



Aran Waves and Greek Echoes: Tragedy in J.M. Synge's Work- *Riders to the Sea*

Dr. Josit Mariya

Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Kottayam, Valavoor P.O, Pala, Kottayam, Kerala, India

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Abstract— John Millington Synge (1871-1909), prominent figure of Irish literature. In his *Riders to the Sea* written in 1902 and this was considered one of the finest one-act play. The purpose of this article is to show how Synge followed the classical unities of tragedy and how his characters and settings portraying the ancient Greek tragedians rather than Shakespearean tragedies.

Keywords— Sea Vs man, Greek tragedy, Shakespearean tragedy, Fate, Nature.



J.M. Synge, one of the greatest dramatists of Irish Literature. He was a lover of nature, and in his plays he introduces the idea that nature is not a background for man's actions and beliefs; it has a definite role in the action and shapes the destiny of human beings. The writings of Synge were not focused on the severe political, social, or moral ends of Ireland. He gave more attention to the lives of the simple peasants of Western Ireland and their joys and sorrows.

Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is one of the successful one-act plays in English literature. It shows us a tragic vision of life. It is a tragic masterpiece. The conflict is that of man vs. the sea. It is an epic of the unequal fight of a puny man against the all-powerful force of the sea.

If we analyse the causes of human suffering, we find that some people suffer due to some fault on their character while others suffer for no fault on their own. We can find no logical reason for their suffering. They are pious people whose actions are all good. They commit no mistakes and yet they suffer. In these case we can only say that they suffer because they are pitted against a mysterious force which we may call the malice of the gods or Fate or Destiny.

Riders to the sea is one of the few effective one-act plays in English literature. It is a tragic masterpiece. The conflict is that of man Vs. the Sea. It is an epic of the unequal fight of puny man against the all-powerful force of the sea. The poor islanders know the power of the sea but they do not give up

the fight. They represent man who is powerless in his fights against the forces of Nature.

When the scene opens we can see the cottage of Maurya, the old unhappy mother. Michael, her son has recently been drowned and she is weeping all the time and going to the sea-shore to see if his body is washed to ashore. she has arranged white boards for his coffin and a cake is being baked for those who would prepare the coffin. Nora and Cathleen, her two daughters, are given a bundle of clothes by the priest. These were recovered from the body of a man who has drowned in Donegal. They got to know that it was his brother's and he has been given a decent burial.

Maurya's last surviving son, Bartley, is determined to go with the red mare and the grey pony to the Galway fair. His mother and sisters try their best to dissuade him from going but he is adamant and departs riding the red mare. Maurya has a premonition that she will never see him again. She sees a vision of Michael riding the grey pony. Soon the body of Bartley is brought in. he was thrown into the sea by the red mare and he was dashed against the rocks and killed. The white boards are used to make Bartley's coffin. Maurya's cup of sorrow is full to the brim. She resigns herself to her fate and says, "They are all gone now and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me.... I will have no call now to be up crying and praying when the breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf in the east, and surf is in the west". He only consolation is that Michael has

had a decent burial and Bartley is going to have a deep grave. "What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied." The poor islanders know the power of the sea but they do not give up the fight. They represent man who is powerless in his fights against the forces of Nature.

Synge followed the ancients and not Shakespeare in making Fate wholly responsible for the tragedy in Riders to the Sea. J. M Synge strictly followed the ancient Greek dramatist while writing this one act play. Now we should just analyse the factors.

Greek Tragedy: The Wrath of the Gods

Tragedy, this genre of writing got importance because of the Greeks. Dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides wrote great tragedies in ancient Greece. Their convention on tragedy is that in this world man suffers not because of any flaw in his character or any crime deliberately committed by him but because of his bad luck. In all their tragedies we can witness the conflict is between the heroes and the gods. It is an unequal fight and the heroes always lose and are destroyed. The hero is a great man possessing many noble qualities but he incurs the wrath of the gods because he has committed the mistake unconsciously or in ignorance. Still he is punished for it. The best example for that is *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus slays his father and marries his own mother in complete ignorance of the fact that they were his parents. He broke the divine law which prohibited patricide and incest. That he committed these crimes in complete ignorance is no excuse. The gods are angry and must be destroyed. Fate plays the principal part in this tragedy. Man struggles in vain against his fate but is powerless against supernatural forces.

