

Apocalyptic Vision in the Rabbit Tetralogy of John Hoyer Updike: a Postmodern Study

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Abstract: John Updike's vision of life and American society is apocalyptic as he wrote novels to depict the present dilemmas of the Americans and the future challenges of the country and the global world. He was also confronted with the riddle of life and existence like Dostoevsky and with a view to find the answers to the mysteries of life and truth he turned to Kierkegaard and Karl Barth who had evolved the "dialectical method" to explore reality and truth. Barth's dialectical method was derived from Kierkegaard who believed that truth is not found in the operation of Hegel's method of thesis and antithesis but rather in the dialectical tension between truth and truth. Kierkegaard wrote: "every truth is truth only to a certain degree; when it goes beyond, the counter point appears, and it becomes untruth" (Kierkegaard, *Word of God and Word of Man* 206). John Updike stated that the purpose of his writing novels and stories is to "examine everything for God's fingerprints." In the 1960's when he started writing his name was associated with other writers such as John Barth, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon busy in experimenting new themes and strategies. Updike ignored the main stream of contemporary fiction and distanced himself from the contemporary writers. His mission was to write a new kind of fiction; to create a new kind of world; to depict the new future of mankind the way Karl Marx had done. Updike's 1500 pages Rabbit Tetralogy is a coherent and unified work presenting Harry Angstrom portrayed after Bakhtin, "a heteroglossic man representing the main currents of American post-war culture. Updike employed the post-modern techniques and literary devices borrowing from Karl Barth, Kierkegaard, Bakhtin and Jean-Francois Lyotard. The historical development of an apocalypse within history is quite interesting. T.S. Eliot also forewarned of the cultural catastrophe after the world war II. D.H. Lawrence, Hemingway, William Faulkner, Henry Miller and other writers of the twenties and thirties used images of death and destruction of the civilization and expressed their apocalyptic vision in their own way but John Updike expressed his concern for the future of America and for the entire mankind in his novels.

Index Terms: apocalyptic, heteroglossic, tetralogy, dilemmas postmodern, forewarned, dialectical

I. INTRODUCTION

Updike sought inspiration from Frank Kermode's *The Sense of Ending* which initiated the thoughts of twentieth century apocalyptic literature. Kermode argued that the age is very critical and is set for something utterly different. Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Cat's Cradle* warns of the absurd nature of nuclear annihilation. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld* Lenny Bruce cries out "We're all gonna die!" Foucault's closing words in *The Order of Things* are also quite

Revised Manuscript Received on December 22, 2018.

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alarming. He imagines the notion of man "erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (387). Lyotard and Baudrillard and Jameson locate the apocalyptic transformation of thought and life in developments of technology and global capitalism. Updike evolved his apocalyptic vision of America in particular and the world in general seeking inspiration from James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Karl Barth and Kierkegaard. Updike spent thirty years to complete his Rabbit novels serving as a fictionalized time line of the post-war American experience. Updike doesn't merely describe the present but he looks at the future destiny of Americans when the nuclear holocaust is threatening and the dark clouds of nuclear missiles are at the gates of America. The Vietnam War, the Korean War and the emergence of terrorism; the attack on The Trade Centre are all the events seriously handled by John Updike. [1] The most important fact of his art is that he has chosen to deal with a world familiar to the majority of people. [1, 7, 9, 5, 10] The heroes of John Updike are baffled and confused struggling to know the mystery of truth and living in the void like the protagonists of Kafka and Dostoevsky. He is caught between the present and the past.

[1] John Updike is a visionary writer of America whose novels reflect a systematic growth both in themes and techniques and particularly his preoccupation with global issues and the future of mankind. This study entitled: "Apocalyptic Vision in the Select Novels of John Hoyer Updike: A Postmodern Study" is focused on the elucidation of the apocalyptic vision of John Updike from American imperialism to terrorism; in matters of love, sex and religion that obsessed the middle class Americans since World War II. This study broadens the general conceptualization critics and scholars hold regarding Updike's work by exploring the themes and literary devices he used to portray the broader world. James Wood writing a much longer essay in *The New Republic* discussed in detail the cosmic vision of Updike and his views on American Post-modernity" (25). John Hoyer Updike is a prominent American novelist, short story writer, poet, art critic and literary critic who won scores of prizes including the Booker Prize and Pulitzer Prize for his innovative ideas and apocalyptic vision. He got Pulitzer Prize twice for his understanding of portrayal of the American consciousness in his novels. He won Faulkner Prize for his stylistic techniques and lyrical prose. Updike published more than twenty novels, and he got favorable reviews as he wrote regularly for *The New York Book Review of Books*. His career is pivotal as he is a unique writer personifying the post-World War era. Updike's career is pivotal. He is one of a handful of writers who witnessed all the events of absurdity; nihilism; explored existentialism and investigated the causes of depression and despair in the middle class Americans. His most famous

