

## Inverting Male Gaze: Updike's *Rabbit Remembered* and the Feminist Perspectives

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### Abstract

The present study takes up a very contemporary and representative voice of American literature, John Updike who has tried to demystify the positive role of the woman in the American society through his writing. Where the woman was neglected and abused. This paper takes up the last of the Rabbit novels, *Rabbit Remembered* (2001) which shows the gradual evolution of women characters. Through a very realistic portrayal he describes women and womanhood in the novels from 1960-2000.

**Keywords:** Feminist, Third Wave Feminism, metamorphoses, courage, reward, appreciation, personal empowerment, individual identities, five decades

Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of their Own* (1977) has pointed out like many feminist critics one of the aspects of women's writing is that it is through this that she can project her lived experiences. Writing for women thus becomes an outlet for repressed emotions which otherwise would suffocate; it becomes a vent through which the claustrophobic self finds a breather. Cheri Register (Donovan 1989, 20) also points out that a literary work provides a sense of feminine identity and projects new ways against which women measure themselves. Since a woman knows herself best, she can lay bare herself in entirety. This said, it is however also true that when men write about women they do so objectively, measuring her by scales that are other than personal. Usually, the mindset cultivated by history and sociology affects their mode of presentation, but sometimes there are writers who can feel for the other, women included. One such writer is John Updike who has attempted to demystify his women characters and has been successful in making women readers identify with his women protagonists. He seems to be a later day incarnation of Hawthorne whose story of Hester Prynne went out to win women's hearts and instill a sense of dignity in them. Updike himself acknowledges that the more he reads it, the more he is struck by how to right everything was.

Beginning with *Rabbit, Run* (1960) Updike focuses on women's debilitating issues and the ongoing tribulations of women. Janice, the protagonist, a woman of leisure is made to realize that everything she eats, wears, enjoys and gives away has come out of her husband's earnings. Her impulse to assert herself is dampened by her consciousness of abject economic dependence. She is entrapped by her own subalternity. In *Rabbit Redux* (1971) Updike takes up the search for identity and the psychological implications of sexual desires. Here Janice searches for a life of personal fulfillment and self realization. The next, *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) shows Janice living a life of her choice and being able to transgress the boundaries and the shackles laid by the patriarchal society. *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) shows complete metamorphoses and in *Rabbit Remembered*, the final Rabbit book Updike seems to have set the stage for Janice to decide the future course of action. At the turn of the millennium she approaches life with a steady foot brushing aside the debacles she had come across. It seems that Updike here is celebrating the new stance that women have evolved for themselves, the courage to condition their lives and to become individuals in their own right.

When the Bible says that "her lamp does not go out by night" (Proverb 31, 18), it means that the woman is prudent and is taking care of the smallest details of her household. However the cultural details of the woman's specific tasks are different in the modern times but the basic principles have remained the same. A woman remembers that she has to perform various tasks without caring about appreciation or reward. Janice doesn't exactly fit into this groove but certainly realizes that she has various roles to play in order to keep her lamp burning.

