Chapter 6

VILLAGES
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When he published Couples in his mid-thirties, John Updike did not foresee that it would cause a fuss. As he tells it, the neighbors in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where he then lived, were supportive rather than reproachful. But further afield, in New York and Boston, he was attacked for his preoccupation with small-town adultery. This was 1968 and the public ban on Lady Chatterley’s Lover had only recently been lifted. To conventional minds, the carnality of Couples was a step too extreme.

Villages (2004) begins in the present tense, at Haskell Crossing, in Massachusetts. The protagonist, Owen Mackenzie, a retired software designer, is waking in bed. We’re told of the dream he has just had, follow him to the bathroom, watch him shave; hear the teasing marital babble – the ‘connubial nonsense’ – that passes between him and his second wife Julia who is an eco-friendly woman of sixty-five years. We think this domestic placidity will soon be shattered but even before we feel the backward pull, suddenly we find ourselves in the past, back in Pennsylvania, where Owen was born. And though the novel fitfully returns to the present – at one point we glimpse Owen arguing politics at a cocktail party – all the action belongs to past.

Owen’s life and sexual odyssey are unexceptional but he was born (as his author was) with one skin too few and thus makes him exceptionally tactile and alert. Despite the depression, then the outbreak of war, the world he grows up in, is idyllically stable and becalmed, ‘a comic strip version of American reality’ with friendly mailmen and changing trolley cars and peanut-butter crackers. But he’s a timid child, fearful of water, heights, spiders, darkness and the great outdoors. Fear also overshadows Owen’s first near-adventure in adult sex. His teenage courtship of
Elsie follows the regulations of those days – ‘a nest of growing permissions’, ‘an inch or two more flesh surrendered with each date’ – until one night they are alone and naked in her car together, and on the cusp of losing their virginities, when he is spooked by hoots and rustlings from the forest, and (like Piet Hanema in Couples) finds his excitement being ruined by nerves. More than once, scenes of Owen’s sexual excursions take place in lap of nature where Updike makes the couple glide apprehensively in ‘pastoral love lyrics’ and the young flesh tries to experience its ‘sexual awakening’ with the help of the ‘sporting of respective organs’ in the ‘car’ or at a picnic spot on ‘twenty-acre nature preserve’. (Taylor, 1971)

Owen’s anxieties never quite leave him, despite his charmed, only-child existence. After university, he goes on to make a successful career in computers, leaving IBM, with his friend Ed to set up with a half-share in a small business called E-O data. The technicalities of the development of computer science from 1950 to 1990 in the novel are dealt with more dutifully than the other strand – the chronicle of Owen’s sexual experiences during the same period. Each evenly numbered chapter is titled ‘Village Sex’, an understatement of the case, since the other chapters have sex in them, too.

To begin with, when he meets Phyllis at MIT and marries her, Owen is still an innocent student with no hardcore sexual experiences as such. His first affair finds its way into his undisturbed life by the time he has turned thirty and has already become a father and moves to Middle Falls for financial prospects. Indeed Owen retains innocence throughout his life, even when he is juggling affairs. Two kinds of women exist in the world, he perceives: ‘Those with whom you have slept and those, a cruelly disproportionate but reducible number, with whom you have not.’ Though not a predator, he takes an old-fashioned thrill in sexual conquest and never overcomes his
wonder at women’s bodies – or at their willingness to let him inside them ‘in such a reckless and adorable way.’ He holds to his faith that women are the bolder gender. And the ‘monstrous miracle’ of sex intrigues him to the last, even after he experiences the heavy toll of sin it can extract.

All the women he ever slept with – Phyllis, Faye, Alissa, Vanessa, Jacqueline, Antoinette, Mirabella, Karen and (putting an end to all his juggling) Julia. His women may not have careers – some are desperate housewives – but he pays homage to ‘the realm of purely personal’ which they share with him. In the novel, God and love are discussed in detail.

The poetry of carnal minutiae is Updike’s trademark and Villages shows no diminution of inventive. Sex to Updike, is our redemption:

Sex is a programmed delirium that rolls back death with death’s own substance; it’s the black space between the stars given sweet substance in our veins and cervices. The parts of ourselves conventional decency calls shameful are exalted. We are told that we shine, that we are splendid, and the naked bodies we are given in the bloody moment of birth hold all the answers that another, the other, desires, now and forever.

(Villages, 319)

This quasi – Biblical apologia for the life and work comes in the last chapter, the fourteenth, and an extension to the main structure required by village wisdom, which says that no building should consist of thirteen storeys. It’s lucky for us that Updike is superstitious, since some of the best writing in the book is to be found here. On the strip – mall debasement of U.S towns, for instance: ‘There are fewer and fewer somewheres in America, and more and more anywheres.’ Or: ‘Big countries are
happier than little countries: more responsibilities.’ Or: ‘Optimism tends to succeed but does this refute the majestic truths of pessimism?' (Villages, 309-313)

The last chapter makes clear why nothing happens to Owen in the present tense. By now, he has found his place in the world and the strings that made him a puppet of the libido have been snapped. All he knows of his male friends is their gold swings. All he knows of womanhood is Julia and the surface order she has brought to his sprawling life. Their tender, babyish regard for each other – ‘squabbling like mated toucans in a tropical jungle and then flying away in a perfect forgetful unison’ – is the best anyone can hope for in old age, Updike implies, and a stay against the darkness to come. (Morrison, 2005)

The most memorable moment of the book comes early on, when the opening dream is transformed, the body resurrected, in a scene of Owen poised above his elderly second wife, Julia, her broken leg in a plaster cast. This image of one body hanging over another, menacing, resuscitating, concealing, addressing itself sexually or pulling back from sex, is the seed of Villages, an image tangled, full of meanings that Updike unravels only tentatively. Those gemlike dragonflies hover above the listlessness of Owen and Julia’s life, but their exalted rapture is an exception to the petty temper of Villages.

Sexual maturity with Owen seems an aberration through which he briefly passed, more or less uncomprehending; on the way from his first childhoodness of old age. Sex is always ‘batsy’ – a private word from Owen’s childhood, meaning ‘messy gross’. Owen’s sexual education begins with an obscene drawing on the side of the playground-equipment shed, a picture that ‘looked like a swollen letter M, but, on examination, was a naked woman’. Sex has some truth to tell Owen that he cannot spell out, whose language he will never know; the M is the variable in an equation
that Owen cannot solve, the banal observe of W, or woman. In *Rabbit Redux*, as he is fleeing through the phonebook, Rabbit muses that M is exactly ‘the initial to put off obscene calls’, least likely to attract aggressive sexual inquiries.

