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The Unitary Self and Conflicting Voices in John Updike's *S*

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John Updike's 1988 novel *S* is the final instalment in a trilogy of works offering reworkings of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It was preceded by 1975's *A Month of Sundays* and 1986's *Roger's Version*, which retold Hawthorne's canonical novel from the perspective of modern-day characters reminiscent of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. The trilogy therefore, offers a single story from multiple perspectives. Updike reimagines these characters as much more complex and multilayered than in Hawthorne's novel. In addition, Updike's Arthur, Hester and Roger characters reflect their contemporary context and adopt each others' characteristics. *S* itself is an epistolary novel told from the perspective of a middle-aged New England housewife, Sarah Worth. The novel begins with Sarah leaving her wealthy doctor husband Charles to join an ashram in the Arizona desert, led by a Jewish American named Art Steinmetz who poses as an Indian guru named Arhat Mindadali. Sarah quickly rises up the ranks within the community, becoming its chief accountant while experimenting with sex and religion in an attempt to cast off her old life.

Although John Updike is arguably a postmodern writer, the legacy of modernism, with its frustration of conventional expectations of unity and rejection of communal reality, is clearly manifested in *S*. T.S. Eliot argued that no writer is truly original, as all are influenced by previous authors when they contribute to the creation of a literary tradition. He stated that "no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone…you must see him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (Eliot). In presenting Sarah's letters to show her conflicting voices, Updike reflects the need to be aware of different traditional influences in order to construct unity. As such, the splitting of the unitary self into conflicting voices may undermine the agency of the author without undermining the agency of the language or the characters. Roland Barthes, to whom Updike dedicates his 1984 book of essays and criticism *Hugging the Shore*, similarly influences Updike's work. Barthes' assertion that authorial "identity is lost" (Barthes) through writing underpins Updike's related emphasis on the agency of language.

Just as Sarah Worth, based on Hawthorne's Hester Prynne character, gives herself to the Arhat when he comes to her trailer, saying "You are my guest, one refuses a guest nothing" (Updike), so Updike implies that the author is not dead so long as they fully surrender agency to language. In other words, provided the author returns "only…as the progeny of his text" (Burke, 32), they can be "at once both dead and alive" (Burke, 32-33) . Assuming this, the author becomes a guest within the text and his "life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work" (Burke, 31) . Indeed, "once the guest (in this case, the author) is within his walls, the host (in this case, language) can have what he wishes of him" (Burke, 32-33) . So while Sarah allowed the Arhat agency, it was only on the proviso that he knew he needed her, just as the author can recover agency through reverence for the power of language. On this basis, Updike seems to accept Roland Barthes' famous 1968 "The Death of the Author" essay as a "call to arms (for language) and not a funeral oration (for the author)" (Burke, 29).

Updike adopts Barthes' logic by subverting the idea of the author being "to his text as God" (Burke, 23) in his presentation of the flawed God-like figure of the Arhat in *S*. The Arhat's declaration that "Women are the gods!" (Updike, 143) indicates an additional transference of literary agency, from a male pretender to a female truth-seeker. That the Arhat deals only in fantasies implies that he is controlled by language just as Updike himself is. The female character of Sarah meanwhile, embraces the multiple meanings of Sanskrit language. As such, Sarah (herself the creation of the male author) recognises the limitations of singularity and suggests that truth can be compiled from a mosaic of alternative linguistic interpretations. Updike's association of language with truth is therefore revealed both in interviews during which he states that "[t]elling the truth is the main, and perhaps the only, social service a writer can perform" (Silvestre, 247) and through the character of Sarah who is described as being someone who digs into facts while others deal merely in fantasy. As a result, an author can come closer to agency from language by recognising the value of multiplicity in the search for some level of representational truth.

