Satirical Implications of Theological Issues in John Updike’s *Rabbit Run*

**ABSTRACT**

John Updike is a complex and intellectual twentieth-century American writer of Post-Modernist fiction. He attacks the traditional institutions of religion, marriage and family in a devastating manner. He is the master gamesman who mirrors the intrigue in various fields. There is intrigue in all walks of life – war, friendship, workplace, marriage, family, love, religion and so on. As a master manipulator, he manipulates these issues and presents them in his perspective. He exposes his dubious intentions by cleverly juxtaposing two contrasting ideas. For example, in *Rabbit Run*, he subtly ridicules the traditional institution of religion and mocks at the hypocritical clergymen, but ends up affirming faith in God which is necessary in a world where people are groping in the dark devoid of values and faith. Here, he starts on an atheistic tone and ends on a theistic note.

Being a Protestant Christian and a religious-minded man, Updike shows much interest in the basic issues of religion that modern man confronts and that torments modern man's mind. His interest in religion is not that of a theologian or a religious philosopher or a religious propagandist, but that of a thinker and a writer. His approach to the theme of religion is not evidently orthodox, but intellectual. He detests that ritualization of religion. He advocates a religion, which is free from rituals, orthodox practices and meaningless monotony. Hence, in his *Rabbit* quartet, Updike, though a staunch Protestant does not hesitate to attack the superficial aspects of religion and explores religious issues to grasp the fundamental and eternal truths of religion. In this context, Edward P. Vargo, observes: “Updike’s religious concerns have also influenced his literary technique. In attempting to create metaphors that make transcendent realities like immortality and resurrection conceivable, he has fused the spiritual with the physical, presenting us with a heightened, or better, a sacramental understanding of the material universe” (Vargo 486).

In his treatment of theology, Updike is influenced by Kierkegaardian and Barthian thoughts. Despite these influences, Updike is not indifferent to the contemporary advancement in human sciences. His dialecticism does include in its folio certain postulates of rationalistic thought. His analysis of certain contemporary phenomena, such as permissive sex or adultery in American society, ethnic and racial uprisings, the breakdown of familial structure and the destructive impact of radical theories of existence on men and the community, have its roots in contemporary discourses started by theoreticians such as Erich From, Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich and so on.

Updike believes that it is only through firm and unshakable faith that man can realize God and attain the knowledge of the divine. He also emphasizes the redeeming nature and miraculous power of faith, which is the gift of divine grace. It is the unflinching faith in God that ensures security and peace to man and holds out the promise of immortality, driving away from man's heart the morbid fear of death. When this faith of man is threatened and eroded, man loses his sense of security and his state of peace and is haunted by the fear of death, and the hope of immortality is extinguished. In such a case, man finds himself in a state of perplexity, which ultimately results in spiritual bankruptcy and darkness. In religious crisis, man struggles miserably, for something that can redeem him...
from his crisis and restore to him security, peace and the promise of immortality. These religious predicaments and crises of modern man's life are presented convincingly and effectively by Updike. In his Rabbit Run, the protagonist, Harry Angstrom Rabbit undergoes a religious crisis with the erosion of his religious faith and recovers his lost religious faith through a divine revelation manifested through a vision. Here, Updike uses the two basic paradigms of religion and morality in order to capture the predicament of his protagonists. They help in confronting the fundamental questions of faith and the perplexing questions of being human.

The beauty of Updike’s style here lies in his satiric inquiry into the concept of religion. He very cleverly presents a deceptive picture of the issue of religion. He makes use of the technique of dualism. He begins by satirizing the hypocritical people, vanity and corruption in the church. He seems to be propagating against religion when he condemns the superficial aspects of it. But the final revelation is completely different. In the end, we understand that he is not condemning religion and in fact he is propagating that faith in God is necessary for peace and order in the society.

