

Galsworthy: The Social Crusader

Dr. Sneh Singh*

Lecturer in English, R. L. Saharia Govt. P.G College, Kaladera

Abstract – In his dramas, as distinct from his novels, Galsworthy has evolved as an individual different from that of the Forsytes and his artistic conscience finds a distinctive expression in them. His dramas are avowed attempts at realistic portrayal of modern society. His presentation and criticism of social questions earned him, at the beginning of this century, the reputation of being a powerful realist, social dramatist of England.

Marrot holds that Dickens and Galsworthy were “kindred” spirits, for John Galsworthy, as passionately as Charles Dickens, hated, “crookedness, custom and fear. He had within him the true spirit of crusaders.

Keywords – Distinct, Evolved, Conscience, Realistic, Portrayal, Criticism, Reputation, Realist, Crusaders.

-----X-----

John Galsworthy belongs to the class of great artists. His creative endeavors-poetry, drama, fiction, enshrines his vision of life and creative impulse. His literary career spread over three-and-a-half decades, reveal him as “the social philosopher, the ironist, the symbolist, the painter of character, the wizard of atmosphere, the pursuer of truth and beauty, novelist and dramatist, man and poet.”

Galsworthy has been a crusader all his life. He had within him the true spirit and genuine passion of a convinced crusader. Marrot holds that Dickens and Galsworthy were “kindred spirits”, for John Galsworthy, as passionately as Charles Dickens, hated, “Crookedness, custom and fear. He had within him the true spirit of crusaders.”

He devoted himself passionately and whole heartedly to great courses directed towards general welfare. Some of the great causes to which he lent active support were: Sweated Industries, Minimum wages, Labour Chrest, Women’s Suffrage, Divorce Law Reform, Prison Reform (Closed cell confinement), Slum Clearance and the like. His interest in these causeways was not merely intellectual. He passionately believed in them and held them dear to his heart. He gave his time, energy and often money. In actual life as well as in his writings and particularly in his plays, he showed impatience with ‘wrong and went ahead with his crusade against what he believed to be bad and unwholesome for the society. The struggle for right causes that he led never flagged or faltered for want of interest and enthusiasm.

Galsworthy presents a scathing portrayal of social misery. In almost everything he wrote, he appears as a man of powerful social conscience. His “justice” is

a proclamation of his “credo of humanity” and love of social justice. He exposed law’s blindness and senselessness. He denounced the prison system; particularly solitary confinement which crushes a prisoner’s spirit. He wrote to the then Home Secretary Winston S. Churchill: “Though personally convinced that separate confinement as a system is against common humanity and common sense and should be abolished...in a prison as in life, man can only be reformed by kindness.. closed cell confinement is an illustration of that lamentable fact. I beg to strike a crushing blow at a custom which continues to darken our humanity and good sense.”

He hated war vehemently: “I hate and abhor war of all kinds; I despise and loathe it. And the thought of the million daily acts of its violence and hateful brutishness keeps driving my soul... If this war is not the death of Christianity it will be odd. We need a creed that really applies humanism to life instead of talking of it. God in the months all those potentates-the world does not beseech them.” War for Galsworthy was “an insensate folly.”

Galsworthy was a humanitarian in every fiber of his being. He had imbibed the spirit of Humanitarianism which pervaded the atmosphere of the pre-war years. His extremely sensitive social conscience urged him to work incessantly and untiringly for the welfare of all human beings, particularly the oppressed and the exploited, by reducing man-made suffering and misery, reforming and humanizing laws about punishment. Galsworthy’s compassion for suffering animals is deep and abiding. He cherished still deeper love

and sympathy for persons in distribution and distress.

Coats justly observes that Galsworthy's imaginative sympathy "extends in much greater degree to the toiling and oppressed classes of humanity." It should, however, be kept in mind that Galsworthy had profound sympathy for the poor and the oppressed, but there was nothing dogmatic or doctrinaire about his views. He disliked being called a "reformer" in the conventional sense of the world. Galsworthy never intended reforming and reclaiming social derelicts and offenders by indiscriminate charity and largesse.

Philanthropy is, no doubt, a noble social ideal, but by benevolence alone suffering cannot be alienated, let alone eliminated. In fact, charity encourages parasitism and falls short of the ideal. In the play "The Pigeon", for instance, the playwright shows the futility and ineffectiveness of philanthropy as it tends to become doctrinaire and encourages parasitism. The three doctrinaire reformers in the play are too much in love with their theories and they incline to "lose sight of the individual." As such, the dramatist reposed little faith in institutional charity, organized philanthropy and theoretical reformism. Such theories are usually devoid of the genuine spirit of sympathy.

Humanitarianism postulates that charity and philanthropy without right judgement defeats the purpose for which they are set forth. Nevertheless, Galsworthy is full of the warmth of the heart, sincere sympathy and fellow-feeling. Coats justly call him "a typical representative of modern humanitarianism. He has a Tolstoian reverence for all life."

Herman Ould holds that "Galsworthy, the reformer, beholding the iniquities perpetrated in the name of Justice, Nationalism, Society, Religion, Property and the other. Gods called up Galsworthy the artist and made him expose the iniquities and he obeyed."

