

ECCENTRICITY AS A TRAIT IN R.K.NARAYAN'S MR. SAMPATH AND THE GUIDE.

Dr. M.R.Kumaraswamy
Assistant Professor of English
Gobi Arts & Science College
Gobichettipalayam-638 453, Tamilnadu
Email: emmarkumar@gmail.com

Introduction:

The term eccentricity can be defined as the condition or quality of being peculiar and according to the Oxford English Dictionary it means “unconventional and slightly strange.”

When we examine eccentricity, either as a line or as a whole nature, with reference to the characters shaped by Narayan's we find that it brings out the abnormal behaviour or the capriciousness of the human nature. On the other hand, when we closely go through the novels, we find that Narayan has a purpose to spotlight on the inconsistencies of life.

At the outset when we browse through the novels, the typology of eccentricity makes one sentient of the rather startling number of the eccentrics that are found in Narayan's novels. On analysis, it looks as though Narayan himself thinks that more eccentric people live here than elsewhere. The reading of Narayan's novels will make one aware that every third character in the Malgudi novels seems to be an eccentric. These sketches seem to have in a large number contributed to inhabit the actions in Narayan's novels. We cannot but help being conscious of their jostling and clamouring presence. They are picturized in diverse appearances and demonstrate varied personality traits. We can say that the eccentric characters in the novels of Narayan may appear as a mere dot and here I have taken for analysis two of Narayan's novels *Mr. Sampath* and *The Guide*.

Portrayal of the eccentrics in *Mr. Sampath*:

The eccentric Ravi in *Mr. Sampath* is realized as an artist turned lover, turned lunatic. With this character, the novelist seems to have completed the portrayals of “the lunatic, the lover and the poet.” He is also realized more as a symbolic character than as

an individualized one. Initially he plays the role of a bank clerk, who unwittingly loses the job. Thanks mainly to his general manager “that compound of beef and whisky,” (18) sees a beautiful woman like a vision but before he immortalized her on his canvas she vanishes. Much later, he takes Shanti for his lost Beatrice and, as Sampath, playing God Shiva, tries to embrace Shanti, playing Parvati, Ravi rushes to the stage, knocks the rival down and tries to kiss and carry his sweetheart. Ultimately he finds himself exorcized and sent to Salem for cure.

Ravi’s eccentricity, especially as he turns a lunatic, can hardly be exaggerated. Ravi as an artist, as an obsessive lover, and a lunatic he, however, comes out flimsily and lacks authentic touches. The artist is mostly shown with a single sketch of his beauty. As a lover he makes an extremely poor and pathetic figure and his lunacy is also summarily dealt with. It is here that Ravi can be taken as a symbolic character.

What seems to be concealed beneath Ravi’s obsessive and airy love for the visionary beauty is in fact his illusory conception of love and his deviation from the ordinary way of life. Ravi’s father is reluctant to see his son employed at Sampath’s film studio. He expresses his concern for the ordinary man’s life as:

“Then he had better try and do something else ... There must be dozens of ways making a living without becoming a performing monkey”. (117)

Ravi may also be taken as a symbolic projection of Srinivas’s mind. Srinivas, who as a sane middleclass householder advises Ravi, “Like Shiva open your third eye and burn up Love,” (103) ironically finds him drawn to the same beauty:

He saw before him a very pretty girl ... A perfect figure ... everything that should send a man, especially an artist, into hysterics. Srinivas ... felt her enchantment growing upon her. (139)

Symbolically again, Ravi’s role of a lunatic or a psychopath assumes importance in the context of the attitude and philosophy of Srinivas. Despite his willingness to stop the inhuman beatings of the exorcist and save his friend Ravi, and in fact stop the whole mad act, Srinivas checks himself because the recently seen “Pisgah” vision makes him realize the futility of his action. It is here that Ravi becomes the medium to project Srinivas’s philosophy of non-action and quietism. In the end Ravi, already showing signs of subdued emotions, is led to the holy place of faith, a temple at Salem. In his heading

towards the temple from the mad and a false world of illusory love, suggests the restoring of the average and ordinary life freed from illusions and distortions. Thus, Narayan seems to make use of Ravi's madness to reflect Srinivas's sanity and wisdom.

