

Symbolism, Sea, Choric Characters and Life of Aran Islanders Are Five Factors Are Primal Objectives of Riders to the Sea by J.M.Syngue

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ABSTRACT: In *Riders to the Sea*, Syngue depicts the fervour and heroism that he finds among the Aran fishermen. Their lives express man's worldwide struggle against hardship and destiny. These experiences could only be suitably expressed through an average of poetic prose. Maurya, Bartley, Nora and Cathleen are distinct by emotion and not intelligence. They respond to life with passion, mind and instinct; not with reason. In their daily association with the sea, they come to understand its secrecy and horror. This is highly suitable for Syngue's play in which the attractiveness of the lyrical idiom can be identified with the touching intensity of the characters. The similarity between Syngue's poetic prose and the verse disastrous drama of the classical playwrights is apparent. Significant of classical poetic tragedy, Syngue's play also includes the ghostly. In Maurya's supernatural vision witnessed at the spring-well, the red mare that Bartley rides on symbolizes existence and the grey pony on which Maurya sees Michael's apparition is the very sign of death. The vision foreshadows Bartley's bereavement that occurs in the course of the play. The full connotation of Maurya's vision could never have been portrayed in a prose play.

Keywords: significant, fate, grey pony, destitute, midst of the sea, Youngman, death, discourage

I. TITLE OF THE PLAY:

The title *Riders to the Sea* leads us at once into the motif of the play. The word 'Riders' means those who go on horseback or in vehicle. Here it refers specifically to the fishermen who ride on the sea in their little boats to earn their bare living. They are thus mysteriously linked to the human and super-human riders, here and in tradition. Syngue's choice of title is the superb brainwork of his genius. The title "Riders to the sea" is the most significant and symbolic to the thematic journey. The main thesis of the play is the

clash between man and the sea, which is archetypal symbol of man's surrender to fate. The two riders Bartley and Michael represent the whole riders of the peasant families of Aran Islanders. The real beauty will come out with the fragrance of title.

In the play there are two riders — Maurya's last surviving son Bartley and his spectral brother (Michael). The living Bartley rides on his red mare while dead Michael rides on the grey pony behind, 'with fine clothes on him and new shoes on his feet'. This is the 'fearfullest thing' that the mother had seen when she had gone out to 'bless Bartley and to give him bread and blessing'. At once she knows that "He's gone now... and they'll not see him again". This awful vision of the mother is particularly the care of the whole plot. It at once solves a problem namely of Michael's death and presages another death.

The title also suggests the vital part played by the sea, the fierce and mysterious Atlantic. The sea stands as a terrible monster, claiming ceaseless toil of poor lives. The Sea is the source of their living and dying. It is the cruel pagan gives the lie to the young priest's prediction that "...Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living". Maurya is kaput by her fight with the sea. Curiously enough, the journey of the Riders, the fishermen, to their inevitable fate is symbolized by the sea. Through the riding of Michael and Bartley we see the Aran islanders. Happiness and enjoyment bid them farewell. Sorrows and sufferings are the part and parcel of their riding. They have to fight constantly against the stony soil from which they will produce food grains after the hard toil and sweat of their body. And hungry sea is ready to devour the riders. Firstly she tempts with the bait of their source of living and lastly she snatches away every fisher folk of the islanders. Again in the title, the preposition 'to' suggest it is one way journey of the riders to the sea with very little possibility of return.

The title is suggestive of the Poseidon-Hippolytus myth. The story is about the tragic fate of Maurya, an old woman of the island. She has her father-in-law, her husband and six sturdy sons. They are all riders to the sea. But all of them except Bartley were devoured before the curtain rises. The play is about the last rider, Bartley. Maurya's fifth son Michael was drowned in the sea nine days before the play begins. Bartley wants to go to the sea. Maurya dissuades but Cathleen says "It's life of a Youngman to be going to the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?" Robin Skelton observes: "the very title itself emphasizes the mythic or supernatural elements; for there are only two riders in the play, one the doomed Bartley and the other his spectral brother".

