

CAUSES OF SOCIAL DETERIORATION IN JOHN GALSWORTHY'S THE FUGITIVE

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Article Received:09/5/2022,

Article Accepted: 20/06/2022,

Published online: 23/06/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.6.2512

Abstract

This paper attempts to depict the causes of social deterioration in John Galsworthy's *The Fugitive*. In *The Fugitive*, Galsworthy portrays the role of the mechanistic model and its polarising influences in various public and private institutions, including the judicial system, industry, and marriage. The inclination of the Western culture to conceive in terms of dualities, which many feminists acknowledge as the ultimate source of class and sex segregation, is the most potent manifestation of this concept. The power-driven nature of this style of mind leads to moral ambiguity because tasks carried out inside it tend to serve their ends rather than a unified moral purpose. *The Fugitive* is a candid, analytical examination of the challenges women face who are divided between the ideals of liberty, marital commitment, and society's harsh laws.

Keywords: Society, Deterioration, Morality, Marriage, Women, Humanity

John Galsworthy is one of the great names in English literary history at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was a dominant figure in drama in the epoch-making first years of the twentieth century when the literature of the modern era was born. Some remarkable traits of conspicuous characters in certain Galsworthy plays spring from their notions about their own life and the life around them. Notions of idealism in personal behavior like self-respect, dignity, loyalty, and humanity and egoistic dominance of one individual self over others become leading thematic motivations in these cases.

Plays that deal with domestic problems of a universal and permanent significance without introducing any immediate social questions are very few. Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* could be included in this group. In his plays, the individual villain is substituted by the invisible force of society. As R.H. Coats, in *John Galsworthy as a Dramatic Artist*, observes, "His naturalism is akin to that of Ibsen, he shares the moral earnestness of Shaw, in his preoccupation with the sores and diseases of society he resembles Brieux" (9).

The Fugitive is the tragic story of a beautiful woman who leaves her husband because she does not love him anymore and is driven to desperate suicide. Social and religious issues are involved in this family breakdown. Clara's helplessness and her husband's obstinacy, the conflict between freedom and coercion, ending in a disastrous consequence, are dramatized in the play.

Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* depicts the causes of social deterioration. It appears from the theme that so long as we respect the conventions of married life, whatever intolerable the conditions, we are safe. However, we are done for when we become separated from the herd and make a bold, adventurous bound for social freedom and spiritual emancipation. The hunt is up at once, and a versatile hue and cry are raised that will not let us rest until, a Fugitive, we are run to earth. Doubtless, society must protect itself, and an institution like marriage must be established to meet the needs of the vast majority of people, who are quite contented with its bonds. However, the world is terribly, needlessly hard on those who, like Clare, is "too fine, yet not fine enough" to fit into the condition imposed by conventional society. Such delicate and sensitive creatures exert after freedom and make a wild leap to secure it, only to find them thrown into the rubbish heap at last because they are unable by training and temperament to earn their living.

The Fugitive is a frank, analytical exposition of the problems of women who find themselves in tragic situations, torn between the ideals of liberty, the sense of marital obligation, and the inhuman laws of society. It illustrates what G.B. Shaw remarked about the Woman question "Woman has two enemies to deal with, the old-fashioned one who wants to keep the door locked, and the new-fashioned who wants to thrust her into the street before she is ready to go" (G.B. Shaw's *Major Critical Essays*, 177). Clare manages to fight with the former but fails in her attempts to overcome the latter difficulty. Cut off from the old world, not yet adjusted to the new, it results in maladjustment to the environment, which consequently brings about a morbid tragedy. In *The Fugitive*, Clare confides in her friend, "I suppose there are lots of women who feel as I do, and go on with it; only, you see, I happen to have something in me that comes to an end. Can't endure beyond a certain time, ever" (374).

Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* "is the tragedy of ladyhood, of women bred and brought up to being all right if things go reasonably well, but neither hardy nor coarse-fibred enough for the cross-winds of life" (372). Clare, one of those women all vibration, iced over with a trained stoicism, is married to the prosaic George Desmond. Clare's problem is almost identical to that of Irene. Sexual incompatibility is so extreme that she can only think of her marriage as the reconciliation of two animals, one of them unwilling. The dramatist is so engrossed in depicting the emotional conflict of the persons concerned that he loses touch with reality. Characters seem to be shadowy beings fighting unreal and exaggerated problems. However, this unhappy marriage problem is personal to the dramatist.

