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The Theme of Women and Violence in the Major Novels of John Galsworthy

Abstract

John Galsworthy, a versatile genius, novelist and play-wright lived between 1876 and 1933, and witnessed three eras in his life time: the Victorian Era (Queen Victoria, 1837-1901), the Edwardian era (King Edward VII, 1901-1910) and the Georgian Era (King George V, 1910-1936). John Galsworthy was a great British novelist, a dramatist, a journalist, an essayist and a versatile genius. He made enough use of his literary devices as an efficacious vehicle, to raise the issues of social and moral reforms, especially, the liberation of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited sections of society. In such a dismal social ethos, Galsworthy rose to give an impassioned expression to the feeling of sorrow and pathos in his writing in general and novels in particular.

Keywords: Victorian society, Sexual abuse, Violence, Immorality, Marriage law, Brutality

Introduction

The Victorian era was a time of tremendous and terrific transformation in the lives of the British people. Victoria became the queen of England in 1837 at the age of eighteen. During her reign, Britain became the most powerful country in the world, as it had the largest empire that had ever existed. Queen Victoria was ruling more than a quarter of the world's total population. Despite the fact that a woman was in power in Britain, the women of Britain had very little authority, dignity or rights, when it came to marry or own a property.

The miserable condition of women had always been a subject of John Galsworthy's work. Almost in every novel, he has depicted the hard lives of women; their status, exploitation, education and various other problems that they underwent in the contemporary society. There are many female characters in his novels that have made the readers aware of

the scenario of women in those days. In his novels, we come across the mental and physical status of women in society. Most of the women had unhappy marriages, dominating and non-loving husbands and had to be victims of domestic violence which they had to bear throughout the lives. Women were regarded as secondary and subordinate to men.

Spousal Rape and Sexual Harassment

In 19th and 20th centuries, many writers gave space to women's problems in their writings. In the male dominated society, women have always been sufferers. Sometimes, they suffered a lot because of the unfavourable conditions and sometimes due to their own near and dear ones. Women had been exploited inside and outside the house.

In his novels, Galsworthy has shown many female characters, belonging to both classes as the rich and the poor. But the common fact of endless misery and exploitation remains the same in the fate of the women of both classes. He has presented these female characters as the embodiment of suffering women. In society, women suffered from many social evils and crimes like rape, marital rape, domestic violence, emotional abuse, etc. He presented in his novels female characters suffering from these social evils. Among many female characters in his novels, one of the most prominent and sympathetic characters is Irene in *The Forsyte Saga*. She is truly a portrait of woman and the various problems that she has to face all her life. She depicts the poor plight of a married woman, a separated woman, a divorced woman, a mother etc. The basis of her marriage was not love but money and lust. Irene got married to Soames but because of Soames attitude and dominance, she could never be a wife to him as he used to treat her nothing better than a living commodity. Her husband Soames just wanted to own her as a property and not love her as a wife. Such was the status of a woman in the contemporary society of Galsworthy's own. Women were treated as an object. For Irene, life was nothing more than a compromise. But Soames had wanted her, even without her consent. With the result, he raped her. He had no guilt over his act and he did not feel himself responsible for this, and on the contrary, he made responsible other for this as he contemplated:

Without the incentive of Mrs. MacAnder's words he might never have done what he had done. Without their incentive and the accident of finding his wife's door for once unlocked, which had enabled him to steal upon her asleep. (*The Man of Property*, 235)

The society and the law in those times were against women because of this Irene could not do anything about it, she could not even complain against Soames as it was against the behaviour of a good wife, and society surely would not have accepted it as Irene was Soames wife and due to this reason, he had all the rights over her. Thus, she was unable to do anything except to live her life as a raped sufferer. Much later in the novel, when she left Soames, and started to live her own, she was not accepted by the society because in those days a separated woman was considered to be of a bad character. This made her life tougher and filled with new challenges every day. But Irene faced them all. In our view, it was one of the worst things for a woman (like Irene) if her husband raped her. A woman got married to have social security but how far she was safe and secure in her own house. She didn't have any legal right in this matter. In society, rapes had been committed in large numbers but a few cases came into lime light for trial because the rapists were very well aware of the fact that the sufferers could not narrate it to anybody because of shame and shyness. In the male dominated society, the society considers the sufferer to be the faulty one to some extent. In the same way, Soames had the same feeling and he knew very well that Irene would not tell about this injustice to anybody. Finally, Soames thought thus:

One thought comforted him: No one would know—it was not the sort of thing that she would speak about.(235)

In another novel, *Over The River*, the last novel of the third trilogy, *The Forsyte Chronicle*, the cruel and callous picture of society man has been drawn. In the novel, Clare got married Sir Gerald Corven who, from the first night of the marriage, proved to be a sadist. Every night, she had to suffer because of own husband. It was not only the torture of the body but also the tormenting of the soul. Every night, in seeking pleasure and getting more sensations, her husband used to hurt her feeling and harm her physically, sometimes,whipped her as she (Clare) told her elder sister:

Seeking sensation, and getting more sensation when you hurt the person you get it from. A wife is most convenient.(*Over the River*, 10)

Finally, it was unbearable for her and she returned to her house escaping from her husband. But her husband came to her house in chasing her and gave her a threat about the bad consequences. Finally, her husband filed a suit into the court for divorce on the basis of fake adultery of his wife. But the misery and misfortune of the woman was that if she

(Clare)made it (her husband's immoral deed) general in the society then it was very difficult for her to live respectfully and to lead a happy and peaceful life. Clare did not tell about the brutality of her husband in the court of Law due to her self-respect. It was one of the most immoral aspects of a husband. In society, rape and sexual abuse had not been the only evil that damaged the personality of women but there were many evils that made the life of women miserable and unbearable. In the novels of Galsworthy, we come across the mental and physical status of exploited women.

Domestic Violence

Different kinds of violence seemed to exist during the second half of the nineteenth century along with the general downward trend in crime rates. Nancy Tomes (1978), in her study of wife-beating in London during the second half of the nineteenth century, portrayed several situations related to domestic violence. According to her, "... tensions culminating in conflict as well as the actual beating were highly visible... it is clear that neighbours regularly watched and even participated in each other's personal quarrels." (*A Torrent of Abuse*, 37). Domestic violence towards wives was given increasing attention by social and legal reformers as the nineteenth century continued. Women were treated as objects and not humans. For men, women had a certain role to play, if they were found deviating from that set pattern or track, they were treated badly. This was a time of hypocrites wherein the image, in fact the fake image in the society was all that mattered. And to keep that image, good and spotless man would not mind sacrificing his woman for it. This immoral deed still prevails in the society. In the century of John Galsworthy, there were many cases of domestic violence. John Galsworthy gave the reference of domestic violence in his works. In the novel, *Fraternity*, there is an instance of domestic violence which shows the degradation of humanity as a whole, when on occasion, Mr. Creed witnesses an attack caused by Mr. Hughs on his wife. Mr. Creed hears a scream while resting in his room on the second floor. He waits, then he hears another, and then goes out to see the matter. Taking the poker in his hand, and putting on his spectacles, he hurries to the door. He stands with his ancient nightgown flapping round his still more ancient legs, slightly shivering; then, pulling the door open, he looks forth:

On the stairs just above him Mrs. Hughs, clasping her baby with one arm, was holding the other out at full length between herself and Hughs. Mrs. Hughs' thin body

brushed past into his room; blood was dripping from her wrist. Creed saw that Hughs had his bayonet in his hand. (*Fraternity*, 117)

At the time of watching this horrible and disdainful scene of violence, with all his might he calls out on Mr. Hughs:

Ye ought to be ashamed of yourself! Call 'imself a soldier, attackin' of old men and women in this way? He ought to be ashamed!(117)

Galsworthy tried to explain that women were not only exploited by society but they were in fact treated badly and brutally by their own husbands also. Even now in this male dominated society, women are bound to live with their husbands for financial as well as social security. In this hard world, it is difficult for a woman to live without a husband. In *Fraternity*, often, Mr. Hughs beats his wife and tortures her. It is clear from the following lines when a conversation takes place between Cecilia, Stephen, Hilary and Bianca. All are concerned about the bad condition of the seamstress, Mrs. Hughs, whose husband is always violent to her. Cecilia tells her husband to do something in the matter but Stephen says:

Well, I don't see what I can do for the good woman, my dear. One can't interfere in these domestic matters.(15)

From the answer of Stephen, we come to know about the callous attitude of society and society-men towards the exploitation of women. No one wants to interfere, no hands are lifted to save women from the beast like husbands. Another instance that throws light on the exploitation of woman is mentioned below, wherein Cecilia asks Mrs. Hughs about the behavior of her husband towards her. To this question, there comes no answer but tears trickle slowly down the woman's cheek. Mrs. Hughs' whispering voice begins with her hardened face as she says:

He's behaving himself dreadful, m'm. I was going to speak to you. It's ever since that young girl——come to live down in my room there; he seem to—he seem to——just do nothing but neglect me. I don't want to speak against her, but she's put a spell on him, that's what she has; he don't seem able to do nothing but talk of her, and hang about her room.(39)

There are instances, in the novel *Fraternity*, which clearly address the problems of women's exploitation and sufferings. They have been battered badly, beaten brutally and treated as objects. They have no option except to live with a partner like a devil. Rules were

made to run a society, but by the same rule, the conditions of women became worst by the time. In Galsworthy's contemporary society, a woman had no right to do anything against her husband except to tolerate his cruelty. Once again, the poor condition of Mrs. Hughs comes into light, when Martin and Thyme go to see Mrs. Hughs and they come to know about her endless misery and her husband's bad behavior towards her. After watching the discoloured and swollen wrists of Mrs. Hughs, Martin asks her about it:

What's the matter with your wrists? Let me have a look. Done last night. Got any arnica?(75)

After having heard the questions of Martin, Mrs. Hughs feels sorry for her poor condition and endless misery. Because of the behavior of her husband, she is ashamed in her eyes and in the eyes of others. Her poor pathetic condition is in the public. Like others, she feels sorry on her helplessness, and at last, she replies to Martin, thus:

I got my wrists like this last night, wrestling with him. He swore he'd go and leave me, but I held him, I did. And don't you ever think that I'll let him go to that young girl—not if he kills me first!(76)

The above example shows that, Galsworthy has tried to make it clear that whatever the behavior of husbands may be towards their wives but wives are always fair and faithful. In the case of Mrs. Hughs, her husband wants to get a girl because he is infatuated towards her, but Mrs. Hughs fights with her husband to save her miserable marriage. Finally, Thyme comes to know about the bruises of Mrs. Hughs by her own narration. Thyme feels pains to see the condition of Mrs. Hughs. Thyme also gets angry with Mrs. Hughs, because, incessantly, Mrs. Hughs has been suffering from the exploitation her brute husband. Finally, Thyme bursts out thus:

Why don't you leave him, Mrs. Hughs? Why do you live with a brute like that? I wouldn't stay another day if I were you. It's your duty as a woman. Take the children and go. What's the good of waiting? We'll give you money if you haven't got enough. No woman ought to put up with what you have; it's simply weakness, Mrs. Hughs.(75)

In front of Galsworthy, such were the pains, throes and corrodes of a woman in a society. She had to bear all the atrocities of her husband for the sake of her children. Women

were considered only dumb cattle. A woman had to tie herself with a house like stake. She had been a child producing machine at the prime of her life. In the same novel (*Fraternity*), on one occasion, when Martin asked Mrs. Hughs about the number of the babies and after listening to the answer of Mrs. Hughs, it became clear that she had been producing a baby almost every year:

I've lost three, sir; there's only his brother Stanley now...I missed two years in the war, of course.(75)

This shows the cruelty of Mr. Hughs. The attack he makes on his wife simply shows the inhumane side of his personality. In another work *Five Tales*, there is another example of degradation of humanity and domestic violence as well. A girl of sixteen gets married to a man who is very brutal, and beats her regularly. The protagonist, Laurence tells her brother about the story of the woman:

Her father was a Pole who died over here when she was sixteen, and left her all alone. A man called Walenn, a mongrel American, living in the same house, married her, or pretended to—she's very pretty, Keith—he left her with a baby six months old, and another coming. That one died, and she did nearly. Then she starved till another fellow took her on. She lived with him two years; then Walenn turned up again, and made her go back to him. The brute used to beat her black and blue, all for nothing. Then he left her again. When I met her she'd lost her elder child, too, and was taking anybody who came along.(*Five Tales*,6)

Most of the women have suffered from unhappy marriages, dominating and non-loving husbands and have to be the victims of domestic violence which they have to bear all their lives. Women have been always sufferers but the most pathetic thing was that they suffered in the hands of their own men in their own places. A woman can fight against Fate but fails in front of her husband. In the case of Irene, her misfortune doesn't end with her rape only but she also confronts with the curse of domestic violence. The novel, *The Man of Property*, brings forth the brutal ways applied by men on women as the only way out. When Soames came to know about the affair between Philip and his wife, in an argument with his wife, Soames gripped her arm and scolded her thus:

A good beating is the only thing that would bring you to your senses.(*The Man of Property*,204)

Irene is not only one female character who undergoes the exploitation from the men in their lives. Again and again, in several novels, women have been shown dealt with domestic violence. *In Chancery* another such example is of Winifred who is treated very badly by her husband Dartie. Her husband steals her necklace and gives it to a Spanish bar dancer. When Winifred comes to know about it, then she argues with Dartie, and then, he becomes violent to her as the narrator narrates:

Dartie seized his wife's arm, and recalling the achievements of his boyhood, twisted it. Winifred endured the agony with tears in her eyes, but no murmur. (*In Chancery*, 47)

Dartie always used his wife as a tool for his own good. He neither loved his wife nor his children. The only thing that could hold him to this relationship was money. Winifred always paid his bills and all other illegitimate expenses that he made. In the nineteenth century society, after marriage a woman's property was shifted to her husband. In this way, she didn't have any right on her own property. *In Chancery*, Dartie's thanklessness becomes clear, when Soames tells Val (the son of Dartie) about the deeds of his father (Dartie) as:

"He has always been a burden round your mother's neck. She has paid his debts over and over again; he has often been drunk, abused and threatened her; and now he is gone to Buenos Aires with a dancer. He took your mother's pearls to give to her. (88)

The above instances prove that domestic violence towards wives was given increasing attention by social and legal reformers in the nineteenth century. Women were treated as objects and not humans. For men, women had a certain role to play, if they were found deviating from that set pattern or track, they were treated badly. This was a time of hypocrites wherein the image, in fact the fake image in society was all that mattered. And to keep that image good and spotless, a man would not mind sacrificing his woman for it.

Unfavorable Marriage Law

Marriage laws of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries made the conditions of women even worse. They could not get divorce easily and if they left their husbands, they were brought back and achieved by the cruel husbands. John Galsworthy was very well aware of the attitude of society towards women because he himself had a secret love affair with Ada and he could not marry her due to the concern for society. At that time, in a society, if marriages were not successful then the women preferred to live separately but they dared not

get divorce for many reasons. In the novels of John Galsworthy, there are many examples of women who live separately from her husbands but cannot get divorce so that they may marry others to run their lives again. For example, in the novel, *The Country House* there is a woman, Helen Bellew who is separated from her husband and lives a lonely life as a miserable creature. A society woman Margery Pendyce is very much concerned about her condition and she writes a letter to her cousin to do something for the lady:

Can you do anything for a poor little girl in the village here who is 'in trouble'? It is such a terrible crime in this part of the country, and she looks so wretched and frightened, poor little thing! She is twenty years old. She wants a hiding-place for her misfortune, and somewhere to go when it is over. Nobody, she says, will have anything to do with her where they know; and, really, I have noticed for a long time how white and wretched she looks, with great black frightened eyes. I would like to do something for her, and I could spare a little money, but I can't find a place for her to go, and that makes it difficult. She seems to be haunted, too, by the idea that wherever she goes it will come out. Isn't it dreadful? Do, do something, if you can. (*The Country House*, 94)

During the earlier time, whether married or single, all women were expected to be weak and helpless, a fragile delicate flower incapable of making decisions beyond selecting the menu and ensuring her many children were taught moral values. A traditional woman ensured that the home was a place of comfort for her husband and family from the stresses of Industrial Britain. A woman's prime use was to bear a large family and maintain a smooth family atmosphere where a man need not bother himself about domestic matters.

