

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VIII, Number 1, 2016

General Issue

Indexing and abstracting

Rupkatha Journal is an international journal recognized by a number of organizations and institutions. It is archived permanently by www.archive-it.org and indexed by EBSCO, Elsevier, MLA International Directory, Ulrichs Web, DOAJ, Google Scholar and other organizations and included in many university libraries.

SNIP, IPP and SJR Factors

Nr.	Source ID	Title	SNIP 2012	IPP 2012	SJR 2012	SNIP 2013	IPP 2013	SJR 2013	SNIP 2014	IPP 2014	SJR 2014
1	21100201709	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	0.313	0.034	0.1	0.271	0.038	0.116	0.061	0.007	0.101

Additional services and information can be found at:

About Us: www.rupkatha.com/about.php

Editorial Board: www.rupkatha.com/editorialboard.php

Archive: www.rupkatha.com/archive.php

Submission Guidelines: www.rupkatha.com/submissionguidelines.php

Call for Papers: www.rupkatha.com/callforpapers.php

This Open Access article is distributed freely online under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). This allows an individual user non-commercial re-use, distribution, sharing and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited with links. For commercial re-use, please contact editor@rupkatha.com.

© AesthetixMS: Aesthetics Media Services



The Dysfunctional Family in Post-war American Fictions

Rima Bhattacharya

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur, India

Abstract

With the advent of the modern and postmodern era, the notion of family has undergone radical transformation. Moving far apart from their 'nuclear' status both families and communities are now a days heterogeneous constructions, driven primarily by materialism and self-interest. A widespread dissemination of statistical evidence in the mass media suggests the predominance of the so-called dysfunctional family in the American life due to a list of causes like: co-habitation, same-sex union, economic sustainability of women, lack of responsibility of men, increased rate of illegitimacy. For a long period of time the post-war American novels too have been focusing on the issue of family decline or the dysfunctional family and its effect on an individual identity. The reasons behind family decline in these fictions are not very different from real life. Several scholars have recently written books and articles claiming that the modern American family is not declining as much as it is changing its nature. The paper takes up an array of Post-war American fictions in order to portray that no matter what kind of perilous journey these fictionalized characters undertake, the root cause of their distress is a dysfunctional family, increasingly marked by a sense of mutability.

Keywords: Family, Post-war, *Herzog*, *Corrections*, *American Pastoral*, *Couples*

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy, 1984, 1)

The above quote from *Anna Karenina* reminds us of the fact that novel as a genre is heavily steeped into the gamut of family relations. It further highlights the fact that an unhappy family is worthy of much exploration and attention compared to a happy family. In fact the popularity of the novel as a genre is directly related to the rise of the middle class who believed in the healthy co-existence of the 'nuclear family' and the other governmental organizations protecting it. The post-war American fictions contradictorily subscribe to as well as criticize the notion of family being the seat of individual development. Yet the novelistic tradition continued to engage vigorously with the idea of family and its relationship with other regimes like class, community and nation.

With the advent of the modern and postmodern era, the notions of family, class, community and nation were radically transformed. The family was no longer 'nuclear'; the communities were heterogeneous, mobile assemblages, driven by materialism and the concept of 'nation' was being modified by the introduction of globalization. For a long period of time the post-war American novels have been focusing on the issue of family decline or the dysfunctional family and its effect on an individual identity. Family decline in America continues to be a debatable issue, especially in academia. Several scholars have recently written books and articles reinforcing the thought that family decline is a 'myth' and that “the family is not declining, it is just changing” (qtd. in Popenoe, 1993, 527).

In the recent times, the term 'family' which is used in many ambiguous ways has become controversial. For some people the term refers to the traditional family, while for others it can also stand for a homosexual couple living together. Although for official purpose the term must be defined yet in general it is an all-encompassing concept with multiple possible meanings that can include two friends who live together, the staffs of an office, a local gang, and the family of a man. However the most common definition of a family constitutes of a domestic group in which people typically live together in a household and function as a cooperative unit, particularly through the sharing of economic resources, in the pursuit of happiness through domestic activities (Popenoe, 1993). In this paper, I will consider an array of post-war American novels which are directly or indirectly based on the seedbed of a dysfunctional family. The objective of my paper is to portray that one of the main problems that affect the fictionalized characters of these novels, is a dysfunctional family, increasingly marked by a sense of mutability.

Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

Although Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* is perhaps best known for the controversy that Franzen himself generated when it was selected for the Oprah Book Club, ironically Franzen's novel is the perfect representation of a dysfunctional family in America at the end of twentieth century, an issue of burning concern that is often discussed on the Oprah Winfrey show. The novel opens with the introduction of the Lambert family comprising of Alfred and Enid Lambert and their three children. The reader is forced to undertake a journey along with these characters in order to trace their lives and comprehend the sorrows and joys, good and bad habits, uncertainties and securities that are passed down from one generation to another. Trapped in a dead marriage that may have never been fully alive, Enid and Alfred Lambert live in isolated retirement in the Mid-western city of St. Jude.

Alfred, an engineer working for the Midland Pacific Railroad Company, who was once a patriarch, is struck by Parkinson's disease. The more Alfred deteriorates neurologically, the lesser he is able to control the mess Enid and his children create around him. With time Alfred loses total control over his life which becomes more and more disorganized after his retirement. The company, for which he had worked, Midland Pacific, is swallowed by an amorphous Megafirm; his children moves out of the house to make their own ways in the world, rejecting the model of adulthood, he and Enid provided them and finally his body betrays him, giving way to Parkinson's disease and slipping into dementia.

Alfred's illness is merely symbolic, and functions as a metaphor for the spirit of disorientation that haunts all the members of the Lambert family. Their feeling of this profound disorientation is, however, also paradigmatic of the general cultural climate of the mid 1980s and the 1990s. The encompassing structures of global networks and those of the media and of consumer culture encroach upon the already disorganized and dysfunctional life of the Lamberts to muddle it further. In one way the novel analyses the manner in which the disturbing realities of "globalization, gender crossings, nationalism, deteriorating patriarchy, conventions of political correctness, materialism gone haywire, addiction, eroding family structures, and the like" make their way into the novel's mosaic of the American denucleated family at century's turn (See Rohr, 2004, 99; O' Donnell, 2010). Annesley (2006) argues that Franzen through his novel offers a "precise description of a world shaped by internal politics, new technologies, consumer economics, and the free market...he link[s] his portrait of the Lambert family with a vision of globalization's complex combination of forces" (111). The familial and the domestic are thus thrown into a state of mess or disorganization amidst the broader scenario of global change.

What we witness in Franzen's *The Corrections* is not just a myth or fiction, but a painful reality. This is definitely a time of crisis where numerous families are breaking apart like the Lamberts. Data collected from the US Census support the finding that the current age has witnessed an unprecedented decline of the family as a social institution. Families have lost functions, social status, and control over their members. In the second edition of *What's Happening to the American Family?*, published in 1988, Sar A. Levitan and his colleagues argues that "Widespread family breakdown is bound to have a pervasive and debilitating impact not only on the quality of life but on the vitality of the body politic as well" (7). Therefore just after Denise breaks her parent's dream of marrying her off ceremonially by voluntarily marrying Emile, Alfred suffers from strange new body tremors and is soon diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

Apart from the high rate of marital termination, the quality of married life in America is turning from bad to worse. There has always been a strong relationship between being married and being relatively happy in life. But an analysis of survey data over the years between 1972 and 1989 indicates that this relationship is growing weak day by day (Popenoe, 1993). For instance Franzen's novel, *The Corrections* portrays a number of unhappy married couples. The relationship between the parents Enid and Alfred, who are introduced to us at the beginning of the novel, is problematic and discordant. While depicting Alfred's inability to control the natural elements as a worker, Franzen is seen to be questioning if not undermining Alfred's competence as a husband and father. Alfred's failure in metallurgical research is mirrored in his marriage and in the relationship with his children. Alfred who had internalized the philosophical ideologies of Schopenhauer firmly believes that: "Woman pays the debt of life not by what she does, but by what she suffers; by the pains of childbearing and care for the child, and by submission to her husband, to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion" and thereby treats Enid accordingly (Franzen 259). Further Enid's nature is strikingly different from that of Alfred's. If Alfred is a strong, hard, cold, metal-like man, Enid, his loving and caring wife resembles a "chaos of warm things" (Franzen 265). Alfred has forever tried to control this chaos unsuccessfully. If Alfred is "the governing force" in the house; Enid is "a guerilla" always trying to evade that governance: "By day she ferried material from depot to depot, often just a step ahead of the governing force" (Franzen 5). Thus almost unknowingly they have been resisting each other throughout their life.

