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**Comedy as a Tool for Social Criticism and Sustainability:
An Analysis of Moliere's Tartuffe, the Misanthrope and
the Miser**

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Abstract

Comedy has long served as a dynamic tool for social critique. This is by offering a unique blend of humor and insight into societal flaws. Molière, the preeminent 17th-century French playwright, used comedy not merely to entertain but to expose the hypocrisies, contradictions, and excesses of his time. This study examines how Molière's *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*, and *The Miser* employ comedic elements to critique unsustainable behaviors and advocate for social and ethical sustainability. Using the theoretical framework of social realism, the analysis explores how Molière's grounded characters reveal the fragility of societal structures that prioritise personal greed, hypocrisy, and superficiality over accountability, authenticity, and mutual respect. In *Tartuffe*, Molière critiques the dangers of religious hypocrisy and blind faith. Thus, showing how they erode family trust and social cohesion. Through the character of Tartuffe, the play demonstrates the unsustainability of privileging appearances over ethical accountability. *The Misanthrope* addresses the tension between rigid authenticity and societal conformity. Thus, illustrating how sustainable relationships require a balance between personal integrity and adaptability. Alceste's idealism and frustrations with societal superficiality highlight the need for compromise in maintaining meaningful connections. Finally, *The Miser* critiques avarice and the prioritisation of wealth over familial bonds. Hence, exposing how material greed undermines emotional well-being and community harmony. The study concludes that Molière's comedies transcend their historical context. This is by offering timeless lessons on sustainability. His works advocate for ethical responsibility, transparency, and adaptability as essential components of sustainable

social systems. Through the lens of humor, Molière critiques societal dysfunction and also inspires reflection on the values necessary for building cohesive and enduring communities.

Keywords: Comedy, Social, Criticism, Sustainability, Societal Flaws

Introduction

According to Chattoo (8), comedy has long been recognised as a powerful vehicle for social criticism. Thus, allowing playwrights to address societal issues in a manner that engages and entertains audiences. Molière is one of the most significant figures in French literature who skillfully employed comedy to critique the moral and social failings of his time (Noel, 64). Peacock (303) affirms that Molière's works present the complexities of human behavior and societal norms. Hence, revealing the absurdities and contradictions inherent in social interactions.

In the 17th century, France was undergoing significant changes (Anievas, 842). Allinson and Anievas (469) affirm that this is with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the decline of feudalism. This transformation prompted a reevaluation of social structures and moral values. This is what Molière captured in the selected plays. The characters adopted by the playwright embody the conflicts between personal desires and societal expectations. Importantly, this is to provide a lens through which audiences easily examine their own lives and the world around them. Therefore, the concept of comedy as a tool for societal reflection is integral to understanding Molière's work.

Furthermore, the sustainability of social values is also a critical theme in Molière's work. Comedies prompt audiences to consider the implications of their actions and the societal norms that govern them (Lambek, 1107). Playwrights use comedy as a reevaluation of what it means to live ethically in a complex social landscape. This is mostly through the illustration of the consequences of excessive pride, hypocrisy, and greed. Therefore, this study aims to examine how Molière's comedies function as tools for social criticism and sustainability. Thus, revealing the enduring relevance of Molière's work in contemporary discussions about morality and social responsibility.

Comedy

Comedy is a literary and dramatic genre that emphasizes humor (Clark et al., 2). This is usually through satire, parody, or absurdity. The aim is to entertain audiences while simultaneously commenting on societal norms, human nature, or cultural values. Comedy has roots in ancient traditions. However, it has evolved to encompass a wide range of forms. Comedy seeks to evoke laughter. Nonetheless, its deeper purpose lies in critiquing societal structures. Thus, exposing hypocrisies or

providing relief from social tensions. According to Aristotle, comedy is an imitation of characters who are "worse" than average (Hsu, 1). However, this is not in a moral sense but in their absurdities, errors, or lack of seriousness. Tianyu (512) observes that this foundational view emphasizes comedy's enduring focus on human imperfection.

The structure of comedy follows a distinctive arc (Sturges, 1). This begins with a disruption of social order, moving through escalating complications, and building up in resolution and harmony. This trajectory, described by Figuerora (33) as the "comic plot," emphasizes restoration and renewal. This is through marriage, reconciliation, or collective celebration (Goldstein, 2). Hsu (4) asserts that comedy is described to be grounded on malice and superiority, nevertheless, playwrights throughout the ages have used it to advance virtue. Moreover, contemporary comedy presents issues of race, gender, and class. This reflects the comedy's adaptability to changing social contexts. For instance, stand-up comedians use personal narratives and self-deprecating humour (Puri, 16). This is to address topics such as mental health, sexism, and immigration, blending comedy with activism.

