



THE PORTRAYAL OF FAITH AND INWARD CONFLICTS IN THE RABBIT NOVELS OF JOHN UPDIKE

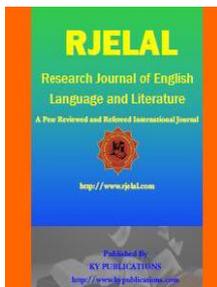
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ABSTRACT

In the long line of novelists who mirrored the society of their times, John Updike was one. He came into prominence with his writings in which he took upon himself the task of recording the post-war America with an unequalled realism. A prolific writer, his oeuvre includes twenty four novels, more than hundred stories, seven poetry collections and numerous essays and criticism. He dealt with issues as varied as God, religion, spirituality, meaning of life, sex, family, gender, materialism, racism, politics, in short all contemporary issues that beset man. The novels taken for the research are: Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich and Rabbit at Rest. The study relies on the critical works of leading Updike's scholars who by their diverse views have thrown much light on the seminal aspects of Updike's work. Peter Bailey's Rabbit Unredeemed examines the scope of individual faith in Updike's fiction. Boswell's John Updike's Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion is utilized to scrutinize the dialectical composition of Updike's themetical concerns. Updike's autobiography Self Consciousness has been utilized to understand the critical aspects of his faith and artistic vision. The object of this paper is to explore Updike's treatment of the protagonist's journey of faith in a milieu that seared the core beliefs which defined the identity of Americans and the resultant inward conflicts undergone by the individual and to establish the paper that despite the skepticism that characterized the protagonist's life, he dies with an awakened knowledge of the spiritual dimension of life.

Key words: Post war America, God, religion, faith, spirituality, racialism, politics, contemporary issues, inward conflicts.

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1. John Updike in American Literature

John Updike occupies a unique position in the annals of American literature. He gave an extraordinary dimension to the banal and mundane aspects of life which delineated with feline accuracy. In his prodigious output encompassing varied genres, he relentlessly pursued the dialectics of

discontentment, conflict, waste, sorrow, and fear juxtaposed by the antithetical elements of contentment, resolutions, economy, happiness and love, which invest his writings with a rare dynamism that accounts for his commercial popularity. The variety of his oeuvre is so diverse that it can be christened the literary Wall Mart. In long line of

novelists who mirrored the society of their times, John Updike was one. Born in Pennsylvania, U.S.A in the year 1932, he had an uneventful childhood. He came into prominence with his writings in which he took upon himself the task of recording the post-war America with an unequalled realism. A prolific writer, his oeuvre includes twenty four novels, more than hundred stories, seven poetry collections and numerous essays and criticism. He dealt with issues as varied as God, religion, spirituality, meaning of life, sex, family, gender, materialism, racism, politics, in short all contemporary issues that beset man. The novels taken for the research are: Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich and Rabbit at Rest. The study relies on the critical works of leading Updike's scholars who by their diverse views have thrown much light on the seminal aspects of Updike's work. Peter Bailey's Rabbit Unredeemed examines the scope of individual faith in Updike's fiction. Boswell's John Updike's Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion is utilized to scrutinize the dialectical composition of Updike's themetical concerns. Updike's autobiography Self Consciousness has been utilized to understand the critical aspects of his faith and artistic vision. Updike courted several controversies and generated strong animosities and the critical opinions on his works are often intensely polarized. Unlike his contemporaries who included Norman Mailer and J.D. Salinger, he dared to parade his views which were politically incorrect. He justified America's intervention in Vietnam when it was intellectually fashionable to don left wing views and proclaimed himself a Christian, though his delineation of the sensuality of his characters would make a religiously orthodox squirm. Contrary to the general trend, he portrayed women with a patriarchal disdain that drew vociferous protests from the feminists. The object of this paper is to explore Updike's treatment of the protagonist's journey of faith in a milieu that seared the core beliefs which defined the identity of Americans and the resultant inward conflicts undergone by the individual and to establish the paper that despite the scepticism that characterized the protagonist's life, he dies with an awakened knowledge of the spiritual dimension of life.

2. Rabbit Novels

Updike's works can be compartalized under a few major heads for an overview. The first category would be the Rabbit novels. Commencing with Rabbit Run (1960) followed by Rabbit Redux (1971), Rabbit is Rich (1981), and Rabbit at Rest (1990) and the novella Rabbit Remembered published in the short fiction collection Licks of Love (2000) in the same order, the Rabbit novels chronicle the fictitious life of Harry Angstrom, who is a metaphor for the average White Anglo Saxton Male. Mirroring the life of five decades, Updike's Rabbit novels are a fine specimen of keen social insight on the dynamics of American culture and the vicissitudes of family life set in the background of heightened gender and racial consciousness. Stressing the historical value of the work Marshall Boswell says, "the Rabbit novels document contemporary American life so precisely that they function as the fictional equivalent of 'real television' or cinema" (2). The precision and clarity in the delineation of the characters in the Rabbit tetralogy, buttressed by stylistic and thematic coherence won Updike accolades from many quarters. Suffice it to say, his literary prowess exhibited in these works was acknowledged by discerning critics by the award of two Pulitzer Prizes for Rabbit is Rich and Rabbit at Rest.

