

The 'Alienated' Modern Man in John Galsworthy's Short Fiction

John Galsworthy'nin Kısa Kurgusunda 'Yabancılaşmış' Modern İnsan

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Abstract: The present study aims to explore how living in a metropolis affects the lives of modern men as narrated in John Galsworthy's short story entitled the Japanese Quince. The story explores the idea of customs standing as obstacles to one's freedom and focuses on the solitary mood of men while they are missing the lust for life. Galsworthy's characters who are dwellers of the metropolis are suffering from estrangement. They are aware of the joys and beauties in nature and in life that stand right next to them, yet they miss them while being too much engaged with the routines, habits and 'musts'. The present paper examines Galsworthy's Londoner characters as representatives of modern man suffering from alienation, being aware of the disease yet making no move towards better. The exploration of the Londoner character, Mr Nilson who is the protagonist in the Japanese Quince will reveal the suffering of modern man from estrangement.

Keywords: John Galsworthy, alienation, short fiction, Japanese quince, modernity.



Introduction

It would not be a mistake to argue that there exists a bond between a city and its citizen. The relationship is a mutual one in which both sides affect each other. The citizens are much like the cities in which they live and the cities take the shape of their citizens. Likewise, men of letters are inspired, nourished and encouraged by the cities they shelter in. Their novels or poems are displays of the cities they describe and the cities are described as how they are seen from the eyes of the novelist or the poet. John Galsworthy is one of those novelists, playwrights and short story writers who is closely linked to the city he belongs to, the city of London. As an author whose life has passed both in the city and in the country, he was well aware of the beauty of nature and the natural and hardships of city life. Galsworthy was also a keen observer of his society who could make critical judgments about the ways and traditions and establish a bond between the past and the present. In this way, his readers were pleased to see how they used to be and how they were then. The present article argues that John Galsworthy's short story *The Japanese Quince* is a product of the author's association with his city. The story was first published in 1910 in a collection entitled *A Motley* by Charles Scribner's Sons and reprinted many times in the years that followed. The last reprint of the collection was in 2015 by Leopold Classic Library.

The story in question touches the problem of modern men and the prominent suffering of most of the metropolitans, namely the alienation of man from his environment, nature and the self. Galsworthy's portrait of his protagonist in *the Japanese Quince* is a representation of this kind of suffering experienced by millions of dwellers in the metropolis. The study will reveal how a Londoner author approaches the lives of the businessmen in his city in his era, a presentation which we can generalize to any metropolis of the 21st Century. First, John Galsworthy will be covered as a Londoner and as an author. Then, the study will specifically focus on Galsworthy's short story entitled *the Japanese Quince*. Finally, the main theme of alienation as presented in the story will be discussed as the disease of modernity and the present century.



Galsworthy, is he the Londoner?

John Galsworthy is a novelist, playwright and short-story writer. He was born at his wealthy family's estate near London at Parkfield, Kingston Hill, Surrey, on 14 August 1867. Galsworthy died in Grove Lodge, Hampstead in 1933. He studied law at Oxford, which was his father's decision. However, he didn't practice in his profession as a lawyer and instead, he chose to travel to Russia, South Africa, and Australia (Schalit, 1970). His education in Law enabled him to give considerable space to lawyers, judges, prisons and prisoners in his fiction. The sense of humor and satire could be seen in his writings about legal practice, the procedures and the arguments that lawyers are inclined to. During one of his travels when he met the well-known novelist Joseph Conrad, he was encouraged to go after literary efforts. He argues that Maupassant and Turgenev are the two writers who inspired him with aesthetic excitement (Frechet, 1982). Galsworthy's close friend Mottram describes his 'Englishness' with reference to Galsworthy's being a central type of Englishman and asserts that he left a mark on most of the people he had contacted with. Gerald Gould called him "English institution" with regard to the Forsytes as representatives of a certain class and typical Englishman (Gindin, 1987).

