CHAPTER – IV

THE NOTION OF ECCENTRICITY

The term eccentricity may be defined as the state or quality of being eccentric and the Oxford English Dictionary offers the following shades of meaning:

1. The quality of being abnormally centred; of not being concentric; of not having the centre.
2. The condition of not being centrally situated, distance from centre.
3. Of a curve; Deviation from the circular form.
4. The quality or habit of deviating from what is usual or regular; irregularity; oddity; whimsicality.

Considering Narayan’s notion of eccentricity, the OED frame of meanings may certainly serve as a point of reference. At the outset eccentricity, either as a streak or as a full-fledged nature, in the cortex of Narayan’s characters, underlines the oddity or whimsicality in human nature. However, a close reading of the Narayan novels reveals that eccentricity seems to be the novelist’s strategy to focus on life’s basic inconsistencies.
At the outset the typology of eccentricity makes one aware of the rather alarming number of the eccentrics in Narayan’s novels. In fact, Narayan himself seems to think “that more eccentrics people live here than elsewhere” (Mani, 84). One may even say that every third character in Malgudi novels seems to be an eccentric. Naturally, the eccentric seems to have largely contributed to populate Narayan’s novels, and seems to be increasing with every new novel of his. One cannot help being aware of their jostling and clamouring presence. They appear in diversified appearances and display divergent personality traits. One may also note that the eccentric character, in Narayan, may appear as a mere dot or a mere line or a full-fledged study. The typology intends to deal with them in the order of their entries on the Malgudi stage.

Ebenezar, reminiscent of the Biblical namesake, seems to be the first eccentric in the Malgudi novels. He appears as Swami’s scripture teacher at the Albert Mission School in *Swami and Friends*. Ebenezar’s streak of eccentricity is chiefly dramatized through his fanatical attitude. The scripture teacher seems to have been literally lifted from Narayan’s ‘school – days’ life. In *My Days* Narayan says: “The teachers were all converts, and, towards the few non – Christian students like me, they displayed a lot of hatred.... The scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuse were heaped on idol – worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus”.

Ebenezar in (SAF) seems to be repeating the attitude of Narayan’s teacher in his
extolling the virtues of Jesus Christ and denouncing the Hindu Gods in general and shri Krishna in particular. Narayan presents the scene with Ebenezer's obvious theatricality thus:

“Oh, wretched idiots!” the teacher said, clenching his fists, “why do you worship dirty, lifeless wooden idols and stone images?........ Now see our Lord Jesus. He could cure the sick, relieve the poor, and take us to Heaven.” Tears rolled down Ebenezar's cheeks when he pictured Jesus before him. Next moment his face became purple with rage as he thought of Sri Krishna.

It is evident that Ebenezar's inflammable denouncing of the Hindu Gods turns into a delightful comicality as it is realized in the innocent world of Swaminathan. In fact it is Swaminathan who turns the episode into an anti-climax by retorting the teacher that if Jesus was so great why he was crucified and asking, if “he was a God, why did he eat flesh and fish and drink wine?”

Ebenzar is a one liner and a one-dimensional pencil sketch. However, installing the eccentrics in Narayan's future novels, he remains one of the memorable caricatures.

As we consider Narayan's first eccentric, we may note certain pace-setting elements in Swami and Friends, especially in the context of the typology of eccentricity in Narayan's novels. The streak of eccentricity seems to be projected though the magnifying glass of exaggeration. The eccentric is realized though the comic filter. One may discern the detached delineation of the caricature. And
finally, one may also note Narayan's flair for the meaningful names. Ebenezar, for instance, strikes an easy contrast to and juxtaposed with the young hero Swaminathan, a character fully realized as a Hindu boy.

Kailas, in (TBA), installs Alphonse in (ATM), as a drunken eccentric. He too seems to be the pick from the novelist's life: Narayan tells us: "My uncle himself was an inescapable model for me...... especially his abandon to alcohol in every from all through the day". Disregarding the genesis of the drunkard, one may say that Narayan seems to have presented Kailas through the generalized psychology of a stock character. However, he has been endowed with a few endearing traits and idiosyncratic features and he plays an enlivening role. As a caricature, Kailas may certainly be regarded as an unmistakable development in Narayan's delineation of eccentric caricatures.

Narayan vividly underlines the characteristic traits of Kailas as he tells Chandran his epicurean philosophy - "A man must spend forty years in making money and forty years in spending", as he grows loquacious and, as he boasts of his extraordinary ability to remember his own name, do any multiplication or addition, and to repeat the numbers from a hundred backwards after "fifteen pegs of neat whisky".

Although Kailas is realized as a two-liner caricature, his role has several implications. Basically, Kailas plays a clown to bring comic relief against the gloomy world of Chandran, the dejected lover. More importantly, he, as has been
already pointed out, precipitates a crisis of conscience in Chandran by showing him the ugliest faces of realities: a horrible drunkard – himself – and a prostitute. Knowing Narayan's flair for meaningful names, one may read the novelist's ironic intentions reflected in Kailas: his name and his association with alcohol, recalls the image of the god Shiva, but unlike the latter's ability to restore merely as a local Bacchus. Kailas may also be taken as the psychological projection of Chandran's imbalanced mind. In the final analysis, Kailas, unlike the eccentric in Swami and Friends, plays a thematically related role of a catalyst enforcing Chandran to the role of a fake sanyasi.

