

AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE OF POST-MODERN SENSIBILITY IN JOHN UPDIKE'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the phenomenon called postmodernism usually defined as the paradoxical aftermath of modernism, every form of writing across the globe underwent radical changes in form, content, symbolism and imagery and above all in the very nature of the message conveyed to the reader. In the United States of America, fiction written during the 1960's, the 70's, the 80's and beyond came to reflect a disturbing, at times unnerving kind of a sociological ethos, especially in the context of human relationships. Among a crop of celebrity status American novelist who gained remarkable prominence with the beginning of the 1960's decade, John Updike stands out as a virtuoso who weaves in his works a ruptured fabric of modern and postmodern American society and culture. Right from the earliest novels like *The Poor House Fair* (1959), *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *The Centaur* (1963) to some of the latest ones like *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) the reader is treated to a well orchestrated "symphony" a kind of a sterile "music" emanating from a "stringless-lyre".

The present research paper attempts to analyze the interesting spectrum of the ways, means and nuances which Updike employs in projecting a debased, dismembered and dehumanized cosmos of humans who are shown as living, interacting, desiring and maneuvering their existence according to ways and methods which at best can only be labelled as a tapestry of the tempting, the tasty and the tumultuous. The study leaves to the conclusion that the ethos of a mass society which we are experiencing these days encapsulates men and women only to make them the willing agents and instruments of sociological dismemberment coupled with an amalgam of the demonic and ecstatic.

Keywords: *postmodernism, American society, family, disintegration, dismemberment*

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel written in the United States after the Second World War came to reflect a host of changes vis-à-vis the content, thematic thrust, imagery and symbolism as well as form and structure. Such changes cumulatively have been often categorized as the contemporary writer's response to the dismantling "ethos of mass society"¹ a society which encroaches upon the lives of humans with clinical and ruthless efficiency. The fictional works of leading American novelists who have written their best-known works during the late 1960's, the 70's and the 80's, embody within the narrative matrix a disturbing and unsettling sociological scenario. The society of modern man and his culture are projected as a human supernova, on the brink of explosion and chaotic extinction. Among the modern and postmodern American writers, John Updike has since attained a position of eminence as a novelist who "despite the atomism, discontinuities, of his world, no longer needs to fear the rawness of American experience; ... Barbaric frenzy and Alexandrian virtuosity constitute the extremes, not the alternatives, he faces"². In fact, not only Updike but every modern or postmodern American writer, be he a novelist, a poet or a dramatist has felt compelled and in fact encapsulated by a kind of quicksand society in which things like tradition, custom and ritual, be it the family, the institution of marriage and above all the man-woman relationship, have got alarmingly fractured or destabilized, even dismembered.

II. WRITING STYLE

As an astute writer Updike "refrains from committing himself to any of the philosophies which he presents".³ But he admits that "he is too tired to attempt to draw philosophy from the scenes which he creates". It becomes obvious that as one of America's most cerebral writers, John Updike treads a path in his works, a path which a careful, cautious and discerning reader too has to tread in order to conceptualize the writer's sensibility, choices and preferences. Updike's distinct prose style, an essential feature of his fiction and discursive writings, is characterized by its vividly descriptive passages, carefully wrought in a striking, allusive and often esoteric vocabulary, revealing an infatuation with language itself. Often placed within the realist tradition—a literary mode that favours precise description of the real world over imaginative or idealized representations—much of Updike's fiction is presided over by a wry, intelligent authorial voice that conscientiously portrays the physical world and everyday life in lucid detail.

II (1) A list of his hitherto published works would be appropriate to indicate the prolific range and a fairly rapid order of appearance. The chronological sequence of the novels spans a time-period of more than four decades: *The Carpenter Hen and Other Tame Creature*: (1958), *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), *The fame Door* (1959), *Rabbit Run* (1960), *Pigeon Feather; and Other Stories* (1962), *The Centaur* (1963), *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (1963), *Of The Farm* (1965), *Couples* (1968), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984), *Roger's Version* (1986), *S* (1988), *Self Consciousness: Memoirs* (1984), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), *Brazil* (1994), *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), *Toward the End of Time* (1997), *Gertrude and Claudius*: (2000), *Seek My Face*(2002), *Villager* (2004) and *Terrorist* (2006).

