

CHAPTER I.

JOHN UPDIKE AND THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS

Since 1940 fiction in America has undergone a great change. Especially after the Second World War, the process of this literary changes seems to have accelerated. All the phases of American history have been reflected in the literatus of that respective period. The Gold' rush, the immigration, the wars, the Jewish movement, the Negro movement have found their voices reflected and echoed in modern American literature. After the wars the American writer turned to the day-to-day issues against the background of the scientific and technological advancement. A great deal of the literature written after the War deals with familiar issues such as the relations between parents and children, between husband and wife, loneliness and disillusionment, the search for identity and so on. Also writers belonging to particular group have succeeded in maintaining their individualities. For example the major Jewish writers have all been acutely attuned to political history and its characteristic modern theme, war, brutality, depression and unemployment. The horror of the recent past stands behind all the postwar Jewish writers. American writers Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow have voiced Jewish sentiments in their works. The Negro writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison have rebelled against the existinn social injustice. The postwar fictional scene thus presents a complex picture of multiple themes and trends.

When we come to the short story, we find major writers like Eudora Welty, Salinger, O'Connor and McCarthy. Eudora Welty's stories are characterised by poetic, mythical and symbolic qualities. The setting in most of her short stories happens to be Southern Mississippi, where she was born. Since the publishing of her first novel she has surprised the readers and critics with astonishing range of mood, pace, tone and variety of material. Mary McCarthy's work is concerned with the individual as a social and political being. Her work is distinguished by its intellectual and analytical qualities. J.F. Power's stories deal with the problems and frustrations of the Catholic clergy. J.D. Salinger, the best known among these, reflects adolescent experience in several of these stories. There is also mysticism in some of his stories. Flannery O'Connor mixes violence, the grotesque and other Southern elements in her two volumes of short stories. Bernard Malamud deals with the problem of Jewish suffering. If man is destined to suffer, he must endure with hope, and if man falls into sin, there is yet the possibility of redemption through repentance, is the central theme of his writings. Fantasy appears in many of his stories. Malamud is regarded as a major character creator, with great inventive gifts, rich comic sense, deep insight into human nature and experience.

III

This was the literary scene in brief when John Updike began writing. Updike does not belong to any literary circle. He does not belong to any particular sect of writers either. He has been a prolific writer. He has been writing since 1954. Since then he has written 10 novels, 9 collections of short stories, 4 collections of poems and literary essays. His steady productiveness has brought him a good international audience.

Updike's fiction has always been realistic. He is not interested in fantasy or anything beyond the reach of the common man. From his very first short story titled 'Friends from Philadelphia' (1954) to Problems and Other Stories, his stories depict the contemporary suburban man.

The setting of his stories is always Pennsylvania. The town Olinger is fictionalized from his native town Shillington. His stories have always attracted attention for his skillful writing about children, adolescents and husband-wife relationship. Through these familial themes Updike has been giving his impressions of the middle class society in the suburban America.

His first novel The Poorhouse Fair was a novel of great imaginative accuracy. In it the inmates of the poorhouse are typical specimens of Updike. To some critics they have represented symbols or products of American history. Rabbit, Run was his second novel. This novel was published in 1960. Rabbit or Harry Angstrom is symbolic of all Americans. He is running from the usual pressures, the usual traps of contemporary society. ^{away}

The Centaur (1963) portrayed Olinger citizens to Olympian citizens and told the story of Peter-Prometheus and his father George Caldwell-Centaur's three days in town, snowed in and unable to return to the mother and the home farm. Updike achieved the adoption of the elements of the traditional pastoral elegy. Of the Farm (1965) was set in Pennsylvania countryside and dealt with man's exercise of freedom more in relation to other human beings and the earth. Some critics think that Of the Farm is a sequel to The Centaur. The characterization of Joey and his musings over the past, the characterization of Joey's mother Mrs. Richardson and Joey's wife Peggy in this novel reminded the readers and the critics of the exercise of freedom more in relation to other human beings and the earth portrayed in the earlier novel.

