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**Research Article**



## Reassertions of Class Consciousness and Tragic Vision in John Galsworthy's *Strife*

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**Abstract**

John Galsworthy, a contemporary playwright of G. B. Shaw, established realism in drama in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century England. Through his plays, he exposed the socio-economic, socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-legal problems in a realistic, sincere and impartial way, providing implied solutions to those problems as an objective observer of the contemporary English life. With objective impartiality, he exposed the wrong-headedness of some traditional beliefs and advocated social reform. The objective of the present paper is to expose the metaphors of tragic vision on account of class consciousness in John Galsworthy's *Strife* followed by some implied solutions. The reasons of tragic vision are pride, lack of human insight, extreme and fanatical approach, rigidity, class consciousness, uncompromising stands, warring faction, obstinacy, and desire to win and dominate, etc. Through this play the playwright wishes to establish the notion that human beings should be ruled by logic and reason and his testimony lies in portraying the futility and stupidity of quarrelling over conceptual differences, which might have been settled by compromise or arbitration.

**Keywords:** Class consciousness, Tragic vision, Extremity, Fanaticism, Warring factions

**Introduction**

John Galsworthy, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century social realist of the contemporary England, has authored some significant plays showcasing the socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-legal real problems of English society of the time. He has authored some outstanding plays like *Justice*, *Loyalties*, and *The Silver Box*. Each of them raises some or the other social problem like *Justice* raises the socio-legal issues and their impact on the weak and subaltern section of society; *Loyalties* exposes racial pride and social layers as distinct loyalties; and *The Silver Box* exposes the legal duplicity; one law for the weak and the other one for the powerful. Similarly speaking, his play, *Strife*, under scrutiny portrays 'irreconcilable extremism'. The impression of Leon Schalit about the thematic approach of the play is:

*Strife* is a drama of irreconcilable extremism embodied in the figures of two chief characters and *Strife*, a relentless tragedy of human conflict, is a far leap, bold, and perhaps bewildering... suffering comes from the implacability of the two extremists, Anthony and Roberts. So it is ever in party struggle—extremism with its demagoguery and its pride and its greed of power waste, human life, cause infinite trouble. (Schalit 232-239)

The playwright himself writes that the main idea of *Strife* is, "Sword perishes by sword, that the fatal thing is strong will minus self-control and balance" (Galsworthy 78). Elaborating this strong and personal notion in a letter to a correspondent, he states explicitly, "The strike, which forms the staple material of the play, was only chosen by me as a convenient vehicle to carry the play's real theme, which is that of violence. It is only fashionable to suppose it is on the subject of Capital and Labour" (78), representing crystal clear class consciousness of the high, and the low, or the strong, and the weak, or the rich, and the poor. M. L. Babbar writes, "*Strife* is a masterpiece, and it deals with extremism, and violence, colossal waste of resources, and

untold suffering among people due to two rigid and frigid protagonists in the play” (Babbar 29).

The play shows social stratification, and social hierarchy. This socio-economic hiatus is the root cause of all the tragic vision in the play. Whatever its merits and demerits are there, it cannot be denied that the play, *Strife*, has attempted and achieved one enormously difficult theatrical effect. The dramatist writes about “the conflict between two identical characters only by different walks of life. It is, in this respect alone, *a tour de force*” (78). There is no denying that it is written on the theme of class consciousness—the class of Capital and that of Labour—which makes the play a social tragedy. It exposes the stupidity of fighting to a finish through obstinacy of classes. The tragic vision, caused by class consciousness in the play lies in uncompromising and dire state of affairs between both classes. Galsworthy was not only a prophet of forbearance and tolerance but also true artist.

Satish Kumar cites R. H. Coats’s interpretation of the play, “*Strife* is a passionate statement on the feud between Capital and Labour” (Kumar 192). The fatal and deadly thing in human personality is strong will minus self-control and balance as said above. Such a will bears a close resemblance to *Hybris*—violence that leads to catastrophe, and which the Greeks considered the root cause of human tragedy. Violent extremism is the prominent thematic strand of the play but, it is the outcome of die-hardness. The two powerful characters of the play—John Anthony, the Chairman of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works, and David Roberts, the leader of the strikers, have been responsible for an immeasurable violence due to their rigid and adamant attitudes. Because of their clashes and conflicts, the workers have been on the strike for five months. The dramatic action takes place on 7th Feb between the hours of noon and six in the afternoon, close to the factory, on the borders of England and Wales, where a strike has been in progress throughout winter. While the company has reached the verge of disintegration, the workers have come to the brink of death for starvation. On both sides the rigidity and obstinacy of the leaders presents a big contrast to the relenting spirit of the followers. Among the employers, it is the iron will and unyielding nature of Anthony, and among the workers, it is the unbending will of Roberts that creates a serious deadlock. Ultimately, Anthony is voted down by his men, and Roberts is ignored by the strikers, whom he was leading because they arrive at a settlement behind the scene. The crest-fallen, now widowed, Roberts is shocked at this unexpected turn of events. The directors of the company have made terms without the chairman and the workers have called off the strike without obtaining the consent of their leader. Galsworthy is impressed by the tragic waste and the misery, which the strike brings about. He wants to prove that men should be ruled by reason and his proof lies in depicting the futility of quarrelling over differences of opinions, which could have been settled by arbitration or compromise. After all, the contending parties settle the dispute exactly on the terms and conditions, which had been drawn up before the five-month-old strike began.