work is his "Rabbit" series including the novels *Rabbit Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* and the novella *Rabbit Remembered*. Harold Bloom observes that Updike may have been inspired by Sinclair Lewis who wrote his famous novel *Babbalanza* and depicted vacuity of the middle class Americans. The name Rabbit evokes the themes of Lewis as the main focus of Updike is to expose and ridicule the absurdities of the middle class Americans. In all his novels his prime focus had been to explore the oddities; challenges; the uncertainties and dilemmas of the American middle classes expressing his apocalyptic vision of the world. Both *Rabbit is Rich* (1982) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) were recognized with the Pulitzer Prize. Describing his subject as "the American small town populated by Protestant middle class Updike was recognized for his careful craftsmanship, his unique prose style. In this thesis serious efforts are made to examine and investigate the apocalyptic vision of John Updike who gives his own fresh approach to the problems and malaise of the postmodern American society. [3,6,12,13]

John Updike articulates his concern for the existential problems confronting modern man in his novels and this aspect is apocalyptic and postmodernist. He raises the problems of the meaning of life, freedom of choice, individual moral responsibility and guilt in his novels. Most of the characters of Updike fear death and he dramatizes the angst and absurdity engulfing the characters. He celebrates America with all its ugliness, where people hold on. His characters fear death and are the victims of angst and social ills of society. He deals with sexual liberty enjoyed by the Americans depicting the disintegration of landscape of America's urban and suburban sprawl, with its motels, fast food joints and bars. He reveals contemporary man's spiritual crisis through the diction of sex in his novels. In his *Rabbit Run* characters are put in a situation of turmoil and must respond to situations that relate to religion, family obligations and marital infidelity. John Updike as one of the most accomplished American writers, and discuss there reflection of the American reality since the 1950s in his fiction, emphasizing the most characteristic features and dominant thematic concerns of his works.

It is quite a fruitful experience to trace out the evolution of John Updike as a writer, both as a professional writer and literary devices employed by him in his novels. J. Updike's "Rabbit" novels, each reflecting a certain decade, starting with the 1950s and finishing with the 1970s, with their own social and cultural climate. The vision of John Updike is not limited but encompasses the broader world since his novels transcend time and space as they portray the broader world. Howard Harper averred in 1967 that the work of Updike "has a depth, integrity, and an ultimate concern" (190). Norman Podhoretz described Updike as "a writer who transcends time and space by his apocalyptic vision."

[14] Harry Angstrom is the typical postmodern hero of John Updike. As the title of the novel suggests he is always on the run and drives in circle; he sleeps in the hutch of his car, and is let loose by Updike to run only. He impregnates two women and becomes a gardener of a widow and run off into the woods at the end of the novel. John Updike has used all the literary devices of postmodern art in portraying the character and the plot of the novel. Harry's wife Janet is a "Springer" and his old coach of

football is "Tot-hero" Updike uses the pun in describing the coach of Harry who is also a reputed football hero. He treats in Rabbit tetralogy the problem of man's survival at a time when neither scientific humanism nor religious dogmas can provide him spiritual sustenance. All the characters are caught in the web of darkness and disbelief. Updike is giving warning to the posterities that in the growing scientific world man will find no clue to the presence of God. In the future it will be difficult for the Americans to survive in the climate of disillusionment, disbelief and death. The time is very near when man will find no way to escape the terror of life and will get no help from within and will be lost in the pit of horror. Howard M. Harper analyzes Harry Angstrom as a "bleak Sartrean existentialist and post-Nietzschean seeker, a kind of ignorant but inspired folk philosopher" (205). The plot is ironical; satirical; ambiguous and absurd. Like Don Quixote Harry is in quest for something and that something is never found. Gulliver leaves his city and his quest separates him from his humanity and at the end he is forced to sleep in the stable of the horses. Harry's flight separates him from humanity; he suffers alienation from his wife and child. The plot is packed with grotesque and bizarre episodes; scenes of deaths of infants, imminent abortions. John Updike uses all the post-modern tools of irony, paradox and black comedy to dramatize these tragic scenes. Harry leaves his home and his wife who is alcoholic and "wants to go south, down, down the map in to orange groves and smoking rivers and bare foot women. It seems simple enough, drive all night through the dawn through the morning through the moon park on a beach take off your shoes and fall asleep by the Gulf of Mexico (John Updike *Rabbit Run* 25). Harry is glued to the car radio which soothes him with songs about "Secret Love" Autumn Leaves" Harry is a confused and bewildered middle class American; the characters in the novel have different opinions about him. Harry is stifled in his own house. The imagery of "clutter" and "corrupt dregs" "rumpled rug", "the floppy stocks" highlight chaos and disorder symbolizing the disorientation of Harry's mind who is sick of his flapper wife. He feels that he is not a free individual as he imagines himself "on a cliff, there I an abyss he will fall into" (22). Harry sees a big question mark before him: "Why am I me?" (22). He wants to lead an independent happy life of a basketball player as he did in his school. He revolts against the middle class style of living and runs away from his pregnant wife. In his house Harry feels "glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty glasses. (86). Harry is selfish; rebellious and adventurous as Eccles tells him: "The truth is You're monstrously selfish...you worship but your own worst instincts" (134).