Aristotle defines tragedy in *Poetics*, Book VI as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (51).

This definition crystallizes much of Aristotle's arguments throughout the *Poetics*:

- a tragedy is first and foremost the representation of human action;
- the actions represented have serious, often dire consequences and the characters represented are of elevated social status;
- the plot is a complete, coherent whole, lasting long enough to represent adequately the reversal of the hero's fortune;

- the language in which a tragedy is composed employs tropes and other heightened or unusual uses of speech and a mixture of different poetic meters;
- the mode of imitation in a tragedy is drama as opposed to narrative;
- the tragedy arouses pity and fear in the viewer and brings about catharsis.

Shakespearean Tragedy: Tragic Flaw

Shakespeare, however believed that human suffering is due to some fault in the person's own character. His heroes are great and noble persons but each one of them has a flaw in his character which causes the tragedy.

Tragic flow of the four major Shakespearean tragedies are:

1. Othello- Jealousy
2. Hamlet- Procrastination
3. Macbeth- Ambition
4. King Lear- His arrogance, pride and misjudgement

Othello is a great general and has all the noble qualities that a man should have. He has married a very beautiful and virtuous lady named Desdemona. They should have lived happily. But Othello has one flaw in his character: jealousy. Iago poisons Othello's mind by telling him that Desdemona, a white girl, does not love him but she loves another white man. Othello is a man of action and without proper investigation he kills his wife and when he realizes his blunder he kills himself. Hamlet is a noble prince and he should have been a very good king of Denmark after his father's death. But his uncle kills his father, usurps the throne and marries Hamlet's mother. Hamlet should have killed the murderer and everything would have been all right. He thinks too much. And which leads to the ultimate tragedy. Macbeth has all the qualities needed in a king but his life ends in tragedy because of his vaulting ambition. Thus all these cases the tragedy is caused because of some weakness in the hero's character.

Of course circumstances also contribute to the tragedy. The fault in the hero's character causes the tragedy in those particular circumstances only. Thus if Hamlet had been placed in Othello's place there would have been no tragedy. He would have thought about the whole thing and investigated whether Iago's suspicion had any basis and he would have concluded that Desdemona a saintly wife. If Othello had been placed in Hamlet's place, there would have been no tragedy. He was a man of action. He would have at once killed the murderer and everyone would have been happy. Thus in Shakespeare's tragedies the hero is placed in circumstances in which the fault in his character causes the tragedy. Destiny is not responsible for the

tragedy That is why it is said that in Shakespeare character is Destiny.

In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge strictly followed the classical unities i.e. Unity of place, time and action, of tragedy throughout this play. The locale is not at all changing, it is always Maurya's cottage. which stands high on a rocky plane exposed to the howling gales and resonant with the thundering sound of the vexed sea. The desolation of the surroundings certainly sets the tragic tone. All happens within a day. And the unity of action is strictly followed in this novel. We get to know about the death of Bartley through an unknown lady but it is not staged.

The conflict is between fisherman of Aran Island and the sea which shows us the inevitable between man and fate in Greek Tragedy. "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea," Cathleen, the eldest daughter, tells her mother Maurya when the latter tries to prevent Bartley, her youngest and only surviving son, from taking a sea journey to a horse fair in Galway. The paradoxical factor is that sea is the source of their both of livelihood and destruction, sustenance and death, removes the element of choice, both physical and moral, in this play.

The Sea as the Agent of Destiny

Synge does not follow Shakespeare in this respect. He believes with Greek tragedians that it is Destiny that causes all human suffering. In *Riders to the Sea* the sea symbolises Destiny or the will of Gods. It does not appear on the stage but outside it roars hungrily for its toll of human lives. Its victims are the men of the island but the chief sufferers are the women who are left destitute after all the men have been drowned. The ways of the sea are inscrutable. The young priest cannot understand them. As Maurya says, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea."

