



## Re-interpretation of John Galsworthy's *Justice* as a Critique of Socio-Judicial Structure of His Time

Shaheen Qamar

Dr. Aruna Sharma

ORCID: 0000-0001-8500-0082

**\*Corresponding Author: Shaheen Qamar**, Research Scholar, Department of English, AK, PG College, Hapur, UP, affiliated to Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, UP, India

**Dr. Aruna Sharma**, Associate Professor, Department of English, AK, PG College, Hapur, UP, affiliated to Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, UP, India

### Abstract

**Aim:** John Galsworthy, a contemporary playwright of George Bernard Shaw, and Harley Granville-Barker, established realism in drama in 20<sup>th</sup>-century England. The research paper in hand aims at reassessing the ill effects of socio-legal injustices and inequalities on human personality in John Galsworthy's *Justice: A Tragedy in Four Acts*. The paper also enlightens the audience about the contemporary ill effects of solitary confinement and its subsequent repercussions on the human mind and body.

**Research Methodology and Approach:** The researcher has adopted MLA style 8th edition in writing the paper and this paper undergoes critical scrutiny showcasing

the inhuman- ill-effects of socio-legal injustices and inequalities on human personality in John Galsworthy's *Justice*.

**Outcome:** Through the play under study, the playwright exhibits the contemporary condition of English life in which the poor, marginalized, and subaltern sections of the then-English society were colonized and dehumanized as the victim of the play, Falder, is made the victim of so-called English culture.

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** John Galsworthy exhibits the ill effects both of society and the mechanical penal system on human personality. His human insight is discernible through the compassionate appeal of his characters in the play. They show their tortured psyche to their audience.

**Keywords:** Galsworthy, justice, human insight, socio-legal injustice, reassessment, solitary, confinement, human personality, etc.

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John Galsworthy (1867-1933), the recipient “of the order of Merit in 1929 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1932, was a man of noble heart and free from those fads and foibles of vanity, which frequently accompany the generous gestures made by smaller-hearted man. His lack of conceit can perhaps best be illustrated by the fact that in 1919 he declined the offer of a knighthood because, in his own words, “literature is its reward”. He “was a social reformer, objectively, and impartially posing a problem, showing always both sides of the question” (Albert 473), but some critics believe that he was nothing but a propagandist. But in the

researcher's opinion, whether he was a social reformer or a propagandist, he was a humane, impartial, and sincere observer of contemporary sociological problems and suggested implied solutions to them. If his hints and suggestions are followed by the socio-legal system, many of the problems might be solved. "The importance of Mr. Galsworthy's work in modern drama does not lie in its artistic power, but in its moral implication and the ethical force of the author" (William 317). The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a revolt against the traditions and customs of the Victorian age and new values and ideals began to be cherished and stressed. New problems came to the forefront, and dramatists, novelists, and poets took upon themselves the task of discussing the multiple and multifaceted problems of contemporary life in their works. Readers know "Galsworthy feels a warm sympathy for the victims of social injustice, and especially for the poor and downtrodden" (Albert 473). His plays are so many pieces of criticism of contemporary life focusing attention on one problem or the other. Here the concerned author of the research is John Galsworthy. His *Justice* (1910) focuses on the ill effects of solitary confinement and its subsequent repercussions on human personality.

A literature review often raises a research question. Here the research question of the researcher in Galsworthy's *Justice* is how and why the so-called disastrous socio-legal system of contemporary England affects weak-willed people like Falder and kills them for negligible offenses done in some fit of temporary madness. Though much research work has been done on Galsworthy's *Justice*, it cannot be challenged that there is no space left for further research because research always eludes. Rajan Lal writes about the elusive nature of research:

One may be, howsoever, meticulous and exploratory in one's research aptitude but one isn't supposed to circumscribe all the dimensions and perspectives in the concerned discipline to a

particular research project. Research always eludes leaving more and more possibilities and new avenues for future explorations. (Lal 27-28)