As a staunch supporter of women's causes, Galsworthy chose the medium of drama to project the problems of women subjected to ill-treatment and persecutions. He tried in his own characteristic manner to shed illumination on the pathetic plight of women and thereby quicken people's imaginative sympathy. He pleaded for the liberation of women from the fetters of the body as well as of the mind so that they could breathe fresh and wholesome air in a social order built on the principles of humanity, liberty and equality. Consequently, Galsworthy became a forced champion of oppressed women and their emancipation is the main thrust of a number of his plays.

In his drama, as distinct from his novels, Galsworthy has evolved not only as an individual idiom of expression: his dramatic works present a world different from that of the Forsytes and his artistic conscience finds a distinctive expression in them. The grey and languishing world of the Forsytes is

adequately depicted in the leisurely pace of the novel. But the novel is not suitable medium to interpret the complexities of the modern industrial era, the intense conflicts and contrast of bourgeois society. As if instinctively, the artist comes to the conclusion that the rhythm of drama, its dialectics of conflict and movement, its rejection of non-essentials make it a more suitable vehicle for the presentation of the dynamic commercial world of today. The poetry and lyricism, characteristics of the novels, are conspicuously absent from his dramas and a somewhat somber portrayal of this industrial age, an incessant search for the essentials of human personality and an anxious persuasion for more tolerance and better understanding characterize them. It is because of this that there is more of the reformer in his plays than in his novels.

But this does not mean that his plays are dissertations on socio-political problems, rather than illuminating documents of human interest. Many times he has made it clear that his plays are without any political or social motive. He has painted social conflicts as ill, not because he champions any abstract political theory but because he has seen them in his own surroundings. In a letter to his friend Ralph Mottram, Galsworthy writes "The artist takes life as he finds it, observes, then out of his store constructs (creates according to his temperament) with the primary object of stirring the emotional nerves of his audience and thereby directly, actively giving pleasure."

And it is because in his dramas he goes deeper into the essence of social living, that in response to the majesty of the stark reality, his dramatic world is colored in a grey monotone. The conception of society, dominating over and dictating the life pattern of the individual, forms a basic idea in his dramas. Society, here fakes the place of the Greek conception of Nemesis, with the difference that the Greek tragic playwrights upheld the conception of the retributive justice whereas Galsworthy's compassions for the sufferer makes him accuse society of unfeeling and unequal treatment of individuals.

His dramas are avowed attempts at realistic portrayal of modern society. The question of realism, then, its nature and scope in Galsworthy's dramas is vital. It is true that Galsworthy has depicted contemporary life and a variety of its problems in his dramas. In that sense he is a realist, adhering to ideas and problems of contemporary society. His presentation and criticism of social questions earned him, at the beginning of this century, the reputation of being a powerful realist, social dramatist of England.

So many different views have been advanced in Galsworthy's approach to his dramatic subjects that it would be only just let the author state his own

case He did so very cogently in the preface to the plays in the Manton edition of his works:

"I do not know if it is a discovery of mine that society stand to the modern. Individual as the gods and the other elemental forces stood to the individual Greek; but one has been seen it hinted at so often that one inclines to think it must be. In any case it can be understood how a dramatist, strongly and pitifully impressed by the circling pressure of modern environments, predisposed to the naturalistic method, and with something in him of the satirist will nether create characters seven or even six feet high, or write plays detached from the movements and problems of his times. He is not conscious, however, of any desire to solve these problems in his plays to effect direct reforms. His only ambitions in drama, as in his other work, is to present truth as he sees it and gripping with it his readers or his audience, to produce in them a sort of mental and moral ferment, whereby vision may be enlarged imagination livened and understanding promoted.

REFERENCES

1. Galsworthy says, "The Universe-a creative purpose-a great artist-creating himself. A globe of infinitely inspired with perpetual rays of creative instinct, as it were, from its own core. This creative instinct, which is and can be-if you think of it, nothing but craving for perfection, for harmony, is manifesting itself always in shaping (making hashes mostly)in its efforts to achieve masterpieces.
2. H.V. Marrot (1935). The life and Letters of John Galsworthy (Harmony-Religion), Londo: William Heinemann, p.754.
3. Leon Schalit (1929). John Galsworthy: A Survey, London, William Heinemann, P.10.
4. H.V. Marrot (1935). The life and letters of John Galsworthy, London, Heinemann, p. 215.
5. "Superfluous suffering deliberately inflicted on a free man or woman rouses society at once to the greatest indignation and rarely goes unremedied." H. V. Marrot: Letter to W.S. Churchill, p. 677.
6. H.V. Marrot: The life and Letters of John Galsworthy (Letter to W.S>Churchill), p. 677.
7. Ibid (letter to Edward), pp. 395-396
8. Herman Ould (1934). John Galsworthy (London, Chapman and Hall), p.18.
9. R.H. Coats (1926). John Galsworthy as a Dramatic Artist (London: Duck-worth), p.4.
10. Errand observes: "Those, sirs, with their theories, they can clean our skins and chain our habits. But our spirits they cannot touch, for they never understand. Without that, monsieur, all is dry as a parched skin of orange," The Pigeon, p. 366.
11. R. H. Coats (1926). John Galsworthy as a Dramatic Artist, London, Duckworth, p.14.
12. Herman Ould (1934). John Galsworthy, London, Capman and Hall, p.200.
13. H. V. Marrot (1935). The Life and Letters of John Galsworthy, p.193.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Sneh Singh*

Lecturer in English, R. L. Saharia Govt. P.G College, Kaladera

snehsingh4552@gmail.com