Updike projects this image in the final Rabbit book, *Rabbit Remembered*, a woman established, composed and determined to brush aside anything that displeases her. She is the winner and a wonder woman! In fact, Updike has set the stage for Janice to decide the future course of action; and at the turn of the millennium this woman approaches with a steady foot, brushing aside the debacles she comes across. She has been at the receiving end at one time, and all the compromises she makes to support her men help her to become stronger. Only a sense of betrayal stays with her and to counteract this sense she marries Ronnie Harrison, the husband of Thelma. Updike draws attention to the fact that nothing shocks Janice anymore not even Harry's wretched past. For instance, Annabelle Byers enters her threshold one day to announce that she is Harry's illegitimate daughter; Janice is baffled for sometime but she retains her sense of balance and doesn't bother much. Updike shows her as involved in activities that are much more substantial in nature than the troublesome one's lurking in her vicinity. "My goodness is all Janice can think to say, as the sherry moves into her veins and begins to tint this nightmare a more agreeable color. What harm could what happened forty years ago do her now?" (189). Thus Updike very significantly celebrates the stoic stance Janice maintains. The unhappy past doesn't impinge upon her life: "Why not let the past die? Why stir up what can't be helped?" (190). She is definite that Annabelle is interested in her money, but "(m)oney is something she has a feel for; it's in her Springer veins. She acted as accountant for her father, and then for Nelson as best she could...This girl won't get a penny from her" (194). Updike shows her growing wise, as figuratively she keeps her eye on her lamps to make sure the wicks are trimmed regularly and to see that the lamp basin does not run out of oil. He projects her as the real estate agent and thus as an experienced business woman moves in a positive manner. She doesn't worry about Nelson and his family problems. Both Pru and Nelson live separately; and Nelson prefers to stay with her for which she has no qualms. Updike posits that she doesn't suffer from any pangs of guilt like Harry, but she cannot forget:

Harry, Harry, he (is) the problem, Janice decides, that girl showing up claiming to be his daughter, ... He made these messes but never cleaned up after himself, even now, dead ten years, leaving it up to the living. (206)

It is necessary to reiterate that Updike as a feminist recognizes the present social order where women have the courage to condition their lives with proper self images of individuality. Janice spends her time in the company of her friends, Amy and Doris playing with them a game of Bridge. She retains her individuality even while she is in the company of others. Updike's focus is also on the intelligent conversation that Janice makes with others; she evaluates her friend's style of living: "She could never be like that, making a false religion out of your furniture. Even her mother hadn't been like that, though she liked nice things once Daddy began to make money at the lot" (205,206). Updike says in a matter of fact way that a woman can be strong, bold and enterprising even within the sphere of marriage. He doesn't believe that marriage has existed for the advantage of men only, in order that men have a legally sanctioned method of control over their women as it has been the cliché of the "Declaration of Feminism" in 1971. He does not share the belief of those feminists who deemed that the termination of the institution of marriage is necessary for the liberation of women. To quote Sheila Cronin, leader of the feminist organization NOW: "Since marriage constitutes slavery for women, it is clear that the women's movement must concentrate on attacking this institution. Freedom for women cannot be won without the abolition of marriage" (Cronin). Accordingly, Updike has shown that Janice at one time moves out of Harry's life for a brief period in order to have an affair with Charlie Stavros. It suits the times in which she has lived as she followed the other women who chose to leave their homes to taste the joys of freedom. But when she realizes the mess that she and Harry have made in their own lives, she returns home. Updike relates one commendable thing, that is, after her return home she becomes more assertive, has gained confidence in herself as an individual and a human being. The feeling of worthlessness doesn't trouble her any longer. Thus feminism has dramatically influenced the life style of many women who feel oppressed and dejected with their circumstances; by breaking the boundaries imposed on them, and after tasting the bitter-sweet pleasures of freedom, willingly return to the nest i.e. the family.

Updike neatly draws attention to other women characters that confidently steer through life's struggles and finally achieve an individual status. The focus shifts from Janice to Annabelle, and later Mim, Pru and Judy. The point of view too shifts from Janice to Nelson, who is thrilled to learn that he has a half sister, and so, is very eager to meet her. Updike uses a simple incident like going to a restaurant to describe their personal tastes for food in order to highlight the similarities found in the siblings. Updike's contention is clear that sometimes these new emerging relationships prove to be more powerful than the existing ones and more fruitful than the relatives one is linked to by birth.

