Theme of Alienation in R K Narayan’s SWAMI AND FRIENDS

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Swami and Friends reflects the concept of alienation through life of Swami. Education has a vital role in human beings’ life. It is the process of facilitating learning to develop values, skills, and beliefs. According to Aristotle, ‘Educating the mind without educating the hearts is no education at all.’ this statement shows the values of education, but in the life of Malgudi days, education has a different scenario. Western people used education as a tool or an object to dominate and overpower India. Mr Ebenezer, the history teacher at the Albert Mission school in Malgudi, deliberately teaches Christian mythology to his students and ensures to make them realize that how the white people were superiors to the Indians.


According to Mr Ebenezer, lectures on Hindu mythology and saying superfluous comment on wooden idols and stone images were fanaticism. He mentions of Mohammad Gazni, who is known as idol breaker, and how he attacked Somnath temple. Finally, he praises the mythology of Christianity and starts to
compare with the eastern Gods. By doing so, he tries to alienate his students culturally and pressurizes them psychologically to accept a new culture and make them complexly aliens in their own home. Mr. Ebenezer makes a mockery of Lord Krishna too, as he calls him out as ‘arch-scoundrel Krishna,’ a person who prefers ‘dancing girls’ and ‘stealing butter.’(SAF 4) Swaminathan’s blood boiled upon hearing derogatory words from his teacher and purposefully asks him a question pertaining to crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the purpose behind eating flesh and drinking wine. His father comes into his defense by sending a letter to the headmaster, ‘I hear that he is always most insulting and provoking in his references to the Hindu religion. It is bound to have a bad effect on the boy. (SAF 5) He further mentions in his letter

“Now see our Lord Jesus. He could cure the sick, relieve the poor, and take us to heaven. He was a real God. Trust him and he will take you to heaven; the kingdom of heaven is within us.” (SAF 4)

Rajam joins the Albert Mission School and becomes a new classmate of Swami. He hails from high-class society, and his father is the Police Superintendent. When Rajam joins the new school, he has a sense of sociological alienation. He finds everything to be strange and develops a kind of detachment with other students. His appearance made him different than others, and that may be the cause of his alienation. Even his English language made him be disconnected from other students because he communicates exactly like the Europeans.

Mani wrote on a piece of paper, “Are you a man?” and passes it to Swaminathan, who pushes it across to Rajam, putting on as offensive a look as possible. Rajam reads, crumples, and threw it away. Mani, upon noticing it, writes another note repeating the question, with the addition “You are the son of a dog if you do not answer this.” and
pushes it across. Rajam hissed into Swaminathan’s face, “You scoundrel, don’t disturb me,” and crumpled the letter. (SAF 16-17)

Rajam's neglect has started by the misunderstanding comment on Mani ‘You called me a sneak before someone’(SAF 20). Rajam keeps himself isolated from his classmates, and it, over time, leads to a fight with them. Though, somehow, nothing untoward happens during the fight. He has no consideration for others, as he considers them as ‘nothing.’ He gradually transforms and over time, develops a friendly relationship with Swami.

Swami is fond of listening to tales from his Granny. After the arrival of Rajam, Swami lost his interest in Harichandra tales as the western influence tales gradually begins to dominate him without his knowledge. Swami begins to show his interest in travelling and adventurous story, which is the reason behind his cultural alienation.

Swami and Mani once visit Rajam's house. They are made to wait in the hall by Rajam deliberately. Rajam comes late, for he carries the attitude of his father. Swami wanders alone in the school and misses the presence of his friends. As he meets his friend, he hears them calling him with the nickname for him ‘Tail’ for preferring to stick around Rajam, instead of accompanying them. Later, one day, When Swami enters his class, he finds the word ‘TAIL’ written on the blackboard.

When Swaminathan entered the class, a giggle went round the benches. He walked to his seat hoping that he might not be the cause of the giggling. But it continued. He looked about. His eyes travelled up to the blackboard. His face burnt red. On the board was written in huge letters TAIL. Swaminathan walked to the blackboard and rubbed it off
with his hands. He turned and saw Sankar’s head bent over his notebook, and the Pea was busy unpacking his satchel. Without a word Swaminathan approached the Pea and gave him a fierce slap on his cheek. The Pea burst into tears and swore that he did not do it. He cast a sly look at Sankar, who was absorbed in some work. Swaminathan turned to him and slapped his face also. (SAF 45)

This kind of humiliation is unbearable for Swami, and he starts to fight with his friends. Swami sobs in front of his friends. “They call me Rajam’s tail,” (SAF 46). A few days later, when Swami tries to talk to his friends, they cast him away. During the class hours, Swami thinks of communicating with Somu, who shows him a hardened look, which reveals the scene of neglect. Swami is thus made to experience sociological as well as psychological alienation.

The British government and their attitude towards the Indians are portrayed as “worse slaves than we have ever been before” (SAF 109). There is a scene of protest where one protester tries to recollect the glorious periods of Mahabharata and Ramayana, Sanka, Buddha, and Kalidas. He wants to spread the news that Indians were the pioneers of civilization much before the white people who, at those times, were living the life of hunters and gathers in the forest. From such a position, there has been a steep fall as Indians had only themselves to blame, as they got voluntarily alienated and migrated from one place to another place.

Just think for a while. We are three hundred and thirty-six millions, and our land is as big as Europe minus Russia. England is no bigger than our Madras Presidency and is inhabited by a handful of white rogues and is thousands of miles away. Yet we bow in homage before the Englishman. (SAF 110)
After the speech, Swami decides to join the protest. One day he is trapped in the strike, and he feels lonely. When he finds his people being beaten heavily by the police and resulting in blood streaming from the forehead of one of the victims, Swami is scared. He later strolls alone on a street of Malgudi for a mile and finds the street calm. He wishes to be back on the storage compartment street and understands that he has been strolling for quite a long time. He misses home, envisioning the entirety of the nourishment the cook makes and considering eating with his mom. The separation of Swami for a few hours reminds the values of his Mother. He experiences sociological alienation.

Swami later finds himself in a tricky situation where he is unable to help Rajam in a cricket match. For Swami, friends were his everything, especially Rajam.

Swaminathan could not think of a world without Rajam. What was he to do in the evening? How was he to spend the holiday afternoons? Whom was he to think of as his friend? At the same time, he was filled with a sense of guilt: he had not gone and seem Rajam even once after his return. Fear, shame, a feeling of uncertainty, had made him postpone his visit to Rajam day after day. (SAF 207)

Here Swami tries to think about his future without Rajam. If he leaves him, then how can Swami live without him? “Oh, Rajam Rajam, You are going away, away. When will you come back?” (SAF 211) At the last moment, Swami is unable to control his feeling and sobs in front of Rajam. All he could get in return is a cold response from Rajam, which moves him deeply. He finds himself being alienated by his friend.
Alienation emerges as the natural consequences of existential predicament. R.K. Narayan's stories are for most in emphasizing the loneliness of children. R. K. Narayan's works are a simplistic but realistic projection of life. Almost all Narayan's principal characters experience loneliness and alienation. The long weary nights which swami spends in the forest enables him to appreciate and understand the love and the affection of his parents. Narayan has projected the theme of alienation in his novel to incorporate the philosophic vision of India.

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