

John Updike's Indian Connection

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I. INTRODUCTION

S is the title of John Updike's unusual novel. This novel was the third in the Scarlet Letter Trilogy. The title itself arouses curiosity. Why only S? What does it stand for? One gets the answers only after reading the novel. The novel is in the form of letters sent by a woman to her husband, daughter, mother and a friend. She signs the letters by different names. To her husband she is simply S. To others she is either Sarah Worth or Kundalini or simply K. She is the protagonist of this novel. What is she? She is a woman who has deserted her house in search of spiritual peace. She is living in a spiritual commune with her guru. The story of her past and present is gradually unfolded through these letters. The reader comes to know about her personality, her married life, her frustrations and her life at the religious commune through these letters. Her final findings are revealing but not rewarding. Is she enlightened or is she disillusioned at the end of her quest? At least we get her impressions. We learn that her name is Sarah which stands apart. She calls herself S because she wants to free herself from her name. She is unhappy in her marriage and so lives away from her family and she wants to forget her past and everything associated with her married life. She lives wholly in the present and refuses to think about future. S is symbolic of her intense desire to get away from her former personality.

Updike has made it clear in author's note that some details of the novel were based on the reports on 'Rajneeshpuram' in Oregon Magazine. He has interwoven facts with fiction. Swami Arhat or the guru of S. is similar to Rajneesh in many aspects. It becomes very clear after reading the novel that the author has made a careful study of some books on Yoga and oriental mythology.

But that happens to be the background. The fiction is the author's imagination. It is his attempt to study the deep layers of feminine psyche. Updike's women characters have come a long way. Their journey began with his first book *The Same Door*. In the beginning their voice could be faintly heard. In *Rabbit Redux* and *Museums and Women* they made their appearance felt. In *A Month of Sundays* and *Marry Me* they became aggressive. Updike turned them into witches in *The Witches of Eastwick*. And their journey still progressed in *S*.

The reader finds that Updike's women characters have reached a new height in *S*. She is searching her own identity. She is trying to develop her personality. She is groping her way out. She seems determined. She is not uncertain or totally submissive. She is not only an object of pleasure but she is out to enjoy the pleasure. She has given up the petty fears of morality, the social status and the family attachments. *S*. is representative of this woman against the background of religious commune and oriental philosophy. Updike has taken full notice of the women's movements and the feminist critics.

The novel begins with a letter to Charles, Sarah's husband. She has not informed him about anything but has simply left the house with some money and a hired car. She has left house after twenty two years of married life together. For these twenty two years she writes.

"Through my thirties I was shamelessly happy about being me, being part of us. I loved our renovations. I grisly enjoyed doing battles with the aphids on the roses and the chinch bugs under the sods and the garden boys with their headphones and their lazy stoned smiles. I even loved those famously dreaded suburban cocktail parties, going in the car with you and in the door on your arm and then us separating and coming together at the end. I loved you, my eternal date, the silent absent centre of my storm of homemaking, the self important sagely doctor off in his high rise palace." (S page30)

Her husband, a busy doctor wanted her to be an ideal housewife. He wanted her to host the parties, look after the household duties. *S* thinks that she was a nonentity in her husband's house. So she decides to desert him and the family. She was 'too stoical, too puritan too much a creature of her society for solitary rebellion'. So she tells her husband that she will change everything including her name. She wants to sever all previous bonds and wants to dissociate herself.

But can she dissociate? Are the family bonds so easy to sever? No. Right in the first letter the reader comes to know that she is very fond of the things she wants to forget. She loves her husband in spite of his neglecting her. She had been caring for him for such a long time that detachment is difficult.

She has left all her relatives in search of an identity. She is after the spiritual truths. But she finds it very difficult. In her letter to her daughter she is very tender. Something moves her to her very foundations. She gives reasons for her strange behavior. She tries to give reasons for her strange behavior. She tries to give her motherly advice. She has fears in her mind that her child may misunderstand her. Updike has made a very careful study of the woman's mind.

"We of the frailer sex have to have some wild hope, something to go on. Otherwise a million years of slavery has conditioned us to huddle by the hearth, stony as it is, and pound some more millet, and get pounded in turn by way of thanks, and commune with the moon. I speak as one of my generation, that come of age just as fifties ended I was nineteen when Lee Harvey Oswald shot them dead and then by twenty I was married to your father and working too hard to support him really to notice that a revolution is going on." * (page 12)

She suggests here that she missed a revolution when she was busy in household chores. She wants her daughter to understand her despair and frustration. She wants her to know

Her hopeless situation as a devoted wife without any identify of her own. She thinks that her past was a sheer waste.

