

CHAPTER. II

M MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP

Twentieth century America and her problems are handled by all the contemporary writers. Different sections of American society are reflected in the works of the authors bred by those particular sections. Especially the conditions they live in, their mentality and ambitions have been the constant themes of these authors. And above all the institution of marriage and its failure has been much discussed. This particular theme has been the most used and abused theme in Contemporary Literature. The institution of marriage has undergone major changes in the present century. After the Second World War the society in general changed its face. Technological advance and the film culture played a prominent role alongwith new concepts of the modern world, in changing the outlook of the society. Psychoanalysts became important in the new system of the changing society. New ideas about free living and sexual pleasure made man unsatisfied with his traditional concepts of sexual pleasure so he tried to seek it by the other ways. The new woman too was changed. She too had her concepts of an ideal man as well as an ideal feminine self. A kind of unrest reigned in this society. The rich could afford the luxuries of the sexual revolution. With poors it was unthinkable. So only the

middle class remained who could not afford the paradise and also could not keep aside the thought of it. What characterized this middle class, which is of course at the centre of Updike's fiction, is the tension between a drive for this "sexual paradise" and at the same time an inability to reach it because of its relatedness to traditional ethical codes of behaviour. As a result transgression of these traditional codes is accompanied by guilt. The writers of this period tried to catch the reflection of this dilemma in their works. It is not only a study of the domestic life but also an in depth analysis of the American middle class society. The mind and background of the people, their anxieties and the reasons behind it, the social setting and its implications have to be studied in this respect. The scientific and technological advancement that has brought leisure, abundance alongwith new social problems and the current thought patterns like Existentialism and Marxism, that have evolved new life styles and in a way have challenged the traditional institutions like marriage have to be given due regard in this connection.

That is what makes John Updike the "poet laureate" of the domestic life in America.

## II

Most of what John Updike has written is devoted to the domestic life of America. His characters try to run away from the institution of marriage. Rabbit Angstrom in Rabbit, Run, Jerry in Marry Me, Tom Marshfield in the novel A Month of Sundays or the Maples in Too Far to Go are weary of their marriage. It is the same pain in his most of works. Only the names and the situations differ

but it is the same suburban middle class man running away from marriage. These characters are restless, unsatisfied and frustrated in their partners and the marriage itself. They know the importance of the marriage. Being middle class people they know that the separation would affect their children badly and that going away from home would not make them happy still they run away. They are brought back. Rabbit or his wife Janice or Joan and Richard Maple are brought back by their friends or parents who act as mediaries. Sometimes it is their conscious which gets them back to their homes. Still the urge of running away remains.

A middle class suburban man with a good background and his family forms the typical Updike character. Most of them are well settled but a few of them are jobless.

Their wives too are ordinary average women. They are brought up in pure Catholic traditions with the customary church going and reading of Bible. The memories of these days are always fresh in their minds. However when they have children the picture changes. The years they have spent happily together become a happy past to muse over. The husband becomes bored and he finds it difficult to spend his time happily with his wife. Arguments lead to quarrels and thus the happiness is shattered. Their children have to be unwilling witnesses to the sad drama that follows. It affects their lives badly. This is the core of Updike's short stories.

### III

There are extra-marital affairs. The male is prominent in establishing these affairs. Sometimes the female partners too have extra-marital affairs. Whenever these characters in Updike's fiction feel, unhappy, they try to find ways to happiness. They seek it from their beloveds. Not that they become satisfied there. Some of them really become blissful and some become unhappier than before.

Richard Maple in Too Far to Go, a collection of Maple's stories has extra-marital relations with many other women.

He is also having a "red herring" that is in Joan's words "one with whom he is not having relations at present but will have sometime in future." Jerry in "Harry Me" adores his blond mistress Sally. He is so obsessed with her that he wishes to die with her. Reverend Tom Marshfield in "A Month of Sundays" has sexual relations with many women. Alicia is the other woman he adores very much. It is she who makes him believe that his body is beautiful. Rabbit or Harry Angstrom of the "Rabbit trilogy" runs away from his home and lives with his mistress, a semi-prostitute. And whenever he runs away from home, he finds shelter at hers.

