

READING JOHN GALSWORTHY'S THE FUGITIVE THROUGH PERIYAR E. V. RAMASAMY'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY: A COMPARATIVE ETHICAL STUDY

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Abstract

*John Galsworthy's **The Fugitive** (1913) is a seminal English problem play that interrogates the ethical and social dimensions of marriage, personal freedom, and societal norms in early twentieth-century England. At the center of the drama is Clare Dedmond, a woman trapped in a constraining marriage, whose desires for personal liberty conflict with the expectations imposed by her husband, George Dedmond, and the broader societal and familial framework. This paper examines the play through the lens of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's social philosophy, particularly his critique of patriarchal authority, social conformity, and the systemic subordination of women. Periyar's rationalist and reformist perspective illuminates Clare's predicament, showing how social morality disproportionately burdens women, enforcing silence, endurance, and adherence to convention at the cost of autonomy and self-realization. By juxtaposing Galsworthy's narrative strategies and character portrayals with Periyar's philosophical critiques, this study reveals convergences between literary and socio-political thought in addressing systemic injustice. It demonstrates that **The Fugitive** not only reflects the constraints of Edwardian English society but also provides a universal commentary on the ethical failures of social institutions that subordinate individual conscience to collective authority. The paper argues that Clare Dedmond's moral and emotional labor exemplifies the enduring tension between societal expectation and personal freedom, a theme central to both Galsworthy and Periyar.*

Keyword: John Galsworthy, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, The Fugitive, Dravidian rationalism, marriage, women, social norms, patriarchy

1. INTRODUCTION

John Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* occupies a distinctive place in early twentieth-century English drama as a social problem play, notable not for grandiose acts of villainy but for its meticulous exposition of the subtle coercions of social life. At its core is Clare Dedmond, a woman whose moral and emotional consciousness illuminates the ethical dilemmas produced by marriage, family, and society at large. Clare's struggle for autonomy, personal fulfillment, and freedom from the confining structures of domesticity serves as a focal point through which the play interrogates the operation of social norms and the uneven distribution of moral responsibility. When analyzed through the lens of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's social philosophy, Clare's experiences acquire a universal ethical significance, highlighting the systemic subordination of women and the moral compromises demanded by a patriarchal society. Periyar's critique of hierarchical social structures, religiously sanctioned customs, and the patriarchal organization of marriage provides a rigorous framework for understanding the social pressures that constrain Clare's agency and impose upon her a disproportionate burden of moral labor.

From the outset, Clare Dedmond is presented as an individual acutely aware of the injustice inherent in her social milieu. Her marriage to George Dedmond, though socially respectable, is emotionally stifling and morally constraining. George embodies the conventional male response to societal expectation, adhering to norms of propriety while struggling to comprehend his wife's

dissatisfaction. In his adherence to social convention, George represents the way in which patriarchal structures limit moral imagination and ethical responsiveness. Clare's internal life, by contrast, reveals the tension between conscience and convention, demonstrating how women, unlike men, are burdened with sustaining social morality while simultaneously being denied the freedom to critique or escape the structures that enforce it. Clare's awareness of the injustices surrounding her extends beyond her marital relationship; she observes, absorbs, and reflects upon the judgments and expectations imposed by George's family, particularly his mother, who reinforces social convention and moral orthodoxy. Through Clare, Galsworthy dramatizes the ethical cost of social compliance, exposing the moral compromises expected of women and the emotional labor required to preserve societal appearances.

