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The “Lyre” without “Strings”: Dismemberment of Man-Woman Relationship in John Updike’s *Couples* and *The Witches of Eastwick*

Shabir Hussain Mirza*

Abstract: A cumulative look upon the fictional spectrum of Updike’s works right from *Rabbit Run* to *S* furnishes to the reader a study in total irony in which language, the mind, and the physical self meet to produce the Orphic voice of nothingness. Updike’s fictional personages, the men and women who inhabit the novelistic cosmos of his works make a mockery of man-woman relationship by tearing apart the institutions of marriage and family. Conjugal harmony in Updike’s novels symbolizes the vanishing Orpheus who leaves behind a “stringless lyre” which we, the moderns and the postmoderns inherit as a “prized possession”. In *Couples* (1968) the man-woman relationship becomes nauseating as the reader is made to witness a group of married men and women virtually swapping themselves as husbands and wives. The central protagonists of the novel namely Piet Hanema, Foxy Witman, Angela, and Freddy Thorne make a mockery of the institution of marriage and domesticity by indulging in adultery with gusto, thereby turning irony into grotesquerie. In *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) the reader is made to witness a quadruple combination of ‘four humans’, three women and one man. The combination of these depraved humans forms the very epicenter of the demonic air of Eastwick which breeds ‘witches’ in the form of Alexandra, Sokie, and Jane. The powerful and irresistible longing and desires of these women create the thunderstorms of fission and fracture which not only shatter the institutions of marriage and family life but also create the Satanic spectacle of sensuous celebrations in the form of pure evil. Darryl Van Horne becomes a Secular Satan let loose in society to create havoc by conducting dangerous games of sex and

erotica. The paper will attempt to analyze thematically, symbolically, and narratively all the aforesaid dismemberment of gendered equations between these fictional men and women of John Updike in the *Couples* and *The Witches of Eastwick*. In both these novels, gendered men and women of Updike speak in different tones of absurdity and meaninglessness, try to sound sacramental but eventually end up by being demonic.

Keywords: Man-Woman Relationship, Dismemberment, Demonic Human World

Ihab Hassan who can well be regarded as the "Plato" of American literary criticism especially postmodern American novel says in his iconic work *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1982): surely Orpheus is no monster of hubris. All the cults we associate with his name blend word and flesh into the dance of existence. He also observes that, "vanishing Orpheus leaves behind a lyre without strings; the moderns inherit it ..." (Hassan, 6). It is this very "stringless lyre" which rings loudly the music of marital dismemberment and demoniacally destabilized gendered relationships in John Updike's two iconic novels the *Couples* (1968) and *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). Fractured conjugal harmony in Updike's novels presents to the reader a nauseating spectacle of man-woman relationship, as Updike portrays a conglomerate of married men and women who swap themselves as husbands and wives. *Couples* (1968) is John Updike's fifth novel is set against the backdrop of the famous Kennedy era in the United States. The institution of marriage and traditional family life and domesticity gets dismembered, and the reader is treated to the spectroscopic spectacle of infidelity, adultery and sexual animalism in a virtually no-holds-barred manner. *Couples* as a novel focuses its narrative upon a 'bedroom community' of Tarbox, Massachusetts, with about ten white middle-aged, middle-class couples. The novel does not present any single central protagonist, as such, with the story focussing upon Piet Hanema a thirty-five-year-old building contractor and Foxy Whitman, the wife of a biologist, Ken Whitman. These women reflect the utter debasement of the 20th-century American society of the 1960s, especially the proclivity of these men and women towards 'extramarital' sex thereby making a mockery of the sanctity of marriage and the purity of family life and domesticity.

For these depraved couples, sex games become the only means of recreation. *Couples* as a novel presents a shocking modern story about

life in sociologically and culturally diseased modern times. Updike's humans, men as well as women in *Couples*, form a community which deprives itself of any meaningful vocation or purpose in life. Meaninglessness, purposelessness and stark absurdity become the hallmarks of these married couples, which, out of sheer desperation, propels them to experiment with their married lives by making the biological necessity sex as a cohesive entity which bonds them into a kind of microcosmic community which, itself, mirrors the diseased ethos of a mass society, a society which continually looks for a *pharmakos* to strengthen itself.