V. Muralidharan writes about human sentiments found in Galsworthy's *Justice* in his research paper titled *Humanistic Concerns in John Galsworthy's Justice*. Here the researcher's main objective is to show how the playwright as an objective surveyor made efforts to bring about the socio-legal reforms in the then-so-called system of justice. The play not only underlines the need for socio-legal reforms but also questions the contemporary inhuman judicial process for petty crimes. Dorothy Ann Springer talks about "Social Deterioration" in her dissertation thesis titled *The Social Implications in the Drama of John Galsworthy*. Here the researcher shows a chivalrous disposition of a weak-willed person named Falder who commits the crime of cheque tapering in his sentimental condition but gets trapped in his illegal deed and is forced to leave the world forever. Karnewar and Kailas Vijayrao try to expose contemporary English society through their research article titled *Study of John Galsworthy's Justice as a Realistic Exposure of the English Society*. Here the researchers try to showcase the social ills and evils of contemporary English life like rigidity in the laws of divorce, solitary confinement, and social rigidity, etc. Sunil Kumar Mishra depicts various social issues in Galsworthy's *Justice* in his research article titled *Social Issues Portrayed in Galsworthy's Play, Justice*. Here the researcher showcases the playwright's socio-legal consciousness because he was a forced victim of such a rigid and orthodoxy-ridden socio-penal system. Here the researcher exposes the playwright's critical attitude towards the inhuman treatment of the society and law of the then system. Vandana Sharma analyses the legal standpoint raised in Galsworthy's *Justice* in her article titled *Analysing John Galsworthy's Justice through the Legal Perspective*. Here the researcher has tried her best to highlight the play as a satire on the then-British penal system. She has also tried to throw

light upon the anti-feminist approach of the then patriarchal society showing women as the second sex and marginalized section of contemporary English life. After keeping in view, the literature review of the play under critical scrutiny, the researcher has tried to synthesize two aspects in her research paper-injustice of contemporary English life and that of the contemporary English penal system and their ill effects on human personality.

Galsworthy is a distinct delineator of English self-satisfied and puffed-up conventions and social atrocities meted out to the weak and the lower through the art of his characterization of the then-so-called English social system with no animosity or fulsome involvement. A. W. writes about Galsworthy, "He depicted an epoch of smug conventions and social injustices with incisive clarity; and depicted facets of the English character, inherent in that epoch and the social system that typified it, without either animosity or fulsome indulgence" (80). There are many parallels and similarities between the works of Charles Dickens and Galsworthy. Charles Dickens raised many social issues and challenges for the poor and downtrodden in his novels and stories. He tried to sensitize the then administration, socio-political and socio-legal system to improve the pitiable conditions of the slum dwellers and the poor through his writings. The same principle applies to John Galsworthy in conjunction with such discourse. Readers or researchers can trace such parallels in their works. Here A. W. reiterates, "Like Dickens, he hated crookedness, custom, and fear. His conventional upper-middle-class upbringing had him into little contact with the lower social orders, yet he understood their loves and their difficulties as well as he understood those of people of his environment" (79).

His play *Justice* was an appeal for a more humane administration of law. Galsworthy through his mouthpiece, Hector Frome, requests the system to treat a convict like a patient, and not like a criminal. He is sympathetic to Falder, a victim of the socio-legal system. Many of the characters show human and humane

concerns in their discourses. One of them is Tweedle. How he reacts to the ill effects of the illegal system of contemporary England is important to be notified. Tweedle says, “He (Governor) ought to have given him a chance. And, I say, the judge ought to ha’ let him go after that. They’ve forgotten what human nature’s like. Whereas we know” (Galsworthy 59). During the writing of *Justice*, Galsworthy interviewed convicts and prisoners who had experienced months of solitary confinement; but he got the views also of prison governors and warders, they too were stated with complete disinterestedness. He helped to reinvest the literature of the theatre with something that had been forgotten during the melodramatic days of Victorian drama which was the uncontrived ‘slice of life’ play that simply states a problem without making any attempt to offer a solution. His play *Justice* was so instrumental that it moved Winston Churchill that he soon after initiated reformist legislation. A.W. writes about Galsworthy’s instrumentality in the revision of law relating to solitary confinement, “He was instrumental in accomplishing revision of the law relating to solitary confinement in prisons; yet his crusade—in the press, by personal appeals to the Prime Minister, and in the rightly celebrated play *Justice*—could hardly have been less angry” (79). V. Muralidharan authors about the title interpretation of *Justice*, “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 following the synthetic system (421).