The loveless and unhappy marriage of Alfred and Enid finds its reflections in the marital and the personal lives of their three children. Although Gary, their eldest son, occupies the lucrative post of a bank Vice President, yet he suffers from clinical depression. His wife is suspicious of him and eavesdrops his conversations at the slightest opportunity; his son Caleb installs a surveillance camera in the family kitchen in order to catch his alcoholic father sneaking into the liquor cabinet; his son Jonah prefers playing a computer game named *God Project II* instead of visiting his old grandmother who is expecting him on the Christmas eve. By the end of the novel Gary's life does not undergo any significant change in relation to his parents, wife and children and he ultimately confesses to his wife that he is, as per her suspicion, depressed.

Unfortunately troubled families like that of the Lamberts' are increasing day by day. Consequently the American society is witnessing an increasing proportion of reportedly never-married men and younger never-married women, and a decreasing proportion of reportedly happy married couples. This retreat from marriage has led to sharp increase in residential freedom before marriage and in non-marital cohabitation. For a long period of time young people, especially women, were habituated to live with their parents until they married but now things are different. Especially for young women, it has been found that living away from home prior to

marriage changes their attitudes towards life makes them more individualistic (See Waite et. al., 1986).

Denise, for instance, the Lamberts' youngest child and daughter, ends up messing her life by falling prey to what one might call "gender trouble". On reaching maturity, unsure of her sexual orientation Denise changes sides continuously from a male to a female partner. She marries her mentor Emile Berger, a short, unsmiling, middle-aged Jew from Montreal without informing her parents and without any kind of ceremony. She is utterly confused about her own desires and has no definite reason for breaking her marriage and switching partners: "As her marriage foundered—as she became for Emile one more flashy trend-chasing crowd-pleaser from Ardennes, and as he became for her the parent she betrayed with every word she spoke or swallowed—she took comfort in the idea that her trouble with Emile was his gender" (Franzen 370). Her attitude towards marriage proves that she was never serious about it. The reason for this might have been the inability to see her parents truly happy in their married life. Even her female partner Becky who realizes how confused she is about herself, tells her: "You're so unbelievably alienated from yourself" (Franzen 370). Finally after having an affair with both her boss and her boss's wife, she gets fired from her job. Therefore Denise in spite of being the most mature of the Lambert children and the only "comparatively stable emotional centre" of a dysfunctional family is unable to configure a healthy marital life for herself (Ribbat, 2002, 566).

Chipper, the middle child, is an academic intellectual and a womanizer. He gets fired from his teaching position at a small college after a public exposure of his indecent entanglement with one of his female students just before he was about to receive tenure for his job. Not only has he had sexual relations with her, but under the influence of drugs has also written a term paper for her. After this disaster Chipper moves to New York and tries to make a living by writing film scripts. There too he gets involved with Julia Vrais, who works as the personal assistant to a Manhattan-based film producer, Eden Procuero, to whom he had submitted his script.

Living on their own, away from their parents, both Chipper and Denise have the freedom to choose their sexual partners and careers according to their own whims. However their lives led as young adults in a nonfamily household leave them feeling isolated and unhappy. Their flight to freedom does not allow them to evade the responsibilities of life. As for Denise, the narrator informs us: "By trying to protect herself from her family's hunger, the daughter accomplished just the opposite" (Franzen 488).

As the novel approaches its climax we see Enid's dream of celebrating Christmas with the family members at St. Jude being converted into a bitter reality. To counter the growing general disintegration of the family, Enid wanted to celebrate one last Christmas with her entire family at home in St. Jude. Unfortunately the catastrophic Christmas ends with the children arguing with each other and the breaking of Enid's dream of seeing her family happy together for one last time: "She saw everything more clearly now, her children in particular" (Franzen 547). The Christmas at St. Jude signifies the failure or dysfunction of the Lambert family, where the individual family members have become autonomous and no longer exist as a cohesive group. Yet at the end of the novel a sign of hope and the family's continuance remains in the lives of the three Lambert children who appear to be happier after Christmas and especially in the life of seventy-five years old Enid, who after the death of Alfred musters up the strength to work for a new beginning and make some changes to re-arrange her disorganized life.