"Snowing in Greenwich Village" (The Same Door) shows Richard bored with wife Joan and attracted to his old acquaintance Rebecca. He fights back the strong sexual impulse. The nameless hero of the story "Incest" (Pigeon Feathers) recalls an incident from the past when he had engaged himself in a mild affair with some stranger. It gives him a sort of pleasure. In "The Persistence of Desire" (Pigeon Feathers) Clyde spots his old love at a dentist's. Both of them are married but the sight of her evokes the old feelings. They are unable to resist these feelings and they ask each other whether they are happy with their

respective partners. In "The Rescue" (The Music School) Caroline is sure that her husband is sleeping with some other woman. "Solitaire" a story from Museums and Women tells about a man brooding over the bodies of his wife and mistress. The man admits that his mistress's body is more beautiful and gives him more pleasure. Ted Turner in "An Orphaned Swimming Pool" (Museums and Women) brings another woman to the pool and still fears that somebody would tell his wife about it. "Ethiopia" (Problems and Other Stories) tells about an American couple visiting Ababa. The man dreams of having sexual relation with a black woman while the woman dreams of having sexual relations with black men. It shows that both of them are longing for extra-marital relations and that they are sexually unsatisfied with each other.

#### IV

Why do the characters in Updike's fiction run away from homes? Why do marriages in Updike's fiction fail? One of the foremost reasons is incompatibility—both intellectual and emotional. The wife does not feel as the husband does. Their outlook also differs. When such thing happens they become total strangers. The gap between

them widens. The men's world is different. They have fixed notions about an ideal woman. Differences in opinions lead them to find these ideals in the other women, not in their wives.

Tom Marshfield's wife Jane is the daughter of a professor of ethics. She always thinks in terms of morality. Tom wishes to think in terms of physical standards. The novel A Month of Sundays shows this wide gap between them, and its devastating effect on Tom. Tom wants his woman to be sexually aggressive and unfortunately Jane is not like that. This causes a sexual incompatibility and frustration in Tom. Jane is brought up in an atmosphere in which ethics have taught her disciplines and Tom does not want it. He revolts against the Catholic ideas about sin. Alicia Cricks is the other woman in whom he finds a wild animal, he is looking for. She is sexually aggressive and does not regard adultery as a sin. It is the downfall of Tom as a priest but he is happy because Alicia gives him sensual pleasure and makes him believe that his body is beautiful and there is nothing ugly and sinful in lovemaking. Tom describes Alicia as one who "thinks with her cunt" and one who is "in bed a revelation." Tom's way of thinking matches with Alicia, not Jane.



Tom's way is down to earth while Jane thinks in terms of high morals. This difference makes Tom turn to other women.

Jerry in Marry Me is totally different from his wife Ruth who is motherly and protective towards him. He finds his ideal woman in Sally who leaves her children on beach and rushes to see him. She is all ambivalent sex. Jerry's hunger for love is satisfied by this sexually aggressive woman. He too seems to be sexually unsatisfied with his protective wife. He is loved by both his wife and his mistress and the result is sexual calamity. The sexual incompatibility makes all the three characters unhappy.

Rabbit or Harry Angstrom thinks that his wife is "dumb" and "really stupid". He finds her unattractive and sexless. This is the beginning which eventually makes him run away. Then he takes shelter at a semi-prostitute. She is able to satisfy him at least physically. He finds solace at hers whenever he runs away from home. Rabbit, Run depicts Rabbit's side. Updike has showed even his wife's side in Rabbit Redux. Janice is restless in this novel. She is no longer the gloomy-stay-at-home type. While Rabbit sticks to his job and tries to make more money, Janice finds life dull and uninteresting. It is now her turn to run away and she does run away.

Lonely Rabbit takes an 17 years old runaway girl, becomes her lover and father. The sexual incompatibility thus breaks the family. It makes the characters difficult and kills the happiness.

In "Solitaire" (Museums and Women) the man playing solitaire is not satisfied with his wife. When he compares the bodies of his wife and mistress, he admits that it is his mistress's body that pleases him more, appeals him more. Richard and Joan Maple are miles apart from each other in character. Joan is enjoying her success while Richard is jobless. Both of them are not happy and are having extra-marital affairs. They know that it is affecting their children still they are unfaithful to each other. Their marital drama is portrayed in Too Far to Go and also in other collections of Updike. The differences lead to argument and suspicion like:

"We weren't doing the twist. We were gliding around very chastly to 'Hits of the Forties'. And don't think I was so oblivious I didn't see you snogging behind the piano with Harry Saxon."