Galsworthy’s *Justice* is a humanistic narrative of a man named William Falder who works in the capacity as a junior clerk in the firm of solicitors named James How, a fully professional solicitor with no emotional element, and Walter How, his son who is a solicitor by profession but he is emotional by humanity. A victimized lady named Ruth comes to him for help because she is brutally thrashed by her husband. Falder seems to be fully sympathetic to or to say, empathetic with her and he is in love with her by degrees. He tempers a cheque of

Rs. 9 to Rs. 90 to flee with her to settle South America. But the irony of fate and that of the situation is that his forgery is exposed before their escape and he is put to trial. He undergoes “penal servitude for three years” (Galsworthy 42) in solitary confinement. After the completion of three years of solitary confinement, Falder comes back to the same firm for seeking another opportunity. But on the side of James How, a condition is put before him that he may be given the job if he quits his living relationship with Ruth whom he cannot desert now. The discussion is going on between him and James, and then detective sergeant Wister turns up there inquiring Falder who has been away from the police station without reporting his presence, which is customary after the release of a criminal. Falder is a weak-willed person. He is horrified at the thought of returning to prison, stumbles and breaks his neck, and dies. Wister tells the solicitors and other people present there, “He jumped—neck’s broken” (76). Such is the tragic end of a weak-willed person due to the disastrous English penal system only for a negligible forgery made in a temporary madness. Affected by such tragedy, Galsworthy studies the legal system and compelled the then government for prison reformation.

‘Insight’ is a meta-concept. It is a way to go deeper into the psyche of living beings. It is “the ability to gain a relatively rapid, clear and deep understanding of the real, often hidden and usually complex nature of a situation, problem, etc.,” or it is an “awareness of one’s own mental or psychological condition, processes, etc.,” (Robinson 703). It is known to most intellectuals that a writer is the total of his age consisting of multiple and multifaceted scenes and sights, trials and tribulations, and precarious situations and predicaments. This is very easily applicable to John Galsworthy. There is no denying that John Galsworthy was a psychosocially insightful writer. He was compounded of faculty of identifying underlying truth or seeing into inner character. The play is not only just about bringing reforms in solitary confinement but also about the

judicial process and the broader relationship of punishment for crime. The playwright experiences the crushing impacts of the foul penal system on the human psyche. It becomes crystal clear that many of the characters in the play are humane and sympathetic to the sufferers in the play- William Falder and Ruth Honeywill. They are Walter How, Cokeson, Hector Frome, and Sweedle who is already cited above. The researcher will try to synthesize the socio-legal injustice done to the sufferers in the play, especially to Falder through the various psychologically insightful characters' sensible and sensitizing deliberations in the play.

Since the research paper synthesizes social and legal injustices, and inequalities, the sufferings and predicament of Ruth and Falder would suffice both perspectives. Ruth is a victim of the maligned force of society. She is prey to the cruel social order. She is a true tragic heroine. Though she does not die, her sufferings are more painful than death. She is alive-dead. She has to bear the pain of the death of her lover. When the dead body of Falder is brought and laid before her, she gets frantic and hysteric with grief. She flings herself upon the dead body and amidst hysteric cries, she asks the people around her not to arrest him again. How painful it is! How heart-rending! She is grief-stricken. She is married to a callous, cruel, heartless drunken, and violent man named Mr. Honeywill. He keeps thrashing her and sometimes tries to strangle her. In such a suffocating and strangling environment, she decides to divorce him and comes in contact with Falder for help but they fall in infatuation with each other and decide to live together in 'South America' (Galsworthy 27) as a conjugal pair. And it is this passionate love that is the cause of the hero's fall and his tragedy. We can trace the ill effects of social injustice on the body and mind of Ruth through her communication with Hector Frome in the court of justice in Act II of the play. She informs Frome in the court saying, "My husband nearly strangled me that morning" (27). She further informs the court, "My dress was torn, and I was half