Galsworthy was thirty when his first book was published. In 1902 he complained that he had made no money although he had written four books. *The Man of Property* was recorded as the first publication by Galsworthy with financial success. The protagonist of *the Man of Property*, Soames Forsyte is a wealthy notary in London who suffers from the misfortunes of his marriage. The novel touches one of the popular topics of that era, specifically marriage and divorce and discusses the themes of justice and freedom by referring to the new legislation about families. With the publication of Galsworthy by Marrot, the resemblance between Forsytes and the Galsworthy family was clearly drawn. Frechet argues for a relationship between Soames Forsyte and Galsworthy and points that *the Man of Property* is the best and mostly read novel by the author.

However, the interest in his works declined with the WWI because they lacked the fervor of patriotism. Galsworthy's fame was established by the publication of *the Forsyte Saga* and continued to grow until his death.



Frechet argues that *the Forsyte Saga* was a narration of the post-war atmosphere by providing “the most comprehensive, powerful, and monumental expression”. Another reason why *the Forsyte Saga* appealed to the readers was that it jumped from 1901 to 1920, excluding the harsh years of the war. People were pleased to recall the unpleasant and depressing times of the period (Frechet, 1982, 2). Later, Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1932 and it was suggested that his narration reached the peak point in *the Forsyte Saga*. (NobelPrize.org)

Later, *The White Monkey*, *Caravan*, *The Silver Spoon* and the last trilogy entitled *End of the Chapter* were all appreciated by the readers. Frechet explains the success and popularity of Galsworthy in these words: ‘The Victorian age was, of course, an object of mockery; but it was also regarded with curiosity and a peculiar pride. (...) Satire and nostalgia were, or appeared to be, blended in just the right proportions to nurture self-esteem and sensitivity. A people whose placid ways had been disrupted by war longed, despite momentary querulousness, to regain its self-confidence, reassert its identity, understand itself better.’(1982) It can be asserted that Galsworthy’s writings were like mirrors reflecting society’s past and present as well as providing a link between nostalgia and satire of the present. The theme of beauty appears in most of Galsworthy’s novels together with the themes of love, sadness and dissatisfaction. For instance, *Irene*, in *the Man of Property*, represents the beauty that does not bring love or happiness. In the *Saga*, the themes of unhappy and loveless marriages, as well as dissatisfaction, appear when *Irene* is shown to have a right to divorce.

In 1967, the British Broadcasting Corporation aired for television a twenty-six-hour adaptation of *the Forsyte Saga*. Born to a wealthy family and having lived his entire life as a member of the upper-class Victorian society, Galsworthy wrote about what he knew and his fiction challenges the standards of upper-class Victorian society. Galsworthy is considered one of the most successful English authors of the early twentieth century. His writings are admired for capturing the proud but declining spirit of upper-class society from the 1880s to the years following World War I. He reveals the shortcomings of society and communicates the possibility of change for the better.



Galsworthy was a good observer of his era and could reflect his observations in the right words and plots. His intellectual background and his extended trips to various countries enabled him to see cultural and social varieties which he could critically observe and evaluate. He was a man of his past and present: he knew how the world used to be and how it was in his time, a fact that encouraged him to establish a bridge between the two. Galsworthy was a founder and the first president of PEN which is an international organization of poets, playwrights, essayists, editors and novelists founded in London and later in New York. Galsworthy also wrote the first three articles of PEN's charter. He argued that literature should remain untouched by political and national passion. PEN emphasized the necessity of the ideal one humanity living in peace.

During his lifetime he had a good reputation which declined after his death. In literary history, he was harshly criticized by some modernist writers mainly by Woolf. He was categorized as an Edwardian writer and was excluded from the Modernist Movement. However, it can be argued that he was a forerunner of modernism in the early 20th century and was far ahead of his time. His experimental style of the interior monologue was used to reveal the thought processes of the characters, a style closely related to the Modernist form of a stream of consciousness. His avoidance of detailed descriptions of characters and his use of open endings were also adopted by Modernists.