An important point is that they appear when the person has reached a stage of maturity in life; and in order to appreciate the new relationship and develop it into a mystical aspect of true soul-mate relationship, very little effort is required. Updike shows how from the very first meeting both Nelson and Annabelle feel as if they have known each other: "He wants to hand her the world but doesn't quite know how. That was fun,' he tells her. 'We'll be in touch.' And he kisses her on the cheek, tasting the rain, imagining her skin as half his, thinking, *My sister. Mine*" (258). Feelings of guilt, protectiveness and sensitivity are combined with true attempts at bonding. Updike skillfully relates how Nelson, a social worker is able to see through Annabelle's camouflage that she has been somehow a victim of man's ruthless passions. He is rather surprised to see her alone without a partner. He tries hard to find someone with whom she could enter into a close relationship. At first he tries to introduce her to Alex, who is Ronnie's son and then later fixes up a date with Billy Fosnacht, his old friend. Finally while driving the car "(he) needs to undress his sister, in front of Billy" (346). This is where Updike very sympathetically handles women's issues. Their tragedies and their mental struggle are highlighted to bring to the core of the sexual degeneration found in the modern American society. Towards the end of the novel when the world is welcoming the new millennium, Nelson probes further till Annabelle in a strained voice confesses about Mr. Byer:

He just groped, all in name of parental affection, of course.' This bit of sarcasm pries her open; she makes a strange shuddering prolonged sound of upheaved regret, then pours out, sobs making her grasp, 'I didn't dare ask him to stop, he'd handled me since I was a small baby, it didn't seem right, yet how could it be very wrong? It was as if he couldn't help it, he was, like, sleepwalking. He'd tuck me in afterwards. (346)

Updike sympathetically presents the inner struggle of women who need the strength to fight the diabolic demonstration of men's sexual passion. It is quite clear that the sexual abuse is based on coercion, using the child's relatively powerless position. Updike has depicted the different phases of relentless sexual abuse of women and children that lead to psychic disorders. Pru recalls her own experiences: "So you got pawed. So did I. My father was a crumb-bum, when you think about it. It's not the end of the world" (348). Pru is tough, and has the courage to face the consequences, that's why she confesses to Nelson and Janice about the sexual affair Harry enters with her. Updike shows her quite mature enough to handle the little episode she has had with her father-in-law. Only Janice and Nelson react strongly as they feel betrayed. Hence Nelson is able to gauge the suffering Annabelle has undergone, and asks her whether her mother knew about it. She breaks down saying that it has remained as a secret between Mr. Byer and her: "Her tears are coming freely now, pent-up, accusing." It has taken so many years for her to own up the miserable period of her childhood. Thus the various types of child abuses take its toll on minds of many victims psychologically.

When a child is abused, her mind cannot handle what happens to her. It's too much. Even if the mind remembers some of the abuse, it will bury most of it. It may remember the events, for instance, but bury the emotions. Basically, what the mind does is take the memories, put them deep in the unconscious and build a wall around them. The mind also pulls the memory apart. It stores the different parts of a memory - the event (the visual picture of what happened), the emotion (like the terror or the sexual feelings), and the identity of the perpetrator(s) and put them in different parts of the mind. Some parts are easier to access than others. There is a layering effect, with the worst memories at the bottom. Updike's concern for such victimization of women and children is obvious; as he reveals the painful anxiety syndromes of the young as well the elderly by making Nelson address such types of issues at the center where he works. "Even these men waiting on Death Row are mostly schizophrenics, Nelson claims, and all child abusers were themselves abused, so they're just passing it on, honoring their father and mother" (210). Updike shows him earnestly trying to set the lives of the schizophrenics by counseling them at the treatment center. However, Updike ironically states that Nelson's house needs to be set in order: "Disorganization takes its toll: a flopped marriage and two fatherless children in Ohio, Judy at nineteen defiant and estranged and Roy at fourteen trying to keep in touch via e-mail and Pru up to who knows what, the bitch has shut him out, him, still living with Mom and Ronnie like some agoraphobic mental cripple himself" (239). Pru has separated though not legally from Nelson as she wants him to move out of his mother's home. Nelson explains to Annabelle, as to why Pru has left him:

I don't know. I guess I disappointed her. She thinks I'm a pipsqueak... Pru always wanted us to get a house of our own and I could never see the point, my mother sitting on all those rooms over in Mt. Judge. I didn't want to leave her alone. My mother. (250) Updike is appreciative of Pru's stand, as she makes a valid point here and her demands are not unreasonable as Janice has married again.