Periyar's philosophy provides a lens through which Clare Dedmond's predicament can be ethically and socially contextualized. Periyar consistently critiqued the social and cultural mechanisms by which women are subjugated, arguing that obedience, self-sacrifice, and endurance are not inherently virtuous traits but socially engineered instruments of patriarchal control. In Periyar's analysis, marriage is a central institution through which patriarchal authority is maintained, regulating women's bodies, labor, and autonomy. Religious sanction and social approval legitimize these structures, presenting the subordination of women as morally praiseworthy, while simultaneously discouraging dissent. Clare's marriage reflects precisely this dynamic. Her desire for personal fulfillment is framed as deviance, while her endurance and restraint are lauded as virtue. Galsworthy's portrayal of Clare's moral and emotional labor resonates with Periyar's insistence that societal morality is often a tool for maintaining hierarchy, with women disproportionately burdened by the ethical expectations that stabilize social institutions.

The tension between individual conscience and societal expectation is further intensified by Clare's interactions with Malise, a literary-minded friend who represents an alternative mode of existence, one informed by intellectual freedom and personal choice rather than social obligation. Malise's presence highlights the

contrast between the constraining domestic environment and the possibilities of a life guided by ethical self-determination. George's suspicion and jealousy of Malise reflect the social policing of female morality, illustrating how women's behavior is subject to scrutiny that men rarely experience with equivalent intensity. In these interactions, Galsworthy dramatizes the ways in which social structures enforce compliance, ensuring that women internalize the moral standards imposed upon them while limiting the spaces in which they can exercise autonomy or critique.

Clare Dedmond's plight is compounded by the generational enforcement of social norms, most vividly represented by George's mother. Mrs. Dedmond embodies the authority of tradition and the moral policing of younger women. She represents the societal expectation that women must maintain propriety, suppress desire, and uphold appearances even when these demands conflict with personal integrity. Clare's navigation of these pressures exemplifies the disproportionate ethical labor assigned to women. Whereas male characters such as George and Malise operate with greater latitude in balancing personal desire and societal expectation, Clare's conscience and ethical awareness require that she manage her own desires alongside the moral and emotional expectations of family and society. In this sense, Clare is both a mirror and a critique of the social world around her, demonstrating how moral responsibility is gendered and unequally distributed.

Periyar's social philosophy illuminates the structural dimensions of Clare's predicament. He argued that women's subordination is socially produced rather than natural, and that traditional morality often serves to conceal systemic injustice. In this light, Clare's moral labor is not merely a personal trial but a symptom of a larger social system that enforces gendered ethical responsibilities. The expectations placed upon her—endurance, discretion, and moral vigilance—are reinforced by both familial authority and social convention, ensuring that women internalize the ethical framework that stabilizes patriarchal society. Through Periyar's lens, Galsworthy's play transcends the specificities of Edwardian English domestic life to reveal a broader ethical critique: the institutions and norms that claim moral authority often impose an inequitable

burden on women while granting men comparative freedom from scrutiny.

Galsworthy's exploration of marriage further amplifies this critique. The institution of marriage in *The Fugitive* is depicted as a mechanism for social regulation rather than a partnership rooted in mutual understanding or emotional authenticity. Clare's dissatisfaction and sense of imprisonment stem not from personal failing but from the systemic constraints of marriage as a socially sanctioned structure. Her attempts to assert agency—whether through emotional expression, reflection, or imagined escape—are continually moderated by the expectations of propriety. The play dramatizes the tension between marital duty and personal autonomy, illustrating how women bear the ethical cost of preserving social morality while men, though constrained by convention, face comparatively fewer moral and social penalties for deviation. Periyar's critique of traditional marriage aligns seamlessly with this depiction, emphasizing that ethical and social justice cannot be realized within frameworks that prioritize hierarchy, control, and conformity over autonomy and equality.

Clare's struggle also highlights the intersection of private conscience and public morality. Her internal conflict—the desire for freedom and the obligation to adhere to social norms—reflects the broader societal mechanisms that constrain ethical action. Galsworthy presents this conflict not as a question of legal compliance but as a matter of conscience and moral courage. Clare's moral labor extends beyond her personal decisions; she navigates the ethical landscape shaped by familial expectation, social surveillance, and institutional authority. Her endurance, reflection, and ethical attentiveness demonstrate how women are positioned as custodians of morality in a society that constrains their capacity for self-determination. Periyar's analysis reinforces this reading by exposing the social processes that construct and maintain gendered moral hierarchies.

