

“A THEMATIC STUDY OF JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE’S PLAY RIDERS TO THE SEA”

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ABSTRACT:

This paper deals with Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*, which is based on the Irish folklores, culture and heritage. Synge's plays helped to set the dominant style of plays at the Abbey Theatre until the 1940s, the dramatist has used the realistic technique in them.

In this paper, the researcher assumes that Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* is topical but its themes are universal, Synge has realistically described the life, habit, custom and culture of the Irish peasants.

The life of the islanders fascinated and intrigued Synge, he has used non-realistic techniques like dream, illusion and fantasy in order to highlight the miserable condition of the lives of the peasants, and the tragedy of a fishing community on the island of Aran. *Riders to the Sea* explores the universal appeal of the peasants suffering and struggle which crosses the boundary of time and space.

Accordingly, in the current paper we aim at a critical analysis of J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* to show that the themes are universal though they remain firmly rooted in the contemporary lives of Irish peasants.

Keywords: John Millington Synge, critical analysis, Irish folklores, thematic study, literary work, Synge's plays, *Riders to the Sea*, universal.

INTRODUCTION:

John Millington Synge (16 April, 1871—24 March, 1909) was one of the greatest playwrights, poets and prose writers of Ireland. He was born in new town villa, Rathfarnham County, Dublin on 16th April 1871. He was the youngest son in a family of eight children. His parents were the members of the Protestant upper middle class. Synge's father was a respected barrister and his mother was a housewife, however; she also had a private income from lands in County Galways. Once graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, Synge intended to be a musician however, as he was stage fright, he gave up the idea of being a musician and pursued writing. In 1894, Synge went to Paris to study literature and language at Sorbonne. It was in Paris where W.B. Yeats, the famous Irish poet, playwright, and the founder member of the Irish Literary Society, discovered him, recognized his talent, and advised him to return to Dublin to devote himself to writing about Irish peasants' lifestyle as well as their culture and heritage. Furthermore, Yeats advised him to go to rural Aran Islands and stay there for some time. He was recommended to study the peasants' lifestyle of that region in order to use them in his plays intended to be performed at the Abbey Theatre. In 1898, Synge went to the Aran Islands and lived there for five years, collecting Irish stories and folklores.

Since 1904, there was no national drama in Ireland. Thus, in 1904, W.B. Yeats, with the help of Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge, and others founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. However, after its establishment, the Abbey was facing acute shortage of plays to be performed on the stage. Only Lady Gregory and Yeats wrote some plays which were not enough to keep the Abbey Theatre running. At this time of crisis, Synge emerged as a savior of the Abbey. In fact, by writing plays for the Abbey, he saved the Abbey Theatre from the crisis both artistically and financially.

Synge wrote plays about life of rural Irish peasants. He wrote prose like *The Aran Island*, in which he realistically describe the life of rural Ireland, *Inn Wicklow* and *West Kerry*, poetry as well as drama. But he became famous for his drama. His famous plays are *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Tinker's Wedding* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

All these plays of Synge are based on the Irish folklores and are the representatives of the Irish culture and heritage. Although all these plays are topical, their themes are universal, as we will see in our study of Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. Although all of Synge's plays are based on Irish folklores, the dramatist has used the realistic technique in them. Synge has realistically described the life, habit, custom and culture of the Irish peasants. Simultaneously Synge has also used non-realistic techniques like dream, illusion and fantasy in order to highlight the miserable condition of the lives of the peasants which we will also discuss while discussing the themes of the play.

Synge's plays helped to set the dominant style of plays at the Abbey Theatre until the 1940s. The stylized realism of his writing was reflected in the training given at the theatre's school of acting and plays of peasant life were the main staple of the repertoire until the end of 1950s. Sean O'Casey, the next major dramatist to write for the Abbey, knew Synge's work well and attempted to do for the Dublin working class what Synge has done for the rural peasants. Beside O'Casey many other writers like Brendan Behan, Brinsley Mac Namara, Lennox Robinson were greatly influenced by Synge. Even Samuel Beckett was also influenced by Synge's style.

In his plays he has depicted the lives, habits and cultures of the Irish peasants which he closely observed living with them. Almost all of his plays are based on Irish old stories, Irish folklore and Irish heritage. In this way he has promoted the Irish culture and heritage which was also the main aim of the Irish Literary Society founded by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory.

It is apparent that Synge is different in his handling the Irish myths and traditions in his dramatic works. Thus, it is Synge who manages successfully to employ the Irish legend for local and universal purposes simultaneously.

