

The Self and the Sea: A Symbiosis of Literature and Seascape in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

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Abstract:

... But men must work, and women must weep,
Though storms be sudden, and waters deep, ...

Charles Kingsley, *The Three Fishers*

The iconic synthesis of literature and seascape manifests well in J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. The playwright brilliantly depicts the sea as the retainer of the Aran Islanders and simultaneously the devastator within the scope of a single act. The poetic fervour of the play infuses a deep sense of urgency in the inhabitants of Aran, who strive to survive within the destructive folds of the Atlantic. The synthesis of time and space and crisis of the content adds beauty and a rare element of drama to this poetic composition of the Irish playwright. The rhythm of the sea that conditions the lifestyle of the inhabitants and the endless efforts of these inhabitants to survive against all odds, create an amalgam of human life and natural environment.

This paper proposes to explore the need to harmonise human and environmental impulses to achieve a perfect balance in the symbiotic relationship between the two. The surge of the sea contrasts with the calm fortitude of the matriarch figure, Maurya, in the play. Again, the vast, malevolent stretch of the sea contrasts the restless energy of Bartley. Therefore, it seems that Synge has compared and contrasted his characters to the changing shades of the sea. Hence, in *Rider to the Sea*, the Riders and the Sea co-exist, contrast, and complement one another as two equal but alternative principles in the dramatic spectrum created by Synge.

Keywords: Riders, Sea, Devastator, Synthesis, Symbiotic, Fortitude, Matriarch, Malevolent, Spectrum

It is opined that the Sea and not the Gods are the source of the law in this play. To go by this belief, one can confirm that the Sea in *Riders to the Sea* is the all-pervasive presence that conditions and influences every movement of this dramatic tragedy. So, the topography of the land on Aran Islands, and the human lives who inhabit it and the daily circumstances of their lives are all made subordinate to the vast and swarthy expanse of the Sea. The Sea controls not just the physical dynamics but also the psychological and emotional contours of the people who struggle for survival against the elaborate panorama of Aran Islands. In his essay titled, “The Balance or Reconciliation of Opposite and Discordant Qualities”, I. A. Richards expresses, “It is essential to recognize that in a full tragic experience there is no suppression. The mind does not shy away from anything, it does not protect itself with any illusion, it stands uncomforted, unintimidated, alone and self-reliant”. (Draper 145) In *Riders to the Sea* the connect between Maurya and the Sea reflects this notion as they both stand ‘unintimidated’, ‘alone’ and ‘self-reliant’. The Sea commands both time and space in Synge’s play. While on the one hand life on Aran Islands is dominated by the movement of the ‘Riders’ to the Sea in search of sustenance, on the other, the concept of space is dominated by the surging Sea which beckons the ‘Riders’ to its depths. The Sea is the dominant presence which embraces and forsakes human lives at Will. In this context, therefore, the Sea can be analysed as the Immanent Will, which nurtures and destroys and is the sole entity in the play which creates that connect between the various other entities of the play and help them proceed towards their respective ends. So, this absolute control of Time and Space is this gyre which the Sea dominates creates a gap within which the human characters vent their emotions and continue with their frugal living despite their persistent resistance against all odds. The odds appear in their daily struggle for survival. They create an abyss in the lives which connects them to the Sea as the Sea appears to open that abyss even wider to consume all that is within and without its periphery on Aran islands.

To quote Raymond Williams from his essay, “Tragedy and Contemporary Ideas”, “Human death is often the form of the deepest meanings of a culture. When we see death, it is natural that we should draw together—in grief, in memory, in the social duties of burial – our sense of the values of

living, as individuals and as a society. But then, in some cultures or in their breakdown, life is regularly read back from the fact of death, which can seem not only the focus but also the source of our values. Death, then, is absolute, and all our living simply relative. Death is necessary, and all other human ends are contingent”. (Draper 187) To go by this reading and analysis, the Sea appears as the omnipotent and omnipresent, encompassing the topography of the islands and its hapless inhabitants. However, the research question continues to arise—are these humans actually helpless? Do they surrender to the call of the Sea, or do they override its diktat? Among all the characters who respond to the challenges of the Sea in the past and present, the character of the quintessential matriarch, Maurya, stands out. Maurya, the dowager, the mother who has lost all to the Sea, claims: “...There’s nothing more the Sea can do to me now” (Synge 13). There is a quiet strength latent in this statement. A statement which defies all possible means of negotiations with the Sea. Instead, she stands as a counter-principle to the swarthy monotony of the Sea. Maurya’s restless unease counters the surges of the Sea. The power that entails within her and the strength that she embodies are incomparable to ordinary human capacities and can solely be paralleled to the inordinate strength of the Sea. Hence, we can surmise that the Sea has met its match in Maurya. The more it inflicts pain on this mother the more she reverts with resistance and an unmatched fortitude that refuses to be overpowered by the Sea.