Updike’s Rabbit Run is a satire on the blank materialism of the secular American society. He condemns the popular American notion that marriage, science and materialism can quench modern man's spiritual thirst. These things lead to disillusionment, disorder and meaninglessness in the lives of contemporary Americans. Updike considers the impact of Harry Angstrom Rabbit's bewilderment with life and disbelief in God on his domestic life and social existence. He expresses the existential dilemma of modern man in general and while doing so, he affirms that there is no salvation without belief in God. He believes that religious belief promises assurance and stability in man's life. A distinguished Updikean critic, James Marshall Boswell treats the Rabbit novels as a single, unified 'meta-novel' held together by the author's existential, dialectic vision. Borrowing his methodology from Soren Kierkegaard, Updike practices a form of 'mastered irony' in which dialectical opposites are not resolved but rather left in sustained tension. Like Kierkegaard, he employs this method in order to preserve the complex, existential, and often-contradictory nature of immediate experience. This dialectical, existential strategy allows Updike to accomplish two additional narrative goals. First, it allows him to articulate and embody the hyper-contemporary existential presence of his main character, Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom. Second, it allows him to engage his reader in an extended 'moral debate' on the nature of goodness that remains unfinished within the book and so relies on the reader's own self-questioning (Boswell 3491).

Updike satirizes the nature of the failure of human existence as well as the spiritual dilemma that confronts the modern America. In Rabbit Run, Harry is found caged and beset by the baffles and confusion endemic of his times. He is caught in the web of disbelief in the supernatural. He initially feels futile and dejected unable to face the spiritual doubts, existential anxieties and moral uncertainties. This has a disastrous effect on his relationship with the members of his family. Reviewing Rabbit, Run, Rachael C. Burchard states:

"It is a story of search for some kind of religious meaning to fit the needs of individuals in contemporary society which negates individualism. It is a search for the essence which impels us to search for that essence which impels us to search for something beyond. Janice who ought to have acted as his confidant remains insensitive, is intuitively aware of the undefined spiritual mystery. He wants to draw spiritual sustenance from Janice and he expects her to understand his strongly felt intuitive intimations of "something beyond". Janice says: "I don't know all about theology but I'll tell you I do feel, I guess that somewhere behind all this ... there's something that wants me to find it" (R.R:103-104). This religious unrest results from the cultural disintegration, which is associated with the breakdown of the Christian religion in the fifties. Harry, despite being self-centered and insensitive, is intuitively aware of the undefined spiritual mystery. He wants to draw spiritual sustenance from Janice and he expects her to understand his strongly felt intuitive intimations of "something beyond". Janice who ought to have acted as his confidant remains insensitive to his intense religious quests. In this way, Updike depicts in the character of Rabbit, man's essential self striving to cross over the spiritual void created by the current environment of nihilism.

Janice's inability makes Harry anxiously turn to Eccles, to strengthen his religious belief and to explain his spiritual quest. Eccles, who represents the decay of the church, has slid down from his position and instead of being involved in the progress of the spirituality of every individual in his fold, he has become a humanitarian in his spiritual activities. The church has lost its influence and relevance to the spiritual life of an individual like Harry. As a humanitarian, Eccles advises Harry regarding his marital
Harry is the only character in the novel who has true religious concern. The remaining characters are either polished hypocrites or practising Christians, leaving church on Palm Sunday "in their best clothes"(R,R:74). In Rabbit Run, Christianity, as it is pictured, hardly offers a solution to the problems of contemporary Christian Americans. The final symbol for it is the darkened church window which Rabbit glances at in order to find that physical presence of the divine and in which to glimpse some bright spiritual reality through its coloured fragments of glass. But the church's interior is unlighted. In this connection, Clinton Trowbridge's observation is worth mentioning: "John Updike's ... fundamental interest is a religious one. Pascal's thinking reed is his image for man also ... Rabbit Angstrom suffers the Pascalean conflict. 'Man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute'" (Trowbridge 442-443).

Updike satirically attacks the fundamental institution of religion through the character, Eccles, an Episcopal Minister. He is not a simple-hearted humanitarian. For a preacher, he is dull and incompetent but somewhat weird: "Eccles wrestles in the pulpit with the squeak in his voice. His eyebrows jiggle as if on fishhooks. It is an unpleasant and strained performance, contorted, somehow; he drives his car with an easier piety. In his robes he seems the sinister priest of a drab mystery" (R,R:192). He runs around poking his nose into other people's business, but at home he is ruffled by a rebellious wife. His interest in Harry and Janice is purely selfish as he wants to prove his ability to himself and somehow become more virile. But we are told immediately that this man is a suspect. Harry observes that Eccles's clerical garb seems to be black, but actually it is midnight blue. His suit too reflects his deceptive nature. He is spiritually inferior to Harry and a social misfit. He, like Harry, has a heart in conflict with itself. He stands for the trivial, superficial aspects of religion and hypocrisy, all which Harry dislikes.