Aims and Objectives:

In our proposed study we aim at a critical analysis of J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* to show that the themes are universal though they remain firmly rooted in the contemporary lives of Irish peasants and these plays and their themes are relevant even in our age.

Problem Statement:

Many critics believe that J. M. Synge's plays are topical and he writes only about a particular place the Aran Island, so they believe they don't have a universal importance, but I believe that, although his plays are topical in nature, but they have universal themes and that why they have got an international importance. More specifically, the following research questions need to be addressed:

- What are the universal themes in J. M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*?
- How realistic Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* is?

Methodology and Technique:

The researcher will depend on the standard methodology of research. The researcher will present the thematic analysis, commenting on the lives of Irish peasants, Irish culture and heritage, social situations and their implication.

Islander's Suffering:

Riders to the Sea is a play written by Irish Literary Renaissance playwright John Millington Synge. It was first performed on 25 February 1904 at the Molesworth Hall, Dublin, by the Irish National Theater Society with Helen Laird playing Maurya. A one-act tragedy, the play is set in the Aran Islands, Inishmaan, and like all of Synge's plays it is noted for capturing the poetic dialogue of rural Ireland. The plot is based not on the traditional conflict of human wills but on the hopeless struggle of people against the impersonal but relentless cruelty of the sea.

"It is Synge who introduces the Irish peasants' drama; in this dramatic school by highlighting the life of ordinary people: tinkers, drunkards, braggarts, tramps, cowards, hypocrites and even patricides. He writes about their lives sympathetically as well as satirically." (Kitishat, 2019: P 2)

Synge has lived with the peasants, observing the people, learning their language, listened to their patterns of speech, recording his impressions in *The Aran Islands* and portraying the tragedy of a fishing community on the island of Aran.

Out of these careful observations, he has collected facts, events and stories as models for his plays. Living with the peasants, Synge observes the dominating and powerful effect of nature and environment on their lives and realizes their guiding influences on their destinies. The prolonged storms, the heavy rains that may continue for a week and the rocky land clothe the Islands with a particular mode of life.

"The life of the islanders fascinated and intrigued Synge and when the incident in the boat made him aware of the destructive force of the sea, the result was *Riders*." (Siebenhofer, 2010: P 55)

Literary realism represents reality by portraying mundane, everyday experiences as they are in real life. It depicts familiar people, places, and stories, primarily about the middle and lower classes of society.

Synge has realistically described the life of the islanders, their struggle for life, the realistic details of Aran Island and the implications of the sea on the rugged life of Irish peasants of the 1800s in which existence becomes an illusion, and life is enshrouded in complexities.

Man Versus Nature:

The main theme of this play is, man versus nature which is a theme that symbolically sets humanity under the control of the inhuman power of the Sea. At the opening of the play, Maurya's daughters learn that Michael has drowned. Her youngest son Bartley rides off to find Michael after learning that Michael is dead, Bartley is thrown by his horse and swept out into sea, where he also drowns. Maurya sees herself at constant war with the sea. She has lost six loved ones to the sea: her father-in-law, her husband, and her sons.

Maurya the protagonist of the play faces several challenges from nature and the most obvious being her battle with the sea. Here she is, alone after she has lost six loved ones.

Riders to the Sea is an example of a hopeless struggle against the impersonal relentless cruelty of the sea. This play shows how human can be destroyed in the face of the harshest nature.

"Indeed, while the poverty in which Maurya and her family live, together with the fact that the island seems extremely far removed from the mainland's industrialization and modernization, suggests that they are lagging behind, the universality of

their sentiments and suffering elevate their archaic existence to one that is much more resonant and impactful." (Osborne ,2016: web)

Suffering is an inevitable facet of life, Synge's characters in *Riders to the Sea* belong to working class and they suffer from extreme poverty. This suffering gives a pessimistic view of the world. Synge has based his play in an isolated island west of Ireland where he found inspiration for his play *Riders to the Sea*, and where he could describe the struggle of life between islanders and nature.

Universal Appeal of Human Suffering:

"The characters in the play with all their distinctive features, big and small represent universal mankind, all victimized and battling for a common survival. Their perseverance and dignified battle for existence make the one-act play a feast for the eye as well as the mind." (Chakraborty, 2013 : P 1)

The male members of the Island are all riders. They ride to the sea for the fishing and to support the family in their livelihood. They make adventures to the sea just to face death. Their defeat with the sea is the defeat of human being by the undefeated nature. The life of the Irish rustics in Synge's play is portrayed in a universal manner.

Synge has based his play in a remote corner of Ireland where he could describe the original and basic struggle of life.