This challenge that Maurya deals with in the play works itself out within the subtext of the dramatic action of the play. It really is a matter of great conjecture that the Sea gains preponderance over the human characters in the play. Indeed, Maurya’s sons are lost to the Sea and Bartley, her youngest and last surviving son is on his way towards abject surrender. Despite this, Maurya resists, survives and sublimates. About this phenomenon, I. A. Richards comments, “Suppressions and sublimations alike are devices by which we endeavour to avoid issues which might bewilder us. The essence of tragedy is that it forces us to live for a moment without them”. (Draper 145) In this moment of extreme suspension, Maurya escalates above the Sea. Of all the major icons of the play, the most poignant is perhaps that of the Pieta, the image of the sorrowing Mary mourning her dead son, an

icon so insistent and iterative as almost to create something of a subgenre in Modern Tragedy. Critic Raymond Williams asserts, “In *Riders to the Sea*, the people are simply victims; the acceptance is not whole, but rather a weary resignation” (Ayling 82). It is indeed easy to see Maurya’s suffering as a form of passive acceptance. Still, when one probes the trajectory of her loss, it can be studied as a mother’s relentless fight to keep alive her identity as a mother to her sons. Hence, this is a form of self-preservation which Maurya attempts and succeeds in maintaining in her saga of struggle with the Sea. This concept, that Maurya evolves as a more powerful entity than the malevolent Sea is an attempt to help the readers comprehend the counterforce that Maurya exerts on the Sea.

In this connection, we can explore the ‘Resilience Theory’ as propounded by Norman Garnezy, who defines resilience as, “Not necessarily impervious to stress. Rather, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery...” (Shean 8) Therefore, this theory claims that it is not the nature of adversity that is most important; it is how we deal with it. This concept can be directly related to the dramatic situation of *Riders to the Sea*. In a desperate attempt to override the suprahuman powers of the Sea, Maurya uses Resilience as a tool to channel her stoic acceptance of Fate. Maurya defines the theory of Resilience in the fortitude she displays from the start till the close of this tragedy.

In this play, water is identified with death, not with life or regeneration. Conversely, Maurya’s very presence as a mother figure in the play symbolises alternate symbols of life and regeneration. We witness a catastrophic collision between maternity and infertility. The Sea represents a barrenness through which it stifles life out of humanity on Aran. On the contrary, Maurya is the representation of fecundity which confers upon her the meaningful identity of her ‘self’ as a mother. Her motherhood is infused with strength, creating a condition in which she embodies the power of quintessential motherhood. Critic Errol Durbach comments, “What we find in Maurya, it seems to me, is the catastrophic collision between Maternity and Necessity; and, ultimately, a quiet recognition that these two opposing elements are in fact identical.” (Ayling 83) Out of this collision, what emanates is also

an intrinsic connection between the two. Synge transforms the play into an image of Necessity from the opening stage direction. Quite effortlessly he converts the local and the realistic images into visual metaphors of the universal and the metaphysical. Apart from the domestic symbols of nets, oilskins, and whiteboards, the spinning wheel throws up the shadows of Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, as critic Donna Gerstenberger suggests, “quietly rise behind the figures of Synge’s fate-ridden women” (Ayling 78). To quote Errol Durbach, “As women, they embody, like the sea, the principle of fate, the rhythm of destiny, the cycle of birth and inevitable death, and although one of the women is rendered effete by the destruction of all her menfolk, two daughters remain to endure the eternal perpetuation of this cycle. Nets and wheels and boards are essential parts of the infernal machinery of the play; and it is in this sense, it seems to me, exist as ‘a natural link between the people and the world that is about them’” (Ayling 85).

Maurya’s stoicism lies in the querulous resistance she shows when she appears in the play. Her resistance to the Sea from the start confers meaning to her selfhood. The matriarch, the moirai, is the Madonna who remains unfazed in the face of inevitable catastrophes. The fact that Bartley rides despite every cautionary warning breathes life into the lines:

“But men must work, and women must weep,
Though storms be sudden, and waters deep.”