Theoretical Framework

Social realism is a literary movement that seeks to depict everyday life. As a literary realism model, social realism examines the lives and circumstances of the working class and impoverished people in novels. According to Nwagbara (89), this kind of artistic approach has been linked to both visual art and the discussion of social inequalities in human cultures, which writers depict in their works. Social realism, which emerged in the 19th century in reaction to urbanisation, industrialisation, and growing class divides, highlights the tangible aspects of existence and challenges oppressive structures. The challenging living difficulties of the impoverished working class have also been addressed by this theory, which is also referred to as socio-realism (Olowonmi, 119). Writers that use this technique attempt to depict the lives of common people in their civilisations in realistic ways through the main characters in their stories. These characters' actions are used by writers to critique social institutions in both fictional and real-world settings (Nwagbara, 89).

The theoretical framework of social realism also allows for an exploration of the socio-political implications of Molière's work. Social realism is rooted in the belief that art should depict the everyday lives and struggles of ordinary people (Nwagbara, 89). This therefore helps to analyse social injustices and moral dilemmas. This perspective aligns with Molière's intent to expose the flaws and absurdities of human behaviour in relation to societal expectations.

Brief Biography of Moliere

Moliere was born 1622. He was a French playwright and actor who was considered to be the father of modern comedy in western literature. Born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin but

popularly known by his stage-name Moliere. His works are known for their wit, satire and the remain relevant for their insightful portrayals of human nature and society. His themes revolves around religious hypocrisy, greed, human folly etc. He died 1673

Synopsis of Tartuffe (1664)

In the well-known comedy play Tartuffe, the title character pretends to be very religious in order to win over Orgon, the head of the household Tartuffe lives with as a houseguest. Orgon splits the family apart with his praise of Tartuffe. In an effort to protect Orgon from his own foolishness and themselves from its repercussions, Orgon's family starts a crusade to find and punish Tartuffe, save their own futures, and bring peace. The play begins with Tartuffe gaining Orgon as a follower and patron by acts of great piety. Living, eating, and drinking well at Orgon's home, Tartuffe is under Orgon's authority to maintain a sinless home. Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother, is a staunch supporter of Tartuffe and her son. Since they properly suspect Tartuffe of being a fraud, the other members of the family seek to get rid of him. Orgon's son and daughter from his first marriage, Mariane and Damis, are in danger of being married in the future due to Tartuffe's tactics. Additionally, Orgon and his wife, Elmire, are separated by Tartuffe. Cléante, Elmire's brother, and Dorine, Mariane's maid, both question Orgon about Tartuffe in Act One, but they are unable to break Orgon's fixation on the false saint.

Orgon tells Mariane in Act Two that he is dumping her for Tartuffe and ending her engagement to Valère, the suitor she adores. Although Mariane and Valère are appalled by Orgon's directive, they are too terrified of him and preoccupied with their own arguments to defy him. Dorine, who boldly challenges Orgon on behalf of the young couple, is left to carry out the resistance task. In addition, Dorine mediates Mariane and Valère's arguments, persuades them to confess their love for one another, and exhorts them to defy Orgon's order.

Elmire carries on Dorine's attempts to save Mariane and Valère in Act Three. Taking advantage of Tartuffe's clear interest in her, Elmire goes up to him with the intention of requesting that he convince Orgon to change his mind and for Mariane to wed Valère. In an attempt to further distance Orgon from Elmire, Tartuffe uses her request for a private meeting to his advantage by touching and proposing to her. Orgon's son Damis hears Tartuffe pestering Elmire while hiding in a cupboard. The irascible Damis heads straight to Orgon to report the outcry. Tartuffe confesses to being a sinner, chastises himself earnestly, and then fabricates everything Damis says to place the responsibility on him when Orgon questions him about what he has been told. Orgon orders Damis to apologise to Tartuffe after becoming so duped by Tartuffe's reverse psychology. Orgon dismisses Damis and denies him his inheritance when he declines. In an effort to bring harmony back to Orgon's household, Tartuffe volunteers to leave. Orgon, moved by this act of selflessness, gives Tartuffe the deed to his land.