The play focuses on the struggle of women who suffer intensely at the loss human lives.

Synge focuses on the suffering of women who suffer tragically for losing their men to the sea. Men have to go across the sea to the mainland to sell their agricultural produce and the animals reared by them, and to make their purchases. Since there are no trees on the island, even the planks to make the coffins have to be obtained from the mainland. *Riders to the sea* presents the universal human struggle, Synge's characters have a tragic conflict, it is universal conflict between starvation but safe life at their homes against predetermined fate in the sea. This one act play exemplifies the suspended tension between agents of life and the agency of death.

"there is a more wide and prodigious aspect of motherhood which focuses on the universal principle of emotions where all the mothers bemoan the death of their child from the same bereaved heart. It is a fact universally acknowledged that no forlorn mother in the world celebrate the death of her child." (Ansary, 2015 : P 2)

Maurya, the protagonist of the play '*Riders to the Sea*', a woman of over eighty, is the principal character in Synge's play. Her courage in the face of the worst disasters which can happen to a mother reaches her to be real heroine of the play. Her personal sufferings become universalized which portrays the tragic predicament of the fisher folk.

The play *Riders to The Sea* gives universal significance to local events. It is an example of a great tragedy. At the start of the play, Maurya has lost her husband and four sons to the sea. Her son Michael has been missing for nine days. Michael went to the sea to catch fish. But he did not come back home. Every day Maurya went to the sea-shore in expectation that the sea might wash up Michael's body on the shore. But the waiting was in vain. The sea did not wash up the dead body of Michael.

Maurya is the witness of many deaths in her family, she had to have a close observation of the death of her family members. She is beaten down by grief and hardship, and we can feel this in her speech:

"In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but is this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old." (Synge, 191: P 14)

Maurya, like most other mothers, takes a great care for her sons. She is an unfortunate mother who faced life challenges in the upbringing of her children, yet from the very beginning we come to realize that Maurya is praying for her children all the time. Thus, Her anxieties become universalized for it describes the tragic predicament of mothers in the fisher folk.

The mother too, as soon as she learnt of Bartley's determination to go to the Sea in order to sell a couple of horses in a cattle fair, in great fear she uttered, "He won't go this day with the wind rising from the South and West." After the death of her family members, no mother can let her child go to the sea in bad weather.

Again, in her speech, she predicts her son's death :

"He's gone now, god spares us, and we'll not see him again." (Synge, 1911: P 26)

The setting in Synge's *Riders to the sea* might be regional but it acquires a universal significance, it deals with the fortunes of poor, uncultured people living under rude and primitive conditions. The tragedy *Riders to the sea* is a regional play but it deals with mother nature which is the same everywhere. So it has a universal appeal. It could be a real experience

of any mother, anywhere of the world living in the sea-shore, where their sons grow up and embrace the watery death in the sea thus leaving the old mothers helpless and alone.

"The dominance of the sea is the main theme of the play. The sea is both a provider and destroyer; it provides life, and at the same time takes it. Its power is illustrated for the audience by the tearing open of the door in the opening scene, and by the descriptions given by Maurya's daughters. That the sea determines their sense of time and direction is not in doubt. The fishermen struggle to get a living out of the sea in tiny, frail boats made of tarred canvas, which they make themselves." (Edebor, 2014 : P 4)

Sea plays a universal roles, at the time it provides livelihood to islanders, it makes a tragedy of their lives. Sea is very important For the islanders, for them, sea is the giver , they must go to the sea, the source of their living in order to survive. But in spite of being the giver, it acts as a taker. Maurya's sons, husband and father-in -law were all drowned in the sea. Critics say that sea made a tragedy of Maurya's life , and consider the sea as the villain of Maurya's life.

"Riders to the Sea can be compared with the great Greek tragedies in its symbolic nature, its universalization of the theme of human suffering and loss". (Elahi, 2014: P4)

Riders to the Sea explores the universal appeal of the peasants suffering and struggle which crosses the boundary of time and space. The sea plays a universal role, at the time it provides livelihood to islanders, it causes endless tragedy of their lives. All male members of Maurya's family drowned in the sea, her last surviving son Bartley decides to go the sea to sell the family horses so they could get some money. He thinks that it is his duty to look after the family. Towards the end of the story, a few Islanders bring the body of Bartley into the cottage and tell the women that the grey pony knocked Bartley into the sea, where he drowned.

The conflict between Maurya, the Grief- widow and the powerful Sea does not remain confined ultimately within the Aran Islands but becomes almost symbolic of essential human conflict with Nature.

