

R K Narayan: The MCC



Paper: Twentieth Century Indian Writing

Lesson: R K Narayan: The MCC

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R K Narayan: The MCC

Introduction

Distinguished with the prestigious 'Padma Vibhushan' in 2000, 'Padma Bhushan' in 1964 and the 'Sahitya Academy Award' in 1960, R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) was an outstanding writer whose fictional oeuvre was firmly grounded in the everyday, average world of India and revelled the travails and ecstasies of its middle-class denizens. Narayan's empathy with his characters does not reduce them to sheer clichés and makes for a delightful read. Reader after reader relates to the emotions and the events that shape the story and has felt a soul-connect with the characters, whether or not he has ever shared Narayan's social



Wilfred Derick
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or cultural space. The greatest tribute to Narayan comes from Graham Greene who had never visited India but felt the nation pulsate in Narayan pages: "It was Mr Narayan... who... first brought India...alive to me". This appreciation is all the more noteworthy since it comes in the wake of the author's very first novel. Without doubt, Narayan is India's formidable introduction of indigenous literary talent to the world at large. Born on October 10,1906 at Chennapatna in Chennai, Narayan had the privilege of living in a small town and a megapolis, as well as getting a cosmopolitan education in English medium, which gave him a catholic and tolerant sensibility. It is remarkable that there is no acridity towards the British in his novels despite the fact that his sensibility was largely shaped by the nationalist anti-colonial sentiments prevalent during the British Raj. Narayan does not foray into the political even though he does deal with colonial reverberations in the lives of his characters. It is Narayan's largesse that whenever he shows his characters vis a vis the colonial rulers, he does it in good humour without a trace of acrimony and bitterness. Narayan is by and large a humanist and an egalitarian. John Updike called him a "writer of a vanishing breed – the writer as a citizen... with a belief in...

Humanity".

R K Narayan: The MCC



Chennapatna

Narayan's childhood was not an average childhood. He was born into a family of eight children but had a lonely childhood. For the first fifteen years of his life, Narayan was brought up by his maternal grandmother, Parvathi, in Chennai, away from the rest of his family residing in Mysore. From her he learnt Sanskrit and mythology. Later he moved to Mysore where he studied at Maharaja's

Collegiate High School with his father as its headmaster. After a comparatively free childhood with an indulgent grandmother, things were a wee bit too handful for our author as his father was a strict disciplinarian. In his novels and stories, Narayan consistently tries to show his readers how children have an uphill task with an education system that strips them of their freedom and adds to their woes since there is a complex schism between what they are taught and their immediate lives.

Though limned in a gentle comic light, the tragedy of childhood is pronounced in Narayan's stories where characters invariably bounce back and come to terms with their cultural handicaps. Narayan did not write in a limbo but backed his literary efforts with real time action. Between 1980 and 1986, Narayan was nominated to [Rajya Sabha](#) - the upper house of the Indian Parliament where he singularly focussed on the plight of school children with an overload of homework that stifles their natural creativity. His efforts resulted in the formation of a committee chaired by [Prof. Yash Pal](#) to recommend changes in India's school educational system.

At Mysore Narayan studied at Maharaja's Collegiate High School. Later, he failed his University entrance examinations twice to eventually graduate in 1930 in four years, instead of the regular three years. The very same year Narayan scripted the first line of his first ever novel *Swami and Friends* in September on *Vijaydashmi*. This novel was published in 1935. In 1933, Narayan began working for a non-Brahman journal, *The Justice* and married despite astrological prediction that his bride would soon die. A daughter, Hema was born to the young couple in 1936. In 1939, Narayan's wife died. It is noteworthy that he neither re-married nor remained glum. In 1940, Narayan brought out a journal, *Indian Thought*. This was a prolific period with Narayan publishing a number of his novels. One of his novels, *Mr. Sampath* was adapted for a film. In 1953, Narayan's works were published in the United States for the first time by Michigan State University Press.