Beauty, love, suffering and law were recurring themes in Galsworthy's writings. As pointed above, beauty comes first among the themes of his fiction. It might be the beauty of a woman or the beauty of nature. The beauty of nature is apparent in *the Japanese Quince*, the story this paper investigates. Nature is presented here as a source of temptation, a beauty to be admired and joy to be run after. The theme of dissatisfaction is also highlighted in the characterization of Mr. Nilson who seems to be dissatisfied with what he has but who makes no move to change it.

In addition to his novels and short stories, Galsworthy also wrote notable plays like *Justice*, *Loyalties*, and *the Silver Box*. Gindin claims that two distinctive features shine out in Galsworthy's drama. Firstly, his plays present a social conflict of the time and end with silence pointing out that



there cannot be a reconciliation. Secondly, the feeling of simultaneous social and psychological pain deepened throughout the plays (1987). In recent years, there has been an increase in the interest in Galsworthy's plays. *Windows* is a play written by Galsworthy and is staged early this year in London. *Strife* is another play by Galsworthy which was staged last year in Chichester. London County remembered Galsworthy and paid a debt to him by remembering his art and erecting a plaque on the house he used to live and died. Galsworthy was not well enough to go to the ceremony to receive his Nobel Prize for Literature, so it was brought to him at his home in in NW3, Admiral's Walk, Grove Lodge.

A 'Japanese Quince' in London

The Japanese Quince is a short story about a well-to-do London businessman. It is about two Londoner businessmen living as neighbors in Campden Hill in Victorian houses approaching the same square garden. The story opens with the protagonist, namely Mr. Nilson's introduction to the reader as a businessman who is well known in the City, the financial center of London.

"As Mr. Nilson, well-known in the City, opened the window of his dressing room on Campden Hill, he experienced a peculiar sweetish sensation at the back of his throat, and a feeling of emptiness just under his fifth rib. Hooking the window back, he noticed that a little tree in the Square Gardens had come out in blossom, and that the thermometer stood at sixty." (Galsworthy, 1910, 247) This is how Galsworthy exposes his story and the protagonist, Mr. Nilson. The quotation displays that the protagonist as a well-known businessman in the business district of London which is even today called "the City". He is described as living in a stunning property, signaling a prosperous life on Campden Hill. When he looks out of his window he can see a square garden, probably one of the dozens of gardens that one can find in London. The natural beauty of the tree tempts Mr. Nilson and he gives a short break from his highly ordered morning routine.

The extract conveys the strange kind of feeling that Mr. Nilson experiences early in the spring morning. The emphasis on the indescribable and peculiar feeling is a signal of a kind of disease that Mr. Nilson suffers. The



symptoms may indicate a physical problem. However, the reader will later realize that they signal the psychological condition of the protagonist. His wealth and class are established in the exposition as well as the common problem suffered by modern man. Although he right away notices the spring morning, he prefers to contemplate the price of Tintos—stock shares. Later, tempted by the beauty of nature, and hoping to get rid of his uncomfortable feeling, he finds himself at the heart of nature, in the nearby square garden, watching the beauty of the Japanese quince tree. Japanese quince is a small tree that blossoms with pink or red flowers in early spring. Contrary to Mr. Nilson's statement in the story that they do not bear fruit, the Japanese quince does bear fruit. The fruit is hard when picked in the fall and not suitable for eating except when used to make preserves.

As he approaches the tree, he can hear the singing of a blackbird that perched in the heart of the branches of the tree. The Japanese quince “was covered with young blossoms, pink and white, and little bright green leaves both round and spiky; and on all this blossom and these leaves, the sunlight glistened. Mr. Nilson smiled; the little tree was so alive and pretty! And instead of passing on, he stayed there smiling at the tree.” The tree is the main symbol of the story with its white and pink blossom, vivacious leaves and a singing blackbird. The Japanese quince represents beauty and joy. The tree looks so beautiful and fresh with all the blossoms and colors and the singing blackbird adds the quality of joy.

