CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga* has received very little critical attention and even this is largely unfavourable. For one thing, most critics take their cue from Virginia Woolf’s essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," (originally presented as a paper to the Heretics, Cambridge 1924), in pointing out the absence of an adequate and authentic human image in the novels of Galsworthy. For instance, Arnold Kettle, relying on Virginia Woolf’s short and incisive comments on Galsworthy, concludes his discussion of the *Man of Property* saying that it "can be read today only as a museum-piece, not as a living work of art." During the inter-war period, the novel of realism had become old fashioned and was effectively replaced by the symbolist novel which could be discussed as a poem. Only during the fifties the novel of realism had reasserted itself which had brought in its turn a renewed interest in the sequential novel like *The Forsyte Saga*. Now the climate of critical opinion seems to be favourable to have a re-assessment of an Edwardian classic like *The Forsyte Saga*.

Any discussion of Galsworthy, the novelist, must be based on the modernist view of Edwardian fiction as a whole. In the literary chronicle, the period 1890-1910, was noted for the emergence of two kinds of fictional mode. Conrad-James - Ford have developed the kind of fiction which placed emphasis on the formal organisation and the evocative power of creative language. Parallel to this there has developed a kind of fiction which gave more importance to the social and cultural relevance of art than to the claims and ends of art. By and large, both the schools of fiction writing have relied on realism. The kind of realism that we encounter in Conrad, James, Ford is psychological, in the sense that the narrative focus is on the man within. This is only a preliminary step towards the stream of consciousness novel which covertly employed symbolist devices to impose order on reality. Since novels of this type are a fertile tract for applying the new critical procedures, it goes without saying that in the academic circles symbolist novel had acquired that kind of esteem which now seems to be unwarranted. Consequently, the reputation of Wells-Bennett and Galsworthy had immensely gone down. Although they have not written "a thesis-novel," they were more interested
in contemporary reality than Conrad, James, Ford circle. Since art has always a purpose, many have reacted against the Jamesian novel which was based on the proposition that art is an end in itself. Even such a sober and urbane critic-novelist like E.M. Forster, had strongly reacted against the Jamesian mode of fiction-writing. Only during the fifties the climate of critical opinion had become favourable for the revival of interest in the Edwardian triumvirate, Wells-Bennett and Galsworthy. Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells have absorbed all the critical attention that the fifties and the sixties have given to the Edwardian novel. John Wain's and Angus Wilson's articles on Bennett have followed closely on the heels of Frank Swinnerton's biography of Arnold Bennett, published in 1950. Bernard Bergonzi's *The Early H.G. Wells* was followed by David Lodge's excellent essay on *Tono-Bungay in Language of Fiction.* Thus even in the recent revival of interest in the Edwardian novel, Galsworthy has not received any critical attention except the B.B.C. - T.V. Production of *The Forsyte Saga.*

Angus Wilson, "Arnold Bennett's Novels," *London Magazine,* (1954), (November'54)

Catherine Dupre's *John Galsworthy* is interesting as the biography of a great man, not as a critical assessment of Galsworthy, the novelist. The only book that is worth-mentioning with regard to Galsworthy criticism is William Bellamy's *The Novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy 1890-1910*. The foregoing account of the Edwardian novel and its importance would not be complete unless we supplement it by a discussion of the themes and methods of the three Edwardians. This may also help us in discussing *The Forsyte Saga*.

**II**

Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy have continued the nineteenth century realistic novel. The Victorian realists made use of realism to share certain insights with their audience. Most of their novels are panoramic and are marked by a strong sense of community. The social issues they dramatise, in fact, needed


the language of realism. But in the modern context it is not easy to define realism. Ian Watt traces it to the puritan culture of the seventeenth century. Discussing the aims, methods and metaphors of realism J.P. Stern says:

The riches of the represented world; its weightiness and resistance to ideals; its consequential logic and circumstantiality - these I take to be among the attributes one would expect to find in realistic literature.