R K Narayan: The MCC

Narayan visited the United States in 1956 at the invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation. Here he met Graham Greene for the first and the only time in a unique literary friendship that spanned five decades. A memorable travelogue, 'My Dateless Diary', was the result of Narayan's American sojourn. In the Hotel Carlton, Berkeley, California, Narayan wrote the most famous of his novels, *The Guide*, which won him the [Sahitya Akademi Award](#) in 1960. This novel was adapted into a much critically acclaimed movie. In 1961 and 1964 he revisited the United States. During the latter trip he met the Swedish-American actress [Greta Garbo](#) and taught her the Gayatri Mantra.



Greene and Narayan at the BBC Studio, London (1957)
www.hindu.com

During this time he also travelled to Australia, Europe, the Soviet Union, Philippines and Indonesia. In 1967 his novel, *The Vendor of Sweets*, inspired by his American experience was published. In 1980 Narayan's works were translated into Chinese. The same year he was awarded the [AC Benson Medal](#) by the (British) [Royal Society of Literature](#). [Honorary doctorates](#) were conferred upon him by the [University of Leeds](#) in 1967, the [University of Mysore](#) in 1976 and the University of Delhi in 1973.

1990s saw a decline in Narayan's health which made him go to Madras to stay with his daughter and son-in-law in their apartment. He continued to write, occasionally visiting his grandson in America. T. S. Satyan tells us that Narayan kept himself entertained with the view of the crowded junction of roads at Alwarpet outside his house. But he missed Mysore: "I spend a lot of time reclining in easy chair and thinking of Mysore, which now has become a sort of emotional landscape... There's so much happening here. There is so much to see. So interesting". On May 13 2001, at the age of 94, Narayan died of cardiac arrest. N. Ram, one of his close friends tells us that just a few hours before he went on a ventilator and breathed his last, the master story teller had to be advised to not strain his lungs and keep quiet for he continued to discuss his plans to write a novel on the life of his *tahsildar* grandfather. On his death, Amitav Ghosh paid him a befitting tribute: "Narayan was a protean figure... His death is an incalculable

loss, not just for India, but for readers everywhere".

R K Narayan: The MCC



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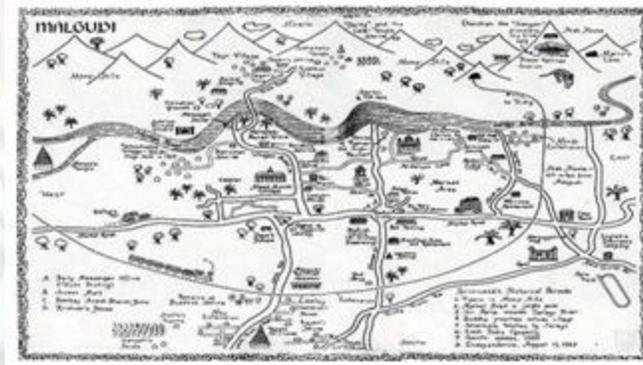
R. K. Narayan and the Literary Scene

The twentieth century in which Narayan wrote was an age in which India emerged as a young promising nation: a nation with a unique cultural blend and a fascinating multi-lingual spool. This period had a mixed response to English which was simultaneously a coveted international language with an elitist flagging and an abhorred legacy of colonialism and servility. Education in the English medium was a rare privilege. Indians who adopted it as their creative medium found it extremely daunting to gain acceptance since not only were they on a new terrain but their writings were invariably spliced with conscious and unconscious borrowings from their native tongue. The end-result however was remarkable: the language of these literary pioneers is masterly in its simplicity, fluidity and naturalness. In the 1930s and the 1940s, four major writers, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Manjari Isvaran wrote short stories in English and gave this genre "an identity... and a representative status, culturally speaking..." in C.V. Venugopal's words. The Indian sensibility interpreted by Indians was given an international platform. Anand handles comedy and satire. There is a lyrical quality to his works. Narayan's works have subdued irony and gentle humour. Raja Rao treats rustic vignettes with much serious concern. Isvaran probes the middle-class female mind and draws "intimate, graphic, uninhibited and revealing" pictures of fisher-folk. It is ironic that these authors were more popular abroad than in their home country. This was because at home those who understood English believed that the European writers were respectable while the West was fascinated by the exoticism of South Asia. It is remarkable how India and Indian accents came alive in the pages of these Indian authors whose stories were about the contemporary man on the street.