"We weren't behind the piano, we were on the band. And he was talking to me because he felt sorry for me, everybody there felt sorry for me. You could have at least let somebody else dance once with Marlene, if only for show" 1

This dialogue from "Giving Blood" (The Music School) shows that both of them are having affairs and are doubtful



of each other. The sarcastic note indicates that they do not believe each other. They think differently and as there is a lot of misunderstanding and suspicion, it can cause grief and separation.

V

The characters in Updike's fiction get bored with their marriage partners and this boredom is shown in many situations. It shows the depth of imagination in Updike in catching the exact moments. After spending years together and sharing joyous moments these characters find it difficult to tolerate the company of their marriage partners.

"Walter Briggs" (Pigeon Feathers) begins with Jack's chat with his baby daughter and then becomes a dialogue between Jack and his wife. The way they talk reveal that they are tense and they are trying to seek happiness from the happy past. It is their futile attempt to stick together:

'....but she moved among the treasures so quickly and gave them so generously, he had to laugh at each new face and scene offered him, because these were memories they had collected together and he was happy that they had discovered such a game for the car when he thought that there were no more games for them. <sup>2</sup>

This paragraph shows how tense the couple is. 'He had to laugh', the natural laughter was no more there.

They are so fed up with each other that 'there are no more games for them'. Only the game of remembering the names from the past where he had to laugh. The tension shows peak of boredom. Soon this tension would sever the bond between them. Soon they would get tired of this game too and it would be the end of their marital bliss. The prestage of the tragedy is indicated in 'he had to laugh'.

In "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" (Pigeon Feathers) there is no direct hint of the tension between the couple. Outwardly it is a simple story told by a father to his daughter, but there are suggestions. The wife thinks 'that was a long story'. The wife's actions indicate that she is irritated. The voice of moving heavy things when her husband is telling the story indicates her annoyance. And the final paragraph of the story says:

'...and with utter weariness watched his wife labour. The woodwork, a cage of mouldings and baseboards around them, was half old tan and half new ivory and he felt caught in an ugly middle position and though he as well felt his wife's presence in the cage with him, he did not want to speak with her, work with her, touch her anything. <sup>3</sup>

The wife is working and annoyed and he does not

not go to help her. He only watches her wearily. He thinks that both of them are put in one cage but are strangers so he does not 'want to speak with her, touch her anything'. Updike has woven the story very skillfully so that the reader finally realizes that the real question is not 'should wizard hit mommy?' but 'should Jack hit Clare?'

The pragmatic woman who does not appreciate her husband's poetic moods appears in "The Crow in the Woods" (Pigeon Feathers) The gap between the couple, the silent building of the tension is shown through a small incident. Again there is no direct mentioning but it has been left to the readers to decide. The boredom of the husband is conveyed through sentences like "came the wife and mother, came wrapped through blue cocoon that made her body shapeless, her face white". The husband is a nature-loving man but his moods are not shared by his wife. Rapt in enjoying a scene he is moved by seeing a crow in the woods. He calls his wife but absorbed as she is in worldly things she tells him prosaically to 'eat his egg'. It is clear that these two will not be together for long.

"My Love Has Dirty Fingernails" (The Music School) tells about a woman's complaint. In all other matters her lover is just fine but a small thing irritates her. Her love

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has dirty fingernails. She is so disturbed that she visits her analyst and while talking with him, the very thought of the irritating fingernails makes her weary:

The air conditioner flooded her silence with its constant zealous syllable. Time was pouring through her and she was wasting her session.<sup>4</sup>

Sarcastic remarks also show the range of boredom. Updike has a special gift for such sentences. The tone is an indicator that the marriage is in grave danger. A dialogue from "Ace in the Hole" (The Same Door) shows:

Ace said "My name was in the papers today."  
 "They spell it right?" She shoved the paper deep into the basket with her feet. There was no doubt she knew about Friedman. "They called me Fred."  
 "Isn't that your name? What is your name anyway? Hero J. Great?"<sup>5</sup>

The sarcastic tone of Ace's wife tells many things. The careless happy-go-lucky Ace and his working wife are having tough time. The shoving of paper into the basket shows that she has lost her interest in her husband's sports activities and that she is fed up with his egoistic thoughts so she asks "What is your name anyway? Hero J. Great?"

