



**The Woman and Nature Connection in J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea***



**Salunke Santosh Siddheshwar**

Research Student

Dr. B.A.M.University, Aurangabad.

**ABSTRACT**

*J.M. Synge, an Irish playwright, was born in a Protestant missionaries family but became an agonistic in his teens. His upbringing by his mother and later on his accompany with several women may account for the strong female characters in his plays. The playwright portrays an unforgettable character Maurya in his *Riders to the Sea*. The play is a one act play that presents a melancholy vision of life on the Aran Island. Maurya's strong and sturdy character that fights against*

*the equally strong and sturdy sea and the final helplessness of human beings against nature is indeed noteworthy throughout the play. Women on the Aran Island have dexterity of understanding nature.*

**KEY WORDS**

*plight, puppets, dexterity, nuances, calamity.*

## RESEARCH PAPER

J.M. Synge was born on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1871 in an old, middle class protestant Wicklow family at Rathfarnham near Dublin. John Millington was one of the ancestors of J.M. Synge who earned the title sing or Synge from Henry VIII for singing melodiously while being a canon of the Royal Chapel. J.M. Synge's father Edmond John Millington Synge was a barrister. He was died just a year after he was born. His mother Kathleen Traill was a devout Christian born in Cork. J.M.Synge was born in a protestant missionaries family but became an agonistic in his teens. He was raised by his mother. His upbringing earlier with his mother and afterwards being accompanied with several other women may account for the strong female characters in his plays. Synge's portrayal of women characters is surrounded with difficulties, challenges and despair but eventually strong female characters who overcomes all the obstacles of life- force and provides audience a firm pathway that leads to triumph.

J.M. Synge portrays an unforgettable character Maurya in his *Riders to the Sea*. In fact, Synge intended to write the plight of the local Aran Islanders but in the process, he sketched Maurya , the woman protagonist, with unique peculiarities. *Riders to the sea* was written 1902 and was first published on 25<sup>th</sup> Feb 1904 at Molesworth Hall, Dublin. The play was afterwards performed in the Abbey theatre in the same year. It is a one act play that presents a melancholy vision of life.

...where centuries of isolation have produced a unique and rugged culture dependent on wrestling a livelihood from the sea. The sea pervades the lives of the islanders and the prevailing atmosphere is that of despair. The details of the play are utterly naturalistic (Ingy Aboelazm, 2011:295-296)

According to T.R. Henn,

“ if we are to understand the inwardness of the play, we must try to reconstruct imaginatively something of the life of the islanders as Synge knew it at the turn of the century” (1963:33)

J.M. Synge visited the Aran Island following the advice of W.B. Yeats and so objectively portrayed the island. Henn describes the island.

The Aran Islands form a small group of three, Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inishee, set far out in the atlantic between the coast of Galway and Clare. The land is poor and stony; small fields intersected by stone walls which retain this shallow soil, itself formed in part from rotted seaweed. There is not timber or turf for fuel, or grass for the horses in the winter months. Prolonged storms meant that the islands were inaccessible for long periods at a time, and for lack of the fishing, might bring families near to starvation ( Henn, 33).

The description of the life of the people living in the island and the picture of the place puts forth the harshness of their realities. The play contains the detail account of the predicament of the islanders against the ravages of nature. The sea is the source of their livelihood. The paradox is that the sea brings disaster for islanders but they cannot live without the sea. The sea is simultaneously life and death for them.

Indeed Maurya wins our praise with her capacity to stand firmly against all her misfortunes, her power of endurance and her dignified behaviour in all the miseries of her life. *Riders to the Sea* has a closely- knit and simple plot. The play portrays the death series of Maurya's family male members. Maurya's strong and sturdy character that fights against the equally strong and sturdy sea and the final helplessness of human beings against Nature is indeed noteworthy throughout the play. Nature in the form of the sea plays a powerful role throughout the play and rules the characters by "shaping their action, moods and fates." (Fermor,169). Maurya seems to be fated to dejection and despair by the force of the sea. However, Maurya accepts the death of her family members due to sea and reconciles to her fate.

MAURYA: (*drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet, and sprinkles the Holy Water over him.*) It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest

I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain.(Synge,18)

J.M. Synge portrays Maurya so sympathetic, worry and keen mother for her sons who declines to break down. Indeed, Maurya is the true emblem of woman's endurance, patience and firmness that even nature is incapable to break that buoyant spirit.

Maurya is the main protagonist in riders to the sea but the play is distinctive in also having a non human antagonist. Ironically maurya and sea are set against each other. Actually, we consider women as emblem of nature and there ample of reasons to justify this correlation. Not only chauvinists but some women also accept that women power lies in her correlation with nature and in her biology. Cultural feminists also accept the peculiarity of nature- Women interrelation and ascribe human behaviour to human biology.

Human nature is grounded in human biology and humans are biologically sexed and socially gendered. (Merchant ,7)

Nature and Women's biology are observed as sources of female power. Collard believes that women's genital capacity creates a powerful link between women and nature.

