CHAPTER - III

ADULTERY

Talking of the ubiquity of the theme of adultery in European and American literature, Denis De Rougemont observes in his Love in the Western World as follows:

"the community ... drives passionate love in nine cases out of ten to take the form of adultery... Ill-essorted couples, the disappointed, the rebellious, the intense, the shameless, the unfaithful or the deceived (whether in fact or in dreams, in remorse or in terror, in the delight of revolt or the disquiet of temptation) – few men and women will fail to see that they belong to at least one of these categories".¹

This description is applicable in toto to the Updikean men and women, for few of them are free from adulterous entanglements. Thanks to the spadework done by writers like Hawthorne in portraying the ravages wrought by repressive sexual codes, it has become easier for Updike to analyse sexual problems in depth. The virtual abolition of censorship has also contributed in no small measure to Updike's naturalistic depiction of sexual problems. Critics were not wanting even in America to dismiss novels like Couples as sheer pornography. What Harry Levin says in Refractions regarding the place of pornography in literature that pornography is
permissible if it carries “honest conviction”\(^2\) can be used to exonerate Updike from the charge that he is exploiting sex for commercial purposes.

**Causes of the Adultery**

Updike makes the readers pardon the ‘sinner’ by making them understand the innumerable forces that act upon a man and egg him on to ‘sin’. What makes the theses by the Hamilton and B.D. Sharma unsatisfactory is that they focus attention only on the disastrous consequences of adultery and never on Updike’s equally powerful portrayal of the causes of adultery\(^3\).

The causes of adultery as represented by Updike can be divided into two broad categories—sexual and non-sexual. But, unlike Ben Jonson’s ‘humour’ characters each motivated by a particular ‘humour’ to the exclusion of other ‘humour’, the adulterers of Updike are complex human beings, each influenced simultaneously by both sexual and non-sexual causes.

**Sexual Causes**

In the case of Updike, the frigid wife and the impotent husband have their partners seeking satisfaction outside wedlock. There are no prudish literary conventions to check Updike and so we find him closely examining such matters as fellatio cunnilingus, genital incompatibility.

**Frigidity, Impotence and the like causing Adultery**

Judith Armstrong says, in her book *The Novel of Adultery*, that the problems of adultery caused by dissatisfaction with the beautiful but sexually frigid wife is a recurrent syndrome of much of French fiction. It is recurrent in
Updike's fiction also⁴. Piet of Couples is presented as a Dionysiac, Lawrentian figure, endowed with extraordinary virility and sexual susceptibility. But his wife Angela has no appetite for sex, like Lucy of Melville’s Pierre and Hilda of Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun. Piet’s abnormal liking for fellatio and cunnilingus is not shared by his wife and so he turns to Georgina and Foxy who immensely like such practices.

Zimmermann of The Centaur is also tied to a frigid wife—she is identified on the mythological level with Hera, Patroness of holy marriage. He gives expression to his unmitigated lechery by seducing the girls and lady teachers of his school. In Of the Farm, Joan’s sexlessness results in divorce. Joey re-marries Peggy who can cater to all his sexual needs. She talks vulgarly with him when he is inclined that way and offers to tickle him and help him reach orgasm as an alternative to coitus during her menstrual period.

Rabbit of Rabbit, Run finds life with this sexless wife equal to being buried alive (p.174). He runs away from home in search of greater sexual fulfillment. Leslie Fiedler analyzing the sexuality of the women in the American novel calls the sexless, ethereal woman as the White Lady and the sexual woman as the Dark Lady. He goes on to say that the American hero, though leading the white lady to the altar and the legitimate marriage bed, really desires only the ravening sexuality of the Dark Lady.⁵ This is quite true of the Updikean hero. The Updikean hero somehow manages to extricate himself from the white lady and marry the dark lady at long last.
Just as the frigidity of wives drives husbands to seek satisfaction in adulterous connections, the impotence of men leads women to commit adultery. Freddy Thorne of Couples is impotent and his wife Georgina seeks satisfaction in Piet's arms. Vera of The Centaur is Venus figure. Her husband, "hunched, dead-pale and... tired (p.14), can by no means assuage her sexual appetite. Vera therefore, involves herself in endless extra-marital affairs. All her search for a man who will combine in himself, the refinement...of a man with ... the massive potency of a stallion" (p.25) ends up in a fiasco. Having failed to secure sexual satisfaction, she settles down with a lower demand on men:

"this is all she asks of a man, all she requires, that he have the power to make her laugh. In laughter, her girlhood, her virginity is reborn" (p.215).