Besides Kailas, The Bachelor of Arts has four characters displaying streaks of eccentricity. Gajapathi, the Asst. Professor of English, correcting everybody's English and asserting that even Fouler has serious English errors, is often caught repeating: "Heads down and pencils busy, gentlemen, listen to me with your pencils gentlemen". A lover of his own voice and an advocate of the new historical approach in the country, Prof. Raghavachar, insists on having "a clarified, purified Indian History". A revolutionary and an anti-imperialist friend of Chandran, Veeraswami, besides his fantastic theory of Cure Hunger by encouraging people to use coconuts and fruits of cactus for food, determines to start a movement called the Resurrection Brigade to gain India's freedom and appeals everyone to be its members including "poets, philosophers, musicians, sculptors, and swordsmen". The last of the eccentrics is the poet called Mohan.
Since as a poet he "doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven," he versifies on a wide variety of subjects from "a Roadside Grass-Seller to the planet in its Orbit: from Lines suggested by an Ant to the Dying Musician".

It may be suggested that the eccentricity telescoped in the caricatures of the teachers, though creates ripples of laughter, it seems to be the writer's strategy to satirize the undesirable notion and practice of education introduced shrewdly by the English and followed meekly by the Indians. It may be pointed out that the novelist's dissatisfaction over the colonial system of education, though playfully and indirectly introduced under the guise of eccentricity in The Bachelor of Arts, finds a serious treatment in The English Teacher. As for the eccentricity projected through Chandran's friends, it may also be taken as the symbolic reflection of the hero's illusory notions of reality.

Narayan seems to be fully convinced to accept the life as a whole. Accordingly, he treats his characters with a balanced view. Putting it differently, he does not believe in painting his human portraits either in full dark -- even Vasu, the metaphor of evil shows some human elements -- or in full white -- Gandhi however, seems to be the only exception. If his good characters are not totally free from the vices, the bad ones too, although subtly, display an element of commendable trait. For Narayan believes in the possibility of even seeing the transformation of demons into Gods under certain conditions. Keeping this in view, one may consider the eccentric Ramani in (TDR).
Undeniably, the eccentricity in Ramani irrupts in the context and the cost of Savitri. Ramani's whims and idiosyncrasies seem to have become the part and parcel of Savitri's consciousness. One may, for instance, note the whimsicality of Ramani reflected in this hooting of his car horn thus:

Ramani as a rule sounded his horn about a furlong from his gate, two hoots which were meant to tell the household, "Ranga, keep the door open...." While to Savitri it said, "It is your business to see that Ranga does his work properly....." Some days the hooting would be less emphatic and, Savitri's ears were sufficiently attuned to the nuances and she could tell a few minutes in advance what temper her husband was in.\(^1\)

It may be noted that there seems to be a decidedly progressive employment of eccentricity in *The Dark Room*. It does not come here merely as a mirth creator. The horn hooting of the car has two meaningful realizations during the course of the novel. At the beginning, if it reflects Ramani's whimsicality, it also comments on Savitri's slavish condition. At the end of the novel, however, Savitri checks herself consciously against her instinctively expressed response to it and almost defiantly says, "what if?"\(^12\) The inwardly transformed attitude of Savitri towards her tyrant husband, though (almost) monosyllabically expressed, vividly notes the growth of her consciousness. The eccentricity, thus, is thematically linked up and serves to underline the development of the flat character of Savitri.
One also recalls an instance, clearly underlining Ramani’s whim as he takes Savitri to a movie. Wishing to monopolize Savitri all for himself, he does not allow any of the three children to accompany the parents and to the daughter persisting to be taken along with them, the father explodes with: “If I hear you squeal, I will thrash you, remember. Be a good girl”\textsuperscript{13}. As for Savitri, Ramani says, “I will count sixty. You must dress and come out before that”\textsuperscript{14}.

If the eccentric streak denotes the tyrant’s whim, it also connotes the husband’s desire to enjoy the beautiful company of his spouse all for himself. He was proud of his fair wife and swelled with pride if he found people turning back to notice the charming lady. At the theatre he became the epitome of love and consideration. It is the streak which brings to the surface the concealed human element in the otherwise inhuman Ramani. In the final analysis Ramani’s eccentricity may also be viewed symbolically as it focuses on Ramani’s “Ex-Centric” role in the context of his affair with Shanta Bai. Significantly enough as the so called centre falls out, the mother plays it and saves the things from falling apart.

The first eccentric worth the name is Dr. Shankar of Medical Hall, in (TET). To Krishnan he is not merely the family doctor but also “the greatest physician on Earth”\textsuperscript{15}. Narayan introduces him with the usual touch of comicality: “he looked like a film star being mobbed by admirers. He waved his hand, smiled, and gently pressed all his admirers back to their seats”\textsuperscript{16}.
Listening to Susila’s symptoms (given orally by her husband) the doctor prescribes the medicine, dispelling the doubts of the bewildered teacher saying: “Oh, it is just Malaria. I have fifty cases like this on hand, no need to see her”17. And strangely enough, when the earlier diagnosis goes wrong and the second says typhoid, the doctor, feeling least guilty about it, says: “I like typhoid... It is the one fever which goes strictly by its own conviction and rules... typhoid is the king among fevers... it is an aristocrat who observes the rules of the game. I’d rather trust a cobra than a green snake”18.