choking” (27). But her tragic predicament does not end here. She says that her husband’s inhuman behavior dreadfully upset Falder when she informed him. She further tells the court, “Because on the morning when my husband nearly killed me...” (28).

Falder is a more tragic figure than Ruth. He is a brutal victim of the maligned force of society. He feels as if he had been caught in an endless web of hard circumstances from which he cannot break away. He is not only the victim of social atrocity and injustice but also of the penal system. Like Shakespeare’s Shylock, he is more sinned against than sinning. The confined life in a prison cell has affected his body, mind, and heart seriously. By temperament, being brooding, nervous, and sensitive, he feels miserable. His devotional affection, and firmness in face of adversity, illumine a few dark corners and recesses in his soul. The edge of criminality is made blunt by the overpowering good qualities of his nature. He seems to fancy that everybody is down on him. In the end, he jumps into the jaws of death under the torture of his spirit and mind. Hector Frome, Falder’s counsel, is truly a psychological human being wrought with the milk of humankind’s ness. In the court of justice in Act II of the play, he puts his pleas on human grounds to save both Ruth and Falder. He says that youth is the most plastic age of man. He did forgery in a fit of insanity and under the impulse of a woman’s cause. Harold Cleaver, the Counsel for the Crown, has already stated his case. Frome argues that Falder’s condition would be narrated by Ruth, who had been leading a very miserable life. In this connection, the question of whether it was proper or not on the part of Falder to make love to a married woman has no business poking its nose. The playwright asserts to expose social injustice and atrocity done to Ruth through Frome as under:

This woman, gentlemen, has been leading a miserable existence with her husband, who habitually ill-uses her, from whom she goes in terror of her life. I am not, of course, saying that it’s either right

or desirable for a young man to fall in love with a married woman, or that it's business to rescue her from an ogre-husband... that, married to a drunken and violent husband, she has no power to get rid of him; another offence besides violence is necessary to enable a woman to obtain divorce; (20)

Hector Frome is so humane and sensitized that he tries to save not only Falder but also Ruth Honeywill. He persuades the Judge to keep her name out of publicity. His cross-examination is intended to bring out circumstances that might extenuate the penalty in the eyes of the jury. She is brutally treated by the social ethos of the time. She is living in demolishing conditions. She has become a sandwich between her murderous husband and strangling social situations. Frome tries to sensitize the court that she has no alternative left but to go to Falder. He informs the judge of the day that she could either go on living with her cruel, callous, drunken, and violent husband in the terror of her life; or she could apply to the court for a divorce from her terrorizing husband. She is economically hard-pressed. She has to live alone with her children. He says that an unskilled woman without means of livelihood to support her children and herself is forced either to the Poor Law or to sell her body. One can see how painful Frome is while advocating her side in the court, “for an unskilled woman without means of livelihood to support herself and her children without resorting either to the Poor Law or—to speak quite plainly—to the sale of her body” (Hampden 31).

