

TRAPPED IN THE WEB: LUKACSIAN REIFICATION AND DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN GALSWORTHY'S *THE FORSYTE SAGA***AĞ'DA KAPAN: GALSWORTHY'NİN *THE FORSYTE SAGA* ESERİNDE LUKÁCSÇI NESNELEŞTİRME VE İKİLİ BİLİNÇ****Tuba TANRIVERDİ**

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Research Paper**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the concept of reification in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* trilogy within the framework of Georg Lukacs's theory of reification. By analysing the character of Irene about the members of the Forsyte family, particularly with her husband Soames Forsyte, this study delves into the dual process by which Galsworthy employs reification. The Forsytes, valuing Irene merely for her financial worth and treating her as property, thus reifying her, are ultimately confined within their own reified consciousness. This study illustrates how Soames's "spider's web" metaphor represents the inescapability of the bourgeois consciousness in its property-oriented world. By depicting Irene as a silent and resilient character, Galsworthy presents a profound critique of capitalist values and the bourgeois society of Victorian England. This article claims that *The Forsyte Saga* assumes Lukacs's theoretical framework by portraying reification not solely as an economic phenomenon but as a psychological trap that alters both the objectifier and objectified.

Key Words: Reification, false consciousness, bourgeois values, property relations.

ÖZET

Bu makale, John Galsworthy'nin *The Forsyte Saga* üçlemesindeki kişilerin nesneleştirilme sürecini Georg Lukacs'ın şeyleşme teorisi çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışma, Irene karakterini Forsyte ailesinin üyeleriyle ve özellikle de kocası Soames Forsyte ile ilişkisi bağlamında analiz ederek, Galsworthy'nin şeyleşmeyi ikili bir süreç olarak uygulamasına odaklanmaktadır. Forsyte'lar Irene'e yalnızca maddi varlığı üzerinden değer biçip, ona bir mülk gibi davranarak, onu nesneleştirirler de nihayetinde kendi nesneleşmiş bilinçlerinin içine hapsolurlar. Çalışma, Soames'in "örümcek ağı" metaforunun, burjuva bilincinin mülkiyet odaklı dünyasına sıkışmışlığının temsilini göstermektedir. Galsworthy, Irene'i sesiz ve boyun eğmeyen bir karakter olarak tasvir ederek, Victoria dönemi İngiltere'sinin kapitalist değerlerine ve burjuva toplumuna yönelik derin bir eleştiri sunmaktadır. Bu makale, *The Forsyte Saga*'nın şeyleşmeyi yalnızca ekonomik bir olgu olarak değil, hem nesneleştireni hem de nesneleşeni dönüştüren psikolojik bir tuzak olarak tasvir ederek Lukacs'ın teorik çerçevesini benimsediğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şeyleşme, yanlış bilinç, burjuva değerleri, mülkiyet ilişkileri.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Victorian England, people increasingly came to be defined by their possessions rather than their inherent qualities. This period witnessed how industrialization intensified the philosophy of materialism and heightened the significance of ownership.¹ Consequently, among the propertied classes, a tendency emerged to extend proprietary attitudes from material goods to human relationships. This tendency, most evident in the upper-middle class, claims ownership rights over material possessions and people, whom they now begin to regard as property. John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1922) is one of the earliest literary examples of this tendency among the upper middle classes. Georg Lukacs's theory of reification conceptualized through Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, becomes a critical analytical framework for understanding this tendency.

Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* consists of three novels, namely *The Man of Property* (1906), *In Chancery* (1920), and *To Let* (1921). The trilogy follows an upper-middle-class English family from the late nineteenth century – one of Britain's most economically prosperous periods – into the early twentieth century, a time marked by profound social and cultural transformations that began to challenge the rigid, materialistic concept of ownership. The first novel of this trilogy, *The Man of Property*, brought Galsworthy significant critical acclaim and commercial success for its detailed portrayal of the Forsyte family's acquisitive values and their determination to pursue property ownership and a privileged position in society. Galsworthy's distinctive depiction of Soames Forsyte as the embodiment of "possessive instinct" mainly affected readers in early twentieth-century Britain. Several factors cause the novel to create a significant impact on the reader. Yet, the most important of them is Galsworthy's intense portrayal of the upper-middle class's obsession with property and his penetrating critique of the class even though he is a member.

The Saga explores the class consciousness of the upper-middle class family Forsytes through the concept of "the sense of property," Galsworthy puts it in the preface, reflecting the shifting values as Victorian certainties gave way to Edwardian complexities. As Hugh Walpole noted, the trilogy "appeared at a time when England was at the end of a period of possessive and wealthy domination when the Forsytes were at the very top of the world and must, themselves, believe that they were there for all time" (Walpole, 1933: 177). Being part of the same historical context and social class – one profoundly shaped by the value judgments of property ownership – Galsworthy's sense of estrangement from his class enabled him to critically depict the deep-seated flaws within the upper-middle class and, more broadly, English society.