In Rabbit Run, "nothingness" in the world takes on a theological dimension. Harry does not find evidence of the existence of God in the materialistic society. He also discards the advice given to him by both Eccles, an Episcopal minister, and Kruppenbach, a Lutheran minister because he "has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the going through quality of it, the passage into death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blowing inside out"(R,R:192). Harry tries to believe in God but cannot as he does not find any trace of God in the world. "He prays, but it is a bad prayer, a doubting prayer; he fails to superimpose God upon the complexities of electricity."(R,R:153). In this context, Brom Weber, states:

Updike has been concerned primarily with what he regards as the inability of American religious and social thought and action to fill man's spiritual void ... And increasingly, as man's nothingness has loomed ever greater for Updike, his novels have moved from constriction of meaning to vagueness to non-existence at their centers. Correspondingly, the characters are emotionless and mindless as well as godless (Weber 442).

The reasons for Harry's discontentment can be traced back to his school days when he was a champ on the basketball grounds. He wishes to retain that image of a hero all his life. But in real life, when he gets defeated in the field of marriage, he feels dejected. His declining domestic state makes him aware of the ordinariness of his existence which deflates his ego. For this reason, he tells Eccles when the latter suggests Harry to reconcile with his wife: "I played first-rate basketball. I really did. And after you're first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate. And that little Janice and I had going, boy, it was second-rate" (R,R:87).

Rabbit dreams of living the life of a star, the top most position and nothing less than that. When that is not possible, he finds himself virtually dead, "just one more piece of the sky of adults" (R,R:6). This fear of non-existence drives him out in quest of "something" (R,R:104), not knowing what that is. Actually this "something" is a steering force outside religion which enables him to understand his identity and a clear sense of perfection. "Because the human being is free," says Randolph M. Feezell, while discussing about Sartre's Nausea, "existence is a perpetual attempt to constitute for oneself a self-identity, a kind of completeness or a study character which would combat the anxiety which arises when one recognizes the vacancy of non-being at the heart of the self"(Feezell 22).

Hence he flees from his family responsibilities seeking pleasure elsewhere. Yen Chu in A Wanderer Between the Pagan Ruins And The Church: Modern Man's Dilemma in Rabbit, Run, observes:
In Rabbit Run, we see a wanderer running to and fro between the pagan ruins and the church of God. Rabbit, the Wandering protagonist is a modern boyish man struggling to set himself free from human bondage and to get a glimpse of the light of Heaven. He has a secret and inexplicable yearning for running upward, yet his sexual desires always drag him down. He runs away from social responsibilities; yet, ironically, his irresponsibility puts him in a position where he can enjoy more liberty and see things more clarivoyantly than other people do. But, unfortunately, his liberty and clarivoyance never give him anything more than momentary drunken elation, and then leave him in a worse plight than before (Chu 22).

Updike satirizes the lack of serious commitments in the American youth through the character of his protagonist. Rabbit does not make any serious commitments in his life and therefore feels dejected and disinterested in life. As a result he runs out in quest of a substitute to God to fill the void within him. His quest is for "something" which can help him be what he is. Unable to locate a viable substitute to God, he adopts adultery as a means to realize his identity, confirm his existence, share human warmth, and renew his creative potentialities. Through sex Updike's characters assert their manhood and enjoy the feeling of being alive. Thus, Updike’s 'Lawrentian religion makes sex the great reconciler.

Rabbit tries to fill his spiritual void with physical pleasure. He runs into Ruth, a part-time prostitute, who showers her unconditional love on him. He finds her whole-hearted love, an alternative to achieve a sense of perfection and love. He experiences transcendental love in her company for the first time in his life. He feels relieved of his agony in her company as she shares life with him.