She needs the space and that is not possible in Janice's house. However, she drives home during Christmas to let the children meet their father. Thus Updike by identifying himself as a feminist has taken the strongest stand in the struggle against oppression of women apart from sexism that has spread everywhere with manifold repercussions. Updike treats the feminist awakening in women as sufficient enough to help realize their potentiality and their weaknesses. This means that Annabelle has grown up with more ongoing preoccupation, with internalized depressive feelings and with external relationships as well. Another point to be noted is that Updike shows how Annabelle knows that a girl cannot and does not completely reject her mother in favor of others, but continues her relationship of attachment to her. He also shows the past clinging on to the lives of those who are in no way concerned. What happened to Ruth some forty years ago is conjured up, to Annabelle's dismay: "It must feel funny," Ronnie murmurs to Annabelle, "being the illegitimate daughter of a whore and a bum" (300). She has fond memories of her mother and doesn't blame her for all the confusions of her life. She has gone to Janice and Nelson to know more about her father and to hear from Nelson every little detail about her father's life. She seeks comfort from Nelson's description of him. Thus the strength and quality of her relationship to her dead father is completely dependent upon the strength and quality of her new relationship with Nelson. Updike has projected Annabelle as a strong woman with a will to face the despicable onslaught of men like Ronnie. His ire is definitely directed at the frustrating limits that society places on women's personal lives. When Janice asks Nelson, "But what does she *want*, Nelson?" He retorts as follows: "Why, she wants,' Nelson says, getting wild-eyed and high-voiced, defensive and, to his mother, touching, 'she wants what everybody wants. She wants love" (221).

Updike's presentation of these women characters clearly indicates that women have realized that their struggle has not gone in vain? 'According to media pundits, we live in a "post-feminist" age; feminism is passed. The term "post-feminism," at least as it's defined in the popular press, implies that feminism is over, that women have won,' claims Kim Louder milk, a doctoral candidate in the Institute of Liberal Arts. Updike in consonance with such claims shows how the two women of different generation fulfill their goals, i.e. Mim and Judy. Mim runs a Beauty Parlour, and has had married many times. Judy is twenty years old with a mind set on becoming an air flight attendant. Nelson very aptly describes Judy's attitude towards life: "But girls now - they're not so easy to talk into things. They're what's the word, empowered" (355). One more thing that Updike hints at is the fitness craze among girls. One of feminism's primary concerns is a woman's life and respect for her body. Nelson describes the way "But Judy is *knit*. She went out for all these sports at high school, and works out at this health club" (356). Finally, when Nelson moves out of his mother's home Pru is happy. He moves into her apartment at Akron and says to Annabelle "it's nice to be back with her. I love her, I guess" (357). Updike with feminist perspective has highlighted the change in the outlook of women.

He feels that once their consciousness is raised, they begin to see the opportunities that help them to develop. One thing is obvious that it is anger that drives them away, forcing them to search for answers for social inequalities. Pru is angry that Nelson is not able to understand why she let Harry have sexual relationship with her: "*It just happened, Nelson. Things just happen. Not everything happens for some deep reason, like you were taught at social school*" (265). When Nelson still insists on an explanation about her voluntary submission, she retorts: "*Why do you keep bugging me about what happened once between me and your father, when we were both half out of our minds, me with your druggy stunts and him with his poor beat-up heart? He's dead, Nelson, your father is dead, he and I won't do anything again if we wanted to. Which we don't. Didn't*" (265). Neither does she feel guilty nor has she any regrets. She blames Nelson for forsaking her for the drugs. She likes to think of herself as a survivor, and not a victim. This newer form of feminism focuses more on the *individual* empowerment of women and less on acts of contrition. It celebrates women's journeys to build meaningful identities in the complex contemporary world. If men and women would walk in obedience to God's word, feminism would be unmasked for what it is, and the harmony that God has ordained for the relationship between men and women would be the result.