Owen goes to women to be told things: he needs his first wife to explain to him that his mistress had been ‘flashy and hard-nosed and shallow’, and his mistress to tell him that ‘life is not some dream you can just wander through’. Occasionally the narrator reports on Owen’s progress with facetious condescension – ‘Another step in his education was due’–which is picked up by the arc, even mocking, Victorian headings: ‘Dream on, Dear Owen’; ‘How Phyllis Was Won; ‘You Don’t Want to Know’. For all the talk of education, Owen’s character seems not to develop. (Karshan, 23-24)

The novel opens in Owen’s bedroom where he is still enjoying the early morning slumber. With Julia, he has become habitual of stealing late hours of morning for cherishing more sleep, after she gets up for her daily routine. In one of these mornings, we are shocked to find him dreaming about his wife’s dead naked body. She is given artificial breathing by a medical official. Owen watches all the activity with guilty-stricken feelings. He thinks that his interference in her peaceful life with her generous husband, priest by vocation, has forced her to succumb to death. She has killed herself to find a way out of her sinful and graceless life. Remorse overcomes Owen and this dream symbolizes his prick of conscience. It may be that Owen’s adulterous Odyssey is itself rebuking him. Beginning with Phyllis, he encountered women in a series of sexual affairs. Though the beginning of his sexual saga was astonishingly applauding as he was still virgin until his wedding with Phyllis but once he tasted of Faye, the first woman who gave him impetus outside his house, he could not resist himself from taking further risks. His sexual life carried with it heavy toll of sin, seduction, domesticity and debauchery. Many of Updike’s heroes
hope to unify and then ‘reunify body and soul’ – most of the time by gnawing the brawn of their carnal desires – Owen is somewhat an immature character who spends his life wondering over the marvels of a female body.

(Donald J. Greiner, 1985)

Owen’s women were his tutors more than his sexual partners and with every partner Owen discovered new marvels of sexual experience. At times, when Owen sees birds, he gets a feeling that the birds also try to teach human beings to stop being vain. In this way, if women are sent to this world to make a man know the worth of his manhood, so the birds try to teach human beings the worth of simplicity towards Nature. Birds have their own world elevated from the ground. They are the ones that seek heavenly stars for guidance during migration. The upper world is their territory all year round and different parts of the world are their seasonal territories with no objection to their living and survival. Here Updike is lamenting the hostile nature of mankind where fellow human beings have no right to move out of their political boundary without legal proof and some place to where their entry is banned due to material, diplomatic and political differences. Updike calls upon mankind to be as generous and loving as birds. We sense criticism on American politics which never receives any immigrant with open arms nor has the habit of giving away its God-gifted products to the needy. He wishes his nation to inculcate the generosity and welcoming nature in its citizens. Some of the birds behave in a friendly way with human beings trying to adjust with them and at the same time, trying to teach them the value of adjustment.

After wasting his life in sexual adventures, Owen finds its translation in the ugliness of his old-aged facial skin. His face defines itself in terms of weakness,
creases, wrinkles and fleshy folds. Sometimes he feels his sins projecting themselves in his sagging flesh:

. . .inviting weakness. . .creases drag at the corners of his mouth, and the eyelids are wrinkled like a desert reptile’s. . .folds snag. . .weigh on his lashes in the morning. . .hates that familiar feeling of something in his eye, elusive but bothersome. . .

(Villages, 08)

There is mention of smoking with clues about its hazards and diseases caused by it. Taking In the Beauty of the Lilies, into consideration, smoking becomes a common point and in both the novels Updike complains of too much smoking habits in American society. An ‘American smokes to no purpose except nothingness and self decay.’

Like smoking, reference of war also haunts both novels – In the Beauty of the Lilies and Villages, war is a vital part of American citizenship. Being killed in the war is considered a way of being not only loyal to America but also immortalizing one’s own self in the war memorial charts hanging at some public crossing. The survivors and those who sustained serious injuries, feel proud as long as they feed on government grants. Soon after they are forgotten and grants cease; they are either rendered idle or seek cheap, risky and adventurous jobs.

There is also mention of adjustment problems with the spouses. Illustration is given in terms of aggressive behavior on part of Owen’s father who makes an irritating partner for his spouse. Submissive nature of a female such as Owen’s mother, gives her no opportunity to savor the colorful taste of life. Sense of financial insecurity always disturbed Owen’s father, Floyd Mackenzie, and gradually Owen internalized this feeling as naturally as a biological descendent.
American society longs for quarrel-free homes and healthy family-life. As far as Owen’s small town is concerned, ‘there were no divorces’; there was lot of disturbance, unrest, confusion in the houses but still people adjusted and the life got along without divorces. ‘Divorces were a way of dealing with life in Hollywood and New York. High class society was more susceptible to this sinful act.’

Glimpses of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* can also be discerned while studying the journey of traits from Owen’s maternal grand-father to Owen himself. His grandfather owned a hardware store, which, inspite of its valuable inventions could attract no customers and thereby no profit or prosperity:

He owned a hardware store in Mt. Airy, this original Owen, and his spare time had invented things. . .but no company had ever taken up their manufacture and made him rich. . .died bankrupt but a glimmer of his hopes of outwitting the hard world descended to his grandson.

*(Villages, 15)*

Some instances in the novel warn the human world about unpredictability of death. Updike, near the close of his foreword to *Early Stories*, notes that happiness has never been the subject of fiction; likewise he knows that ‘death and its adjutants tax each transaction’. Death approaches with suddenness, therefore, Updike’s aim is to inculcate fear in human mind. God is omniscient, so, every act of human beings should be directed towards virtue and that the unpredictable death may not strip mankind off God’s grace. At the same time, God is all forgiving and gives human beings various opportunities to redeem themselves. God has gifted his creatures with quality to beget ‘children’ – God’s angelic version in young and innocent faces. To bring-up their children in the best possible way, people need to abstain themselves from all evil deeds so that they can portray themselves as role models before their
young ones. Another way is to be kind to the weaker sex, in every respect. The most shameful and frequently faced problem by American children is the disappearance of their fathers from the family, sooner or later and that too, for another woman. Owen’s buddy, though his best friend, still had to bear ‘crowning insults’ from Owen for being a fatherless child. Owen had a time to boast of having a father and of being a child to an unbroken family. (Pritchard, 2005)

Feeling of unhappiness and distress experienced by women because of them belonging to gender other than male and being subordinate species in home and society is among the top issues of the novel. For instance, a secret unhappiness made the life of Owen’s mother stressful. Updike has talked about some rare moments of a woman’s life when she feels disgusted of all worldly relations as they always demand from her without giving anything in return, not even respect. A woman sometimes despises the base desires, tries to forget their existence and gives them a ‘touch me not’ response. In Updike’s opinion, such denials should not be met with aggression or arrogance on the part of males. Such purity adds to the chastity of woman and this trait is endeared with Christ.

Owen longed to gain knowledge about women, discover those secret pathways which could be laden with answers for such questions as related to the women world. Knowledge about reality ‘is good to have’ even if it is sinful. His main areas of thrust were physical and emotional aspects of women. He always needed women to guide him towards their feelings and to tell him about other women. But Updike sometimes deals with his protagonist strictly and gives him a whiplash of remorse. There is extensive account of his guilty feelings which chased him even in his dreams. In his dreams he never saw his wife in a clear vision:
Often in his dreams the wife-figure is ambiguous, misty-faced, and could be either woman. Phyllis, a stately dirty-blondie had been taller. . .certain bohemian insouciance, and Julia, a compact, long-lashed brunette. . . snappier. . .but both acquire in his dreams a recessive, generic wifeliness.

(Villages, 38)

Moreover, at some instances, Phyllis’s feeling of loneliness and insecurity on the part of her husband and her own silent acceptance with resignation, leave remarks on Owen’s subconscious mind which awake him during his sleep to shake him up out of guilt and fear.