Exactly opposite is the situation in "The Kid's Whistling" (The Same Door). In "Ace in the Hole" the wife is weary as

the husband is not working but in this story the wife is weary because her husband is overworking. She is lonely because of her husband's obsession with money and work. She knows that she has to tolerate this boredom because there is no other way. So when she has to take leave of her husband:

"Here let me walk you out."  
 "Oh no." She lifted a long pale sarcastic palm.  
 "Don't let me disturb you. Time and a half you know,  
 I can flounder out on my own." 6

Her boredom, hopelessness are clearly reflected in these sentences. She has to be alone. In accepting that her state of mind is obvious.

## VI

Updike's characters respect the institution of marriage. They strive to keep it safe and sound but they seem to be helpless against the mad desire which drives them away from home. They have no control over it. In fact they are helpless and innocent victims of some twist of fate. Honestly they want everybody to be happy. There is no spirit of vengeance in Updike's fiction, just everyday drama. His fiction depict happening in any middle class house. Nothing villainious is found in Updike's fiction. If anybody is villians there, it is the character itself. Nobody else is driving them at it. The characters are sorry for the state of affairs. A sense of guilt is observed in his fiction.

Updike does not want to justify their mistakes so he catches the moments when they are feeling guilty. This makes his characters very humane and his portrayals very touching. These fallible and vulnerable adults receive sympathy from the readers for their miserability and their striving to stick together.

Rabbit or Harry Angstrom, who is on the run comes home whenever he feels guilty. When a Protestant minister tells him of his duties as a human being and as a husband he returns to his wife. When he learns of his baby's death he feels bound to be returning on his run. He is a very difficult character, who feels the ties but wants to run away from them. When he learns that his mistress is pregnant he is in dilemma. He feels that he should not leave her at that stage. There are many such instances when he feels guilty. This guilty-consciousness makes him hesitate before taking any hasty decision.

In Rabbit Redux, Rabbit's wife Janice, who has run away from home with her lover returns home afterwards. She too feels guilty in deserting her family.

A Month of Sundays is a confession of a New England minister. While referring to his desert retreat, he addresses his confession to the manager Mrs. Prynne. He observes her behaviour towards the drunken Indians



and feels that 'love is not an emotion, an assertion putting out but a transmotion a compliant moving through.' His justification of his affair with Alicia Crick, is a poor attempt to conceal his guilt in not being faithful to his wife and church. (His wife who thinks only in terms of morality represents the church.)

Too Far to Go a collection of Maples stories serves as a good example of Updike's skill in portraying man-woman relationship. Updike says in his forward that it is a story of "decline and fall of Marriage". How the marriage ends is not ideal but what they feel about each other, how they strive to keep the marriage in order makes a good reading. There are many stories in which the miserable characters feel sorry for each other. "Giving Blood" (The Music School) tells about the couple, who after giving blood feel differently about one another. Richard who is trying to reconcile with his wife in the story "Wife Wooing" (Pigeon Feathers) talks about Nixon and admits his guilt in the words; "Honey, Hiss was guilty. We are all guilty conceived in concupiscence, we die unrepentant."

And while discussing "The Red Herring Theory" the Maples come across their sorry state of affairs and are almost in tears. The Maples are very much stricken with the sense of guilt. In spite of their extra-marital affairs and their not being faithful to each other, their conscious

pricks them. That is why they try to stick together. A time of separation in "Separation" makes them aware of the loss they are causing to each other. Their moods, remarks show that they love each other and some blind force prominent in Updike's fiction carries them away from each other. Because of their vulnerability, their attempts to make each other happy the Maples became very very popular when the stories were turned into a play for a TV serial.

Ted Turner in "The Orphaned Swimming Pool" (Museums and Women) is not happy in turning away from his wife. It is another sad tale. When he takes some other woman to the swimming pool, he fears that it would be known to his wife as other women have seen them. This fear is born out of the sense of guilt. It also shows that these characters of Updike are just plain ordinary guys. They are not bad people. They are seekers of pleasure in these affairs. It is their attempt to hide their pains and pretend that they are happy. This element is prominently present in Updike's fiction.

