

# The portrayal of the tragic atmosphere in *Riders to the sea*

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**Abstract-** *The Aran Islands*, this is a prose work of synge and describes his impressions of the life of the people of these islands. On the advice of Yeats Synge went to these islands and stayed there from 10th May to 25th June, 1898. He spent two weeks on Inishmere and four on Inishman. He returned to Aran in the summers of 1899, 1900, 1901 and 1902. He spends in all four and a half months in the Aran Islands. He observed the life, language and the beliefs and superstitions of the people and he noted down these impressions in his note books. At Yeats's suggestion he offered the manuscript for publication. It was published by Elkin Mathews in association with Maunsel and company in 1907.

*The Aran Islands* is described in the first person and is in the form of a journal. Synge noticed that the islanders were very simple and poor people and they lived lonely lives in constant fear of death. At the same time people have good humor and Vitality. They have strong faith in supernatural.

Synge describes various stories that he heard there. Several of his plays are based on these stories. Synge noted down the words and phrases that he had heard there and he used these in his plays. *The Aran Islands* should, therefore, be carefully studied by one who get an insight into his plays.

**Index Terms-** *The Aran Islands*, Supernatural, Superstitions, Manuscript.

## INTRODUCTION

John Millington Synge was born on the 16th of April, 1871, at Newton little, near Rathfarnham, a village in the suburbs of Dublin, of an old Anglo-Irish family of landowners. His father, John Hatch Synge, was a barrister who specialised in land conveyance. His mother was the daughter of Rev. Robert Trail, Rector of Schull, in Cork. Synge was thus descended from protestant families on both sides. Synge's eldest brother Robert, became a land agent. Samuel, the brother, became a missionary in China. Synge was the youngest son of the family.

Because of ill-health synge could not attend any school for long. At ten he was sent to Mr.Herrick's Classical and English School in Dublin. But his attendance was irregular. Three years later he was sent to a school in Bray but due to illness he was withdrawn after one day. After that he was taught by a private tutor at his house. He entered Trinity College, Dublin in June 1888. There he distinguished himself in Irish and Hebrew. He obtained the B.A. Pass degree in 1891 without any distinction.

One reason why he did not do very well at Trinity College was that a lot of his time was taken up by music. In 1887 he had begun studying the volin under Patrick Griffith in Dublin. In November 1889 Synge began to attend lectures in musical theory at the Royal Academy of music. In January 1891 he joined the orchestra of the Academy and played in a concert in March. He also took part in a concert at the Molesworth hall in January 1892. On 16th March he was awarded the scholarship in counter- point.

Synge settled down in Hotel Corneille in Paris and started writing poems. In December 1896 Synge met W.B.Yeats. Yeats and Maud Gonne were at that time busy founding the Irish League whose object was to fight for Irish independence. Yeats said to him, "Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racing, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression." Yeast felt that Synge could make an original contribution to Anglo-Irish literature if he studied the life and the speech of the people living in the lonely Aran Islands and described these in his writings.

Synge left for Ireland but he did not immediately go to Aran Islands. In the autumn of 1897 a large lump was formed on the side of his neck. He was operated upon in the mount street Nursing Home. The

operation was successful and by the middle of January 1898 he had recovered completely. He left for Paris on the 19th of January 1898.

1902 was a very creative period for Synge. He wrote *Rider to the sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen* and began *The Tinker's Wedding*. In July 1904 he completed the well of the Saints and *The Tinker's Wiedding*. On the 26th of January 1907, *The Playboy of the Western world* was performed and cause riots in Dublins but it was performed with great success in Oxford and London.

Synge was a very careful producer of his plays. He used to see to it that every word of the dialogue was pronounced in the correct way. He used to remember the plays by heart and he was used to repeat the sentences several times before the actors so that they got the intonation and the word music right.

On 28th April, 1908, the doctors found a lump in Synge's side. He entered the Elpis Nursing Home on 30th April. Exploratory surgery was done on 4th May. The doctors found that cancer had taken deep roots and so an operation could not be performed. He was becoming weaker and weaker. In spite of his illness he had come up to the Third Act of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. But he was fast sinking. But he was gentle and was liked by all at the hospital. He died at 5a.m. on the 24th of March, 1909 at the age of thirty and was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Harold's Cross, Dublin.

#### HABITS AND BELIEFS OF THE PEOPLE IN ARAN ISLAND

W.B. Yeats went to Paris after his visit of Aran Island – a group of island off the west coast of Ireland. He met J.M. Synge there and told him that he was wasting his time in Paris. He advised Synge to go to Aran Island, live with the people there and write plays depicting the manners, habits and beliefs of the natives of these islands

Synge went to Aran Island in May, 1898 and he returned to this island in four succeeding summers. He lived with the people and made a close study of their habit and beliefs. He based his play on these observations.

*Rider to the sea* is based on his third and fourth visits. In this play we see the habits and beliefs, the manner and misfortunes of the Maurya family. This family represents the people of Aran Islands.

These people had to struggle all the time against the stony soil and the cruel sea. The sea around these islands was very rough and every storm meant mourning in some houses. Synge felt that these people were under a judgement of death. They struggled against heavy odds and were crushed down by cruel Fate. The depiction of their ways and beliefs in *Rider to the sea* creates the proper tragic atmosphere in this play.