At the heart of *The Forsyte Saga* lies the "sense of property" role in shaping the class consciousness of the Forsyte family members and its impact on human relationships – both structuring and disrupting them. The Forsytes perceive their family members and outsiders through the lens of "possessive instinct," attributing value to individuals accordingly. This perspective leads them to treat people as commodities, much like their other possessions, a dehumanizing pattern that Galsworthy adeptly demonstrates in the trilogy, making it a significant factor in the work's impressive artistic accomplishment. It can be argued that by illustrating how the "sense of property" obliges individuals to perceive one another as objects, Galsworthy presents a literary exemplification of Lukacs's theory of reification.

Reification is the theory conceptualized by Georg Lukacs in his seminal work *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), specifically in the essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the

¹ For a detailed discussion of materialist tendencies in Victorian England, see Thomson (1950, pp.99-118); see also Reader (1964, pp.132-164).

Proletariat.” It is based on Karl Marx’s concept of “commodity fetishism.” Lukacs argues that in capitalist societies, the relations of production give rise to reification – that is, the objectification/thingification of human relationships and experiences. Before expanding on the theory, Lukacs provides the following core definition: “The essence of commodity structure is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a “phantom objectivity,” an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukacs, 1971a: 83). Throughout this process, relationships between people transform into a subject-object relationship rather than being a relationship of subject-subject and human characteristics, emotions and even people themselves are valued as objects. Within the framework of capitalist society, those who possess the means of production operate under what Lukacs conceptualized as “false consciousness” that naturalizes treating people as objects, mistaking their economic power for legitimate authority over others; this is evident in social relationships as well as in more intimate relationships such as marriage.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse the process of reification in the relationship between Irene and Soames Forsyte – one of the central themes of *The Forsyte Saga* – within Lukacs’s theoretical framework. Through this analysis, the study intends to explore how bourgeois materialist class consciousness in capitalist societies and its “miniature” (Galsworthy, 1922/1950: 3) Forsyte consciousness, shaped by the “sense of property,” reifies human relationships. Firstly, the Forsyte family members’ property-oriented attitudes toward Irene will be examined, followed by a detailed analysis of Soames’s property-centred perspective and behaviour toward Irene and her silent yet steadfast resistance to these attitudes. Even though the study acknowledges the contexts of marriage, Victorian gender relations, or women’s positions within Victorian social norms, the examination will more broadly be approached as a dialectical relationship that reflects the inherent contradictions of capitalist society and the practices of reification. Furthermore, the present analysis employs the Lukacsian concepts of “class consciousness,” “false consciousness,” “totality,” and “reification” to examine Galsworthy’s critical portrayal of the Victorian-era English upper-middle class and the relationship between Soames and Irene. It explores the positioning of Soames as both an agent of reification and a reified figure himself. In doing so, the analysis reveals the depth of social critique in Galsworthy’s work.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs Marxist literary criticism, particularly the concept of reification as developed by Georg Lukacs, to examine John Galsworthy’s portrayal of reified class relations in *The Forsyte Saga*. The concept of reification, developed by Georg Lukacs, which describes the perception of human relationships as commodity relations, provides a significant literary device for understanding both the relationships between characters in *The Forsyte Saga* trilogy and Galsworthy’s critique of his social class. To fully understand Galsworthy’s critique in the trilogy, this study will first examine how Lukacs developed the concept of class consciousness from Marx’s original framework, then define essential concepts such as “false consciousness” before thoroughly analysing reification as the central theoretical lens for interpreting the *Saga*’s portrayal of bourgeois society and relationships between the characters.

Georg Lukacs conceptualises the Marxist understanding of class and, accordingly, class consciousness within a broader framework, expanding beyond the economic determinism of Marxist theory which states that “the division of society into classes is determined by position within the process of production” (Lukacs, 1971a: 46). That is, in Marxist theory, class formation is grounded in the assumption of a shared class condition, defined primarily by a typical relationship of functional private property, a similar socio-economic position, and a unified pattern of action determined by “objective interest” (Dahrendorf, 1959: 24). However,

Lukacs, in his seminal work *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), delineates class consciousness, in its broadest terms, as the representation of a class's historical circumstances, as well as its economic position, regardless of the psychological state or empirical awareness of its members. This consciousness derives from a class's objective position within the financial structure and its relationship with the unity of society. For Lukacs, absolute class consciousness does not regard what people think about their social position. Still, they could grasp their historical situation and interests entirely rather than what they would think and feel. Lukacs conceptualises class consciousness as the dialectical relationship between "objective possibilities" in the social production process and their subjective reflections at the level of consciousness. As he states, "class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions 'imputed' [zugerechnet] to a particular typical position in the process of production" (Lukacs, 1971a: 51). From this perspective, class consciousness does not merely denote the psychological states of individuals or classes but rather the subjective reflection of an objective social position. However, individuals' subjective reflection is not a mere automatic reproduction of what they perceive; instead, it is the objective economic possibilities of the social classes at the level of consciousness of the individuals who constitute the class. Through this process, classes acquire the capacity to act according to their objective economic interests. However, this capacity does not always fully materialize, as various historical and social factors shape the relationship between subjective consciousness and objective position. Therefore, in its broadest meaning, class consciousness or identity² is historically shaped by modes of thought, social relations, and their practical manifestations; that is, it is a collective understanding beyond individual consciousness, reflecting a class's place and historical significance (ibid.: 47).