Mr. Nilson's true character is exposed when he confronts Mr. Tandram, who functions as a mirror image or doppelganger in literary terms. Their brief conversation shows that although they have been living as neighbors for a number of years they have never met or fallen into fellowship. Feeling obliged to speak, both men speak in brief words. Physically, the men are similar in the sense that they have same the height and mustaches, and are in frock coats, carrying their morning paper. When Nilson reaches the top step to his house, he experiences that same choking sweetness in his throat.

Alienation of Man in the Modern World and Life in Metropolis

The feeling of belonging in human beings and the concept of self-realization have a long history, beginning with the myths of antiquity, and



are still popular in modernity. In the age we are living we know that many people suffer from estrangement from themselves, their environment, and their true nature. Most of us might have seen people in the streets in different countries offering a free hug. Such a request arises from the very basic need of human nature to be with others. However, the social circumstances of today together with the working environment and conditions of the modern world drive a man into a world of alienation.

Modernism is what brought the concept of alienation into the lives of men. Today, it can be argued that a high percentage of the world's population is suffering from estrangement from themselves, their environment, and their true nature. The nature of man forces him to socialize, communicate and share ideas to fulfill and realize his true self. But, the problems of the modern world prevent us from fulfilling our true nature. The world appears as insecure, crowded with the unknown, and hard in working conditions. Although we live in crowds, we feel alone. The big cities, shopping malls, residences with securities, big factories, or business centers of towers are full of people who are alienated from their families, society or their own selves. The alienated man finds himself in a fallen state in which he conflicts with the whole world. The common use of the word is the active form "to alienate" means to remove something from someone. The term conveys a sense of loss or detachment (Bruce and Yearley, 2006). The fallen man has lost his bond to the rest of the world including his job, family, friends or society.

The concept of alienation is relevant to the study of sociology, philosophy or psychology and denotes to the different forms of the alienated man or the process of alienation. The process of alienation means the estrangement of people from the world in which they are living. Abercrombie et.al. adds that alienation is the process during which individuals estrange from themselves and others (2006). The original use of the philosophical term dates back to the German philosopher Hegel which was later transformed into a sociological concept by Karl Marx. Hegel's philosophy proposed alienation as a part of a process of consciousness, an argument that accepts alienation as a wholly internal level of consciousness.

It was Marx who argued for an external understanding of the concept in which man gets alienated as he is triggered by external circumstances.



Alienation transforms into a sociological concept closely related to the field of economy. Marx founds alienation in the process of production and moves on from the concept of 'alienated labor'. According to Marx, the first manifestation of alienated labor appears when the laborer is alienated from his product. Nature provides man with what is required for living and working. When the laborer gets more and more possession of the external world, the external world is no longer an object of his own production and is far from being a source of physical nourishment (Marx 2014). The first type of manifestation of alienation is the first step toward others. Marx's idea of the types of manifestations of alienation can be concluded as links in a chain; man alienates products from himself which is followed by his alienation from the activity of production. The first two result in his being estranged from his natural and essential world. The alienated man who cannot fulfill himself as a free and creative being of praxis cannot realize himself as a social being having humane relationships with other men.

Humans become what they are by realizing the power and the capacities they possess; therefore, it is important for Marx to become, live like, and work as a free human being. The modern world of capitalism was on the rise during the time of Marx and Galsworthy. Although the philosophies of both men were different, they were intellectual people who observed and mused over their societies. The increase in mass production brought harder and less humane working conditions. The system encouraged employers to think of their workers as their slaves. The work became an oppressive power on the individual and drove him into alienation. The self-alienation of the individual brought the worker's alienation from the other workers and the relationships got insincere.

The Alienated Londoner, Mr. Nilson

Galsworthy pictured himself as a Robinson Crusoe left alone on an island and estranged from the rest of the world and even himself. Gindin argues that Galsworthy regarded himself alienated from his class, his culture, and his country. In Galsworthy's words about his Englishness are such: "If my pictures of life have any quality of endurance, if they have any seeming truth, those pictures will be found in the long run to have been painted by one who has loved England, but never been part and parcel of



the England he has loved.” (cited in Gindin, 1987, 8) It is generally acknowledged that artistic individuality might be a cause of alienation. However, Galsworthy’s alienation is closely related to his denial of his writings’ nationally representative function. He insisted that one should not judge England by reading his words. He asserts that he has been an “exile” in all his days. He also felt himself like an outsider in his social class. “He often expressed uneasiness with the comfortable, upper-middle-class Victorian, commercial background that has pampered him. (...) Out of his guilts, his feelings of estrangement, his family and his reactions to it, and his slowly growing observations of his world, Galsworthy constructed the fortress of his own imagination, an alien’s fortress ” (Gindin, 1987, 9, 10).