There is no denying that Frome's arguments in favor of Falder evince the weakness of his character. Frome contends that a man of weak character should not be abandoned as the despair of society. He should not be eternally condemned. If there is any chance of his reformation, he should be reformed by law and society. Many people who, like the prisoner, have been found guilty of committing an act, unwarranted by the social code of behavior, have been utterly crushed for want of understanding on the part of those who have the powers of

Law, like James How. They think of them to be criminals, whereas they are merely patients and not criminals. They need psychological understanding, sympathy, and even empathy on the socio-legal side. They, therefore, should not be subjected to the harshness of the penal system. If such people are treated as criminals, in due course, they may become real criminals. Society punishes them, and tortures them to be criminals; and they, on their part, wreak vengeance on society through further criminal acts. Galsworthy speaks through Hector Frome in defense of Falder as under:

Gentlemen, men like prisoner are destroyed daily under our law for want of that human insight which sees them as they are, patient and not criminals. If the prisoner be found guilty and treated as though he were a criminal type, he will, as all experience shows, in all probability become one. (36)

Towards the concluding part of his speech to the members of the jury and the judge, Frome, naturally very doubtful of the success of the plea of temporary insanity, put forth in defense of Falder, tones down his argument into what is practically an appeal to the jury for merciful, sympathetic, and empathetic consideration. It is the jury that can save the unfortunate criminal by using their sympathetic imagination and human discretion. The course of justice is often relentless; the law makes out many provisions for discrimination between criminals following each deservings man. It is a collective body of rulings and directions which are operated mechanically, i.e., with no emotions and sentiments. Life is an inert but powerful machine that requires only an initial start to roll recklessly on, the criminal code devised by the state requires somebody to bring a case against some other body who has offended the law. Then the prosecution, trial, and sentence take their course relentlessly, and the accused is crushed and ruined for his guilt without any consideration for the springs--the defects in the socio-legal system or the individual weaknesses--which occasion the

guilt. One can see how Galsworthy through Frome criticizes justice and metaphors it:

Justice is a machine that, when someone has once given it the starting push, rolls on of itself. Is this young man to be ground to pieces under this machine for an act which at worst was one weakness? Is he to become a member of the luckless crews that man those dark, ill-starred ships called prisons? Is that to be his voyages from which so few return? (36)

Frome has concluded the evidence for the defense. He tries to elaborate on the real meaning and purpose of justice. He feels that a man commits a crime within seconds, but has to pay for the same all through his life. He compares justice with a cage from which nobody comes out unhurt when one has fallen into it. It is also like a heavy stone roller, once given the push, it goes on rolling forever. Frome contends that the chariot wheels of justice have been crushing and trampling Falder for the last two months. He has undergone a lot of mental, psychic, and physical torture. It is imprinted on his mind, body, and soul. He, therefore, is not going to forget it throughout his life. It is just like a permanent scar on his fair face. The scar has become indelible. So, the chariot wheels of justice have already crushed and punished him and any more punishment or crushing by these wheels would result in a complete breakdown of life. The culprit would be completely undone as a man. If he was imprisoned as a criminal, he would be lost forever. The first stage was the beginning of the torture. The second was his mental and physical torture as a result of the court ordeal and penal trial. The third one would be to put him behind the bars again. Frome is, thus, not prepared to see that in the interests of the prisoner and justice. Let's see how the playwright through his mouthpiece criticizes law, "The rolling of the chariot –wheels of justice over this boy began when it was decided to prosecute

him. We are now already at the second stage. If you permit it to go on to the third, I would not give--that for him" (37).

To conclude it may be summed up that in his plays, Galsworthy is the judge and society is the real criminal. The playwright records his anger and aversion to the conventional socio-legal system of England, which is of no help to the weak-willed and humane person like Falder who commits the crime of tempering a cheque only because of the moment of aberration of mind. John Galsworthy exhibits the ill effects both of society and the mechanical penal system on human personality. His human insight is discernible through the compassionate appeal of his characters in the play. There is no denying that most of the characters in the play are more or less submissive to the socio-legal system which leaves indelible imprints of scars on their heart and mind, and body and souls. They show their tortured psyche to their audience.

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### **Shaheen Qamar**

Shaheen Qamar is a research scholar in the Department of English at AK PG College, Hapur, UP, India under the scholarly supervision of Dr. Aruna Sharma, Associate Professor of English in the same department of the college. The topic of her research is "John Galsworthy Reinterpreted in the Contemporary Context." She qualified for UGC NET in English and also did B. Ed.