Also, his guilt was accompanied with reluctance he had been experiencing since his childhood. His reluctance had its roots in his father’s financial crisis, his mother’s deteriorating health and his parents’ unhealthy relationship. His father’s job was none too secure. Then, when Owen was thirteen, his still intact world shattered; the mill where his father worked, closed down. Floyd Mackenzie walked the baking summer-streets of Alton looking for an accountant’s job. ‘The humiliation of it wore his face thin and tinted it yellow’ which reminds us of Updike’s Clarence Wilmot and his encyclopedia. The uselessness of accounts and the honesty attributed to it, depressed Owen’s father and he vowed to get his son a practical scientific education. Floyd Mackenzie’s experience of the depression had been that ‘engineers were the last people to be fired, so, the kid needed to latch on to something practical.’

Such financial crisis settled in young Owen’s self, thus, the future dreams of inventions that would make him rich. But it could not generate in him a thirst for creation and to embark into opportunities. For creation and novelty he needed to struggle wherein he had no risk-taking capability and he never wanted to come out of his passivity.
The novel is not only about personal feelings and desires of some characters but it is also an excellent critique of shocking reality of some of the American values as a whole. An honest, respectful and moral behavior towards these values could turn a nation into a Utopia whereas derailment of the same turns life into a perpetual thirst, dissatisfaction and guilt. Owen could never respect the fact of his father supporting members of three generations in a house – parents, wife and son. He never tried to reward his father’s expectations with him. Instead of learning from his father and minimize his burden, Owen never valued his sacrifices and settled down cozily with the well-off Phyllis. For him, the fact persisted that ‘parents embarrass their children’.

*(Villages, 103)*

The other degrading value is the injustice done to women. In a particular nation, success can never be a big deal if gender segregation is erased, giving way to cooperation and a feeling of felicity for each other. Phyllis is an example of a national treasure that is never valued for its mental brilliance and appreciable potential. Even her ambition to pursue a PhD is thwarted by her husband. Owen never seemed to admit that four children were born out of their union. In words of Owen, ‘It’s not as if we screw all the time, either. I hardly know how it happens.’ *(Villages, 144)* For Owen, destiny of a woman was to be thrown inside four walls, unnamed, unknown for her contribution to national progress:

He had always felt mathematically inferior to her, earth-bound, relatively muddy in his thinking, though he had done creditably at MIT. . .received faithful raises from IBM. . .and in some pocket of his heart was relieved that she had relegated PhD thesis to the dustbin. . .nobody wants a wife smarter than he.

*(Villages, 130)*
Not to mention man-woman relationship, Updike also laments the inability of women to wake up for their own united cause of adoring their feminist dignity by themselves. In almost every sector, woman abhors woman, making it advantageous for men to rule over their divided feminist self. Updike illustrates his point by giving us a pathetic account of woman-to-woman relationship which was a record of tension between Owen’s mother and his wife, Phyllis.

Scanning through elderly people’s life in nearly all Updike’s select novels, we never fail to grieve over their longingness to connect with life and people. The nearing end years of Owen’s grandfather somehow remind us of aunt Esther in In the Beauty of the Lilies who remained in contact with the outer world with the help of her telephone, and here, for Owen’s grandfather, ‘waiting for the mail’ signifies the same thing.

On the other hand, Owen’s father doesn’t feel light hearted at the sight of his son, Owen and his family. His rich son who ought to have lessened his father’s burden of running household expenditure, keep his parents and grandparents with him in his lavish home and take special care of their elderly needs, mercilessly leaves his father to bear all the expenses of Owen’s family visits. American children seldom prove to be their parents’ soothers; in fact, the heartlessness of grownup children results in the parents’ alarming tension.

Another aspect of conflict was the more reserved nature of Owen’s mother than that of Phyllis. In fact, Owen’s mother never experienced self-satisfaction or any exchange of dignified treatment by her own husband who had always killed her youthful excitement, never respected her womanhood and left her to search for a faithful male in her son. All these conflicts could not give Owen a prick of
conscience. Instead, back in Middle Falls, he was ready to bless himself with his worthy betrayal.

In a country of conflicting familial relationships and unstable sexual lives, a broader spectrum gives us an overview of coming and going political leaders. Such violent, political and racial situation gradually became piece of everyday news. Americans, even then, would not fall short of entertainment. To fizz off their strain of child-rearing, home-making, earning livelihood with ticking of the clock, couples met at the town’s get-togethers where others’ spouses exchanged words and liked each other – which was not unexpected in such particular social setting. Such savage freedom gave Owen his second sexual break, Faye. Owen sought to public booths to contact Faye but again, he being reluctant, gave chance to Faye to dominate. She instructed him of what he should do or say in case anybody else picked up the phone. She herself decided when their hot meeting would take place and where. On the phone itself, Faye taught him to be patient and practical ‘because life is not some dream you can just wander through’. (Villages, 151) She also instructed him to drink more. Owen always accepted such instructions from women as he wanted to know the how-about of adjust with every woman, trying to grasp their different demands regarding sex. Faye’s sexual recklessness and adoration and her gladness that her man was Owen, was not less than a lesson for Owen. Their stolen hours from Owen’s precious work achievements and Faye’s domestic care, take us into Roger Lambert’s apartment in Roger’s Version where Dale and Esther are swallowing time into huge gulps to steal as many moments as possible in silent adultery. Owen and Faye would sneak into her house where Faye would wander naked as a deer moves in the forest. A woman’s image compared to a deer indicates a connection with Updike’s Towards the End of Time. Like Esther of Roger’s Version, it was Faye who ended the
affair and left her lover shocked. Through Faye’s conversation with Owen over the phone about her husband’s trickiness regarding money and Phyllis’s assurance that Faye’s husband ‘took good care of her financially but he had exhausted her capacity to romanticize him’ (Villages, 163), it was proved that Faye was just quenching her sexual thirst by romanticizing Owen as one of her many victims. Once satisfied for some time, she retreated into her lavish household.

After sometime, Owen met Stacy, his partner Ed’s fiancée. In his heart, Owen accepted the fact that Stacy was a charmer with her extremely unreserved way of swimming, fully naked. In a moment of loneliness and awareness of Owen’s affair with Faye, she offered Owen a blowjob which due to his sense of respect for his partner, and a prick of conscience, Owen refused. But Stacy’s aggression and willingness reopened him to new possibilities. In no time he could look for an excuse for his sinning and seducing nature as nobody was devoid of such disgusting traits, not even the government. Everybody, whether individually or collectively, sin as per their levels. Here, Updike magnifies his view regarding corruption where human beings give way to blunders with the excuse that if others do it then why not they. So, in case of any rebuke from within, a sinner has others’ deeds to fall upon.

At Heron Ponds, Alissa Morrissey, wife of Ian Morrissey, the commercial painter, attracted Owen towards herself with her strange body fitness and frequent smiles at hearing Owen’s voice. At New Year’s Eve in Morrissey’s house, under the influence of celebratory champagne and roused by Alissa’s party-outfit, Owen could not resist himself from kissing her and touching her private parts. Her tough resistance confirmed her acceptance for him. It became clear to Owen that these were layers to Alissa as there could be to all women. Owen was proud of his discovery – one step
ahead in his education and a progress in his sexual odyssey. ‘Now the trick was to find the layer where a man was welcome’.

(Villages, 192)

The Morrissey’s entertaining others at late night parties in their house, is a clear sign in America that the family is going through marital distress.