(*The Three Fishers* by Charles Kingsley)

The entire play moves towards a ‘synthetic vision’ of existence in which images of life and death intermingle. The dead for instance, are clothed in new garments while the living wear the clothes of the dead. The pain of a mother’s loss of her sons quite naturally evokes the pain of bearing them, which Maurya refers to as ‘hard birth’. As Durbach comments, “As she speaks, the cynical pattern of faith begins to establish itself again, that sense of inexorable repetition in which the central ritual of the play is uttered and enacted simultaneously” (Ayling 88). For instance, the baby on her knee becomes the corpse on her table. And yet, the rituals of birth and death seem superimposed. When

Bartley's corpse is brought in, some primitive sacrificial ritual is evoked by 'the iconographical Pieta'. With the entry of Bartley's corpse with water dripping from a piece of red sail, Maurya experiences a sense of triumphant freedom. It is a process of acceptance arrived at, after nine days of keening. When Maurya says: "They are all together this time, and the end is come" (Synge 15), she is finally able to vent the words that had choked in her throat at the spring well. She is now able to confer the blessing of the 'Universal Mother' upon all her sons. All men are riders to the unappeasable sea; and to accept Maurya's blessing is to share in the tragic experience of the play that, "No man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied" (Synge 15). Therefore, Durbach concludes, "Necessity make *Riders to the Sea* a perfectly conceived and exquisitely wrought tragedy of the sorrowing Mother and her fated sons." (Ayling 89)

The iconic synthesis of literature and seascape manifests well in J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. The portrayal of the sea as the retainer of the Aran Islanders and simultaneously the devastator, is brilliantly depicted by the playwright within the scope of a single act. The poetic fervour of the play infuses a deep sense of urgency in the inhabitants of Aran who strive to survive within the destructive folds of the Atlantic. The synthesis of time and space and crisis of the content adds beauty and a rare element of drama to this poetic composition of the Irish playwright. The rhythm of the sea that conditions the lifestyle of the inhabitants and the endless efforts of these inhabitants to survive against all odds create an amalgam of human life and the natural environment.

In this play, Synge explores the need to harmonise human and environmental impulses to achieve a perfect balance between the two. The surge of the Sea contrasts the calm fortitude of the matriarch figure, Maurya in the play. Again, the vast, malevolent stretch of the Sea contrasts the restless energy of Bartley. Therefore, it seems, that Synge has compared his characters to the changing shades of the sea. Hence, in *Rider to the Sea*, the Riders and the Sea co-exist, contrast, and complement one another as two equal but alternative principles in the dramatic spectrum created by Synge.

The power of an external force impinging on the internal circuit is a motif that has been explored by Brecht in his play *Senora Carrar's Rifles*. The central figure of the play is that of a mother with a son whom she wishes to protect. The outside, impersonal force in this play is the War. In both the plays the sons die in action and the mothers are left behind surrounded by characters of a lesser level. This course of dramatic action indicates an indebtedness although Brecht did not follow Synge's spirit, he was influenced in many ways by *Riders to the Sea*. The departures in Synge's play are there in the characters of Cathleen and Nora who cannot accept as easily as Maurya as their husbands and sons in time will also ride down to the Sea. Hence, they have a lot left to lose unlike Maurya who experiences the saturation of loss and converts it into a stoic triumph. Critic Sydney Poger, analyses that "Synge's play is powerful tragedy because it comes out of the lives of the people whom it describes. It comes out of a long religious, cultural and linguistic tradition. While the presence of death is overpowering the beauty of ceremony and acceptance blend with it to create the play's texture. Its strength is also in its Aristotelian Cathartic sense. We suffer with Maurya, about whom the play revolves, and we sympathize with her relief as well as acknowledge the truth of her final declaration" (Ayling 96) about death as a universal reality. Critic Denis Johnston observes, "*Riders to the Sea* has a classical unity and a completeness that makes one aware of the fact that in a sense it has ended before it begins." (Ayling 74) The brevity of the dramatic action is indeed intriguing. It enables the dramatic critic to remain focussed upon the entire play length as the crisis contains the exposition, rising action, denouement and resolution within its dominant presence. The tragedy is Orestean in nature. No moral choice is offered to the characters. The Sea is the source of the law and there is no escape from it. The play is about the effects of this inevitable force upon the human lives on Aran, especially upon the central, rather pivotal figure of Maurya. Bartley's Irish preparation for his journey conceals this dilemma that is Orestean in nature. Orestes by the law of life is bound to avenge his father. But, by the law of life, he must not kill his mother. Likewise, Bartley must ride down to the Sea; if he meets his end, he and his mother will have to accept it as the inevitable. The play is read as an elegy. Had it been concerned as a tragedy, then the notion of death