In another novel, *The Patrician*, the condition of poor Mrs. Lees Noel is the same as Helen Bellew. One of the characters in the novel, Mr. Courtier tells Barbara about the story of that miserable woman:

Her father was ill and wanted to see her settled before he died. Well, she found out almost directly, like a good many other people, that she'd made an utter mistake. (*The Patrician*, 64)

When Barbara hears a few starting and startling words of the story, then she comes a little closer to catch the every word of the story of the woman, and she asks him "What was the man like?" at this, Milton further says:

Not bad in his way, but one of those narrow, conscientious pig-headed fellows who make the most trying kind of husband—bone egoistic. A parson of that type has no chance at all. Every mortal thing he has to do or say helps him to develop his worst points. The wife of a man like that's no better than a slave.(64)

In a society, if a wife were separated from her husband she had no rights of access to see her children. A divorced woman had no chance of being accepted in society again. It was treated as the biggest sin ever and women were punished heavily for it. Due to such harsh and hard norms of the society, almost all women would prefer staying in the shackles of a bad marriage instead of becoming social outcasts. Another instance, from the novel *The Man of Property*, confirms the stark reality of divorce law and outcast, when Irene returns to Soames after two days' elopement with her lover, then she encounters the hatred of Soames. Earlier in the novel, Soames rapes Irene, then she takes the decision to elope with her lover but she fails because her lover dies in an accident. She prefers to live with her tyrant husband than to live in a state of social outcast. She cannot get divorce because she knows the reality of the divorce laws that they are not in favour of women. That is why, she prefers the cage than to go for her rights as the narrator remarks:

She had come back then of her own accord, to the cage she had pinned to be free of—and taking in all the tremendous significance of this...(The Man of Property, 120)

Helplessness of Women and Inhumanity of the Opportunists

Galsworthy's presentation about the pathetic condition of women begins with Irene and it continues in several other novels. In another novel, *Fraternity*, there are certain instances which bring forth the women and their condition in the society. In the novel, there are many small girls who are bound to work on low wages that is not sufficient to maintain their life perfectly. Galsworthy shows that the faces of the poor working girls look like a complete book of misery and suffering. In the novel, there is one such instance that gives us a hint of women exploitation, when Mrs. Stephen Dallison goes out for shopping in a store, then she sees a working girl in the shop and she thinks:

That poor girl looked very tired; it's a shame they give them such long hours!
(Fraternity,4)

By this, Galsworthy tries to paint and present the bad condition of female workers. In the same novel, a conversation between Hilary and Mrs. TallentsSmallpeace shows the exploitation of women in the name of work and money. Sometimes, conditions compel a woman to do something to earn her livelihood. It may be immoral but it is real that they are ready to show themselves naked in the painting for the sake of a few coins. We have a developed society with all types of facilities but with this development, we also have different kinds of ways of exploiting women. In the novel, there is a girl Ivy who comes from a village to be a model in the city but she fails in it badly as Mrs. TallentsSmallpeace tells Hilary:

I fancied perhaps you might feel that our Society—hers is an unsatisfactory profession for young girls! Of course, there are many very nice models indeed. I don't mean that they are necessarily at all—if they're girls of strong character; and especially if they don't sit for the—the altogether (nude).(10)

The above lines from the novel, *Fraternity* throw ample light on the inhuman side of the society. In a society everyone wants to take an advantage of somebody's misfortune. In all his novels, Galsworthy has portrayed the poor condition of women, directly or indirectly. In *Fraternity*, a description about a model shows the poor state of women in those days. When the little model, Ivy comes to see Hilary on his call because Hilary wants to help her by providing a work as a translator for his father-in-law, and when she comes, Galsworthy draws her picture through the eyes of Hilary thus:

“He found her standing in the middle of his study, He saw a round little face with broad cheekbones, flower-blue eyes, short lamp-black lashes, and slightly parted lips. It was difficult to judge of her figure in those old clothes. Her appearance, at all events, was not "too matter-of-fact." Her speech, however, with its slight West-Country burr, was matter-of-fact enough, concerned entirely with how long she would have to sit, and the pay she was to get for it. In the middle of their conversation she sank down on the floor, and Hilary was driven to restore her with biscuits and liqueur, which in his haste he took for brandy. It seemed she had not eaten since her breakfast the day before, which had consisted of a cup of tea.(23)

When Hilary watches the little model as a whole, then the girl understands about his contemplation and her on own accord, she says to him:

If you haven't money, you can't buy things.... There's no one I can ask up here; I'm a stranger.(24)

After listening to the statement of the little model, Hilary enquires of her, “Hadn’t she got any job yet?” At this, the little model answers sullenly:

No, I don't want to sit as most of them want me to till I'm obliged.(24)

After listening to the answer of the girl, Hilary takes a heavy breath and murmurs that “Ah! She has had experience already.” As we know, England tasted the fruit of industrialization in the nineteenth century, and because of this, a great crowd of poor and unemployed people, including women and children, came to city from village to make their fortune. By the above instance, Galsworthy showed us that many girls were on the way to city to be successful, but in this race, only a few were fortunate enough.

In *Indian Summer of a Forsyte*, in a conversation between Irene and Old Jolyon, Galsworthy shows the helplessness of an exploited woman. Irene spends very hard days after leaving her rich and cruel husband. She tells Old Jolyon about her struggle to run her life. She teaches music to earn her daily bread, and she is also engaged in helping the women who are sufferers like her. She says to him about her doing as:

Trying to help women who've come to grief. I've no money to spare. I can only give sympathy and food sometimes. I go to a hospital. What hurts me most is that once they nearly all had some sort of beauty. (*In Chancery*, 10)

After this, Irene tells Old Jolyon about her hard bygone days. After leaving Soames, how she had to spend her three days on the roadside, and how she “was taken care by a woman”. Now, she does the same by helping other women who are in trouble and have been exploited like her, as she says:

I didn't care whether I lived or died. When you're like that, Fate ceases to want to kill you. She took care of me three days—she never left me. I had no money. That's why I do what I can for them, now. (19)

Finally, another interesting woman character in *The Silver Spoon* is Victorine. She belongs to the low strata of the society. For her, arranging for two meals of the days is also a

Herculean task. She loves her husband to such an extent that she does not even hesitate to give up her self-respect for their good. She believes in giving not taking. Her husband is dismissed because he commits a theft to nourish her in pneumonia. Now Victorine is ready to do a job after watching the poor condition of her husband who now sells balloons near a gutter side. Victorine only gets a job of sitting altogether (nude).

Conclusion

Thus, there are many female characters that dominate the novels of John Galsworthy. The condition of women has been very much against their destiny. In his novels, Galsworthy showed the same poor condition of women that he saw and observed in his contemporary society. Women were expected to stay home and be good ladies, expert in household chores and be good wives and mothers. Their roles were very limited and very well defined, and the changes in these definitions were not accepted by the society. Women were supposed to stay in frame where everything was definite. They were supposed to deal with household chores only and the world outside the house was the area of work for the men of the family. Galsworthy has mentioned different women, from different social classes and different family settings in his works to bring out their mental and emotional status. It was not an easy task for a woman to make her mark in the society because at every step many restrictions were imposed on her. And what makes Galsworthy's writings so interesting is the sensitive and influential portrayal of the female characters. He has done the characterization of these characters keeping in mind all the nitty-gritty related to them. If there is a good woman in the novel, there is also a bad woman in it. He has made his writings so real that the feelings and the emotions attached with each of the characters touch our hearts. Women, their social status and their sufferings have always been a matter of discussion in John Galsworthy's novels. He has highlighted all such issues concerning the lives of women's exploitation in all the novels.

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