Even though Orgon's family issues are beginning to embarrass society in Act Four, his resistance to Tartuffe just serves to strengthen his obstinacy. That same evening, he makes the decision that Mariane shall wed Tartuffe. Mariane drops on her knees, pleading with Orgon to spare her from being forced to wed a man she despises. Elmire chooses to fake a seduction of Tartuffe after Mariane's cries and entreaties are unsuccessful. In order for Orgon to observe Tartuffe's immorality for himself, she extends an invitation to attend the celebration. Elmire's advances are met with an angry response by Tartuffe, who boasts about how simple it is to guide Orgon "by the nose." After being made fun of, Orgon becomes enraged and tells Tartuffe to leave the home. However, Orgon realises too late. Tartuffe is the owner of the house. In response to this catastrophe, Orgon worries about a hidden strong box.

Orgon explains the strong-box at the beginning of Act 5. Orgon had mistakenly given the box to Tartuffe for safety after hiding it at the request of a friend who was living in exile. Tartuffe has been blackmailing Orgon with the strong-box and its contents. Tartuffe convinces the King to order Orgon's arrest and has him and his family removed from their home. It's too late when Valère tries to assist Orgon in escaping. To accompany Orgon to prison, Tartuffe shows up accompanied by a royal officer. The royal officer arrests Tartuffe rather than Orgon. The officer goes on to say that the King identified Tartuffe as a master criminal wanted for numerous heinous crimes after Tartuffe denounced Orgon in court. Tartuffe was followed by the King's officers, who saw him defraud Orgon. The King honours Orgon for his prior devoted service, restores his property, and pardons him for concealing a fugitive's strongbox at the play's conclusion. Valère and Mariane's renewed engagement marks the play's conclusion.

Synopsis of the Miser (1666)

Harpagon was introduced at the beginning of the play with his money as his sole worry. He almost tries to strip search everyone that enters and exits his home because he is so fixated on money. We also learn that since he is afraid someone is stealing, old Harpagon has buried a tiny box in his backyard that contains a large sum of money (10,000 French crowns), which is a lot of money in the 17th century. Harpagon now sounds like a dog that has a favourite juicy bone.

Harpagon's daughter Élise and son Cléante appear to have fallen in love in the meantime. However, Harpagon wants Élise to wed a wealthy elderly man named Anselme and wants Mariane, Cléante's girlfriend, for himself. In order for them to be happy at last, Cléante and Élise scheme to force Harpagon to abandon his designs. However, Harpagon is not so easily duped. Before long, he discovers Cléante's plot and threatens to disown the boy for speaking out against him.

La Flèche, Cléante's valet, unearths Harpagon's backyard treasure and takes it in the play's last act. Harpagon contacts the police after going completely crazy. Because he is so

level-headed, he insists that the criminal be apprehended and hanged. However, Cléante promises Harpagon that he would receive his money back as soon as he consents to let Cléante wed Mariane and Élise wed Valère, her lover. Harpagon only consents after learning that Anselme, the man he wishes Élise to wed, is actually Valère and Mariane's long-lost father. How practical! More importantly, though, is that Anselme is willing to give Harpagon a sizeable cash in exchange for the elderly man simply leaving the other people's affairs alone.

Synopsis of the *Misanthrope* (1668)

The elegant social environment of seventeenth-century Paris is the setting for *The Misanthrope*. The title's misanthrope, Alceste, is repulsed by the injustice, hypocrisy, and general corruption in human civilisation. Alceste's concern for justice stems from the fact that he is involved in multiple cases, the results of which are decided by the party with the greatest clout in court rather than by who is right. Yet, Alceste has fallen in love with Célimène, a young widow who is known for flirting and for surrounding herself with suitors. She is a perfect illustration of the dishonesty that Alceste finds repugnant in other people. She gets reprimanded by him for having too many suitors. Célimène responds that she is only innocuously flirting with him and that she saves her real love for him. Then, Basque, her servant, tells them that two other people who are vying for her, Acaste and Clitandre, have come. Despite his threats, Alceste stays with Célimène.

In the last act, when all of her suitors learn that Célimène has made love promises to each of them while mocking the others behind his back, they confront her for her dishonesty. Thus, the only man still eager to court Célimène is Alceste. On the understanding that she live with him alone, he extends his forgiveness. Surprised, Célimène agrees to marry him but claims she is far too young. Alceste denies his love for Célimène out of anger. Alceste finally makes the decision to flee and live in isolation in the forest because he is tired of civilisation and fears the repercussions of numerous legal disputes. Eliante and Philinte, who want to convince Alceste to reconsider his decision to vanish forever, follow him when he leaves alone.