Saul Bellow's *Herzog*

In many of the post-war American novels divorce has replaced death as a dissolver of marriages. For instance, Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog* introduces us to the protagonist Moses Herzog who is not really crazy but is temporarily crazed with grief over the breakup of his second marriage. His apparently irrational thoughts and actions can be explained as normal for a person going through intense grief. In fact, we see Herzog moving through certain stages which are typical for those mourning a divorce. First of all he is shocked by the audacity of his wife who throws him out and suffers from months of depression during which he indulges in brief sexual flings. Next he feels heart-broken and betrayed after discovering that his wife had been carrying on an affair with his best friend. Subsequently he passes through a phase of homicidal anger during which he flies to Chicago and impulsively plans to kill his wife and her lover (he is however, unable to do it). Finally after suffering from a sudden accident and an arrest for possession of an unregistered gun he withdraws to his country-house where he learns to accept his life and forgive himself.

Herzog is regarded as one of the finest and most psychologically accurate character portraits in American fiction depicting the downfall of a family. In fact one could say that, Bellow is working out his own private woes (he had then been divorced two times) through the fictional creation of Herzog. In order to understand Herzog's divorce grief, it is necessary to consider the nature of his marriage to Madeleine, his second wife. Many of the divorce therapists note, that divorces occur usually when marriages take place for the wrong reasons. Herzog left his first wife Daisy because she was too conventional, a Jewish woman like his own mother. He saw her as rigidly ordered and boring: "Stability, symmetry, order, containment. . . . By my irregularity and turbulence of spirit I brought out the very worst in Daisy" (Bellow 126). In Madeleine, he finds the other extreme, a character more irregular and restless than his own. He marries her whimsically because she is young, beautiful, brilliant, intense, and offers excitement and change. As long as Herzog was married to Daisy, he had led the perfectly ordinary life of an assistant professor, respected and stable but an 'ordinary' life is not good enough for Herzog, who considers himself extraordinary. Therefore by voluntarily negating his marriage with Daisy, Herzog symbolically rejects the idea of a "traditional nuclear family", formed by two people involved in a heterosexual, monogamous, life-long marriage which is characterized by a sharp division of labour, with the female as full-time housewife and the male as primary provider and ultimate authority.

Further in order to understand the problems between Herzog and Madeline it is important to concentrate on two of the general or basic functions of a family: "economic cooperation (the sharing of economic resources, especially shelter, food, and clothing); and sexual regulation (so that sexual activity in a society is not completely permissive and people are made responsible for the consequences of their sexuality)" (Popenoe, 1993, 529). The marriage between Herzog and Madeline doesn't work because two of these basic family requirements are not followed. Once they are married, Herzog keeps on complaining about Madeline's sloppy housekeeping and spendthrift ways. As a wife she does not provide the stability that Herzog needs in order to work. Madeleine becomes a shopaholic, spending up to twelve-hundred-dollar in ten days on unnecessary purchases which she cannot even recall. Madeline's excessive purchases signify her dissatisfaction with her marriage with Herzog. Thus their marriage lacks the economic cooperation and understanding that is required between two partners in order to lead a happy married life. After the divorce, Herzog thinks, "A woman who squandered her husband's money, all psychiatric opinion agreed, was determined to castrate him" (Bellow 202).

Further, there is no sense of fidelity in the marital relationship between Herzog and Madeline. Herzog is clearly a polygamous man who is unable to find a totally satisfying

relationship with one woman. Therefore after each divorce he gets involved with girls like Sono Oguki and Ramona who partly help him to overcome his divorce grief with their sexual favours. Madeleine too causes irreparable damage to Herzog's soul by committing adultery and getting involved with Herzog's friend Valentine Gersbach. She further manipulates Herzog's best friend, his lawyer and his psychiatrist to get rid of him and isolate him further. Moreover, Madeleine complains about Herzog's sexual inadequacy to female confidantes, including her mother, her aunt Zelda, and even the babysitter, thus publicly ruining Herzog's reputation and preparing for the dissolution of the marriage (Crosby et. al., 1983). Therefore the need for sexual regulation that does not allow partners to indulge in sexual relationships outside marriage is also not fulfilled.

