

Aranian Women: A Socio-Cultural Survey In the Select Plays of J. M. Synge

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Abstract

What attracted Synge to the Aran Islands was partly an urge from the intellectual and the sophisticated towards the simple and primitive, where traditional folk ways and folk arts still gave a style and dignity to men's lives that was absent in Paris or Dublin or London. Synge was highly attracted by the ideal of the simple harmony of the lives of the peasants. He had a great respect for the factual truth. He had a great sympathy for the people of Aran. Synge admired the simplicity of the people and identified with them. He gave us true and vivid picture of life of Aran Islands. His journey is probably the best introduction to his dramas. He took some of his plots from stories he heard on Aran Islands; world he wanted to create in his plays. But plays he wrote are not simple sketches of peasant life; they are works of imagination, close to myth and fairy tale. He uses a peasant background and peasant idiom to create something new in drama.

Keywords: Aran Islands, Aranian, Primitive, Milieu, Saga

Introduction

The Aran Islands lie off the west coast of Ireland, at the extremist edge of the continent of Europe and are cut off from the mainland. The location was one of the main attractions for Synge. But at the same time Aran could also be seen as related to Europe. Synge commented at the end of the story of Lady O'Connor: "It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate, native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European association." (Nicholas Greene, 33) The Aran Islanders were conscious of their isolation and at the same time they were interested in what was happening on the mainland. 'Is there any war in the world at this time, noble person,' Synge was asked repeatedly. Beyond Aran is a *domhain mor*, the big world, which can be contrasted and compared with the little world of Islands. They were surprised when Synge, an experienced traveller from the world outside, could find something new to him in the Aran Islands. Aran could be described a place too far removed from the mainland, from the centres of civilization, as also symbols of civilization such as police, the law, the currency, the postal styles, etc. The people lived in the state of penury and were always at the mercy of the hostile natural elements. Aran is quite literally a microcosm, a small world. Synge could see the basic human situation without the interference of a high civilization or the complication of an elaborate social structure.

Synge emphasized the primitive quality of life on Aran Islands. By returning to the primitive milieu, he felt that he escaped from the accidental features of contemporary urban life, and reached essential truths. In Aran he found a community untouched by the standard concepts of the 'big world- progress, modernity and centralization. But at the same time, he noted the grim side of the Islands. The fact that those conditions which gave so much distinctive grace and wholesomeness to island life, were at the same time, responsible for making the islanders unusually susceptible to harsher realities of life. What added richness to the dream made actually bitter. They were highly dependent on weather conditions which brought frequent storms, and the days of mist and rain made all life indescribably desolate. The remoteness and simplicity which kept them as an integrated community unpolluted by the world also kept them off from the benefits of modern science, and accentuated their feeling of dread and isolation in the face of vast, uncontrollable forces of nature.

The main adversary on the Aran Islands was the natural universe itself. It was not only the sea which threatened death but the barren rocks also forced them to leave or starve. The struggle to survive on Aran Islands meant enormous difficulty. The population was very sparse. The plots were

fenced with stone walls which were constructed only to get rid of stones. Natural clay was rare and extremely precious, therefore, the land for cultivation had to be made. In such a setting, man was constantly confronted with the harshest facts of his circumstances, his helplessness and mortality.

The sea for Aran Islanders has a twin personality: it is both a source of livelihood and also a malevolent destroyer. Its fury takes an enormous toll of life and property almost every day. It is a terrible enemy mollified with awe and respect, not to be challenged with arrogant pride. The intimate desperate battle with sea was an essential part of Synge's image of Aran— Synge may have exaggerated the frequency of accidents, but the dangers of fishing to the light canoes in the Atlantic were undoubtedly real and terrifying. Many of the accidents, in fact, happened because men were carelessly drunk. An old man explained to him the value of caution, "A man who is not afraid of the sea will soon be drowned, for he will be going out on a day he shouldn't." (Robin Skelton, 215)

Though nature has been man's enemy in Aran and he seemed to be alone before the hostile nature, yet it was also what gave beauty and distinction to the lives of the islanders. Nature is as intimate a part of the people's life and speech as ever. Just as Synge's knowledge of Aran Islanders helped him to understand the primitive yet aristocratic civilization of ancient Ulster, so his understanding of their relation to nature made him one with the tradition of Irish Nature Poetry. The Aran Islanders have a more direct and immediate sense of their natural environment than people in the developed society because they experienced nature in their vitals.