She adopts different tones while writing to different people. To her husband she is very blunt. With her daughter she becomes soft. Her mother's heart melts out when she addresses her. And when she writes to her friend Midge she is very open. She pours out the deepest feelings of her heart. She also sends tapes with her letters to this friend of hers because she knows that there are less chances of misunderstanding with her friend, who knows her well.

The reader comes to know about her religious adventures, her guru and the other community members. The commune she lives in believes in free sex. They have no reservations about that. The commune has no objection to drugs also. For S this is very much ordered life or routing life. She had been bound to the moral code but now she finds no chains at all. For her it is like a bird who has suddenly found freedom after spending years in cage. She was not aware that such freedom existed anywhere. In a worldly sense her life was so far perfect but now her very concepts change. In the company of Swami Arhat and his band she has a realization. She looks at the world in a new light. Midge is her close friend so she reveals everything to her without any reservations. In her tapes and letters she gives the account of her encounter with a rapist, who is in the ashram in the guise of a sanyasi (a monk). She has sexual relations with one other ashramite. What makes her letter typical is that she requests her friend to keep her sexual adventures secret from her husband. It is because she has respect for her husband and she loves him. She has deserted him but she cannot totally dissociate herself from him or her family.

She gives detailed description of Sami Arhat and her conversation with him. He gives her the name of Kundalini or the latent power. (According to Pantanjali the ancient Yoga guru, the Prime Energy resides at the base of the spinal cord in a serpentine form. It has to be awakened with the Yoga practices under the supervision of a guru.) His obsession with worldly things and women is apparent from the very beginning. She does not think that it is wrong. She accepts it in a normal way. She describes it in her own way.

“You say 'Saham' you are she.”
“Saham. I am she.”

“Great Kundalini, stand so I may meditate upon your body, each glistening particle, each cell of skin, each hair and gland. Think with me of your body cell by cell, as something greater than galaxies, greater than the entire jewel tree. You are like Bodhisattva standing in the land of Bliss, in Sukhavati. You are infinitely tall, infinitely splendid.

“You are immensely radiant, Amitabha. You are Amitayas, forever enduring.”

“Mm. That feels nice. Ticky but nice.” * (page 160)

And what follows is fit to be in any porno book. It is not meant to. The description is fitting to the part of the story. Updike goes on giving such things because his themes are related to them. Why does S give description? She and through her Updike wants to point out the difference between her past and present.

The difference between her husband's lovemaking and Arhat's is that Arhat's Lovemaking makes him an equal partner.

His is a religious affair. His constant talking and quoting Sanskrit texts gives her a sense of satisfaction calling her his eternal shakti gives her a feeling of elevation. Her husband loved her as his wife but Arhat loved her as 'Vishesh Rati' or as an extraordinary Female. She expresses on her experience in these words.

“But, my God, the gentleness of the force that comes off him, it's like an oil bath, it's like the shot of whisky we used to take working its way into our blood, all churned up, these first few minutes. And once he slipped out of what can I call it? - his master hood his cosmic distance, and perched forward on that big silver threaded armchair he uses as a sort of throne to grab my ass, I had this incredible wave of pity, of wanting to open myself the way I used to do to little Pearl, to become this brainless fountain of life. I mean, the vibes I got was not so much that he needed to fuck me as feed on me, the way he says we all feed on him. With Vikshipta there really was this sensation of his wanting to sock it to the whole world and I was there under him as a kind of delegate, and the joy of it all for me was my ability to “take it” to absorb the fury and make it into something positive-but with the Arhat' idea of being a jivanmukta was that you needed nothing.” * (page 17/18)

She describes her encounters with Vikshipta, one ashramite and Arhat in this paragraph. She goes on living there. She becomes adept in the ashram terminology. Sukha, Dukha, Prakriti, eternal Purusha etc. are freely used by her. In the meanwhile her husband, daughter and friend all try to persuade her into coming back. The lawyers keep pestering her because she has come away with some money. In her answers she tries to convince all that whatever she did was right. Her pragmatic mind does not forget anything. From her mother's letters she comes to know that she (her mother) is flirting with some old retired admiral. She tries to tell her mother that the admiral might be after her money and she should keep him at an arm's length.

Her daughter is away in England and she is infatuated with some Dutch boy. At this time her husband is trying to convince his daughter that S. has run away. In her letters to Pearl S. rhetorically tells her daughter that it was she who cared for her. Her father and the entire male society have always tried to dominate the female society.

