The Americanness in John Updike's Works

Moyuri Dutta
Ph.D Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Assam University, Silchar

1. Introduction

John Hoyer Updike (March 18, 1932 - January 27, 2009) is an American writer of novels, poetry, short-story known for his all-encompassing delineation of the American, protestant, small-town middle-class life that starts from the 1950s. He won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice in 1982 and 1991. His most outstanding works are The Rabbit Saga (1960, 1971, 1981, 1990), The Centaur (1963), Couples (1968), Bech, A Book (1970), The Witches of Eastwick (1984), A Month of Sundays (1973), Roger's Version (1986), S (1988), Towards the End of Time (1997). He explored the American middle-class concerning marriage, marital infidelity, sex, religion, family obligations as the significant concerns in his works. Being raised as a protestant, Updike also featured religion and the conventional protestant faith in his works. John Updike is one of the greatest American writers of fiction of his generation being widely lauded as America’s “last true man of letters”.

Updike’s subject was always the American protestant small-town middle class. His debut novel The Poorhouse Fair (1959) gives a masterful insight into the struggle of values between a Christian inmate and a poorhouse master, who believed in the perfectibility of man. His Rabbit novels (Rabbit, Run followed by Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit at Rest) gives a panoramic view of the many changes in the lives of an ordinary man and the small town of Pennsylvania, Brewer. The Rabbit novels were written American civilization describing the falling American civilization, the waning American men and women, infidelity, separation, divorce, abandoned child. The RABBIT novels won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice.

Updike’s fifth novel Couples, published in 1968 was the bestseller with its small-town setting portraying the first post-Puritan American generation and the lives of ten couples. The couple’s marriage is shown to be disintegrated and for them, adultery was more a matter of concern or an act of evil. He describes a suburban world with a sexual buzz. Updike mainly wrote about women, the degrading American morality, infidelity, and observed as a novelist should like Flaubert or Joyce. John Updike always depicted the deep truths of the American soul.

Updike was born in Shillington, Pennsylvania, and many of his early works were written from his experiences there. Many of his later works are set in New England during his stay in the 1960s. And there he tried to examine middle-class America and its fidelity, religion, and responsibilities. His works couples (1968) and marry me exposes the prevailing gender politics during that time in east coast suburbia.

In an interview in 1966 for *Life* magazine, Updike tells Jane Howard "My subject is the American protestant small-town middle class." His work *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) was reviewed as a sex comedy and gives a satirical view of women’s liberation. The "Scarlet Letter" trilogy that began with *A Month of Sundays* (1975), continued with *Roger’s Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) reflects Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*. Updike has been many times accused of his portrayal of women. It has been also pointed by many critics that Updike’s plots lacked violence.

Updike’s novels give a wider view and realistic perception of the small-town American middle-class family. His plots cover more of the disintegrating American society and its dissatisfaction. He mostly talks about the different alterations in American society in his works.

**Works Cited**