Over the years the psychological character of the marital relationship has changed substantially. Traditionally, marriage was considered to be a social obligation but today, marital partners are chosen primarily to be personal companions. No longer comprising of a set of norms and social obligations that are widely enforced, "marriage today is a voluntary relationship that individuals can make and break at will" (Jacob, 1988, 145-146). In Bellow's novel, Herzog marries Madeline because he feels she could be an intellectual helpmate: "he relied completely on her intellectual judgments" (Bellow 72). However with time Madeleine's growing intellectual depth turns out to be a threat for Herzog: "I understood that Madeleine's was to take my place in the learned world. To overcome me. She was reaching her final elevation, as queen of the intellectuals, the castiron bluestocking" (Bellow 82). Madeleine is undoubtedly the dominating figure in their relationship. In the 1950s hegemony of the traditional nuclear family helped to fuel the modern women's movement which gave rise to a group of women who were economically independent and vocal about their rights and freedom (Friedan, 1963). Therefore Herzog who is clearly intimidated by Madeline's intelligence and dominating character realizes that he "was dealing with a new female generation" (Bellow 118).

Madeleine unlike Daisy also refuses to fulfil the role of the wife in a traditional nuclear family where the wife alone is responsible for the housekeeping. She sleeps with Herzog in a "disorderly bedroom" and the parlour where she announces her decision to divorce Herzog is untidy (Anand, 1993). It is only after confronting this disorder in domestic life that Herzog is reminded of his first wife Daisy who was a cooler, organized and conservative person compared to Madeleine. Thus one could say that almost in a chronological manner Herzog breaks away from a traditional nuclear family to form a modern nuclear family, followed by the dissolution of the concept of family altogether.

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

In terms of ethnic relations many researchers have interpreted the breaking away of first generation members from their immigrant families as a condition necessary for their growth and assimilation into American society. In fact many theorists on social class have emphasized the fluidity of the American class system and the necessity of the individual to be cut off from the family and other ties which appear to hinder his or her upward movement within the class system. In such a system the son should be better than the father, or he should be in the process of achieving a higher status compared to the father. In most of the cases under such conditions it is necessary to discard former identifications (particularly those with parents and kin) for newer and more appropriate ones (Sussman, 1959). This is exactly what Seymour Levov, the protagonist of Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral* does in order to be assimilated into the American society around him. At the beginning of the novel *American Pastoral*, the reader is introduced to Zukerman, the narrator who is in the same state as the protagonist is going to be by the end of the

novel i.e. without wife, children, and prostrate. In the novel we find Nathan Zuckerman, musing on the life of Seymour Levov, nicknamed “the Swede” by everyone at Weequahic High School back in the early 1940s because of his fair complexion, blond hair, and blue eyes, one of the only Jews Zuckerman can remember looking so Aryan. The Swede, a few years older than Zuckerman, was his community's best athlete, excelling in several sports, and epitomized the figure of an all-American young man that every boy wanted to emulate and every girl dreamed about. This hero, whom the narrator calls a “household Apollo,” represented the hopes and dreams of the Newark community trying to gain advancement and assimilation into the greater, and largely gentile, America (Roth, 4). As Zuckerman reminisces, “through the Swede, the neighbourhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world” (Roth, 3), allowing his Jewish admirers to remain blind towards the war abroad and the bouts of prejudice at home.

To Zuckerman and to the reader trying to explore aspects of cultural assimilation – the profoundly memorable Swede represents everything that is America. He is described at one point as a Johnny Appleseed figure, and his love for his country is never questioned. Thus the narrator muses, “the Swede lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin . . . Yes, everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here” (Roth, 213). Being a success in high school athletics and completing an admirable term in the Marine Corps, the Swede marries a former Miss New Jersey, Dawn Dwyer, buys an old stone house and settles down in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey. Not only does the Swede represent America in general, but the progress of the ethnic American in particular (Royal, 2001).