In no other country in the world, Synge notes, that the marriages are undertaken so late in life, and in other country in the world is there so high a proportion of the unmarried. Worse than the number of bachelors and the old maids is the custom of deferring marriage until the man is almost sterile and woman incapable of producing more than two or three children. In many parts of the country, early marriage is thought to be risky and even a trifle indecent. A man will often defer marriage until he is well on in years, either because his parents refuse to accept a possible bride into the house or because he wishes to accumulate the safety of a "stocking", or because he feels more secure as a bachelor. These prolonged repressions do affect the mental stability later on.

Main article

The condition of women in Aran Islands is even worse as they lead a life soaked in poverty and sufferings. The fate of an Irish "small farmer's" wife is a ceaseless drudgery, as she has to cook food for the family and has cattle to be milked, beasts to be fed and turf to be carried. These women wait for the groom to get married at the right age. Though the proper age of marriage for Aranian women is thought to be thirty five because of too much work, the women of Aran get old before time. The late marriages are, therefore, often loveless, arranged by matchmakers and dowry balanced against land and cattle. The men often defer marriage until they are well advanced in

years. Due to accidents in the sea or emigration for livelihood, the number of men is quite less in comparison to the women. Women are thus, always at the receiving end as they cannot choose their husbands or cannot reject a man because there are not many suitors to choose from. They marry a man with a little bit of land and cows and sheep on the hills so that he can provide her food and security to the offspring.

Keeping this background in mind, J. M. Synge has presented the lives of Nora, Maurya, Pegeen Mike, Sarah Casey, etc. in his plays *The Shadow of Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Playboy of the Western World*, *Tinker's Wedding* respectively. The miserable condition of these women is beautifully presented by J. M. Synge. There is no satisfaction in the lives of these women as men have little role to play in their lives. Many of them have migrated to foreign countries to make their livelihood leaving their wives, mothers, or daughters to struggle on the sea-shore. Many of other are either lost or dead. For farmers, it is very difficult to make both ends meet.

The Shadow of Glen demonstrates very clearly the down-to-earth, the drab and mundane routine of Nora. To Nora, the loveless marriage has deprived her of children, brought her to horrors of loneliness on the hill farm, to the unending drudgery of its work, to the man who is always "cold". Patch Darcy, her former lover, is dead and is no more than a memory to her. Michael Dara, her new lover, is a poor thing, but he is at least a male. She has kept alive a half flicker of maternal tenderness for the old husband. Only the Tramp turned poet has something attractive to offer though she knows that it will betray her yet it has been a fine bit of talk and she will go with him when he offers to take her. The play is a reflection of loneliness, sadness and alienation mirrored in the life of Nora. She is a sexually active woman who always complains of her husband's coldness. When she looks at her bed, remembers Patch Darcy and speaks of her loneliness. Her mood is sexually suggestive rather than melancholic. She is a creature intensely aware of her futility of her life and imminence of death. She is trapped by her realization that no matter what course she takes in life, none seems to offer her the freedom she craves.

Nora embodies the tension between free emotional fulfillment and maternal security, between imaginative insight and everyday appearance. She is a fine ardent woman who has found in marriage a few material goods and a dwelling, but no satisfaction of her emotional and imaginative needs. She is caught between two ways of life: the one with her husband, a dull, restricted, lonely life. The other is represented by the Tramp, more adventurous, but bordering on the hard and the insecure. But to mingle both the ways of life into one is impossible for Nora.

Nora's husband and her environment are incompatible. Her indifference to her husband's death may be regarded as callousness. She seems simply unaffected moving her household chores in a perfectly normal manner. As she says to Tramp: "It does not matter any way". (SOG, p 82) the most interesting opportunity in the play offered to Nora is one which

she does not choose but is forced upon her – it is the life offered to her by the Tramp when she is rejected by her husband and her lover. It seems that the life of the Tramp does offer hope to Nora but it is difficult to accept because the depression, hallucination and madness that characterize the people of the glens have been intensified – if not induced by Nature. When the Tramp says:

We'll be going now, the lady of the house – the rain is falling but the air is kind, and may be I'll be a grand morning by the grace of God... but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there will be no old fellow wheezing, like of a sick sheep, close to your ear. (SOG, pp. 93-94)

Nora is painfully aware of the inadequacy of nature to help her: "what good is a morning when I'm destroyed surely, and I going out to get my death walking the roads." (93) Nora undercuts the Wordsworthian cast of the view of Nature. "I'm thinking it does myself will be wheezing that time lying down under the heaven when the night is cold." (94) Nora goes with the Tramp not because together they will savour the pleasures of Nature, but because the Tramp has "a fine bit of talk." (Ibid)

Nora is Synge's unique creation who reveals that life of an Aran Islander was a saga of untold misery and that of a woman was even worse. Nora is a hostage of circumstances, unfair traditions, rituals and demographic patterns. She is the one who suffers the Irish life and situation in the worst of ways, and because there is no help, has to make all kinds of compromises.

