



## John Galsworthy's Vision of Life

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**Abstract:** *All great artists have an acute social awareness. They are directly or indirectly affected by the problems of their time and are related to their society in one way or the other. Speaking of the Victorians it can be said that "Tennyson was society's spokesman, Thackeray its wit, Dickens its social conscience, George Eliot its 'fast' woman and Browning its intellectual." The artist's view of life and his expression of it, in his works, is conditioned by the society he belongs to. "It does not matter whether the individual's attitude towards that society is one of acquiescence or approval or whether it is that of a rebel, as waft or warp, he remains part of the pattern." It does not mean that an artist's own individuality is of no significance. It is always important and an artist has to blend it with his consciousness of society.*

*Galsworthy, too, realized this fact. His works clearly show that he always considered art as part of life. At no stage of life he supported the dictum of 'Art for Art's Sake' Once he unequivocally declared that "art is rooted in life for its inspiration,"*

**Key Words:** indirectly, affected, Speaking, Victorians, spokesman, Thackeray, Dickens, conscience.

After reading Galsworthy's works, particularly his novels, one is easily impressed by his awareness of society and its problems. In most of his novels he takes one or the other problem of his time and treats it at full length. Being the only son of a very rich father, he was kept away from all kinds of hardships and discomforts. And yet he was able to develop a social conscience through his knowledge of mankind and through some revealing personal experience. One of these experiences was his nocturnal visits to the poorer districts of London; Marrot records his "fondness for wandering about at night in the poorer districts listening to the conversations of the people sometimes, visiting dosshouses."

Galsworthy discusses all sorts of social problems in his novels but only four of them occupy his mind predominantly. Other social issues are only offshoots of these four major problems which can be enumerated as follows: economic disparity, society and the individual, law and justice and the woman's question.

Galsworthy pays a good deal of attention to economic disparity as it is one of the basic social

questions. According to him, it is the cause of the social suffering and is the main obstacle to the coming together of the rich and the poor. On the one hand, the rich enjoy all the luxuries of life and on the other the children of the poor are miserably housed and fed. Even the law has no solace to offer them. While the rich can purchase even law with the power of their money, the poor have no access to it. In his early novels the mood of Galsworthy is a bit rebellious. As a consequence, he lashes out at this problem severely.

In his novel *The Island Pharisees* the novelist exhibits the world of the doss-house and that of the smug Dennants together. Here the novelist criticises 'the smug English Society for its hypocrisy and prudery, its bigotry and formalities. The presence of Ferrand who jestingly propounds better truths in sharp contrast to the Dennants, symbolizes the state of those who have nothing to call their own in this world. In this novel Shelton while visiting London slums, sees a "doss-house". a doorless place with a stone-flogged corridor. He is deeply moved by the night life of the slum dwellers. These slum dwellers are thieves, drunkards, ruffians

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and poor and helpless women. They seem to know nothing of morality culture and civilization. The poor old man tells Shelton with a drunken scorn.

"It's the same all over this pharisaical country. Talk of high morality and Anglo-Saxon civilization : The world was never at such a low eff ..... look at women : the streets here are a scandal to the world. They won't recognize that they exist..... their noses are so dam high: They blink the truth in this middle class country."

Fraternity reveals a new dimension of this problem and deals with the issue in a more concrete manner. It not only shows two worlds existing side by side but also stresses the fact that the gap between the two is so vast as to be unbridgeable. In this novel the novelist discloses two different worlds, the world of the Dallisons and their 'Shadows'. The world of the Hughes and little model is the wild, pathetic and wretched world of the or and the down-trodden. They suffer throughout their lives and face various hardships. The intellectual rich, on the other hand, are cultured and civilized persons. The novelist mention Mr. Purcy Al Damyer who is always unaware of the miserable conditions of the lower class. Even those who know of the problems of this class are willing to do nothing. What they do is to interfere with the lives of their "shadows" according to their whims and prejudices. Stephen Hilary like other men of his class writes cheques for charities but he never cares to come into personal contact with the lower classes.