Updike uses satirical mode in his treatment of the issue of sex. He begins by treating sex as a binding force between man and woman that cures the various social ailments. But ends up saying that it gives temporary solution and that permanent security can be found only in the faith of the divine. Living with Ruth, Rabbit feels rejuvenated and alive at least momentarily. He feels as if all his problems are solved. The theological aspect of sex in Rabbit, Run is evident from Updike's repeated projection of the church, when Rabbit makes love with Ruth. This is because physical union becomes a kind of religious ritual, a substitute to God to attain peace and love. In Rabbit, Run, Updike implies that a whole-hearted and unconditional love in or outside the range of marriage establishes lasting relationship and generates true love between a man and a woman provided they have belief in God. In this connection, in his Survivor in Contemporary American Fiction, Sukhbir Singh observes:

Nevertheless, sex offers Updike's protagonists a temporary solution for their existential precariousness. Having exhausted their search for the divine in their sexual pastimes, Updike's protagonists gradually reach a state of complete exhaustion - a state of total nothingness - where they desperately cry for some clue to the presence of the supernatural power. At this critical juncture, Updike's protagonists become witness to some external natural phenomena which act for them the visible manifestations of the invisible metaphysical power that governs their lives. On witnessing such phenomena, they like David Kern and Piet Hanema, suddenly experience an epiphanic moment which gives them a faint perception of God's presence in their scientific and materialistic universe (Singh 149).

Updike lets Rabbit learn from Ruth, the forgiving divinity and the indifferent yet impartial Nature. At the Chinese restaurant, Ruth laughs cheerfully and says: "Rabbit you're a Christian gentleman" (R,R:57). Rabbit "stares at the horizontal strip of stained-glass church window". And the "childish brightness" of the church "seems the one kind of comfort left to him" (R,R:71). Then Ruth is not just a satisfying part-time prostitute, though temporarily, she is the one who makes Rabbit see for a while, the ephemerality of pleasure, the puniness of terrestrial life, the immortality, the indifference and the vastness of Nature and God. In The Elements of John Updike, Alice and Kenneth observe: "The natural sexual appetite is the universal concern that opens human life to an understanding of that which is beyond the animal sphere. This biological urge carries with it a transcendent summons. Man who can lust after flesh cannot find an end to his desires except in the love of God" (Alice and Hamilton 139).

Updike tells us that "[Rabbit's] feeling that there is an unseen world is instinctive" (R,R:190). Instinctively, he runs uphill in search of that "unseen world" which is even beyond the comprehension of Eccles. In their happiest time, Rabbit asks Ruth to take off her shoes and climb with him to the top of the mountain over Brewer. There he thinks inwardly: "It seems plain, standing here, that if there is this floor there is a ceiling, that the true space in which we live is upward space" (R,R:93). The sight of a church catches his attention and even in the presence of Ruth, he is moved "to close his own eyes and bow his head with a movement so tiny Ruth won't notice" (R,R:74). Throughout the novel, Rabbit, with his sexual perversions and psychological blocks, acts upon an instinctive conviction: "Goodness lies inside, there's nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight" (R,R: 248).
The unlawful, unapproved love of Harry and Ruth is strong and binding because Ruth alone discerns Harry's affirmation of an unseen world. Even the humanistic minister, Jack Eccles, who volunteers to sort out the differences in Harry's domestic life, fails to sense Harry's transcendental quests and even tries to snub Harry's inarticulate and unidentified spiritual quest thus: "...all vagrants think they're on a quest. At least at first" (R,R:104). But Ruth who understands Harry states the reason for liking Harry, in the following words: "cause you haven't given up. 'cause in your stupid way you're still fighting" (R,R:76). Hence Harry develops an unprecedented affection for her. He confesses his belief in the divine not to his wife, but to his mistress. He is pleased to express his reassurance to her which is shared by the people, who putting on their best clothes as "a visual proof of the unseen world" (R,R:74), attend the service in the church nearby. At the same time he feels guilty for going to bed with Ruth when he ought to be sharing the belief in God with the church-goers. Yet he, for the first time, bows his head and prays: "Help me, Christ. Forgive me. Take me down the way. Bless Ruth, Janice, Nelson, my mother and father, Mr. And Mrs. Springer and the unborn baby. Forgive Tothero and all the other. Amen" (R,R:74). Thus Ruth kindles and brings out the better side of Harry's character and makes him pray, feel sinful, love the church and reaffirms his faith in God.