Nothing links the human animal and nature so profoundly as women's reproductive system which enables her to share the experience of bringing forth and nourishing life with the rest of the living world. Whether or not she personally experiences biological mothering, it is in this that women is most truly a child of nature and this natural integrity lies in the wellspring of her nature. (Biehl, 12)

Oona Frawley called the play a "sublime feminine tragedy". We are more affectionate for Maurya due to her role of a mother who lost all her sons. Maurya's predicament is indeed the portrayal of the predicament of mothers in general who lose their children and are left in destitute. It is said that woman directly shares her personal relationship of motherhood with nature and we find it so conspicuous in Maurya's case since she, with her peasant surroundings, is more connected with nature. Nature in the form of sea plays the role of arch rival for Maurya. Susan C. Harris writes,

Maurya's reward for her labour is the excruciating experience of watching her sons die. Maurya is struck by the cruel futility of motherhood as she has experienced it. (Harris, 110)

J.M. Synge portrays nature in *Riders to the Sea* that monopolize over humans. Nature in the form of sea is so merciless for islanders who live being the puppets in its forceful hands. Since the islanders lost their young and working men due to various forces of nature, women on the island who were traditionally connected with nature became aloof from nature. Nevertheless, women on the island have dexterity of understanding nature. Maurya was grown up on the island and so she could understand the mood of a sea and hopes her only remaining son Bartley to avoid crossing the sea.

J.M. Synge's portrayal of woman in his plays is so praiseworthy in a sense that all his women characters seem to be wiser, flexible, strong and caretaking than men. Maurya could understand the moods and nuances of the sea but the male members of her family failed in. Maurya tries to save her last son Bartley's life by opposing him to undertake the voyage.

MAURYA: Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a  
Word from an old woman, and she holding him from the Sea? (Synge, 10)

J.M. Synge depicts women characters in all his plays as so understanding, reconciling and affectionate whereas male characters are depicted to be intolerable, enraged, restless etc. The researcher strongly feels that Synge has aptly portrayed women characters for they are the true meaning of the world. Women are true emblem of love, affection, resilience, patience, understanding, peace etc. Maurya carries all these features in her character. Maurya finds herself in the tragically ironic situation on her inhospitable island where Maurya says:

MAURYA: (taking a stick Nora gives her) 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. (Synge, 12)

Maurya's struggle is so contrary to the outside world. After any natural calamity men are killed, sometimes the aftermath of calamity brings depression to men but women stays strong and sturdy. They remain aloof from any pessimistic aftermaths like depression, suicide, loneliness. Women only think of overcoming strongly the barriers and uplift the family. Maurya is the fine example of such women whose calmness in the midst of her grief is praiseworthy. It is so sad that Maurya lost her husband, her husband's father and five of her six sons. Sea claimed the deaths of all male members in her family. Her reminiscences of the past deaths in the family are so much sorrow- stricken. Maurya had suffered so much difficult time at each delivery of her sons. But when we think other side of the coin, the researcher feels that death ceased the struggle of all male members but Maurya's predicament reaches to culmination with the deaths of her sons. Maurya foresees endanger for her last remaining son Bartley and strongly opposes his undertaking the trip to the mainland. Maurya's inner mind tells her Bartley's incapability to return alive due to the chances of blowing a storm on the sea.

Maurya: If it isn't found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. If it was a hundred horses or a thousand horses, you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only? (Synge, 10)

Maurya proves to be so careful about her children. She tried every way to dissuade Bartley from undertaking the voyage but Bartley was adamant for his decision. He could not look his mother's priceless affection in front of materialistic gains. Eventually Bartley is also died and there remains Maurya and her two daughters Cathleen and Nora in the family.

### **Conclusion:**

The researcher has presented only cruel side of the woman and nature connection but the researcher doesn't claim only this side of the woman- nature connection. In fact, the researcher accepts the more beautiful, serene and pleasant side of the relation. As Maurya is shown careful for her family, follows her duties to the family, cautious about her son, so Nature is for all human beings on the earth. Now a days there are increasing instances of various natural calamities but it is due to the greed of human being. J.M.Synge has challenged worldly assumptions that nature and women are closer to each other in this play. He has also portrayed women characters as close associates to nature in his other plays like *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, *The Well of the Saints* etc. In fact nature is unpredictable. Nature is

omnipotent and omnipresent. Human beings cannot tie and rule nature. What we have in our hands is to serve and conserve the nature. Maurya teaches us resilience, tolerance and patience against natural fury. Maurya also makes us aware of the strongness of women. There are so many Mauryas widespread in our surrounding society. When there is business loss or agricultural loss due to natural calamity, we see men committing suicide but women of the families stay stronger and bounce back the hurdles with their will power.

## **REFERENCES**

- Aboelazm, I. John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*:-A Caribbean Revision. *International Journey of Social Science and Humanity*, 1.4(2011):294-299.
- Quoted from Andree Collard's *Rape of the Wild* by Janet Biehl Janet's *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) 12.
- Fermor Una Ellis *The Irish Dramatic Movement* ( London: Methuen, 1977) 169
- Henn. T.R. Introduction. *Synge: The Complete plays*. Ed. T. Henn. (London: The Master playwrights, 1963): 1-78.
- Harris Susan Cannon, *Synge and Gender, The Cambridge Companion to J.M. Synge*, ed. P.J. Mathews 110.
- Merchant Carolyn, *Ecofeminism, Terra Femina*, orgs. Rosiska Darcy and Thais Corral (No place: No publisher, 1992) 7.
- Synge J.M., *Two Irish Plays, Riders to the Sea & The Playboy of the Western World* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1986) 11.