Updike has given an insight into the middle class American life in a realistic manner. He has depicted the mundane American life, which of course had changed over the years. His fiction is distinguished by its attention to the concerns, passions, and suffering of average Americans. The appeal of *Rabbit, Run* owes a great deal to its true-to-life portrait of an American man and his family. Although many of the themes in *Rabbit, Run* also have a universal

relevance, this story has obvious roots in the USA. Harry Angstrom is portrayed as a type of average American.

While at first glance he may appear childish, pathetic, and not worthy of our attention, the situation he puts himself in raises questions that keep us interested. He is, despite his actions, not all bad, and he has a certain charm that allows us to identify with some aspects of his character. Updike manages to convey Rabbit's feelings of being trapped in a cage, much like his nickname would suggest. He has nowhere to turn, and when he has a chance to escape his captivity, he runs. The America of *Rabbit, Run* is a stark alternative to the "American Dream" narrative, which presents America as a place where success is always right around the corner and failure is conveniently left out in favor of a happy ending. In Updike's version, a more realistic one, happiness and fulfillment are harder to find. The culture of America in general and the 1950's in particular, is an important reason for the story's resonance.

Harry-Ruth relationship is based on selfishness to enjoy carnal pleasures. Harry tries to fill his spiritual void with sexual pleasures.[8,11] Tothoro, his school coach inspires him to become a winner in the greater game of life. Harry has no faith in God; he discards the preaching of Eccles and Kruppenbach. He tries to pray but can't; he tries to believe in God but his actions take him away from God. His running is meaningless as he is not running to find any moral or spiritual meaning of life but his search is for something which can help him to know what he is. His journey is cyclical; he leaves Ruth also and comes back to his wife Janice on the pretext of seeing a new baby and to get freedom from the burden of guilt. But Janice gets drunk and the baby is drowned. Harry again deserts Janice and goes back to Ruth who is pregnant.

The problem with the modern man is that he can't decide; he always keeps his options open and is often caught in a trap. Harry's indecisiveness brings him anguish as he doesn't get anywhere. His struggle for freedom and dignity remain elusive. Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom as his nick name "Rabbit" suggests is, "the frisky international mischief maker," that America represents. Updike himself argues in an interview with Sukhbir Singh: "Harry is just as I am" Harry is Everyman of the future who is selfish; uncertain; devoid of faith in God and bound to lead a lonely and desperate life. The apocalyptic vision of Jon Updike is articulated through the instable and selfish character of Harry. The age in which Updike lived was characterized by moral and spiritual decadence. There was no certainty and future was bleak; the sense of insecurity and terror became accentuated further with the collapse of values and the American Dream. Ihab Hassan gives a clear picture of the growing nihilism and disintegration of culture:

Survival appears indeed both the secret and paramount obsession of contemporary man...Memories of Holocausts from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, a succession of wars from Korea to Vietnam...all these perpetuate a mood of crisis that no writer can entirely ignore" (123).

The spirit of the age in which John Updike lived was characterized by revolution and rediscovery. Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich expounded Post-Freudian theories to examine the morbidity and depression of the Americans. Harry experiences an inner discord when he observes other families united but his own family falling apart. John Updike depicts the future of the American

societies which will not remain united and the husband and wife will experience absurdity and meaninglessness. The marriage as a sacred institution will cease to exist. Caught between desire and necessity Harry represents the archetypal American male in search of stability and love in the family.

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