The title has a biblical significance. If we have a look at the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament we will realize the symbolical meaning. When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them: but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tumbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tumbrels and dancing. Miriam sings—"Sing to the Lord, for he has ...thrown into the sea." Pharaoh's riders are destined to death as Maurya's 'riders' are fated to meet their death in the sea. The title has also supernatural element. One of the riders is the ghost of Michael who pursues his living brother and takes him away from this world. To quote T. R. Henn's *The Harvest of Tragedy*—"The symbolism of the red mare and the grey pony, the ageless and noble terror image of the horse communicates its sense of mystery even without the memory of the Four Riders".

The lives of the Aran islanders are determined by the sea. Their fates are destined by the hungry sea, whereas Pharaoh's horsemen were punished by for their misdeeds. Synge with his tragic scheme pushes the riders into the sea. So the riders have to take shelter under the sea after their death. Hence the title is very suggestive and symbolic.

II. LIFE OF ARAN ISLANDERS :

When Synge came to the Aran Islands he was fascinated by the unselfconscious manners and simple dignity of the islanders. He saw an old world charm in their earthen ware, homemade cradle and baskets. The girls wearing raw sheep skins and men riding on horses without even the use of saddle or reins seem to be out of the world of

fairy tales. After the first flash of enthusiasm Synge realized that such 'heroic' life could be unbearable. The sense desolation induced by the sweeping fogs and the waiting wind provide an appropriate setting for the kind of elegiac play that *Riders to the Sea* is.

The play is therefore a veritable record of the social, economical, geographical and religious life. The Island is stark bare so far as the landscape is concerned. There are no trees to relieve the sense of desolation. Nor does the sea have any better prospect to offer—the monotony of the waves ceaselessly biting on the shore is relieved only by squalls and tempest. The life style of the islanders is primitive. Their day to day lives have no amenities to soften the harness of the nature. The islanders are mainly fishermen by occupation. They supplement and complement their meagre income by cultivating rye on rather stony soil. They rear up pigs and horses and sell them at the time of economic crisis. Even when they know that the sea is a hungry demon, they have no other alternative but to sail on it for their sustenance. Cathleen's comment: "It is the life of a young man to be going on the sea and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?"—emphasizes the islanders' need to go to the sea to feed their family as well as themselves.

Poor as they are the women-folk have to labour as hard as the men to keep the family going. Cathleen had to mind her work at spinning wheel even when the shadow of the death of her brother Michael had cast a tragic gloom on the family. So poor are these peasant people that they cannot afford to use any other fuel but turf; that is decomposed vegetable matter. And what they often get to cook is nothing more than a bit of wet flour...and may be a fish that would be stinking.

These people in spite of their poverty make good and kind neighbours. The common tragedy of the sea seems to bind them close. The men-folk never fail in their duty to a bereaved family. The customary 'keen', that is the funeral lament is kept by women. For example, men brought the dead body of Bartley to the cottage and the women gathered there and knelt round the dead body 'with red petty coats over their heads'.

As regards their moral and mental outlook, these simple peasants though devout Christian retains many of the strange superstitions of their Celtic forefathers of old. Cathleen and Nora have great faith in the young priest. They believe in the assurance given by the priest that 'Almighty God won't leave her destitute', for she always prays so fervently for her son Bartley. Maurya too utters her prayers not only for the living Bartley but for his soul when his dead body is brought to her. But the

touching Celtic superstitions are never missing. 'There was a star up against the moon' at night and that was an ominous sign to Maurya. It meant some great disaster. When Bartley was gone in spite of her request, she was sure that he would be lost: "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again". Such 'unlucky word' behind him terrified Cathleen and she sent the old woman out on the way to bless her son.

Visions and illusions were interpreted by the peasants, especially their old women, as sure omens of things to come. Maurya saw the figure of Michael riding on the grey pony behind Bartley. Cathleen, when she heard of this from her mother could not believe; "It's destroyed we are from this day". She was sorry to imagine that none but the 'black hags' who fly over the sea would give the funeral lament for her drowned brother, Michael. The islanders were always anxious to give their dead and decent Christian burial. So, in some respects they were Christians and in other pagans.