The novel's narrative opens with the mention of the Hanemas, Piet and Angela. Piet is a building contractor and Angela a vivacious woman of thirty-four. The couple discusses another character Freddy Thorne, a dentist by profession who is defined as a novel's "king of chaos". Thorne makes matters worse for the couples by playing an active role of an arch disruptionist and commentator regarding the affairs of the married couples, who have come to Tarbox, ironically, to reconstruct their lives. There is little harmony between Angela and Piet as a married couple with both of them suspecting each other's marital loyalty. When Piet accuses Angela by telling her that she was not happy with him she responds by saying:

"How can I be," she asked, "when you flirt with every women in sight?"

"Insight! Do I!"

"Of course you do. You know you do. Big or little, old or young, you eat them up. Even the yellow ones, Bernadette Ong. Even poor little soused Bea Guerin, who has enough troubles". (*Couples*, 7)

The Hanemas have just returned from a party thrown by another couple the Apple bees, Frank and Jannet who have come to Tarbox. The party is in honour of Ken Whitman and his pregnant wife. Like the Hanemas, the Whitmans also function as a discordant couple. Although Foxy Whitman is pregnant. The other couples who take part in the novel's action and become important components if its fictional cosmos are the Thornes, Freddy, and Georgene, Smiths, Marcia and Harold, Guerins, Bea and Roger, Saltzs, Irene and Ben, Ongs, Bernadette and John, Constantines, Carol and Eddie and Gallaghers, Terry and Matt. During the conversation in the opening of the novel between Angela and Piet,

the former tells her husband what Freddy Thorne thinks about the couples:

He thinks we're a circle. A magic circle of heads to keep the night out. He told me he gets frightened if he doesn't see us over a weekend. He thinks we have made a church of each other. (*Couples*, 7)

The so-called 'church' these couple form becomes a kind of apostatic platform upon which these existentially defunct couples play their perverted games based on fun, entertainment, and mainly sex. These men and women feel that sex can be the only 'glue' which can forge a sense of camaraderie among them. In other words, these couples form a devil's discotheque, a clandestine world in which they 'sexualise' each other religiously, thereby defining religion in their own terms. Thus, sex in *Couples* becomes more and more twisted; and unsatisfactory nature of sex as a substitute for all that is wrong in life- and especially in American society. The novel ends with a series of repetitions: death, remarriage, and finally return to normal life as couples. The central protagonists in *Couples* return to God respecting which earlier they had stopped, and realisation dawns upon them that believing in God and respecting Him constitutes a way of life to happiness. These couples seek a God who transcends death and gives these depraved humans much leverage in having unbridled sex. Sex in *Couples* becomes a meaningful and viable identity for themselves. As an act of defiance, Piet comprehends his freedom against the limitations imposed by the consciousness of death by constructing buildings, attending church to seek God who transcends death and above all by having a lot of sex. In Piet Hanema's case performing sex does not constitute a death wish but a life wish and fear of death haunts him so much that he even dreams of his death:

The plane streamed straight down. The liquid in Piet's inner ear surged, froze. He knew there could Be pulling from this dive and awoke in darkness, Convinced of his death. (*Couples*, 256)

It is this fear of inevitability of death which Piet combats with having affairs with diverse women like Georgene Thorne, Bea Guerin, and Carol Constantine. Obsessive fear of death as a psychological imbalance and impoverishment propels humans like Piet to commit adultery with a sense of flourish and great satisfaction. Women with whom Piet has sex

are all married, and as wives, these females become significant components of a debased society which can symbolically and metaphorically be compared to a "lyre" without "strings." Piet finds Foxy attractive and irresistible even in her pregnancy, and he tells her:

That seems strange. You're lovely this way. Your skin is Glossy, even your shape seems right I can't imagine making Love to you with a flat tummy. It wouldn't be you. You'd lack grandeur. (*Couples* 202)

Piet cannot resist Foxy Whitman, as for him she becomes the temptress, the enchantress and in the context of both of them, it virtually becomes a demonic cocktail of adultery and infidelity, thereby tearing the institution of marriage to smithereens. Piet becomes the modern Orpheus who consents to his dismemberment and adultery for him becomes a lyre sans strings. Piet finally divorces Angaela and marries his mistress Foxy Whitman. Marriage in case of Piet and Foxy becomes a marriage of convenience and root of escape by means of which they try to invest their adultery with some kind of justification and meaning.

The Witches of Eastwick (1984) is a postmodern novel of John Updike and in this particular work, the reader is treated to a spectacle of demonic depredations and practices by three divorcee women who, themselves become living embodiments of "lyres" without "strings", constantly playing the animalistic music of orgiastic sex. These three women Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane through their repulsive sexual practices exercise a total dismemberment of the institution of healthy feminism. Alexandara Spofford, Sukie Rougemont, and Jane Smart, are 'sick-minded' women reveling in their fiendish feminist practices, appear to reject patriarchy by dumping their respective husbands as filthy and unwanted 'garbage.' These three women feel bored and fed-up with their mundane married lives and the realities of quotidian conjugal existence. All these realities together act as a catalytic force propelling Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane to revolt against their respective husbands. They form a small microcosmic group, an adulterous commune within which these women attempt to combat the feelings of waste, death, and boredom on the individual as well as the collective plain within their individual and collective lives.