Among this generation of writers writing in English, R.K. Narayan stands out by virtue of the extraordinary simplicity and naturalness of his language which is stripped of Rao's spiritual meanderings and Anand's transliterations from Hindi. The New Yorker said that Narayan's writings are significant for "being the first English writing to infuse the novel with an Eastern existential perspective". Narayan's first literary contribution was a short story, 'Dodo' to a magazine 'The Merry' in the 1930s. He sets his characters before our eyes with the utmost economy of words, without any interposing description or moralisation, steering clear of message or doctrine. According to B. Vyaghreswarudu "Narayan has a scholarly pen, a poetic imagination and the perfect eye of the journalist" whose creative genius, Srinivas Iyengar says is like "perfume... nowhere concentrated but fills the entire atmosphere".

R K Narayan: The MCC

Narayan has a marked preference for short stories as "the short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of detail, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax". Elsewhere he tells us that since novels are centralized on major themes, a great deal of experience is left on the periphery whereas short stories cover a wider field by presenting concentrated miniatures of human experience and can be brought into existence deftly through mere suggestion, the focus being on a central idea or climax. He paints life as it is and never loses sympathy for his characters. In an interview to the Indian Express in 1961 - 'A peep into R.K. Narayan's Mind' - he said that when art is used as a vehicle for political propaganda... the stuff of fiction is forced into the background. In another interview he declared that "Politics is the least interesting aspect of life... It's only the human elements which last". He is content like Jane Austen, with his little bit of ivory, just so many inches wide. For the most part he prefers to get his effects by revealing new aspects and experiences of life in seemingly common-place situations. His stories centre around the lives of middle-class Indians, a class to which he belonged and which he knew intimately. V.S. Naipaul rightly surmised that "he always appeared to be writing from within his culture". Narayan himself asserted that "To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots - both in religion and family..." for the "material available to a story writer in India is limitless". Narayan's thoughts and expressions remain in perfect synchronisation. He is never verbose. The language that his characters use has Indian rhythms and cadences. 'In Defence of R. K. Narayan' B. Vyaghreswarudu contends that Narayan becomes what Raja Rao calls a true *Upasaka* in having a strong desire to communicate and in achieving a mastery over the language. In 1994 Narayan won the Yatra Award given for outstanding literary achievements from South Asia. The citation said, "Mr. Narayan is a master story-teller whose language is simple and unpretentious, whose wit is critical yet healing... and whose narratives have the lightness of touch which only the craftsman of the highest order can risk". William Walsh pays rich tribute to Narayan's art: "It fascinates by the reason of the authenticity and attractiveness of its Indian setting, and engages because of the substantial human nature it implies and embodies". The master story-teller believed that "Only the story matters... if a story is



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in tune completely with the truth of life... then it will be automatically significant". Narayan's fictional locale was more or less circumscribed within Malgudi which like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County gained an identity over a period of time and became eponymous with the changing face of India. Readers and critics have tried to locate Malgudi on the Indian map. But Malgudi is everywhere and nowhere. In 2010, in an interview with Susan in Frontline, Narayan tells us about "... a place called Lalgudi near Trichy and a place called Mangudi near Kumbakonam or somewhere. But Malgudi is nowhere". Jhumpa Lahri has the last word when she asserts that "in spite of their signature shortness there is nothing scant

R K Narayan: The MCC

about Narayan's stories... he erects, complicates, and alters a life" in a few pages. She places Narayan in "the pantheon of short-story geniuses" – Chekhov, Maupassant, O. Henry and Frank O. Connor.