Updike has agency over his characters and readers because he has chosen which letters to include in the collection, thus manipulating their effect. However, he is aware of authorial fallibility and emphasises the overriding power and importance of origins; whether the letters be linguistic (in terms of his writing), or historical (in terms of Sarah's ancestor Hester Prynne who offers a shorthand for understanding Sarah's character). That Hawthorne mystifies Hester's origins in *The Scarlet Letter* compounds the sense that Updike is toying not only with the reader's expectations, but also with the canon itself. Although by the end of Hawthorne's novel, we know more about Hester's past than most of the other characters, as we do of Sarah in Updike's novel, the process of uncovering the parallels between the characters of Hester and Sarah reiterates Updike's emphasis on origins. Sarah, who is seemingly knowable through her ancestry and language, is also a mystery – suggesting that no level of multifarious language or contextual prologue can ever uncover a whole truth about either a fictional character or a real person. It is the quest to come as close as possible to knowledge and truth which underpins Updike's emphasis on origins. This emphasis is explicit both in the novel, with Sarah telling her mother she should polish the Prynne silver "once every three months" (Silvestre, 21) , and in interviews in which he insists that "a writer in the English language ought to reread one [Shakespeare] play every three months, so as to recall what language is capable of" (Salgas, 180) . This suggests that Updike pays more reverence to Shakespearean language than to Shakespeare the author, thus supporting Barthes' claim that "language…invariably precedes and indeed determines the subjects of its writing" (Burke, 34) . However, even if Updike assigns agency to Shakespeare the author, this statement could be seen as a reflection of Updike working within his literary tradition, itself a unification of multiple voices very much aware of the importance of language.

Language provides unity through contradiction, supporting the idea that agency of the self is not necessarily undermined by multiple voices. Just as Sarah's "ancestors with their single insistent initial" (Updike, 148) provide a sense of a unified self, the reader realises that this very unifying letter is being used to ease the divorce settlement and division of possessions, thus ensuring separation. Sarah reminds her husband that all items marked with the initial P are her belongings to be retained after the formal dissolution of the marriage. Similarly, the multiple, ambiguous meanings assigned to Sanskrit words are compounded by the "war between superego, ego, and id" (Updike, 89) waged by the sannyasins in the ashram. Postmodern critic J. Flax's statement that "Postmodernism should encourage us to tolerate…ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity" (Flax, 56), suggests that this sense of conflict should be recognised as a reflection of contemporary society's fragmentation of the self into a mosaic of contrasting voices which make up the whole.

Sarah, as a postmodern character, offers a different 'self' (signing her letters with everything from Ma Prem Kundalini to S, Sare, K, Mummy and Shri Arhat Mindadali) to different fictional audiences, even saying to her best friend Midge "For God's sake don't tell any of this to [Sarah's husband] Charles or even to [Midge's husband] Irving" (Updike, 44). Updike allows the reader the luxury of seeing her full 'self' with all its contradictions. That Sarah is renamed Kundalini, a name which describes the snake of coiled energy at the base of the spine for example, emphasises the sexual aspects of her character while her 'Mummy' persona writes letters about the suitability of her daughter's boyfriend and the need for education. Sarah's conflicting voices mirror the disunification of the self wrought by the categorising tendencies of materialism and capitalism. Sarah is "trapped among trappings" (Updike, 19) and her trappings are the language she employs to manipulate various audiences. Just as Hollywood films must appeal to a multiplicity of viewers to create blockbuster audiences, so the fragmentation of the self can be seen as the logical extension of this search for mass appeal in a series of niche markets. Sarah therefore embodies the division of the unitary self into conflicting voices, implying that female gender is itself a site of multiplicity. As Judith Butler notes, the "production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain. The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities" (Butler, 110). In *S*, Updike both presents and parodies heterosexual assumptions and the idea of a gender/sex distinction.

The male author Updike and the male character of the Arhat give Sarah a voice by respectively compiling her letters, selling her a tape recorder which she "never figured out how to erase" (Updike, 104) and telling the other sannyasins to "Let Kundalini speak" (Updike, 105). As such, Updike implies that women allow men to seemingly have control because women are aware of the details, the contradictory voices if you will, which provide female characters with relative agency, allowing them to uncover truth. This is highlighted by the fact that the Arhat is the figurehead of the ashram but admits he is unable to function without women who need him or understand the conflicting demands placed upon the community. Female recognition of the value of multiplicity, emphasised notably as a gender trait in the character of Sarah, implicitly eases the authorial quest for truth and autonomy. Without wishing to fall into an essentialist trap suggesting that only women recognise the value of multiple interpretations, Updike implies that the friction between multiple meanings and a singular interpretive vision actually extends the boundaries of language in its ability to come closer to representing truth.

