

IRISH LITERARY MOVEMENT AND J. M. SYNGE

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ABSTRACT

The Irish movement, also known as the Celtic Revival began a new brand in Modern drama. This movement was essentially national in character and concentrated on Irish themes and ideas. Irish drama was not intended to expose the cause of realism or naturalism. Its aim is to bring back to drama the mythology, legends and symbols of Irish life. John Millington Synge comes into sight to attract audiences. He wrote down *Riders to the Sea*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *The Well of the Saints*, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* etc. to portray Ireland's existing ethos. The presentation of Ireland's contemporary culture by Synge's appreciated by the audience. J.M. Synge, one of the innovators of the Irish Literary Movement, 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. Art for him was the expression satisfying and abiding of the zest of life. The plays of Synge have won the appreciation from not only the Irish people but also from the people who are aligned to the folk lore of Ireland. This paper attempts to highlight the contribution of J.M. Synge to Irish dramatic world. Synge has created a non-English atmosphere in his plays with the help of 'chanting' style of the actors while delivering dialogue. He was committed to renew the grandeur of Celtic Ireland that is quite evident in his plays. Synge tried to restore the vanishing Celtic literature.

Key Words: Celtic, Ireland, Drama, Folklore, Mythology, Nationalism

The literature of the twentieth century has been marked by realism-almost naturalism and drama too is no exception. The early twentieth century drama under the influence of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy is too realistic and too involved with the contemporary social problems. It is Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist who popularizes the theme of realism in modern drama. He dealt with the problem of life in a realistic way and offers solutions to problems that has confounded the society of his time. In England also realism gained popularity. Jones Pinero, Shaw, Granville-Barker. Galsworthy and a number of other dramatists dealt with real life and problem that the modern society faced in their plays. These dramatists have presented real life with all its wants and sordid ugliness. Problems of marriage, justice, law, administration and strife between capital and labour-all these problems are dealt. G.B. Shaw emerged as a prominent playwright. He is best known for problem plays. In his plays he wrote about social, domestic or personal issues. This period witnessed growth of drama of ideas. The dramatists of problem plays exposed double standards of the society. These playwrights highlighted the realities hidden in so called idealism of the present times.

Romanticism as a trend in Modern drama had given the preponderating trend of realism and propaganda in modern drama a jolt which became perceptible with the passage of time. The first new trend against realism in drama is romanticism introduced by the Scottish dramatist J. M. Barrie. These romantic plays *Mary Rose*, *Peter Pan*, *Admirable Crichton*, *The Will and Dear Brutus*-appear somewhat refreshing after the

problem and propaganda plays of Pinero, Jones, Shaw, Galsworthy and Granville-Barker. The emotions, whims, and sentimentalism implicit in the Scottish tradition are exploited by Barrie with determination and professional assurance. Along with the development of the nationalistic prose-drama or the drama of ideas, the revival of poetic drama also took place. W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot defended poetic plays and waged on war against realistic prose drama of the modern age. They were of the opinion that poetry is the natural and complete medium for drama and that prose play is nothing but a kind of abstraction: and that verse play is capable of something much more intense and exciting.

The Irish movement, also known as the Celtic Revival began a new brand in Modern drama. This movement was essentially national in character and concentrated on Irish themes and ideas. Irish drama was not intended to expose the cause of realism or naturalism. Its aim is to bring back to drama the mythology, legends and symbols of Irish life. Castle states,

“The imaginative idealism which has always characterized the Celtic race, the love of passionate and dreamy poetry which has exercised a fascination on the Irish mind, the belief in the fairy world which Irish people have cherished is presented in the plays produced at the Abbey Theatre. The object of the Irish dramatist is not to make people think, but to make them feel; to give the audience an emotional and spiritual uplifting such as they might experience at mass in a cathedral or at the performance of a symphony”(51)

The Celtic revival in Ireland is a deliberate attempt by a group of Irishmen to give Dublin a national theatre. Ireland has provided them with stuff for their art. It is same as they have colours but not the paper to draw their thoughts. Although they believe that they are glorifying the Irish past. The history of Irish drama is interesting and thought provoking. The possibility for coming out of national drama in Ireland was not realized due to the peculiar nature of the Irish ethos. W.B.Yeats with the support of Edward Martyn, George Moore, and Lady Gregory set up the Irish Literary Theatre. In 1903 the Abbey Theatre came into existence with the bountiful aid of Miss. Horniman. Later, the shaky financial state of the Abbey was restored by Fay Brothers. Frank and William Fay were the first Irish actors who played role in an Irish Drama. They played role in George W. Russell's *Deirdre*, and W.B.Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory contributed to Irish drama and they tried to arouse interest of the audiences in their cultural past. Later, John Millington Synge comes into sight to attract audiences. He wrote down *Riders to the Sea*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *The Well of the Saints*, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* etc. to portray Ireland's existing ethos. The presentation of Ireland's contemporary culture by Synge's appreciated by the audience.