We can argue that Galsworthy’s works have been enriched by his views of alienation. His story ‘The Japanese Quince’ is, no doubt, one of these. As asserted at the beginning of the article, the protagonist of the story is suffering from a disease common among the metropolitans. Mr. Nilson and his mirror image Mr. Tandram are drawn as men who have difficulty in socializing and whose lives are centered on the finance business. The emphasized similarity between the two men is to point out that there are so many people like them who live in a metropolis and who miss the real beauty and joy of life. These similarities tell the reader that there is nothing distinctive about them. They are among the mass of men who lead lives of estrangement and ordinariness.

Modern man suffers from the kinds of physical symptoms like Mr. Nilson’s ‘queer sensation’, ‘feeling of emptiness’, ‘a faint aching just above the heart’ or ‘choky feeling in his throat’. The physical symptom Galsworthy draws for his character later appears not to be physiologic. It can be argued that Galsworthy touches on the problem of modern man. It is the case for most of us complaining about how tired, exhausted or sore we feel. When the check-up results display no serious physiological problem, we turn towards psychology. It can be implied that Galsworthy’s protagonist’s condition is a result of his alienation from the environment and his true nature. Both Mr. Nilson and his mirror image Mr. Tandram are implied to be alienated from their environment, nature and themselves.

Galsworthy paints a fairly complete portrait of well-to-do men who are out of touch with the self and the others. Nilson lives in an exclusive



section of London, fashionable Campden Hill, and apparently makes plenty of money as an investor in London's financial district. Thus, he does not lack the means to lead a dynamic, outgoing life. What he lacks is the will to become more involved with the world around him. The beauty in nature and the natural charms them at first sight. However, the possibility of leading natural lives passes unacknowledged and they prefer to go on with their rigid and ordered lives. The case of Mr. Nilson is similar to the cases of many city dwellers that appear to have enviable lives when looked from the outside. But, the reality of the inner self is quite the contrary. Although they are not satisfied with their monotonous, uneventful and artificial lives, they do not take a step to change their ways.

Galsworthy's choice of 'Japanese Quince' as a tree in that park may be due to the idea of 'belonging'. The tree is exotic, it is not native. It does not belong to that land or city. 'Belonging' is not only a feeling for humans but also for any living thing. Normally, the Japanese Quince tree bears fruit if it is brought up comfortably and naturally in its original, native habitat. Similarly, a man reaches to the utmost and realizes himself when he lives freely and naturally. However, the modern world forces to live us in our own non-visible cages where we imprison ourselves. The modern world's conditions as they are unfolded in the metropolises force us to live unnaturally. Man loses the idea and hope of 'belonging' and it is when he gets alienated from his true nature as a human being.

Mr. Nilson's character in *the Japanese Quince* is a representative of such a Londoner who lives in a rut and the qualities of beauty and joy are missing in their lives. The case can be generalized to millions of metropolitans living in London, Istanbul, New York, etc. who are alienated from both nature and the environment. It can be argued that the urbanization of the planet was a phenomenon that Galsworthy has foreseen as disturbing. However, it is promising to see that more and more people are getting aware of the problem and trying to return to nature and what is natural. It is true to argue that Londoners increased awareness of this disease and attempted to take steps towards a more natural life.