V.L.G. in *Mr.Sampath*, although a dot of a character, plays an important functional role. Basically, he is realized as the most popular stage and film actor and is known to have played the only role of Lord Shiva all his life. Absurdly enough, the reason for his sticking to the only role was not so much for its challenging possibilities but because V.L.G. happened to be a great devotee of Shiva. The religious actor says: "I do no other role. I'm a devotee of Shiva. Both in work and in leisure, I want to contemplate Shiva". (141) Narayan describes the eccentric in these words:

V.L.G. took out of his pocket a small casket, out of it he fished a piece of tobacco and put it in his mouth, and then proceeded to smear a bit of lime on the back of a betel leaf and stuffed it also into his mouth. He chewed with an air of satisfaction. (142)

It may be noted that Narayan seems to juxtapose the ridiculous V.L.G. with the sublime image of Lord Shiva. Apparently, V.L.G.'s tobacco chewing act deflates the reader's anticipation for the Great Shiva. In fact, the initials, V.L.G. have an unmistakable ring of trivial modernity in the context of the spiritually evoked name of Lord Shiva. Finally, it is in keeping with the juxtaposing technique that V.L.G. as Shiva descends from the Kailas because Sampath refuses to pay him five thousand rupees for the extra acting and is obliged to quit the scene unceremoniously.

Significantly enough, a one-liner eccentric also seems to be playing a functional role. It is because of his exit from the stage that Sampath plays Shiva and the whole film flops. One may also read an ironic suggestion in Lord Shiva's role. V.L.G. and Sampath though play God Shiva, instead of realized as the "chaos controlling agent" they end up as the Lord of Misrule. In the final analysis, it may be noted that Narayan's employment of eccentricity, realized especially in the one or two liners, seems to be an ironic or symbolic device to underline the thematic implications.

Eccentricity of characters in *The Guide*:

The odd man Marco in the novel *The Guide* is the only eccentric cuckold in Narayan's novels. Like many of his eccentric counterparts, Marco too is a centrally

related character. Despite him being a cuckold, or perhaps, because of it, Marco virtually shapes and controls the other major characters in the novel. Uniquely, even after his exit from the scene of action, Marco, especially for Rosie, still remains on the stage as, what may be called, a bright absentee. It may be significant to focus on the most characteristic element of his life, oddity, as it seems to have become the guiding principle of his life.

Marco, a shortened version of Marcopolo the great traveller, is the name given by Raju, as the former appears to him in his first encounter with the eccentric. It is pertinent to mention it because Marco gave Raju the impression of being a “space traveller,” (8) striking a definite contrast to all the earth-bound tourists. In fact, from the first appearance to his final exit, Marco’s entire span of life is realized through glaring oddities.

Despite the essentially modern and liberal spirit reflected in his “matrimonial advertisement,” Marco’s first encounter with Rosie must have given her the distorted image of the man who seemed to be interested in and concerned with things rather than living human beings. Rosie says to Raju: “we met, he examined me and my certificate, and we went to a registrar and got married”. (75) If Marco unreservedly exhibits his eccentricity, his oddity seems to have created a discordant note in the bride Rosie’s mind.

It may be significant to stress that the odd man preferred to peep into the degree certificate to verify its validity rather than peeping into the life-long companion. He in fact considered marriage as the social symbol of status and prestige. In this context Marco reflects the Duke in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” without, of course, the latter’s horrifyingly inhuman trait.

Marco is mostly realized as a scholar engrossed in his research. He seems to have been destined to live all alone. It is important to note his preference for the loneliness over human company which C.D.Narasimhaiah attributed to Marco’s obsessive research. He says: “Long preoccupation with walls and stones has made a stone of himself and the stone is in the midst of him”. (186) He feels excited and thrilled in the company of stone-walls, and grows grim and ominously quiet in the company of human beings. Raju puts his oddity thus: “Dead and decaying things seemed to loosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs”. (72) Although this certainly is the lover viewing the rival, one cannot miss the basic oddity in

Marco's nature and the biting irony that despite Rosie also being an artist, Marco not only totally disregarded her art but also regarded it as "street acrobatics." (130)

Marco's odd and cold relation with his wife and his abnormal passion for the research among the ruins may be attributed to the lack of virility in him. Although Narayan is known for his reticence in the scenes of passion, he is certainly not silent in the novel *The Guide*. When Rosie, for instance, confides in Raju, she talks about Marco not being a "real and live husband". (76) She seems to have suggested enough to underline what's what. Raju says: "I looked up at her to define her meaning, but she lowered her eyes, I would only guess". (76) It shows that Narayan does not feel comfortable to consider mere facts.

