

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

EVER INSTRUCTING FINGERS: AN ANALYSIS OF UPDIKE'S SELECT NOVELS

TEHREEM ZEHRA

Aligarh, India

E-mail id: [meshayll619@gmail.com](mailto:meshayll619@gmail.com)



TEHREEM ZEHRA

ABSTRACT

The primary function of art is to instruct. For a piece of work to be influentially instructive, the writer has to be equally bitter and sweet at certain instances, in his dealing with the specific concept of his culture or humanity as a whole. Though America has the right to muse of being one the pioneers in holding a large population of instructive writers yet no other writer ever proved to be so instructional as well as observant as John Updike. Updike liked to write about the 'middles where the extremes clash'; in a country where almost everything is regulated as per the racist dogma, Updike can swing back into any realm of the society and bring us back in no time laden with informative and moralising modification.

**Keywords:** Betrayal, Adultery, Children, Faith, Bleak, Millennium.

Be it a commonwealth country's Chinua Achebe or R.K Narayan or Conrad of a master mind nation in the market of imperialism, but none have considered their literary career as complete without adding gems and dabs of an instructional ruler to moralise their brethren. These nations have had a long history of hundreds or may be of thousands of years to sow and reap their fruits or thorns. Surprisingly, there is such a nation in the world which shook and rose, stretched and yawned, laboured restlessly, attempted and achieved and grabbed every heartfelt desire with a lion's paw and that also in a span of not more than four centuries. The United States of America is a phrase which holds its meaning in its own group of words. The Southern plantations along with their leisurely life, rapidly growing industrialisation as well as business and trade centres in the North and carving of new civilisation toward the Western frontier have been some of the accountable historical facts of a young America in eighteen and nineteenth century. New place for settlement, new and promising prospects,

independent life, Dollar worship and glorious status back at home attracted numerous souls to the American subcontinent. The land under a continuous process of construction and reconstruction, at one hand, experienced a massive inflow of immigrants and the resultant mixed society till date is in an attempt to maintain its individuality with a successful amalgamation in typical American atmosphere. On the other hand, a race obsessed with authority, materialism, technology and sex roused many a writers of every literary era in America. Hawthorne raised questioning fingers on the darkness of Puritanism in his master piece *The Scarlet Letter* whereas Hemingway questioned the crumbling fate of America in the form of a chopped and torn 'marlin' in his *The Old Man and the Sea*. Even the migrated writers like Oscar Wilde talked about American pride and consumerism in his works. Wilde's short novel *The Canterville Ghost*, a comedy, in an attempt to praise American advancement and modernism, turned out as a comment on American obsession with money, self-

promotion of American selling brands, disrespect towards elders in the society, nuclear family system and a sense of repulsion for the outer world.

When such an America celebrated its stumbling entry into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a prolific writer like John Updike was ready with his pen and paper to sketch a utopian America against the real one. For this he acquired a number of strategies; sometimes he portrays an angry and hopeless wife, a neglected child, selfish husband, a betrayer torn with guilt, a disgusted sexual partner, an impotent president or a faithless divinity professor. In this way, what Hawthorne and Hemingway did for American Puritanism was further carried out by Updike in his literary career through 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Beginning with *Rabbit* series which make up the backbone of his literary outburst, he seldom eulogises the American spirit of adultery, selfishness, capitalism, consumerism and wavering faith. He puts his heart and soul to reform the deteriorating self and values of his nation.

With the onset of intensive study of the select novels chronologically, an enriched journey through the American doubtful spiritualism, the spirit of boastful assertion and the reasons of its gradual decay, narrow-mindedness, racialism, insecurities in second marriage, the lasting scars and psychology of the humiliated children due to the betrayal of either of their parents can be seen. The last point above has its imprints overshadowing the other ones as it sets a chain of betrayal, unpleasant memories, jealousy and a haunting revenge on the mind of the protagonist, Roger Lambert, in the first gem of Updike's select novels package *Roger's Version* (1986).

This means that God's love is transcending and is not to be claimed or measured otherwise God has the Ultimate Power in his possession and is capable of humiliating his slaves to silent death. In Updike's select novels, whoever muses to have acquired the summit of theology, finds himself drifting away from His divine grace (Rev. Wilmot and Roger Lambert) and left in a black pool of doubt, anger, jealousy, escapism, decay and intolerance. The person loses his worth and is caught in a web of insecurities. In the first hand narration in *Roger's Version*, it is clear to the reader that insecurity

haunts Prof. Lambert, throughout the story, due to his second and younger wife, Esther.