Clare has been brought up in a country rectory where her widower father lives with a small income and a large family. In due course, she marries George, and soon afterward, she feels that her marital life is unsatisfactory. Clare is fond of poetry, while George is prosaic. After five years of wedded misery, during which she discovers that George chiefly desires that which she is more and more unwillingly to give, Clare deserts her husband and goes to Malise, and artistically minded friend, for advice. Though she likes him, yet shrinking from dishonourable relation with Malise, she takes a turn to sell gloves behind the counter of a draper's shop, but she feels unfit. Seeing no way, she returns to Malise as his mistress. "The Pack! Ah! What Second-Hand devil is it that gets into us when we run in packs! - A Motley" (84).

George comes to know the later development with the help of spies. He offers Clare his home again, the privacy of her room, and an independent income. However, Clare refuses to accept. In revenge, George institutes divorce proceedings and demands 2000 pounds from Malise. Thereupon Malise loses his love for Clare, and rather than embarrass a man she loves, she sells her mother's jewelry and is driven forth again, this time to a life of vagabondage.

Next time we find her, plainly but neatly dressed without a single penny in her pocket, sitting at a table in "The Gascony" Restaurant on Derby Day. A young man comes and makes advances on her, and she is about to accept the request; another polite request that he would have supper with her at the same place the following evening. Suddenly she realizes the desperate nature of her situation and feels shy and becomes nerveless. In despair, she takes poison while a company of revelers in the adjoining room keeps up the chorus at a hunting song accompanied by horns, with the refrain, "This day a stag must die."

Clare, in *The Fugitive*, occupies a leading role and has been brought up in a country rectory, where her widower saint father with a small income and a large family. She marries George, an averagely decent English man, and soon afterward discovers that she and her husband have not one idea in common. After five years of wedded misery, during which she discovers that George chiefly desires that which she is more and more unwilling to give. She wants to help her parental family in order to uplift their economic standard. For that, she requires money, while George is neither interested in her father's family nor giving any economic aid. Even after the five years of their marital life, she has no issue. Perhaps the main reason for her unadjustment with George, she feels sexually dissatisfied from George's side because he feels her not a human being but a beautiful thing. Therefore, she deserts her husband and goes for advice, as a sexually dissatisfied lady, from an artistically minded friend Malise, who himself is not an economically sound person. She departs from him in turn and takes to selling gloves behind the counter of a draper's shop. For the routine and drudgery of this position, she is utterly unfitted both by temperament and training, and after a time, no other door beam opens to her. She returns to Malise, this time as his mistress, for she feels she cannot take and not give. She sticks not to go back to George as he has the decency to offer her his

home again, an independent income, and even the privacy of her room. Clare's pride and repentance for the man cannot be overcome. In revenge, George institutes a divorce proceeding and demands a cost from Malise of 2000 pounds. This naturally ruins Malise, and he loses his love for Clare; rather than embarrass a man she loves, she sells her mother's jewels and is driven again to a life of vagabondage. In the next scene, she sits at a table in 'the Gascony' restaurant on Derby Day, plainly but neatly dressed and without a penny in her pocket. A young man advances to her, and she is about to yield to his solicitations when the request of another gallant that she would have supper with him at the same place on the following evening suddenly reveals to her the desperate nature of her situation. In despair, she takes poison.

Clare has no element of vice in her composition. She is naturally a loving woman, and if sometimes she is childish and a little petulant, it must be remembered that married life to her has been like confinement in a damp underground cellar so that her one desire is to escape into the fresh air. When she realizes what will be expected of her as a fallen woman shrinks, horror-stricken from the prospect, and prefers to die by her hand.

Galsworthy means the play is the tragedy of a particular situation with a heroine with a set character and moral code of her own. Even when she decides to initiate herself into prostitution, it is not because of her moral laxity but because she has a firm belief that she could not take anything from anyone without giving something in return. From the sociological point of view, Clare's suicide is additional evidence that the Feminist movement contained destructive elements in itself. The emotional tension and maladjustment of the women of that age are symbolized in Clare, justifying the abrupt denouement. Clare stoops to such a level out of her bitter resentment against the whole world. However, she is essentially virtuous, and her spirit revolts seeking the only immediate outlet, death. Meticulous care has been bestowed on this character, emphasizing the spirit of defiance against conventions and subservience to self-imposed strictures of morality.