Marco's cuckoldry has many implications. Basically, it underlines the odd man's mental make up. In fact his morbid interest in his research and total neglect of his wife may be taken as one of the causes for his cuckoldry. If Marco had shown a wee bit of human consideration, a little love and a little affection to Rosie, the Karma conscious Indian wife would never have stooped to folly. Marco's straightforward and plain nature may also be considered responsible for the fall. He seemed to have taken his wife's faithfulness and his trust in Raju for granted. It is in this context that one recalls Raju's comment on Marco, after the fall, as he ironically says:

I had several problems to contend with. Her husband was the least of them. He was a good man, completely preoccupied, probably, a man with an abnormal capacity for trust. (102)

In fact, Marco's trust in the basic good and virtue in human nature may be regarded as the redeeming feature in the otherwise inconsiderate eccentric. It is in this context that one recalls Marco's reaction to Rosie's betrayal. He puts it thus: "I didn't know that hotel catered for such fervid art-lovers." (132)

In a way Marco's reaction to Rosie's betrayal also appears typical. His determination to abandon the sinner remains unequivocal. He says: "You are not my wife ... I don't want you here, but if you are going to be here, don't talk. That is all". (134) His reaction to Raju's breach of faith also appears equally characteristic. Says the man of few words: "Let us be done with everything and then you get out of my sight." (118)

The stunned and pained Marco through “the look of despair on his face” (133) and appearing “vacant” (119) expresses the painful sense of being the cuckold. But he had better and more dedicative pursuit than to indulge in the story of the betrayal.

Marco keeping the promise by faithfully acknowledging Raju’s help in his book and his gesture of sending Rosie’s jewellery may possibly be interpreted as oddity and eccentricity respectively. As a matter of fact, it adds a silver lining to his otherwise darkish portrayal. Ironically, it is the Cardish Marco’s passivity which seems to pull the string and make Rosie and Raju dance.

Conclusion:

The eccentrics in Narayan’s above two novels drive home the point about the novelist’s character delineation. As a delineator of surface human character, Narayan finds the eccentrics more beneficial. The caricatures as types that figure significantly are understood through their idiosyncrasy and apparent incongruity. The eccentrics have been basically portrayed in a humourous way. Narayan depicts either the attitude or the behavioural pattern of the people. It is in their portrayal as comic creation that one can know Narayan’s conception of comedy which, although basically creates mirth and laughter, is not divorced from tragedy.

We find that the eccentric characters in the above two novels are male characters. It is probably because the woman in the middle-class family represents “custom and reason”. Narayan suggests that since women in culturally dominated Hindu society imbibe the principle of acceptance, they remain more centric as against the deviatingly eccentric men.

It is clear that the eccentrics stress the recurring patterns of the Malgudi novels. They bring out the cultural ethos, the circular journey of the protagonist and the assertion of the average and the ordinary.

Primary Sources:

Narayan, R.K. *Mr.Sampath*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1983.

---, *The Guide*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1971.

Secondary sources:

Bhatnagar, M.K. *New Insights into the Novels of R.K.Narayan*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008.

Dadich, Anil. *Narayan's Style: A Linguistic Perspective*. Jaipur: Bohra Prakashan, 1996.

Hariprasanna, A. *The World of Malgudi*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1994.

Narasimhaiah, C.D. "R.K.Narayan's The Guide" in *Aspects of Indian English Literature*. Ed. M.K.Naik. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1982.

Raizada, Harish. *R.K.Narayan: A Critical Study of His Works*. New Delhi: Young India Publications, 1989.

IJSER