As Lukacs refers, Marx conceptualises consciousness as inherently tied to history, originating from the historical process rather than existing independently of it. Therefore, defining class and class identity, particularly bourgeoisie class identity, is intimately related to the historical context in which the consciousness is constructed, considering that the historically changing relations of production essentially form class consciousness. This phenomenon not only emphasises Lukacs's priority over historicity in his conceptualisation of class consciousness but also accentuates the bourgeois tendency to disregard the historical process and to naturalise existing social relations and class divisions. Throughout this process of naturalisation, capitalist relations of production and their institutions are regarded as timeless and unchangeable, like the laws of nature (ibid.: 49-77).

Contrary to its depiction as a natural phenomenon, classes – and, accordingly, class identity – have been historically established through the development of capitalism. With the emergence of capitalism, class relations evolved into a distinguishable fact of historical and social reality, as economic interests appear as the essential driving force of historical changes. This allows individuals to develop an explicit consciousness of class relations – an understanding inaccessible in pre-capitalist societies (ibid.: 58). In bourgeois society, property ownership.³

² For a discussion on class consciousness and class identity being used with the same meaning, see Eidlin, B. (2014) Class formation and class identity: Birth, death, and possibilities for renewal. *Sociology Compass*, 8(8), 1045-1060; also see Nadal-Melsio, S. (2004). Georg Lukacs: Magnus Realismus? *Diacritics*, 34(2), pp.71-83.

³ On the determinant role of property in class formation, see Caudwell, C. (1970). *Romance and Realism: A Study in English Bourgeois Literature*, pp.38-39. Princeton University Press. Caudwell notes that the bourgeois triumphed over feudalism by replacing direct authority with property rights, concealing social relations through monetary transactions. See also Rogers. A.K. (1917). Class consciousness. *International Journal of Ethics*, 27(3), 338-341.

The means of production becomes the central component of class formation, enabling a minority to control public wealth and converting social power into the power of private individuals (Dahrendorf, 1959:12).

When examining bourgeois consciousness shaped by property ownership, Lukacs identifies it as fundamentally rooted in economic terms, limited to the perspective of individual capitalists rather than societal totality. The bourgeoisie's principal contradiction lies in its inability to generate accurate historical and self-consciousness, as recognising its historically contingent position would delegitimize its social dominance (Lukacs, 1971a:59-66). The bourgeoisie cannot transcend itself as a class since its existence depends on the structural servitude of others (Meszaros, 1971, 108-109). This inability to comprehend history leads the bourgeoisie to accept the appearance of social reality uncritically (Graham, 1986: 46) – a phenomenon that manifests in what Lukacs terms “false consciousness.”

The concept of “false consciousness” is critically important in Lukacs's theoretical framework. It refers to a class's inaccurate perception of its objective position and the broader social reality. Particularly characteristic of bourgeois thought, false consciousness conceals social relations' historical and changeable character, demonstrating them instead as natural and static structures. In this process, social ties – essentially products of human labour – are regarded as autonomous and governed by objective laws like natural phenomena. This ideological mystification constitutes a significant obstacle to social transformation, obscuring the possibility of change. In addition, this illusion is essentially linked to the reification of social relations, central to Lukacs's critique of capitalist society (Lukacs, 1971a:54).

2.1. The Concept of Reification

The concept of reification, initially formulated by Lukacs, is grounded in Marx's idea of commodity fetishism to explicate the fundamental characteristics of modern capitalist society. As Lukacs said in *History and Class Consciousness*,

the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society, together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them (1971a: 83).

When examining the description of commodity fetishism from the first book of *Capital*, which Lukacs also references, Marx states that a commodity is mysterious because the social character of human labour manifests as an inherent property of the product itself. The relationship between producers and their collective labour is not identified as a direct social relation among individuals but as a relationship between their products. Consequently, the products of labour take on the character of commodities. Eventually, social relations between people become objectified as seemingly independent interactions between objects⁴ (Marx, 1867/2013: 47). Within this description of Marx, the central point that Lukacs regards essential for understanding the theory of reification is that human activity, one's labour, turns into something independent and objective, something that, through an independence foreign to the individual, begins to dominate them. As stated in the quote above from Lukacs, in his analysis of reification, two key aspects – objective and subjective – arise. Objectively, the world of objects

⁴ For details on the process of commodity fetishism, see Marx, K. (1867/2013). *Capital*. pp. 17-62. Moreover, for details on the relationship between commodity fetishism and reification, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

and market movements assume an autonomous reality, with laws that, though recognisable, present themselves to individuals as external forces beyond their control. Subjectively, in a fully developed market economy, human activity evolves into alienation, changing into a commodity that operates independently of individuals, subject to the inhuman objectivity of society (Lukacs, 1971a:87).