It is also true that she cannot do anything against the malicious power of the sea which devours all the male members of her family one after another. The principal attribute of a tragic hero, both in classical and modern tragedy is his capacity to resist the forces of necessity which will ultimately destroy him. As D.D. Raphael remarks, the tragic hero "is a man like us, showing human weaknesses; but though an object of our sympathy, he also seems sublime".

III. CATHLEEN AND NORA AS CHORIC CHARACTERS:

The term 'Chorus'(from Sanskrit – 'sutraddhar') is used originally by the ancient Greeks in Attic drama of the 6th and 5th centuries BC, is a group of singers and dancers who take part in a drama and are accompanied by music. Being independent from the root of the action they represent as objective spectator, commentator, author's point of view and even a conscience of the audience. Naturally, the central action in *Riders to the Sea* of J.M.Synge comprises of Maurya's total loss of all her sons and her heroic acceptance of her tragic destiny, in which Cathleen and Nora have no direct part to play, and accordingly, he had no room for the proper development of minor characters within the scope of his play. Yet Synge included the characters of Cathleen and Nora with a conscious design. Actually, Synge, who modelled his plays upon Greek tragic drama, conceived of the two characters of Cathleen and Nora in the near mould of the chorus, an important convention of Greek drama. They do serve choric functions such

as observing and commenting upon the course of action.

In *Riders to the Sea* the very opening conversation of Cathleen and Nora form the exposition of the play. For example, we learn from their dialogues that the entire house is reeling under terrible agony of a mother who anticipates the death of a son who is feared to be drowned in the sea. Moreover, we learned that the mother is so grief stricken that she is in a state of trance, tossing in her anguish. We are thus not only informed of the basic situation through Cathleen and Nora in the beginning of the play, the information they supply also helps to build up an atmosphere of tension and suspense which contributes to the emotional effects of the play.

Nora and Cathleen, the two sisters, primarily also provide relief amid the taut atmosphere of gloom and suspense. The two sisters give the audience temporary moments of relief. Like that of a formal chorus here from the beginning of play they emphasize the values and culture of the Aran people. In sentiment, they become a symbol of Aran county girls and in times we can search through their words for the likes of the sea, lives of the young fisherman, what the young priest say and nearby geographical location etc. These entire things must have their interlinked association to death but for the brief moments theirs are a pause to the tragic overthrown. Again introduction to such innocent girls in the tragic plot creates a false believe that these girl can never loss their brother.

Though unlike a full scale five act play Synge could not enjoy the liberty of giving the chorus, ample, time and space in order to comment upon and interpret the action,. Cathleen, at least on one occasion makes a comment which remains the most glaring truth about the central problem of the play. Cathleen tells Maurya while she desperately tries to prevent Bartley from undertaking a ride to the sea that 'It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea', - this statement throws the most significant light upon the inevitability of being a rider to the sea in the lives of the Aran Islanders.

As Chorus, however, Cathleen and Nora are partly unsatisfactory, since on one occasion the two sisters fail to interpret the action in the proper light. For example, when Maurya accepts her final destiny calmly, while she had howled and wailed exasperatedly on earlier occasions when her other sons had died, and particularly when Michael was lost, Nora feels that it is because Maurya loves Michael more than Bartley that she calmly accepts the death of Bartley. Nora Says, "She's quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you

could hear her crying out from this to the spring well. It's fonder she was of Michael, and would anyone have thought that?"

While she bitterly lamented the death of Michael the same response in Maurya is interpreted by Cathleen in an equal mistaken manner, when she says that Maurya is placid only because she is tired after the series of tragedy that had already befallen her. Cathleen says, "an old woman will be soon tired with anything she will do, and isn't it nine days herself is after crying and keening, and making great sorrow in the house?" Both Cathleen and Nora fail to fathom the heroic fortitude in Maurya, and it is in their failure that lays their inefficiency as chorus through the two sisters, taken together, represent the chorus, they are individualized. This is proved by the fact that they do not always speak in the same tone and that they often have different interpretation of the same event. This is proved by their different reactions to Maurya's heroic fortitude at the end of the play.