The MCC

Narayan's forte is his ability to understand and deliver the complexities that limn simple lives and the seemingly straightforward. Narayan is at his best when he delves into the world of childhood with its innocence and its struggle with a baffling adult world. The children that people Narayan's pages are from a quintessentially quaint background on the threshold of modernity where rusticity has a strong foothold but is not its defining feature. Narayan creates a fictional semi-urban town, Malgudi as the backdrop for his stories – a setting typically South Indian. Narayan's genius lies in his ability to so universalise the particular that it strikes an empathetic chord with those who have never visited the South. A reader, even a casual first time reader, gets the uncanny sensation of having met these children in person or of having lived through a similar emotional trajectory. The story, MCC is an extract from the novel, *Swami and Friends*. *Swami and Friends* is a bildungsroman that maps the childhood years of Swami, a typical naïve child who hates regimentation and studies but loves outdoor sports. Vagabond, aimless dreams of taming lions or being renowned for ordinary sporting abilities define his every day. It is incredibly charming that this little lad has his tragedies and struggles that seem incongruous and yet so final and defining since they happen to him in his limited understanding of life's complexities and life's continuity despite all odds. Swami does not have the advantage of experience though he has his share of animated passion. Swami and his gang of friends invariably get caught up in the anti-colonial stirrings of the British Raj. Swami joins the *Swadeshi* movement not because he has an ideological political bond in common with the nationalists but because the movement fires his imagination and he enjoys the idea of going on a rampage. It is bittersweet to see this lad opposing the British with his English education. Nevertheless Swami is expelled from his school which had been targeted by the revolutionaries, and vandalized by Swami who participated in expressing anger against anything that smacked of the British, including schools run by the missions. Subsequently Swami gets admission in another school which is however not as highbrow as his earlier school. MCC begins as an aftermath to these events when the children get together to play.

With his characteristic sense of subtle down to earth humour, Narayan begins MCC on a political note where children become judgemental without understanding the complex societal underpinning. It is pertinent that the entire story centres around the children's passion for cricket which leads them to create a club, MCC. Little does Swami realise that there is nothing indigenous about cricket, which is a British legacy. Through the story, Narayan has his jab at cultural purists since cultures know no boundaries and human societies are complex accretions where what is most appealing is retained. Cricket with its relaxed pace and camaraderie fascinates the Indian mind set. It is extremely amusing that the name MCC is inspired by and is a throwback to Marylebone Cricket Club. For all their anti-

R K Narayan: The MCC



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colonial sentiments, the young lads hero worship British cricket legends like Tate and Brahman. It is rather endearing to see that this lot is beyond understanding the absurdities of parochial nationalist zeal. It is the writer's genius that he paints for us a sunny world where the everyday is not affected by revolutionary stirrings. Home remains a comforting zone and the hometown a restful relaxing space where the ardour to revolt and alter does not change the rhythm of ordinary day to day existence. Narayan is the artist of the average and the ordinary, and it is beautiful how all his fiction is a tribute to the spirit of simplicity. He shows us the ordinary in its every day colour but the warmth and empathy with which he canvases it is extraordinary – the stories leave an indelible impress on our minds with a better and more comprehensive understanding of how people and societies cohere and grow, and how childhood is unique in its limited but confident apperception of the complex adult world.