Later, he frequents Krishnan’s house and familiarly moves about. He even plays with the teacher’s daughter Leela and gives her a ride on his shoulder. When he is confronted with the Swami, playing a sort of spiritual healer for Susila, Dr.Shankar merely smiles and says to the agnostic teacher: “Don’t belittle these people.... There is a lot in him too, we don’t know. When we understand it fully, I am sure we doctors will be able to give more complete cure”19.

It may be pointed out that although Dr.Shankar’s eccentricity basically underlines the oddity and idiosyncrasy in his character, it may also be viewed symbolically. Viewed thus, the eccentricity, particularly realized through his detached and aloof attitude to Susila’s sickness, may be regarded as the symbolic projection of Krishnan’s future attitude to Susila’s death. In fact, Krishnan too displays a vivid streak of eccentricity as he is caught composing a poem, “The
Great Kailas\textsuperscript{20}, as Susila lay on her death-bed. But concealed beneath the eccentricity of the teacher seems to be the projection of the sthitaprajana.

Dr. Krishnan’s playing with Leela may look unbecoming for his profession. But beneath the insane behaviour seems to be concealed his spiritual maturity of understanding the world of innocence. In the final analysis the eccentric doctor’s comic role, with his absolute detached attitude, may in fact exemplify the nature of feelings... usually accompanies laughter.... Indifference is its natural environment\textsuperscript{21}. And the eccentric may also underline Narayan’s concept of tragedy with an unmistakable ring of comedy.

The headmaster in (TET) has a distinct identity as an eccentric. He, as a headmaster, seems to have a double in real life as Narayan talks about the one in his memoir, My Days: “I never knew what his name was: one never thinks that a headmaster could have any other name”\textsuperscript{22}. He is introduced as Leela’s teacher happily engrossed in his experimental school for children, the called meaningfully, Leave Them Alone. Despite his own children, the headmaster was ironically destined to shape and look after other people, thanks mainly to his termagent wife. He exemplifies a life of ironies and paradoxes. He serves the astrologer’s predicted death and despite the pleadings and entreaties of the members of his family, resolves to renounce the household for good and devote to Leave Them Alone.
As an eccentric character he rings authentic. For instance, while taking Krishnan to his house when his children tell him that their mother was not at home, the father says: “Excellent.” Or, when Krishnan was surprised to see him reading a critical book on Beaumont and Fletcher, “The dullest work, the headmaster reveals the mystery by saying: “If I open a book like this and allow my eyes to rest on the lines, it helps me to do a lot of private thinking. I read very few books for any other purpose”23. Or, when he tells Krishnan that he never uses a towel at the bath room because he enjoys “a whole – sale drying”24.

Narayan makes his symbolic intentions clear by giving the eccentric no name. Read in this sense, the headmaster plays Krishnan’s alter-ego. He may also be regarded a catalyst as he opens a window on the innocent world of children for Krishnan. Significantly, he seems, in a way like the eccentric Dr. Shankar, to be related to Krishnan through the death motif. Symbolically, if the headmaster survives his own death, *The English Teacher* survives that of his wife’s. Ironically, however, if *The English Teacher* succeeds on communicating with his wife, even after her death, the headmaster, despite his living wife, is destined to have no communication with her. In the final analysis, although the two-liner eccentric creates subdued laughter, he reflects the inevitable sadness in human life underlined in Narayan’s notion of comedy.

At the outset, the eccentric Ravi in (MS) is realized as an artist turned lover, turned lunatic. With him, 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 bank clerk, unwittingly loses the job, thanks mainly to his general manager “that compound of beef and whisky”25, 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 Parvathi, 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. But playing an artist, or an obsessive lover, or 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 may be taken as a symbolic character.

In the context of Ravi’s mad degree of love, Chandran (TBA) looks more sensible as he restores the temporarily lost balance of mind. 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 (and therefore sane) way of life. Ravi’s father, reluctant to see his son employed at Sampath’s film studio underlines his concern for the ordinary man’s life thus:
“Then he had better try and do something else.... There must be dozens of ways making a living without becoming a performing monkey”

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”, 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.”

Symbolically again, Ravi’s role of a lunatic or a psychopath assumes importance in the context of the (entire) attitude and philosophy of Srinivas (and by implication of Narayan). 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’s 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 -- is suggested the restoring of the average and ordinary life freed from illusions and distortions. Thus, ironically enough, 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. Says the religious actor: "I do no other role. I'm a devotee of Shiva. Both in work and in leisure I want to contemplate Shiva". 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".

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 the 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 one or two liners, seems to be an ironic or symbolic device to underline the thematic implications.