### **Brief Literary Survey**

A literary survey often raises a research question. Here the research question of the researcher in Galsworthy’s *Strife* is how and why this play is considered as a social tragedy

and how it intensifies the concept of social consciousness. Though much research work has been done on Galsworthy's *Strife*, like his other plays, 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 as under:

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)

Amir Hossain in his research article titled *Social Realistic Projections of Galsworthy's Strife*, has tried to project the playwright's dramatic theory with a view to promoting the dilemma and socio-psychological conflicts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in a realistic way. He has also tried his hand in the portrayal of the influence of social realism and socio-cultural importance to the contemporary English Society. G. Kodishwari in her research paper titled *Humanitarian Concerns in John Galsworthy's Strife* traces the pride and prejudice of two pivotal characters in the play and consequences on both of them on account of the absence of humanitarian insights among the early 20<sup>th</sup> century England. The researcher also tries to exhibit the new reformist idea of fighting against capitalism to have an ideological and illusionary finish and perfection. S. Sowmya Rani in her research article titled *Social Realistic and Inequality of Galsworthy's Strife & Justice* has tried to show that Galsworthy's *Strife* is based on the social conflicts of industrial life and retard production between Anthony and Roberts through whom the dramatist tries to showcase the adamant and diehard attitudes and lack of human psyche in the contemporary English life. He also wants to throw light upon the unstable revolutionary passions of the common workers against the ruling class for their rights in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Sushil Kumar Mishra in his research paper titled *Realism Portrayed in Galsworthy's Strife* has tried his hand in portraying *Strife* as a beautiful indictment on the present structure of industrial society. He also endorses the playwright's concept of working in union and of avoiding unnecessary class conflict.

### **Class Consciousness and Tragic Vision**

Keeping in view the above observations and surveys by various research scholars on John Galsworthy, the present research scholar has tried to synthesize the twin concepts of class consciousness and tragic vision in the play through valid and logical arguments, assertions, and explorations. Galsworthy is a typical writer of modern social tragedy because in his plays the readers generally find tragic vision on account of some social problem or the other such as family relationships, social injustice, social deterioration, idealistic approach to life, and frustration effecting out of caste feeling. In social tragedy, the divided society takes the place of divided self. The play, *Strife*, is one of the fine social tragedies of Galsworthy. The staple theme of the play is conflict between two powerful individuals and also between two classes of society, *i.e.* Capital and Labour. Here the main cause of the tragic vision is ego of class consciousness on both sides. But the underlying theme of the play is the tragedy of colossal waste of resources, and untold suffering of subaltern workers because two fanatics and extremists clash with each other. The play ends with wasted lives, and a settlement the terms

of which are precisely the same as those proposed in the beginning of the clash between classes. R. H. Coats writes as under:

Groups, classes, and interests pull in different ways. There is no spirit of harmony, no reasoned co-operation, and imagination, entering into the point of view of the other people. The result is friction, waste, havoc, a house divided against itself, the exhausting struggle of tumultuously clashing forces at cross purposes with one another. (Coats e-book)

There is no denying the fact that most of the tragedies in social, political, cultural or any other sector of life occur when two extremists clash with each other. They may be two groups or two individuals. In Galsworthy's opinion, the real theme of the play under scrutiny is the conflict between two strong willed fanatics, and extremists. The conflict between two classes is incidental. But a close scrutiny of the play would make it clear that the clash or conflict between two classes is as important as the conflict between two individuals. As a matter of fact, the conflict between two individuals always draws force from the conflict between two classes or sections of society. Anthony and Roberts represent their followers as many leaders do. Both of them oppose each other not only because they are leaders of their respective classes but also because they have ideologies which impel them to fight for their interests. Both of them do not come to any agreement or compromise because that would mean deserting their followers and betraying the classes to which they belong. It is this class loyalty which is behind the bitter exchange between Enid, daughter of Anthony, and Madge, daughter of Henry Thomas, in the play. R. H. Coats writes, "It is true that the chief protagonists in this play are not groups but individuals; yet these two men interest us quite apart from the inherent strength of their personalities, largely because they represent slowly evolved social forces of great magnitude and importance..." (Coats e-book).