Human Beings Not Responsible

When the play opens we are told that Michael had been drowned nine days back. Michael was a good rower and a skilful fisherman. His death was certainly not due to any fault in his character.

The main tragedy in the play is Bartley's death and that is certainly not due to any fault in his character. His decision to go does not imply any wrong doing on his part. It is true that Maurya tries her best to stop him from going and if he had not gone he would not have died that day. But how long could he avoid going to the sea? If he was destined to die he would have died in some other way or on some other day. The young man of the island had to go to the sea for their normal work. Bartley was only doing his duty. He needed money for the expenses of the family. So he wanted to go to sell his horses at a fair. He is caught in the meshes of Fate. He is knocked down by the grey horse into the sea and is

snatched lifeless from the waves. It is Destiny that causes the disaster.

Maurya's Suffering due to Fate

Maurya is the main sufferer in the play. She loses her father-in-law, her husband, and all her six sons, all within a period of about twenty years. She is a noble and pious lady who prays to God almost all the time. Her suffering is only caused by her bad luck and not by any fault in her character. At the end of the play, Maurya, like the heroes of Greek tragedy, bows before her Destiny which had decreed that she should live to see her husband and all her sons dying one after the other. Thus the tragedy in *Riders to the Sea* happens not because of any fault in the character of the victims but wholly because of Destiny which human beings can neither understand nor control.

Conflict Essential in a Play

Conflict is essential in drama. The plot of a play becomes interesting and gripping only when there is a conflict in it. Some critics have said that there is a conflict in it. Some critics have said that there is no conflict in *Riders to the Sea*. That is not true. This play could not have been a great tragedy if there had been no conflict in it. The conflict in this play is between the sea and humanity, singly and collectively.

Types of conflict

There are different types of conflict in different plays. In Greek tragedy the conflict was between man and the gods or destiny. In modern plays the conflict usually is between two groups of people. There may be a conflict of wills. The conflict may be between the hero and the villain. In some plays the conflict is purely internal. Hamlet is at war with himself.

In the tragedies of Galsworthy, the conflict is between the hero and the laws and conventions of society. The conflict may be between a human being and the circumstances or the environment in which he finds himself. In this play the sea represents the mysterious power of Destiny. He can neither understand nor control this power. When man comes into conflict with this power, his life is bound to end as a tragedy.

No Inner Conflict

There is no inner conflict in the mind of any of the characters of this play. A psychological study of their mental state would yield no result. They are members of primitive community whose thought process are very simple. Maurya is a simple old woman who has led the same type of life from infancy to old age. She had a large family consisting of her father-in-law, her husband, six strong sons and two daughters. Tragic conflict entered her life when the hungry sea started devouring the men-folk of her family one

by one. She tried to avoid her bad luck by resorting to prayer. But this did not prove of any avail. Within a span of about twenty years all the male members of the family are drowned and she is left utterly helpless with her two daughters.

No Clash Between Characters

There is no conflict between the character of Riders to the Sea. Maurya does not come into conflict with anyone. It is true that Bartley goes to the sea against her will. She tries to persuade him and warns him but he does not pay any heed to her exhortations and warnings. But this is not a conflict. He only ignores his mother's words and does what he considers to be his duty to the family. He does not die only because he ignores his mother's warnings. The sea, like inexorable destiny, was only waiting to devour him. If he had not gone on this day, he would have gone some other day and would have been drowned on that day. So his death is not due to any conflict of wills. It only completes the series of deaths which had been decided upon by cruel Fate. As for Cathleen and Nora, there is not the slightest hint of a conflict between them and their mother or brother. The sea is responsible for all the tragedies.

The Sea an Archetypal Symbol

The sea is an archetypal symbol of hostility to man. This symbol is being used by writers since times immemorial. We find descriptions of the conflict between man and sea in myth and legend, in history and literature. The sea is a tyrant- god, full of mystery and power. It attracts young men, offers a challenge to them and then destroys them. It is a pre-existent evil and good.

The Real Conflict

The conflict between man and sea is very real in Aran islands. The soil there is stony and very few crops grow there. The people catch fish from the sea for their food and collect sea weed from the sea –shore for their fuel. For all their requirements they have to go across the sea to the mainland. As Cathleen says it is the life of a young man to be going on the sea. The seas around the islands are very rough and the storms come frequently and unexpectedly and so drowning deaths are very common. The sea is the giver and taker of the lives of the islanders.