Then comes the time when S. comes to know that Swami Arhat is an American. He is not an Indian but had lived for some time in India and had studied Indian holy books to give the impression that he is a Hindu. (Updike has confused Hindu and Buddhist texts.) This is some revelation, a sort of eye opener. She does not have the feeling of cheating. She is not shocked but a bit disturbed. Whatever might be his origins, she feels that she has received something wonderful from him. He opened new horizons for her. He gave her a new image and changed her personality thoroughly. His manners, quotations and his calling her Shakti have given her new meaning to understand life. She is a remarkable character.

Her uniqueness is her boldness and her presence of mind. Updike has created a number of women characters but S. stands out. The witches in The Witches of Eastwick are also bold but there is wickedness in them. S is bold in her adventures but she is not wicked. Updike has carefully conceived her. She is kind and loving. She has no malice towards anybody. As soon as she arrives in the commune she confronts Durga, the old companion

of the Swami, who finds the new arrival a threat to her authority. And her fears are not groundless as S soon becomes the favourite disciple of the Swami. But at the later stage of the novel Durga and S become friends. She has love for her husband who treats her as a domestic servant. She even writes kind letters to a convict, who is serving a sentence in a jail. She has concern for her mother. Her letters show that. Similarly she is aware of her duties as a mother. Her letters to her husband Charles are outwardly dry but if we read between the lines we find that she is very much attached to him and the memories of her days with him are evergreen in her mind. When she learns that he is marrying her friend Midge, her reactions are typical and they show how much pains Updike has taken to build her character.

She writes,

“Charles, I can’t express how serene and benign I feel about you and me. Parting is an illusion. Loss is an illusion, just as is gain. We shed our skins but something naked and white and ‘amara’ slithers out and is always the same things can’t be undone, it would seem. There is a gain in it ‘prakriti’, an arrow of time. We get tired. Do remember and remind the despicable Gilman that whether or not this divorce goes through is to me matter of utter indifference. Having known the Arhat’s divine love I am not in the market (unlike needy old you) for any further attachments. I need to be still and feel now I have acquired the means to be still.” *51(page 228/229)

Alinga is one ashramite with whom S has special relationship. In some ways she resembles her daughter so she has maternal feelings towards her but in some letters it seems that S. has homosexual relations with this girl. It is a delicate relation. Her maternal feelings and her yearning for a good companion are combined together. It shows that S is hungry for love and it is natural because she has spent many years without any real affectionate friend. As she herself tells, her mother was a dominating type and her father a kind but wife-fearing man. She had to give up education to get married. That was at the age of twenty. Her husband Charles is a doctor who being always busy has no time for romantic interlude. She suspected that he has affairs with the nurses. Her only daughter is away from her. Pearl is in England. This has made her life colourless and dull. For twenty two years she has been suffering and tolerating the humdrum of life. Then she hears about Arhat and his commune. There she learns the real body language. In her contact with the

different ashramites she gains something. She learns new meaning of love or ‘Luff’ as the Swami pronounces it. She complains about none even at the time when she learns that the Swami is not a Hindu at all. Alinga’s relations with her open new dimensions for her. She is having new experiences. Alinga’s relations with her open new dimensions for her. She is Alinga’s ‘dark prince’ and for her Alinga is like her daughter.

“She – Alinga, of course-is I believe thirty-one and has been around the world several times since leaving Car Rapids and arriving here, and I know you and she could share as much through her, my dear elf child I often feel drawn towards you. She can be very irreverent, even about the Arhat, and you would enjoy that with your wicked sense of humour...” *(page 77)

S is a pathetic story of a woman. Like all Updike’s women characters, she happens to be a middle class American woman. She has that suburban mentality in her. Her feelings and reactions are not extra ordinary. They are like any other woman but what makes her different is her Indian connection. Outwardly this may sound absurd but it is not. It is a serious attempt. For example this Arhat’s tape is enough.

“Sivasem eva mayanam, strimayaiva vishishyate.” This is from an ancient Mahayana text and says, “Of all forms of illusions woman is the most important.” For Buddha and his followers, a woman is the portal of release. She is that within the world which takes us out of the world. She is that being through who is made manifest the Karuna, the compassion, of nirvana of non-being. She is the living wonder of the world.’*(page 91)

What follows is a description of a woman and her body and an attempt to give spiritual meaning to all those things. S is trying to learn this shakta terminology in which a woman is worshipped like a goddess. The sex and body language is part of the ritual S becomes an active participant in it. There is more to it. Compared to Alinga, she is an old lady. She is mature. She is in her forties. Yet she feels that the ashram and the ashramites have given new dimensions to her personality. There is Christianity in here and there is Hinduness in her. She is strangely Indian in some ways. And Arhat finds these elements in her and that makes the novel different.

AUTHORS

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