Through its objective and subjective aspects, reification is manifested in two main spheres of social life: the reification of human relations and the structure of market capitalism⁵. In the context of the reification of human relations, the process starts with the reification of consciousness. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukacs explains that reified consciousness regards commodities as the independent expression of social existence and shows no inclination to surpass this condition. As capitalism constantly reproduces itself at higher levels, reification becomes more deeply rooted in human consciousness. Rather than transforming this condition, reified consciousness seeks to strengthen it through the pretense of objective analysis. As a result, relationships between individuals, their labour power, and their products disintegrate, creating a reified and alienated social order (ibid.: 13).

The concept that Lukacs terms the “reified mind” is described by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1991) as the “reification of identity” or the “reification of the total self.” The authors define this condition as the individual’s restriction or reduction of themselves to a specific role. This phenomenon reveals itself as follows: “I have no choice in the matter; I have to act this way because of my position – as a husband, father, general, archbishop, chairman of the board, gangster, or hangman, as the case may be” (Berger & Thomas, 1991: 108). As commonly noted in the definitions provided by Berger Luckmann and Lukacs, a reified identity perceives the socially constructed “second nature” imposed upon it as unchangeable, making it unable to perceive the potential or imperative to move beyond its current circumstances. When consciousness and identity are reified, human relationships inevitably change through this same course. Lukacs describes this process as replacing immediate human connections with abstract and objective forms in capitalist society. Social relationships are restructured according to economic rationality once perceived as “natural” and organic. Individuals no longer engage with one another directly but rather through reified social forms. This change leads to the fragmentation and atomisation of social life, as personal relations weaken and are replaced by abstract, quantifiable connections. As a result, it becomes steadily more difficult for individuals to perceive one another in the wholeness of their identity as social interactions progressively adopt a mechanical and instrumental character (Lukacs, 1971a: 91).

In the context of these reified social relations, when analysing the connection between the bourgeoisie and the process of reification in bourgeois consciousness, Lukacs states that bourgeois consciousness functions as both the origin and the product of reification. In capitalist society, it comprehends reality in a fragmented, structured, and mechanical manner, interpreting social relations through the lens of commodity exchange. This perspective normalises social dynamics as natural, thus concealing their historical construction. Within the economic, scientific, and legal system it builds, bourgeois consciousness cannot understand the social totality, perceiving only isolated, rationalised fragments. The progressive specialisation of labour under capitalism reinforces this fragmented perspective. Consequently, bourgeois consciousness regards social relations not as the outcomes of human labour, but as events governed by external, natural forces that function separately from human action. This reified

⁵ The detailed account of the reification that emerges as a result of worker’s alienation from their labour and its product within the market capitalism can be found in Lukacs, G. (1971). *History and Class Consciousness* (pp. 87-89). MIT Press.

consciousness prevents people from seeing opportunities to change social dynamics, presenting the current capitalist system as inescapable and permanent (ibid.: 93, 109-110).

Therefore, this study examines one of the central themes in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* trilogy – comprising *The Man of Property*, *In Chancery*, and *To Let* – by analysing the relationship between the Forsyte family, particularly Soames Forsyte, and Irene, applying Lukacs's framework of reification. The analytical framework, especially concerning the Soames-Irene relationship, will be thoroughly studied regarding possession, acquisition, and reification. Initially, textual instances where the Forsyte family perceives Irene as a commodity due to her lack of property will be scrutinised. Subsequently, the study will examine cases in which Soames explicitly regards Irene as one of his possessions. Finally, Irene's resistance to this reification process will be scrutinized. Throughout this process, key concepts from Lukacs's theory – reification, false consciousness, and bourgeois class consciousness – will be employed to analyse the characters' awareness, behaviours, and worldviews. The literary examination will focus on the vocabulary and symbolic imagery characters apply about each other, dialogues regarding property, the characters' consciousness of their social status and roles, and the impact of property relations on more intimate relationships. By stressing the concept of reification, this study aims to offer a new perspective on class analysis in *The Forsyte Saga*, developing preceding analyses.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a considerable and valuable body of research on John Galsworthy and *The Forsyte Saga*. While these studies generally examine property and the philosophy of materialism in Victorian English society, class dynamics, Galsworthy's critique of his class, and the changing social position of women and their newly acquired rights, there is no comprehensive study in the literature that analyses the Soames-Irene relationship or Irene's general reification by the Forsyte family members from a Lukacsian perspective. This gap offers a significant area of analysis into how property dynamics shape individual relations. This section will review the key findings of existing research on Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* and emphasise the main aspects of current analysis.