Unlike Georgina and Vera who stick with their husbands and at the same time carry on illicit affairs, Janice cut herself off completely from her husband. In Rabbit, Run, the husband ran away from the passionless wife. In Rabbit Redux, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme—the wife Janice runs away from the passionless husband. Rabbit's belated efforts to win back his wife by having intercourse with her repeatedly end in failure. Connie, Foxy's aged mother in Couples, represents the modern American ideal of drinking sexual life to the lees. Soon after Foxy's marriage, she divorces her unsatisfactory husband and remarries a very rich man. During
her brief stay with Foxy in Tarbox, she blithely goes about flirting with the young men of the locality.

Maharishi Vatsayayna, author of the *Kamasutra*, divides men and women into certain brand categories, based on their genital features. The man belonging to a particular category would reap maximum pleasure, if married to a woman belonging to the same category. Most adulteries in the Updike world could have been avoided by following Vatsayayna’s “pairing” rules. Janice’s adulteries are due to her genital incompatibility with her husband. Rabbit, with his thin organ, “could not... give her the friction she needed” (p.327). Stavros, on the other hand, went “deeper inside, where the babies happened, where everything happens. Also, Rabbit ejaculates much too soon and leaves Janice unsatisfied, whereas her lover Stavros can prolong coitus in a slow, leisurely manner (p.76).

The other side of the picture of a woman preferring a man with a thick organ is a man preferring a woman with a tight sexual organ. This is one among the several factors drawing Piet to Foxy. He tells his wife in justification of his adultery that Foxy is 'tight' (p.445). Updike’s portrayal of adultery gain immensely in precision and verisimilitude because it is related to such basic matters as the duration of coitus, the size of the genitalia, and the like. Updike turns the searchlight daringly into areas, which a squeamish writer would instinctively avoid. David Lodge’s statement that Updike’s analysis of adultery is in no way an improvement upon Hawthorne in *The
Blithedale Romance is not quite correct, because Updike's overt analysis cover areas which Hawthorne's innuendoes do not.

Pre-marital Sex

Vance Packard says:

that casual premarital sexual encounters, if successful, can reduce tensions ... can produce a sense of accomplishment, of adventure... they can make males feel grown-up... they can improve one's sophistication as a connoisseur of bed partners.

Vance Packard fails to note that when premarital sex is seriously engaged in and does not result in marriage, it may create a vacuum in the minds of the lovers and leave them longing for each other even after marriage. This is a kind of mental adultery; for, though physically attached to the marriage partner, the person is mentally living only with the premarital lover. This is the finding of eminent sociologists like Robert Bell, Eugene Kanin and David Haward.

Updike shows that the first lover of a woman always remains embedded in her mind as a prototype. She keeps searching for a similar figure in all her subsequent love life. Foxy of Couples belongs to this behavioural pattern. Before marrying Ken, Foxy was in love with the Jew Peter from whom she was separated by her parents. Even after marriage she continues to search for similar Jewish figures. In Tarbox, she is drawn to Ben
Saltz because he is a Jew. Her infatuation with Piet is also strong from the fact that he shares some of the sexual tastes of Peter and is thus an echo of her first lover.

Like these women, some men are also shown by Updike to seek extramarital sex in order to attain the perfection of pre-marital sex. Piet of Couples and Rabbit of Rabbit, Run often recollect their first sexual experience with their classmates. These delightful, unencumbered experiences have formed an oasis in their desert like lives. All their successive adulteries are but frantic efforts to re-enact and recapture the past. The men in Bech’s novel The Chosen also keep re-living the past, like Piet and Rabbit. For them, orgasm is “perfect memory” (Bech: A Book, p.58); that is, orgasm is achieved not by the present coitus but by the coalescence of the memory of some past coitus with the present one.