#### STONY SOIL AND CRUEL SEA

The people of Aran Islands were half-peasants and half-fishermen. They worked very hard and yet were very poor. The soil was stony and only crops like rye grew there.

The young men had to go to the sea constantly for fishing and for going to the mainland. The sea was the giver and taker of their lives. It was their arch-enemy and yet they were wholly dependent on it. From the sea they collected sea – weeds for fuel and kelp to be used as a manure for their fields.

In *Rider to the sea* the sea is the agent of Destiny. It does not appear on the stage but outside it roars hungrily for its annual toll of human lives. Maurya has lost her husband, her husband's father and four study sons during a span of about twenty years. Nine day before the play opens Michael was drowned and the drowning of Bartley is the main tragedy in the play.

#### SENSE OF ISOLATION

The people of Aran Islands are all the time conscious of their isolation. They seem to be cut off from the rest of the world. As Maurya takes the sick that belonged to her dead son Michael, she says, "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."

These words help to build up the tragic atmosphere in this play.

#### FAMILY TIES

As usually happens in isolation communities, family ties are very strong among these people. Maurya loved her husband and her sons very dearly and so the drowning of all these men has been the greatest calamity of her life. Cathleen and Nora are very

affectionate to each other and they very great love for their mother and brothers. That is why the deaths cause deep wounds in their heart.

#### NEARNESS TO DEATH BUT SENSE OF DUTY

The seas around these islands are usually very rough and so the young 'rider to the sea' face the risk of dying any moment. But the young men have a sense of duty and they go to the sea at all times in spite of the risks involved. Maurya tries her best to persuade Bartley not to go to the sea that day but he is determined to do his duty. Cathleen says, "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea."

Every storm at sea brings mourning to some families. They have a system of ritual mourning known as "keening". It is a lamentation for the dead in which the women wail and moan and sway their bodies rhythmically. We see the women "keening" when Bartly dies.

Women keep praying for the safety of their menfolk but prayers are usually of no avail. Maurya has been praying for Bartly through half the nights but in spite of that he dies. At the end Maurya finds no hope or comfort in prayer and so she seeks relief in bowing before mortality. Everyone has to die. There is no way of avoiding it. So we should be satisfied if our dead get proper burial.

#### MAKING OF A COFFIN

There were no tree on these islands and so the boards for making coffins had to be purchased and brought from the mainland. The custom was that the male members made the coffin for the dead members of the family. That is why Maurya wants Bartly not to go because Michael's body might be washed ashore any day and he would needed to make the coffin. When Bartley dies there is no male member left in the house and so Cathleen asks some other persons to come and make the coffin. She tells them that they can eat the cake, which had been baked for Bartley, while they are making coffin.

As the play opens we see the white boards kept in the kitchen against the wall. That creates the tragic atmosphere at the very beginning of the play. When Bartly dies Maurya's consolation is that he will have a fine boards and a deep grave.

#### PORTENTS AND OMENS

The islanders judge the state of the weather from the position of the stars and the direction of the winds. Maurya thinks that the sea will be rough because the previous night she was a star near the moon and the wind was rising from the south and the west. She tries her best to stop Bartley from going but when he does not listen to her and leaves, she has a strong premonition that he will not come back alive. 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." Maurya's forebodings make us certain that Bartley is doomed and would not come back to his mother alive.

#### THEIR BELIEFD AND SUPERSTITIONS

The islanders are Roman Catholic Christians but Christianity does not play an important part in their lives. The poor peasants feel the menace of Death all around them and so they forget he teachings of Christianity and seize upon any belief of superstition that offers hope of safety and comfort. The consolations of Christianity do not console them. They have pagan beliefs which are older than Christianity. The priest is referred to in the play but he is absent physically as well as spiritually from the lives of the natives. His words of comforts do not comfort them. Maurya says, "It's little the like of him known of the sea."

Maurya believes in the efficacy of the 'holy water' which is collected from some holy well on the dark nights after Samhain. It has magical properties. Maurya sprinkles this holy water on the clothes of Michael and on the dead body of Bartley.

The islanders believe in spirits and spectres. There was a legend of a certain Bride Dara who had seen a dead man with a child in his arms. When Maurya come back from the spring well she says, "I've seen the fear fullest thing any person has seen since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms." She saw Bartley riding on the red mare and the ghost of Michael "with fine clothes on him and new shoes on his feet "riding on the grey pony. She was frightened because it was a sure indication that Bartley would die very soon. The girls are also superstitious and hearing this they start "keening"

and Cathleen says, “it’s destroyed we are from this day.”

The appearance of a ghost following a man is a very bad omen. It creates the dark atmosphere of terror in the play.

In her last speech also Maurya is a typical old woman of the island who is prepared to accept whatever Destiny has in store for her. She says that no one can live for ever and so we must be satisfied. This is the feeling of stoic resignation and not one of the Christian faiths in the immortality of the soul and the mercy of Christ.

Pagan beliefs are stronger than Christian faith among these people. This strengthens the tragic atmosphere in the play.

#### CONCLUSION

The young men of Aran Island wage a constant war against the elements. It is an unequal fight in which man is always the loser. The sea feeds them and also devours them. The sea is the agent of Destiny. The men cannot help going to sea and so they are all the time under the danger of sudden death. Their families have, therefore, become superstitious. They believe in magic, spectres and spirits. The depiction of these habits and beliefs in Rider to the sea creates the atmosphere of tragic doom in the play.

#### REFERENCE

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