As one passes from one novel to another (in its chronological sequence) one notices Narayan's progressive development in the portrayal of his eccentrics. If they remain essentially comic and grotesque caricatures, they also underline thematic relevance. The Madras Crank in (TFE) may be regarded as an exemplary in this context. When the bereaved sire Margayya (receiving the news of the death of his prodigal son, Balu) goes to Madras, a chance acquaintance takes him to the eccentric, known as the Madras Crank who turns out to be a wealthy owner of a theatre. This is how the Crank introduces himself:

I am not God, but only God's agent. He ordered, "Go and prepare The world for my coming." That I am doing. I write every day to Every King, Ruler, Viceroy, president and Minister, n the world, That their boss is soon arriving... Every day I write to President Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill, particularly.

Significantly, the one liner crank, besides playing a wonderful specimen of eccentricity, serves other symbolic functions as well. It is in this sense that he seems to be related to the other equally wealthy eccentric, Margayya, and
underlines thematic relevance. The supposed death of Balu, conveyed by the Madras Crank, may be viewed as the loss of the filial relationship of the man with Midas touch. It is the death that virtually turns the exasperated father blind towards his already pampered son as he encourages him to lead the more indulgent life and ultimately gets him married. Balu’s death obliquely comments on the next door people, as the glimpse of the joint – family relationship in (Narayan’s) India. It also underlines a characteristic Indian experience as Balu’s mother expresses her excessive grief over the demise of her son.

In the final analysis, the Madras Crank may be regarded as one of Narayan’s delightful caricatures realized through his singular eccentricity. It may certainly be relevant to note Freud’s views in this regard: “As is known, caricature, comic in itself, from the entire picture... a feature which would be overlooked if viewed with the entire picture. Only by isolating this feature can the comic effect be obtained which spreads in our memory over the whole picture”.

As one considers Waiting for the Mahatma one cannot help thinking that if intended, Narayan the ironist par excellence, could certainly have painted Mahatma Gandhi as the Eccentric Extraordinary. Possible for the personal reverence for Gandhi, the novelist must have cast him differently. Moreover, the novel, although grows under the shadow of the Mahatma, it is certainly not his story. One may therefore consider the other eccentrics, merely the one liners, in Waiting for the Mahatma.
When Sriram was in detention at the Central Jail, he was confronted with the self-styled leader, a bully, imprisoned on the charge of house breaking and murder. The idiosyncratic trait of the bully was his whim to sing a hymn, a bhajan – “Rama Rama, Sita Rama” and to threateningly insist everyone to join him. When sriram was released from the jail, the bully’s parting words to him were: “When I am released I will break into your house some night, and teach you good sense. I don’t like selfish fellows like you”.

The jail bully and the eccentric Ramu (at the village) who climbed the tree-top with a lantern, causing untold anxiety to his mother shouting, “if you are going to quarrel, I’ll jump down and make you all scream”, have obviously no thematic relevance and seem, therefore, primarily to people the novel.

The odd man Marco in (TG) is the only eccentric cuckold in Narayan’s novels. Like many of his eccentric counterparts, Marco too is a centrally related character. Despite his being 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”, 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. Says Rosie to Raju: “we met, he examined me and my certificate, and we went to a registrar and got married”. If Marco unreservedly exhibits his eccentricity, his oddity seems to have created a discordant note in bride Rosie’s mind.

It may be significant to stress that the odd man preferred to peep into the degree certificate (probably to verify its validity) rather than peeping into the lifelong companion. He in fact considered marriage as the social symbol of status and prestige. In this context Marco may recall the Duke in 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. What is important to note is his preference for 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”. It is no
wonder then if 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 unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs". 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".

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 Guide*. When Rosie, for instance, confides in Raju, she talks about Marco not being a "real and live husband". She seems to have suggested enough to underline what’s what. Says Raju: "I looked up at her to divine her meaning, but she lowered her eyes, I would only guess". Possibly, Narayan does not feel comfortable or consider it necessary to bare the 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 of his cuckoldry. Had he 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.” 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.”

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.” 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.”

The stunned and pained Marco through “the look of despair on his face” and appearing “vacant” underlines 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’s 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.

At the outset, the name Nataraj (The Man-Eater of Malgudi) makes Narayan’s ironic intentions quite clear. If Lord Shiva (another name of Nataraj) is mainly associated with the tandava – nritya and is reputed to have restored the disorderly chaotic universe, the printer Nataraj, although finds himself obliged to dance on many stages, is basically realized as the “Lord of Misrule.” As one considers Nataraj as a full-length study of eccentricity, one may become aware of the multi-levelled implications the character underlines.

Significantly enough, Nataraj seems to be introducing himself as an eccentric printer by exemplifying his strange attitude in the context on his kindred souls, particularly the poet, and seen the journalist, the daily visitors of his parlour at the Trust printing press. Totally unmindful of the basic principle of business psychology, Nataraj lends his ears to their innocuous tales and his place for their comfort. He even prides over the fact his parlour becomes serviceable for the common good: “Anyone who found his feet aching as he passed down Market Road was welcome to rest in my parlour on any seat that happened to be vacant”49.
Nataraj is never preoccupied with the profit motive and in the reversal of order (as a businessman) he exemplifies honesty as the motto of his business. Instead of showing rivalry to the next door printer of the Star Press, the owner of the original German Heildberg, Nataraj, eccentrically enough, is often caught persuading the customers to go to the neighbour for excellence, and to top it, he genuinely feels proud of the "machine" as if he himself owned it. Following the essentially eccentric trait in his nature, Nataraj in his first encounter with Vasu, advises him to order less number of visiting cards to keep them fresh and presents himself as a scatter-brained businessman inviting bankruptcy.