Biographies are the most comprehensive studies of Galsworthy and his works, particularly *The Forsyte Saga*. First, James Gindin's *John Galsworthy's Life and Art: An Alien's Fortress* (1987) is a significant source in the field. Gindin establishes Galsworthy's alienation from his class as his fundamental starting point, evaluating his entire life and works through this analytical framework. According to Gindin, Galsworthy frequently "sees himself as the alien, as in dramatizing himself as Robinson Crusoe, alone on a new island" (Gidin, 1987: 8), a perception that was evident not only in his writing but also in his personal life. His "sense of being the outsider was not attached solely to his literary ambition or his sense of himself as a writer. He often expressed uneasiness with the comfortable, upper-middle class, Victorian, commercial background" (ibid.:9). For Gindin, Galsworthy built his outsider's fortress of imagination from personal guilt, alienation, family dynamics, and evolving social perceptions. This fortress embodied both his entire literary career and specifically began with *The Man of Property* before expanding into *The Forsyte Saga* trilogy after multiple attempts over a decade (ibid.:9). Another inclusive biography is Alec Frechet's *John Galsworthy: A Reassessment* (1982). In contrast to James Gindin, Frechet provides a detailed chronicle of Galsworthy's biography and an insightful evaluation of his literary contributions. Frechet praises Galsworthy for his keen observation of British society and its post-war challenges, his strong writing, and his ability to bridge the past and the future (Frechet, 1982: 2). He claims that Galsworthy had an intimate understanding of his country and held up a mirror to its society (ibid.: 3). He also observes that Galsworthy's social criticism novels reflect his sensitivity toward the lower classes (ibid.: 29). Furthermore, approaching Galsworthy with Wells and Bennett as transitional figures from a

different perspective, William Bellamy, in his book *The Novels of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy: 1890-1910* (1971), presents an analysis of the novels of these three writers, who are frequently mentioned together due to their realist approaches to literature and criticised by modernists such as Woolf and Lawrence. Bellamy examines the works of these three authors through the spectrum of fin de siècle (turn-of-the-century) psychology and concludes that their works seemingly serve as a therapeutic response to the crisis engendered by aforesaid psychological patterns (Bellamy, 1971: 15-21).

Sarah Edwards, in her “The Rise and Fall of the Forsytes: From Neo-Victorian to Neo-Edwardian Marriage” (2011), begins with the claim that *The Forsyte Saga*, especially the first two novels in the trilogy (*The Man of Property* and *In Chancery*), are transition novels. She focuses on the historical representations of marriage and divorce issues that are heavily emphasized in the novels, as well as the newly acquired rights of women. At the same time, she examines how Galsworthy, as an Edwardian novelist, isolated himself from historical events to focus on changes in the institution of marriage and how he relates this to an imperial event such as the Boer War. In a related analysis, Alison Hulburt’s article “Sentiment Wasn’t Dead: Anti-Modernism in John Galsworthy’s *The White Monkey*” (2015) examines the first novel of the second trilogy. Although the title suggests the article centres on this specific volume, she provides an analysis of the historical transformation of the capitalist system depicted in the novels. Hulburt argues that while the first two generations of Forsytes were firmly bound to “the sense of property,” the later generation was shaped by a consumer capitalist system. Similarly, in her article “Forsytes’ Bildungsroman: A Saga of A Place” (2011), Svetlana Nikitina analyses the houses of the upper-middle class Forsyte family in the novels and the various settings where the story unfolds, interpreting these spaces as symbolic representations of the capitalist system and its hierarchical structures. Focusing on the theme of social justice, in her article “John Galsworthy and Slum Clearance” (2020), Jill Felicity Durrey provides a detailed analysis of Galsworthy’s works, claiming that they show the real world and the class distinctions in it. Durrey argues that through his works, Galsworthy encourages readers to observe social injustices and try correcting them. Through a close reading of the representation of people with low incomes, the lower classes, and women’s rights in his works, Durrey claims that this theme persists throughout Galsworthy’s literary career. Similarly, Drew B. Palette, in his article “Young Jolyon: The Forging of a Satirist,” examines how Galsworthy articulates a critique of his social class’s sense of property through the narrative voice of young Jolyon. Additionally, Palette explores the biographical parallels between young Jolyon and Galsworthy.

The above-mentioned studies represent only a part of the academic literature on Galsworthy and *The Forsyte Saga*, having made valuable contributions to the field. However, as demonstrated in the reviews, no study thoroughly examines how the Forsyte class’s fixation on property leads to reification in human relations and how this reification process manifests itself in the Soames-Irene relationship. In this context, this study will attempt to contribute to the existing body of literature by addressing this gap.

4. REIFICATION AND RESISTANCE: ANALYSING IRENE AND THE FORSYTE CONSCIOUSNESS

In *The Forsyte Saga*, Galsworthy depicts Irene as a central figure who both experiences and challenges the reification process inherent in Forsyte consciousness. Through her relationships – particularly with Soames – Irene appears simultaneously as an object of bourgeois “possessive instinct” and a resistant force that exposes the limitations of reified consciousness. Her character reveals how reification affects self-identity, interpersonal dynamics, and class relations in Galsworthy’s critique of bourgeois society. While some biographers attempt to draw parallels between Irene’s unhappy marriage and subsequent choices she makes with events in

Galsworthy's own life, the significance of Irene's character lies primarily in her subjection to a process of reification and her resistance against this whole process.