The story begins with Rajam coming over to Swami's house. Rajam is an outsider to Malgudi. His father is a police officer which mandates transfers from one place to another. Rajam is very different from the locals since he has a commendable English and his father's profession gives him an edge over his friends. Furthermore, Rajam is rich. The children at Swami's earlier school, Albert Mission School, are awed by Rajam. Rajam is a confident child though a little too full of himself. He feels very important as his father is in charge of the nation's law and order. It is interesting that unlike the other boys at Malgudi, Rajam is methodical, organised and capable of delegating duties and tackling unruliness. Towering over his classmates, Rajam remains affable in an aloof distant sense. He strongly feels he is different in his group towards whom his attitude borders on being condescending and mean. Unlike a spontaneous well intentioned close friend, Rajam makes calculated overtures. He waits for a decent time to elapse before he goes to meet Swami. The story begins with the sentence: "Six weeks later Rajam came to Swaminathan's house to announce that he forgave him all his sins..." Children's behaviour reflects on their society – its value systems and its snobbery. Rajam is conceited as he has been brought up to believe that the school he goes to – Albert Mission School – has a snob value which is absent from Swami's current school – Board High School. Without any supporting proof, Rajam sits judgement on the latter school which he believes produces good for nothing idiots. We are immediately given evidence to the contrary. Swami is in cheerful company that looks after each other and does not devalue anyone who is different. We get to know that Swami is proud of his new friend – Akbar Ali – a Mohammedan who has lent his latest creation, a box camera, to him and is not parochial or bigot but affable enough to laugh at the follies and excesses of the Mughal rulers. Through Swami we realise that Akbar Ali does not begrudge the misdemeanour of the Mughal rulers but has the good sense and humour to see it as history. On the other hand, Rajam belittles himself and his own religion. It is appalling to hear this lad speak

R K Narayan: The MCC

disrespectfully of his traditions and mores and declare conclusively, "We Brahmins deserve that and more." The two schools -Board High School and Albert Mission School - figure as symbols of indigenous education system and an education system modelled on the British education pattern, respectively. In all probability, Narayan tries to make his readers grasp that foreigners cannot understand the inclusiveness of Indian society which has helped it to grow and expand. On the contrary, the Raj could only be consolidated and expanded by playing on differences, by encouraging divisiveness and creating rancour on social and religious lines. It was imperative to British imperial designs that Hindus who were in majority, should consider themselves despicable. As such, Rajam is a fine example of this politics of divide and rule. He tells Swami, "... it is your Board High School that has given you this mentality", adding pompously that had it been for him, he "would have kept clear of... dirty politics and strikes" little realising that Swami had been part of the uprising while studying at Raja's Albert Mission School. It is heart warming to see Swami surrender to his friend's admonishing and regain his goodwill. Rajam is quickly mollified since like all children he is theatrical and lives for the moment. The two of them agree to be "friends as of old".

The story begins with Swami getting bored and languishing at home. Within a month's span, incidents and chance occurrences seem to have redefined the contours of friendship. Like adults, little children have their social trajectories though these are passively defined by the adult world that delimits who they are and how they lead their lives. One of Swami's friends, Sankar, just disappears and everyone is left guessing the reason which they believe could be his father's transfer. Another friend, Somu, is detained because of which he is regarded as an outsider. In the world of childhood everything is ephemeral: pain, longing, nostalgia, envy or hatred are temporary emotions. Swami moves on with minimal misgivings. He feels zero guilt over Somu's expulsion from his group since he has never questioned the injustice of reducing friendship to rights and prerogatives. Pea is diminutive in size and has health problems. His friends do not see anything out of the ordinary in his medical condition. The resilience and acceptance among children is remarkable. Mani and Swami continue to interact like they've always done.

Rajam moots the idea of starting a cricket club. It is absolute merriment to see the young lads discussing cricket in the same juvenile breath which makes them confess candidly, without a trace of guilt or smugness that they have no idea of how cricket is played. Rajam and Swami exchange notes on how they collect photographs of their cricket icons but are thoroughly inept at the game. They