Submission to Fate:

"Through the use of the symbols of bundle and the sea, Synge vividly captures aspects of the terror of life in the fretted island, all the mystery and cruelty of the sea, including death, drowning, grief, fate, seafaring life and mother-son relationship". (Edebor, 2014: P 5)

Another dominant theme in Synge's, Riders to the Sea, is fate. This play is a tragedy of humanity that has universal appeal. It is the islander's fate to go on the sea, since they must make a living for their families, the community's fragile existence depends on them in order to make a living from the sea. Maurya, a grieving old woman, has lost her sons, husband and father-in -law in the sea, she struggles to retain a hold on the lives of the young men that they still have.

Maurya is praying for them all the time. But the poor mother's prayers could not save them, and her desire ends in this satisfaction and sorrow. She seems to understand the link between man and the inevitable death at the hands of nature. The play ends with her submission to the fate, she has realized the truth that no human power of whatever magnitude it may be can resist the fate. These events in the islanders life are inevitable and universal.

The islanders become the prototypes of the whole humanity and its tragic fate. It is the fate of the young men in the community to go on the sea, since they must make a living for their families, despite that their lives are at risk each time they go out.

"Many elements of the play remind one of the classical tragedies of antiquity: the compelling structure, the foreshadowing of the tragedy and its inevitability, as well as the stoic acceptance of fate". (Edebor , 2014: P 5)

Maurya believes that it is their fate to die in the sea. Moreover, she believe that death will also be her fate by saying "No man at all can be living for ever and we must be satisfied" (Synge, 1911: P 45) means that she will soon be with them. Thus, the play ends on this note of submission, it acknowledges that fate cannot be avoided—it is every character's fate to die, not only the men.

The play ends with Maurya praying that her husband, his father, and her four sons will rest in peace. The curtain falls on her prayer.

Conclusion:

Synge manages successfully to employ the Irish legend for local and universal purposes simultaneously. Riders to the sea has a universal appeal, it deals with human nature which is the same everywhere. It gives universal significance to islander's suffering, terror of life in the fretted island, hardiness of peasants, the conflict of man against nature and submission to the fate.

Themes are universal and that why they have got an international importance. The life of the Irish rustics in Synge's play is portrayed in a universal manner, Synge's characters represent universal mankind, they present the fortunes of poor, uncultured people living under rude conditions, the universal human struggle and the tragic conflict between starvation but safe life at their homes against the predetermined fate.

Riders to the sea acquires a universal significance, it deals with the universal principle of emotions, Maurya's personal sufferings become universalized which portrays mothers bemoan the tragic death of their child. It could be a real experience of any mother, anywhere of the world living in the sea-shore

Synge's treatment of the material gives universal significance to local events that it had transformed Synge's drama to universality, and his characters become the prototypes of the whole humanity.

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"دراسة موضوعية لمسرحية جون ميلينغتون سينغ الراكبون في البحر"

الملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة مسرحية سينغ الراكبون في البحر التي تستند إلى الفولكلور ، الثقافة والتراث الأيرلندي. ساعدت مسرحيات سينغ في تحديد الأسلوب المهيمن للمسرحيات في مسرح أبي حتى الأربعينيات ، وقد اعتمد فيها الكاتب المسرحي على الأسلوب الواقعي.

تفترض هذه الورقة أن جميع مسرحيات سينغ موضوعية وموضوعاتها عالمية ، بحيث وصف سينغ من خلالها حياة الفلاحين الأيرلنديين وعاداتهم وتقاليدهم وثقافتهم بشكل واقعي.

أذهلت حياة سكان الجزيرة الكاتب المسرحي سينج، فقد استخدم تقنيات غير واقعية مثل الحلم والوهم والخيال لتسليط الضوء على الحالة البائسة لحياة الفلاحين ومأساة مجتمع الصيد في جزيرة أران. ويكشف سينج من خلال المسرحية عن النداء العالمي لمعاناة الفلاحين وكفاحهم الذي يتجاوز حدود الزمان والمكان.

نهدف في الورقة الحالية إلى تحليل نقدي لمسرحية سينج الراكبون في البحر لإظهار أن الموضوعات في المسرحية عالمية مع أنها لا تزال متجذرة بقوة في الحياة المعاصرة للفلاحين الأيرلنديين وأن هذه المسرحية وموضوعها ذو صلة حتى في عصرنا الحالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جون ميلينغتون سينغ، التحليل النقدي، الفولكلور الأيرلندي، دراسة موضوعية، عمل أدبي، مسرحيات سينغ، الراكبون في البحر، عالمي.