The *Freelands* also is a realistic picture of social inequality. In this novel Galsworthy draws a real picture of those who are socially oppressed. They are not allowed to enjoy the freedom of action and freedom of ideas. On a slight ground of morality they are crushed. This book gives an impression that the two social groups would never understand each other and be closer. A Commentary describes the truths of grim social existence and shows that Galsworthy knows "the world of dark and broken waters running beneath the bridges of great towns."

In the *White Monkey* Galsworthy sets the

life of Bicket and Victorine in contrast to the life of Michael Mont and Fleur. Bicket is compelled to steal copies of *Copperfield* for the treatment of his wife. He admits his guilt before Michael Mont.

"Well, Mr. Mont, anything that'll give me a chance, I don't mind confession. I have, ad a few previous, and it is just about kept my wife alive. You've no idea what that pneumonia like for poor people."

The suffering of Bicket and Victorine is the suffering of all those poor people who always live from hand to mouth.

Thus, Galsworthy, in all his earlier novels, paints economic disparity which, according to him, is incompatible with true social progress. In these novels his sympathy is always on the side of the poor who suffer on account of the defective system of society and unsympathetic attitude of the rich towards them. Galsworthy like Marx and other thinkers of his time was conscious of the sins of capitalism. According to him, the root cause of all economic disparity is capitalism. True progress can never be achieved unless the wide gap between the rich and the poor is bridged. Capitalism cannot be justified because it gives chances of true progress to persons. He believes that we cannot reject what has been called "the struggle for sheer existence." It will go on continuously. But you cannot make others suffer in the name of the struggle for existence. According to Galsworthy, "live and let live" is the best ideal to be followed. According to him, society would follow the goal of equality. He, however, never talks of mathematical equality. For him equality means such conditions in society in which all the persons, poor or rich, weak or strong, small or great may get the opportunity for their physical mental and spiritual progress. It is of course, not easy to realize equality which is "the greatest of all visions."

Galsworthy gives a practical solution as well to remove economic disparity. His theory of Foggartism expounded in his novel '*The Silver Spoon*' is the remedy offered for the then state of



affairs. Foggartism is associated with a character, Sir James Foggart. Michael Mont, a practical idealist support this theory. The chief characteristics of Foggartism are as follows :

- 1- Young persons should go to colonies to increase trade.
- 2- People must go back to the land and efforts must be made to increase agriculture.
- 3- Self-sufficiency in food should be stressed.
- 4- Slums should be abolished, there should be check on the use of aeroplanes in war. Galsworthy, thus, gives some practical suggestions to remove economic disparity.

Galsworthy as a social thinker expresses his views on the relation of society and the individual as will. He was the supported of individual freedom. He criticized all those social institutions which crush individual liberty. He criticizes all those social institutions, customs and conventions which destroy human energies. If George Pencyce in *The Country House* "is spoilt, the system is to blame."

The conflict between a philistine and a revolutionary artist is the theme of his novel *Villa Rubein Here Harz*, the hero makes efforts to marry Chris, a girl belonging to that class of society called philistine. Here may be seen the fight of the individual against society. This time Harz wins but in other novels the individual is broken and society wins. Bosinney is completely ruined by Soames in *The Man of Property* and Bob Tryst face his tragic doom because of the power of the Mallorings. Several novels of Galsworthy show that in conflict between society and the individual, society wins as it is powerful.

Galsworthy's approach to the whole question of society and the individual is a balanced one. He was temperamentally an individualist but his legal training taught him the importance of the State. He can not be placed in the category of Locke and Voltaire who do not tolerate any checks upon the natural liberty of the individual. But Galsworthy does not believe in collectivism and does not call upon the individual to submerge his interests into

those of society, as Marists and Socialists do. He is in favour of individual liberty if it is not harmful to society. Social institutions are good, if they do not interfere with the human progress. Neither society nor individual is supreme. Both are important if they work within their limitations.