Malise's role in the play further elucidates these dynamics. He embodies an intellectual freedom and detachment from social enforcement that is largely unavailable to Clare. The contrast between his ethical latitude and Clare's constrained agency illustrates the

gendered distribution of moral responsibility, emphasizing that women's moral labor is both disproportionate and structurally enforced. Malise's presence also underscores the ethical tensions inherent in social expectation: Clare's moral and emotional attentiveness is continually evaluated against the backdrop of male behavior, demonstrating the asymmetry in social accountability. Galsworthy's nuanced characterization highlights the complex interplay between conscience, desire, and social conformity, while Periyar's critique identifies the structural forces that produce such gendered asymmetries.

The Dedmond family as a whole functions to reinforce social expectation and moral orthodoxy. George's parents, through both direct and indirect pressures, remind Clare of her ethical obligations as a wife, daughter-in-law, and participant in social life. This reinforcement of duty exemplifies the ways in which familial authority collaborates with societal norms to produce moral compliance, particularly among women. Clare's negotiation of these pressures illustrates the ethical compromises demanded by social conformity, highlighting the disproportionate burden women bear in maintaining appearances, resolving conflicts, and upholding social morality. Periyar's philosophy provides a critical framework for understanding these dynamics, demonstrating that the ethical expectations imposed upon women are socially constructed mechanisms designed to perpetuate hierarchy and control.

Clare Dedmond's predicament also illustrates the tension between individual conscience and institutional authority. Legal and social institutions, including the family, social convention, and marriage, operate as mechanisms of control that limit moral agency. Clare's awareness of injustice, her desire for personal fulfillment, and her ethical sensitivity position her as a moral observer within the play, but not as an agent fully capable of altering the structures that constrain her. Galsworthy dramatizes the consequences of this tension, revealing how social norms sustain themselves through the internalization of ethical responsibility by those most affected by them—primarily women. Periyar's insights clarify that such internalization is neither natural nor ethical but socially engineered to maintain patriarchal authority.

Galsworthy's problem play thus becomes a site for ethical reflection, demonstrating how societal expectations shape, constrain, and exploit female agency. Clare Dedmond exemplifies the emotional and moral labor required to sustain a society in which obedience, discretion, and endurance are disproportionately expected of women. Through the comparative lens of Periyar's social philosophy, it becomes clear that Clare's experiences are not unique to Edwardian England but represent a broader critique of patriarchal social systems. Both Galsworthy and Periyar illuminate the moral cost imposed upon women, the inequities of social norms, and the ethical failures of institutions that privilege order over justice.

Clare Dedmond's experiences reveal how social norms systematically assign moral responsibility to women while constraining their freedom, reflecting the structures that Periyar E. V. Ramasamy critiqued in his social philosophy. Her emotional labor, ethical awareness, and desire for autonomy demonstrate the costs imposed by patriarchal authority, conventional morality, and socially sanctioned institutions such as marriage, which Periyar identified as instruments of control that limit women's rational choice. The pressures exerted by George Dedmond, Malise, and the Dedmond family illustrate how societal expectations enforce obedience and endurance, echoing Periyar's assertion that morality is often socially engineered to maintain hierarchy rather than justice. Clare's struggle emphasizes that true ethical life, as Periyar argued, requires equality, reason, and freedom from oppressive social norms. By navigating the tension between personal conscience and societal constraints, Clare exemplifies the universal relevance of Periyar's critique: that liberation—both moral and social—demands the courage to question tradition, resist patriarchal authority, and reclaim autonomy. Her narrative thus bridges Galsworthy's literary examination of individual suffering under rigid social systems with Periyar's rationalist vision of a society where ethical responsibility is equitable and not imposed disproportionately on women.

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