

**Grief-Stricken Mother Maurya: Portrayal of Motherhood in J.M.Synge's
play Riders to the sea**

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Abstract:

Riders to the Sea is one of the greatest one-act tragedies in modern literature. The author of the tragedy, John Millington Synge, has beautifully woven it with acute threads of pity and fear. The play revolves around the life of the innocent people of Aran Island. Most of them belong to the fishing community. The life and struggles of the family of Maurya are focused on here. Through her family, we have an intense understanding of the challenging living conditions of the islanders—their repeated combat with life and death. The play also grasps our attention to the rejuvenating spirit of the male and female islanders who are losing their family members prematurely. Even after having this lifelong conflict with the sea, they are passionate about going and earning through the source of the sea. She has lost all the male members from her three generations still she is content to face life with a spirit that the sea cannot harm her further as she doesn't have anything to lose now. The sea, portrayed as an antagonist in the play, is both a preserver and a destroyer to the people of Aran Island.

Keywords: Tragedy, antagonist, rejuvenating.

John Millington Synge (16 April 1871- 24 March 1909), a significant playwright and one of the most prominent figures in the history of the Irish Literary Revival, was born in Dublin. While Yeats was the leader of the Irish Dramatic Movement, Synge was the soul of the same. Yeats advised Synge to devote himself to writing about Irish peasants' lifestyle, culture, and heritage. Following his advice, Synge went to Aran Islands in 1898 and remained there for nearly five years; during this period, his efforts were towards collecting Irish folklore and stories. Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory founded the 'Abbey Theatre' in Dublin in 1904 to promote Irish plays. Synge was the major contributor and survivor of the 'Abbey Theatre'. It can also be said that Synge raised Irish drama to the level of Shakespearean drama. Synge is one with Shakespeare in capturing life's emotional and compassionate aspects. The sympathetic portrayal of the Irish Gaelic-speaking peasants and fishing community. Similar to Hardy's treatment of nature and the life of Wessex folk,

Synge too focused on the customs, superstitions of the Irish people, and scenic beauty of Ireland. In this way, his works are mostly untouched by the modern tinge—all of the above provided raw material for his works.

Yeats wrote in an 1893 issue of *The Bookman*: "These poor peasants lived in a beautiful if the somewhat bleak world, where little has changed since Adam delved and Eve span. Everything was so old that it was steeped in the heart, and every powerful emotion found at once noble types and symbols for its expression."(web source)

Synge wrote several plays- *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *The Well of the Saints*; they all portray the life, struggle, and hardships faced by the people of Aran Island. Synge has closely observed the life of Irish people, skillfully interweaving them in his works. He has walked closely with the soul of the Irish Dramatic Movement while promoting Irish heritage. His accomplished handling of the Irish culture has influenced other writers, too—authors like Brendan Behan, Sean O'Casey, Lennox Robinson, Samuel Beckett, etc.

Synge's one-act play *Riders to the sea* is based on the life of the sea-fearing people of Ireland's Galway Bay. Though the sea is a savior for them as they depend on the sea for their livelihood, it also plays the role of a destructor in their lives by engulfing their favorite ones. They praise, worship as well as condemn the ocean for several reasons. In the initial scene of the play, we find mother Maurya, the main character, worried about her son and constantly murmuring certain things about his being dead or alive. Through her, we learned that she has already lost four sons out of six. She is a mother to eight children. Six sons and two daughters. She keeps lamenting the loss of her father-in-law, husband, and four young sons. All of them were fishermen and humble sea-fearing people. Alike any other family residing on the coast of Ireland, the family of Maurya too is busy interfacing their destiny with that of the sea. Cathleen, the elder daughter of the family, is seen as troubled to get a bundle of clothes brought by a priest. She is gathering the courage to open the pile while the other corner of her mind is busy praying that the clothes shouldn't belong to her brother Michael, who has been lost for one week. The younger daughter of the family, Nora, is worried about the same. Recently they lost their brother, Michael, in the sea. The grief-stricken mother Maurya has been superstitious too before the death of Bartley when he was going on his last voyage. Maurya saw the ghost of Michael behind Bartley in the sea; she narrates the scene: "I looked up then, and I am crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it-with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet." (*Riders to the Sea*. 73) We came across many ill omens that Irish people believed for ages. The direction of the wind blowing, turbulent weather, shrieking owls, and the ghost of the dead chasing the alive ones are some of the superstitions they believe in. Maurya believes in the same, and she keeps worrying about her sons' goodwill. Grieved Maurya cries out, "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."(*Riders to the Sea* 63)