IV. SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY:

In Synge's *The Riders to the Sea*, the sea is one such symbol. Its clash with man is almost as old as literature. It symbolizes both existence and decease; it is the donor and stealer of life. The deprived islanders constantly live under its threat. Its looming arbitrary moods strike terror in their hearts. But the Islanders also seek its protection as it provides them with the necessary means of subsistence. Man's conflict with the sea and woman's loss-both are archetypal, found everywhere, in myth, legend, history, from classical plays to *Lycidas*. Maurya's husband perished in the sea; her husband's father too was drowned; and then all her sons, of whom there were as many as six, are snatched away from her by the sea. The bodies of some of these men had been found, while the bodies of the others had not been found.

The sea is Nemesis, the unsympathetic and uncaring power which is out to destroy man. The conflict which constitutes the play exists on various levels. At one level it is the conflict between paganism and Christianity; on another it is a conflict between old ways of life and the new. The sea is as impersonal and as pitiless as the gods in whose hands men are but flies. Sometimes, as a 'demy-god', as a 'survivor' or as a 'slaughterer', the sea made its impact on the inky-sky of the *Riders to the Sea*. The sea, under the masque of a kind magician, spoils the young lives with its magic stick (waves).

The 'rider' is another archetypal pictogram. The fishermen on the Aran Islands are all riders to the sea whether they are willing or not.

And here, as well as in tradition, they have a mysterious affiliation with the human and the super-human riders. The correlation between the red mare of Bartley and the grey pony on which Michael's apparition is seen is the symbolical pinnacle of the play. Red is allied with virility and youth, grey suggest death. 'The red and grey clocks' is a cliché in the *Scottish Ballads*, and Yeats uses this opposition in *A Full Moon in March*. Revelations reinforces the proposition of death as it represents death as riding a insipid horse. Moreover, the sea god Poseidon created the horse, therefore the horse-farmers are regarded as his servants. So, the sea and the horse are intimately associated.

Synge also uses what is known as 'unstressed symbols'. The coffin builders have for their refreshment the bread that Cathleen baked for Bartley. It was this bread that Maurya tried to give Bartley when she swathe vision at the spring well, itself a symbol of life. By this reiterated use, the bread takes on added significance. Its Christian associations give place to irony. By this Synge may have wished to suggest the negation of the sacrament or communion. The number nine is another major symbol in the play. When the play opens, Maurya has been mourning Michael's death for nine days. When Bartley is leaving the house, he tells Cathleen that he will probably be away for two days, or three days, or four days. If we total up these days, we get the number nine. When Bartley has been drowned, and people start coming to the cottage, we find that two women enter the house first, followed by three more who in turn are followed by four more. The total number of deaths in Maurya's household also comes to nine in a way.

Along with the white boards we have a reference to the nails. The nails are connected with Christ. These symbols imply not only the proximity of life and death, but also the sudden and unexpected incursion of death into the world of the living. There is also a subtle symbolic significance of the possessions. Maurya's stick, bought by Michael, is the support that sons should have been. Bartley sets out his journey in the new shirt which belonged to Michael, the fact that the Christian dead are buried in new clothing becomes relevant her. The sisters find out the truth about Michael through the stitches on a shirt. Synge expects his audience to remember the sisters of Fate and the thread of life.

Finally, Maurya's gesture of putting 'the empty cup mouth downwards' is full symbolical overtones. It is suggestive of the renunciation of any further need for consolation. Her cup of misery is all but full and she feels emotionally exhausted,

realizing that the end is her. The peace and consolation that she feels to have finally attained through the death of Bartley ironically suggests that in this alien universe the only way to get rest and comfort is through the exhaustion of the capacity of suffering. The symbols are deliberately interwoven in the very tragic fabric of the play.

But it is the pathos of the play that grips the readers' heart even more than the tragedy. The play is soaked in tears of unspeakable anguish. The persons whose simple lives are treated here frightfully grimly against the malignancy, but they are just ordinary men and women toiling to learn their bread, fearing the unknown, clinging to one another in moments of peril and sharing common human emotion and passion. The misfortune of this particular family has been told so staggeringly that it is impossible not to be profoundly struck by them. Death himself might well be ashamed of his conduct at her last few words in the drama: No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. The strongest impression the play leaves in the mind is one of a thick gloom of despair and helplessness.