Ian Morrissey, a magazine illustrator represents the handicraft job artist whose outworn talent is no longer accepted anywhere. The resulting diminished respect has turned him into a gloomy and sarcastic person with an old age look. Graphically air-brushed computerized photographs have replaced old manual illustrations. Updike, through this New Year’s Eve party, brings Ian and Owen opposite to each other – one representing the rapidly outdating services which are no longer cared for and the other ascending the ladder of success in the race of industrialization. In words of Ian:

We react to machines and go dead when they are shut off. . .your old man, limited as he was, had mastered his tools. Nobody can use tools any more. They have to have everything done for them, by so-called experts, at twenty-five bucks an hour. And even so it’s all done badly.

(Villages, 195)

Disappearing magazines from the market also marks the decreasing reading habit in people who are now more attracted towards latest audio-visual inventions and with little time left for contemplation and leisure-study. In such an atmosphere of destruction and construction, Owen managed to welcome Alissa as his new mistress. With Alissa, Owen made piles of discoveries. In fact she turned out to be the most talented and updated instructor in the field of sex. On the other hand, Owen discovered in himself the capacity to remain cool during sex, to hold his own orgasm and release it when the woman was about to have her own climax.
At two instances, Updike has shown the image of a woman during sex as being sacrificed and the man as an executioner – when Phyllis and Owen were preparing to devirginate each other, Owen imagined he was fleecing a lamb as he moved the comb repeatedly over Phyllis’s genitals and now when Alissa knelt for him, cleaving her legs, the sight of her cervical vertebrae seemed to Owen ‘the neck’ that ‘the executioner sees’.

But there were areas to which Owen was still an unfrequented explorer. Menstrual blood of a woman, flaming erected penis were among those events which Owen either hated or shied away from. With Alissa he discovered that these sore and ugly organs called genitals was sense of being of an individual. Their value was in their inward juices which had to be valued by the partners. Under the influence of sexual excitement, Owen could go on as long as the faith of their value overpowered him but then he was left uncertain as to why women put up with such pain, risk and disgrace. After a certain session, he felt that women took abasement and pain as part of bliss. Here the author raises the point that unless a sexual transaction was a psychological one, the male partners are left to ‘stick with the sordid pathos of the inflatable female bodies, with usable mouths and vaginas. One must feel the other.’

(Villages, 204)

After struggling with each other’s bodies and using them to their completeness, the two lovers, Owen and Alissa, had to grope for words and things to discuss. After having exploited the bodies, they had no aim in such adulterous relationship to aspire for. Here Updike’s rebuke is clear when he pinpoints the ‘problem:
what do you do with the bodies afterwards? A man and a woman like-minded enough, with physiologies and sexual educations roughly matched, agree to meet and use each other for an hour; then what?

(Villages, 204-205)

Updike is questioning the adulterous human nature of his countrymen and is suggesting them to wonder for the whereabouts of their self-control and conscience. He seems to be aggressively asking them what they intend to do after adultery; what they are leaving behind for this nation.

Through their cozy conversation, Owen and Alissa help Updike to throw light upon the different causes of murders committed all over the nation. The most prevailing cause being the killings of poor girls who take the risk of getting pregnant but men cannot let go of the matter easily. Owen is also trying to terrify Alissa of grave consequences in case she became pregnant from him. But at the same time Updike takes his readers the safe way down to sex ‘by a shot of antibiotics or a trip to enlightened land where abortion is legal, use of pill or an IUD’. (Villages, 205) Here Updike promotes contraceptives as he does in Couples. Alissa also brings home the point that ‘women need attention. It is a part of their natural instincts. Alissa seems to be struggling to get something through Owen that she greatly misses with Ian. Another instance where she proves Ian’s neglect is, when she never gets the smile revived on her face as she does with Owen; and one of them falls asleep before they finish this marital duty. On his side, Owen cherishes the ‘feminine glimpses that Alissa sometimes shows into what it was like to be a woman which Phyllis rarely afforded him’.

(Villages, 207)

From intimate moments with Alissa, Owen discovered that women seldom feel ashamed of their womanhood. According to Alissa, menstruation feels like
lactation, gives excitement as it is the essence of womanhood. She feels proud of being generous to mankind by giving away a volume of herself. Also it establishes her relationship with pain and prepares her for the major pain of child-birth. Somewhere, while authoring this conversation, Updike had in his mind the pain of Jesus at the Cross. The way Jesus struggled to be identified as the son of God by pagans and Jews and gave away his blood and bore pain on the Cross for the redemption of mankind. In the same way, a woman, by bearing the fruit of her love-making, wrapped in utmost security in her womb band carrying on this responsible act until she delivers the child with deadly pain; bringing an alive gift to this world, thus, having given away, a precious part of herself generously, free to move about in the world. Also protecting her child becomes her priority than yielding to her partner. Therefore, as soon as Alissa became pregnant accidentally, she decided to jettison her lover to keep her baby safe; she revived her freshness and smiles while Owen was horrified by the paternal ambiguity of that growing fetus. As pregnancies are thinning out in America, so such good incidents are rare. Updike hands over the responsibility of motherhood to a responsible lady whom he trusts and is sure she would shoulder its task till it is successfully and safely accomplished. Even after continuing their hot meetings for one year and a half, Owen and Alissa were seemingly ignored by their spouses, Phyllis and Ian, who, along with the village, knew everything but didn’t appear to know: ‘A village is woven of secrets, of truths better left unstated.’ It isn’t a village’s way to tell. On the other hand, Alissa was sure that her child would be welcomed by the village. ‘A village is a hatchery, cherishing its smallest members.’ Updike laments the unhealthy relationship of American spouses who either avoid or hate to beget children. According to Updike, family planning is admissible but at the same time child birth is a sign of family’s union, guarantee of continuation of husband-wife
relationship and strengthening of their bonds. This point is very well proved when Phyllis expresses to Owen her longingness for another child ‘if it will bring them close together.’ Phyllis being a true companion for Owen, ignores his sexual affairs, carelessness on his part, and is all prepared for a fifth child, just to have a fresh start with her husband. But the next moment she herself rejects the idea as if trying to make Owen realize the otherwise loneliness. She was becoming harder and bitter for him. Sometimes she also sounded ironical when he advised her to do an academic or dancing course of a year or two. She quite understood where her busy routine would take him to.

Phyllis’s silent longing for Owen and her lack of possession for him gave way to more women in his life. Phyllis asks a crowd of people ‘Who wants to be the next?’ (Villages, 216) to see the new born Nina and congratulate Alissa but this became symbolic for Phyllis withdrawing and giving way to ‘next’ women entering in Owen’s life. And of course, it did happen, as Owen, in an attempt to promote his E-O data, had to attend some conferences where a number of women showed up and one of them explored the opportunities of a night far from home.