According to him realism finds its true nature and scope where life means entering relationships. What Stern says seems to be true of most of the Victorian novels. After reading a novel of realism the one simple question a reader would pose to himself is whether the world of the novel is true to life. From this it follows that realism can be a mode of writing and also a mode of evaluation. Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, each in his own way, have tried to represent life as they saw or understood it. One can easily understand and sympathise with Virginia Woolf and those critics who follow her in down-grading

the Edwardian novelists. But impatience is not assessment. The changing cultural pattern would definitely have its impact on the view of the self and society at any given moment in the history of man. The Edwardians inherited an uneasy cultural legacy from the Victorians. Empire and progress have made life materially rich, but they have also impoverished it in various other ways. The Edwardians were conscious of the black spots on the social fabric. But they have no ready-made chemical solutions to remove the spots. They have hoped for a better world. Many novels of Wells have a utopian paradigm. Science and Technology have to be cultivated and not to be condemned. His science fictions are fictions of hope. Committed as they were to a utopia, the Wellsian fictional structures are not to be judged as formally incoherent but as vividly communicative. In the case of Galsworthy it is his awareness of the social malaise which was largely the result of a cultural dead-end that made him give significance to personal relationships, especially relationships among various members of a family which is the basic unit of society. It is understandable why The Forsyte Saga has for its theme marriage, manners and morals.
His purpose like that of Wells appears to be one of sharing some of his insights with his audience. Virginia Woolf had felt that life did escape the Edwardian novelists. The word, life, it must be honestly confessed, is a equivocal term, if not a vague one. What appears as life to one may be death to another. To the Edwardians, it must be said straight away, it means life as it is lived in the midst of the social fabric. Although they were very much aware of the pain of alienation, it did not engage their attention. Life is meaningful only in a given social and cultural context. To suit their aim they have evolved a fictional rhetoric which is simple, straight and logical. Their language shares the common idiom. Rarely do they employ the language of metaphor. Their works are not evocative but exploratory. They are eminently prosaic in the best sense of the word.

III

From what has been said in the foregoing paragraphs, it is obvious that any approach to an Edwardian classic like The Forsyte Saga must be oriented towards a creative understanding, that is, the kind of reading in
which the reader participates. R. Peacock, discussing the functions and uses of literature, rightly says:

Each reader can select a corpus of works which would have the effect of constituting an instrument of faith for him; of his faith, Credo, philosophy of life, set of values; or for his asceticism, because the sceptic also makes a choice and supports it. These works, by subject, tenor and style will correspond to his nature and spiritual complexion, and as he reads and re-reads them he enacts a ritual of his own deepest desires and impulses. Literature taken up in this way is not only truth but implemented truth; it is activated, incorporated into a total act of living, of creating and maintaining the self in its characteristic intellectual and spiritual form and existence.

Although Galsworthy did passionately react to the mess and muddle the literal observance the codified law creates in life, he was not a revolutionary in any sense of the word. On the otherhand, he had pleaded for a sane and liberal understanding of the institutions of law and marriage. Therefore, his satire lacks the pungency of a rebel like Lawrence. The Lawrencean ethic and aesthetic have grown out of Lawrence's quarrel with society. What we have in The Rainbow and Women in Love is the vision of a great artist in conflict with the conventional human image he utterly

disliked. The rise and fall of Gerald Crich, the industrial magnate, authenticates a personal and private view of man to which Lawrence himself was committed.

Therefore, writing on Galsworthy, he says:

Satire exists for the very purpose of killing the social being showing him what an inferior he is and, with all his parade of social honesty, how subtly and corruptly debased. Dishonest to life, dishonest to the living universe on which he is parasitic as a louse. By ridiculing the social being, the satirist helps the true individual, the real human being to rise to his feet again and go on with the battle. For it is always, a battle and always will be.\(^9\)

From the above quotation it seems very clear that to Lawrence satire is a potent instrument which is to be employed destructively for the sake of a creative possibility. Since Galsworthy wanted to bring to the notice of his reader the positive and creative aspect of the social being, his satire is mild but to the point. It largely works in a homeopathic way rather than in allopathic way. It tries to preserve what is useful to an integrated self by eliminating that which is harmful. In the following chapters an attempt has been made to read The Forsyte Saga in order to see it as a product of a total act of living, of creating and maintaining the self in its characteristic intellectual and spiritual form and existence.\(^9\)