Rabbit's contentment in Ruth's company is short-lived due to his precar ious nature. When Ruth forces him to marry her, Rabbit refuses to be chained by that responsibility and once again runs. He craves for infinite freedom and individuality not sure of himself. His state of mind becomes extremely peevish, unstable, changeable and whimsical. In this connection, Fred Standley rightly observes:

Rabbit has no focal point - no clearly conceived object outside of himself (either man or reason or God) with which he can affirm the reality of his own existence either in affinity for or in rebellion from - he also has no alternative internal focal point - no sense of his own selfhood either in the process of becoming or as having crystallized... (Standley 375).

Rabbit's escape into fantasy and physical pleasures offers a temporary solution for his existential precariousness. He is totally exhausted in his quest for the divine in his physical pleasures. He gradually reaches a state where he desperately yearns for some clue to the presence of the supernatural power. At this juncture, Sukhbir Singh, observes:

Updike's protagonists become witness to some external natural phenomena which act for them the visible manifestations of the invisible metaphysical power that governs their lives. His heroes become more sensitive, more perceptive, and more responsive to the inner sensations and more receptive to the outer stimulations. With the help of these attributes, they acquire the necessary knowledge to evolve a strategy of survival and the necessary spiritual intensity to perceive the presence of the divine power, Updike's protagonists achieve salvation from their sufferings and stability in their marital relationships (Singh, Sukhbir 149).

Ruth is shrewd enough to understand the ultimate futility of her relationship with Harry because she knows that "he just lived in his skin and didn't give a thought to the consequences of anything" (R,R:121)...and that he "doesn't think much about what he gives other people" (R,R:117). When Janice is in her labor room, Harry feels responsible and runs back to her. But dissatisfied with Janice, Harry once again returns to Ruth and pleads with her to accept him. But Ruth's earlier love and tenderness for him have already died in her heart. After the death of his infant daughter, Rebecca, Harry runs to Ruth for the third time. She condemns him thus: "You're Mr. Death himself. You're not just nothing, you're worse than nothing" (R,R:245). She wants to make him accept his responsibilities, by facing up to the situation, and clearly shows the alternative as either to divorce Janice and to marry her or to count her and his unborn baby dead. Harry leaves Ruth once again because "guilt and responsibility slide together like two substantial shadows inside his chest" (R,R:247).

Rabbit impulsively runs away from his family on the pretext of a spiritual quest. He is very soon brought back to his familial responsibilities and social involvement. When his wife Janice refuses to oblige to his sexual impulses he flees again from his family. Janice inadvertently drowns their infant daughter in a bath-tub. Rabbit once again returns to his family. Trying to justify his action during his daughter's funeral he finds himself running away once again. Updike reveals very valid reasons for the misunderstanding and tension that colour the marital relationship of Harry and Janice. They are: Harry's earnest enthusiasm evinced as an ex-sportsman, his occupational dissatisfaction, domestic disharmony, sexual inadequacy of his wife, his spiritual quest and his dread of death.

Updike satirizes the fears and phobias of the contemporary Americans. Due to his vague and undefined spiritual quest Harry develops a dread of death described by Kierkegaard as "the fear of nothingness ... if this be actual physical death or the death of freedom and manhood" (Vargo 73). Harry's fear of death is described in the metaphors of "traps" and "nets". Tothero, his high school basketball
coach, and Ruth remind him of death by their "mute dense presences" (R,R:187). Yet his vision of death as the absorption and continuation of earthly life vacillates between his hatred of the materialistic world and his private ideal world. Hence, his dread of death, though momentary and ambivalent, has its own effect on bringing in marital tension between Janice and Harry. But Harry, as a spiritual quester, refuses to accept death as the end of everything as others in the novel do. His strong, unverbalised and inexplicable convictions have fortified him to believe in death not as an end of human living but as an entry into an unseen transcendental world.

REFERENCES