At the same time, Owen’s heart sank because ‘the advancing technology was takingover his commandline interface’. ‘The geometrical increase of chip capacity which enabled each pixel on the line-scan monitor to have an address which indicated that a simple manual motion hurled computations to the next locations along with all other pixels in its icon or text block’. (Villages, 223) The inventor of this marvel got the idea from watching school children writing and running their own small programmes using Logo, whose commands were all expressed as objects and movements – ‘Turtle graphics’. Updike here states that ‘it would always be the young who had the intuitive connection with this gorgeous toy, a brainy box’. Such great
progress in the field of technology could present before Owen an alien future, a world of computers, as mass-marketable as typewriters, all their elegant mathematics, once the remote province of electrical engineers and Boolean logicians now buried beneath a cartoon surface. Owen could feel the useless efforts of his generation reduce to heaps of debris. He was worried about the obsoleteness of his sleepless days and nights when he and Ed put their heart and soul to make E-O data stand on its feet. He realized the heart-breaking reality of history of ‘construction and destruction’ which has always been the motto of this nation. Owen and Ed were working their best so that further advancement in this field may not overcome them. The computer world was changing and giving more space to women than Phyllis’s time. Every now and then, one of these women sneaked some hours with Owen away from Phyllis. To hide one’s identity it had become a fad to have ‘fancy names, trim bodies, short skirts, long hair and liberated morals’. Moreover, the girls of 70s and 80s were paying more attention to their physique to follow the mode of feminist assertion. All such beautifully built girls were seen at conferences and their respective stalls where Owen, at the E-O stall, hawked a packaged games application. However, Owen anticipated that these games would not be cashed easily because ‘a home that had a computer in it was one in a hundred thousand’. Updike analyses the future of computer as a box holding video games for children for their entertainment. Initially, it was an invention which took place during world wars as these wars had their own destructive and capitalist demands. Now this device is adding to the industrial, scientific and financial output of the nation.

Owen struggled on his path of achieving success in the sale of E-O data and at the same time had chance to spend his night hours with a lot of feminine variety. There were the desperate ones, as well as happy-go-lucky entertainers who were also
experienced in matters of artificial arousals for sexual desire. Antoinette, working for Cray computers, belonged to the former category while Mirabella belonged to the latter. Here Updike frankly portrays a race which is madly obsessed with fleshly pleasures.

With increasing age, Owen realizes many things regarding women and the plans related to his work; therefore the last chunk of the novel makes Owen analyze the reason why genders are created by God and the formula of specific talent. As Owen perfects the writing of programmes for payrolls and pension plans and is not able to outshine recent software companies, in the same way, women only perfect sexual activities because ‘it was what they were programmed to do, there was no mystery’. (Villages, 234) Gender discrimination is reflected in these lines and Updike’s Owen represents Every American mindset to throw light upon the ideology that a female can never claim to contribute to any stream of national progress; she is ‘good for nothing’ except fulfilling the sexual desires of the main pillars of mankind – ‘the male gender’.

During the seventies, illicit love was no longer a strange temporary contract between any one of the spouses of Middle Falls with the other. By this time, Owen’s sojourn with the women reached its experienced and ripened stage. Now, not only Owen but also most women sought after him in the market of sex and self-offering. Other men were either interested in drinking or inventing chances in promising fields of technology or too consumed by the business of earning a living and taking care of their property but seldom had time to cherish the nurturing essence of their life – ‘wives’. As a result, these women had to hunt for men who could give them time, if not for true love then just for quenching their thirst. Owen sees that where spouses have no considerable age difference between them, the question which might arise after some years of marriage is that of divorce or neglect on the part of one or the
other. But where one of the spouses is older than the other, generally the younger one, the wife, does not have to keep up with an angry, complaining and dominating family-head. Also, she does not have to experience a sort of insecurity or jealousy, instead, she enjoys the helpless position that her husband has to go through or she is given undue freedom by her man, willingly, provided they should be with each other at prior fixed and appointed times. Vanessa is such a woman. Owen sensed her feminine side when he saw her tending to her garden. Updike never misses an opportunity to attribute female with delicacy and softness. And if she is a little rash like Vanessa, then flowers in the garden being tended by her add to this missing feminine element. Shewas ‘quite dignified and matter-of-fact’ and approached Owen without any hesitation. Her toughness and her mannish voice added to her confidence so much so that she openly admired Owen’s tender and lovely relation with Phyllis. However, she develops an inferiority complex with the more educated Phyllis. At the same time, she also makes Owen feel repulsive with Phyllis on the pretext that the latter never returns him with equal love. She asserts that Phyllis never gives a damn care to anybody except her children who were her entire world. Vanessa says:

. . .you think she’s lovely, it’s rather touching. . .too bluestocking. She never left school. . .doesn’t give you shit. Or anybody else, really, except her children, up to a point. She is about the most insulated person I’ve ever seen.

(Villages, 239)

Updike makes an astonishing discovery that for an ideal woman her husband’s greatest gift is the children she has with him and her care for them marks the level of respect that she has for her husband but Owen was unable to realize the importance of this subject. In this way, Vanessa had opened for Owen sure reason for his guilt. Owen knew that he was responsible for Phyllis ‘insulated’ in a wounded self; his lack
of respect for her genuine intelligence, his not being fond of her as his wife or his
children’s mother, his flying from one woman to another with Phyllis’s deliberate
ignorance of the matter and all this to keep her family from a severe break-up. Such a
discovery by an unfamiliar woman fascinated Owen and an indication that she was
the ‘next’ one to give him lessons on sex.

The lesson Owen learned from Vanessa was a surprising one – ‘masculine
women give great sex’. She brought to sex a certain serious playfulness, treated it like
a man does, considering the event basically physical and was conscious of the need
for variety with her graceful as well as thoughtful touch. ‘Like a good craftsman she
pondered over the task while away from the work bench.’ Instead of pouncing on his
organs, she used to study them; at the same time increasing his longingness for her so
that she could greet him at their next tryst with a fresh idea. At times, in contrast with
her masculine pleasure, Vanessa was in a considerable appraisal of the advantages of
being a male and frequently mentioned the fact that one of the beauties of being a man
is that he cannot be raped. Updike’s Vanessa is a sort of a complicated character who
represents the amalgam of being under-educated and the weaknesses of feminine
form.

(Villages, 240-241)

During his private meetings with Vanessa, Owen felt that American female
adolescents, for their own sexual growth, can go for having temporary physical
relations with same sex partners if they cannot afford opposite sex partners but he also
admits that such unnatural relations are of no use at all. Vanessa says disappointedly:

. . .like being with a weak man. . .Why be with a weak imitation when you
can be with a real one? It’s all a matter. . .of being known. You want to be
known better than you know yourself.

(Villages, 244)
In this way, Updike is strongly opposing the lesbian relationship and defining it as being with weak imitation of Y chromosome. Here, he is calling for the revival of originality, of the relationship which never looks as apt as it does between an Adam and an Eve.

In the course of his sexual sojourn, Owen meets another number in his list – Trish Oglethorpe. In one of these New Year parties, Owen fell into a conversation with Trish regarding the element of forgiveness. He appreciated the new president who pardoned Nixon from being sentenced and said, ‘We all need to be pardoned’. (Villages, 247) This hope of being granted pardon eats up Owen like a pest. He has to carry this aura of fear and guilt that he needs to be pardoned by his neglected parents, wife and children especially when he knows that Phyllis proves to be his trustworthy companion in his hard times. Whenever Owen is left to enjoy his freedom with other women, ‘her curious apparent absence gave him a premonitory stab of guilt; he felt unworthy of his happiness’.

(Villages, 267)

According to Trish, all the versatile identifiable talents from the so-called inferior being – the woman, ‘makes you wonder what is a woman’. A woman is a wonderful packet, carefully shaped by the divine hands who when steps out from her cocoon, exhibits marvelous ventures in all streams of life. But deducting all the traits which placed her above a man, Owen liked women ‘ironical, detached and devoted to the realm of the purely personal, the privilege of the free world’. (Villages, 249)

With Karen Jazinski, Owen’s encounter was a different one. It made him realize that freedom lies in generation gap. With people of the same generation there comes the question of negotiation about commitment. One feels trapped by future plans and the ‘fear what one is going to do with it’ (Villages, 252). With partners having a generation-gap, there is no future. Moreover, Karen hated making promises
of any personal meetings, the thing which she didn’t have to fear with old age partners. This is the way the younger generation after Owen perceived sexual relationships and freed itself from centuries of hang-ups.