Woman's question, so prominent in Galsworthy's time, also drew the novelist's attention. Galsworthy was the supporter of the women's cause. As women was considered a socially degraded creature in the Victorian era, her life was full of misery and hardships. She was bound to man from her childhood to her death. Socially and politically she was thought inferior to man. Consequently, she was denied social freedom as well as political rights. Man was free to use property right on her. If a woman married a man, she was expected to obey him and fulfil his desires whether she loved him and or not. Owing to false ideals of modesty and duty she was compelled to suffer throughout her life. Freedom from the bondage of marriage was a dream to her as divorce laws of the time were too antiquated, complex and harsh. No woman having any sense of decency could think of seeking their protection. John Stuart Mill in his "Subjection of Women" criticized this state of women and considered their continued slavery "a relic of the past discordant with future." Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, Granville Barker, St. John Hankin, Stanley Houghton and a few others as well lent their full support to the woman's cause.

Galsworthy too was not silent about the misery of woman. He had deep knowledge of woman's suffering through Ada, his wife, who had to suffer the agony of married life because of the tragic mistake of her first marriage. His article *On the Position of Women* shows his deep thinking of this question. In this article Galsworthy mention two facts for the inferiority of woman to man. According to him, "women have not the political vote, women who can be divorced for one offence must, before they obtain divorce, prove two kinds of offence against their husbands". Galsworthy



supports the emancipation of woman as it is a genuine idea. The concluding words of his article show his faith in the justice of the woman's cause and his support for it. "Our whole social life is in essence but a long, slow, striving for the victory of justice over force; and this demand of our women for full emancipation is but a sign of that striving. Are we not bound in honour to admit this simple fact?"

Galsworthy depicted the misery of those married women as well who were bound to their husbands though they had no love for them. Only the sense of duty and respectability made them lead such a miserable life. Irene and Clare find themselves married to mental and spiritual distress. This is also the case with other heroines of Galsworthy too. The theme of loveless marriage is the major theme of the most of Galsworthy's novels. His most important novels the Forsyte Saga, the country house, the patrician, the dark flower and beyond deal with the theme of unhappy union. He has been so much conscious of this problem that his last published work over the river, also treats the problem of unhappy marriage and the agony it brings to those who are bound to it.

Galsworthy deals with the problem of law and justice and suggests some reforms. His approach to this question is well balanced. Galsworthy believes that society is responsible for the existence of criminals. Vicious social conditions compel human beings to commit crimes. According to him in most cases criminals' existence is due to poverty, environment and upbringing. But society takes vengeance from the "victims of its own shortcomings" and call it justice.

Galsworthy does not approve the hostile attitude of society towards the ex-convicts. He believes in the reform of criminals. In a letter to Churchill he says that the former criminals should be given work, otherwise they will again go to jail for want of employment. He himself gave work to so many ex-prisoners and helped them. In essence Galsworthy's social faith lies in reforming the

criminals by giving them proper treatment and having a sympathetic and human outlook towards them.

Thus, Galsworthy is a reformer in the manner of a "creative artist". He makes an attempt, through his works, to resolve social problems by mutual understanding and sympathy. All his novels attack social snobbery and prejudice, urge for a larger outlook, more tolerance, more intimate and benevolent understanding and more self-sacrifice. They seem to stress that intolerance and egoistic feelings are at the root of all our social and personal troubles. As a social thinker, Galsworthy stands for human happiness which all may share equally without any discrimination of race, sex or creed. Hence, the essence of Galsworthy's social faith lies in "the dignity of man, in Freedom, Health; Justice for all."

Galsworthy was not interested in the solution of certain specific social problems as Shaw others like him were. He only stressed certain ethical values which, he thinks, are essential to human happiness and wanted the world to be reformed in a natural way. This attitude saves him from being a preacher. He always disliked forcing "goodness on the consciousness of the reader or spectator except by the negative method." With the help of his negative method he stresses the importance of love, kindness and courage in human relations and conveys his message to mankind.

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