3. Rabbit Run

Rabbit Run delineates the life of twenty-six year old Harry Angstrom, set in the fictitious provincial town of Mt. Judge in the America of late 1950's. Suddenly seized by angst born out of dissatisfaction in the conventional relationships of family, society and religion, he runs away from them as the title suggests. His only glory is his skill in the game of basketball. Married to Janice, an alcoholic and with a two-and-half year old son Nelson, Harry known well by his nick name Rabbit finds the domesticity irksome and in a fit of emotional strain deserts Janice even though she is pregnant. He enters into a live-in relationship with Ruth who is a prostitute. Rev. Eccles, and Tethro, his high school basketball coach, persuade him to return to his wife but without avail. Meanwhile, Janice gives birth to a baby girl Becky and goaded by Eccles, Rabbit makes peace with his wife, turning his back on Ruth who at this time becomes pregnant. But the reconciliation is

short lived as Rabbit is at loggerheads with her this time over sex. A frustrated Janice finds refuge in alcohol and in a highly inebriated state, accidentally drowns the baby in the bath tub. The novel ends with the guilt laden and bewildered Rabbit running away from the baby's funeral, abandoning Janice and Nelson for the second time. Willis Wager succinctly captures the essence of the Novel when he opines: "Probably the best of his [Updike] novels so far is Rabbit Run its central character 'Rabbit' Angstrom (suggesting Angst, or anxiety), a 'humour' character in the sense of being funny but having an overdeveloped character trait, that of running away from his problems" (169). The novel's limited range of action might appear to bear out the claim of unreceptive critics like Harold Bloom who finds that the Rabbit novels "scarcely sustain re-reading" (1). A close analysis of the novel shows Updike's preoccupation with things both spiritual and temporal. The relationship between Rabbit and Janice on one hand and with Ruth on the other, presents the dialectical tension between the Good and the Evil.

4. Rabbit Redux

Rabbit Redux is aligned with the major events of the sixties of the last century coinciding with America's conquest of Moon and the intense racial and political turmoil that ravaged the domestic scene. The novel's action which spans a brief period of four months between July and October 1969 is captured as a quartet, each named after an individual except for the first which has a seemingly incongruous addendum. The first chapter is named Pop, Mom, and Moon, and the other three after Jill, a flower child of the sixties, Skeeter, a black Vietnam war veteran and Mim, Rabbit's sister and his only sibling, in the same order. The oddity of inclusion of the lunar sphere in the caption of the first quartet gets resolved by a skilfully contrived symbolic unity achieved by prefixing each of the four sections with epigraphs taken from the conversations of the astronauts of Apollo 11 and the Russian Cosmonauts. According to George Hunt, "If Rabbit, Run was Updike's quintessential novel of the 1950's, Rabbit Redux is search for the 1960's" (165). In the first novel, Rabbit was overcome by angst which propels him to seek new frontiers whereas Rabbit

Redux finds him in a state of stupor induced by external circumstances. The story line of the novel is linear unlike Rabbit, Run whose movement is set in a zigzag pattern. One finds here the protagonist whose personal life with his wife is at nadir. Janice has an affair with Charlie, a co-worker, but with the passion of the life youth being over, the knowledge of the illicit tryst does not elicit any violent domestic convolutions. On the contrary, Rabbit treats the matter with disdain. When he confronts Janice, she promises to end the affair, but surprisingly Rabbit suggests that she can go on seeing her lover which really shocks and hurts Janice. She deserts her son and her husband to be with her lover. In her absence, Rabbit gets involved with the members of the culture, particularly Jill, a White Hippie from an affluent background and Skeeter, a Black militant and a drug pusher. Both of them come to stay in Rabbit's house and Jill plays a sort of surrogate mother to Nelson. On the awareness of God, Hunt's finding is that "Unlike the Rabbit of Rabbit, Run, Rabbit in Rabbit Redux is no longer a religious slave in the loosest and most nostalgic sense" (177). Boswell's insightful observation that in this novel Updike engages "complex and hair splitting theological issues" (104), is proven right as even the socio-political issues like racism, capitalism are dissected from a theological perspective. At the end of the novel, one finds Rabbit confronting the same existential problems that engulfed him in Rabbit, Run without any obvious solution.