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R K Narayan: The MCC

surmise that every cricket player, including legends like Hobbs must have learnt to play cricket after initial hiccups: "Probably Hobbs too was shy and sceptical before he took the bat and swung it". After a little hesitation over his weak cricket skills, Swami quickly warms up to the idea of forming a cricket team and challenging other teams to matches they believe would be easily won by them. The two friends have a very entertaining childish conversation over the name of their team. Swami enthusiastically suggests six to seven names which are eagerly jotted down by Rajam. Rajam is a little partial to naming their team, MCC, an acronym for 'Malgudi Cricket Club'. However, Swami in all his childhood innocence feels apprehensive about the name since he fears it could invite a law suit from Hobbs team, 'Marylebone Cricket Club' (MCC) at London which had been established in 1787 and entrusted with managing cricket laws. Laughter sparkles through the naivety of these lads who are actually nobodies but take themselves with earnest seriousness. With characteristic childishness, Rajam suggests a way out. He proposes that their team could have two names, one for formal inter-team matches and the other for their local games. Swami comes across as a worrier. He thinks that two teams would invite dual taxation. Narayan takes a jab at the common man who sympathized with Gandhi, not because of ideals of nationalism but because he had no inkling of the government's functioning. Rajam felt that there were "endless problems... The Government did not seem to know where it ought to interfere and where not. He had a momentary sympathy for Gandhi; no wonder he was dead against the Government". Their troubles seem compounded by their inability to decide who the Government actually was. This was a time of transition. Furthermore, they had no idea of the amount that had to be paid as tax. One feels a tad sorry for Rajam who is completely baffled by the sea of problems confronting them; he had simply imagined an uncomplicated boys' game - "gather a dozen fellows on the maidan next to his compound and play, and challenge the world".

Once the youngsters decide to have a team, their next agenda is to get their gaming gear. They go through the sports catalogue of Messrs Bins provided by Rajam who decides to settle for nothing but the best. He zeros on Junior Willard Bats, Seven Eight, "made of the finest seasoned wood". However, Swami in all his candid innocence states an indiscreet obvious: "It looks like any other bat..." which gets him an admonition from Mani: "You are not fit to be even a sweeper in our team" - a literal English translation of abuse in vernacular Hindi. Rajam also reprimands Swami and compares Junior Willard Bats to Rolls Royce. He asks Swami whether or not he knows the difference between Rolls Royce and other cars. We have a long answer from Swami, bristling with indignation at the unexpected reaction from his friends to his unpretentious innocuous statement. Swami gives us a long list of the merits of Rolls Royce and we have an interesting purview of the age's fascination with this car - a symbol of privilege and wealth. At the receiving end of Swami's information, Mani shuts up Swami saying that he ought to deliver a lecture on Rolls Royce while Rajam has the last word on the discussion. He tells his friends that at his earlier school his team had a dozen Willard bats among them and the bats had silk cords and hidden springs in them "so that when you touch the ball it flies". Once the superiority of the bats is established and mutually agreed upon, all the three get down to the business of placing a written order for the bats. Every time the lads put their heads together, they have an extended discussion, which is psychologically plausible since children have an active imagination and a mind of their own. Rajam thinks that they ought to order three bats so that they have a backup in case one of the bats breaks. He is overruled by Swami and Mani who think two bats are sufficient and three a waste of money. Despite his initial ignorance, Swami - who was till then considered a "heretic", catches on the enthusiasm. He is entrusted with the job of writing a letter to Messrs Bins. However, he becomes nervous and is unable to write anything comprehensive and substantial. Eventually Rajam ends up writing the letter, abrogating the proposed team's captaincy. We also get to know that the team has two names: 'Malgudi Cricket Club' and 'Victory Union Eleven'. The letter is

R K Narayan: The MCC

critically assessed and Mani feels that Rajam had inappropriately addressed Messrs Bins as 'Dear Sir' since they were complete strangers and it would be a breach of propriety to address them familiarly. A little detour into debating on social finesse gives us an idea of what constituted correctness during this period, and how the standards could differ. Through Rajam's rejoinder we get to know that "dear" is an appellation exclusive to people who share a common rank while 'Sir' is used by subordinates while interacting with their seniors. The letter is posted as it is.