The Levov family is also highly troubled and dysfunctional. Lou Levov unlike his son Swede is much more rooted to the ground reality and has his own misgivings about the Swede's desperate attempt to be a part of the American society. One can find a reflection of this attempt even in Swede's act of choosing the family's stone house in Old Rimrock. When the Swede first sees the old stone house, on a high school away game with his baseball team, he becomes enchanted with it and vows to buy it for his future family. For him, the house represents everything American. When the Swede's parents visit the stone house for the first time, Lou Levov, the father immediately sees through his son's idealization of his new home, and tells him outright what it represents: “You're dreaming. I wonder if you even know where this is. Let's be candid with each other about this - this narrow, bigoted area. The Klan thrived out here in the twenties. Did you know that? ... It is Republican out here from top to bottom . . . [The residents] didn't like the Jews and the Italians and the Irish – that's why they moved out here to begin with. . . . They wouldn't give a Jew the time of day. I'm talking to you, son, about bigots. Not about the goose step even – just about hate” (Roth 309). Lou Levov is already aware that soon his son's dream would wake up to the bitter realities of life. Interestingly, although Lou comes from a generation that experienced discrimination at home and whose families in Europe suffered a dreadful fate yet he acknowledges the importance of honouring one's own roots in order to preserve the memories and the traditions in which one has grown. Complete assimilation resulting in the loss of one's ethnic self is tragic for Lou.

However the Swede pays no heed to the advice of his father and ultimately buys the house. He further exceeds his limits and goes against his father to marry the catholic-raised Dawn. Swede's relationship with his brother Jerry is also not smooth. Jerry who since childhood has lived under the shadow of the magnanimous character of his brother suffers from prangs of sibling rivalry and is quite sure about the failure of the Swede's assimilation into the American society. Jerry ironically describes to Zuckerman what he sees as the underlying premise of his brother's family: “[Dawn's] post-catholic, he's post-Jewish, together they're going to go out there to Old

Rimrock to raise little post-toasties” (Roth, 73). Humour aside, Jerry is aware of the potential problems awaiting the near perfect life of the Swede, and he even more than his father, is not afraid to speak his mind. In an excited conversation between the two brothers, Jerry lashes out at his brother’s pretence saying, “You don’t reveal yourself to people, Seymour. You keep yourself a secret. Nobody knows what you are” (Roth, 275). The Swede however cares less about what his father and brother thinks about settling in a WASP community, and more about his childhood dream of setting up his own isolated nuclear family far from the signs of ‘belongingness’ that remind him of his Jewish background. For those who place a strong value on generational continuity, such a splitting up of generations is a real loss.

The America that the house idealizes is the America of the Mayflower surrounded by people like Bill Orcutt, the Levovs’ neighbour, who can proudly trace his ancestry back to the Revolutionary War. If the Jewish Swede and his Catholic-raised wife want to fit into this image and locality, and become a part of it, a price must be paid for it. The price is paid by the Swede and Dawn’s angry 16-year-old daughter, ironically named Merry, who becomes obsessed with the Vietnam War and gets involved with violent radicals, and in 1968 blows up the small town’s only post office, accidentally killing the community’s prominent and much beloved doctor. After the explosion Merry goes into hiding, evading both the FBI and her family. The core of *American Pastoral* is devoted to the unfolding of the life of the Swede after this tragedy: the attempts to find his daughter, communication with her associates in crime, the complexity in his and Dawn’s emotional relationship, and the ultimate disintegration of the family (Royal, 2001). The family as an institution in decline can have alarming consequences for children and this is what exactly happens in the case of Merry. Merry Levov, who is hostile to America and the ideologies of her parents, grows into a troubled adolescence and complains that her parents have given her less than they should have despite the family’s sufficient wealth and means (Kimmage, 2012). Merry who is a sensitive adolescent cannot accept the WASP pretences of her parents. Sirjamaki writes about the problems of adolescence in his book *The American Family* stating that “Adolescence brings on its own specific problems to young people...On one hand adolescents strain towards maturity and independence, and physiological processes within each of them prod them on in this effort. But, on the other hand, because they are still young and beset with self-doubt and hesitations, they yearn also for the safety of the family. Their parents are similarly caught between conflicting sentiments. They feel normal satisfaction that their children are reaching towards their majority, but regret too, that they grow up and soon will leave home” (124). Finally the Swede and Dawn are unable to handle their adolescent daughter whose temperament and frequency do not match with theirs at all. As a father, Swede is unable to check Merry’s impulsive and immature spirit of independence which inspires her to repudiate the protective atmosphere of home and family and enter the dark regions of America where she lives in abject poverty and is sexually exploited time and again. By blowing up the general store Merry exposes the falsity of her father’s façade, proving that his Jewishness has always been “visible” to their blue blooded neighbours (Hogan, 2004). Further time proves that the relationship between Swede and Dawn is as pretentious as their adopted identity in the Old Rimrock locality. Swede soon discovers that Bill Orcutt and Dawn are having an affair, and Orcutt, an architect, is working with Dawn to draw up plans for a new home into which supposedly the Levovs will move. Dawn therefore replaces her husband with Orcutt, a WASP object of desire that her husband never was and could never be. In fact one could say that the lack of a happy, stable home with devoted, honest parents who not only love their children but also love each other causes Merry to move out of Swede’s fantasy land and make a choice of her own.