Non-Sexual Causes of Adultery

Adultery may be committed not only for sexual reasons, but also for a variety of non-sexual reasons. A childless wife may seek extra-marital sex to get a child for herself. The mothering instinct, not the sex instinct, is at work in such cases. Even if the woman does not openly talk of her unfulfilled wish to mother, it is there at the subconscious level, impelling her to have, extra-marital sex, to get the child denied within wed-lock. Some of the adulteresses in Updike are led by this subconscious feeling.

Another non-sexual cause of adultery is the romantic wife’s wish to be adored and made much of. The dull husband who fails to praise and flatter is
scorned and the man who can enliven her bored life with warm praise and flattery is preferred by the romantic woman. Updike shows that it is not enough if a man has love for his wife; he has to verbalize it in attractive terms.

Religious and other kinds of temperamental incompatibility may also create dissension between a couple and force them to seek extra-marital partners with whom they can share their tastes. Pity may appear an innocuous feeling but sometimes pity for a person may develop into a sexual relationship. Revenge also occupies an important place in the spectrum of non-sexual causes of adultery. Adultery is sometimes committed as a vengeful measure against a person.

**Childlessness Causing Adultery**

In this metaphysics of the love of the sexes Schopenhauer says that the sexes, always at war with each other, stay together for the purpose of the propagation of the species. When this purpose is not served, marital relationship tends to break up. Women’s urge to ‘mother’ is so great that when her husband fails to give her a child because of his impotence or some other reason, she is prompted by her subconscious urge to turn to extra-marital sex to have a baby. It seems when a woman cannot have child through lawful means, she instinctively adopts unlawful means. In Updike adulterous women are childless. Thus, Updike establishes the connection between adultery and childlessness.

Foxy of *Couples* is dissatisfied with her husband because he kept her barren for seven years, devoting all his time and attention of research work to
the "magnetic Haward goda" (p.52) and not paying any heed to her craving for a child. When her husband does give her a child, it is too late. She has already begun to take an interest in Piet. Bea Cuerin is another childless wife in the novel whose endless adulteries might be caused by the subconscious urge to have a child by lawful or unlawful means. Vera Hummel, the most notorious adulteress of The Centaur, is also childless.

**Taciturn Husbands and Adulterous Wives**

The taciturnity and lack of demonstrativeness of husbands disappoint romantically inclined wives who want to be adored and make much of. After marriage most husbands become cinders, emptied of the fire of passion. They do not realize that the provision of economic comfort by itself cannot satisfy a romantic wife. In Updike, the romantic woman turns away from the husband who has ceased to flatter and pay court to her and come to regard her as a neuter being. She gravitates towards the man who gushes and rhapsodizes and poetizes, even though the silent husband's love might be no less genuine than the frothy lover's.¹⁰

The disastrous consequences of pairing a romantic woman with an unromantic husband are vividly depicted by Updike in *Marry me* and *Couples*. Sally of *Marry Me* loves being adored and made much of by men. Walking along the streets of Washington, she loves being yelled at and gazed at by men. When no man is there to appreciate her beauty, she imagines herself as
being gazed at by a statue:

“she studied Charles V, Sculptured by Leone Leoni,
and existed as a queen in his hyperthyroid
gaze” (p.36)

It is a pity that this highly excitable woman is tied to the earthy, prosaic,
incommunicative Richard. His tongue simply drops manna:

“Can I forget, though I live forever in Heaven among the
chariots whose wheels are all eyes giving God the glory,
how I saw you step from a tab, your body abruptly a
waterfall?” (p.34)

Again,

“You’re great. You’re a great blonde ... when you get up,
it’s like the flay being raised” (p.53)

Sally’s husband is incapable of such imaginative flashes. He always
remains glum and silent at home. The utmost height to which he can rise is to
call her sally-o’-a very low emotional diet for the ravenously hungry Sally.
Sally tearfully tells Jerry that he is the only man to see her “as very special”
(p.44). Janice of Rabbit Redux has a similar story to tell. Rabbit calls Janice a
dumb mutt and makes her feel like one. But her lover Stavros adores her and
makes her feel like Helen of Troy (p.158).
Georgina of *Couples* is another romantic character who badly wants to be adored and admired. She is dissatisfied with her husband not only because he is impotent but also because he does not say anything in praise of her charm nor does he do anything to inflate her ego. Only Piet pays her loving attention:

"With extreme care, as if setting the watery last cogwheels of a watch into place, Piet kissed the glossy point of her left shoulder bone, and then of her right" (p.63)

Like Jerry making Sally feel her special, Piet makes Georgina feel herself a queen, whereas her husband makes her feel like an invalid:

"She and Freddy rarely quarrelled. They want to sleep on one another, and kept going to parties, and felt dreary all next day, like veteran invalids. Only Piet had brought her word of world where vegetation was heraldic and every woman was some man's queen". (p.425).

Updike makes it clear that the husband who remains tongue-tied is bound to lose his romantic wife. The romantic wife in Updike demands, like Shakespeare's Cleopatra; "If it be love indeed, tell me how much".11

**Religious and Other Differences between Marriage Partners**

If there is an unbridgeable gap between the husbands' character and the wife's making mutual adjustment impossible, then adulterous relationships
are formed with people having similar character traits. Updike shows adultery taking a homogenous turn.

In *Marry Me*, the irreligious Ruth is married to the intensely religious Jerry and the irreligious Richard to the intensely religious Sally. This acute religious difference causes reshuffling of couples—the religious man commits adultery with religious woman and the irreligious man, with the irreligious woman.

Thus, in Updike birds of a feather join together.

**Pity and Compassion**

Updike shows pity for the suffered leading to lasting marital and extra-marital unions. Philosopher and theologians refer to this kind of love as agape. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, talks of agape as a powerful force leading to the formation of lasting human relationships.

Updike shows that a woman might undertake to satisfy the sexual needs of an adulterer as a kind of obligation. Jill of *Rabbit Redux* gives herself to the men who ask of her. Jill considers it an act of charity to assuage the sexual appetite of man—it is like giving food to a starving beggar. And Jill says: “I am not interested in holding anything for myself”. (p.186). Though she gives herself to countless men, she gets involved with very few. Her affairs are all highly dispassionate and impersonal. She tells Rabbit that she just lets them do it to her and does not do anything back. Those affairs happen on the
surface, a million miles away". (p.186). Even her love for Skeeter is born of pity for his forlorn state.

In Couples, the Applebys and the little Smiths exchange each other's partner not out of passion (though Passion is there in the beginning) but as a kind of obligation.

"Obligingness had become a part of it; ... a general courtesy replaced individual desire. The women would sleep with the men out of pity, and each would permit the other her man out of an attenuated and hopeless graciousness". (p.190).

In the permissive American society, compassion has resulted in Jill's hippie philosophy of free sex and the Apple Smiths' group sex. Updike shows that a man's pity for a fallen woman might develop into an adulterous connection with her. Rabbit wants to rescue Jill from the blacks' brothel. With this intention he admits her into his house, but he himself develops a sexual relationship with her.

Thus, in Updike sympathy leads not only to marital unions but also to life giving extra-marital relationships.

**Revenge**

Updike shows that adultery is sometimes committed not for sexual gratification but as a retaliatory measure against the person who oppresses the adulterer.
Updike's world abounds in adulterer motivated by revenge. Jill of *Rabbit Redux* defies her rich but unloving parents by becoming a devil-may-care hippie-prostitute. What is sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose. Janice's adultery with Stavros is meant by her as a revenge not only against her husband but against Rabbit's mother also. (Rabbit's mother is constantly egging him to desert Janice).

In *Couples*, Marcia falls in love with Janet's husband Frank and draws him to herself. Janet retaliates by drawing Marcia's husband Harold to herself.

The black Skeeter in *Rabbit Redux* has sex with Jill but there is no love in it. He ill-treats her, humiliates her and finally leaves her to die in the burning house. He visits all his hatred of the white race on this poor white girl. A similar situation occurs in the couples. The white girl Candy of this novel suspects that the black Filellou is having sex with her only to revenge himself on the white world. (p.163). Since these affairs in Updike are motivated more by a need to wreak vengeance than by love, they do not bring a lasting fulfillment to the adulterers.