Comedy as a Tool for Social Criticism and Sustainability in Molière's *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope* and *The Miser*

Hypocrisy and the Unsustainability of Religious Pretense in *Tartuffe*

Molière's *Tartuffe* critiques the institutional and personal misuse of religion. Therefore, the play exposes the consequences of blind faith and the exploitation of spiritual authority. Molière's portrayal of Tartuffe is grounded in social realism, as it reflects the 17th-century French tension between genuine piety and performative religiosity. The character of Tartuffe embodies the dangers of blind faith. Orgon's adoration of Tartuffe is expressed through his declaration:

ORGON. Ah! had you but seen him as I first met with him, you would have loved him as well as I do. He came every day to church with a composed mien, and kneeled down just against me. He attracted the eyes of the whole congregation by the fervency with which he sent up his prayers to Heaven. He sighed and groaned very heavily, and every moment humbly kissed the earth. And when I was going out, he would advance before and offer me holy water at the door. (Act I, Scene v)

This illustrates Orgon's naivety and the folly of placing trust in appearances. The comedic elements serve to highlight the moral dangers of hypocrisy. Therefore, encouraging the audience to question the authenticity of religious facades in their own lives.

Tartuffe's duplicity mirrors the exploitation of religion by opportunists, while Orgon's gullibility reflects a societal tendency to value appearances over substance. Tartuffe is intentional about deceiving others into believing that he is religious. Upon seeing DORINE, he said aloud to his servant Laurence:

TARTUFFE. Laurence, lock up my hair-cloth and scourge, and beg of Heaven ever to enlighten you with grace. If anybody comes to see me, I am gone to the prisons to distribute my alms (Act III, Scene II)

Moreover, religious hypocrisy as symbolised by Tartuffe's character, becomes a destructive force that threatens family and societal harmony. This is presented in the following excerpts:

*DORINE: He calls him brother, and loves him as his soul.
Why, he'd see Tartuffe share all he controls;
And he is even planning to make him his heir!"(Act I, Scene ii)*

This highlights Orgon's irrational devotion to Tartuffe. Moreover, the description showcases how religious manipulation leads to unsustainable social structures. Orgon's plans to disinherit his children in favour of Tartuffe reveal how misplaced trust erases family bonds.

Meanwhile, Cléante's voice of reason contrasts with Orgon's blind faith. This is to establish the importance of critical thinking in fighting social and moral corruption. Cléante's skepticism reflects Molière's critique of excessive deference to authority. This is because it compromises the sustainability of justice and truth. Cléante's perspective is presented thus:

CLÉANTE: They would have everybody as blind as themselves. To be clear-sighted is libertinism, and such as don't dote upon empty grimaces have neither faith nor respect to sacred things (Act I, Scene v)

Meanwhile, Molière advocates for a sustainable society rooted in reason and authenticity. Tartuffe's exposure and downfall establishes the need for vigilance against deception. Additionally, this reveals the importance of accountability in maintaining ethical order. The comedic resolution reinforces the necessity of balancing faith with reason to ensure societal cohesion. Cléante stated:

CLÉANTE. Nay, brother, hold, and don't descend to indignities; leave the wretch to his evil destiny, and don't add to the remorse that oppresses him. Much rather wish that his heart may now happily become a convert to virtue, that he may reform his life through detestation of his crimes, and may soften the justice of a glorious prince; while for his goodness you go and on your knees make the due returns for his lenity to you. (Act V, scene viii)

Authenticity vs. Social Expectations in *The Misanthrope*

In *The Misanthrope*, Molière shifts his focus to the fragility of authenticity in a society governed by politeness, flattery, and superficiality. Alceste's disdain for social hypocrisy and his uncompromising honesty set him apart from the other characters. However, Alceste's idealism, while admirable, isolates him from others. The implication is that this suggests that uncompromising authenticity (hypocrisy) disrupts the balance needed for sustainable social relationships. Alceste expressed:

ALCESTE: No, I cannot endure that abject custom which the majority of your worldly friends affect. I hate nothing so much as the bowing and scraping of those great makers of protestations, those affable givers of trumpery kisses, those obliging praters of empty words, who strive to outdo each other with civilities, and treat an honest man and a scoundrel with the same air and manner. What advantage is it to you if a man courts you, swears friendship, faith, zeal, honor, tenderness, makes you some fulsome compliment, and then turns round to the first rascal whom he meets, and does the same? No, no, a well-conditioned soul wants no esteem so prostituted; the finest hospitalities are valueless when we find ourselves rated with the crowd. (Act I, Scene i)

