

Significance of Aran Islands in the works of J.M.Synge

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Abstract

J.M.Synge did not "find himself" until he was discovered by another young enthusiast from Ireland, W.B. Yeats, who, in 1898, induced him to leave Paris and return to Ireland and devote himself to a study of the people, and write real Irish plays for the recently-founded Irish Theater. In the Aran Islands, in Wicklow and Kerry and Connemara, Synge found the necessary material and inspiration for his plays. Synge's interest in old Irish myths and folklore to rekindle the glory of Celtic Ireland can be seen in his plays. By making ample use of the Irish mythology and folklore, Synge tried to revive the diminishing Celtic literature in his own unique way in his plays. Synge's characters are common peasants, fishermen, tramps, travellers and rogues. Synge was quiet, introspective, reticent, yet he allowed his true temperament -- with all its wild vagarious longings, its furious exultations -- to find expression in his plays.

Key Words: Mythology, Nationalism, Revival, Nature, Folklore, Culture

J. M. Synge is regarded as one of the distinguished dramatists of the Irish Literary Renaissance. It was W.B. Yeats who advised Synge when he was in a Paris to go to the Ireland and to work on the region ignored i.e. penetrate to the beliefs and half hidden secrets and the customs and superstitions of the folk. Synge got inspiration from Yeats to describe the life of the people, who are the beautiful amalgamation of ideal and actual; love and hatred; sorrows and ecstasies. Synge visited the Aran Islands to know about the habits, customs, traits and tradition of the islanders. Infact, these islands are a group of three islands—Aranmor, Inishmaan, and Inisheer. Many customs and old-traditions have disappeared from the Island except Aran. Synge's sensitive mind and receptive heart instinctively responded to the nature, he observes in the Aran Islands, in Wicklow and West Kerry, where the inhabitants make no distinction between the natural and supernatural and who constantly struggle for existence against the sea and the vagaries of the weather.

Illusion versus reality and the relationship between human beings and the natural world are the major themes central to Synge's works and he had tried to demonstrate his complex personality in his plays. It was his play, *Riders to the Sea* which was the first to be published in October, 1903, but *In the Shadow of the Glen* was the first to be produced on the stage—by the Irish National Theatre Society.

Riders to the Sea is considered as one of the finest plays by Synge which demonstrates heavily and directly on his experience of life on the Aran Islands. Synge's book length journal *The Aran Islands* reveals many of the details along with the main incident on which the play is based .Synge found something unique on the island that became the characterizing feature of his plays i.e., language to express his attitude and the attitudes of the Irish people. He

discovered English language spoken by native Irish speakers, which resembled Irish intonation, syntax, and in parts also vocabulary. The Aran Islands was lucky for Synge as it provided him with a setting, an idiom, and a language to express his attitudes towards life in general and Irish life in particular.

Ann Saddlemyer opines that Synge's "simplicity of design, developed for the most part in Synge's two shorter plays, combined to create the style of acting and production which became known as 'the Abbey method'" (xv). Saddlemyer through this quick and clever remark makes a connection between Synge's dramatic texts and the early Abbey style. Many scholars believed that William G. Fay was the creator of the Abbey style. It was not William but his brother Frank who was the theorist behind the style. Synge has created a non-English atmosphere in his plays with the help of 'chanting' style of the actors while delivering dialogue.

It would therefore be not quite right to agree who accused the dramatist to be completely aloof from the problems of the country. Indeed, along with Lady Gregory, Yeats and George Moore Synge was at the center of the revival movement of Irish literature and theatre. He was chosen as a co-director of the Abbey established by Lady Gregory and Yeats and later joined in by Miss Horniman. He was passionately a patriotic person, in his own quite way celebrated the language the people and the culture of his country as no other poet or author did, although he took his cue from one of the great poets of twentieth century, W.B. Yeats. He travelled up and down the whole country and went to the extreme west to the off shore Aran Islands to study and collect facts of the customs, the ways of life and their dialects, the influence of the elemental nature on their way of life, their problems and more significant individual occurrences; the little episodes and anecdotes, which he has recorded in his book on Aran Islands and also some of them in his books and in his plays especially. A reader therefore finds the language of his plays to have a peculiar quality mixed with the local Irish or Gaelic words and expressions. This also lends to it a dimension of mystic intensity like that of poetry.

The plays are written in prose form and yet have the focus and intensity of poetic drama. Synge's meeting with Yeats happened in France while Yeats was attending meetings of Irish League of the nationalist movement for freedom and Synge was travelling Germany and France still in search for his true vocation. He had thought that he should travel to Germany for the Germans naturally excelled in music and had produced great musicians and he had won a scholarship from Royal Academy of Music, Dublin. After having realized that, he could not attain the kind of excellence in music to make a mark or even earn a living by it, he came to Paris. Here he wrote some criticism of drama and poetry; he also did some translating work and taught English at the University. It was here that he met Yeats and he said to him to give up Paris and go to Aran Islands. So he made several visits to Aran Islands besides travelling the length and breadth of the country doing exactly what Yeats had suggested to him.