Death is one of the major themes in Updike’s novels. In *Villages* there is an underlying current of approaching death right from the beginning of the novel. It hits the reader as a harsh reality at the culmination of the novel where Updike states that people run to seek others with hawk eyes unaware of the approaching end which never discriminates between men and women, children and adults, young and old.

Updike comments that people try their best to escape death through different surgery, therapy or ‘an expensive house renovation’ preparing for the years ahead. But they forget that the inevitable finds its way to those who are selected for it because ‘death never loses its quality of unexpectedness. Every time a person falls victim to it, it is expected that others learn a lesson and beware of it. The only solution is to prepare for the death itself. Life should be consumed in doing social welfare, learning and preaching values of love for mankind, respecting feelings and relationships, thus preparing for one’s own salvation. Death is quite merciful to most of the people who die decades after their birth when signs of old age begin to show upon them such as ‘defiant eyes, munching jaws, dropsical knee, excruciating hip, shaky white head’, etc; in this way death warns them of its approach and expects them to prepare for it.

*(Villages, 269)*

Death is not a long sleep as it seems to us. At times now when the seventy-year old Owen has brought his sexual saga to a halt by marrying Julia, both of them visit the Sunday Church and Owen contemplates the old people and ponders over the idea of approaching death, the priest tries to awaken those in the pews that what ‘we perceive as death in this temporary world is just a duration of short sleep after which a
last call shall awaken all men from their graves in the twinkling of an eye; here come
the greatest riddle:

. . .why did nothingness, the ground note of cosmic reality. . .choose so
troublesomely to violate itself and give birth to anything at all? At this point,
even the religious minds fail to work. The Church in strategic retreat abandons
the cosmos to physics, and takes refuge in the personal. . .evanescent
consciousness.

(Villages, 271)

This consciousness takes us to people who gave themselves up for the sake of love
for mankind but for those who want to be merry and live for their own selves, St. Paul
adds in the Bible that God should not be taken in communication with evil. Evil has
that alluring power which attracts the good towards itself and destroys it. These lines
might be referring towards the slip of Julia, the parson’s wife when she fell in love
with Owen, which she later on ‘construed as rescuing him from a desperately immoral
life’.

(Villages,274)

Being wife to a pious priest, she could not get along with the habit of the
village to keep her affair in a secret continuation. She could not help hesitating in the
faces of Middle Falls respectable ladies and many of them had been Owen’s sexual
partners:

Middle Falls had seen other scandals and break-ups but this was of a novel
order, a clergyman’s wife and a coolly arranged double split. . . Julia led the
way, the first to separate and the first to divorce. Her shock at her own fall had
galvanized her and she never looked behind.

(Villages, 275-276)
Updike had this tendency of turning his characters towards their childhood innocence where more conscience is expected. Updike considers this thing through Owen’s children:

Owen’s second son, Floyd, brought home from school the news that Reverend Larson and his wife, Julia, of all people, were splitting up. . .they had been fighting a lot and the children. . .were very upset. Floyd could not see. . .that it was the news about himself, the first crack of a doom about to descend on his own head. Owen had been drawn into that pit of fatality whose rim. . .marked so many years ago. . .Danny Hoffman pulling the trigger of. . .Colt .38 before dawn. . .

(Villages, 275-276)

Owen has to be taken away in Mifflin Avenue where, during his childhood, a neighbor, Danny Hoffman ‘killed himself with his own father’s Army-issue colt .38. It was now a matter of some advanced years, afternoon, instead of dawn and a family gathered around kitchen table instead of the financially deprived war survivor, Danny’s lonely home. Here, Owen himself was going to be his child’s executioner. Here the colt was the divorce and Owen was going to fire his family out of his own life and the resultant death would be the broken home. Owen’s children would become like his childhood’s friend Buddy Rourke, fatherless. It was Owen who once felt proud of having a father but now he himself was snatching this pride from his children. He managed to be the most stoic person through all divorce procedures. He felt oddly light. He had a sensation that with this drastic element he had begun his delayed adulthood. This translates what he learnt in his profession. Cutting throat for more profit, leaving and destroying old machines for newer ones, was what Owen was applying to his own life.
Updike also goes on explaining the material differences that take place between the divorcing partners. It is not only the matter of mathematical division. It becomes the matter of dividing joint opinions, feelings and wishes. Moreover, memories have to be split. With Phyllis being newly orphaned, Owen did not hurry in the divorce process with its distasteful facilitators. Though Owen had not been brought up in a perfectly religious atmosphere, still he could feel his children praying for his return so that they could live happily like a family. But now Owen could not back up. He wanted to free Phyllis of him as well as himself of her. He was under Julia’s influence who told him that such marriage was a ‘mutual degradation’.

Owen should have known the consequences that the children of a broken family bring upon their parents. Now the wheels of fortune were slightly turning against Owen as his adolescent children ‘invented a mood of protest, an automotive caricature of adult disorder’. (*Villages*, 283) Three of his children contributed to the damage of the cars that he owned. Though none of them did it of their free will, but the circumstances exactly matched those which went with Owen while with any of his women. History was repeating itself and his younger blood was punishing him through hitting and hurting his material self. Somewhere the adolescents were deeply wounded seeing how everything was to be divided between their parents at the time of the divorce, so, they preferred to see things damaged rather than divided.

In this way, one side of Owen subjected to extreme destruction, his professional branch tried to offer him the chance for taking risk and magnifying his business from software alone to both software and hardware. Ed, like the ever struggling, aspiring and constructive American mind tried to drag Owen into this larger and newly cropping out development in the American economy. But in this Owen resembles Omar Ashmaway, the father of Updike’s protagonist, Ahmad in
Ahmad’s father also hesitates in taking risk and plunging in American reckless construction and deconstruction. The professional side of Owen fails to brush up itself in spite of having a guide like Ed.

Therefore in very and many places, Updike has discussed this American rejection for old and outworn things mercilessly ranging from gadgets to the elders in the family. Updike tries his best to relate all these things with each other because more or less they have a connection with modernism. Old technology is discarded as soon as the newer strategies are invented. The case is almost same with the furniture acquired as legacy because it is despised by the younger generations; tossed to one side along with the memories connected with them. After his mother’s death, the last member to die in his parents’ house, Owen had to think about the furniture, earlier used by his parents, with a slight distaste.

In the middle of his own furniture, discussing with Phyllis about the matters of divorce, Owen wants to stay in the rooms of his house which are full off memories of Phyllis and of his children. Phyllis knew about Julia as she always knew about Owen’s other women but this time it was the question of a relationship coming to an end. She admits that her inadequacies, her refusals, inhibitions and detachments were somehow responsible for making their life less interesting and spice-free but at the same time she wanted Owen to understand that his extra-marital affairs did make little difference on her as their own commitment outlasted these crippled relations based only on fleshly desires.