III. CRITICAL OPINIONS

Critical opinions on the work of John Updike are diverse and galore, nothing surprising in the case of a prolific writer with a career spanning more than four decades. Updike's creative acumen as one of America's leading contemporary writers has its foundation across the exciting and innovative expanse of his novels numbering more than twenty from the inaugural one, *The Poor Home Fair* (1959) to the latest one, *Village*: (2004). All the same, the multidimensional genius of Updike can also be witnessed in a good number of Short Stories and Poems he has written besides Essays and Criticism and some Memoirs titled *Self-Consciousness*. Needless to say, that it the fictional works which have attracted maximum scholarly attention as these offer a challenging as well as highly involving spectrum of investigation to any intelligent and committed researcher.

III (1) It has been rightly pointed out that Updike's works, like: Faulkner's reveal increase unease with structure, whether in form or content; in Updike's ease this shows particularly in the concentration on perception as a last desperate remedy for the problem of meaninglessness. Again, and again, like so many modern novelists, he returns to describe and evoke experience—no matter what that experience may be—for, in the face of increasing social and personal collapse, the feeling of the moment is the only positive reality man has.⁴

The "feeling of the moment" can be defined in terms of desperation to find out some cure for the existential problems afflicting Updike's fictional protagonists. Cumulatively, what the reader accosts in the novels of Updike, is a fractured, dystopian, deconstructive and disruptionist scenario of the contemporary American family, human relationships and above all the institution of marriage. His works as a novelist "can appear realistic and local, but its resonances are greater; his essential concern is with transcend form and the pressure against it of a compelling but disquieting history; his novels of domesticity are really novels of social anxiety and secular unease"⁵. The factor of "social anxiety and secular unease" obviously gets related to the chronic recurrence of adultery, infidelity and other marital aberrations which afflict the fictional cosmos Updike weaves in his novels.

III (2) Norman Podhoretz comments about Updike by pointing out that "his prose was overly lyrical, bloated like a child who had eaten too much candy"⁶. Podhoretz goes to add that Updike "seems a writer who has very little to say and whose authentic emotional range is so narrow and thin that it may without too exaggeration be characterized as limited to a rather timid nostalgia for the confusions of youth"⁷. The opinion of Norman Podhoretz seems to be somewhat lop-sided and extremist; vis-à-vis the role-playing-matrix in Updike's concern for the existential aberrations of the postmodernist generation in the United States is construed as a fondness for behavioural vacillations among the young men and women who populate the author's novels. Another interesting opinion focuses on the fact that for Updike the "subject matter has

always been contemporary American middle-class life the life-styles of his characters are close to those of the country at large, and his fiction could hardly escape the radical changes in those lives"⁸. Primarily due to the instability of society itself human nature and relationships amidst such a social environment, chronically reflect the irreconcilable nature of the American middle class ideal and ground-level experiences in a turbulent world. The postmodern American novel, with such fictional men and women in its narratives does not concern itself with high and lofty ideals and goals, but increasingly and rather obsessively deals with the burden, the pain, the anguish, and even the ambivalence of personal relationships. Such relationships in a demonic human world leave no scope for defeats and victims on the sociological plane. Such type of fictional narratives, Updike s included; reveal ironic American Adams and Eves hopelessly and in an absurdist manner striving for existential redemption. More often than not, the climactic product comes in the form of what could be termed as "adamic falls and quixotic redemptions".

III (3) John Updike "uses texture and a new sort of pattern in place of linear action",⁹ and even his "style is a view of the world through a lens of alienation"¹⁰, which is the recurrent problem inherent in the contemporary American novel. And not only alienation but human relationships as a whole become "an ever-changing act of apprehension, belonging in the contemporary world of changing thought, changing history, changing ways of naming experience ..."¹¹, something witnessed repeatedly across the firmament of Updike's fictional cosmos. Another critical consensus maintains that Updike has "matured and developed as a writer concurrently with the birth of a new American culture. His methods have been to grow with that culture, while maintaining a basic artistic conservatism which forms a helpful bridge from our present times to the recent, but aesthetically remote, past"¹². Ostensibly, as a realistic socio-cultural diagnostician Updike in spite of his artistic compulsions, keeps his creative stance in the novels as that of a fabulator, successfully synthesizing contemporaneous ills with past forgotten glories.

IV. WHY DISMEMBERMENT AND DISSOLUTION

The family, a sacrosanct institution inherited as a pious acquisition in any given civilization and culture, now in the works of writers like Updike and implicitly in actual reality, undergoes fracture and fission, dismemberment and dissolution. After all why? The answer is not far to seek: an unnerving disequilibrium in the gender-equation. The man-woman relationship as projected in the novels of Updike and his contemporaries like Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, John Hawkes and Jerzy Kosinski, to name a few, undergoes demonic changes and becomes an exercise in anguish bondage, pain and confusion. The reader is treated with a kaleidoscopic spectrum of a Kafkaesque scenario in which both men and women get entangled in a Sisyphus-like struggle against the crippling ethos of a mass society and a hostile social environment in which human dignity and ethical values seem to be doomed to extinction.

