



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

HUMANISTIC CONCERNS IN JOHN GALSWORTHY'S *JUSTICE*

V. MURALIDHARAN¹, Dr. S. RAMAMURTHY²

¹Research Scholar (P/T), Bharathiar University, Coimbatore
jayamuralidhar86@gmail.com

²Dean of Academics, Centre for Research, SrimadAndavan Arts and Science College, T.V. Kovil, Trichy
srmurthy1948@yahoo.com



ABSTRACT

John Galsworthy is a British playwright committed to writing with reformist zeal. His plays are known as 'problem plays' discussing his contemporary social issues and anticipating possible solutions from his audience. His social consciousness and protesting attitude towards the evils prevailing in his time have made him an artist with profound humanity and his critical attitude towards intolerance, ignorance, hypocrisy, tyranny, superstition, and all the rest of the social disparities in his plays confirm his stand as a moral artist with humanistic concerns. Hence, this paper attempts to trace the humanistic concerns in Galsworthy's *Justice*. In this play, his attack is directed on the unjust law of the English penal system and inhumane treatment of the prison towards a convict. His objective outlook and impartial treatment of the problem give us the undistorted outlook of the elemental fault ingrained in the legal system. He also enlightens his audience of the then cruel practice of solitary confinement and its subsequent consequences in a pictorial manner. This paper focuses on his humanistic belief that man is inherently good but the social institutions have often victimized man and hinders his survival and progress.

Key Words: Galsworthy, problem play, inhumane, humanism, and legal system.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Late Victorian drama was essentially didactic. Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright, considerably influenced the attitude of the English dramatists with his realistic plays and naturalism. Thus, romantic ideals and melodramatic elements were replaced with the realism and naturalistic techniques of the contemporary playwrights. Drama, during the period, became a social document focusing particularly on the conditions of the lives of the middle-class and the proletarians of the English society. The popular playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy made

use of their plays to put forth the burning and unsettled problems of the society with reformist zeal. John Galsworthy (1867-1933), a Noble laureate, was a committed playwright with an objective outlook towards the problems confronted by the humanity of his time. He was socially conscious of the evils that thwarted the freedom and dignity of the English people and impartially juxtaposed the human problems letting his audience to contemplate solution. His plays were therefore known as 'problem plays'. Being an artist with a moral vision, he sought for justice in all the spheres of life. The impartial treatment of his characters and

the undistorted picture of the social life were the outcome of his humanitarian attitude towards life. In this connection, the play, *Justice* is an earnest appeal of Galsworthy for a humane law to make a necessary reform in the punishment of solitary confinement. This paper discusses Galsworthy's humanistic bend of mind, man is born good but is victimized to circumstance, with respect to his appeal for the compassionate treatment of a convict as a patient and humane law in the place of rigid, mechanical, and inhumane system of law.

John Galsworthy's *Justice* (1910) is a problem play with its deep insight on the penal system and solitary confinement of his time. It is a story about a man who forges a cheque to flee with a woman. She is tortured by her husband and finds no solace in her married life and wanted to settle abroad with Falder, a clerk. His forgery is found before he escapes from the place and is put to trial. He is given six months solitary confinement and released. He returns to the same company seeking a second opportunity which can be given on condition that he must quit the pitiable woman. This is against his will, and therefore, perplexed and helpless to determine anything. A police man comes in search of Falder as it is the custom to sign at the station even after the criminal is left the jail. But Falder, being perilous at the thought of returning to prison, stumbles to break his neck and dies. Such is the tragic end of the weak hearted man who did the forgery out of a temporary madness. Galsworthy studied law and practiced as an unofficial but judicial advocate of tolerance, sympathy, and compromise as he found these ideals the eternal solution to all the human problems and miseries.

Humanism : An Overview

The root-word for humanism is humble (humilis). The Latin *humanus* means human or earthy. The word *humanitas*, during the Middle Ages, was known by scholars as those relating to the practical affairs of secular life (the study of languages and literatures is still sometimes referred to as 'the humanities'). Since the *humanitas* drew much of its inspiration and sources from the Roman and Greek classics, the Italian translators and teachers of those writings came to call themselves *umanisti*, 'humanists'.