Stages of the Conflict

The conflict between man and the sea begins at the very beginning of the play. Maurya's fifth son, Michael, was drowned nine days back and his body has not been found yet. There is great roaring in the sea and waves are rising high. But Bartley is not frightened by them. He must do his duty. He had to go to the mainland to sell his horses there. His mother's efforts to stop him prove of no avail she has forebodings that he will fall a victim to the sea. As he leaves

she can only cry out, "He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world". She sees the ghost of Michael who seems to have come to take his brother to the other world. Maurya is horrified. She recalls how Stephen and Shawn had been lost in the great wind and how their bodies had been found in the Bay of Gregory. Sheamus, his father and grand-father were lost in the sea on a dark night and not a sign of them was found in the morning. Patch was drowned when his boat was turned upside down.

Who wins at the end?

Outwardly it seems that the sea is always victorious in the eternal fight between man and the sea. It has taken away all the male members of Maurya's family. But the sea is defeated in the sense that it cannot do any further harm to her. It may roar as much as it likes with its winds and waves but it will not be able to disturb Maurya's peace. She has tremendous powers to endurance and so the seas have not been able to crush her down. She is beaten but unbowed. It is the invincible spirit of man which finally triumphs in the conflict between man and the sea.

The climax is reached in a tragedy towards the end of the play. In a good tragedy the dramatist arranges the action in such a way that the climax arises logically out of it and does not surprise or shock us when it comes. This is very difficult in a One –Act play because there is only about half an hour in which the dramatist has to prepare our minds for the climax, in *Riders to the Sea* Synge has done it very skilfully. Hints and forebodings of the impending tragedy are scattered throughout the play, so that when the news of Bartley's death comes we are prepared for it and are not shocked by it.

Mournful Atmosphere

The play opens in a mournful atmosphere. Michael, Maurya's fifth son, was reported to have been drowned nine days back and the poor mother has been weeping bitterly since then. The youngest priest has given Nora a bundle of clothes which had been taken off from the body of a drowned man in Donegal and the members of the family have been asked to identify whether these belonged to Michael.

Fresh Anxieties

Within a few minutes of the opening of the play we get the feeling that Michael's death is not the last sorrow that Maurya is going to face. The door is banged open by a gust of wind. Nora says that the sea is "middling bad" and it will get worse "when the tide turns to the wind." Cathleen is worried about the safety of her brother, Bartley, who is planning to go to the mainland to sell his horses at the Galway Fair.

Maurya's Forebodings

Maurya had seen a star against the moon the previous night and she thought this indicated that some disaster was to come to them. So when Bartley comes she tries her best to prevent him from going. But Bartley determined to go and he leaves invoking God's blessings on his mother and sisters. Maurya does not bless him but, instead of that, she expresses her terrible foreboding. She says, "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world". We now feel that Bartley would not survive long.

After Bartley leaves Cathleen discovers that she had forgotten to give the bread to her brother. At this Nora says, "It's destroyed he'll be going till dark night." Nora's unconscious use of the word 'destroyed' fills our hearts with fear for Bartley's safety.

The atmosphere of an impending tragedy is further intensified by Maurya's remarks when she is given the stick that Michael had bought. "In the big world", she says, "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." This gives us an idea that premature deaths have been taking place in this family and prepares our minds for another premature death.

Michael's Ghost

Whether we believe in ghosts or not we are all frightened by them and we all regard their appearance as bad omens. Maurya goes to the spring well to give her blessings and the bread to Michael. But she returns from there in a horrible condition. She tells her daughters that she has seen the most frightful sight that anyone had seen since the day Bride Dara saw the dead man holding a child in his arms. She saw Bartley riding on the red mare and the ghost of Michael riding on the grey pony behind his brother. This sight frightens Maurya so much that heart is almost broken certain that Bartley is doomed. Nora tries to comfort her mother by telling her that the young priest had asked them not to worry because God would not be so unkind as to take away Maurya's last surviving son. But this does not comfort the old woman. She says that the priest knows nothing of the vagaries of the sea. Maurya goes to the extent of making a prophecy that Bartley will be lost now and she asks her daughters to make arrangements for his coffin. This is clear hint to the audience to be ready to hear about Bartley's death within a few minutes.

