FAMILY CRISIS IN AMERICAN FAMILY AS REFLECTED IN JOHN UDPIKE'S RABBIT, RUN
(Krisis keluarga dalam Keluarga Amerika yang terefleksi dalam novel John Updike Rabbit, Run)
Yeni Prastiwi1, Djoko Soematro1, dan Djoko Moerdianto2
Program Studi Pengajian Amerika
Program Pasca Sarjana Universitas Gadjah Mada

INTISARI


Kata-kata kunci: krisis keluarga - suburban - nilai-nilai

1. Ngadirejo RT 3/3 No. 31, Karetwo, Sukoharjo 57163
2. Fakultas Ilmu Budaya Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta.
INTRODUCTION

The postwar era was a dream era for most Americans. Generally, the mainstream Americans enjoyed tremendous economic growth and social contentment. The economic growth affected every part of America, from cities to suburban areas. In fact, the fastest economic growth emerged in suburban areas. These were the result of the growth of more sophisticated technology. However, this betterment did not bring adequate progress, particularly to the psychological well being of Americans.

John Updike, one of the most prolific American writers in the 1950s, gave positive reactions to things mentioned above. He captured the social phenomena in his literary works. However, his works were considered not attractive enough; later audiences, readers and critics, realized that his works were a breakthrough. In retrospect, he exposed the domesticity, everything to do with daily life and relationships among people. He presented them with brilliant imagination and creativity. It is really striking that he talks about marriage couples in crisis, while other writers deal more with the impact of economic conditions on individuals. Baym, in the *Norton* Anthology, asserts that Updike is mostly concerned with social and domestic condition in his satirical writings (2181).

Family is, thus, as the basis of Updike's writing. In the post-war era, the family's roles changed too. Grob and Billias imply that Americans in the immediate post-war period seemed to be more complacent and willing to confirm the dominant values of their time—named a reconfirmation of the traditional family. However, certain values are always in juxtaposition in a society change.

Based on the notion that a literary work is mental evidence, this study intends to find out to what extent John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* depicts the reality of American life, particularly that of the American middle-class family living in the post-war suburbs in his *Rabbit, Run*. Updike presents one's inability to adjust on conformity that creates excess; a harmonious family turns into an unstable one. In *Rabbit, Run*, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom is a married man who was not good at conforming to the dominant values. At the time, the traditional family had the father as the breadwinner; he was also the sole decision maker. The characters in *Rabbit, Run*, of course, are all involved in a family crisis. Thus, this study intends to examine the way they part in a family crisis.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

This study employs the interdisciplinary analysis, involving sociology, psychology, literature, and history fields of study. The method employed in this study is library research. In gathering the data, the writer employs library research. The data will mainly concern the American social condition of suburban area in the age of the 1950s, the domestic affairs in this life style, the historical aspects concerning the era of post World War II in America. The social aspects that are studied through library research indeed will be the primary task of the writer. The data will be taken from both written and electronic sources. Written sources include books, journals, and some articles. The electronic data will be gathered from the Internet. In the end, the data will be presented descriptively.

This study is based on qualitative research using a descriptive analysis. Since the topic of this research is family crises in the middle class American family in the suburbs in the 1950s, the study will review some books that can be pursued as references related to American family, particularly in the fifties.

ANALYSIS

The nineteen fifties is the period when the American society began to experience a great affluence, emerging from the prior era of the Great Depression and World War II. Rapid economic growth was the consequence of the post-war economic demand. All this brought moral euphoria. All these Americans strove for economic and not societal betterments.

One negative consequence of this age was generational. While the parents remembered the Great Depression, and worked hard to insure their financially, secure future, their children enjoyed the fruit of their parents' labor. In part, their parents tried to isolate their children from the hardship they had endured in the past twenty - thirty years. The luxury of the new suburban life essentially spoiled the era's youth who lacked their parents' ambition.

Because of the new abundance, youth no longer were required to have jobs to provide them with spending money or to contribute the household income. Families did not let their children grow naturally and materially independent, and this produced dependent youth. This family also created family friction, as the youth rebelled against parental authority. As historian Christopher Lasch (1978) describes this age: "the family had been 'invaded' by outside forces - advertising, the media, experts, and family professionals and stripped of its functions and authority" (Skolnick and Skolnick 6).