Couples (1968) depicted the couples of Tarbox, a pastoral mill town, trying to establish "a counter ethical erotic utopia." Rabbit Redux (1971) was a sequel to Rabbit, Run. In this sequel Rabbit's progress and his wife's running away was woven with a little wealthy background and the Vietnam War along with the Landing on Moon. A Month of Sundays (1975) was written in the form of confession. A New England minister, his ideas, his married life and his extra-marital affairs were depicted in this novel. Critics called it Updike's 'Scarlet Letters', again with symbols for ethics, sensuality and spirituality. Marry Me was published in 1976 in which Updike depicted one man and his two loves. The hero of the novel Jerry is loved by his wife and his mistress. Updike told his dilemma in Marry Me. The Coup (1978) resembled some actual happenings and it portrayed a black Muslim communist tyrant, in which he tried to show the superiority of Western thought and culture. The Coup is his only novel that did not portray his typical themes and that did not have his Pennsylvania location and middle class characters.

IV

The world of Updike is fully illuminated in his collections of short stories. Most of his short stories were published in *The New Yorker*. A good many of the contemporary stories were published in *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker's* place in developing the short story in America is extremely important. *The New Yorker's* annual collections of short stories published in 1940, 1950 and 1960 contain stories by America's major short story writers like Salinger, Eudora Welty, McCarthy, Saul Bellow and Updike. These writers wrote regularly in *The New Yorker*.

The first Updike collection of short stories, titled *The Same Door* came out in 1959. Updike's first ever story 'Friends from Philadelphia' figures in this collection. This story concentrates on a boy's gradual awakening to manhood. There are no sensational or climatic scenes or any violence or deaths in these stories. The stories are set in the midst of daily life. The second story 'Ace in the Hole' resembles the basic plot of *Rabbit, Run*. The final story in this collection 'The Happiest I Have Been' is in the form of reminiscence. It evokes the mood of one's transitional stages of maturity. It can be interpreted as a symbolic door between husband and wife, between old friends or between chance encounters. The image of the door, a familiar object of ordinary life

is fitting and effective for Updike's purpose to show that the formative events of one's being occur within the framework of the common and that the common moments can be redeemed or lost through the quality of one's response to others.

Pigeon Feathers followed in 1962. The glow of joy and pain, of intensely felt experience through memory is the content of this collection. Whether in 'Walter Briggs', 'The Persistence of Desire', 'Wife Wooing', 'Packed Dirt', or in 'Pigeon Feathers', memories of happy past, happy relationship, age of innocence play a good role. 'The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble and Fanny Island' is a collection of intrinsic blessings and images that would evoke joy.

The Music School came out in 1966. Some critics regard it as Updike's best collection of short stories. Most of these stories portray marital tension. 'Giving Blood', 'Avec La Baby Sitter describe this tension to the minutest detail. The story of doctrinal debates is in 'The Christian Roommates'. Orson Zeigler, who has mapped out his future as a town physician, meets Hub Palamountain as his roommate. He is arrogant, vegetarian and a yogi too. Each moment of their conflict is rendered

finely. The story points out the differences in cultures.

'At a Bar in Charlotte Amalie is a tale that describes events witnessed at a bar. 'The Bulgarian Poetess' is about an American author who meets a fellow writer and gives him moments of grace. Updike persuaded this writer with many more stories, to be published in his next collection of short stories linked together.

Bech: A Book was published in 1970. It presented novelist's problems. The hero, Bech is a blocked writer. He has written one very successful book and he is feeding on that. This book of Updike is interpreted in many ways. One interpretation is that it is Updike's attempt to state the American writer's case in the broadest possible terms. Updike persuaded this character with more linked stories in Bech is Back. These stories were published more recently in 1983.

Museums and Women (1972) was Updike's attempt to catch original goodness, original sin and women. The stories play off the ironic contrast between history and the present moment. There is a note of melancholy in many stories but there is a kind of assurance at their heart. They render modes of reconciliation and acceptance, values in themselves. Varieties of stories are handled in Museums and Women.