Sarah tells her daughter that men are "only and entirely what we in our poor fevers made of them" (Updike, 74), suggesting that women create men through language and fantasy just as Updike has similarly created Sarah, implying that her agency is actually undermined by her male creator. However, that Updike has chosen a female narrator in order to present multiple voices suggests that he remains controlled by the language he uses and needs a female voice to acquire agency. If “purusha, motionless inactive spirit, is male, and prakriti – active nature, you could say – is female” (Updike, 43), then it is only through the female character that the male author can claim any agency from language. Indeed, instead of denying her agency, Sarah’s conflicting voices represent a powerful challenge to the status quo in their “desire to unsettle…totalitarian power structures through mobile linguistic (dis)connections by juxtaposing themes, styles, and interpretations” (Sunka, 15). The “feminized genre” (Sunka, 17) of the letter, in light of Butler’s analysis, suggests that the act of writing is performative in itself. This is emphasised by Sarah’s solipsistic letters sent to unclear addresses which themselves mirror the similarly “conflicting desires, positions, and self-enforced taboos of the postmodern condition” (Sunka, 16).

S is at once a “first-person confession, in the Puritan tradition” (Silvestre, 245), thus paying homage to literary and national origins, and a policed text. The latter trait is highlighted by the third-person authorial voice emerging in the labelling of Sarah’s letters to her mother as being “To Her Mother” (Updike, 141) rather than ‘my’ mother. While the male author Updike polices Sarah’s letters, raising issues of female agency, the female character of Durga literally polices Sarah’s letters within the world of the novel, referencing the limitations of feminism and its hierarchies of oppression. The idea that she who has suffered is somehow more worthy is made explicit by Durga who confronts Sarah, saying: “Did *you* have to suffer three years of dysentery and sixteen grillings by the Indian police?” (Updike, 110). The unitary or stable self associated with such rigid gender performance is thus unpacked in *S*. Judith Butler states that the “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core [is]…discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory framework of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler, 110). Sarah comes to embody female sexuality as a source of power which, like fiction, derives not from creating something entirely new (or giving birth – note there are very few children in the ashram) but from recognising the importance of origins and using multiplicity to get as close as possible to the white elephant of representational truth.

When Sarah accuses Charles of being a “strategist in the war between the sexes” (Updike, 149), the male voice of Updike, through the female character of Sarah, mobilises the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ and the idea of gender as performance. The battle between Charles and Sarah thus becomes one between man and woman, unity and multiplicity, and gender as innate and performed. This begs the question of whether Charles and Sarah are defined by their gender or if they define their own gender through their acts. Sarah’s reference to feeling “so married to you, so yours” (Updike, 227) during their early lovemaking certainly buys into Butler’s notion of gender as performance, as does the Arhat’s later accusation of Sarah’s rejection on the basis of too much emotion as being “Spoken like a man” (Updike, 199).

Updike implies that there can never be true agency from gender (even if performed), just as the author, to a certain degree, will always be subject to the yoke of language. Through his female character, Updike suggests that all women have men in them; “no man is just man. No woman is just woman, Men hold the seeds of womanhood within themselves and women hold the seeds of manhood within themselves” (Updike, 68). Judith Butler argues that “acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body" (Butler, 110). Such gendered acts produce an effect of internal core/substance but only on the surface of the body, just as Updike's characters produce the effect of authorial coherence on the surface of the text. But the language/text owns Updike and his characters just as the essence of gender identity underpins one's performance of gender. Sarah herself confirms this, with her acknowledgement that Pearl has "played and [is] playing so splendidly the role of Daughter and your father impeccably assumed the part of Dada but I seem to have forgotten my lines and wandered offstage" (Updike, 13) in her search for her true inner essence.

While the Arhat uses his appearance as exotic 'other' to profit sexually and financially, although ultimately failing, Sarah successfully uses her status as female 'other' to reap long-term monetary reward. That Sarah, like her ancestor Hester, is consistently presented as being dark, darker even than the Arhat ("he said I was darker than he was" (Updike, 63)), emphasises the otherness of female sexuality. This could even be viewed as a result of the conscious 'othering' of female sexuality, to the extent that Sarah is able to commodify her alterity in a way which Hester Prynne was unable to do. Sarah's commodification of her alterity implies that conflicting voices offer a richer construction of character and use of language, just as Sarah's multiplicity literally ensures her a richer future.

