

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

January 2015 Vol. IV. Issue I

www.galaxyimrj.com

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Search for Identity in Updike's Rabbit Novels

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Updike is an eminent writer of later twentieth century America who emphasized upon social situations and human condition in Modern American society. The contemporary American fiction is about man who keeps himself away from immediate problems and responsibilities towards his family and society. Updike has dealt with common issues, related to the themes of modern culture in relation to the contemporary society. American man doesn't know exactly what he really wants in life but he is running for something beyond his clear knowledge. He finds belligerent in search of individual freedom. In most of his famous works, Updike has chronicled the life of Harry Rabbit Angstrom over the course of several decades even generations, from his young adulthood to his son showing their running in search of identity. In *Rabbit, Run*, Harry has started his search but fails which turns towards Janice, his wife who runs for her lover Charlie Stavros. In *Rabbit Is Rich*, on the other hand it's his son Nelson who runs away from his wife Pru which is nothing but the imitation of his father without reason in search of something that nobody knows again.

In this paper focus has been put upon the thirst of Updike's heroes for liberty and independence. The desire for independence has made society face sociocultural tribulations. However, John Updike often celebrated his novels depicting man's struggle against responsibility enduring personal endeavors. The protagonist Harry Rabbit Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run*, runs from his wife and son in search of something rather his own identity somewhat like spirituality. Updike catches familial aspects, the mentality of American middle-class man along with his belief in individual freedom beside his repercussion on his married life. Updike highlights his belief in individual freedom and its ramification on his family life has been discussed in 'Rabbit' novels. Josephine Hendin writes about Updike's distinct skill and exploration of man in his fiction as:

John Updike's novels show man's marriage as his fate. No one has done more to explore male freedom as a myth than Updike in novels. American man, whose life from cradle to grave is structured by women (Hendin, p437).

In America, liberty has provided to both sexes that either of them could end their domestic union by just announcing to the partner being fed up, or having found a new flame or fancy, or could even simply walk out that is so much as a goodbye. Updike tried to focus upon the problem of freedom and identity of people, the failure of religious belief and the dubious

nature of existence itself. The industrial revolution stimulated social transformation increasing people's income by enhanced employment to both men and women. The married people find more job opportunities in industries that allow them to relocate in cities. Men and women acquired more opportunities inspiring them to live independently free from all domestic qualms. Women moreover began to grab opportunities facilitating them work outside home which affected their mutual faith as well as emotional attachment.

Similarly, Rabbit wants to get away from responsibilities and live independent life. The whole situation he feels is like a trap that he wanted to escape from but unable to get away. He remembers his past glory and moans upon his own life helplessly. He was a basketball player in his youth who experienced the joy of unhindered graceful movement in basketball court. The former glory and fame that was accustomed to him now become the past of history but remained as sweet memories, described as:

“In his time rabbit was famous through the county in basketball in his junior years. He set a B-league scoring record that in his senior year he broke with a record that was not broken until four years later”(Updike, p7).

Coming out of such a vigorous life, he was compelled to live an ordinary life with his irresponsible wife, Janice. Though pregnant, she mindlessly watches TV, drinks heavily and lives in their squalid, cramped apartment. Rabbit is exhausted of her careless behavior therefore seeks to run away from her. However he could only replace members as he goes to his high-school basketball coach, Marty Tothero who substitutes him to his father and Ruth, a prostitute, who is substitute for his wife. These people have effect on Rabbit's behavior who tries to find wife in Ruth though he had fled from one. Rabbit represents American everyman who think family as burden on him and desire escape.

He drives the whole night away from Brewer, only to ascertain that he lost in a maze of freeways and secondary roads. While driving in the dark, he thinks about his childhood, his irritating wife, his domineering mother, his sagacious coach Marty Tothero, his present plight and his sister. However he tries to recapture his mother and sister feeding his crying son in backward vision different memories go through his mind speedily for instance he is driving with speed. He wants to soar in free cosmos like saints that has been his inner desire observed from his imagination when he heard news of Dalai Lama, the spiritual legend. He wants to seek something beyond house towards spirituality. Something is rather admirable in his struggle against the inadequacy and deadness around him.

At his old place there are Mr. and Mrs. Zim living with their daughter Carolyn. The story of this family is much irritating to him. According to him the girl and her precious beauty are like something that had happened elsewhere in France, Persia or Heaven. But in the house she suffers from a very worst situation when her parents quarrel before her. She would feel to kill them in their sleep. Her helplessness is described as:

“All day long Mrs. Zim screamed at her and when Mr. Zim came home from work two of them would shout together for hours. It would begin with Mr. defending the little girl, and complicated flowers in the night. Sometimes she said that the little girl would murder them both as they lay asleep”(Updike, p18).

These thoughts of family are responsible for his running away in fear of his filthy life with Janice. His experiences with her as wife are not good enough that raise feeling of insecurity deeply rooted in his mind that cause him to run away. Burhans Clinton comments on his Flight of escape:

“Rabbit Angstrom increasingly feels trap in the net, caught in a life of incomprehensible complexity and meaningless triviality seeking escape” (Burhans, p.336-7).

At seven thirty in the evening, Rabbit stops at a hardware store opposite two gasoline pumps outside. A middle aged man comes to fill his car with regular oil enquires him in curiosity where he wants to go. Rabbit answers that he does not know exactly. The tipsy man gives him a piece of scholarly advice: “The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you’re going before you go there” (Updike, p.26). He gets as far as West Virginia turns around and returns during the early morning through eastern Pennsylvania to Mount Judge. In these twists and turns circles, Rabbit longs for something better, something he desires for new. He is running from this background but he gets to the same place driving round and round.

In *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit and Janice have virtually exchanged their roles. In the novel he tries to keep his marriage alive but Janice leaves him for her lover Charlie Stavros. Both Rabbit and Janice do not have any affection to each other but are caught in marriage. The novel shows, when traditional relationship is prevented from fulfillment, family life comes under pressure. Janice finds her husband’s idea of family, quite obsolete and old fashioned in present America. Updike, in these novels, is not concerned with adultery parse but simply with woman’s search for identity. He is in fact interested in investigating the impact of social change on marriage and familial relationship. Though she leaves her husband with son but cannot live with her lover for long time and soon realizes her mistake turns back home. Her lover Charlie too fed up with her wifely supremacy that ends their virtual unity.

Thus I conclude my paper with conviction that Updike’s characters are fumbled with their own existence and self. They run in search of identity which is beyond their knowledge. This has grown as the common problem of America where people are rare sensible towards family as pioneering institution. Family proves as a riddle of life that no one can solve which has now turned as a universal issue in this era of globalization. It has increased autonomist tendencies among people turning their family lives into turmoil resulting in nothing but vacuum.

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