CHAPTER IV
THE CHANGING SOCIETY

To LET, the last novel of the Trilogy, dramatises the generation gap in the Forsyte family and its complications in terms of the post-great-war situation. We are told repeatedly that Soames Forsyte had his anxious moments during and after the war. The changing political climate and the economic restructuring of society were not advantageous to his interests. Even in the sphere of art, there has been a considerable change and Soames has no liking for young girls like his nineteen-year old daughter "squealing and squawking and showing their legs!" The word "Flapper" was odious to him and he was happy to know that she was "not a Flapper, not one of those slangy, ill-bred young females. And yet she was frighteningly self-willed, and full of life, and determined to enjoy it. Enjoy! The word brought no puritan terror to Soames; but it brought the terror suited to his temperament." Moreover, many members of his family have thought that they are now emancipated. "Everybody was emancipated now, or said they were - perhaps not quite the same thing!" The younger generation of Forsytes are all very much aware of the change that has come over the morals of

2. Ibid., p.394.
the Forsyte family. For example, Val Dartie tells his wife Holly that "our family is in pretty queer waters, with uncle Soames marrying a French woman, and your Dad marrying Soames's first. Our grandfathers would have had fits."³

In the earlier chapter it has been mentioned how embarrassing it was to Jolyon Forsyte to tell his son to snap his ties with Fleur because it would mean his knowing the unpleasant facts about his parents. Because of his daughter's youth and the complications that it may lead to, Soames Forsyte has to familiarise himself with many aspects of life of which he was very much unaware. But as we follow him in his various encounters with the crisis, the war has brought in the social manners, we see the self unwilling to yield and at the same time unresistant to the on-coming pressures of new manners. The narrative drift of To LET is, bye and large, that of a twenties comedy, although the role of "star-crossed lovers" adds a touch of poignancy to the ending of The Forsyte Saga. In part I, Section VI, "The Mausoleum," we have the

³. Ibid., pp.400-401.
comic unexpectedly turning into the grotesque. Soames visits his uncle Timothy at the Bayeswater Road. Led by the house keeper, Soames goes to see his uncle. When Soames was told that Timothy did enjoy his bath, "those quite loud words gave Soames an insight. Timothy had resumed his babyhood." 4 When Soames asks the keeper whether his uncle takes interest in things generally, she replies: "Oh! Yes, Sir; his food and his will. It's quite a sight to see him turn it over and over, not to read it, of course; and every now and then he asks the price of consols, and I write it on a slate for him – very large. Of course, I always write the same, what they were when he last took notice, in 1914." 5

When he left the place Soames thought: "So it all passes, passes and begins again. Poor old chap!" 6 Soames's pity for his uncle need not detain us here, but a reading of the "Mausoleum" unmistakably suggests the sadness of a person at the effacement of that family tenacity which had nourished and sustained him. The same sentiment is re-echoed towards the end of the novel when he reflects; 'To LET' – the Forsyte age and way of life, when a man owned his soul, his investments, and his woman, without check or question. And now

4. Ibid., p.398.
5. Ibid., p.398.
6. Ibid., p.399.
the State had or would have his investments, his woman
had herself, and God knew who had his soul. "To LET"
that sane and simple creed!" 7

In order to see the relevance of *The Forsyte Saga*
to our own concerns we have to re-examine Soames's
belief that Forsytagism was "a sane and simple creed"!
The reassessment ought to be one in which we would
like to know whether the "sane and simple creed" has
been faithfully followed by Soames himself after his
marriage with Annette. We know that Soames has married
Annette for the sake of progeny and her natural charm
added glamour to the whole affair. From her point
of view, it is simply a marriage of convenience, in
the sense, that it has given her status and security.
Although Soames feels disappointed for not having a
son, there seems to be no regret in him for having
a daughter like Fleur. We don't find him aggressive
in asserting his rights on his second wife as he had
done earlier with Irene. After having ascertained
to himself that his wife has not been faithful to
him, he doesn't succeed in forcing from her any kind
of confession except the promise that she will be more
discreet hereafter. When he tells her that she is a

7. Ibid., p.528.
bad woman, she immediately retorts: "I donot think so. Living with you has killed things in me, it is true; but I am not a bad woman. I am sensible—that is all. And so will you be when you have thought it over". Realising that he cannot go further, he leaves the scene with the feeling that she is right.