John Updike's *Couples*

John Updike in *Couples* advocates promiscuity as an antidote to the prevalent climate of nihilism, and thereby repudiates the concept of family altogether. This was the time when America was changing at a fast pace. Revolution was in the air due to the widespread unrest growing from the anti-Vietnam-War movement, an expressive youth culture, frequently violent racial protest, and the feminist revolution. Further the pharmacies overflowed with prescriptions for the birth control pills that “always” worked. John Updike's *Couples* vividly documents the ambience of the suburbia in the age of post-pill paradise. According to Hendin (2004), this sudden advent of biological freedom eroded the confident sense of family and social stability and moderation at the core of traditional “middle-class culture” (8). The novel truly represents the inescapable conflict in the Western culture between passion and the establishment of a family through marriage. The contrasts between the innocent courtly love of the past and the guilt-laden physical indulgence of the present repeatedly find their way through the fabric of the novel (Galloway, 1981). In an interview with Eric Rhode (1994), Updike confesses, “*Couples* is of course not about sex as such it is about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left” to fall back on (52).

In the novel one encounters ten middle class couples indulging in rounds of adultery as their marriages have become stale. Foxy tells Piet about her husband stating, “We've known each other so long we're rather detached, and just use each other” (Updike, 202). Georgine confesses to Piet “I'm miserable, Piet. I can't stand living with that man much longer...I'm losing all sense of myself as a woman” (Updike, 217). They are people who are trapped in between the staleness, sterility and boredom of the Old America and the vulgarity of the New. They want the best from life but eventually end up spreading their own infidelity, vulgarity, and dissatisfaction throughout their locality (Sheed, 1968). Their dreams remain unfulfilled as their children grow without care, largely immoral people move into their neighbourhood, and the debauched American culture catches up with them. According to Lodge, the description of Tarbox, its couples and their way of life depict more the weaknesses and fragility of such a life rather than its allure and charm (Lodge, 1971).

Conclusion

The role of family in human life has always been highly paradoxical. It can be both the origin and cause of everything that is beneficial to humanity – love, affection, care, stability, loyalty, trust and authority – and at the same time a site of abuse, terror, misery. It is an institution which for ages has been considered to be essential, if not universal. History depicts that a nation's strength depends upon the strength of its family units. In fact, family is the base on which a country is built. Unfortunately, Americans today are less willing than ever before to invest time, money, and energy in family life. Most still want to marry and have children, but they are gradually turning more to other groups and ideologies, and are investing much more in themselves. This is because individuals today are self-created, mutable constructs, rather than unwavering products of a familial support system. Once the only social institution in existence, the family over time has lost its importance to such institutions as organized religion, education, work, and government (See Lenski & Lenski, 1987). However one should not forget that there are two sides to every coin and all the consequences of the decline of the American traditional nuclear family cannot be negative. One of the most prominent concerns about this functional decline is the weakening of family authority which was almost invariably held by the eldest male – the patriarch. The decline of patriarchal authority has brought about a rise in the status of women from being wholly owned appendages of their fathers, husbands, or some other male relative, to being full citizens with

