

A Comment on the Socio – Economic Life of Working - Class Women in ‘STRIFE’, a Play by John Galsworthy

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Abstract – *The article aims for a thorough textual study of the play; its characters and their portrayal by the author in particular; to reach to some assertion as to the author's stand regarding socio-economic life struggles of working class women. As the title "Strife" suggests, their life is full of troubles and tribulations. How they overcome these challenges thrown at them by life and society is what makes them strong.*

Keywords – *Textual, Portrayal, Assertion, Socio-Economic, Troubles, Tribulations, Overcome, Challenges.*

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Strife is the third party play of Galsworthy and it is considered by many to be the best. It was finished about the end of April, 1907 and its subject was the most burning problem of the day; the struggle between labor and capital. The fact that Galsworthy took up a living subject like this for his drama is a measure of the depth of his social consciousness and of the gradual progress he is making in his understanding of society. Indeed, when he composed this play, no other question was of more importance in England, then this.

Although **Strife** centers on the conflict between labor and capital, it encompasses the socio-economic life of working-class women. The predicament of the women in the wake of the strike has been brought into full focus and calls for their redemption not only from the fetters of starvation but also from the domination of men. Coats justly points out that, **"On the side of the workers, the women and children are enduring the greatest privations through cold and hunger, for the winter has been exceptionally severe.(1)"** Equally severe have been the striking men on their families.

"The strike has continued for five months. It is a bitter cold winter and the resentment among the workers is also bitter. Their women and children are hungry and the workers have either coal or cigars. The directors of the company are also not in comfortable position. The company has already lost nearly fifty thousand pounds, many new orders are being taken up by other companies and old contracts will have to be carried out at a great loss. Two months earlier, Roberts, the representative of the strikers

, met the Board of Directors in London only to be told by its Chairman the he did not know what he was talking about and that he was a foolish uneducated man, knowing nothing of the wants of the men he spoke for. Now the directors themselves have come down to study the conditions and seek a way out of the deadlock. John Anthony, the Chairman of the Board of Directors, who has been in the same post for the last thirty years is adamant in his views. The other strikers are tired and they want to come to a settlement. The directors are afraid of losing more money.(2)"

In this situation the struggle of labor and capital takes the form of a conflict between their two representatives, John Anthony and David Roberts.

In the very nature of social drama, there is a suggestion for the redress of social problem and the amelioration of social conditions. For social dramas are meant to depict topical problems and as such a zealous reformatory spirit thus informs them. In this play Galsworthy has tried to achieve the impossible and he has succeeded as much as in the nature of the impossible task allowed him.

David Roberts stands for the dominant position of men vis-à-vis women in society. He is with John Anthony, Chairman of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works, but also in his family life.

His wife, Mrs. Roberts, aged about thirty-five, is a very patient and forbearing woman. She knows her husband well and tells her friend Madge that the striking workers **"won't beat Roberts"** When her employer Ms. Enid asks

Mrs. Roberts, **"Can't you stop his going Annie? Have you tried? Does he know how will you are? (3)"**, Mrs Roberts smiles ironically and replies like a docile, passive woman who doesn't have the least to stand up against her domineering husband ; ***It's only my weak 'art, M,m."***

Though Mrs. Roberts keeps appearances before her former mistress Enid by telling her that **"I don't look like a dyin' woman. (4)"** The fact is obvious enough that she cannot resist her husband's oppression of her spirit. He rejects outright Enid's request that he might have some pity on his dying wife.

Although she craves for children, Mrs. Roberts realizes the truth that **"when working man's baby is born, it's toss-up from breath to breath whether it ever draws another, and soon all is life; and when he comes to be old, it's the workhouse or the grave.(5)"** They are so poor that it is almost impossible to save for children. But Mrs. Roberts is a woman and thus full of maternal yearnings. She longs to have a child of her own but her husband would not allow it, so she grieves. Roberts does so due to economic hardships. And his wife knows that, **"That's why he wouldn't have no children, not though I wanted them.(6)"** But no matter how much she tries to hide it she does feel hurt and deprived. Her desire is implicit in her remark to Enid: ***You've got your children and you'll never need to trouble for them(7)"***. She cannot afford children and the fact hurts her.