The term 'humanism' was first used by a German educationist in 1808 to refer to a course of study based on Latin and Greek authors, a curriculum that had been established by Italian Renaissance humanists. Their curriculum covered moral philosophy, history, literature, rhetoric, and grammar; it has expanded over time to include other subjects as well. Eventually, the word humanism came to indicate a certain perspective, an approach, a mentality, a vision stressing the importance of human experiences, capacities, initiatives, and achievements (Peltonen).

Though classified under many heads, all the humanisms focus, "the ways in which mankind have, do might live together in and on the world contained" (Davis, 131). Davis further says about the broadest philosophy of the theory and its cherished ideals in general, "the freedom to speak and write, to organize and campaign in defence of individual or collective interests, to protest and disobey: all these, and the prospect of a world in which they will be secured, can only be articulated in humanist terms" (132). Humanism, in short, fights against the ignorance, tyranny, persecution, bigotry, and injustice and promotes the cause of human freedom, dignity, and values.

Since *Gorboduc* to *Waiting for Godot*, drama has been focusing on the internal and external progress of man's nature. It perseveres to perfect human nature with its wit and action. The plot in drama is always anthropocentric. Though recent critical theories try to trace the human psychology through the lexical brilliance of author, the ultimate aim of the drama has not been transformed since its inception. The modern liberal humanism and existential humanism may be juxtaposed to traditional humanism but they cannot exactly be antithetic in their spirit of human liberation. Thus, the core aim of humanism is human liberty and fraternity.

Discussion

According to Galsworthy, tragedy arises due to misunderstanding. As a humanist, in the perspective of Galsworthy, misunderstanding is the root cause of all the human miseries, out of which is born disappointment, disillusionment, despair, and finally death. It is true of many of the plays of

Galsworthy and particularly the idea is focused well in his play, *Justice*. Though Galsworthy is praised for his humanitarian zeal and balanced criticism of his characters. His focus often lay on the universal issues of humanity. His focus laid in the play is on the contemporary England and its rigid system of law. Daiches regards Galsworthy not essentially a great dramatic artist but agrees that his plays are "humanitarian fables of social and moral worry; such plays as *Justice*, *Skin Game* and *Loyalties* command respect and sympathy for their technical competence and humane feeling, but these two qualities are not enough to make a great dramatist" (Daiches, 1109).

The title *Justice* may lead to varied interpretation but in the perspective of Galsworthy, it is ironically referring the injustice and wickedness of man-made system of law. The very meaning of justice is turned upside down by the people of law who should first understand the right sense and essence of the word in its right spirit before they act in accordance with the synthetic system. Hector Frome, the advocate of Falder in the play, is a mouthpiece of Galsworthy. His argument in the play clearly exhibits Galsworthy's humanistic faith that the convict must be treated as a patient and not a criminal. The playwright speaks through Frome thus:

FROME. Gentlemen, men like the prisoner are destroyed daily under our law for want of that human insight which sees them as they are, patients, and not criminals. (Act II, 153)

The social problem discussed in the play *Justice* is in connection with the English penal system. Galsworthy concerns more in the reformation of the bitter and tragic reflection of the penal system. The play is not a well-constructed one just like his play, *The Silver Box* (1906) in which he focused the double-standard of law. But, in its action and handling of situations, it is unequalled with the rest of his plays. It is interesting to trace that Galsworthy is a follower of Dickens in his humanitarian appeal towards his characters and their conflicts. According to Galsworthy, art stands for its absolute moral purpose. He believes in the deterministic ideology that man is subject to become victim to the circumstances but also hopes that man can seldom

attain perfection if he strives for it. Though he advocates that character is destiny, he never fails to register the equal share of the prevailing inhumane legal system that breaks down the weak-willed individuals. Here, in *Justice*, he finds fault with the legal system which functions mechanically without considering the victim's motivation behind the conviction committed. Frome argues that Falder has not intentionally committed the forgery it is because of temporary madness that he alters the cheque. His is a simple crime but the punishment given to him is more than what he actually deserves. The following argument of Frome justifies the idea of the tragic waste of Falder:

FROME. Once this cheque was altered and presented, the work of four minutes—four mad minutes—the rest has been silence. But in those four minutes the boy before you has slipped through a door, hardly opened, into that great cage which never again quite lets a man go—the cage of the law. (Act II, 153)

The system of law must consider the weak character and intention of Falder. He has not deliberately changed the cheque; not intentionally fail to confess; not cunningly prepared to flight but reacted only out of his feeble nature that never lets him face the problem at its face. Falder could be considered a hero but there is actually no hero to be mentioned in its strictest sense. He does not possess any of the noble or lofty qualities of a tragic hero. In fact, he is an ordinary clerk who barely survives and no ray of hope is found to his great progress in his life and in the plot of this play. "...the play being conceived in an ecstasy of rage against human oppression, the restraint of the artist controls most of the scenes. He does not give us the noble hero unjustly imprisoned; he does not give us a hero at all" (Phelps, 122). Thus, the humanistic artist has championed the cause of a common man and downtrodden through defending the protagonist of the play.