equal rights. Therefore this can be seen as a positive contribution of the so-called 'decline' of the traditional nuclear family and this is why many researchers would like to believe that the modern or post-war American family is 'changing' and not 'declining'. Such an idea of change although suspicious is not absolutely unacceptable as 'family' is an entity is to be created purely out of mutual fellow-feeling and support and in such terms one can locate a family even amongst strangers. In such a situation one can only hope that perhaps the change or decline of the traditional nuclear family to the modern nuclear family is still a positive and acceptable transformation rather than the dissolution of the concept of family and its values altogether.

References

- Anand, T. S. (1993). *Saul Bellow: The Feminine Mystique*. Jalandhar: ABS Publications.
- Annesley, J. (2006). Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the 'Novel of Globalization'. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29 (2), 111-128.
- Bellow, S. (2012). *Herzog*. London: Penguin UK.
- Crosby, J. F., Bruce A. G., and Marsha C. R. (1983). The Grief Resolution Process in Divorce. *Journal of Divorce*, 7 (1), 3-17.
- Franzen, J. (2001). *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Siroux.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Galloway, D. (1981). The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (1966). *The Chelsea House Library of Literary Criticism*, 50-61.
- Hendin, J. G. (Ed.). (2004). Introducing American Literature and Culture in the Postwar Years In *Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture*. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Hogan, M. (2004). Something so Visceral in the Rhetorical. *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 23, 1-14.
- Jacob, H. (1988). *Silent Revolution: The transformation of divorce law in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kimmage, M. (2012). *In History's Grip: Philip Roth's Newark Trilogy*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Lenski, G., and J., Lenski. (1987). *Human societies*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Levitan, S. A., Belous, R. S., and F., Gallo. (1988). *What's happening to the American family?*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lodge, D. (1971). *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- O' Donnell, P. (2010). *The American Novel Now*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Popenoe, D. (Aug., 1993). American Family Decline, 1960-1990: A Review and Appraisal. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 55 (3), 527-542.
- Ribbat, C. (2002). Handling the Media, Surviving *The Corrections*: Jonathan Franzen and the Fate of the Author. *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 47 (4), 555-566.
- Rhode, E (Interviewer) and Updike, J (Interviewee). (1994). John Updike Talks about the Shapes and Subjects of His Fiction. *Conversations with John Updike*. (Ed.) James Plath. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 46-54.
- Rohr, S. (2004). 'The Tyranny of the Probable'—Crackpot Realism and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. *Amerikastudien / American Studies: Neorealism – Between Innovation and Continuation*, 49 (1), 91-105.
- Roth, P. (1998). *American Pastoral*. [1997]. London: Vintage.
- Royal, D. P. (2001). Fictional Realms of Possibility: Reimagining the Ethnic Subject in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 20, 1-16.
- Sirjamaki, J. (1967). *The American Family: In the Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Sun-Bar Publications.

- Sussman, M. B. (Spring, 1959). The Isolated Nuclear Family: Fact or Fiction. *Social Problems*, 6 (4), 333-340.
- Sheed, W. (1968 April 7). Play in Tarbox. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/06/lifetimes/updike-r-couples.html>.
- Tolstoy, L. (1984). *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Joel Carmichael. New York: Bartam Classics.
- Updike, J. (1968). *Couples*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Waite, L. J., Goldscheider, F. K., and C., Witsberger. (1986). Nonfamily living and the erosion of traditional family orientations among young adults. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 541-554.

Rima Bhattacharya is currently working as a PhD Research scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Science in Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK), India. She has completed her M.Phil Degree from the Department of English, University of Calcutta, India. She completed her M.A. in English literature from the Presidency College, University of Calcutta in 2010 and taught at a College (affiliated to Calcutta University) for two years as a lecturer. She Graduate with English Honours from Loreto College, Kolkata, India. She has already published papers in the field of Children's literature and American Poetry. She was also a founding member of an e-journal called *The Inclusive*. Her research interest includes Children literature, American poetry, Postcolonial writings and Graphic novels.