Moreover his unpleasant past, cropped out of a betrayal in his parents' marriage when his father got involved with another woman and left Roger's mother grief-stricken and unsupported. Roger's step-sister, Edna, roused his revengeful instincts with her lavish and secure childhood. Roger Lambert, when grown-up and educated, at a point, loses his sublime faith in God. He fails to respect his first but infertile wife, Lillian who extended her love to orphans and in an angelic way gave away her material assets for their welfare. With Esther, he had a son, Richie, but their house is symbol of chilled emotions and decay. Edna's daughter, Verna's appearance on the scene does not contribute much to the novel except a soft corner for racial discrimination and the brown race; though she stimulates her uncle Lambert's revengeful instincts and he manages to get a chance and goes as far as to have sex with his niece. He feels released and blessed for a few moments partly because he could not believe to have revived his sexual juices in his deteriorating years and also that he had avenged his own humiliation as a neglected child and satisfied his thirst for Edna through Verna. Now the most threatening blow that Roger Lambert got was from a zealous computer whiz, Dale Kohler, also Verna's friend. Dale, in an attempt to prove God through a computer programme manages to thwart much of Lambert's mocking attitude about a God who would be 'felt in a computer software'; would be available in 'frosted images' and in human hands and digits rather than in hearts and minds. But as Dale begins his project, he experiences a gradual spiritual breakdown and discovers his inability to carry on his Government Grant aided project. This is an indication for inability of human beings to possess God in a specific size or shape. All through the novel, Lambert acts a spy on his house, his new wife and his 'opponent' Dale whom he abstractly accuses of committing adultery with his wife, Esther.

Updike, in an attempt, to project the negatives of betrayal in relationships and its dire consequences, emotionally and psychologically, on the children; loss of faith and the resultant doubtful mind, suspicious nature, insecurity and complex;

biases in terms of racialism, gender and age and the triumph of devil over struggling and wandering human mind in search of God, writes a tell-tale journey of Lambert into the mind of his wife and Dale Kohler. Updike joins various dots on a paper and makes them revolve around Roger Lambert and brings home a point that children need a healthy, robust and secure childhood to grow into positive and blooming future; emotions like revenge and jealousy seldom find their way to them. Children grown under the wings of their caring parents never learn to acquire hip-hop nature while sexually playful nature of parents can guarantee a series of betrayal in coming future. As far as the question of God and Divinity is concerned, Updike asserts that claiming to have knowledge of religion is appreciable but trying to possess that knowledge to the extent of megalomania and derailing one's own students, should be out of question. Moreover, adultery and material distraction add to our godless values. The end-scene of *Roger's Version* depicts the couple, Roger and Esther, behaving as casually as ever. Esther's telling him that she is going to Sunday Church, a place where he has stopped to go long back, fills the reader with doubt about the confirmation of Roger's descriptions for Dale and Esther's relationship. Esther's ignoring Dale in thanks-giving party in her house also denotes that she abhorred him for losing his zeal and godly grace. While Verna is an instrument to rouse our sympathy, Esther, though a home-breaker turned wife, is a symbol of quest for Divine grace in a 'divinity professor's mind', in 'binary digits of computer programme' and ultimately acquires solace in a cathedral. At last she understands that God resides in a peaceful and confident heart not in material or fleshy bodies.

The next novel in the list of select novels, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), is quite apt to be called upcoming link in Updike's novels. The familiar song of Updike for his deep felt sorrow about the weakening bonds of godly values in religious preachers of the nation, following the price that the posterity has to pay. The Protagonist, Rev. Clarence Wilmot, feels 'last particles of faith' have left him after he had served the ministry for almost a lifetime. He spends a long time contemplating the

household furniture waiting for some external sign of God's wrath. Even an extension in Church for Lord's services fails to cure his faithlessness and he resorts to leave the parsonage. The atheist Ingersoll is an instrument for taking Revd. Wilmot off track and his book *Some Mistakes of Moses* successfully does its task. Clarence is rendered jobless and in a state of acute penury and is left to trot through the streets of Paterson, under blazing sun or the stormy weather, selling copies of an encyclopaedia for children. To escape his distress, Clarence hops into the movie houses where the fate of actors is not in the hands of God but in the hands of manipulative producers and directors who can bring upon a happy ending even from bleak circumstances.