Since Synge not only made extensive notes on the life and manners of the people he met and knew during his visit to Aran Islands and other travels, which he later published in a book form, but also used parts of the material for his plays. The group of islands known as the Aran

Islands lies off the Western coast of southern Ireland. There are chiefly three islands. The North island is called Aranmor, about three miles in length and about half a mile in width; the middle one to its south is roundish in shape. It is called Innishmaan. It is smaller than Aranmor. The Southernmost is the smallest one and is called Innisheer. The chain of these islands is about thirty miles from main land County of Galway. It is not far away from County Clare and Connemara. Kilronan is the largest village on the island Aranmor and hub of activity. Modern fishing industry seems to have invaded and the old raw life and culture has undergone a sea change. Yet this is where Synge went and stayed like one of the native villagers and gathered his anecdotes from the people and made friends with the men and women of his island. His first impressions:

I am in Aranmor, sitting over a turf fire, listening to a murmur of Gaelic that is rising over little house under my room. I met few people; but here and there a band of tall girls passed me on their way to Kilronan, and called out to me with humorous wonder, speaking English with a slight foreign intonation. The rain and cold seemed to have no influence on their vitality, and as they hurried passed me with eager laughter and great talking in Gaelic, they left masses of rock more desolate than before.(144)

During his stay there he encountered several people and witnessed other social occasions or ceremonies like the burial of the dead typical of people there. An old and half blind man in his conversations with him revealed the people's very primitive superstitions and belief in supernatural phenomena. He spoke the language so well and Synge was so impressed that he employed him to learn the local dialect. This old man once told him how the fairies had carried away his child. Yet in spite of the charm of the old man's companionship he moved on to the next southern island Innishmaan, where Gaelic more commonly used, would be easy for him to pick up. Besides, life there was almost untouched by the corruption of the modern civilization.

I have decided to move on to Innishmaan, where Gaelic is more generally used, and the life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe. I spent all this last day with my blind guide, looking at the antiquities that abound on the island. Later in the day as the old man talked continually of the fairies and women they have taken, it seemed that there was a possible like between the wild mythology that is accepted on the island and the strange beauty of the women. I am settled at last on Innishmaan in small cottage. Early this morning the man of the house came over for me with four oared curagh (a special quality of boat) with four rowers...and we set off a little before noon. It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canoe of a model that has served primitive races since man first went on the sea. We landed at small pier, from which a rude truck leads up to the village between small fields and bare sheets of rock like those in Aranmor. The youngest son of my boatman, a boy of about seventeen, who is to be my teacher and guide was waiting for me at the pier and guided me to his house, while the men settled the curagh and followed slowly with my baggage.(168)

Besides the beautiful sights of seascapes and forested mountain-sides and spreading valleys that captivated him he discovered several other material objects and things pertaining to the daily life of the people of the island. He describes these objects in the following words:

Every article on these islands has an almost personal character. Which give this simple life something of the artistic beauty of medieval life. The curaghs and spinning-wheels. The tiny wooden barrels that are still much used in the place of earthenware, the home made cradles, churns, and baskets, are all full of individuality. Many sorts of fishing tackle, and oilskins of the men are upon the walls of the kitchen; and right overhead, under the thatch, there is a whole cow-skin from which they make pampooties (Long boots like the galoshes that are great help when one is to walk among the rocks or when one has to step into the surf).(178)

He goes on to describe in his diaries the very singular process of making kelp from broad fronted seaweeds and then trade it in villages or towns for their high content of sodium, and magnesium and their use in the manufacture of glass. Synge then goes on to describe the rearing of horses, which too are then traded across on the mainland. Due to shortage of fodder and grazing land the horses were let loose on the grasslands on Connemara from June to September each year and then roped in and are brought back to Innishmaan. He has graphically described the process of loading the horses on to the boats to send them once again to the markets on the mainland for trading. Handling them is difficult because he says that in the whole place there is but one saddle and reins and a bit. So, they have to make do with halters prepared rope or heavy cord.

Further on he recorded his meeting with a girl, who he thought was rather 'unusual'. She seemed unusual to him because even as a very young girl of fifteen or sixteen she could shift in moods as variable as being a playful and cheerful teenager of today and the next moment to reflect in her eyes the whole melancholic history of the old Irish race against the elements of Nature. He carried with him some very happy and interesting memories when he left this southern island and went back to the north island to Aranmor. The weather was bad and the sea rough on the day he had decided to leave. Even the local people forbade him from taking the boat. Some of them decided against traveling on such a wild day. He saw that the crew of his boat had already left for the pier, where the boat was harboured. He carried on with his plans and was able to cross the straits, or the 'sound', as it is called in those parts, the narrow sea running between the two islands safely. Looking across from his cottage his remembrances come back to him:

I am in the north island again, looking out with a singular sensation to cliffs across the sound. It is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people, whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend. The charm which the people over there share with the birds and flower has been replaced here by the anxiety of men who are eager for gain. The eyes and expressions are different, though the faces are the same, and even the children here seem to have an indefinable modern quality that is absent from the men of Innishmaan.(190)

It is said Christianity arrived in Ireland in the fourth and fifth centuries AD before that the native use to worship many pagan Gods but because of the spread of Christianity by the Christian Missionaries the pagan population of England was converted into Christianity. Christian monks did a remarkable thing by writing about religion and culture of Druids (Celtic learned people) which they themselves didn't write so in this way the records of early Celtic literature survived.

Synge's interest in old Irish myths and folklore to rekindle the glory of Celtic Ireland can be seen in his plays. By making ample use of the Irish mythology and folklore, Synge tried to revive the diminishing Celtic literature in his own unique way in the plays. Synge was closely associated to life, a life which was rich and wild in reality, one of his close friends writes about him as a man who though has read a lot at one time, but he was not often seen with book in his hand. It is a curious thing that *Riders to the Sea* succeeds with English audience but not with an Irish audience, and *The Shadow of the Glen* which is not liked by an English audience, is always liked in Ireland. Since then *Riders to the Sea* has grown into great popularity in Dublin, partly because with the tactical instinct of an Irish mob, the demonstrators against *The Playboy* both in the press and in the theatre, where it began the evening, selected it for applause. *The Playboy of the Western World* most of all, will be loved for holding so much of the mind of Ireland. It is the strangest, the most beautiful expression in drama of that Irish fantasy which over flowing through all Irish literature that has come out of Ireland. It shows the unbroken character of Irish genius.

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