayan wonderfully. He writes about the hot sun and the unbearable sunny afternoons and yet they do not seem to disturb Swami and his Friends. In fact 'they found the noon and the afternoon the most fascinating part of the day. The same sun that beat down on the head of Mr Hentel, the mill manager, and drove him to Kodaikanal, or on the turban of Mr Krishnan, the Executive Engineer, and made him complain that his profession was one of the hardest, compelling him to wander in sun and storm, beat down on Swaminathan's curly head, Mani's tough matted hair, and Rajam's short wiry crop, and left them unmoved... The same sun made the three Friends loath to remain under a roof' (Narayan, p.90-1). Cooperative *Play* is also emphasised when Swami and his Friends plan a game of cricket together. Narayan devotes a major portion of the story highlighting the planning, coordinating and adapting to the rules of *play* in the game of cricket by all the Friends.

Narayan, adds humour to the narrative when he describes how the drudgery of school and the lessons taught, hold no meaning for Swami. When his father holds the arithmetic book open and dictates "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 gazes at this sum, and every time he reads it, it seemed to acquire a

new meaning... His mouth begins to water at the thought of mangoes. He wonders... what kind of a man was Rama... (Narayan, p.100). This incident also makes us deliberate on the power of reasoning and divergent thinking in play, which the structured system of education often overlooks. Narayan describes this scene with wonderful humour when he writes: "Father, will you tell me if the mangoes were ripe?" ...He felt strongly that the answer to this question contained the key to the whole problem. It would be scandalous to expect fifteen annas for ten unripe mangoes (Narayan, p.101).

The dialogues that Narayan gives to his characters, cross the barrier of time. Swami wonders if 'every teacher thought that his was the only subject that the boys had to study. Six sums in arithmetic, four pages of 'handwriting copy' (Narayan, p.144).

The importance of *play* in a child's life cannot be neglected. *Play* is integrated into a child life through most of his relationships, especially Friends. The agony which Swami faces when Rajam stops being Friends with he makes him see the world become 'blank all of a sudden. The thought of Lawley Extension without Rajam appalled him with his emptiness. He swore that he would never go there again... What was he to do in the evenings? Whom was he to think of as his friend? (Narayan, p.207)

Play and the Friendship bonds created thereof, make Swami 'take out a neat tiny volume of Andersen's *Fairy Tales* that his father had bought in Madars years ago for him' (Narayan, p.208). Rajam's Friendship means so much to Swami that he is devastated when Rajam leaves Malgudi. Though he accepts Swami's gift, Swami does not get a chance to speak with him. Mani tries to console Rajam. Lie, as told by Mani, in the garb of *play*, dresses the emotion of consoling and supporting his friend, Swami. Narayan writes:

Swaminathan broke down and sobbed.
Mani said: "Don't be foolish, Swami."
"Does he ever think of me now?" Swaminathan asked hysterically.
"Oh, yes," said Mani. He paused and added: "Don't worry. If he has not talked to you, he will write to you."
"What do you mean?"
"He told me so," Mani said.
"But he does not know my address."
"He asked me, and I have given it," said Mani.
"No. No. It is a lie. Come on, tell me, what is my address?"
"It is—it is—never mind what... I have given it to Rajam."
Swaminathan looked up and gazed on Mani's face to find out whether Mani was joking or was in earnest. But for once Mani's face had become inscrutable (Narayan, p.212).
And thus ends the story of Swami and Friends.

6. Summary and Conclusion

Narayan's novel *Swami and Friends* brings out different shades of *play* in a simple story of a child, Swaminathan. The entire journey of Swami is full of various kinds of *play* which are defined as various categories in the discipline of Child Development. Since *play* is an important measure in the age-appropriate and developmentally-apt progress of a child, to dismiss *play* as a mere waste of time is inappropriate. *Play* crosses the barrier of time. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, engaged in *play*

in 1935 is a story of any child in the present times. *Play* is the work of children... that's how they learn, create, explore and think. The inability of a child to engage in *play*, is seen as a red flag in the course of development and is suggestive of the need for early intervention. Hence, the hypothesis that *Play* is an essential area for Child Development and not a mere waste of time is proven by discussing the facets of *play* in R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*. Indeed it's about time we redefined the phrase *it's a child's play!*

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