V. ROLE OF CRUEL ATLANTIC:

Actually it stands as a 'destroyer and preserver' of life. As a destroyer, the sea snatches all the male member of the island to prove its cruelty and insolence. On the other, as a preserver, it provides the elixir of livelihood to prove its god like superiority. The sea has already devoured 'five strong sons' of Maurya, still Bartley cannot keep away from the sea.

Here fate is represented by the sea and thus assumes the role of the antagonist relentlessly claiming its victims as they ride over it. From the stage direction of 'The door which Nora half closed behind her is blown upon by a gust of wind' at the beginning of the play, the sea remains an invisible but pervasive and ominous presence till its end. Its very invisibility thus enhances its sinister aspect and inevitable power. The implications of Bartley's sea journey to the mainland to sell the two horses is thus framed against the door blown open by the gust of wind indicating the menacing condition of the sea. The sea dominates the action of the drama and influences the movement of the events from the beginning to the end. At the beginning 'the nets' suggesting fisher folk, hence the sea-we are made aware of the sea's dominance on these fisher folk. And when the sisters are discussing the bundle the half open door is 'blown open by a gust of wind', as if the sea reminds them who is master here. The sea becomes an entity in the play. After Bartley's death 'the great surf' almost seems to represent the

sea's exultation over the fateful event. But the sea is devoid of any feeling. Its cruelty is conveyed through the phrase "...power of young men floating around the sea". Maurya's confrontation with the sea is usually indirect-through her attempts at preventing her son from going on a sea journey during rough weather. The sea frames the argument between Maurya and Bartley before his departure. The futility of Maurya's endeavour to discourage her son's journey is evident not only in the fact that 'It is the life of a young man to be going on the sea' but also to the weight of material considerations which defeat her maternal values. Maurya has thus to clutch at and negotiate the evasive nature of Bartley's justifications which imply that the sea has a deceptive and ambiguous role in the play.

With its titular importance and its centrality to the concept of Fate, the sea is also dramatized in the play through the superstitious beliefs held by Maurya and the supernatural element which link it to the world of the dead. Maurya's vision of the spectral Michael on the grey pony following Bartley on the red mare, thus links it both to the world of the dead and to Manannan Mac Lir who, in Irish legend, represents the sea and is, like Poseidon, believed to ride the waves on his steeds. In finally accepting Fate's legislation that 'no man can be living forever' after Bartley is killed by the grey pony pushing him into the sea, Maurya ironically overcomes her control of the sea: "They're all gone now and there isn't anything more the sea do to me..."

The sea is Nemesis, the unsympathetic and uncaring power which is out to destroy man. The conflict which constitutes the play exists on various levels. At one level it is the conflict between paganism and Christianity; on another it is a conflict between old ways of life and the new. The sea is as impersonal and as pitiless as the gods in whose hands men are but flies. Sometimes, as a 'demy-god', as a 'survivor' or as a 'slaughterer', the sea made its impact on the inky-sky of the Riders to the Sea. The sea, under the masque of a kind magician, spoils the young lives with its magic stick (waves).

Maurya's real heroism emerges in the capacity she shows for suffering and endurance despite her old age and also the bereavements she has suffered in the past. When Bartley does perish, she does not weep and cry, her attitude is, instead, one of strong defiance: "They are all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me". It also shows her vain efforts in the past to evade what destiny had set in store for her. All her life has been a series of anguished moments, hectic efforts, and prayers to save her sons from the sea. Earlier,

she said that she would not survive Bartley's death, but now she resigns herself to the fact of her defeat at the hands of the sea: "It's a great rest I'll have now". Daniel Corkery has noted, Maurya is "so firm set and an integral in her nature that in spite of all its victories over her, she is still herself and will remain herself, not distracted, nor frenzied". In the archetypal concept, the sea is the embodiment of Fate. It represent Fate (Clotho), with which humanity are locked in eternal battle.

Tragic irony of the play is also associated with the sea. This is evident in Bartley's remark, "I have no halter the way I can ride down on the mare...saying below". This line pressures which preclude Bartley from heeding his mother's advice to remain at home is clear in this statement. Bartley's haste becomes powerfully ironical—he seems to be rushing towards sea or an inevitable end.

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