In the suburban areas, the residents conformed to the common trend
Yeny Pessini, et al., Family Crises in American Family can influence offspring by expecting behavior that is appropriate to soc-
ial change, and can in turn be guided by offspring in formulating this expec-
tation (qtd. in Skolnick and Skolnick 529). Parents are not the sole
perpetrators in forming expectations to their children, but the children
themselves take part in determining parents' expectation, even parents'
dream. Child's achievements for instance may lead parents' expectation
to certain dream about their child's future. Parents occasionally ignore
the children's freedom to make a choice in their life. The parents' expec-
tation to the child sometimes over-control that makes the child feel
manipulated by parents' authority. Parents forget that a child is an indi-
vidual who has his or her own right to make a choice in their life. Skinner
and Roger notes that "all men control and are controlled... in the broad-
est sense is not how freedom is to be preserved but what kind of control
are to be used and to what ends" (124). This sentence implies that par-
ents' control over the children has to last in a certain goal or the children
will face authoritative parents.

Updike in his Rabbit, Run shows this authoritative parents through
Mr. and Mrs. Springer's intervention to their daughter's marriage,
Jane's. This happened to Jane when she determines obstetrician for
her pregnancy medical checking. "Jane's used to another obstetrician
for the first baby and after her hard time her father made her switch to
this one" (RR 200). Mr. Fred Springer's rolling in his married daughter's
life was well accepted by her daughter, Jane. This Jane's "acceptance" to
her parents' favor personifies the fifties generation with typical char-
acteristic - spoiled generation. Jane used to lean on parents' help before
further self-effort for betterment. Mr. Springer acknowledges his daughter
habit well, that he could not trust his daughter neither Jane's husband.
Mr. Springer's anxiety to recognize awful situations that might happen
to Jane leads him to the stage of denial - a denial that her daughter
is about time to grow up and to stand by her own feet. A psychologist,
Jerry Lewis, (1979) stresses that denial here refers to the conscious or
unconscious refusal to recognize painful acts, situations, or ways of be-
ing (qtd. in Strong and Devault 286). However, it shows parents' inabil-
ity to accept change or it is namely denial of change. On one side, this
parents' denial of change would be a very useful aid for the kids but on
the other side creating a bad role modelling for kids too. The good thing is
helping Jane's state of survival when she was jobless and has to be a
temporary single mother for her children. This parents' aid fits Aldous' (qtd.
finding, a family sociologist, (1967) that middle-class parents ignored their
children financially or by providing services (qtd. in Strong and Devault
286). The bad side is that her father's help devalues her effort to perform
her autonomy as a married woman. Additionally, Updike also shows

Cries of Parent-Child

Family failure is also determined by the role of parents. Parents gen-
erally require their children to have a brighter future than they are. Par-
ents' expectation to their children may lead to family crises. Moreover,
things will be worsening if the mother and the father have a different
expectation.

Updike also depicts this kind of family crisis in his Rabbit, Run. The
major character, Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom experiences this authoritative
crisis. His father, Mr. Earl Angstrom lets Rabbit grow with all the capac-
ity Rabbit has. On the other side, the mother puts much expectation on
Rabbit's future, since she knew Rabbit's talent in sport basketball. She
wants him to have a career as a successful basketball player "but they
didn't know how he had worked at that. Out back every evening hang-
ing the ball way past dark: you wondered how he could see" (RR
163). Rabbit thus tried to find his own way within the sprout of Basketball
in American Society.

Rabbit as a son tries to find his self-identity and not to depend on his
parents' support by making decision for life determination to show his
self-sufficiency. Hence, parents expectations to their child sometimes
will be a constraining matter for the psychological development of the
child - maturity, when they do not notice the child's expectations.

On the other hand, parents' expectation works in a reciprocal term to
the children's way of determining and conducting life occurrences
what Marilyn Johnson (1976) terms it normative expectations. Parents
Rabbit’s inconvenience towards Mr. Springer’s intervention into his marriage.

Cries of Wives-Husbands

A marriage is built with full of hopes or conceptions to form a strong happy family. Expectations are shared among couples of lovers prior to the marriage. When it comes to a marriage and has to withstand of family problem, shattered expectations are on this way. Burgess and Locke, speaking on this imply, “certain idealistic conceptions of each other derived in the romance of courtship and engagement are likely to break down in the prosaic activities of everyday married life” (547). Ups and downs of life matters may deviate life conceptions that one has created.

Ruth Leonard, the other character in Rabbit, Run, gives a scene of this shattering of conceptions between husband and wife. As implied by Burgess and Locke, there are kinds of basic elements of family crisis: the shattering of conceptions which each holds of the other and divergent conceptions which are present at the time of marriage or develop afterward (547).

On another scene, Updike shows a divergence of conceptions of wife-husband relationship. It was begun with a decision of marriage that had to be made in rush by Rabbit and Janice. First, Rabbit and Janice were blinded with love they had in their youth that they committed a premarital sex.

...she felt awful about being pregnant before but Harry had been talking about marriage for a year and anyway laughed when she told him and said Great she was terribly frightened and he said Great and lifted her put his arms...she couldn’t explain to anybody she had been so frightened about being pregnant and he made her proud...” (RR 252).