This novel of Updike celebrates its entry into the millennium years with a gradual worship for stardom. The silent decay of Clarence shattered his children; Jared, the lost and disillusioned American youth behind the glory of war, Esther, an immorally selfish daughter and the shocked and delicate Theodore who was disappointed with God for what happened to his father. Clarence's wife, Stella also feels the unexpressed guilt felt by her husband that once a person who kicks off God's grace then only the Almighty knows how to degrade his slave towards silent death.

This novel is also a pamphlet in which Updike gives an account of such things which are endeared by God. Clarence's sister and his youngest son, Esther and Teddy have their roles in connecting with the world through telephone and postal service; Estella's struggle with her lively spirit and her will for life throughout the journey of four generations to come, Teddy's daughter, Essie's confidence in herself and in her secure and certain familial bonds and lastly, Essie's son, Clark's ultimate sacrifice for innocent women and children to liberate them from the tyranny of a pseudo-god, Smith; and right there Updike's four-generation saga completes its arc which had started from abstract love for God and ends with the same, thus conveying its message successfully that a person's sole aim of life is to live for God and his creatures and likewise die for Him and for them.

In the same way, the love for God and his creatures is extended towards a third counter-part,

Nature, in Updike's *Towards the End of Time* (1997). This novel is a typical critique on Wild-Life preservation where the protagonist, Ben Turnbull, represents a selfish but impotent part of civilization that falls helpless in the hands of a poaching spirit, his second wife, Gloria. The deer in the forest sometimes camouflaging as a whore in his house symbolises the demand for the shelter. Here, Updike conjures the appeal for the preservation of nature all through the novel. His nagging with Gloria, every now and then, represents the collision of the civilization-gone-astray with capitalism and industrialization. The novel is full of the element of innocence and concentration exhibited by the attractive animals while feeding on greenery. Poachers, deer-slayers and armed persons are extensively mentioned in the novel. How killing of animals can disturb the ecological balance, is illustrated with the example of breaking up of the first marriage, throwing out the first wife from the familial chain just to replace her with a second wife who has no affection with the existing children and other relations but her sole aim is to exercise a domination over her partner and to muse of her position as a rich widow in near future. The sympathy that the animals expect from the human beings and their subsequent disillusion and that 'one long gaze' from a dying or fleeing animal is just a warning for the brewing animals' inner grudge, a question on their part whether the Human world does know that 'Time' repeats itself or whether it knows, how well the creatures gifted with reason, are preparing for the last meeting with God. Updike also sketches the ugliest future of America in the form of pseudozoans – metallobioforms, the upcoming wild-life born out of the spilled chemicals from nuclear reactors and that swallows everything ranging from wood to living human beings in just wink of an eye. Rest of the theme constitutes of breaking up the prevalence of racialism, value of patience and power of adjustment in African nature and a craving in elderly people in the American society to get due respect from the younger generation.

The next ball in Updike's hand is *Villages*(2004) where the author converges his view from Nature and creation to familial relationships.

Here Updike emphasizes on stability in personal relations through the extreme and merciless instability exhibited on the part of the accused protagonist, Owen Mackenzie, a soft-ware engineer. Updike opens his novel in the present tense to enhance the experiences of the punished-self of Owen. His dream of guilt – his second and younger wife, Julia's dead body lying naked in a room and doctors are trying to save her while Owen is standing at a distance with a feeling of remorse that he had killed her – fills the readers with horror and curiosity about Owen's evil past. Updike also tries to avenge for Owen's victims in the past, by describing in detail his sagging flesh, his hurting eyes, his restlessness in not finding Julia beside him in bed, in describing his nagging bladder and above all, a unified wifely figure in his dreams which leaves him confused about who the woman is. For further clarification, Updike takes us to Owen's past where he grows from a hesitating and troubled child to an MIT student. Descriptive accounts in the novel about the aftermath effects of war helps Updike to criticize America as a 'vain war-lover' whose dead soldiers are given tribute on a bulletin-board at Haskell Crossing but the survivors are forgotten and rendered jobless and some desperate ones commit suicide. Once married, Owen takes women as his guides. He needs his wife to tell him about the other women and those other women to teach him about the feminine gender. Thus onset of a sexual odyssey leaves Owen as a favourite hot commodity in the market at his every sexual phase. But 'Time' has to show Owen that permanence never finds its way to the pride of human beings. After sleeping with a long list of women, Owen is overwhelmed with Julia, a parson's wife and decides to marry her. In the tense atmosphere of filing for the divorce, Owen's children praying for a unified home, the stoic attitude of Owen leaves us clutched-fisted out of anger for his selfishness, dishonesty and his never-growing-up position. His wife, Phyllis accuses Julia of being a 'con-artist' and decides to cancel the petition for divorce but on her way she meets an accident and dies. Eventually, married to Julia, Owen lives with a third haunted self in the house. He and Julia live in fear of losing each other; Julia feels insecure even when Owen is out to play golf; when

he sits alone, she notices him gazing somewhere guiltily.