IV(1) In the current postmodern urban culture in developed as well as developing countries, the preceding observation has since become a hard reality and in this context John Updike becomes "in worldly terms a successful writer"¹³, who has "always taken pride in the professionalism of his work,"¹⁴ as reflected in his novels. Perhaps, such a creative contingency earns for Updike an antithetical connotation as a novelist who is "Christian on the one hand, yet twentieth century skeptic on the other"¹⁵. The fact also remains that Updike is a "humanist, believing strongly in the worth of the individual, yet finding him often defeated by the forces beyond his control"¹⁶. These "forces" get epitomized by the intrusion of illusory entities like an irresistible desire for individual satisfaction and a workable identity amidst destabilized, sterile and dismembered lives. In novel after novel, this existentially operative scenario is presented by Updike as the stark truth about the personages who represent the actuality of American society and culture in his novels. As natural corollary to this formulation comes when Updike's novelistic protagonists with their inflated egos make desperate attempts to propitiate their dreams, perversions and fantasies.

V. AUTHORS SENSIBILITIES

Coming back to the author's sensibility, Updike's "ideologies are a composite of too many for definition"¹⁷ because he is "his own best example moving one step up on the foundations of his own accomplishment each time a new book appears"¹⁸, which can be seen in the novels as well. As Updike "tends to be a social realist"¹⁹, he depicts the feeling of the absurd in the relationships between men and women, besides illustrating a kind of a frustrating search for truth. To borrow an expression from Ihab Hassan, this type of

dispersal and dehumanization, perversion of human values and fracture of relationships, witnessed among the male and female personages in the contemporary American novel, reminds one of a “lyre without strings,”²⁰ reminiscent of Orpheus, the legendary Greek musician who was brutally slaughtered by the Maenads. It is said that the severed head of Orpheus was thrown by his murderers into the ocean. The dismembered body of Orpheus becomes the metaphor of a debased, dehumanized and deconstructive society which strengthens itself on the degeneration of human values and morals. Metaphorically speaking, the modern as well as the postmodern assault on human culture and relationships becomes a hard reality, there by not only dehumanizing art but also deforming the creative energy. Such a sociological vision creates a kind of an anxiety regarding society and human consciousness. A sense of ironic contradiction and waste with human individuals becoming victims of society and certain processes also forms the main concern in Updike’s novels of manners and morals. The novels have been appearing regularly, with a maintained focus on the sociological aspect, earning Updike the label of “the most prolific major American writer of his generation”²¹.

V (1) It has been frequently pointed out that a kind of compromise has been forged “between the conflicting realistic and romantic traditions of the American novel”²². This realistic-romantic dichotomy continues to exist in the criticism of American fiction in many forms and guises. Among these forms, one can logically include the form of marital relationships as a part of sexual politics. Both the sexes have been shown “in their real complexity of temperament and motives”²³, which means that the man-woman relationship reflects a kind of an explicable equation vis-a-vis nature, to each other, and in context of the social classes involved. Well known practitioners of the contemporary American novel have with metonymical regularity tried to redefine and restructure symbolism and realism in order to support their respective visions regarding the impossibility of maintaining human equilibrium within a hostile social environment and Updike is no exception.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Spectacle of social dismemberment becomes the structure of reality, the structure of language and the structure of logic. Whatever, Updike is doing as a novelist becomes quite true and realistic even in the Indian context. In the highly urbanized metropolitan culture of our country, the man-woman relationship is no different: even average middle-class Indian housewives crave for extra-marital relationships. In a survey conducted by ‘India Today’ and ‘Outlook’ magazines in the year 2000 and 2004, a huge chunk of young unmarried women in their late 20’s and early 30’s preferred much older and mature men for any kind of relationship. In fact according to information conveyed by a recent issue of India Today, middle-class house wives crave for extra-marital relationship and Outlook magazine in the year 2004 had for its cover the caption: *Women on Top* with an ironic parody of the famous episode of Lord Krishna taking the clothes of bathing milkmaids and sitting pretty on a tree to taunt and tease them. Here, as shown by Outlook, it is the woman who has taken away the clothes of a number of men bathing in the river, thus earning the sobriquet of *Woman on Top*. In the context of all these realist assertions it can be justifiably said from the reader’s point of view that whatever John Updike portrays in his novels vis-à-vis American society and the culture can apply to any given socio-cultural ethos in the postmodern world today. The “stringless lyre” of the demonic Orpheus goes on reverberating with the dismembering music of dehumanization of fracture and fission.

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