Clare, a lady by instinct, has delicate over-sensitive nerves. She is a typical example of the woman of that transition period, where women find it revolting to surrender to their husband's marital rights in the absence of love yet find themselves unable to arrive at an alternative solution. Clare tries a desperate last leap which proves to be fatal. She decides to leave her ladyhood behind and degrade herself. However, at the critical moment, the inherent sense of decency asserts itself, and she puts an end to her unbalanced self. This is perfectly logical and in keeping with her character. With strong passions and prejudices, affection, and loyalties, Clare always acts on impulses.

The positive and negative aspects of ladyhood seeking release from the conventional fetters blend in Clare. The sense of ladyhood is manifest in her innate desire for respectability, decorum, and chastity. It constantly crashes with the womanly traits of revolt, even at the risk

of her happiness. Clare breaks the fetters but, in that attempt, destroys herself also. Galsworthy deeply analyzed her character when he called *The Fugitive* a tragedy of ladyhood to defend Clare against solid adverse criticism. "Gerald Du Maurier called it the tragedy of a 'fey' woman and was disappointed that Galsworthy did not explore the possibilities of the situations to the full" (H.V. Marrot's "Life and Letters of John Galsworthy," (371). However, it is neither idleness nor selfishness that is responsible for the tragic end. As the playwright emphasizes over and over again, what seems to be utter selfishness and absolute disregard for everything conventional is the strict moral scruple of adhering to the principle of morality dictated by her inner-self. At the last minute, the sense of decorum asserts itself. In "The Later plays of Mr. John Galsworthy," St. John Ervine vehemently attacks the denouement of *The Fugitive*; he attributes the failure to the artificially contrived situations, and Galsworthy's 'Determinism' in his theory that men are creatures of circumstances" (85). In a problem play specifically meant to expose a particular situation caused by the clash between social and individual codes of morality, it is inevitable that the circumstances must be preconceived. With a fixed character like that of Clare with a strong individuality of her own in an atmosphere of rigid codes of conduct, this is the most natural and practical culmination of such a story.

Clare is a failure both as a wife and a woman. She fails even to keep herself alive. Her ideas do not serve any real practical purpose in life. It is the reason for this failure in life that Galsworthy wanted to analyze. The strange traits in Clare's character are introduced to prove his points. The play is a penetrating study of a woman's tragic end precipitated by a violent clash between her strong sense of individuality and society. Acting on impulse is the tragic flaw in this great character. However, she is a lady in the real spirit whose only ultimate resort is death. It studies a great lady who turned into a great tragedy. "In his lengthy letter to Andre Chevrillon (March 16. 1913), Galsworthy explains the situation in *The Fugitive* and contrasts the British and the French Idealism, proving specifically how their respective attitudes to morality differ from each other" (H.V. Marrot's "Life and Letters of John Galsworthy," 364-365). The personal interest in such women had made Galsworthy sometimes blind to similar problem man have to face. Because of his bitter experiences, the satirist in him developed and sometimes even outgrew the artist.

Clare in *The Fugitive* is one of the best examples of such characters with whom society seems to be sporting. The deterministic forces of society come into full play in her case. The experiment is set up with methodical care; all the details are given earlier so that a scientific deduction can be made in advance. In "The Later plays of Mr. John Galsworthy," St. John Ervine criticizes Galsworthy for the exaggerated sense of inevitability introduced in *The Fugitive*.

He has been called a determinist because he shows his people as creatures of circumstances. However, in his later work, particularly in his play *The Fugitive*, his

determinism has become wilful ... he has deliberately tied their hands behind their backs and then exclaims. (85)

These are the victims of adverse circumstances, and indeed they are, but the circumstances have been artificially created by Galsworthy and not by any force that governs the universe.

In the play *The Fugitive*, social problems have been given less importance than the problem of the individual. It should not escape our notice that a corresponding change in dramatic mood and technique attends to his shift to emphasis from the social to the individual. In *The Fugitive*, this sincerity, this excess of personal feeling, marks its grave defect. Situations seem choked with feelings, and the characters have feelings they cannot express. Consequently, this unrelieved earnestness leads the dramatist to sentimentalism, especially at the end of the play.

Moreover, the characters are sticky and unconvincing in their activities. Despite all these, the atmosphere of the play boldly demonstrates the dramatist's sincerity and humanity, his genuine pity for the tragedy of women not strong enough to face the rough and tumble of life. Clare stands out as a symbol of mute revolt against hostile social surroundings.

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