**Obstacles to Adultery**

Even when a man and a woman are 'game' for adultery, they often find themselves baffled by obstacles, some of which prove to be insurmountable. Because of obstacles, adultery is not committed, or if committed, the pleasure got out of it is much less than what it ought to be. Updike has made a minute study of the several barriers against adultery. Though the hold of religion is weakening, adulterers in Updike are checked by such bogies inspired by
human superstition as the fear of being punished by God. The feeling of guilt caused by cheating one’s partner is another powerful deterrent factor. Accusations levelled by children also bring to a speedy end the affairs of parents. Fear of losing one’s public image also paralyses the adulterer.

**Fear of God**

As Bertrand Russell says, man-made sexual values having become intertwined with religion, violation of sexual values grips man with the fear that he is violating God’s dictates\(^{13}\). In Updike adulterers are haunted by the fear of being punished by God. As Bernard Eugene Melinda says in *The Secularization of Modern Cultures*,\(^{14}\) religion appears to have a strong hold on people in general and on adulterers in particular. In spite of the secularization of modern cultures, religion has been scotched, not killed.

Jerry of *Marry Me* 'sinning' with Sally, feels himself hopelessly placed. Sally, more worldly-wise than Jerry, says that divine sanction of their adultery is not necessary and that they can “give each other the blessing” (p.50). But Jerry categorically asserts: “For some reason it must come from above”. Obsessed with his sinfulness, Jerry cannot give himself whole-heartedly to Sally.

In *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit’s enjoyment with the prostitute Ruth is dampened by obsessive thoughts of sinfulness. When he sees the Church from Ruth’s house, he feels guilty and silently prays to Christ to forgive him and all concerned (p.74). When his newly born child is accidentally drowned and dies, Rabbit thinks that this is a punishment inflicted on him by God for
this sinfulness. At the funeral of the baby, Rabbit becomes enlightened
enough to cast his guilt on God and acquire a feeling of ease. Listening to the
priest Eccles’s recitation of Christ’s promise of resurrection and everlasting
life, they quested for immortality in Rabbit; this is how John C. Stubbs
characterizes Rabbit of the graveyard scene\textsuperscript{15} satisfied. He comes to believe
that his child has “ascended to Heaven” (p.237). But his wife is, as Edward P.
Vargo says, still earth-bound, unwilling to cast her guilt of Christ.\textsuperscript{16} And so
Rabbit runs away from her.

Piet of \textit{Couples} is a very complex figure. His sense of sin gives him
“amazing virility” (p.14). At the same time he is also frightened at the prospect
of being punished by God for his affairs.\textsuperscript{17} At a certain stage he decides to
stop his affair with Foxy for fear of being exposed to God’s wrath:

“They (Piet and Foxy) had been let into God’s playroom,
and been happy together on the floor all afternoon, but
the time had come to return the toys to their boxes and
put the Chaira back against the wall” (p.358).

When Foxy and Piet divorced by their partners, Piet looks at it as God’s
punishment:

“God ... nails His joists of Judgement down firm, and
moots the universe with order” (p.441).
Again,

“there was, behind the screen of couples and houses and days, a Calvinist God who lifts us up and casts consultation with our wills. Angela had become the messenger of this God”. (p.459).

Instead of rationalizing the Angela—Ken behaviour, the frightened Piet looks upon them as God's instruments to punish him. Rabbit of *Rabbit Redux* is also preyed upon by such irrational thinking. He attributes the burning of his house to God's wrath (p.324) at his adultery with Peggy and not to the prejudice of his neighbours who have set fire to the house to drive out Skeeter. Every unfavourable incident is construed by the Updikean adulterers as a visible sign of God’s disapproval. So great is their fear of God.

When average adulterers are agonized so much by fear of God, the intensity of the agony is bound to increase when the adulterers are clergymen whose duty it is to maintain absolute sexual purity in their personal lives. The priest Thomas Marshfield of *A Month of Sundays* becomes impotent with the highly religious Mrs. Herdow. He feels guilty of violating God’s dictates and this guilt makes him impotent. Thus, in Updike the clergy suffer much more than lay men and women. Religion has rendered them incapable of adultery.