In Act I of *Strife*, Anthony, the chairman of the Board of Directors of Trenartha Tin Plate Works, shows Scantlebury and Wilder the agenda of the meeting to review the policy of the factory board in relation to the strike, which has existed for the last five months. Wilder sees three social layers calling them a fiendish three-dimensional fight of triangular confrontation. He metaphorises classes of the union leaders, the working men and the factory board. He says, "It's this infernal three-cornered duel-the Union, the men, and ourselves" (Galsworthy 7). The playwright brings out the main cause of dissent in the mind of Roberts through Trench, the secretary to the Board of Directors of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works. Trench draws the attention of the board members to a discovery made by Roberts. Wilder hates Roberts and calls him 'brute Roberts' and holds him mainly responsible for the continuance of the industrial strike. Wilder hates him because he is rigid, fanatic, obstinate, and 'a man with a grievance'. He does not agree with Edgar Anthony, son of Anthony, that Roberts was not paid suitably by the directors for his discovery which earned the company huge profits. Wilder says that he was paid seven hundred pounds and that should be enough. At this Trench protests that Roberts is often heard grudging that the board has made a net one lakh pounds out of his discovery and dismissed him by paying only seven hundred pounds. Trench's protest is worth

noticing as, “Company made a hundred thousand out of his brains, and paid him seven hundred—that’s the way he goes on, sir” (11).

When the workmen are called in by the Board of Directors, they are asked to be reasonable and tell them what they want. On the insistence of Simon Harness, a Trade Union official, Henry Thomas says that what they want from the company is simple-justice. At this Roberts butts in on the conversation. He employs a very bitter, sarcastic and ironical language. He reminds Thomas that to expect justice from the company is to ask for the impossible. The men from London will never be fair to the just genuine demands of the company workers. He asserts that they have been misbehaved and ill-treated and called “discontented dogs—never satisfied” (16). He is sore to remember that when he met the Chairman in London he was told that he was an illiterate and idiotic person who had absolutely no knowledge of the genuine needs of the workers. Mrs. Annie Roberts has been stuck to bed for long and Mrs. Enid Underwood comes to visit her in her hard times. During her conversation with Annie, Enid Underwood tries to convince her of the necessity of persuading Roberts to come to terms with the Company. Annie argues that the rich draw huge dividends and lead a luxurious life while the poor are not allowed even to ask for their just and genuine demands in order to meet the bare needs of their daily lives. Enid contends that the poor waste away their earnings in drinking and gambling. But Mrs. Roberts declines her allegations saying that her indictment is far away from truth. They are always forced to live from hand to mouth. Enid’s allegation is too much for Annie to bear. She gets very agitated and tells Enid what Roberts has always said about the life of a poor man. From birth till death a worker’s life is all a gamble. It is uncertain whether a baby born to a worker’s family will draw the next breath or not. There is no security for a worker in his old age, however hard he may try to pinch or save. That’s why Roberts does not want to produce children though Annie desires to have them. How sarcastic and suffocating the deliberation of Annie is! Her conversation exhibits the colonised condition and subalternity of the poor of the then England while the rich coffer. In Act II, scene I of the play, the researcher tries to show Annie Roberts’s reaction against Enid’s proposal as under:

Roberts says a working man’s life is all a gamble, from the time ‘e’s born to the time ‘e’ dies. He says, M’m, that when a working man’s baby is born, it’s a toss-up from breath to breath whether it ever draws another, and so on all ’is life; an’ when he comes to be old, it’s the workhouse or the grave. He says that without a man is very near, and pinches and stints ’imself and ’is children to save, there can’t be neither surplus nor security. That’s why he wouldn’t have no children, not though I *wanted* them. (Galsworthy 32)

In the same scene of the play, after the departure of Enid, Annie Roberts tries to persuade Roberts to come to the company’s terms. She explains to him that the continuance of the strike may be very harmful for the wives and children. A stage has reached when the men’s wives and children can no longer stand the strains of the industrial strike. Form the core of their hearts, they want a compromise. She pleads with him to understand all this and put an end to the strike. On hearing this, Roberts could not help controlling his anger. In his arrogance and illusion, he asserts that none will die until they have defeated the directors whom he calls robbers. The

workers resorted to the strike in order to force the company to grant them their dues. The continuance of the strike for five months, he believes, created a rift and fissure among the directors and the defeat is visible in their faces. He, therefore, does not agree with his wife and decides not to budge even an inch from the stand that the workers have taken. The researcher here quotes Roberts's reaction, "Who talks of dying? No one will die till we have beaten these—This is what I've been waiting for all these months. To get the old robbers down, and send them home again without a farthin's worth o' change. I've seen their faces, I tell you, in the valley of the shadow of defeat" (32).