Ien Ang suggests that "multiplicity [is] useful…to describe the necessary condition of existence of those who are positioned, in varying ways, as peripheral others to the white, Western core" (Ang, 199). Sarah's 'otherness' is associated with her gender and swarthy complexion inherited from her ancestor Hester Prynne, herself symbolic of dangerous female sexuality. The conflicting voices in Sarah's letters to different fictional readers are therefore needed to harness the power of language and allow a broader insight into her character. Ang's analysis implies that this position of insight and multiplicity is only afforded Sarah because of the othering of female gender. As Ang notes, the "fracturing of the category of 'women' is historically and structurally entrenched" (Ang, 197). Updike emphasises the innate multiplicity of femininity through Sarah, who is at once a mother, wife, home-maker, lover, sex object, man and even "a mermaid in the waves, looking up at this artifact of men from another world" (Updike, 19). The association of women with contradictory voices is also highlighted in the novel by the lotus as "the symbol of woman" (Updike, 93) and multiplicity (as in a "whole lotus of meanings" (Updike, 84-85)).

Simone de Beauvoir argues that one becomes a woman by buying into gendered culture, while Michel Foucault similarly suggests that "the human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (Foucault, 208), indicating that power is not imposed but consensual. One must buy into subjectification, just as the sannyasins buy into a performative concept of identity by denying their own conflicting voices and blindly accepting the multiplicitous language, which denies them agency. It is not the sannyasins' innate multiplicity but their singularity, which denies them autonomy from the power of language. Through Sarah, Updike condemns the other women in the ashram for seeing everything in "only one dimension" (Updike, 48), associating this with an absence of "history" (Updike, 48) and "collective memory" (Updike, 48) in their Midwestern upbringing. This draws a parallel with Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Literary Talent", which condemned authors who did not recognise the multiplicity of their collective literary tradition. Eliot suggests that only by recognising this multiplicity could they achieve a unified authorial voice. Sarah's ability to recognise and express multiple selves is therefore linked to her Puritan ancestors, just as Updike himself is indebted to modernism and the epistolary form for his language and representation of conflicting voices.

That Updike has chosen the epistolary genre conforms to modernist techniques by anchoring incoherent, disunited representations with stable, classical forms by creating "the tradition of the new" (Keep). The readers' agency is threatened by being built into literary performance as we become voyeurs and are incriminated by our awareness of all conflicting voices. Only the novel's transcribed tapes allow the reader agency from the tyranny of Sarah's narration, although even these are not free from authorial choices and linguistic constraints. That many of Sarah's letters are solipsistic, as indicated by her letter to Myron Stern at an unknown address, confirms that the reader is manipulated by Updike, Sarah and language.

Discussing his principal themes, Updike notes that "sex and religion are such basic human concerns – the first a tribute to our bodies and animal selves, the second a tribute to our mental and (some would say) spiritual selves" (Silvestre, 246). This suggestion of multiple selves implies that the conflicting voices in the narrative are being used as a tool for getting closer to truth in fiction. While the Arhat argues that "(w)e must use foolishness to drive out foolishness" (Updike, 71), Updike similarly seeks to "describe the world as it is" (Silvestre, 247), thus using "fiction to gain access to truth" (Newman, 240). The danger of subsuming conflicting voices is the loss of self, implying that multiplicity allows one to come closer to the reality, rather than the performance of self (be it the selfhood of author, reader or character). As the Arhat says, "to confront the other, the opposite, and thus achieve advaya...is perilous, because within it one loses the self" (Updike, 155). In other words, language encourages conflicting voices that create a unified mosaic of the self to reflect the fragmented authorial search for truth. While wrestling with the Inland Revenue Service forms, Sarah mirrors Updike's authorial recognition of the limitations of language in her complaint that there are too many conflicting 'selves' that represent the ashram (Updike, 129-130). It is at once a school, church, fraternity, and publishers and as such, only by applying these many conflicting labels can a unified truth be compiled.

The division of the self in contemporary novels affects the agency of author, reader, and fictional character, which are themselves interconnected. If, as Barthes famously propounded, "it is the language which speaks, not the author" (Barthes), then the division of the unitary self into multiple voices signals the lack of agency of the author, if not the characters, created by the language of the contemporary novel. However, the concepts of unitary self and conflicting voices are not mutually exclusive, and can actually combine to enhance the agency of the reader and character. While the agency of the author is limited by language, the use of multiple conflicting voices can be seen to represent the authorial struggle for truth and autonomy. In this case, the agency of language allows conflicting voices in the narrative to create a character through a process of mosaic-building which results in a more autonomous voice.

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