The most touching story appears in Problems and Other Stories, entitled "Domestic Life in America". Fraser in this story is divorced. He visits his wife Joan, who has gotten the whole house by decree. Then he finds that she is still in love with him and that she is unhappy without

him. This moves him. They have separated but the love is still there. Updike's typical characters can't live together and yet miss each other after separation. They are difficult to understand. In "Guilt Gems" (Problems and Other Stories) an aged divorcee feels guilty in ruining his family. He blames himself but now it is too late. Nothing can be restored at that stage. But Updike respects this guilty-consciousness so he calls it guilt gems.

"The Doctor's Wife" (Pigeon Feathers) is jealous of the happiness of the visiting couple to the island, where she is the reigning queen. The couple is happy. They have come to the island because they cannot afford any other place. The Doctor's wife spreads poison in the husband's mind. She nearly succeeds in doing what she desires to. She nearly ruins their happiness, but then Updike's special sense of guilt prevails;

'Abruptly he felt guilty in relation to his wife. He had betrayed her. His seriousness had been unworthy of her.'

The husband feels that he was rude and unkind towards his wife. In listening to the 'Doctor's Wife', he had betrayed her, had been unloyal to her. And when this sense of guilt prevails it becomes clear that the marriage would be saved.

It can be concluded from these examples that Updike's characters feel guilty in having failed as husband or wife or as father. Sometimes this guilt is associated with nature. There is a story in The Music School entitled "Leaves" in which a husband whose wife has left him, is busy in brooding over the falling leaves in solitary mood:

I am upheld in a serene and burning universe of leaves. Yet something plucks me back, returns me to that inner darkness where guilt is the sun. &

leaves remind him that his wife has left him. It also relieves some of his tension to enjoy the falling leaves. The sunlight peeping through the leaves arouses his guilty-consciousness. It arouses the hope that things can be restored, <sup>so</sup> he will be reconciled with his wife if this feeling of guilt persists. "The Hermit" (The Music School) has been totally unsuccessful in his life but oneness with nature wipes out the desparation in him and teaches him that life is worth living. He enjoys a new kind of life, a new experience in which there is no shame, no guilt in the company of nature.

In "Twin Beds in Rome" (The Music School) the Maples on the verge of separation get lost in the old and beautiful buildings of Rome. The beauty and style of the ancient

buildings enchants them and then emerges the feeling of of guilt typical in Updike's fiction:

At one point she turned at him and said, "Darley, I know what was wrong with us. I'm classic and you are baroque". 9

This new understanding makes them happy again. They grow reluctant to leave each other. And this is what happens time and again in Updike's fictions. His characters repent, reconcile and leave each other to unite once more and finally depart for good.

## VII

Updike's notions of man-woman relationship go a bit ahead in his novel Couples (1971). This novel differs from his other works. The setting is the same with the same middle class characters but there is a boldness in this novel. There are extra-marital affairs born out of sexual frustration, boredom and differences in temperaments. It is concerned about the efforts of a number of couples in Contemporary New England to create a 'clandestine erotic Utopia'. It is a serious novel which exploits extensively the matter traditionally reserved for pornography.

Applebys and Smiths develop the protocol of wife swapping and gain the corporate title 'Apples-iths'. The couples attempt to improvise a free way of life. It is a revolt against the existing moral code of the society.

Adultery opens the way to erotic delight which is far from being selfish or brutalizing. For in changing partners the aging couples achieve an awareness of their beauty:

Harold believed that beauty was what happened between people, was in a sense the trace of what had happened so he in truth found her, though minutely creased and puckered, and sagging, more beautiful than the unused girl, whose ruins she thought of herself as inhabiting. Such generosity of perception returned upon herself, as she lay with Janet, lost in praise. Harold felt as if a glowing tumor of eternal life were consuming the cells of his mortality.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of the novel the congregational church in the town is destroyed by lightning and the couples feel that they are being punished for their counter-ethical values. The guilt is felt. Foxy, in this novel fails to take contraceptive and becomes pregnant by Piet. These two are banished by their spouses and cold shouldered by the other couples, for making the clandestine cult scandalously public. Only after the wrath of God on an empty church and after their temporary purgatory of separation and exile, are they allowed to marry and settle elsewhere.