It may be pointed out the comically dramatized scenes of Nataraj's eccentricity seem to be suggesting serious implications. Primarily, Nataraj symbolizes the good (as against the bad epitomized by Vasu) in the novel. Beneath the veneer of the eccentric behaviour, one may discern his self-effacing and altruistic nature. His attitude also focuses on his essentially social sense and human consideration as against Vasu's egoistic and inhuman attitude.

In the peaceful and quiet Malgudi, Vasu comes like a maelstrom and plays havoc with the lives of the Malgudians. Nataraj seems to have been the first victim of the "rakshasa." But strangely enough, forgetting his tormenting and evil ways Nataraj finds himself admiring and congratulating Vasu for his exemplary single-handedness in taxidermy -- the root cause of the whole trouble -- and he even becomes unhappy for not being able to talk to him. Nataraj philosophises his
stand thus: "I could never be a successful enemy to anyone. Any enmity worried
me night and day.... It bothered me like a toothache."

Interestingly, the eccentric trait seems to have coloured his mind as well. When the bully (Vasu) forcibly takes him to the Mempi village and mercilessly drops him there, Nataraj’s imagination runs with him and he says: “I was struck with a sudden fear that this man was perhaps abducting me and was going to demand a ransom for releasing me from some tiger – cave. What would my wife and little son do if they were suddenly asked to produce fifty thousand rupees for my release?”

Ironically enough, the essentially virtuous Nataraj, the typical family man, like Srinivas in Mr. Sampath finds himself stirred uneasily and temptingly in the presence of the seductive temple prostitute Rangi when she tells him Vasu’s plan to shoot the temple elephant Kumar: “My blood tingled with unholy excitement. I let my mind slide into a wild fantasy of seduction and passion. I was no longer a married man with a child and home. I was an adolescent lost in dream over a nude photograph.... I hoped I would not weaken.” One may certainly discern here the essentially timed and weak Nataraj. What is also realized is his typical and inherent middle-class psychology with its faulty of fertile imagination fantasizing the wildest possible things.

Finally, Nataraj’s mind, totally obsessed with the singular thought of the imminent threat to the life of the sacred elephant Kumar, undergoes severest
tension and he lets out a terrific cry—'Oh, Vishnu'—drowning all the voices in the temple. Although, it may be interpreted as the oddest and the most eccentric of Nataraj's acts, it may also be taken as the symbolic dramatisation of the story of Gajendra—Moksha mentioned in the context of Vasu's rebellion. The cry, in other words, may be interpreted as the belief in god's intervention to help the devotee out of his disaster. Finally, the eccentric even comes to believe that after all he himself must have finished Vasu. It may, however, be taken as the reiteration of the average Malgudi hero's myth-making trait.

As one takes into consideration the rest of the eccentrics in the novel, M.K. Naik's observations are worth recalling: "In terms of character, The Man-Eater of Malgudi presents the single concentration of eccentrics in Narayan's entire fiction." The eccentrics make their bizarre world funny and absurdly alive with their weirdest antics. Sen the "arm-chair journalist," all set to launch his paper, is always caught criticizing Nehru's policies. He also happens to be the first Malgudian to dare Vasu, who often humiliated the forms calling him "the local Nehru". Although a two liner, Sen travels all through the novel. The poet, though basically a teacher, has no name and is known as the "monosyllabic poet." His chiefly and singularly realized eccentricity is reflected in his poetic composition -- The Radha Kalyan -- versified in strictly monosyllabic form. He often carved the required monosyllables out of polysyllable when he ran out of them. Nataraj is thrilled to hear the line "Girls with girls and dance in trance."
To him the composition, Radha Kalyan, has more devotional than literary value. Interestingly, he too suspects Nataraj to be the “Giant Killer” and bolts away with his life when the latter offers him the stuffed cub left by Vasu. About the poet, Gerow Edwin says: “The poet is perhaps the antithetical character, the non-agent. His facelessness is understood by his namelessness. Or perhaps Narayan intends rather to emphasize the poet’s universality: in the beginning was the World”57.

The Forestry Officer is yet another caricature realized with a distinct mark of idiosyncrasy. Funnily enough he boasts to have been attacked eighteen times by the rogue elephants. He seems to be reputed to have tracked on foot an average of at least one tiger every half year. The officer has collected the Golden Thoughts. He wants Nataraj to print the book enabling him to distribute the copies free of cost to school children and thus serve his country. The one liner also obliquely comments on Vasu’s malevolent nature.

Dr. Joshi may be regarded as the exemplification of Narayan’s obsession with the types. He clings to his unborn hospital. Although a veterinary surgeon, Dr. Joshi is all eager to treat Nataraj and disarms the latter by grandly philosophizing: “Only the stimuli and medicinal doses differ between human beings and animals”58. Even a one liner of a tailor (at the Mempi village) merrily pops and buoyantly plays his one minute role. He is all set to spoil Nataraj’s plan to take the ailing elephant to Malgudi. A member of the temple committee, the
tailor is a suspect accomplice of Vasu in his diabolic plan to shoot the elephant. Thus he too indirectly reflects Vasu’s dark design.