The main storm came when the words slipped from Owen’s mouth that Julia will reform him and save him which meant that a younger wife, is cherished as a wife but the one who is older, is avoided because she seems more like a mother. Shocked and wounded at her husband’s washed brain and his stupid excuses, Phyllis determines
not to give up this marriage for divorce. As a matter of fact, she realizes that a ‘woman ties man’ and for implementing this her withdrawal will make the situation worse. She took her age factor as a humiliation and felt that Owen ‘got trapped’ in Julia’s ‘pious little singsong’. She stopped blaming herself and turned the canon towards Owen. She argued that it was his job also to make their marriage interesting instead of hopping from one woman to another. Inspite of this furious quarrel with Phyllis ‘he was flattered with her wanting to fight for him’. (Villages, 293) She had to accept that Owen was taken in easily by women and ‘never having grown-up’ was one of his charms. (Villages, 290) Phyllis decided to take a firm stand; she decided to give up the case she filed for divorce and rescue Owen from that trap of Julia – the ‘con artist’. She left Owen behind in a way that he felt ‘she had taken his prospects and troubles out of the house with her’. (Villages, 294) Somewhere Owen could doubt that ‘Phyllis’s indignant reaction was not centered on him’. It was a woman’s wounded pride, threatened security and fear for the children that activated her. Here, Updike is trying to awaken the male gender that if a woman is being angry for her children then she sees the threatened orphaned future of the coming generation. Updike questions the female gender why at such moment ‘they want to go with men’. On one hand, a wife is trying to drag him towards herself and on the other, a slipped woman wants to have him as a new husband. A man is being wanted by two women and earlier he had been an object of interest for many women who still display signs of jealousy for him. In this entire game, man is the demanded centre, women are at the periphery. Updike questions about this worthlessness of a woman. But he comes with the solution that each woman is made for a man and men should realize that ‘nature has provided sockets for respective plugs’. Updike asserts that male gender should accept this balance of nature. (Hunt, 1980)
A woman like Phyllis was too rational for Owen to understand. So far having the sense of security of being Owen’s legal wife, she did not compete with any of his lovers; her high tipped nose and extra care for her children was itself a sign of superiority over other women. She never needed to make an extra show of herself but this time the threat was a deadly blow. Julia was going to throw her out of marital bonds. The shock was too rough to bear. On her way to Hartford, Phyllis lost her control over the steering wheel and the numbness of her mind led her to an ultimate end. Her car flipped and Phyllis broke her neck. Her accident could not stop Owen from marrying Julia but it chased him for the rest of his life as a sense of guilt. On his part Owen had killed two people that day, Phyllis and Julia. In addition to being his wife, Julia was like holding the responsibility of a guilty self inside Owen. The ‘acceptance of each of other’s guilt in taking what they had wanted’ turned their life into a perpetual ‘discomfort’. For the rest of his life Owen was left to be crushed by the feeling of remorse. In his dreams he spots Julia going in a speedy car; events flash upon his mind like animated series of a movie – a speedy car going out of control and the woman inside will be killed after the car meets an accident. In his dream Owen cannot make out exactly who the woman is but sensing her high-tipped head in the seat gives him the notion that she is Phyllis. Awakening from his dream, he fears that it could be Julia so he wanders in the house looking for her, usually after every awakening from his dream.

(Suzanne Uphaus, 1980)

The life after 25 years has turned the situation up-side down as Julia spends most of her time with her friends and squanders money lavishly to satisfy herself while Owen, without complaints, confines himself to his house, tinkering with internet and doing oil-painting. As the second wife and also younger, Julia succeeds ‘in keeping her formerly philandering husband on a short leash’. In this span of a
quarter of a century, a lot of new discoveries took place in every field of work and venture. The software and hardware which was new to Owen and his contemporaries, was now common to every household. Every technology was showing its marvels in various fields. Cyber Space, computer-engineering contributing to banks which can ‘summon up currency quotations from all over the world’. (Villages, 303) Major and minor technology spreads its arms beyond American sub-continent and adds to the economy of some of the most backward Eastern countries.  (Adam Begley, 2004)

Owen’s drowning years often took him to church where he sensed that the rich seldom came with true faith or a desire to attain salvation. Most of them turned up either at Christmas or at Easter as if to clear off debts of the divine sustainer. Here Updike pauses to share with his readers the hollowness of the rich and he frankly unfolds it. Even after having sensed this ultimate truth, Owen mixes up with rich societal sections but is unable to inherit their traits. Sometimes he marvels at their discipline, disprovocativeness, tolerance, cool mindedness in social meetings and their ability to over-drink. However he admires that rich are spared of scattered wandering throughout the nation, ill-equipped nuclear families of deserted down-towns and razed forests, of roving job to job and mate to mate. The rich neglect the fact that they can be of great benefit to mankind as with their money they can help construct, repair the ancient cathedrals which are means to carry us peacefully from our cradle to our graves.

In this world of spiritual decay and technological fret and fever, Owen has retreated into his house with his oil paints and canvas. Owen’s children, who once had prayed for their father’s return to the family but in return got indifferent glances from him, at this stage of life, were rolling the same punches to him – ‘they
displayed their stoic sophistication of a generation to whom family dysfunction is very common’. (Villages, 304)

But no matter how much one tries to escape from himself or his past, his place of living weaves him to its centre. Every village is near and exposed to the secrets of its own inhabitants. Even after selecting Haskells Crossing as a remote place for living peacefully with little or no connection with Middle Falls, ‘the relationship between Owen and Julia is loving but haunted’. (Villages, 304) Phyllis pulled herself away from Owen’s life but still he thinks of her everyday. She does not intrude much with his dreams but all by itself he feels generic oneiric wife-figure which is not certain if she is Julia or someone else. Such dreams horrify Owen for some time and they impart to him an unending feeling of guilt which is also a prick of his sub-conscious mind. Sometimes this wife-figure in his dreams establishes her aura over his first house which has always been significant to him under the protective wingsof his parents. While conscious and awakened, Owen sometimes thought of Phyllis’s end more like a suicide as if to move away from Owen and Julia’s life. Inspite of her speedy rush in that car, she did not care to fasten her seat belt. He wondered how it could have been a suicidal death when she had an aim to recover Owen by cancelling the divorce procedure. At times, Owen convinces himself that it was a game of fortune turning its wheels towards him because God set the happenings in his favor. With this blasphemous thought, Owen shelters himself thinking that it happened all by itself.

Amidst all this Owen was being punished, no matter whether he could understand the fact or not. For sex, he had always chased women, offered himself to them, was always available for the things he could satisfy them with and his search for women, study of their sexual behavior never seemed to end. For sex itself, he
married Julia and now he had to meet an inhibition while his sexually fervent wife, younger than him, displayed her intimate needs to him. As Updike also knows ‘that increased options’ or in Owen and Julia’s case, ‘increased’ availability should become Owen’s punishment, therefore, sleep overcomes his protagonist to draw a veil between him and Julia. As far as Owen is concerned, the variety of ‘options had to immobilize his activity of transgression with the anxiety of choice’. Surprisingly, his organs are well-aware and are greatly provoked at her sight but fail to receive her signals. Owen, in this way, has partially been successful in his marital life. Both of them are able to live peacefully but still, in their hearts, they know that something very essential is missing. This makes them restless and at times they go on feeling insecure of each other which is clear from Julia’s agitation when she argues with Owen that she hates it when ‘he is not in the house, even when he is just off for golf’. (Greiner, 1985)

It’s not that Owen, due to his old age, lost his power to provoke his genitals; even glimpses of a woman in his dreams and her wanting him to kiss her leads him to successful erection, which proves that he is still sexually active. Surprisingly, in Julia’s case, he is left to compete with his senile desire to sleep. (Villages, 307)

Owen dreams of a woman, Barbara Emerich, in a school classroom where Owen is asked by his teacher to give Barbara a pencil or a textbook. Barbara instead of receiving things from his extended hand, responds by curling more deeply into herself, so that he had to come closer. She ‘expected him to kiss her but outwardly maintained her stubborn stillness’. (Villages, 307) Somewhere this silent urge of a woman to call Owen to herself but without opening herself to him, reminded Owen of Phyllis at MIT. Owen’s getting an order from an authority to handover a pencil or a textbook to this dream womanly-figure leads us to the point that Owen’s duty was to
gift Phyllis with motivation to study more and complete her PhD instead of feeling cozy with her neglecting it, till it was forsaken forever.