So although the plot is different the conclusion is the same. Though Updike deals with counter ethical values in this novel, he pays attention to the fact that the institution of marriage is not to be easily broken off. His basic theme happens to be man-woman relationship, whether it be legal or illegal so he has compromised by making Piet and Foxy suffer. He allows them to marry only after their temporary purgatory of separation and exile, for the unethical things they do.

#### VIII

To sum up we get a clear and definite picture of the domestic life in America from Updike's fiction. His novels and short stories deal exclusively with suburban characters. From their way of thinking they do not seem to be much religious but religion holds an important place in their life. The marriage in Updike's fiction fail due to many reasons. The characters spend some time happily together and then the 'downfall' begins. The characters in their mid-forties grow weary of their marriage partners and just walk out on them. One of the reasons for their walking out is difference in temperaments and likings. If the husband is of artistic temperament, the wife happens to be plain and dull. Sometimes there is sexual frustration. After having children they find their wives unattractive and sexless.

The wives cannot satisfy the husbands sexually. Sexual frustration makes them seek the pleasure elsewhere. In this way the extra-marital relations are established. These unhappy characters grow so weary of each other that they find it difficult to spend time in each other's company. The boredom is reflected in very trivial matters too. Being jobless or getting rapt in business can cause havocs in their tense family life. Updike's unhappy characters try to find solace in 'the other woman' or 'the other man', who meets their needs and who happens to have the same tastes as them.

Still peculiar is the fact that these characters in Updike's fiction, who cannot keep their marriage bonds, respect the institution of marriage. Despite their failure they try to stick together. Despite their differences and tussles they reconcile. In this way of behaviour a sense of guilt is found. They feel guilty and ashamed of their behaviour when they extra-marital relations. Then there is every possible attempt to refresh the old bond. Though the basic idea is to show the state of American suburban families through these stories, Updike succeeds in portraying the most unsolvable puzzle called the human mind. His stories give the readers a fine version of the American male and female



## IX

While writing on Too Far To Go Paul Thoroux comments:

If there is something seriously missing there it is Joan's point of view. I think any married woman could quite justifiably accuse Updike of weighing the argument in favour of Richard, worse he seems to want us to sympathize with and understand Richard, while at the same time pitying Joan. If the Maples were not being whirled about without a divorce, they would hardly be worth writing about - this wouldn't matter, but it strikes me as special pleading to omit the other side of the story. <sup>10</sup>

Now it is true that little is known about Joan but the accusation is not fair. Updike does not deliberately favour Richard's side, nor does he neglect Joan. What he does is he puts their behaviour and affairs before us in which Richard seems to be guiltier. It is also true that the author being male, he may portray Richard's side more vividly. There is no self-pitying or wound licking in these stories. Both of them are aware of their faults but they cannot overcome them. They are helpless in this matter. They maintain extra-marital affairs; try to be happy but are not happy. They are pitiable. The husband, the wife and the innocent children, all of them are vulnerable. Updike wants to show what happens when such gaps occur in the family.

Talking about women Josephine Hendin thinks that women are the masculine pursuit in Updike's fictions that offer the 'promise of relief and rebirth'. As an example she points to Marry Me in which Jerry's appeal comes from his boyish hope for 'heaven in women'. And about Men, she thinks that they are victims of forces which he (Updike) understands but they do not. When they find women of their dreams they invariably begin to hate them.

Anatole Broyard has another complaint:

While Mr. Updike has become the poet laureate of domestic life and divorce, the children in his stories are oddly boring. Perhaps this is because they were born and bred in a world where divorce is commonplace.<sup>12</sup>

If only the children are considered it must be admitted that if they are looked only as children they would appear dull but as Broyard himself has pointed out it must be taken into account that these children are born and brought up in a world where divorce is a common thing. Then only one can better appreciate Updike's child character. Updike's world is divided between the grown-ups and children, but basically they are all suburban characters. Their ways of looking at the world are the same. It can be seen that the elders in Updike's fiction are usually in their mid-forties and are guilt-ridden, the wives are motherly, the mistresses are sexually powerful and the children are vulnerable.