Maurya's Account of Past Tragedies

There is now flash-back in which Maurya recalls the past deaths in the family. She had her father-in-law, her husband and six sturdy sons. All of them, with the exception of

Bartley, had seen lost in sea. The bodies of some of them had been found while the bodies of the rest were not found at all. Maurya starts describing the way in which the body of Patch was brought to the house. nine women-mourners came to the house, crossing themselves and kneeling down with red petticoats on their heads. Then the body of Patch was brought by the men wrapped in a sail, with water dripping from it. This tragic vision melts into reality and Bartley's dead body brought into the house in exactly the same way. We are not shocked or surprised because this seems to be only an extension of the list of deaths recalled by Maurya.

Thus the tragic climax in *Riders to the Sea* arises out of the action of the play. It does not shock or surprise us because the dramatist has skilfully prepared our minds for it by hints and forebodings scattered throughout the play.

Synge strictly followed the tragic atmosphere of his Greek predecessors like Sophocles and Euripides. He used the symbols of black cat, white boards, baked bread and the new rope have tragic connections. Symbols like grey pony, red mare and the resurrection image of dead Michael gives us a powerful feeling of unavoidable fate for the Fisherman of Aron Island. Nobody can avoid it. Here, Bartley also does not escape from his fate.

Maurya, the chief protagonist of this one-act play, becomes a grand tragic figure like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. She consoles herself by saying "No man at all can be living for ever and we must be satisfied". This stoic resignation to fate combines the play with Greek tragic pattern.

Chorus, gives us the clear picture of the present, past and future to the audience to as the play proceeds. An important fact is that there is no separate existence of chorus but Nora, Cathleen and especially Maurya play an important role of chorus in this play.

In terms of its symbolism and its universalization of the theme of human sorrow and loss, *Riders to the Sea* can be likened to the greatest Greek tragedies. With her calm acceptance of her fate, Maurya achieves a kind of heroic grandeur that could only be accomplished by the protagonists of classical playwrights like Sophocles.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, J.M. Synge's "*Riders to the Sea*" stands as a powerful testament to the tragic vision of life, drawing inspiration from both Greek tragedy and the works of Shakespeare. Synge, diverging from Shakespearean tragedy, aligns with the Greek tradition by attributing human suffering to the inexorable forces of destiny. The play unfolds as a poignant exploration of the perpetual

conflict between humanity and the sea, symbolizing the omnipotent and capricious nature of fate.

In the Aran Islands, the sea becomes an archetypal symbol of both sustenance and destruction, embodying the dualities of life. The narrative, set within the unities of time, place, and action, evokes an atmosphere of impending tragedy from the very beginning. Maurya, a tragic figure akin to those in Greek dramas, undergoes a relentless cycle of loss, each death representing an encounter with an unfathomable destiny.

The play skilfully builds towards its climax, with Synge employing foreshadowing and foreboding to prepare the audience for the inevitable tragedy. The sea, a relentless antagonist, takes away each male member of Maurya's family, creating a sense of fatalism that permeates the entire narrative. Through the lens of ancient Greek tragedy, where man struggles in vain against the whims of gods, "*Riders to the Sea*" presents a similar struggle between humanity and an inscrutable, indifferent force.

The conclusion of the play brings forth a sombre reflection on the enduring spirit of man, resilient in the face of relentless adversity. While the sea may claim its toll, the indomitable human spirit emerges victorious, echoing the stoic resignation found in classical tragedies. In Maurya's acceptance of her fate, there is a tragic grandeur that aligns with the profound ethos of Greek drama.

In essence, "*Riders to the Sea*" stands as a tragic masterpiece, seamlessly blending the ancient Greek tradition with the rugged realities of the Aran Islands. Synge's exploration of the conflict between man and destiny, symbolized by the sea, resonates with timeless themes of suffering, loss, and the unwavering human spirit.

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