The Forsyte family members' attitude toward Irene manifests clear evidence of Lukacs' concept of reification through literature. From the beginning, in the family's first meeting, when the disagreements between Irene and Soames become the topic of discussion, these Forsyte members of the upper class, who interpret every relationship in terms of property, ascribe the underlying tension to the financial destitution of Irene's family background. Soames's father James Forsyte, presents a defensive justification to his brothers regarding his permission to their marriage: "Well...I couldn't help Irene's having no money. Soames was in such a hurry; he got quite thin dancing attendance on her" (Galsworthy, 1922/1950: 10). Nicholas Forsyte confirms this, saying she is good-looking, but "she'd no money" (ibid.:10). Upon these remarks, the family discusses profession of Irene's father. When they hear he is a professor, Roger Forsyte observes, "There is no money in that" and continues, "Ah...Soames will have trouble with her, you mark my words, he'll have trouble – she's got a foreign look" (p. 20) which indicates that, first, these family members define Irene directly in terms of her property and wealth (or lack thereof). Then, they perceive her as "other" due to her "foreign look" instead of one of their own. Seeing her as an outsider, the family identifies her solely as "Soames's wife." When they primarily position her as Soames's wife – and even as his possession – they deny her an independent identity, reducing her to merely Soames's wife and devaluing her due to her lack of wealth. Swithin Forsyte's admiration for Irene's beauty eventually transforms into an attitude that reduces her to purely an aesthetic object. His insistent manner concerning carriage rides with Irene, with complete disregard for her personal preferences, distinctly manifests this reification tendency (p.137). Irene's beauty is frequently discussed among family members. Indeed, one of the family elders, old Jolyon, refers to Irene's beauty as "dangerous" (p.235), indicating the potential disruptions and threats to family order that her beauty might incite. As demonstrated in interactions among family members, Irene is defined by her financial inadequacy and physical beauty. She is not recognized as an autonomous individual with her thoughts and desires. This attitude subjects her to a complete process of reification.

Among the brothers and sisters, James Forsyte's perspective on Irene is particularly noteworthy, as Irene is his son Soames's wife, and her existence and actions directly affect his family. James is disturbed by how this woman, whose autonomy he does not recognise, causes concern for his son and family. Ultimately, James's primary concern is the well-being of his son, a member of his own family and class; thus, his attitude toward Irene becomes a clear example of the reification of Irene. When rumours of Irene's unhappiness in her marriage with Soames circulate within the family, James cannot comprehend Irene's unhappiness, as in his view, his son has provided everything for this woman of limited financial means:

They had a lovely house (relatively small), were in an excellent position, had no children, and no money troubles. Soames was reserved about his affairs but must be getting a warm man. He had a capital income from the business — for Soames, like his father, was a member of that well-known firm of solicitors — and had always been very careful. He had done quite unusually well with some mortgages he had taken up, too—a little timely foreclosure—most lucky hits!" (pg. 51).

Therefore, "There was no reason why Irene should not be happy, yet they said she'd been asking for a separate room. He knew where that ended. It wasn't as if Soames drank" (p.52). James utterly dehumanises Irene, disregarding her emotional dimension as a human being, and presents her lack of money as an example of Irene's economically vulnerable position, "Luckily, she had no money – a beggarly fifty pounds a year!" (p. 53). Therefore, as James presumes, Irene cannot consider ending her marriage due to financial constraints. Instead, James's remark, "I tell you my opinion, it's a pity you haven't got a child to think about and

occupy you” (p. 82), embodies a patriarchal perspective that not only reifies Irene in economic terms but also defines her through her reproductive capacity, regarding her as a biological means of production. This reflects Lukacs’s claim that capitalist relations of production permeate all areas of society. Moreover, throughout the first novel, *The Man of Property*, James’s references to Irene, “She was getting to have opinions of her own” and “He felt that her friends ought to be chosen for her” (p. 52), exposes that he perceives Irene not as an autonomous individual, but as an object to be controlled. Despite these considerations to manage Irene’s decisions, James cannot control the situation and harbours anxiety about a potential scandal and damage to the family reputation. “There’ll be a scandal; I always said so” (p.322) emerges as James’s immediate reaction when confronted with the news of Irene’s departure from the household. Subsequently, by telling Soames, “Don’t you listen to her, follow her and get her back!” (p. 323), he fails to consider why Irene left the house or her emotional state. This attitude of James demonstrates that for him, Irene exists simply as an extension of Soames’s identity, devoid of autonomous individuality. James’s reification of Irene provides a significant, though incomplete, illustration of how the Forsyte family transforms human relationships into property relations. This process will reach its culmination in Soames’s treatment of his wife.