Once the letter is despatched, the lads take a break "with a feeling of relief" having done "exacting work". A while later the postman brings them a letter which they childishly presume could be from Messrs Bins or Hobbs. Like children often do, they do not have an appropriate sense and time. They discover that the letter is from Sankar, one of their friends, whose father had got transferred. Sankar's letter shows Narayan to be an astute child psychologist. The letter is simple, monotonous and repetitive but the children go gaga over it and immediately get down to writing a reply. Mani copies Raman's letter *adverbatim* while Swami's and Raman's letters are near identical. A master at copying and illustrating human emotions, Narayan is consummate artist at his best while limning children who by nature are hyperactive and natural imitators. Once the letters are collectively put into an envelope and the envelope sealed for delivery, the children are unable to read Sankar's postal address on the envelope because the address is stamped all over. Narayan shows us how the postal department could be totally indifferent to the concerns of the country's citizens, treating its work routinely without bothering how people at large could be inconvenienced by its hastiness and shoddiness. As such, the letter is not posted.

Nothing keeps the children's spirit down for long. Despite "a dark curved smudge on the envelope" which was not "very illuminating", the days ahead continue to bring in excitement and new beginnings. Soon, a letter from Messrs Bins arrives which fills the children with pride. They are overwhelmed by the idea that a company of national stature had sent them a personalized, typed letter and not merely a regular card. They gloat over the fact that they were henceforth a legally recognized and a nationally acknowledged team since "His Majesty's post office" had "promptly delivered" a letter addressed to their captain. They took it as a compliment that Messrs Bins had sent them a huge catalogue worth four annas. In their innocent self-obsession these lads believe that they are extraordinary and do not reflect over their out-of-the-ordinary feats. Innocence and limited awareness coupled with ignorance soon backfires. The boys read and re-read the letter but find themselves at sea with its formal technical jargon. We are told the sum contents of the letter:

"Messrs Bins would be much obliged to him (the captain) if he would kindly remit 25 per cent with the order and the balance could be paid against the V.V.P. of the Railway Receipt".

"Three heads buzzed over the meaning of this letter" but were unable to even surmise whether Messrs Bins was sending them their order or not. With nuanced humour, Narayan tells us that "In the end they came to the conclusion that the letter was sent to them by mistake. As far as they could see, the M.C.C. had written nothing... to warrant such expressions as Obligated, Remit, and 25% ". They decide that the letter meant for someone else had been mistakenly sent to them. Despite him being overruled all the time, we see that Swami is astute and observant. He tells Rajam that Rajam's examination score of 60% was overrated as he was unable to comprehend the letter and the letter was specifically meant for them as it started with "To the Captain, M.C.C." In their collective limited wisdom, the children send the letter back to Messrs Bins with a covering letter informing

R K Narayan: The MCC

Messrs Bins that they had sent them "somebody's letter. Please send our things immediately".

For the next ten days the children wait for the bats to arrive but are disappointed. However, the children are naturally an optimistic lot. With characteristic resilience they take things into their stride

and accept the finality of doing with whatever is at hand. We are led to an anti-climax where the highs of anticipation and excitement give way to resigned acceptance and routine happiness. They find three bats in good condition in a "deadwood case" and "three used tennis balls" – not cork balls – from Raman's father's club. The lads contended that there was no harm in practising with old gear for, "By the time the real bats and the balls