For Londoners, square gardens have always been an important part of city life. The physical conditions, gardening, inhabitants, security, or privacy of the squares have changed since the seventeenth century, yet, their



use and necessity of them have always existed. London squares have always been different from the ones in Europe filled with dust and stone. The squares in London are “open spaces surrounded by houses with an enclosed central communal garden”. (Longstaffe-Gowan, 2014, 2) These garden squares are planted with trees, shrubs and flowers and decorated with banks, monuments, paths and lights. The garden squares have always offered a playground for children of the neighborhood, a place for socialization for the elderly people of the surrounding houses, or resting areas for bypassers. The enclosure of the garden squares in the early eighteenth century was meant for security and privacy (ibid. 4). Although the evolution of the square gardens in London does not end, it is for sure that they will always be an important part of the city. They are the parts of the city that remind people of natural, peaceful and beautiful life. They allow the people to meet, greet and speak with others and let them know the residents of the neighborhood.

Conclusion

In an essay from “The Short Stories of John Galsworthy”, J.Henry Smith quotes from a letter from Galsworthy in which he explains his purpose in writing in *The Japanese Quince*: ‘*The Japanese Quince* attempts to convey the feeling that comes to all of us -even the most unlikely- in the spring. It also attempts to produce in the reader the sort of uneasy feeling that now and then we run up against ourselves. It is also a satire on the profound dislike which most of us have of exhibiting the feelings which Nature produces in us, when those feelings are for one quite primitive and genuine.’

Galsworthy depicts nature’s power to tempt us towards beauty and joy, especially during spring. The uneasy feeling that we experience makes us uncomfortable and makes us hesitate to jump into the world of the Natural. This is modern man’s problem to suppress his own self rather than embrace life. However, the solution provided by Galsworthy is a return to nature and the self. After carrying out a survey of Galsworthy’s life and homes, Frechet questions if Galsworthy was a town-dweller or a countryman. He spent most of his time in the country; however, there were times when he was happy to choose living in London. He sometimes expressed



that the urbanization of England repelled him, not because 'he had a phobia of towns but because that they filled him with distaste, and, above all, distrust' (1982). From this point forth, we can argue that the condition of Mr. Nilson is a manifestation of Galsworthy's personal view of city-dwellers. Mr. Nilson chooses to live in the city despite his distaste and distrust.

As the title of the present paper suggests, Mr. Nilson is an alienated Londoner as drawn with Galsworthy's pen in *the Japanese Quince*. However, Galsworthy argues that the metropolis of London provides its citizens with tempting beauty and joy as well as distress, regulations and order. Most Londoners are aware that open space, trees and natural beauty improve city life. Furthermore, it is our choice to take advantage of any of these. We suggest that Galsworthy's Londoner, Mr. Nilson can be generalized to the citizens of many other metropolises like New York, Paris, Berlin or Istanbul.

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Öz: Bu çalışma, bir metropolde yaşıyor olmanın, modern insanın yaşamını nasıl etkilediğini John Galsworthy'nin Japon Ayvası öyküsünde anlatıldığı biçimiyle derinlemesine incelemektir. Öykü, alışkanlıkların insanın önünde bir engel teşkil edebildiği düşüncesini soruştururken bireyin yaşama tutkusunu ıskalayarak içine düştüğü yalnızlık şeklindeki ruh haline odaklanmaktadır. Galsworthy'nin karakterleri, yabancılaşıma duygusu içindeki metropol insanlarıdır. Aslında, bu karakterler, hemen yanı başlarında duran doğanın ve yaşamın neşe ve güzelliklerini farkında olmakla birlikte kendi rutinleri, alışkanlıkları ve zorunluluklarıyla meşgul olurken bunları kaçırmaktadırlar. Bu çalışma, Galsworthy'nin betimlediği Londra'da yaşayan karakterler üzerinden modern insanın yaşadığı yabancılaşmayı ve bu duygunun bilincinde olmalarına karşın daha iyiye doğru bir adım atmayışlarını irdelemektedir. Japon Ayvası öyküsünde bir Londralı olan Bay Nilson ana karakterinin analizi yoluyla, bu çalışma, modern insanın yabancılaşıma sorununu incelemeye odaklanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: John Galsworthy, yabancılaşıma, kısa öykü, Japon ayvası, modernite.