Alexandra, Sukie and Jane earn for themselves the label of 'witches.' Alexandra reveals herself as the wisest of the group, and

together these three ladies display an intense hatred for the monotony and dullness of normal worldly existence. Alexandra says

There was so much dirt in life, so many eraser crumbs and stray coffee grounds and dead wasps trapped inside the storm windows, that it seemed all of a person's time—all of a woman's time, at any rate—was spent in reallocation, taking things from one place to another, dirt being as her mother had said simply matter in the wrong place. (*WEW* 1)

The above-quoted words spoken by Alexandra symbolise a demonic parody of the institution of marriage as this woman compares her husband to unwanted dirt. This 'dirt' has to be shifted and removed away from her vision, thereby, implying the necessity of divorce.

The main action within the plot of the novel takes place in Eastwick a locale in Upstate in New York. These three 'witches', Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane occupy a mansion called Lenox Mansion which has been purchased an evil, maverick genius, with the name of Darryl Van Horne. This secular Satan steps into the world of these three women like a tornado and with his Satanic charisma hypnotizes Alexandra, Sukie as well as Jane in order to make them indulge along with himself in highly sensuous, erotic and sexually demonic practices, symbolizing evil in its purest form. This entire abhorrent and horrendous spectacle becomes highly gripping and arresting with the irresistible longing of the 'witches' bringing about a social tremor, which totally fractures and destabilizes not only family and domestic life but also the entire sociological atmosphere of Eastwick. Darryl Van Horne becomes the epicenter, the focus of attention for Alexandra, Jane and Sukie. Van Horne and the three women indulge in orgies of perversion and sexual enjoyment with no-holds-barred. Things move on propelled by the debased and sick psyches of these the three women and Darryl Van Horne becomes the presiding deity in this grotesque dance of derailed man-woman relationship.

The novel ends on an ironic note of regeneration when the secular Satan, Darryl Van Horne, departs from Eastwick and the three 'witches' seem to have some change of heart by a kind of realization regarding their evil practices and the demonic parody of healthy existence which their lives have become. Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane leave Eastwick after Van Horne has already left and thus the narrative seemingly ends on a

note of optimism and hope that perhaps these women may, after all, forget the past and try to reconstruct their lives in a better manner. However, such assumptions can at best only be wishful thinking. The ending of the novel also conveys an implicit suggestion in a very subtle manner: women like Alexandra, Jane and Sukie can any time go haywire because of being intrinsically weak and poor in the resolutions of their minds, thereby being prone to continuing the 'witches' experiment at a different place.

In conclusion, it would be quite appropriate to give an illustration of a sexual scene involving Sukie with a colleague and a friend, Clyde Gabriel. Sukie is not easily satisfied, because of her apparently insatiable sexual appetite:

... a taint she had often noticed, bending over him at the desk as his pencil jabbed at her typewritten copy. It was part of him, something woven in. She stroked the hair skull with its long bump of intelligence. His hair was thinning: how fine it was! As if every hair truly had been numbered. His tongue began to flick at her nipple, rosy and erect. She caressed the other, rolling it between thumb and forefinger, to arouse herself. His sadness had been cast into her, slow to come in that delicious way of older men, left her own demon unsatisfied. She needed more of him, though now he wanted to sleep. (*WOE*, 144)

The above-quoted lines truly reflect the "demonic erotic relation" which eventually becomes "a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty or frustrates the one who possesses it" (Northrop Frye, 149).

It won't be an exaggeration to say that the entire world created in *The Witches of Eastwick*, implicitly our own present-day world, is a world of apostasy and damnation in which individuals like Darryl Van Horne become the instruments whose only job remains to heap tribulation upon mankind, by selecting soft targets, obliging women like Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane. In the present day world, with a demonic and sick society, the deluge of Satanic magnetism creates so many Van Hornes and countless women like Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane, who primarily destroy their womanhood and the peace of their married lives by becoming willing partners in a diabolically executed erotic syndrome of man-woman relationships.

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**Assistant Professor
Department of English
Government Women College
M.A. Road, Srinagar
mirzashabir@gmail.com*