Soames’s attitude toward Irene is a typical expression of his class identity and aligns with his sense of ownership, thus emerging as a straightforward process of reification. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there exists a conflict between Soames and Irene from the very beginning of their marriage. Soames attempted to influence Irene’s decision about marriage with great persistence, while Irene consented to marry only after receiving a promise that they could separate if the marriage proved unsustainable.⁶ However, Soames did not honour his promise, which caused Irene to distance herself. As illustrated, Soames, failing to fulfil his promise to Irene from the beginning, has shown that he regards her as one of his possessions and disregards her wishes and decisions. Throughout their marriage that began in this manner, Soames’s perspective on and attitude toward Irene continue to manifest how a property-based consciousness reifies such an intimate human relationship, with Soames failing to distinguish his wife from other objects he possesses: “Could a man own anything prettier than this dining-table with its deep tints, the starry, soft-petalled roses, the ruby-coloured glass, and quaint silver furnishing; could a man own anything prettier than the woman who sat at it?” (p. 69). As demonstrated in this passage, Irene is reduced solely to her physical beauty and is ontologically equated with the luxurious and glossy objects in the house. However, as Soames remarks, “Out of his other property, out of all the things he had collected, his silver, his pictures, his houses, his investments, he got a secret and intimate feeling,” but “out of her he got none” (p. 70), thus his attempt to completely objectify Irene as he does his other possessions proves unsuccessful, creating one of the fundamental conflicts between them. Nevertheless, Soames’s proprietary claims over Irene are evident in his attempt to control her social relations: “On Saturday morning, Soames had found her at her writing table with a note written to Swithin, putting him off. Why did she want to put him off? he asked. She might put her people off when she liked, but he would not have her put off his people! She had looked at him intently, had torn up the note, and said: ‘Very well!’” (p. 136). As illustrated in this example, Soames’s possessiveness surrounded even Irene’s social circle, and the differentiation between “his people” and “her people” clearly reveals the property-based mindset in Soames’s consciousness. He further desires to know and control Irene’s daily actions almost every moment of the day, sometimes in alarming ways. As Irene’s resistance to Soames’s possessive behaviours intensifies, Soames takes his frustration to the point of violent thoughts: “A good beating ... is the only thing that would bring you to your senses” (p. 251). He does not act upon these thoughts; however, after

⁶ For the complete story, see Galsworthy (1950, pp.120-122).

his internal reflections and the rumours he receives, Soames reaches the extreme point of reification in his treatment of Irene, utterly erasing the line between person and possession. The passage begins with “The morning after a certain night on which Soames at last asserted his rights and acted like a man” (p. 292), which exemplifies the ultimate stage of this process, as Soames normalizes his actions. His rape of Irene, described by George as an “act of property” (p. 299), constitutes the most extreme expression of a marriage ideology based on ownership. In the end, he enforces what he perceives as his property rights over her body, disregarding her will entirely.

During his efforts to reunite with Irene after years of separation, Soames once again demonstrates that his perspective on Irene has remained unchanged – he still regards her purely as his commodity: “She was like an empty house only waiting to be retaken into use and possession by him who legally owned her. To Soames, the thought of re-entry into quiet possession of his property with nothing given away to the world was intensely alluring” (p. 524). Despite his emotional feelings toward Irene, he again does not distinguish her from his other possessions and entirely disregards her emotions. After objectifying Irene to such an extent, Soames repeatedly questions why Irene does not love him throughout the three-volume *The Forsyte Saga*. He perceives himself as the ideal husband – he possesses wealth, status, and the ability to provide the life he envisions for her. When defining himself as a character, stating “I’m not lame, I’m not loathsome’ I’m not a boor, I’m not a fool. What is it? What’s the mystery about me?” (p. 545) he demonstrates a lack of consideration for others and fails to acknowledge Irene’s emotions. His self-centred questioning affirms his inability to see beyond his perception of himself. Although Galsworthy had not encountered Lukacs’s theory of reification at the time, from a socialist perspective, he perceptively illustrates through his writing how human consciousness within the capitalist system equates other individuals with “things,” as in this very example of Soames and Irene.

Irene exhibits a “silent, passive, gracefully averse;” (p. 70) yet resolute resistance throughout the multifaceted process of reification imposed upon her by Soames and his family. Galsworthy explicitly states in the *Preface to The Forsyte Saga* that he deliberately portrays her in this specific way: “The figure of Irene, never, as the reader may have noticed, present, except through the senses of other characters, is a concretion of disturbing Beauty impinging on a possessive world” (p.viii). By characterising her as the “concretion of disturbing Beauty,” he positions her as a silent splinter that disturbs Forsyte world of property. Through *The Forsyte Saga*, she struggles to preserve her stance and identity. In a Lukacsian sense, this reflects a phenomenon similar to the awakening of proletarian consciousness. Irene’s resistance against social expectations and her unhappy marriage becomes evident in her rarely heard responses. For instance, her declaration, “I don’t care if I never get home” (p. 144), becomes a subject of gossip within the family gatherings, stressing her sense of alienation from the Forsyte class, family, and marriage. She further expresses her marital unhappiness in response to Soames’s possessive demand, “Where were you?” – which he considers his right – by replying, “In heaven – out of this house!” (p. 256). Irene experiences freedom only when she distances herself from the family that is connected by only possessive attachments. After separating from Soames, Irene evolves from “sheer passive resistance” to having “more of her...something of activity and daring” (p. 496). However, Soames does not attribute this change to her newfound personal freedom but instead to the financial independence granted by old Jolyon. For Soames, whose worldview is shaped by Victorian social norms, Irene’s decision to live alone is unacceptable. Yet, Irene, through making clothes, visiting hospitals, playing the piano, translating, and working with a publishing house, constructs an image of a self-sufficient labourer, presenting a clear stance against the bourgeois norms imposed upon her. Despite Soames’s persistent offers and promises of a separate life in exchange for a son, she ultimately

declares, “God made me as I am,” she said; ‘wicked if you like—but not so wicked that I’ll give myself again to a man I hate” (p. 641), demonstrating her final, determined resistance against sacrificing her identity and autonomy. Although those around her explicitly recognise it that Soames views Irene as his “property” – “She was his property” (p. 964), “Soames once owned [Irene] as a man might own a slave” (p. 966) – Irene unequivocally rejects this claim of reification. In the face of all remarks and accusations, she remains silent but never surrenders to the reification process imposed by members of the Forsyte class. In doing so, she defiantly challenges the restrictive gender norms and societal expectations placed upon women during the Victorian period.⁷