Fatalism is conspicuous by its absence in the world of Updike. Updikean adulterers also accept pain and frustration but not because of faith in all-powerful fate. At the end of *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit and Janice give up
their adulteries and sleep not because they think it vain to strive against an overriding fate but because they are too exhausted to fight any more. The American, without being shackled by fatalism, is bent on squeezing out of life as much sexual pleasures as possible.

**Fear of Being Caught by One's Wife/Husband**

To judge from Updike's fiction, the fear of being caught out by one's spouse appears very powerful even in the permissive American Society. The couples in *Couples* are crippled by the fear of being found out by their spouses. After finishing intercourse with Freddy's wife Georgina, Piet is so much frightened that he views even clouds and birds as spies appointed by Freddy to spy on intruders (pp.64-65). The funniest scene in the novel is that in which Piet jumps from the Thorne bathroom where he spent some time sucking Foxy's milky breasts, in order to escape being caught by his wife. Foxy, impregnated by Piet, has to abort in secret to conceal this affair from her husband.

Sally of *Marry Me* panicks when her husband's friend Wigglesworth finds her with Jerry in Washington. She has to flirt with him also in an attempt to prevent him from exposing her to her husband, just as Foxy has to offer to sleep with Freddy to secure his help to abort herself. All the adulterers in Updike tell shameless lies to their spouses to conceal their affairs.

Jerry of *Marry Me* is torn between his wife and his mistress; he is tortured. Sleeping with his mistress, he keeps murmuring his wife's name. The ambiguity of the last chapter in *Marry Me*, juxtaposing a picture of Jerry living
with Sally with another picture of him living with Ruth, is deliberate. The ambiguity is indicative of Jerry's oscillation between Sally and Ruth. He has been deserted by both of them. Like Jerry, Rabbit also cannot be at peace with his mistresses. When Lucy Eccles invites him, he returns down the invitation. Having rejoined his wife recently, he does not want to betray her once again.

In *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit's wife has run away from him to have extra-marital sex and so Rabbit is quite justified in seeking the same means of pleasure. Still, Rabbit cannot let himself go. He is not quite happy about committing adultery with Peggy and Jill. When closeted with Peggy or talking with Jill, he guiltily thinks of his wife. (pp.193, 194).

In spite of the permissive environment, barring a few exceptionally strong-willed women, the wives in the Updike world cannot bring themselves to remain content with an adulterous relationship for long. The woman in Updike has coitus with her lover but fails to derive any pleasure from it, because she is riven and wrenched by the guilty feeling of proving false to her unsuspecting husband. Ruth and Sally of *Marry Me* are such unfortunates whose attachment to their husbands wrecks their adulterous relationships. Ruth has extra—marital sex with Richard a few times but suddenly stops it because she cannot go on cheating her husband. When Richard compels her to have sex with him as usual, she weeps bitterly and extricates herself from his clutches.
Sally's plight is even more pathetic. She decides to divorce her husband and settle down with her lover Jerry. But, she cannot bring herself to divorce her husband cold-bloodedly. Sally feels that she should be roasted in hell for her sin (pp.197, 233); she kneels before her husband and asks him to whip her for her sins. She changes her mind and sticks with her husband.

Like Rabbit proving impotent with Jill because of his guilty feeling, Foxy of Couples cannot reach orgasm with Piet, as she feels guilty of cheating her husband.

Even when a husband is cruel and there is ample justification for a wife to commit adultery, she is still gnawed by the feeling of proving false to her husband. She can indulge in adultery only half-heartedly. Beatrice Cook of Bech: A Book has been divorced by her husband. Yet, she is unable to enjoy her sex with Bech. She still keeps thinking of her husband.

**Fear of being Caught by One's Children**

Not all children are as understanding as Henry James's Maisie who is quite sympathetic towards her parents' insatiable search for love. The adulterers in Updike find children an obstacle—sometimes an insurmountable obstacle—to their illicit affairs. Peggy's son in Rabbit Redux is a thorn in her flesh. He vehemently opposes Peggy's affair with Rabbit. Peggy lives in constant dread of being caught red-handed by her son. Just as Peggy is blocked by her son, so Rabbit is blocked by his son Nelson. The fear that his impressionable son may be corrupted, watching his and Skeeter's sex. Jill
makes him inhibited towards her. To have their group sex, the couples have
to wait till their children go to sleep.