It vividly shows that both Rabbit and Janice were standing on different conceptions about getting married. Her not being ready to get married made a divergence of the marriage conception as Rabbit has. She became a wife with a different characteristic of an ordinary suburban wife at the 1950s who adored the glory of domesticity.

Subsequently, she performed another kind of family crisis, which might weaken the bond of family relationship. It is shown by her ignorance to her duty as a wife to serve her husband and do home chores. She did not welcome his husband from work as women of the fifties usually did. Human being is a unique one with his or her own characteristic. Each characteristic carries different conduct, but and most of all claims respect for the right of others. Strong and Devault emphasize the significance of respect among family members as follows: “another way we show that we care about our family members, friends, and fellow human being is by according them respect for their uniqueness and differences even though we may not necessarily understand to agree with them (519). In other words, respecting other people is not always asking for agreement but understanding and tolerating others’ deed relating to their uniqueness.

However, society where one lives in would not consider one’s toleration to his or her couple as a positive action that subsequently would bring a good result. Burgess and Locke emphasize that, when an unfavorable reaction of the community is foreseen or experienced, a new type of crisis develops; namely, that of disgrace” (549). American suburban society in the 1950s like Pennsylvania which holds traditional family values further glorifies fidelity in maintaining the marriage stability for family strength would consider Janice’ toleration to her husband’s sexual affair as a crisis; infidelity is considered as family crisis since it brings the family into disgrace.

Besides, infidelity or unfaithfulness in a marriage is something that is unacceptable for the fifties’ society particularly in suburban area. Pogrebin seems also thrive to emphasize that both husband and wife—should not make a comparison in terms of wanting experiment of comparison at the aim of self-contentment. In Rabbit, Run, Rabbit, the one who commits extramarital sex does this kind of comparison between Ruth and his wife, Janice. “Janice was shy of his eyes so Ruth heats in his darkness...He braces himself on her arms above her, afraid, for it is here that he most often fooled Janice, by coming too soon” (RS 84 - 5). His new sexual intercourse experience with another woman makes him compare between Ruth and Janice. At the same, it also builds his self-confidence and does an experiment in sexual outside-marriage intercourse.

Additionally, such an extramarital sex is something unacceptable for the society. “Americans in the 1950s considered the does of extramarital sex was likely lack morals.” (http://www.theage.com.au/2003/02/26/1046064096428.html). Both Ruth and Rabbit are in a way of having personal relationship. They decide to live together for a private reason and have private bargain about relationship. The more important to notice from their relationship is that they are not under legal commitment, marriage, but cohabitation. Since Rabbit has been married, his decision to leave his family to live with Ruth is one of his ways to get another exclusive sexual experience and free from social responsibilities as well. Waite notes that cohabitants do not have responsibility for financial support of their partner and do not pool financial resource. Cohabitants are
more likely than married couples to both values separate leisure activities and to keep their social lives independent" (http://www.gsu.edu/~ccph/ ncc_negativereffects.htm). The door of cohabitation tends to be individualistic in the sense of being selfish for married man, and cheating his marriage for another woman. He minds about his own interest than thinks of preserving or caring about the health and the strength of his family and marriage as well. Rabbit, as the member of the fifties‘ society apparently wants to rebel toward the social conformity about traditional family values which praises the satisfactory performance of traditional roles.

A view of disgrace is also captured in Janice, Rabbit’s wife. She is addicted to liquor. Her mother finds out that it is one of the crises in her daughter marriage that needs to be recovered. Her mother says, “Yes you say stop when you keep bringing us all into disgrace. The first time I thought it was all his fault but I’m not sure anymore. Do you hear? I’m not so sure (RR 262). One of family members experiences a crisis, and the whole family will suffer it too.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study indicates of crises that are experienced by characters in John Updike’s Rabbit. Fun covers crises in parent-child relationships and crises in wives-husbands relationships.

In short many crises are revealed in the novel. The first is the crises in parents - child relationship that is begun with family expectation, but it leads to other crises, authoritative parents, and parents’ intervention, into children’s marriage. The other crises revealed in the novel are the lack of parents’ time allotment for children, child distress and child abuse. Another kind of crisis is the crisis in wife - husband relationships that are shattered of conceptions and divergence of conceptions, less respect of marriage couples, wife’s negative tolerance to her husband’s affair and social disgrace.

This study would never be accomplished without the endless prayer and support from my beloved, Iwik, Bapak, my friends Porno and Winda. The abundance of love and help from my respectable advisor Pak Soem and Pak Moer also made this thesis accomplished. Thus I express my deepest gratitude for them all. May Allah SWT bless you. Amen.

REFERENCE