It is difficult to explain precisely the reason for those sudden outpouring of talent in Ireland but one thing is sure that the history of Irish drama is scarcely separable from the history of English drama because of the lack of individuality. The play of Ibsen and other imitators were in the vogue. In 1891-92, the two literary societies are founded by Yeats. The founder members of the movement-Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, George Moore and

Edwin Martyn discussed the want of a theatre separately for the Irish plays written on Irish culture. The movement coincided with the Irish National movement for independence, though they must not, on that account be identified with each other. With the mixed contribution of the members (mentioned above), the Irish Literary Theatre came into being in 1899. At this stage they felt the need of actors and a theatre not on much expense due to the financial weaknesses. Somehow, they arranged for the requirement and the plays are chosen for performance of Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *Heather Field*. Moore entered the picture on Martyn's invitation and took charge for the arrangements of English actors. In the meantime Edward Martyn was granted a license to produce plays in the Ancient Concert Rooms in May. The first production of these plays took place for the half month of May, 1899.

Moreover, even though their original manifesto announced that their theatre would produce "Celtic and Irish dramatic literatures". Some of the plays faced much of the hostility from the critics, clergy and from Irish nationalists. Edward Martyn had conceived the idea that Yeats's play, which is about a woman who offers her soul for her people is heretical. A pamphlet entitled "Souls for Sale" by Frank Hugh O' Donnell attacked Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*. The Abbey Theatre became the home of a distinguished drama, where Synge worked as director and William Fay was its first manager. English actors used to perform for the Irish plays which give idea to Yeats and Moore, for the foundation of an Irish Company of actors. Actors of London were selected for the purposes that were trained for the Irish plays under the guidance of William and Frank Fay. Thus the Irish National Theatre Society was founded where the actors were

prepared with good expressions and well speaking of verse. The result of it is praiseworthy as *Deirdre* by A.E. is applauded by the audience, for its well stage setting and the style of acting.

The Abbey Theatre Company had established itself and performed in London, Cambridge, Oxford, Manchester, Glasgow and other British cities. The plays familiarized people with the life of the simple, unspoiled peasants of Ireland with all their superstitions and customs. But the plays were attacked for the subject matters and the use of language, which was developed by Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge because the old Gaelic is too difficult and too rarely understood. The new plays showed a collision of views between the enlightened artists and Irish nationalists on the one hand and clergy class on the other. Production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, led to the hostile reception of it not only in Ireland, but also in America where the Irish Nationalists showed fierce resentment over the performance. But the directors remained determined and soon the names of the leading playwrights Yeats and Synge became household names and their plays got space in the books of Universities. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* also received same hostility and many times it looked as though the theatre would be closed due to continuous rebels against their satiric vision. Yet somehow it was able to withstand the opposition. The plays written by the Abbey dramatists reflected the artistic fervour which has sustained the movement. Their mission was not only to create good plays, different from the traditional stuff but also to change the taste of the audience. These dramatists aimed at two things: to draw the emotional experiences undergone by Irish people and to use the Irish language

which later conceived as difficult for the foreign audiences so modified to some extent which became popular in Irish dramatists. In the drama of Yeats's dramatic gifts are limited to mostly with Irish legends or are simply morality plays in verse. They are probably more satisfying to read than to see. George Russell (A.E.) produced the play *Deirdre* which marks the beginning of the Irish Theatre Movement. Lady Gregory wrote a number of slight peasant comedies, some noteworthy plays such as *The Rising of the Moon* and *Gods and Fighting Men* but her contribution in the establishment of new literary movement is exemplary.

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. Yeats started his dramatic career with *The Countess Cathleen* which was a great controversy when it was performed in the Abbey Theatre. Joint works of Yeats and Lady Gregory contain; *Deirdre*, *The Hour Glass*, *King Oedipus*, *The King's Threshold on Baile's Strand*, *The Pot of Broth*, *The Unicorn from the Stars* and *Where there is nothing*. The poetic drama gave much satisfaction to Yeats's soul, thus rendering amazing expressions to his work. He looked towards the Greek dramatists for the inspiration to write Irish legends and myths, which inherited all the symbols from the Greek sources and the output is of eternal value.