David Roberts is quite stubborn man. His attitude towards his wife is not to be appreciated. Even when she pleads with him to compromise for the sake of the **"women"** and **"children"** who are suffering due to the elongated strike, he brushes her arguments aside brusquely: ***"If they will go breeding themselves for slaves, without a thought O' the future o' then they breed . . (8)." Howsoever right he may be in his arguments, the fact remains that he is unyielding and unaccommodating even when there are reasonable and ample grounds. In spite of his wife's serious illness, he does not allow her to accept genuine help through little gifts from her former mistress Enid. He does not even allow her to work so that he could help out in the household economy. According to Roberts, "This is not women's work.(9)" With a flash of malice Mrs. Roberts says, "No, the women may die for all you care. That's their work.(10)" This is Mrs. Roberts mild assertion of herself in the face of Robert's damn- care attitude towards his ailing wife. Without the slightest of the regard for his wife's delicate health he remarks, "Who talks of dying? No one will die till we have beaten these ""(11)." So saying this he averts his eyes from her. Coats rightly remarks that Roberts is "really killing her by his inflexible stand for principle, and both of them know it. (12)" Roberts might be a militant trade union leader, he might have his principles but he is also a husband and he owes it to his wife to look after her well-***

being, especially when she is so very ill. Besides his own wife, being a leader of the struggle, he is duty bound to consider the well-being of each and every worker and his family. He ought to look for an early settlement of the strike and not drag it by making it an ego issue. But what he does is loathsome. He leaves his wife to God's care and she in turn in her helpless state follows his movements with ***"half malicious, half yearning" (13) eyes***. Her feeling of her husband are mixed. She loves him of course but can't help feeling malice towards him as well. This makes obvious her resentment and helplessness. The unfortunate result of Robert's neglect of his wife is that the poor soul dies untended and uncared for. She is sacrificed at the altar of her husband's stubbornness. Roberts may be a faithful husband but a callous one.

The relationship between Rous and Madge, who are overs, reveals another aspect of the position of women vis-à-vis men. Madge tries all tricks in her trade to dissuade Rous from supporting Roberts. She wants the strike to end and knows how to obstinate Roberts is. She is also aware of Mrs. Robert's suffering and does not wish to suffer herself the same way. If she succeeds in turning Rous against his leader she believes the strike might end. But Rous refuses to listen to her as he has sworn to stand by Roberts' side in this strike.

With soft ***"mockery"*** Madge chides Rous ***"you are a pretty lover!(14)"*** Roberts does not listen to his wife and Rous to his girlfriend. "Smiling" madge says that ***"I've heard that lovers do what their girls ask them – but that's not true, it seems!(15)"*** She throws herself sensuously against him and ardently plead: "Do it for me! Do it for me!" But he blurts out, ***"Damn I can't! Don't play the wanton with me!(16)"*** He remains adamant.

However, Madge is not a docile doormat like Mrs. Roberts. She asserts herself and says to him: ***"But you can't break your word with me! Then, be god, I can!"*** Rous rushes off and Madge too feels as hopelessly as Mrs. Roberts. She muses and grumbles : ***"waiting an' waiting – that's what a woman has to do! (17)"*** This is a woman's plight in a society dominated by men. She definitely deserves redemption from this strangle-hold and Galsworthy takes upon himself this task.

It is true that Roberts does not come across as a cruel and tyrannical husband but he is by all means a domineering one. Mrs. Roberts is a loving and loyal wife. Although she longs to have children, she keeps her opinion to herself, knowing Roberts' views about it. She tries her best to justify her domineering husband's behavior. But Roberts is not so considering. He neglects his wife even when she is gravely ill. He deprives her of motherhood and enforces strict economy in the household. He does not even allow his wife to take any help from her former mistress who his

genuinely worried about Mrs. Robert's declining health. She ultimately pays the price by her own death.

She dies due to her husband's stubborn and uncompromising attitude.

Galsworthy maintains that women must have their way and say. They are not merely "**breeders**". They are men's best companion. They have a certain place in society and should get due recognition.

Women are not heard simply because they depend on men for all their needs, even for their bread. It is only the stubbornness of Roberts but also the economic and emotional dependence of Mrs. Roberts which leads to her death for want of care. The playwright's impassioned plea, though tacit, is that women must not remain deaf and dumb. They must come forward, become articulate and vindicate their position as compared to men.

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