Updike does not miss hitting Owen financially when his children damaged material assets in circumstances or places which matched one of Owen's sexual meetings in the past. Owen is left alone after the last of his kids has left the house to struggle in life. In the concluding words of the novel, Updike compares Owen to America which lives in a fantasy that she is superior to other nations but inwardly she is just drowning herself into the pit of decay, fear and insecurity. Updike also treats the obsession of a public with new technology and the gadgets and the obsolescence of creative art and craft. In a nutshell, Updike portrays an adulterous capitalist (Owen/America) crazy for modernism, rich in resources and atomic power but at the end of the day 'all alone' with only 'enemies' and 'competitors' around.

Updike's last novel in this chronological order of the list of the select novels is *Terrorist* (2006) and it completes the full circle with its linking strands of adultery, insecurity, broken homes, lack of parents; and also explores some novel themes like weak educational system, lack of belongingness towards nation and bringing up of a terrorist mindset.

In this book, Updike resolves to treat the problem of the adolescent minds who are fresh pass outs from High School and could be a promising future for their nation. Updike's shattered protagonist, Ahmad Ashmaway Mulloy, a mixed blood American student of Central High, experiences a mental turmoil due to his split family; a single mother with sexually playful nature who mocks her son's Muslim religion and a runaway Egyptian father. The kid Ahmad who used to question his mother about his father, was sent off to a mosque to have lessons in Quran in the company of Imam Sheikh Rashid. The introvert child grows into a High School boy with increasing complexities and hatred towards Western godless culture. At the end of the day, Teresa Mulloy ends up having a child who does not even want to bind himself with her as an American son.

Updike also prepares an alter ego of Ahmad in the novel – a counsellor in Central High, Mr. Jack

Levy, who in spite of being a partial atheist, loves humanity, wants to impart fruitful teaching and misses the long lost moral values in American culture. Jack Levy is a mouth-piece of Updike and likewise tires himself out grumbling about the deterioration of educational system and the rough and crippled progress of American unity. His tightened self finds its release in Teresa's bed but a woman longing for a permanent partner ultimately rejects him and accuses him of being a depressed insect, only fit for holding the responsibility of his obese wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth resembles the American mainland that is fed on cookies and entertainment, crazy about modern gadgets which help minimise the work as well as the body movement and at the same time milking money out of citizens in the form of bills and taxes, worries about terrorists' attack and talks about American defence but cannot do anything about it. Updike's Ahmad is prepared for a terrorist attack by Sheikh Rashid but timely intervention of Mr. Jack Levy stops his student from going ahead. What Ahmad could not allow his own mind to perceive as human love, is accomplished by his alter ego, Mr. Jack Levy.

Thus in an attempt to create a Utopian America, Updike had to satirise, criticize, lament and point out a decaying culture with inhuman values, lack of self-restraint and self-preservation, racialism, moral and spiritual degradation, wavering faith, unstable relationships, blind faith in capitalism and technology, glorification of war and its disillusion, extreme negligence towards nature and destruction of Self as well as of the world. Updike cast a wet eye on the canvas of this mainland and discovered that he should act like a potter who keeps patting his pitcher while grooving it on the wheel to give it an ideal shape. His whiplash is sore but awakes the reader to the bitter American reality. In his novels, Updike has given every possible way to instruct the readers for bringing about reformation, improving their lot, respecting natural laws, being kind and human in behaviour, getting the other concept of *carpe diem* to spend the entire life in preparing one's own self for achieving salvation instead of obsession with sex. He wants his countrymen to realize the ticking hands of the running 'time' and

respond to his 'call' and save themselves before it becomes a 'Late Call'.

**References**

1. Updike, John. *Roger's Version*. Penguin Classic, UK. 1986. Print.
2. \_\_\_\_\_.*In the Beauty of the Lilies*.Penguin Classic, UK. 1996. Print.
3. \_\_\_\_\_.*Towards the End of Time*. Simon & Schuster, UK. 1997. Print.
4. \_\_\_\_\_.*Villages*. Penguin Group, UK. 2006. Print.
5. \_\_\_\_\_. *Terrorist*. Penguin Group. 2007. Print.