Considering the treatment of eccentricity in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* in its entirety, it may be realized that the novel seems to have been written when Narayan’s irony was reigning supreme. It may also be pointed out that by presenting the eccentrics from different walks of life Narayan seems to be suggesting the essentially incongruous nature of life. As the novel closes on a happy note of the extinction of the evil and the restoration of peace and order, the novelist’s positive philosophy of life may be discerned. Besides the recurring patterns like the hero’s coming back to the world of normalcy, the assertion of the average and the ordinary and the realization of sanity through illusion, the novel is realized as Narayan’s typical comedy underlining the celebration and continuity of like symbolized in the form of Shastri as “the embodiment of the gothic of selfless love, necessary action”.

At the outset there seems to be a general consensus among the critics and readers of Narayan’s novels to regard Jagan, the protagonist in *The Vendor of Sweets* as a fully realized eccentric after Nataraj in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. It may also be pointed out that the apparently ambivalent nature of Jagan seems to land most to his overall image as the odd man out. As an eccentric, Jagan is mainly focused as a characteristic Shastra-abider and as a unique Gandhian. Putting it differently, if Jagan keeps quoting and exemplifying the Shastras and the
Gita, he also remains equally shrewd and practical businessman hoarding his unaccounted money. And even though, as a Gandhian, he apparently professes and practices the Gandhi principles like non-violence, non-cooperation and ahimsa, his Gandhism, in its actual realization, seems to have been reduced to mere trivialities and fads. It may, however, be possible to regard Jagan’s oddity in his role as the follower of these two principles as Narayan’s strategy to artfully conceal and camouflage the protagonist’s quest (as a common man betraying human foibles and fallibilities) for the spiritual realization. Apart from these two traits spelling out the oddities, Jagan seems to breathe eccentricity throughout the novel. It may be worthwhile to underline certain obvious instances and note the implications.

The most obvious oddity becomes noticeable in Jagan’s peculiar relationship with his son Mali. The apparently caring and loving father is often seen worrying and fretting over the young boy’s habit of eating less. The father longs to see his son eat more: “Jagan had an almost maternal obsession about the boy feeding properly”⁶⁰. Personally, however, he is hardly found telling his son so. Like a benevolent guardian he sees to it that the poor eater gets enough money (to eat as he likes outside the home). One often notices him expressing his deep concern for the motherless child to the cousin who has been assigned the duty to look after the welfare of his son. Beneath the oddity of the father’s relationship with his son, Narayan seems to suggest the irony of fact in Jagan’s case. His only
son Mali, the gift of the God of seven hills, instead of constantly give him moments of pain and anxiety. It may also be noted that the artfully introduced dissonance between Mali and Jagan eventually becomes responsible for Jagan’s renunciation.

When Jagan learns the disturbing news about Mali’s turning a college dropout, he is in fact much distressed but shows no inclination to send his son a show cause notice as it were. On the other hand, Jagan seems soon reconciled to the son’s decision, innocently dreaming the happy prospects of Mali’s becoming a writer. But again, he learns that the son has left for America helping himself on the sizeable chunk from his ingeniously hidden money. However, the shock-wave seems to be Jagan’s momentary reaction, because the odd man is caught thinking that it is after all the son’s money and that he has only to ask for it. In this particular instance Narayan seems to underline the basic nature of Jagan: his love for the son scores more than his love for money. He does not become obsessed with the thought of accumulating wealth like his cousin Margayya. Needless to say, Jagan is a far cry from Shylock. Putting it differently, the ambivalence in Jagan’s behaviour seems to comment, although obliquely, on the fact that despite his being the shrewdest businessman in Malgudi, Jagan would never hesitate to put his relationship with Mali before the money matters.

Another apparently eccentric act of Jagan, the thriving and shrewd businessman (who would not hesitate even to recycle the left over sweets and sell
them again), is seen in his steeply reducing the price of his sweets and sell them at an astonishingly low rate. Although he tries to cover it as a benevolent act enabling him to see the poorest of the poor child happy, the whole thing obviously seems to have been triggered out of the polluting ways of Mali and Grace. It may be called the puritan’s reaction to the unholy act of the deviants. The eccentric -- to all business community -- plays havoc with the (sweets) market and is found, to the surprise of the business delegates, engaging the free cooks and discoursing on the Gita, it is all in one’s hand. Make up your mind and you will all find the object of your search. One may, however, add that, although behaving outrageously eccentric, Jagan seems to be really putting himself on the right track which, as shall be seen in the typology of sanyasa, may take him towards the light of self-realization.

At first it may look odd that when he becomes fully aware that the deviant son very much needs his help for his acquittal from the police custody for getting caught with a bottle of liquor in his car, Jagan checks his melting heart and possibly the tears for the boy and march on towards his spiritual goal. It may be noted that Jagan does not simply march off before carefully assigning Mali’s problem (and also the welfare of the shop) to the most trusted and competent cousin. Beneath the odd act (of marching away), however, one may perceive the sane follower of the ideals of the Hindu way of life, the desirable renunciation, after having fully played his role at the grahasthashrama.
Finally, Jagan's instruction to the cousin to buy grace a return ticket to America may also appear rather odd for the much suffered and grieved businessman. One may again perceive beneath Jagan's so-called eccentricity, his gracious gesture shown to the most ungracious grace when he finally says to the cousin: "If you meet her, tell her that if she ever wants to go back to her country, I will buy her ticket. It is a duty we owe her. She was a good girl". Significantly enough, Jagan seems to have imbibed the principle of forgiveness, possibly because he could read her predicament and see her as an innocent person despite her obvious deviation.