Thus Nelson realizes that with the Internet easily accessible even Roy would be affected. "Judy has gone off the deep end with boys, he doesn't know when she lost her virginity, it must have been in Pennsylvania, when they all still lived in this house, Judy in the front bedroom, there were some pretty late dates he remembers, coming in that sticky front door, whose pop woke him up, footsteps slithering up the stairs, when she was just sixteen" (264). The ability to explore one's identity is considered by the young as a privilege.

With regard to such indulgences, Updike feels that the young women experience a kind of sexual empowerment that is purely individual and in fact it just promotes the sexual passion of women. Apart from this, the young women's aspirations are to climb the corporate heights, enter dream careers earning substantially good incomes. Judy is shown as keen on taking up a career. Thus Updike corroborates what Naomi Rockler-Gladen, a freelance writer who specializes in education believes in that personal empowerment dominates the Third Wave feminism: "Most women who identify themselves as Third Wave feminists or who are drawn to this philosophy, are young".

One particular feature that Updike stresses on is marriage, for which women have an innate desire, no matter how sublimated nature can be to social idiocies. Annabelle finally yields to this desire and decides to marry Billy Fosnact: "Ever since I was a little girl I've thought if I ever got married it would be in a church, with all the formality." She further asks Nelson: "If Billy and I get married, will you give me away" (359). The underlying assumption is that these choices somehow compromise the feminist beliefs: but what is liberating to one generation is oppressive to the next? Modesty champion Wendy Shalit, author of the new book *Girls Gone Wild*, blames the "third-wave feminist establishment" for carrying their sexual revolution too far. Shalit maintains that third-wave feminists, among other forces, have conditioned young women to become sluts. She profiles younger girls who embrace chastity as the route to self-determination - apparently because they feel oppressed by their older sisters' alleged equation of pole dancing with empowerment - and heralds the coming of a milder fourth wave.

Updike ends the Novella on the notion that women would comfortably settle for conventional roles provided there is enough space for each other to pursue their individual careers. Pru and Nelson, for instance are keen on pursuing a career of their individual choice. Nelson says: "She saw this ad for 'Human Resources Assistant' for one of the big banks down on Market Street saying 'people-oriented individual' and they liked her" (356), and about himself: "I've begun to check around, for jobs in mental health" (357). Updike's belief is that men and women have a God-given privilege to fulfill their roles with respect for individual capabilities. Any side-stepping leads to consequences such as the destruction of the relationship between husbands and wives, the destruction of the family, and the loss of respect for human life.

It is obvious that to Updike feminism brought about substantial changes in the lives of American men and women alike. Giving women positive options for personal fulfillment outside of the home in turn has given America the benefit of the abilities of a typically overlooked section of society. Updike's beliefs confirm with the third wave feminism that is focused much more on personal empowerment as a starting place for social change. Third Wave feminism celebrates the construction of individual identities in a complex, postmodern world, and invites women to define themselves as they wish from the smooth finish of possibilities. Very substantially Updike has shown the transformation of Janice taking place over the period of five decades and each decade focuses on the change in her personality that suits the times in which she lives. In confirmation with the feminist movement Updike clearly supports the woman's cause and suggests the way out from oppression by presenting his women characters' reactions and transformation. Thus throughout Updike's works, one finds the gentle observations of American life and customs. He pays such loving attention to detail; the result is a style that forms the semblance of a life fully resonant with the experience of Janice and other characters within the five decades. He constantly asks the reader to reconsider common preconceptions of a woman's life in contemporary society. Moreover the countless issues of his women characters are presented in a realistic style designed to reveal and examine the character of individuals whose collective experiences have shaped the moral fiber of America.

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