As far as Owen is concerned, the spots in Middle Falls which he visited for sexual purpose marked his town and he remembered Middle Falls by these points, spots and spaces. Haskell Crossing remains unmapped in his mind as such interests do not exist here or if any possibility occurs, Julia tries to overcome them.

Owen remembers his mother whom ‘he had always seen a cosmic questioner’. (Villages, 309) The source of her unhappiness was never known or seen by Owen or to be more precise, he never tried to. He was an object of possession for his mother and his female sexual partners had to struggle to get a share of him. His mother wanted him as a male whom she could rely on after not finding a perfect male partner in her husband. Updike’s dissatisfied mothers, be it Owen’s mother or Ahmad’s mother, Teresa, long for a sense of security by possessing their sons when they fail to possess their husbands. However, with Owen’s second marriage, his mother learned that life is a never ending track; at least it can never end with confining someone to yourself, even if he is your progeny. She also learnt that relationships are a series of withdrawal on one side and acceptance on the other. She had to accept Julia under the same ideology and withdrew from her position as a possessive mother.

Updike unravels before us a surprising fact of death and how it acts as a means of imparting adulthood to us. ‘All Owen’s adults died tidily, out of sight, as if to spare him unpleasantness and preserve his charmed, only child-sense of life.’ Had the adults died in front of Owen the sight of their faces changing color, their wide-opened horrified eyes begging the Omnipotent for mercy, their ultimate struggle for breath and after a last shudder, the body being rendered lifeless, only then Owen could have experienced the sense of responsibility, maturity and a kind of fear from Almighty.
Owen went on committing sins one after another till he became the reason for ‘wreckage of two existing households and a death, though no court could convict him for it’. (Villages, 311-12)

It was not that Owen was not given any training during his childhood regarding the skills he needed in life. When he was young, he and his mother used to go to football field and play tennis. Her aim was to make Owen concentrate on the balls, to hit the target and in this way to learn how to combat the hardships in life. She also wanted him to remain connected to her through a common bond of painful struggle.

Updike has in store not only sinners like Owen but also generous people, like the priest Art Larson, who somehow with God’s grace, maintained his financial as well as social status among his former parishes. ‘Surprisingly his manner towards Owen was no less benign than at their first meeting.’ Updike lays stress on the value of faith and how it binds the believer ‘in fatalism’ and a tendency ‘to forgive’. (Villages 312) Faith never fails to soften our hearts and elevate us above human selfishness. Moreover, whatever good we do to our fellowbeings shall return to our graves as God’s grace. Updike also analyses Christianity as a source of self realization. It teaches us to limit our desires for eternity, to fear our heavenly abode, to try tirelessly for self improvement, to stop thinking of ourselves as superior beings for whom this world is a misfit and if it’s ‘not an Eden’ then certainly the fault is ours. Once a person is at fault, he continues with this slippery track as he is scared of gathering courage to improve his mistake. Such fears make us loath and avoid death and we try harderto live. Updike concludes that discontent, imperfection and insecurity are basic reasons for non-ending human desires. Updike might be pointing out that remarriage is also within the domain of the above mentioned reasons for greedy desires. At times:
Owen’s puzzlements concerned why a pair (Julia and Larson) so well matched had allowed itself to split up. But ideality becomes by itself, in a couple, a reason for dissatisfaction and rebellion. Americans need to experience room for improvement, for progress.

(Villages, 317)

Updike warns his country to beware of such an end as Owen’s. Even after fulfilling his desires to utmost satisfaction, Updike gives us a terrified Owen:

There is an enlarging hollow in his life – its approaching end. . Julia cannot save him, though the sight of her, clothed and unclothed, still lifts his heart. She cannot save him with her silky, willing body, her uncanny aquamarine gaze, or her. . .Christian piety in which he has joined her in defiance of his scientific instincts and his indifferently churched upbringing.

(Villages, 309)

The children, having gone to enjoy their life, Owen and Julia have been left alone in the house as, once, many years ago his parents were left to die in loneliness. Updike always fills up his pages with fearful warnings about old time repeating with different characters:

Owen and Julia live with another presence in the house, their approaching deaths. . before that. . with its idiotic life-in-death. . .both forgetful, she of errands. . .he of names. . .names planted early in the brain seem to last.

(Villages, 318)

Both of them are becoming more dependent day-by-day and as it is said that old age is ‘reverting them to infancy’. But some of the old questions are ‘still imperfectly answered’. Though Owen came to know more about women’s resolution regarding
having sex but when the matter fleets about ‘why’ of this thing then it turns out that such questions are better left unanswered as ‘they deserve no answer’.

(Villages, 318-19)

‘Women are trapped in a biological universe where the species that do not propagate, disappear. Women’s nature is very large to seek sex amid the world’s perils’ which means that they have more courage to take risks. Updike wants to give due importance to women and to the genitals of both the genders as sex is the only activity that ‘exalts’ women as well as our organs which are otherwise rendered as ‘shameless’.

(Villages, 319)

Owen’s poor memory gave him a preview that his charmed life has been a long torment of fear, desire, ambition and guilt. Similarly he ‘fails to conjure Christmas gleam’ in his present ‘excellent white seaside house’ which ‘the shabby homely things in his grandfather’s house had possessed, even in the pale December window light’.

(Villages, 320)

While winding up his novel, Updike recounts all the women in Owen’s life, not missing the way each of them achieved orgasm and the way they perceived sex, ranging from Phyllis on her wedding night, Alissa, Faye to Vanessa and Karen. Ultimately, he tries to convey to his readers that all of these women, belonging to different status, ideologies, circumstances and behavior had common instincts in terms of nature. All of them ‘brought transcendent value to the act, the supreme interaction’. Updike concludes that human nature should be ‘romantic or human beings will fail to lift themselves above the deadpan copulation of sheep and squirrels’.

If the above mentioned view is generalized then the human nature should extend itself to romanticize God’s creation. Updike appeals to his countrymen
to magnify their potential to love human beings irrespective of race, religion and nationality so that they could elevate themselves above the level of fleshy love of animals and the barbaric nature. A celibate villager said that Americans can’t make out where they stand in this world. Half of their lifetime, they are sound asleep, not aware of their own activities. ‘Yet they esteem themselves wise and have an established order on the surface.’ (Villages, 321)

Here in the novel’s hurried and slapdash final page, Owen is compared to America which is a national village shrouded in denial, in the way that Owen’s nurturing, protective villages also nurtured and protected his lies and betrayals. For America, it is all about ‘unshakable egotism’ as being carved out of wilderness, madly possessed by its mixed inhabitants who have caused it to grow ‘helplessly self-centered’ or rather never grow.
Works Cited