5. Rabbit is Rich

The thematic connect between Rabbit is Rich and the first novel Rabbit Run is apparent in the first sentence itself where Updike declares, "running out of gas" (Rich 1), Rabbit muses over the thin traffic on the road caused by the oil price hike. The word 'running' foregrounds Updike's continued engagement with a problem that was encountered by the protagonist in the first novel. The four novels of the tetralogy can be structurally viewed as two units, with the first having a counterpart in the second. Boswell remarks, "Rabbit is Rich feels almost idea-free, an astonishingly realized work of pure fiction that eschews abstract ideas for the palpable touch of felt experience" (135). The quest for life experience is sought in material comfort and

in the elitist society bereft of spiritual dimension. The recurring theme of duality of life and death and the role of the transcendence comes in for a subtle but systematic appraisal in the novel, despite the ostensible engagement with materialism. The vividness of make-belief life of Rabbit is Rich manifests itself in materialistic struggles and sensual pursuit. Even in Rabbit Redux, when a sexually rejuvenated Janice leaves her husband for Charlie, Updike observes that she was unaware of the fact that "death was eating enough into her body" (Rich 43). In Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit is overwhelmed by the spatial forces of water and fire which remind him of God's presence. However much he tries to run away from God, he is unable to escape the presence of death. Boswell further opines, "All the things he used to fear- nothingness, confinement, death comfort him now" (138). Thus, in Rabbit is Rich, Updike's God is not only relegated to background but is also met with a challenge in which man wants to raise himself as his serious contender. This dialectic interplay between faith in God and negation of his presence in human affairs constitutes one of the important strands in the theological undercurrents noticed in the novel.

6. Rabbit at Rest

In the last novel of the tetralogy, Rabbit at Rest, Updike poses the phenomenological question "What is life supposed to be?" (Rest 157). Rabbit nowhere seriously considers this question till the fifth decade of his life and even this question is raised by Pru, his daughter-in-law. Before foregrounding the vital query, the main engagement of the novel is focused on the ontological question, 'What is life?' Translated in decipherable terms, it indicates whether there is a spiritual dimension to life or is life a mere biological existence that ends with death? In other words, the question implies the duality of life and death. On the underlying spiritual dimension of the novel, Bailey makes a pointed observation that there is a "dramatization of the irresolvable enigma of faith that confronts a believer like Harry or Updike himself at the end of the twentieth century" (157). The dialectical concerns which foreground the inner conflicts of the protagonist are powerfully expressed by the protagonist himself as, "mind over matter, electricity over muscle" (Rest 248), and the

inherent tensions between these polarities are portrayed sympathetically. Right in the opening paragraphs of the novel, Rabbit contemplates on his death which he sees in all the objects around. Therefore, Rabbit at Rest despite its ambivalent position seems more inclined to conclude in a spirit of affirmation of the life experience of a person without pronouncing moral verdicts. Rabbit although successful materially, ends up to be a rich recluse leading his life pointlessly. His life is a classic example of people who have absence of faith and keep running from the inevitable.

CONCLUSION

Updike looked upon his craft as a surrogate tool to find meaning for human existence. He assigned much seriousness to writing and declared that work was the only consolation for having been born. His vocation defined his very existence, according to his confession in Self-Consciousness: "My own chosen career... its daily excretion of yet more words, the eventual reifying of these words into books... is a kind of bicycle which, if I ever were to stop peddling, would dump me flat on my side" (228). This obsession translated into an enquiry of the moral, social fabric of America with the focus on the individual's struggle for faith. The four questions discussed in the preceding paragraphs fairly sum up the artist's burden. If Rabbit, Run impliedly asks God would not intervene to mitigate manmade disasters, Rabbit Redux questions the cause of man's running. In Rabbit Rich, the paradox of running despite the material opulence which gives life an apparent stability is addressed. Rabbit at Rest attempts to inquire the parameters of living by posing the question what is life supposed to be? All these questions revolve around the fundamental problems that have been focus of great literature. The question raised in the last novel Rabbit at Rest is the fulcrum on which the social, and religious concerns of Updike rest. Updike keeps his vista both on the spiritual and the material aspects of life experience that lends strong pragmatic dimension to the tetralogy. If consistency is the hallmark of a novelist's vision, one can say without the fear of contradiction that religion is one of the abiding focus of Updike's career. A teleological view of Updike's oeuvre shows that from the beginning of

his literary career, Updike was keenly engaged with spiritual dimension of life in the twentieth century America that seared individual faith with a hitherto unknown velocity.

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