Updike's concepts about marriage and affairs appeared in linked stories in Too Far to Go published in 1979. The stories in this collection reveal the marital state of Richard and Joan Maple. Their extra-marital affairs, the tension between them, their frustrations along with their moments of joy are captured in these stories. Many of these stories were published in other collections too. The Maples became very popular when Updike turned these stories into a TV serial. These stories show Updike's deep study of the American suburban couple.

Problems and Other Stories was published in the same year. This collection shows deep understanding of the human nature in stories like 'From the Journal of a Leper', 'Minutes of the Last Meeting', 'Transaction' and many others. Marriage and its failure, woman's mind are prominent in other stories.

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Updike thus displays a fine capacity and a lot of skill in depicting human nature in the context of middle class ethos. As observed earlier his setting has always been Olinger, the fictional Pennsylvania town. And the people he portrays belong to the middle class. They are not rich. They are not penniless either. Most of them enjoy middle class luxuries.

Like Ace of "Ace in the Hole" or Richard of the Maples stories, the characters in Updike's fiction are sometimes jobless, but they soon find some kind of job. Rabbit in Rabbit, Run earns his living as a gardener, when he has no other means while living with his mistress. Updike's characters do not mind any kind of job. In fact they care less about it.

Their ambitions too are typically middle-class. "The Christian Roommates" (The Music School) illustrates this point. Orson Zeigler in this story maps out his future as a town physician and a well-to-do citizen of his home town. He represents the common suburban man. Harry or Rabbit in Rabbit Redux is richer than he was in the earlier Rabbit, Run, but he maintains his middle-class mentality. He has no ambitions.

Most of the characters in Updike's fiction respect religion. Not that they do not have doubts but they perform their customary duties as required. As the narrator in "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car" says:

I tried not to go, but it was not in me not to go. I never attended the same church two Sundays in succession for fear I would become known and be expected. To be known by face and name and financial weight robs us of our unitary soul, enrolls us against those others. I

He avoids going to the same church but he does go. He cannot avoid going altogether. He fears that by going to the same church again and again he would be associated with the Others. The Others means the congregation. He has doubts about it. But instead of openly rejecting it he just changes the church and continues his customary duties. This religious tendency belongs to the middle class.

Another typical middle class tendency is that most of Updike's characters have respect for traditional values. They value the moral codes and as a result their adulterous affairs are rooted in a middle class sense of erotic adventures. They fear confrontation and when their mistake becomes known to their partners, they feel ashamed or they have guilty conscious. This happens only because the middle class values are deeply rooted in Updike's characters.

In his short stories Updike has tried to show this middle class suburban man. He has captured his moods, musings and childhood memories. He has depicted the suburban marital life of this Olinger man. His joys, his exstasies are finely portrayed in the form of short story. One learns of Ace's pride and failure in "Ace in the Hole", doubts of a divinity student in "Dentistry and Doubt", of the moments of grace shared by a teenager in "The Happiest I Have Been". The religious querries become known in "Pigeon Feathers" and

the sadness and the guilty-consciousness of this middle class became known in stories like "Guilt Gems", "Giving Blood", "Snowing in Greenwich Village". Yearning for shelter in "A Sense of Shelter" and his friendship can be found in "The Christian Roommates".

Updike's fiction in general thus reveals the suburban life. Updike's characters are different in one sense. His characters are lost in memories that evoke joy. There is sadness, guilt but a queer kind of happiness. Either in childhood or in adulthood certain things make their life worth living. In small outwardly things they are rewarded. These unexpected rewards in the everyday life with its ups and downs and a bit understanding (It may be mistaken as in "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and so Forth".) with a kind of innocence make their life worth living.