Act III of *Strife* reflects precarious predicament of the workers, and their families suffering much more. Their wives and children have been without food for many days. Roberts does not look after his ailing wife due to his ego and rigidity. She had a weak heart and she was not given proper treatment so she left the world forever. Her sudden demise occurs at a time when Anthony had practically succeeded, once again, in rallying the workers around him and which proves too dangerous for him. The workers decide to desert him and agree to a settlement prepared by Harness. Annie's death upsets the directors very much but Anthony. Edgar holds the directors responsible for the tragedy. Wanklin suggests that Annie had a weak heart, and therefore, she died. Edgar, who is honest in his analysis of the situations, says that such long-drawn struggles do bring to light the weak spots in everybody. It is quite simple. But if they had not approached the problem with imagination, and had not indulged in a cut-throat policy, they might have saved Annie's life. He makes it clear that he is not defending anyone and says that even a fool would not see the extent of misery and suffering among the workers and their families. Edgar assets his endorsement, "A struggle like this finds out the weak spots in everybody. Any child knows that. If it hadn't been for this cut-throat policy, she needn't have died like this; and there wouldn't be all this misery that anyone who isn't a fool can see is going on. ... I don't defend the men, or myself, or anybody" (65).

The workers with the Union Official Harness are holding a scheduled meeting with the directors. The workers were thinking that Roberts would not be able to come to the meeting because his wife was dead. He is so cynic and fanatic that he arrives at the meeting leaving his dead wife due to the meeting, though he is late. His arrival is not less than a great dismay for the workers. It is a big irony of thought that he little knows of his having been overthrown as their leader. He tells Anthony in his usual firm tone that they have decided once again not to submit to the directors. The workers have reconsidered their position. They are united as before in their struggle against them, he tells Anthony, though it being an ironical situation. He is in confusion that they would die rather than bend or surrender to them. He warns them that it was wrong on the part of the directors to think that they would come to bend on their knees before them. In a very angry tone, he tells the other directors that they can leave for London because his workers are not willing to budge even an inch from their declared stand. Here irony is so stunning, "ye may break the body, but ye cannot break the spirit. Get back to London; the men have nothing for ye! (71). On the other hand, Anthony too has been overthrown by the other directors. Anthony too like Roberts has been rigid and uncompromising at a stretch. The other directors including his own son have come to an agreement to settle the workers' affair on the

terms drafted by Harness. The result is that Anthony resigns his position on the board. When Roberts wants to know if Anthony has agreed to the compromise, he remains unmoved. Roberts is greatly shocked to know his overthrow. He bursts into a half-mad laughter saying that his arch-enemy too has been defeated by his followers exactly in the same manner as he was overthrown. Therefore, both the rigid, and frigid leaders have been sagged by none other than their own followers. Roberts's frustration against Anthony is really worth seeing, "Then you're no longer Chairman of this Company! Ah! ha—ha, ha, ha! They've thrown ye over – thrown over their Chairman: An—ha—ha! So—they've done us both down, Mr. Anthony?" (73).

### Implied Solution

"Galsworthy does not propagate his ideas in the *Strife*. He is not a propagandist. He suggests his message, if any, through plot, character, parallelism and contrast, irony and other devices. The main idea is also suggested in this play, and is not stated clearly" (Gupta 66). Though he did not believe in moralising, it is abundantly clear that he is for a compromise in life. Extremism does not pay. When two extreme forces or individuals come into conflict, there is nothing but loss, colossal waste, predicament, suffering, and misery. The moral of the play is that most of the social problems can best be resolved by compromise. Peace and harmony, and not clash and conflict, make life better.

### Summation

To sum up, it may be assumed that Galsworthy's *Strife* is possessed of tragic vision because of class-consciousness, and social stratification, which causes class conflicts. Here the class conflicts arise from two diehards, fanatics, and strong-willed extremists—Anthony, and Roberts, representing Capital, and Labour respectively. The two confused and illusionary protagonists try to outsmart each other but ironically are overthrown by their followers. The plot of the play, apart from focussing attention on Anthony, and Roberts, also throws light upon the element of class suffering and tragic waste due to these two diehards.

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