Galsworthy creates a striking irony in the *Forsyte Chronicles* by illustrating that while Soames and the Forsyte family seek to objectify Irene, they fall victim to the process of reification. Soames’s inability to possess Irene as he does his other property drives him into a profound existential crisis over the years, forcing him to confront the limits of his logic of reification. His frustration is evident in his grief: “When I came here tonight, I meant everything that I could to do away with the past and start fair again. And you meet me with ‘nerves,’ and silence, and sighs. There’s nothing tangible. It’s like a spider’s web” (p. 545). Here, the “spider’s web” functions as a metaphor for Soames’s reified consciousness. This web of possessive instinct that shapes Soames’s consciousness imprisons him from comprehending it, understanding other people’s intangible sentiments, and, most importantly, perceiving Irene as a human being rather than a possession. His reaction exemplifies the mindset of a typical Forsyte, who, when confronted with intangible emotions beyond possession and material wealth, experiences discomfort yet remains within the framework of capitalist values without questioning his own reified consciousness. Soames explicitly expresses this metaphorical web that surrounds him in a moment of inner conflict in this internal monologue:

If only he could burst out of himself, out of this web he felt around him for the first time. If only he could surrender to the thought: ‘Divorce her—turn her out! She has forgotten you. Forget her!’ If only he could surrender to the thought: ‘Let her go—she has suffered enough!’ If only he could surrender to the desire: ‘Make a slave of her—she is in your power!’ If only he could surrender to the sudden vision: ‘What does it all matter?’ Forget himself for a minute, forget that it mattered what he did, and forget that whatever he did, he must sacrifice something. If only he could act on an impulse!” (p. 349)

This passage first describes the confines created by his class in detail and every aspect of his life. Then it emphasises Soames’s desire to escape from the metaphorical “web” surrounding him using the “if only” structure. While Soames craves to liberate himself from all the thought patterns that constrain him and reify his mind, as well as from the value judgments of his class, his longing for liberty remains unattainable because he is trapped in the very sense of property and desire for possession that shape his consciousness. He acknowledges the restraints enclosing him: “He could forget nothing; surrender to no thought, vision, or desire; it was all too serious; too close around him, an unbreakable cage” (p. 350). For Soames, this notion of being trapped within a cage or web is temporary. When young Jolyon knocks on the door, he returns to the world of his materialist values. This momentary awareness, followed by a swift reversion to the same possessive attitudes, illustrates how deeply embedded his bourgeois identity is and how thoroughly reified his consciousness remains. This reification of Soames’s

⁷ For an analysis of women’s position in Victorian society, see Hamilton, S. (2001). Making history with Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian feminism, domestic violence, and the language of imperialism. *Victorian Studies*, 43(3), 437-460; Langland, E. (1992). Nobody’s Angels: Domestic ideology and middle-class women in the Victorian novel. *PMLA*, 107(2), 290-304; Peterson, M.J. (1989). *Family, love, and work in the lives of Victorian gentlewomen*. Indiana University Press.

identity is further described in his concern with his family name during the divorce proceedings. He believes “The name was a possession, a concrete, unstained piece of property, the value of which would be reduced some twenty percent at least” (p.679). His discomfort derives not essentially from personal suffering but from the harm of this abstract possession -he fears that “after that half-hour, all bearers of the Forsyte name would feel the bloom was off the rose” (p.279). The irony is remarkable: while reifying Irene, Soames himself becomes trapped in a reified perception of his own identity, considering his name as “his property” that has “never been exploited” (p.679). His sense of value becomes connected with the economic and social value of the Forsyte name. Consequently, Galsworthy constructs a twofold critique – Soames not only reifies others but also suffers from the very same process of reification that depicts his class consciousness.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this paradox of dual reification, Galsworthy demonstrates one of the fundamental contradictions of bourgeois society. While Soames treats Irene as property and reifies her, he becomes an object within the capitalist value system, unable to think beyond its confines. The “spider web” metaphor, beyond being a mere artistic device, reflects the existential reality of the Forsyte bourgeois class – an actuality of their reified consciousness, as Lukacs extensively analysed in *History and Class Consciousness*. The bourgeois consciousness confined by this system, even if they momentarily perceive freedom, cannot surpass their false consciousness to question the reality they experience. Soames’s instant moment of awareness, followed by his immediate return to his bourgeois self, depicts reification as an economic phenomenon and a profound psychological entrapment. The bourgeois subject, confined within the very cage it has constructed, continues to live trapped in appearances, unable to grasp the essence.

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