In the final analysis, Jagan's eccentricity seems to be Narayan's strategy to underline the common man's search for identity and spiritual realization. The art of the novelist lies, so it seems, in the fact that he presents his protagonist as a probable study of the full-fledged eccentric and an admirable authentic specimen of humanity.

The Vendor of Sweets opens in the active and full presence of the cousin and it also closes as he plays the most trustworthy alter-ego of the protagonist, ready to perform the entrusted duty. It may also be noted that like the headmaster and the medium in The English Teacher denomination seems to play a symbolic role in The Vendor of Sweets. It is especially in his relationship with Jagan that he plays quite a few roles. It may be significant to underline these roles and their implications.
At the outset the cousin is realized as an expert in tasting the sweets. In fact he plays the connoisseur in the profession of tasting the sweets. He tastes the sweets, especially the new experiments, almost as a ritual and given his — the expert’s — opinion which is accepted and respected by the owner of the shop. What seems to be concealed beneath the cousin’s rather unusual profession (at least in the Indian context) is the paradoxical realization that owner of the sweets, wrapped up in the illusory world as he is, seems to be destined not to enjoy the sweetness of life; the sane cousin symbolizing Jagan’s subconscious mind, however, seems to.

The cousin (in the context of his relationship with Jagan that is) plays the most important role of the uncle to Mali. If for Mali’s benefit he plays a benevolent uncle and, unlike Jagan, a sympathizer of his modern world, the cousin, in fact, plays the most needed medium for the old father to realize his son’s intentions. It is here that he provides Jagan all the necessary information about Mali and his schemes. It is through the cousin that Jagan learns about his son’s plans the college, to go to America and to market the novel-writing machine. Ironically enough, he happens to be the only person (until, of course, Jagan meets the hair-dyer) who is often seen giving a piece of advice to the Gita preacher: “what is all your study of the Gita worth if you cannot keep your mind untouched by all this? You yourself have explained to me that one should not identify oneself with objects or circumstances”63.
A man about town, the cousin, as a typically cast do-gooder plays the all
time helper to those who seek his help. Known to all and being the most
knowledgeable person in all practical matters, he is often seen helping out one
family or another. (For instance, he offers his company to a pilgrimage-bound
family).

Finally, he is seen, risking his life and pedalling the bike most perilously
and giving the already distressed father the news of Mali’s arrest. It is through this
scene that he emerges as a competent custodian of Mali’s welfare and Jagan’s
shop. It may also be noted that it is through this scene that Narayan presents one
of the most memorable caricatures in his novels. This is how the novelist
telescopes him:

[He] saw his cousin riding down clumsily on a bicycle, his tuft
flying in the wind, his wheel zig-zagging perilously on to the edge
of the storm drain and retracting miraculously to the centre of the
road. Jagan stood arrested.... The wheels seemed to come straight
for him... The cousin helplessly dashed past him a dozen yards,
and fell down off the saddle, leaving the bicycle to bolt away by
itself to a ditch.

In the final analysis, the cousin seems to serve Jagan’s ears, eyes and the
subconscious self. He is realized as Jagan’s alter-ego symbolizing the latter’s
sanity. Paradoxically, it is though the parasitical existence that the cousin plays
the most supporting friend of Jagan.
China Dorai, the sculptor-cum-hair-dyer, has a specifically tailored role in *The Vendor of Sweets*: to initiate the confused and bewildered householder to the shastra-dictated vanaprasthasharma, the threshold of sanyasa. Apparently a thumb-nail sketch, the hair-dyer, as a caricature, plays a functional role. It is in the context of the hair-dyer's role in Jagan's spiritual realization that Iyengar says:

> From the electronics of the novel writing, Jagan is switched back to the sanity of the bearded men -- this man from the previous millennium -- whose life is centred in bringing a deity to life out of a stone, and installing it on a vacant temple pedestal near a pond in the recesses of the Mempi forest. It is the Goddess Gayatri -- to be seen nowhere else, the deity of Radiance -- who is to come stone

The novelist seems to have blown some life into the airy figure, as, for instance, he is realized through certain idiosyncrasies including his bouncing like a child and plucking and eating a guava.