"The instinct of self preservation warned him not to batten down his hatches". This makes him more flexible in his views about marriage and morals. In *The Man of Property*, he was vociferously dogmatic about the "sanctity of marriage". Now we find him conscious of the risk involved in forcing people to come out with truth. He goes to his wife's room after the misunderstanding we have just discussed. She receives him in the most matter of fact way, as if there had been no scene between them. "And he returned to his own room with a curious sense of peace. If one didn't choose to see, one needn't. And he did not choose — in future he did not choose. There was nothing to be gained by it — nothing!" From the above discussion it follows that in Soames Forsyte there is not any radical change. His views and pre-occupations are

8. Ibid., P. 463.
9. Ibid., P. 463.
10. Ibid., P. 463.
the same. But there seems to be a dim realization that "the same and simple creed" of the Forsytes needs some kind of modification. This is very well implied in the passage just cited, "If one didn't choose to see, one needn't". Here we have not a change in the self but the impact of change on the self. It would like to maintain its unyielding stance and at the same time cannot resist the oncoming pressure.

In his role as a parent Soames has the advantage of a man who has passed through a crisis in life. He, time and again, has dissuaded his daughter not to take undue interest in the past history of her family. When he saw the obituary notice in The Times of his cousin, Jolyon's death, he was for a moment tempted by the idea of securing Robin Hill for his daughter. Although the juncture of two Forsyte fortunes had a kind of conservative charm, he had dismissed the idea as nonsense and put the notion from his head. Swallowing his pride, he goes to Robin Hill to settle once for all the issue of his daughter's marriage with Irene's son. That young man, scrupulously obeying his father's last word, unhesitatingly says no. It was a sort of victory in defeat for Soames Forsyte. Later Fleur
marries Michael Mont.

We see Soames Forsyte in his sixties calm, resolute, and facing the formidable problem of the collapse of personal relationships with immense fortitude. As has been pointed out earlier there is not any radical and noteworthy change in his views and activities. The man's mental furniture remains the same. Alert and acquisitive by nature, he would like to keep his control over his assets. As a husband and parent, he has learnt much from his past failure. There is a kind of basic honesty and integrity of the self, although it doesn't envision a selfless creed with altruistic inclination. The earlier aggressive self sheds some of its annexing tactics. Age makes the man more affectionate but also more cautious. We see the self in a state of crisis. Sometimes sceptical of its own long-held convictions, Soames Forsyte, the man of property, though he believes in "the same and simple creed" of Forsytes, has realised that it is not always sane or simple. The rigorous practising of the creed may involve one in the arid landscape of times forgotten. If the self chooses not to see the facts that are irksome, it may be possible to
maintain a semblance of peace in personal relations. In *To Let* it is this that Soames seems to have realised. But even this is not an evolution towards "Better self." On the other hand, it is an admission that in the everchanging social and cultural context the free self is compelled to realise the limits of its activity. Freedom doesn't mean self-righteousness and omnipervious passion for controlling men and money under the protection of statutory safe-guards.

The Platonic conception of the self even in Plato's time had only theoretical and academic value. The free self which was largely the creation of the Romantic movement had no resources to combat those social and economic forces which impair its integrity. As William Bellamy so well put it the post-great-war world had to confront not a cultural crisis but a post-cultural crisis. According to him,

A very serious disinheritance occurred, for example, in the late-Victorian period, after the public assimilation of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and after what J. Hills Miller has called 'The Disappearance of God' from the nineteenth-century universe. With such an uncovering of inexorable process, with such a sudden removal of what Wells calls 'a beginning ... and an end'. With such a depletion of 'the sum total of the transmittable results of living together', it is hardly surprising that
the late Victorians came more and more under the domination of the fin-de-siècle myth. Concepts like 'crisis', 'transition', 'decadence', 'renovation', 'sickness', and 'therapy', which have only recently been fully exposed as functional conventions, seem in 1890s partially to have superseded institutionalized 'values' as the primary means man possessed of making sense of his life.

Viewed from this angle what Galsworthy has tried to do in The Forsyte Saga seems to be not to achieve a cultural revolution but to move beyond culture. Soames Forsyte has to confront a reality in which no cultural orientation would be of any help. Not only in The Forsyte Saga but in its thematic continuation Modern Comedy and some of the shorter pieces, we see the self, accustomed to the practice of value judgement, though onesided, slowly moving towards a semblance of authenticity. Even in To LET he is very much aware of the post-great-war generation's craze for novelty and license in manners. The same feature was acutely satirised by Waugh in his novel The Decline and Fall. But the bright young things of Galsworthy's To LET have made Soames Forsyte not only practice a kind of detachment but to live in a state of hope. However much Soames bemoans the lack of push and tenacity

to make money in the fourth generation of Forsytes, he does not want to fight those forces that are eroding Victorianism. Inspite of the waters of change that were rolling on property, manners and morals, Soames had faith in the possessive instinct and the instinct of home. He fondly hoped that they would reassert themselves. This is one of the reasons why Soames is so fascinating to us who have passed through the various phases of modernism and modernist movement in art and culture.