Riders to the Sea is yet another play where Synge focuses on the plight of women. Maurya belongs to fisherman's family like many in Aran. Fishing is not a vocation of choice for them, it is one of compulsions. They have to live by the sea, suffer its fury, and pray to it every day for a bumper crop, fertility of the soil, and long life of male members who go out to the sea for their livelihood. Like Nora in *The Shadow of Glen*, Maurya, along with her two daughters Nora and Cathleen, lives an accursed life of extreme penury. There was a time there were six men in the house: she had her husband, her husband's father and six sons, each a hardy farmer and fisherman in his own right. She cooked for them, even as her fears made her anxious and nervous making her spend sleepless nights in prayers for them every night they ventured out on the sea. She struggled to keep the house going with her daughters who were both beginning to decline into the normal Aran women chores of the keeping cattle, knitting and whiling away their time in idle gossip, even as they waited for someone, someday to slip a wedding ring on their fingers.

The play begins with six of the men already dead, the seventh Michael is lost and the eighth Bartley, unscarred of the terrible stormy seas, getting ready to go the horse fair. The unseen hands of destiny guide the lives of the people of Aran. Nora sees the supernatural visions and believes in them. She believes in omens and instinctively knows it to be indication of coming disaster. She asks Bartley not to go but he cannot help himself from going because of

the wretched life the family will have to face if he desists. When Bartley, the only breadwinner in the family is seen bent on going to the sea, Maurya feels that the sea would swallow him too. She bewails her apprehensions in the following lines:

In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old. (RTS, p. 98)

She asks Bartley not to go because the weather is not good. She says, "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had it itself. What is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only"? (RTS, p. 98)

Maurya's life is a sad tale of bereavements and grim sufferings. She is a victim of the cruel and relentless sea which stands as the symbol of fate. In the darkest hour of suffering, she mumbles her defiance of the starkest facts of her terrible destiny: "They are all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me... I'll have no call now up to be crying and praying when the wind breaks..." (RTS, 105) The merciless sea has robbed her of all that she had. The speech speaks of something won with defiance rather than something lost. Birth is hard, life a trail to be endured, and death deliverance in Aran.

The Playboy of the Western World is yet another play which focuses on the life of a young woman who wants to get married, settle down and get security. Pegeen Mike fully represents the local women who are greatly impressed by Christy's account of how he had killed his father. She takes Christy as the hero of her dreams. Although she has great self-confidence in herself, she feels jealous of the village girls and the Widow Quin whom she regards as a menace to her growing relationship with Christy. Although Pegeen is engaged to be married to Shawn Keogh, she makes no secret of her contempt for him. There is not a single 'daring fellow' of Pegeen's choice in the whole village. She expresses her contemptuous opinion of Shawn by describing him "middling kind of scarecrow with no savagery or fine words in him at all." (PWW, p 220) She also mockingly tells him that he is a kind of man who would make a girl think of a bullock's liver rather than of a lily or a rose. She strongly urges her father to employ Christy as a pot-boy in the Shebeen because, with him by her side, she would no longer feel afraid of the soldiers or tinkers. When Widow Quin suddenly appears on the scene, Pegeen puts up a strong resistance to the widow's attempt to steal Christy away from her own house and succeeds in driving away the formidable rival.

Widow Quin also makes attempts to win Christy for herself. She promises to help Shawn marry Pegeen by herself marrying Christy. She does not feel any guilt about having murdered her husband. On the contrary, she claims that a woman who has killed her husband and who has lost all her children for a young fellow like Christy, who too is a murderer.

In *The Tinker's Wedding*, the situation to some extent is the same. Sarah Casey, a beautiful young woman wants to remarry her husband with whom she has been enjoying a happy married life.

Sarah Casey like Nora in *The Shadow of Glen* is dissatisfied with her conditions and tries to alter it. Like Pegeen Mike in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Sarah has too many suitors but she wants to live her life according to her choice. Sarah's haste to get marriage ceremony over before anyone gets to know about her bizarre desire to get married according to Christian rituals is both comic and curious. She admits that it is a whim and here J.M. Synge glorifies the theme of the passage of time and decaying beauty. She wants to get married so that no one will be able to call her a dirt name. She clearly despises the respectable people. The tinkers are very poor people who don't have enough money to give to the priest to get married. The priest asks for some money along with a tin to wed them but a day before their marriage the tin gets smashed. Thus, Sarah's desire to get married remains unfulfilled.