would not seem expectable but a violation of the expected norm. as critic Robert Bechtold Heilman opines, “in the elegiac there is a sense of the hero as victim: hence its proper relation is to disaster rather than tragedy. One of Maurya’s lines is a key to all literature of disaster: “they’ve all gone now, and there isn’t anything else the sea can do to me”.” (Ayling 72) These words help Maurya consummate in strength. She evolves as a ‘whole’ person, without the inner divisions or clashing loyalties that mark meaningful human conflicts. The dominant effect is one of pathos, and its import is limited. This pathos must not be mistaken for tragic effect. That would belittle the understanding of the whole human role and the modes of human failure. It is not the story of the failure of human efforts against the seething wrath of the Sea. It is indeed a saga of human strength that clashes against the surges of the Sea despite certain disasters and the wrath of the seething ocean. The human lives which are lost to the Sea are not to be analysed as lives which fail to make a mark in the circle of life and death. Instead, they conquer the fear of death in their grit and determination to take life in its stride and plunge headlong into the depths of the Sea. *Riders to the Sea* expresses an integrated view of peasant life which Synge gained from his residence on the Aran Islands. As critic Sidney Poger points out, “This is a play, not of a single event, but of a continuous struggle” (Ayling 93). As a mother, Maurya tries her best to stop Bartley. She tries to take recourse in the words of the young priest, but he says that he would not take responsibility. So perhaps as a mother, Maurya draws every bit of resilience she could command to prevent Bartley’s departure. However, when she is faced with the certainty of his loss, she escalates from the level of the personal to the universal. This helps to transform her grief into pathos and her role as a mother into that of quintessential motherhood. Maurya’s strength of acceptance is contained within her persona as a mother to whom the Sea can do no more harm. The fact that she repeatedly asserts this idea, converts her pathos into her triumph. The void she is left with after Bartley’s departure and death is not an empty nothingness. Instead, it is filled with a need to rise to the challenge of the Sea at every step. It is argued that Synge is content to show us the pathos of his theme. Unlike as in Heijermans’ play, *The Good Hope*, Synge does not try to rouse any indignation. Instead, the fortitude lies in “So it is, and so it must be”. Critic Max

Beerbohm observes, “It is the tone of the mother herself, whose acquiescence is deeper than the acquiescence of the mother in *The Good Hope*. She submits not merely because it was vain to rebel. To rebel is not in her nature. She has the deep fatalism of her race; and for her the things that actually happen, for evil as for good, are blurred through the dreams that are within her...” (Ayling 60).

While in conversation with Synge, James Joyce had once commented about the play that, “it was too brief to sustain the tragic mood. You cannot have a tragedy in a play that lasts for twenty minutes” (Ayling 61). However, despite the brevity of its dramatic action, there is an in-depth sense of temporality to the play which prolongs the tragic experience of *Riders to the Sea*. The audience is drawn inexorably towards the climax when the curtain is lifted. W. B. Yeats himself had commented, “...I remember saying once to Synge that though it seemed to me that a conventional descriptive passage encumbered the action at the moment of crisis, I liked the *Shadow of the Glen* better than *Riders to the Sea*, that seemed for all the nobility of its end, its mood of Greek tragedy, too passive in suffering...” (Ayling 59). The argument of the modernist mind is that this passivity is a consummation of strength. In this context we note that in Yeats’ play, composed in collaboration with Lady Gregory, *Cathleen in Houlihan*, the nationalistic idea of sacrificing young lives for the sake of their motherland, Ireland, is pronouncedly expressed. Therefore, it is argued that the play denies the finality of death. This is perfectly in keeping with Maurya’s claims in *Riders to the Sea* that death triumphs over the Sea in a universal context. The ritualistic practise of keening performed by the Irish women is yet again a ritual of acceptance. Maurya keens and thereby plunges into the process of first acceptance and then defiance of death. Critic T. R Henn has cited Dunbar’s ‘Lament for the Makaris’:

“Since for the Death remeid is none,

Best is that we for Death dispone

After our death that live may we:

Timor Mortis conturbat me.” (Ayling 67)

Likewise, Maurya triumphs through her acceptance, T. R. Henn observes, “For death and the Sea take all; but the Sea takes the young before their time, so that it acquires a new and hostile dimension, an auxiliary of Death. In it there are constant ironic reversals. Maurya takes Michael’s stick, lest she should ‘slip on the big stones’” (Ayling 67). This is a process of Inversion that Synge uses in his play. The young die and in their death, the old feel empowered. After Bartley’s death, Maurya and her daughters are not rendered helpless. Instead, they brace themselves to continue. The end is a benediction; thankfulness for the ‘white boards’ that will make Bartley’s coffin.

In the amalgam of the living and the dead, Maurya attains the stature of a priestess, blessing “...the soul of everyone is left living in the world” (Synge 15). Maurya’s cottage transforms into the microcosm of the world and by escalation the microcosm. ‘All men’ who are living is blessed by this mother who had had a ‘hard birth’ and who is the root and source of all life on this earth. The note of resignation with which the play ends does not benumb all with pain but ignite the valour to continue despite the primordial presence of the Sea.

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