J.M. Synge, one of the innovators of the Irish Literary Movement, 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. Art for him was the expression satisfying

and abiding of the zest of life. The last of his plays *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, deals with the old legend of a beautiful lady who causes the destruction of the island. In doing so he tried to follow the Greek tragedians but the work was the least satisfactory as the playwright had used to make ordinary men into heroes but here he had attempted to turn the heroes into ordinary men. Other plays of Synge have won the appreciation from not only the Irish people but also from the people who are aligned to the folk lore of Ireland.

If the success of Synge is considered only due to his subject chosen from the land which is full of myths and folk tales then it would be unfair because his sympathetic observation of the material, his sensitiveness and his creative imagination has rendered a remarkable design to his work embodied with the universal appeal. Synge visited the Aran Islands. 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. When he visited Aran, it was still glorious with all its primitiveness. The women had worn red flannel skirts and plain Shawls, whereas the men used to wear blue turtleneck sweaters, homemade trousers and vests. Closeness with the villagers provoked Synge to write :

“The peasants are pure and spiritual, yet have all the healthy animal blood of a peasant and delight in broad jests and deeds. The young men are simple and friendly, never specking however, to strangers till they are addressed. The old men are chatty, cheerful and inquisitive. The girls are inclined to deride me when they are a handful together. Singly they are at

first shy, or pretend to it, but show exquisitely bright frankness when the ice is crushed. Old women full of good fellowship but have mostly little English and my Gaelic does not carry me beyond a few comments on the weather and the island. (46)

Not a single play of Synge could be written without the description of nature. 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. In his famous plays *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*, the nature play vital role, whereas in *The Tinkers Wedding* and *The Well of the Saints*, it is described as a kind comforter; a source of energy, it is present in *The Playboy of the Western World* whereas *Deirdre of the Sorrows* possesses it as a chief actor in drama. Synge found the people of the Islands, with unparalleled capacity to stimulate his imagination and the work was the output of a nature mystic dramatist. Thus the themes taken by Synge were a part of nature itself.

Riders to the Sea, in fact, is a one-act drama, depicting the conflict between Man and Nature where nature is too immense and formidable power to cope with. Sea, in the play, is the main cause of the sufferings and ill-fates of the islanders who are helpless and even admitting the changing moods of the sea cannot avoid it, because actually, the destroyer is the sustainer too, as all their occupation except kelp making is fishing. The victory of the sea over the victims is inevitable as its power is unquestioned. Synge gives us the

varieties of nature so as to make assessment how the man responds the all aspects of nature. Mostly, it is the nature, who is giver and the man is the taker and this relationship of give and take, goes on without any complaints or compliments. It is quite illustrious in *The Well of the Saints* where the beggars, who are blind, feel the nature through their other senses which are working and are quite happy.

J. M. Synge whose contribution lies mainly in the drama and basically it was Synge who is regarded as the eminent playwright of the Irish dramatic world. Synge has created a non-English atmosphere in his plays with the help of ‘chanting’ style of the actors while delivering dialogue. He was committed to renew the grandeur of Celtic Ireland that is quite evident in his three plays. Synge tried to restore the vanishing Celtic literature. For this purpose he made plentiful use of the Irish history, mythology and folklore in his exclusive manner. It is noteworthy that the plays of Synge reflect rural way of life that he encountered during his visits to Aran Islands or experienced during his childhood.

His one-act play *Riders to the Sea* depicts the islanders’ way of life that Synge experienced himself on Aran, while *The Tinker’s Wedding* and *The Playboy* are centered on folk tales that Synge came to know from the islanders. Synge presented different settings for his plays just to expose diverse portrayals of the rural Irish community. It can be asserted that *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World* represent the life of peasants living exactly in the West of Ireland. The renewal of cultural tradition was the prime aim in Irish society. There was need of revival of an indigenous culture in Ireland to construct a national identity. J.M. Synge may be considered among the architects of

cultural and social reconstruction of the nation. There is no denying the fact that Synge influenced Irish drama to a large extent. He played major role in formation of Irish nationalism. In his own way he promoted a national literature by portraying Irish rural life and community.

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