Aim of the Study

An attempt has been made to trace and analyze the preoccupation of J. M. Synge with Aran Islands, its people, especially the women, their miserable life style, their demeaning poverty as also their precarious existence at the hands of a hostile nature. Aran was not merely Synge's dream of a world, it was really real. The experience of a primitive community was significant as it provided an ultimate test of reality. The Aranian women were so closer to basic truth in that they were closer to nature, and they lived their lives without self-consciousness where Synge found his own deeply-felt ideas and beliefs supported by the intuitive experience of a community, they were verified into absolutes through his personal experience on Aran Islands.

Research Methodology

Different approaches have been undertaken by various scholars and critics to analyze the works of J. M. Synge. The approach to the present study of the plays of J. M. Synge would be largely socio-cultural, though other approaches and insights would also be used wherever necessary. It shall focus on the socio-economics scenario comprising the detailed study of the social life of Aran Islanders. The socio-cultural approach is by and large opposed in thrust to the formalist approach as expounded by William Empson, R. S Crane, Yvor Winters, I.A Richards, T. S. Eliot, etc.

Review of Literature

Because of exceptional richness in nuances, ironies and ambiguities there has been a kind of critical renaissance on Synge's dramatic oeuvre. The plays have attracted critical attention and have sustained critical interest that demonstrates the vitality and artistic power of Synge's plays and inspire a diversity of new responses and approaches. Among them T. R. Henn: *The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge* (London: Methuen, 1963) compiled with introduction and annotations are by far the most comprehensive and lucid. It gives the researcher the basic background of J. M. Synge, his life and preoccupations. Alan Price's book: *Synge and Anglo Irish Drama* (1961) trace the development of his creative output in an Anglo-Irish context. W. B. Yeats' essays on J. M. Synge place the playwright in rich

context of his ambience. Lady Gregory's book *Our Irish Theatre* details her association with Synge. Twentieth Century Interpretations (1969) edited. By T. R. Whitaker discuss the various aspects of *the Playboy of the Western World*. Eugene Benson's book *J. M. Synge* (1982) is quite useful as it contains a great deal of information about Synge's visit to Aran Islands. Nicholas Greene's *Synge: A Critical Study* is however one useful study which came out in 1975 and has tremendously enriched the Synge scholarship. Seamus Deane in *Strange Country* (1977) has observed that women in Synge's plays occupy the lowest position despite their individual potential to voice and realize their needs. They only serve the establishment of liberty of men. *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge* (2009) includes an essay that sumps up crucial postcolonial traits in the playwright's complete body of work. Joseph Valente's *The Myth of Manliness* (2010) is a significant contribution to gender and masculinity studies in relation to Ireland and also offers several insights in to the modernist character of Synge's plays. Roche in *Synge and the Making of Modern Irish Drama* (2013) has also contributed to the critical debate on Synge and modernism. He places Synge on par with Joyce as they both deploy modernist techniques. Maria Kurdi in review essay *J. M. Synge, Our Contemporary: Recent Trends in Synge Criticism* (2015) argues that in spite of the scandalous reception of the first few performances of his plays, J. M. Synge has remained the enduring playwright of the Irish Drama Renaissance. His dramas have won acclaim and have been continuously performed on both the Irish stage and in theatres all over the world.

Conclusion

The contribution of J. M. Synge to Irish drama can be evaluated from the perspective of how he experienced and interpreted life of the Aranian Illiterates. Even though leading a wretched and miserable life, a life full of drudgery, Synge's plays show the dominance of his powerful women characters: Maurya, Nora Burke, Sarah Casey, and Pegeen Mike. All these women characters help to bring out the significant themes of the plays that is horrors of life which bring ageing and which entail an inevitable loss of beauty and consequent blighting of love instinct. Though they were aware of the passage of time and the nature of beauty as ephemeral, they are brave enough to take risks in life. J. M. Synge has not portrayed them in Wordsworthian cast, praising and enjoying the beauty of nature. They are aware of the fact that even Mother Nature is not going to improve their wretched ways of life. Life in Synge's plays is often described in images of decay while death is usually praised. Women generally are offered a better life but that seems to be a mirage in this rocky desert.

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