So, in *The Misanthrope*, Alceste's uncompromising idealism highlights the difficulty of sustaining meaningful relationships in a society governed by superficiality. Molière critiques the unsustainable extremes of both rigid authenticity and widespread hypocrisy. Philinte declared:

PHILINTE: Give up yourself this churlish virulence. Your teachings cannot change the world frankness charms you, I will tell you bluntly this disease of yours is laughed at everywhere you go. Such wrath

*against the ways of the world makes you ridiculous in the eyes of many
(Act I, scene I).*

Furthermore, the play establishes Alceste's belief in the unsustainability of a society that prioritises deceit over truth. Moreover, his refusal to conform reflects a broader critique of societal norms that demand insincerity for the sake of harmony. This is presented in Alceste's words:

ALCESTE: Useless to say a word, useless to reason with me; nothing that you can do will turn me from my purpose. The age in which we live is too perverted; I desire to withdraw from intercourse with men. Honor, uprightness, decency, and the laws were openly arrayed against my adversary; on all sides was the equity of my cause proclaimed; and on the faith of my just rights I rested tranquilly. And now behold, I am defrauded of success; justice is with me, but I lose my case! A traitor, whose scandalous history is well known to all, comes off victorious by the blackest falsehood! (Act V, Scene i)

Avarice and the Destruction of Human Relationships in *The Miser*

In *The Miser*, Molière examines the destructive effects of greed on family and social relationships. Harpagon's character, though exaggerated, reflects real societal attitudes toward wealth and materialism. Harpagon's obsession with money renders him incapable of genuine human connection. This, resulting to conflict and distrust within his household. The play critiques the societal glorification of wealth at the expense of ethical and emotional well-being.

HARPAGON. This rascally valet is a constant vexation to me; and I hate the very sight of the good-for-nothing cripple. Really, it is no small anxiety to keep by one a large sum of money; and happy is the man who has all his cash well invested, and who needs not keep by him more than he wants for his daily expenses. I am not a little puzzled to find in the whole of this house a safe hiding-place. Don't speak to me of your strong boxes, I will never trust to them. Why, they are just the very things thieves set upon! (Act I, scene iv)

This expression encapsulates Harpagon's value system, which equates wealth with happiness and power. His worldview reflects the unsustainable prioritisation of material gain over human relationships. Moreover, Harpagon's perspective about the best husband for her daughter was based on money and not happiness. Thus, leading to alienation and mistrust from Valere. The mistrust is established clearly:

VALERE: Ah! it must be granted that there is no reply to that; who in the world could think otherwise? I do not mean to say but that there are many fathers who would set a much higher value on the happiness of their daughter than on the money they may have to give for their

marriage; who would not like to sacrifice them to their own interests, and who would, above all things, try to see in a marriage that sweet conformity of tastes which is a sure pledge of honour, tranquillity and joy; and that... (Act I, Scene vii)

Importantly, the resolution of *The Miser* had Harpagon's schemes unraveled. This serves as a reminder of the importance of balance in pursuing wealth. Therefore, following Sustainable societies must prioritise human well-being and family over the accumulation of material riches.

Conclusion

Molière's *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*, and *The Miser* exemplify the power of comedy as a tool for social criticism and a platform for promoting sustainability. Through sharp satire and critical characterisations, Molière critiques the unsustainable behaviours and societal flaws of his time while offering lessons that remain pertinent today.

In *Tartuffe*, the critique of religious hypocrisy highlights the necessity of accountability and transparency for maintaining trust and social cohesion. *The Misanthrope* explores the delicate balance between authenticity and social adaptability. Thus, demonstrating that rigid idealism and superficial conformity are equally unsustainable. *The Miser* exposes the corrosive effects of greed. Thus, advocating for the prioritization of human relationships over material wealth.

Across these texts, Molière reveals the fragility of societies that fail to foster ethical behaviour, mutual respect, and balanced values. His comedic perspective allows for an accessible yet incisive critique of behaviors that undermine familial harmony and social stability. Molière's legacy endures as a vital contribution to the discussion of sustainable human relationships. His works challenge people to confront the flaws in their systems and behaviours while inspiring a pursuit of more ethical and enduring paths forward.

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