

**PROBLEMATIC IDENTITY OF A WOMAN IN JOHN UPDIKE'S NOVEL S.****SUMBUL**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English. A.M.U. Aligarh, India

***Abstract:** Identity is an umbrella term used to describe a person's conception and expression of their individuality. In fact, Identity is a difficult term: more or less everyone knows more or less what it means, and yet its precise definition proves slippery. In popular culture, it tends to be explicitly invoked only when it is seen as being in trouble. So we are accustomed to hear of identity crises, in which people are not quite sure who they are. This might suggest that it only becomes important when it is missing or otherwise a problem.*

*Updike was a major prolific American writer. He is concerned with the Loss of Identity of an individual in a dehumanized society, which is marked by erosion of spiritual and moral values. In a world obsessed with material pursuit and prosperity, human self gets reified.*

*S. is a biting satire of life on religious communes. It is a deep and true story of an American woman in search of herself. The novel can be called an affectionate meditation on American womanhood. S. attempts to celebrate freedom of women to pursue their emotional ends, self and identity.*

**Key Words:** Identity, Womanhood, Crisis.

This paper is an attempt to map a woman's emotional crisis with reference to John Updike's S.

Identity is one of the cardinal issues for every human being. Identity is an umbrella term used to describe a person's conception and expression of their individuality. The word, identity points to something singular. It may not always be a conscious decision, but everyone, at various times in their life, adopts different identities i.e. the subject keeps on fading, reinventing and reemerging. It is this that, in turn, shapes others' perception of us. "To review the concept of Identity means to sketch its history. In the twenty years since the term was first employed in its particular sense...its popular usage has become so varied and its concept so expanded that the time may seem to have come for a better and final delimitation of what it is not. And yet, by its very nature, what bears such a definitive name remains subject to changing historical connotations." (Erikson 1968).

““Identity” and “Identity crisis” have in popular and scientific usage become terms which alternately circumscribe something so large and so seemingly self-evident that to demand a definition would almost seem petty, while at other times, they designate something made so narrow for purposes of measurement that the over-all meaning is lost, and it could just as well be called something else.”(Erikson 1968).

“Identity is a difficult term: more or less everyone knows more or less what it means, and yet its precise definition proves slippery. In popular culture, it tends to be explicitly invoked only when it is seen as ‘being in trouble.’ So we are accustomed to hear of ‘identity crises,’ in which people are not quite sure who they are....This might suggest that it only becomes important when it is missing or otherwise a problem.” (Lawler 2008).

Updike was a major prolific American writer. During his career he occupied a central position in the American literature. He was born and brought up in Shillington for which he has a deep love. He says “the time spent anywhere in Shillington was delicious.”(Updike 1989). He is concerned with the Loss of Identity of an individual in a dehumanized society, which is marked by erosion of spiritual and moral values. In a world obsessed with material pursuit and prosperity, human self gets reified. Many novels of Updike dealing with this subject are bestsellers and masterpieces and *S.* is one such magnum opus. It is very interesting, strange and problematic to find how a male writer tries to delve deep into the psyche of his female character with empathy and see the world with her very eyes. Some may argue that he is a failure if he is trying to capture female psychology and its nuances in this novel but his attempt is still commendable for no human being can understand another human; neither man another man nor a woman another woman.

In this novel John Updike gives us a witty comedy of manners, a biting satire of life on religious communes, and the story -- deep and true -- of an American woman in search of herself. *S.* can be called an affectionate meditation on American womanhood. Sarah comments, “The strange thing about womanhood is that it goes on and on – the same daily burden of constant vague expectation and of everything being just *slightly* disappointing compared with what one knows one has inside oneself waiting to be touched off. It’s rather like being a set of pretty little logs that won’t quite catch fire....” (Updike 1988).

*S.* is an epistolary novel which deals with a woman’s quest for identity. *S.* primarily narrates a woman’s perennial attempt to rebegin. She renounces her home and family for the pursuit of identity. The chief character Sarah P. Worth says about her husband, “I shed you as I would shed a skin with some awkwardness perhaps and at first a sensitivity to the touch of the new, but without pain and certainly without regret” (Updike 1988). She adds, “Perhaps it *was* your fault. Leaving me alone so much amid our piled-up treasures, you gave me time to sense

that my life was an illusion, *maya*.” (Updike 1988). Women have had a metaphorical hunger brewing in them as a result of inequalities suffered at the hands of male supremacy. The focus is the female self in general, striving to define and assert itself both in relation to and in opposition to the male self. “The ambivalence toward power in women emerges in *S*.” (Olster 2006).

The eponymous *S*. is Sarah Worth, the protagonist of the novel who is a housewife and is fed up of her mundane household life. She gets no emotional satisfaction in her married life. Her emotional vacuity leads her to go searching for it outside her house in the Ashram. In her letters and tapes, Sarah relates the circumstances that prompted her to leave domineering and philandering Charles and to seek communion with the Arhat and his band of *sannyasins* (pilgrims) in the ashram. About this kind of recourse into different cults and religion taken by people especially Americans, one of Updike’s characters Tom Marshfield says:

*Is not even faithlessness, which once assaulted our piety with the vigor of a purer piety, now a desert beyond reclamation, a feeble and featureless wilderness where none but the most degenerate of demonic superstitions-astrology, augury, Hinduism-spring up in the hearts of the young, until they too soon cease to be young, and nurture in their blasted greenness not even these poor occult weeds? What has our technology that boasted its intention to reconstruct paradise, shown itself to be but an insidious spreader of poisons? Where has it landed us, as its triumph and emblem, but upon the most absolute desert of all, the lunar surface where not even lichen or a microbe lives? (Updike 2007)*

Tom’s approach is that of a non-believer. He believes that God has his chosen ones and even if we do good we are not rewarded and the Lord’s elected ones in spite of doing the wrong are not reprimanded. Also he says that Americans try to find solace in Hinduism not because they believe in that or has high regard for it but as a fad of modernism or as a desperate and clueless attempt to find solace.