It may be noted that the hair-dyer's eccentricity is realized in his odd and rather mysterious ways. Narayan seems to have cast him basically as a symbolic character. It is in this sense that the hair-dyer appears all set to offer Jagan, the disillusioned man, a "promise of spring, a sort of spiritual revelation. As always, Narayan artfully conceals this intention by making the sculptor-turned-dyer (who offers youthful appearance to the grey-haired people) a rather dubious character. Jagan, for instance, goes to the extent of speculation that, "he might.... have been born to a passing concubine of his so-called master who never married".
In the last analysis, it may be suggested that the eccentrics in *The Vendor of Sweets*, like all their previous counterparts, seem to wear the masks of oddity, concealing certain serious issues related to the central character and theme of the novel. And, like all other eccentrics in Narayan, they may also be taken as the symbolic representation of the absurd and incongruous nature of human existence. The typology of eccentricity, especially in the context of the central character, notes the recurring patterns of the Narayan novel. Thus Jagan’s stepping into the Vanaprasthashrama may be symbolically taken as the return of the native lost temporarily in the world of Maya or illusion. Jagan’s determination to march towards the spiritually conceived resort and leaving the warring issues of the worldliness behind may be taken as the assertion of the tradition over the deviating modernity. Finally, his act of deserting Mali seems to obliquely comment on the consequence of Karma.

By now it has become evident that Narayan’s obsession with the eccentrics seems to be one of the salient features of his character portrayals. As for his comedy, the eccentrics constitute the crux of his comic art. It may also be pointed out excepting very few eccentrics like Ebenezar (SAF), most of them have been realized with thematic relevance. Barring Nataraj (TMEM), Ramani (TDR) and Jagan (TVS), most of them remain caricatures. As a matter of fact the ordinarily realized heroes too invariable display a strong streak of eccentricity in their character.
As one considers the treatment of eccentricity, besides Raman and Daisy showing distinct streaks of oddity in their nature and behaviour, the Townhall Professor is formally introduced as the "local eccentric" in The Painter of Signs. Reminiscent of the Madras Crank in The Financial Expert, the professor, sitting cross-legged like Buddha, and donning the purple attire, sells the talismen carrying "secret messages" and delivers his spiritual message in catchy phrases: "past is gone, present is going, and tomorrow is day after tomorrow's yesterday. So why worry about everything? God is in all this. He is one and invisible. He is in yesterday, tomorrow, and today".

In the eccentric's utterance, one may possible discern a universal message underlining the ephemeral nature of human life, the supremacy of the wheel of existence and the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. As for Raman, determined to establish the age of reason, seems to have been taken for a ride, as he falls unwittingly into the trap of the crank and finds himself losing the newly painted signboard in exchange of a mere piece of paper with the message "This will pass". Raman seems to have read the connotation of the message. His reaction is typical: "He studied the message, and its significance seemed to deepen while he brooded over it giving him a feeling of perpetually gliding away from the objects and moments. Losing all sense of stagnation, Raman felt suddenly light at heart".
Significantly, the one-liner eccentric’s message for Raman becomes prophetic. It seems to indicate the passing of the illusory phase in Raman’s life symbolized in his “Daisyism.” At the end of the novel as Daisy goes away and Raman throws away the key and returns to the solid world of reality represented by the “boardless” friends, the prophecy in the message is fully realized.

Moreover, the message, “This will pass,” seems to have a wider implication. It seems to be the central and guiding principle in all Narayan novels. The normal peace and rhythm of life suddenly disrupted by the ascending of a tempest, eventually returns to its original state as the average and the ordinary voice finds itself asserting against the illusory temptation. Narayan, perhaps, meant the same thing when he said to Naipaul: “India will go on.” It fully expresses Narayan’s faith in the eternity principle of Indian culture, its overwhelming capacity to assimilate the foreign (and warring) elements and finally to assert its existence.

Considering the treatment of eccentricity in its entirety in the novels of Narayan, it may be pointed out that at the outset the eccentric trait seems to be the commonly shared attribute of the Malgudi character. The trait is realized on different scales from character to character. Putting it differently it has appeared just a streak in some characters, it has become a dominant trait for some, and it has been realized as an entire form of expression for some other. One may certainly discern a distinct growth and development in Narayan’s delineation of eccentric.
Excepting one or two, most of the eccentrics have a thematic relevance. It may also be noted that most of the caricatures have extremely narrow, almost microscopic existence, but they invariably make an imprint, playing catalysts or foils or choric roles. As regards the protagonists, besides their apparently humorous realization, they also seem to underline the inherent incongruity and offer serious issues like the spiritual, ethical, cultural, and philosophical notions in life.

The eccentrics in Narayan's novels may also point to the novelist's character delineation. As a delineator of surface human character, Narayan finds the eccentrics more conducive. It is here that the caricatures as types figure prominently, and are realized through their idiosyncrasy and apparent incongruity. It may also account for Narayan's flat characters as against the round ones. The eccentrics have primarily been focused through their humorous realization, telescoped as either their attitude or behavioural pattern. It is in their portrayal as comic creation that one may also discern Narayan's conception of comedy which, although basically creates mirth and laughter, is not divorced from tragedy.

It may also be pointed out that excepting a female character, Shanta Bai in The Dark Room, displaying some streaks of eccentricity, most of the eccentrics in Narayan are male characters. It is probably because woman in the middle-class family represents "custom and reason" and known "what is and what is not proper." Putting it differently, Narayan seems to be suggesting that since women
in culturally dominated Hindu society imbibe the principle of acceptance, they remain more centric as against the deviatingly eccentric men.

Finally, one may also find the eccentrics, in some cases at least, stressing the recurring patterns of all the Malgudi novels. In that, they seem to underline the cultural ethos, (the strategy of) the circular journey of the protagonist and the assertion of the average and the ordinary.
NOTES