Joey of Of The Farm cannot have sex with his second wife happily. He
is sorely agitated, thinking of his children who are living a stunted life with his
first wife. It seems even an urban child can obstruct one’s adultery. Ruth of
Marry Me agrees to separate from her husband and allow him to live with his
lovers. But he cannot bring himself to do so, because Ruth is pregnant.

Thus children are shown affecting adulterous parents in several
different ways. Some parents stop their affairs because of the unrelenting
criticism of their children. Some stop for fear that their bad example might
corrupt their children. Some others have to put an end to their adultery,
because they cannot leave their children helpless to pursue adultery.

Fear of Public Scandal

D.H. Lawrence, analyzing why Anna of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina cannot
give herself whole-heartedly to her lover Vronsky, says:

"Why, when you look at it, all the tragedy comes from
Vronsky's and Anna’s fear of society ... They couldn’t
live in the pride of their sincere passion, cowardice, was
the real sin".¹⁸

Like these Russian adulterers, the adulterers in Updike are also
unnerved by the prospect of public scandal. Fear of the public often boils
down to fear of one’s neighbours, of the people in one’s street.
Despite the vaunted permissive atmosphere in America, people in Updike are also afraid of public calumny. Piet says that he will allow his wife to sleep with any man but then adds a formidable condition—she should not create a public scandal and should maintain absolute secrecy! Much of Janet's inhibition seems to be due to the fear of being observed by her friends. So, when all her friends leave Tarbox to witness a hockey match at Boston and there is nobody to watch her, she is freed of the incubus of public exposure and renews her adultery with Harold.

In *Couples*, fear forces Janet to maintain an appearance of chastity. Updike shows that fear promotes only falsity and hypocrisy. In Updike's *Rabbit Redux* the dwellers in a street directly interfere with the adultery of people. But public factor takes destructive turn in Updike's work partly because in *Rabbit Redux* intolerance of adultery is combined with racial prejudice against blacks. To put an end to the Jill-Rabbit-Skeeter commune, the public burns Rabbit's house with Jill inside it.

The public also appears in the shape of people one works with. The desire to be held in high esteem by one's colleagues is a check on one's adulterous affairs. Mrs. Herzog of *The Centaur* commits adultery with principal Zimmerman but she is sorely disturbed because she has been watched by her colleague George Caldwell. She lives in constant dread of being exposed by him. Vera Hummel is chronically worried because her affairs have gained her an unsavoury reputation among the students and fellow-teachers— they have youged her name into lavatory walls.
One's boss is also shown affecting one's sex life adversely. George Caldwell turns down Vera's sexual overture for fear of being caught out by his principal Zimmerman. Piet has to take tremendous precautionary measures to keep his affairs secret from his boss Gallagher. In *A Month of Sundays*, Thomas Marshfield, confined in a sanitarium, falls in love with Ms. Prynne, manageress of the sanitarium. Thomas, being an interior, can communicate his desire only through vague innuendoes and enigmatic insinuations. Ms. Prynne also takes nearly a month to break down her inhibitions (caused no doubt by her superior status) and reach out to Thomas. Ms. Prynne does not act at last. Better late than never!

Sometimes, a man belonging to a high station in society has to repress his adulterous longing to maintain the dignity and decorum expected of him as an outstanding figure in society. Bech of *Bech: A Book* visits a number of communist countries in the capacity of a sort of cultural ambassador. He gets ample chances of 'laying' with a number of women in those countries but he scrupulously restrains, probably because he thinks that affairs will spoil the image that a cultural ambassador is expected to project. He flirts freely when he goes to England because, not being an ambassador this time, he has no onerous responsibility to maintain an image.

Thus the public is represented in Updike as a powerful octopus which grips and crushes men and women through its innumerable tentacles.
As a result of obstacles to adultery, adulterers in Updike resort to such
devices as sexual fantasy, sexual dream and talk and fetishism, as substitutes
for sexual consummation.