Sarah’s character is vividly delineated by Updike. In fact he seems almost to luxuriate in the persona of Sarah, exploring aspects of her past and personality that go far beyond the practical demands of the plot.

She rejects the bonds of societal institutions such as family and marriage that have not provided her with existential purpose. Despite having all the material comfort at home she feels there is a void in her life. Her husband Charles is a doctor for himself but Sarah’s identity always remains relational. She is a wife in relation to her husband. She is a mother in relation to her daughter Pearl. She says, “It’s so hard to know how totally we’re supposed to live for others and what we may do for ourselves” (Updike 1988). She tries to befit every role assigned to her; whether be it that of a daughter, a mother, or a wife.

Sarah as a daughter had puritan upbringing due to which she never tells anyone that she wanted to marry someone else and not Charles. Even now she thinks about her mother's well-being and therefore instructs her not to make any wrong decision.

Sarah as a wife gives up her studies for Charles. Sarah makes many sacrifices: sacrifice of her personal choice for marriage, sacrifice of her education for her husband's education etc. Sarah as a wife carries out all her duties well. In one of her letters she writes she has served as a party doll, bed warmer etc. But she is never given any credit by her husband. She realizes that she is just a trophy wife. Charles treats her just like any other piece of furniture in the house. As Sarah complains "To him I was another piece of furniture and unless I got coffee spilled on me or squeaked like a rusty door he never gave me a glance" (Updike 1988). She calls her marriage of twenty-two as "...twenty-two years of respectable bondage and socially sanctioned frivolity." (Updike 1988).

Sarah as a mother cares for her daughter Pearl and warns her not to commit the same mistake of leaving her studies in between for marriage as she had done in the past. She advises, "...you'll allow him to put a permanent cramp in the ongoing splendid adventure of your womanhood just as your father with the connivance of my parents did to me twenty-two years ago." (Updike 1988). Sarah finds that Pearl blames Sarah for leaving the house and not Charles and takes Charles as a caring father then she tells her;

*You write of what a tender and attentive father yours was when the sad truth is he hardly bothered to kiss you goodnight most nights let alone read a bedtime story as you and he both seem to be fantasizing. Worse yet, even when you had a cold or mumps that time your face looked like a gourd, or that very odd fever up to 105.5 degrees that had me so worried about possible permanent brain damage, your father the big Boston doctor couldn't be bothered to doctor his own daughter but had me drag you over to the Beverly Hospital and sit there in the waiting with...the air so thick with germs you refused to breathe and turned bright blue. Precious Pearl, make no mistake: I nursed you...I dried your tears. I sang you songs when you were nervous at night, on and on until my own eyes could hardly stay open. (Updike 1988).*

Sarah clearly informs Pearl that, "...raising you was not an equal partnership..." (Updike 1988).

Her bottling up for a long time makes her a simmering volcano. Finally she decides to quit and relinquishes her home and her husband and goes to the Arhat ashram. She says, "I'm making my leap into a new life." (Updike 1988). In the ashram also she takes care of everything

like accounts etc. She cannot move up in her social scale despite that she has organizational and managerial skills. “Men are sometimes bitter when they are cast aside.” (Bellis 2000). In the Ashram also, her identity is once again that of a second class citizen as a woman, as she and no woman character in the novel stands a chance to occupy the centre by dislodging bejeweled in diamonds Arhat who held the supreme position himself. She is relegated to the second class position. “. . . Arhat has this theory that women are stronger in selflessness than men, which may be a nice way of saying they’re subservient.” (Updike 1988). Every man whom she comes across was found to be after her body. A woman is either objectified or idealized which denies her both agency and voice.

The narrative resists identifying the masculine as simply active and creative and the feminine as passive and receptive. “What a woman has to realize is that as far as she’s concerned she’s number one, too, just like a man” (Updike 1988). It subverts the claims, according to which the subject of desire is male and the object of desire is female. “. . . being a woman...has its dukha but I wouldn’t be a man for anything . . .” (Updike 1988). Her search for identity in this patriarchal society is not fulfilled either at home or at the ashram. She tries to escape the net of the society and thus quits the ashram also at the end. She says, “I’ve decided to leave the ashram.” (Updike 1988). Thus, her vacuity with which she leaves her home continues to haunt her throughout her life.

Thus *S.* attempts to celebrate freedom of women to pursue their emotional ends, self and identity.

### References

- Bellis, Jack. De. (2000). *The John Updike Encyclopedia*. London: Greenwood Press. Print.
- Erikson, Erik. H. (1968). *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. London: Faber and Faber. Print.
- Lawler, Stephanie. (2008). *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*. U.K: Polity. Print.
- Olster, Stacey. (2006). *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. England: Cambridge University Press. Print.
- Updike, John. (2007). *A Month of Sundays*. London: Penguin Books. Print.
- Updike, John. (1988). *S.* London: Andre’ Deutsch Ltd. Print.
- Updike, John. (1989). *Self Consciousness Memoirs*. New York: Alfred. A. Knopf. Print.