The play, in fact, has no hero, heroine or villain. Galsworthy's role as a humanist makes him evasive to the heroic portrayal of a tragic kind like Julius Caesar or a young romantic heroine like Juliet to develop his sense of tragedy. No cunning, cruel or dangerous villains are found in his plays since his humanistic outlook makes him believe that man has

no ingrained wickedness of his own and morality is not fixed, but circumstantial. Falder even confesses to James, after his rigorous solitary confinement, "I mean, I'm not what I was" (Act IV, 169). Society is the real villain; the dramatist is the hero and the audience, apparently the judge. He merely records his aversion towards the conventional penal system that is of no help to the weak-willed individual who unintentionally commits a forgery only because of a moment aberration of mind.

Galsworthy's concern for humanity on the whole is often seen through his characters' compassionate appeal in his plays. Almost all the characters in the play are more or less submissive to their system. Cokeson, James How, Walter How, and Sweedle are all sticking to their firm and its professional ethics. The Chaplain, Cleaver, Doctor, the Governor, the detective Wistor, and Warder are all noble and doing their task allotted by the system they abide with. They are all types representing physicians, lawyers, and police men. Some of his characters are the playwright's mouthpieces. In *Justice*, Cokeson and Frome are his perfect mouthpieces in the sense that they sympathize and see things with a humanistic lens. For instance, Cokeson goes to prison before Falder's six months of solitary confinement is about to end. In an interview with Prison Chaplain, Cokeson's compassion and sympathy for human in general and Falder in particular is reflected:

COKESON. I can't help thinking that to shut him up thereby himself 'll turn him silly. And nobody wants that I s'pose. I don't like to see a man cry.

THE CHAPLAIN. It's a very rare thing for them to give way like that.

COKESON. (*Looking at him in a tone of sudden dogged hostility*) I keep dogs.

THE CHAPLAIN. Indeed?

COKESON. Ye-es, And I say this; I wouldn't shut one of them up all by himself, month after month, not if he'd bit me all over...If you treat'em with kindness they'll do anything for you; but to shut'em up alone, it only makes'em savage. (Act III, Scene I, 157)

Ruth's husband is considered probably as a villain in the play as he causes her a great trouble to flee from him to seek her refuge in Falder, a poor clerk. The rich law has no answer for her plight, how can the poor Falder remedy her mammoth problem with his meager income. This question is unsolved in the play and cannot be solved at all since poverty led Falder to the moment aberration of mind and forced him to commit such an unintentional forgery. Universally law is often not humane but rigid and mechanical. The poor is seldom squeezed under the machine called law. Galsworthy, as an artist, comprehends the reality that human understanding is lacking everywhere. Courts and laws are ineffective in reforming the convicts and they instead intensify their agony and desperate fate. Phelps observers this idea thus,

There is only one villain in the play and he does not appear. He is the drunken ruffian, Ruth's husband, who beats both her and the children, and from whom under the English law she can find no way of escape. All the other people are a mixture of good and evil, and all seem to have good intentions. What they lack is precisely the lack that enrages Galsworthy, they lack human understanding, and the sympathy born of it. They cannot put themselves in the place of the suffering man and woman – if they could, oppression would be ceased and war be no more. (124)

There is a common criticism on Galsworthy that he is biased because he sways between the conscience of man and the consciousness of artist. In fact, in this play, he juxtaposes his balanced view of life. Yet, the final tragic end of Falder, the clerk, shows Galsworthy's victory as an emotional and sympathetic man rather than trumpeting his glory of true impersonal artist of perfect balance. But the fact is that not everything be seen through a political spectacle or artistic excellence in a work of art, particularly from Galsworthy, a naturalist and realist. More than a realist and naturalist with respect to his plot and techniques, he is a humanist with a heart of a Christian. It can even be said that his realism and naturalism are the outcomes of his ethical humanism. Falder's suicide cannot be the remedy

for Galsworthy, though he closes his curtain with the final consoling words of Cokeson. "No one'll touch him now! He's safe with gentle Jesus" (Act-IV, 173). He lets the audience to contemplate the after-effect of the final statement. Phelps' opinion of Galsworthy better illustrates his belief in Christian spirit:

From the point of view of orthodox political economy, Falder's suicide is a good thing, for his problem is thus eliminated. We need not worry about this care any further – only the woman and her children now remain on our hand. But from the point of view of Christianity, which is Galsworthy's view – whatever he calls himself—every human soul is precious in the sight of God and man. For the matter of a trifling sum of money of which he who lost it could afford to lose, two souls suffered shipwreck. (125)

There is no good and evil conflict as if in *Morality* plays; no conflict between men vs. destiny; no dilemma between internal and external force. Social system vs. weak hearted victim is the combat here. Finally the society, a villain, wins over the victim. The death of Falder is a tragic accident in the view of Nicoll who further observes the tragic conflict in the play as follows:

The Governor and the Warders of the prison in *Justice* are not inhuman brutes, the businessmen are not grasping materialists, callous and hard-hearted; yet these men are the tools of destiny. The pitiful Falder is caught in the toils of a force which transcends all the characters in the drama; they are not the direct cause of his fate; his fate depends upon society. The place that the tyrant took in accident days is assumed by an invisible, yet omnipresent force of civilization. (365)

Conclusion

Galsworthy records in his diary about the play's outcome:

Justice made a great sensation, especially in Parliamentary and official circles, Winston Churchill, the new Home Secretary, and Ruggles-Brise, head of the Prison Commission both witnessed it, the first with sympathy, the second with a sinking

sensation. Reinforcing previous efforts the net result was that solitary confinement was reduced to three months for recidivists, and to one month for intermediates and star class. (qut. in Varshney, 44)

Solitary confinement is the most inhuman punishment to be given to the least degree of conviction like forgery. Though the punishment is reduced to three months from six months by Winston Churchill, the man to man concern on compassionate ground is not thoroughly achieved in the mechanical penal system as Coats rightly observed, "If Galsworthy's indictment of human justice is severe, his indictment of the general harshness of the world, man's inhumanity to man, is still more bitter" (Coats, 80). Galsworthy anticipated reform not in penal system alone but in basic nature and treatment of fellow-human beings towards the convict both inside the jail and in the social sphere. Though the play attracted the attention of the then Home Secretary Winston Churchill to effect important reform on the solitary confinement and 'Ticket-team-system', it particularly supports and upholds the value and dignity of man at the expense of any institutionalized system and reform.

Sheila Kaye-Smith, a biographer of Galsworthy, observes the irony of the play thus, "Galsworthy suggests no remedy, no alternative. He does not hint anywhere that Falder has been badly treated as well as justice will allow; as many men are the victims of injustice, so is he the victim of justice" (24). Galsworthy never suggests any remedy in his play as his plays are strongly suggestive to the social institutions to contemplate and make their own amendments for human betterment. Davis sums up the goals of all the humanistic schools thus, "For one thing, some variety of humanism remains on many occasions, the only available alternative to bigotry and persecution" (132). Galsworthy, as a social critic, depicts the human intolerance and harassment in the name of penal servitude, solitary confinement, and ticket of leave system in a vivid manner in this play. The intellectual, moral and social stand of Galsworthy rightly places him amidst the humanists with a concern for the welfare of humanity. This paper endeavours to identify the

humanistic perspective of Galsworthy who has expected the officials of court and prison to treat a convict as a patient and suggests a flexible and humane law to remedy the eternal problems confronted by weak-willed individuals like Falder. His rest of the plays can also be studied with respect to his humanistic ethics and profound moral vision.

References

- Daiches, David. *A Critical History of English Literature*. Vol. II. New Delhi: Supernova Publishers. 2010. Print.
- Davis, Tony. *Humanism: The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Galsworthy, John. *25 Plays*. USA: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928. Print.
- Kaye-Smith, Sheila. *John Galsworthy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916. Print.
- Nicoll, Allardyce, *British Drama*, London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd., 1932. Print.
- Peltonen, Markku. *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570-1640*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.
- Phelps, William Lyon. *Essays on Modern Dramatists*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921. Print.
- Varshney, R.L. *John Galsworthy: Justice*. Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 2013. Print.