VI

While reviewing Museums and Women Tonny Tanner wrote:

We know by now that Updike can convey to us of familiar experiences in Suburban America, and in many of these stories once again he does it incomparably well, the abrasiveness of children quarreling, the insecurities and anxieties involved in moving house or changing districts. - the trivial tameness of cocktail party, the irresolvable misery of participation in an affair that lacks the stability of the marriage and in a marriage that cannot recapture the passion of an affair the modest pleasures of the kitchen, the garden.....²

Tony Tanner has exactly summed up Updike in this paragraph, as these are the subjects Updike deals with. But to Tanner Updike is not convincing about love, but only about the continual presence of fear. It is surprising that Tanner fails to appreciate stories like "I'll Not Let Thee Go Except Thou Bless Me" or "Man and Daughter in the Cold" in which Updike passes the message of love. It is true that affairs mark his stories but the core is love and he definitely offers a convincing picture.

Updike is regarded as one of the best short story writers on familial themes. Stories like "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" (Pigeon Feathers) provided good thought provoking material. In this connection Alfred J. Griffith writes:

Because of their brevity, Updike's short stories often provide more accessible examples of structural subtlety than his novels, where the architectonics are more cumbersome and consequently more difficult to comprehend as a whole. 'Should Wizard Hit Mommy?' one of the finest stories from the 1962 collection 'Pigeon Feathers' provides an excellent illustration of the way structure can, with the greatest economy invent a superficially simple story with deep layers of meaning. ³

And elaborating upon this he says;

'Should Wizard Hit Mommy?' the title of this story asks. Because of the interplay of the structural parallels Updike has created it also asks "Should Jack strike out at Clare?" ⁴

A particular group of critics have always found Updike boring. For example Norman Pandoretz thinks that Updike has 'little to say' and that 'his authentic emotional range is narrow'. The reason behind this is that Updike always portrays the suburban society and his fiction has always picked American middle class society. Not that Updike neglects other themes. For example The Coup depicts a militant black Muslim, who exploits his own motherland and Couples tells of the 'erotic utopia' created by some couples by revolting against the existing moral codes. Certain stories in Problems and other Stories like "Augustine's Concubines" have an entirely different range. On the whole it is true that Updike is more at ease with the stories dealing with familial themes than with socio-political reality.

His linked stories Too Far To Go received acclaim. Paul Thourax missed sentences like 'I could kill you!' He says:

But perhaps this is the very feature that distinguished them from the common run of howling wound-licking look-what-you-did-to-me fictions of the recent years. They are the most civilized stories imaginable and because of this the most tender. Updike, when I read this novel 'Marry Me', I thought, is the poet of the woe that is in the marriage. It is rather to his credit that he conceives of marriage as something other than a Jabberwork; and because he avoids the pique and self-pity in that trap, his stories are celebrations rather than warnings.⁵

Updike's excellence lies in his "marriage stories" and his stories about childhood. Through his marriage stories he has depicted the suburban man, his mentality, his moments of joy and grief or pain. There is a kind of melancholy note of failed marriages and extra marital affairs. But the characters in Updike's fiction find a way to happiness through memories, musings and sudden realizations or awareness. And these moments give them the force of life.

The children in his fiction are endowed with blessings. They seek the happiness through their understandings and their sense to be one with their ideals. Children in Updike's fiction come alive especially in three of his collections. They are The Same Door, Pigeon Feathers and The Music School. Updike has shown the difference between the innocents and the grown ups, has compared their ways of life, and has given some definite conclusions. Critics like Arthur Voss have agreed that Updike writes very well about children. And from both these studies emerges a good picture of the American society, Updike's vision of contemporary America.

In the following chapters an attempt is made to offer a critical statement on the major aspects of Updike's short stories. These major aspects are :*) Updike's world of adults specifically in the context of man-woman relationship and 2) the role of children in the world of Updike's short stories. The dissertation thus seeks to offer a critical analysis of these major aspects of Updike's stories in relation to his portrayal of the American ethos. This dissertation is concerned primarily with Updike's three collections namely The Same Door, Pigeon Feathers and The Music School but wherever necessary his novels and other works have also been taken into consideration briefly.