Day-dreaming is part of the normal mental life of every individual. But,
as Dr. Louis Berg says, when “reality is substituted for the unreality of the
artistic world, when the individual can no longer tell where one begins and the
other ends, then we are in a fantasy universe”. 19

In America there are chances for sexual expression and hence there is
lesser need to fantasy there. Though fantasy is less in Updike, there is a
diluted kind of fantasy in almost all of his works. Rabbit of Rabbit Redux
identifies himself with Stavros and derives vicarious pleasure from imagining
Stavros’s coitus with Mim (p.325). Mim being Rabbit’s sister, Rabbit can only
fantasy having intercourse with her.

Rabbit of Rabbit Redux indulges in fantasies. Rabbit’s fantasies are
sex-soaked. Whatever he cannot bring himself to do is freely thought out by
him in lavish detail. Watching Peggy’s back turned to him, he indulges in a
salacious fantasy about “the dog position” (p.98). His imagination simply runs
riot, thinking of “a billion cunts in the world, snowflakes”. (p.98) Again, setting
Peggy standing close to him, he imagines all kinds of pubic hair. Thus, the
inhibited Rabbit revels in imagining sexy scenes, instead of directly asking
Peggy for sex.
Like Rabbit, Jane of *A Month of Sundays* also lives in imaginary world. Married to a priest who is interested more in other women than her, she considers it would be “fun to go to bed with everybody and see what it's like”. (p.61). But, being inhibited like Rabbit, she contents herself imagining having intercourse with several men (p.84). Janice of *Rabbit Run* has lost hope of recovering her husband. So she lives in a fantasy world conjured up by the T.V.

The adulterers in Updike resort to filthy talk to get the pleasure denied them in real life. In *Couples*, the impotent Freddy achieves sexual release not by having coitus with Angela who is given to him by her husband to sleep with, but by filthy talk with her. In *The Centaur*, the teenagers of Olinger school, having no sexual outlet, release their sexual impulse by smutty talk and by looking at pornographic cards. Confined in a sanitarium and deprived of sexual outlet, Thomas Marshfield of *A Month of Sundays* gives vent to his sexual passion by writing out quite conventional sermons and also through vulgar “slips of the tongue”.

Filthy dream is another substitute for sexual consummation. Conner of *The Poorhouse Fair* dreams of playing with a variety of girls on the sea-shore— all the pent-up passion of this authoritarian escapes through the safety-valve of dream. A rigid disciplinarian in waking life, her repressed passion spurs up to the surface in her dream.

When there are insurmountable barriers to adultery, people resort to exhibitionism as the next best thing. Janet of *Couples* temptingly juts forward
her breasts in the parties she attends. Mim of *Rabbit Redux* displays her
crotch to Rabbit.

Freud said that inhibited people renounce the normal sexual aim, that
is, coitus, and content themselves with some trivial object associated with the
beloved. He called this fetishism and cited Faust’s asking for his beloved’s
handkerchief and garter as an instance of fetishism. Instead of striving for
sexual consummation, Faust was contented with an object connected with the
beloved. Most of the adulterers in Updike are such fetish worshippers. In
*Rabbit Redux*, Nelson treasurers Jill’s gift to him, a guitar. *Bech of Bech: A
Book* leaves books with Ekaterina in Russia and with Vera Clavanakova in
Bulgaria. The two ladies are content, treasuring these gifts.

To sum up, Updike shows that when people cannot get any fulfillment
whatsoever from marriage, they turn to adultery. But the adulterer cannot
boast in the Caesarian vein: ‘I went, I saw, I conquered’. His path being
strewn thick with insurmountable obstacles, he tries to derive from dreams
and fantasies a shadowy kind of pleasure. Updike shows much life-nourishing
energy going down the drain.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


16. Edward P. Vargo, Rainstorm and Fire, p.76.

17. These two are contradictory impulses and Pieta must be a perverse moralist, as David J. Sordon says , to “welcome sin in order to feel pleasure and welcome doom in order to feel atoned for sinning” [David J . Sordon, “Some Recent Novelists: Styles of Matyrdom.” Yale Review, 58 (Autumn, 1968,) p.118.