The tone and expression of Maurya reveal the pain and trauma which she undergoes. She doesn't bestow a word of blessing or random words on Michael. She was instead

wailing when he went by. Maurya's agony and suffering seem to be packed to the brim, and she has accepted her tragic life; that is why she has taken that Michael, who has been missing for a week, is no more in this world. She was preparing herself to face a similar situation. She wanted a proper burial for her son Michael. This is why she demotivates Bartley from going to the fair to sell his horses. The sea represents the fate of the people of Aran Island. Moreover, the sea has taught them great lessons about life and death by proving itself a source of energy and, simultaneously, a destructor. The author has skillfully woven the intricate life of the island's people.

“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, Dr. Amal)

The play's plot is based on the conflicts between the fishing community and the sea. The sea determines the destiny of the inhabitants of the island. The family of Maurya depicts the other familiar islanders, their tragic life, and stories of struggle to survive amid their sea-fearing experiences. Maurya, the play's protagonist, is shown the opposite of the sea in the entire space. She has witnessed six deaths in her family, including her close ones. The sea has played havoc in her life. We could notice her battling against the implications of the sea.

Regarding her last son, Bartley Maurya has submitted entirely to the sea. She has decided that Bartley will not return home once he steps out to sell his horses. Maurya tries to stop Bartley from going; she says, "It's hard to set we'll be sure the day you're drowned with the rest." (Riders to the sea. 62)

Bartley turns a deaf ear to all the wailing and lamentations made by the mother to stop him. They are the only earning male family member; he has to face the sea despite the harsh weather. Maurya keeps on murmuring since the day Bartley set out for his sea journey. The daughters of the house, Cathleen and Nora, are brave enough to be on the side of their brothers, and at the same time, they console their mother too. “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.” (Riders to the Sea. 62) The sea has been a constant destructor for the family. However, the family has earned enough survival from the source of the sea. Sea has accompanied the fishing community equally in their good or bad times.

Riders to the Sea can be called a true tragedy that arouses the reader's emotions of pity and fear. It gives us a glimpse of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. The metaphor of Catharsis used by Aristotle in his poetics which talks about the purification of the emotions of pity and fear, are well knitted in the plot. Maurya's family spends their life playing the life and death combat with the antagonist sea. The stormy, vast, stretched Atlantic Sea, which can be witnessed over the Aran Islands, is so predominant that sometimes it is called the protagonist of the play than Maurya. It has made its formidable presence though it remains in the background. The sea is brutal to the characters. The play's plot is interrupted by these up-and-down situations. The sea is both the preserver and destroyer for these

islanders. There has been no possibility of agriculture on the island; hence for livelihood, the inhabitants have to depend on fishing and trade through seaways. This results in the early or premature death of the inhabitants. Most of the surviving population is of females who are homemakers.

The inevitability of death has brought desolation in the life of old and bereaved Maurya. She is grieving as her young sons had left her, leaving things for the old mother after them. This is such a reversal of the situation. When Michael, her fifth son, wasn't found for six days, she was occupied with grief and mental agitation that she lost the resistance of her tongue and kept on repeating certain things about her sons.

Maurya, a tragic character in the play, remembers how the sea gulped the happiness of her life in her frenzy. It was with the death of Michael that she said in a heart-rendering manner, "It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin, and I, after giving a high price for the finest whiteboards you'd find in Connemara." (Riders to the Sea. 60)

Mother Maurya has a profound heart full of compassion after losing all her son, husband, and father-in-law, massive three-generation male members of the family, who were the only breadwinners for them. Maurya wants to spend their entire life with the satisfaction that she needs not fear further because the sea has gulped all her sons, and she has nothing to lose in the future.

The character of Maurya is an embodiment of the acute portrayal of motherhood. We, as readers, are deeply touched by her troubles. Her life is stocked with mercies and struggles. One shall adopt from her life the power of endurance and fortitude. Misfortunes break down on her like a calamity. She loses all the male family members, including her six young and working sons, in the stormy sea; regardless, she kept her determination, courage, and liveliness forever, which is commendable.

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