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arrived, they would be in form to play matches". Their friend, Samuel – nicknamed Pea – promises to get them "four real stumps that he believed he had somewhere in his house". Things look bright enough for a nice friendly cricket match. "A neat slip of ground adjoining Raman's bungalow" is decided for the pitch. A team is readied with Rajam handpicking a few of his classmates. At five o' clock, on the day of the match the M.C.C. team assembles excitedly at the selected spot but soon excitement gives way to anxiety when Pea does not show up with the promised set of stumps. Narayan creates a frizzle of suspense when after half an hour Pea is seen coming but against the blinding glare of the sun it becomes difficult to discern whether or not "he was carrying a bundle" or "swinging his hands freely". The team is sorely disappointed. Pea stumps them without getting the promised stumps. He tells them that he could not locate the stumps in his house. Irritated, Rajam tells him that he should have informed them earlier instead of keeping them waiting needlessly to which Pea gives a candid reply: "How could I come here and tell you and at the same time search?" Bittersweet humor laces through the narrative and makes us see the sorrows of childhood in a light hearted vein. Once again we are in the midst of a resilient and a forgiving childhood. Though "A cloud descended upon the gathering" for each one of "them had been dreaming of swinging a bat and throwing a ball", one of their team members suggestion that they could mark a portion of Raman's compound wall as a temporary wicket restores their enthusiasm. The match begins in high sports. Swami becomes the bowler and Rajam the batsman. As luck could have it, Swami, who had never ever played cricket before, bowls out Rajam "with the first ball" and is given the title "Tate".

R K Narayan: The MCC

A short note on colonial undertones in MCC

Swami and Friends was written during the British Raj. Despite the novel's innocuous storyline which centers around its child protagonist, it is impossible to miss its subtle critique of colonialism. In MCC the plot is the dynamics of cricket in the world of Indian children. It is intriguing how Narayan has a jab at cultural purists and develops cricket into a representative symbol of colonial politics. The game can only be played with the right gear and equipment which the children are able to procure only after thwarted efforts. The cricket gear that they are finally get is second-hand but serviceable enough for them to start playing. The whole process of trying to get a British Sports Manufacturing Company to deliver them their gaming gear and finally defeating their own efforts is a sly dig at the confused love-hate relationship that the Indians shared with their colonial rulers. Language was one such area where innumerable communication lapses occurred. Upward mobility was an uphill task for those who were not educated in an English medium. However Indians consistently found the highest posts beyond their reach and like Swami and his gang of friends they had to accept and live with this frustrating truth. The irony was that Indians who occupied high posts glorified their position and sneered at those beneath them. They had clout like Rajam and just like him they were confused since patriotism and bootlicking the British rulers could not go hand in hand.

There are a few direct references to the British policies in the text. The children give us an insight into the social disquiet over British taxation laws and how Indians smarted over the idea that their hard earned money would line the British coffers. Rajam and Swami fret over whom to send payment to for the cricket gear they intend to purchase. The lads recognize Gandhi's call for *Swaraj* during their conversations. The story travels a full circle with the youngsters taking for granted that English medium schools run by the missionaries were the best despite the readers seeing Swami growing into a wholesome, rounded and more tolerant person than Rajam once he leaves the missionary school: Swami shares excellent camaraderie with one of his Muslim classmates but Rajam does not find it worth appreciating. What underlines this oblique reference to colonial politics is Narayan's optimism that irrespective of differences among themselves, Indians remain unified and one. As such, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds the children successfully play their game. And the crowning glory is that this group is like a typical Indian who firmly contends that that he is equal to any international icon. The story ends with its protagonist, Swami being given the title Tate. It is a befitting conclusion for no matter what or how much Indians tried, they could not escape the British yardstick to evaluate themselves and their achievements.

R K Narayan: The MCC

Glossary

deadwood case: thin plywood, light timber case

Hobbs: Sir John Berry "Jack" Hobbs (1882 – 1963) a British [cricketer](#) nick named 'The Master' is regarded as one of the greatest batsmen in the history of cricket

Jumping Stars: A football club in Madras of which Narayan was a member

M.C.C.: Marylebone Cricket Club' (MCC) at London which had been established in 1787

Muhammad of Gazni: The first sultan of the Ghaznavid dynasty in Afghanistan (971-1030) who invaded India seventeen times between 1000 and 1026 A.D.

Rolls Royce: A legendary car manufacturing company founded by [Charles Rolls](#) and [Henry Royce](#) in 1906 in [Manchester, England](#)

Tate: Maurice William Tate, an English [cricketer](#) of the 1920s and 1930s . He was the first Sussex cricketer to take a wicket with his first ball in Test cricket.



R K Narayan: The MCC

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