

Hostility of Fate towards Human Beings: A Study on the Role of Destiny in

J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

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Abstract

Drama, with its remarkable artistic expressions and aesthetic composure, contributes to humanity the perfect ideals of life and truth aiming at renovation of lifestyle. The tyranny of fate is experienced by all irrespective of the class to which they belong. John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is a heartbreaking magnum opus that portrays the wonders of sea as the part of nature which is the real background and setting to the play and occasionally playing the role of an artist. This one-act play reminds us of ancient classical tragedies in which fate is the principal foe of human beings who are arbitrarily punished for no fault of their own. All the characters seem to be puppets in the hands of fate as they are fore-doomed to suffer from the fate according to their previous karma which never lets them to escape the doom which has been specially ordained for them. Fate has here been shown to be relentless, merciless and hostile to human beings. This paper strives to give accent to the misfortunes of a peasant fishing family and the hostility of fate towards this family. It also unfolds the tragedy brought about wholly by fate which employs the sea as its principal agent.

Keywords: Destiny, Fate, Death, Sea, Struggle, Burial.

In the world of literature, drama being an audio-visual medium of expression is of course the most peculiar, the most appealing and the most delightful of all types of literary pursuits. It is so deeply associated with the inner consciousness that it has rightly been regarded as the best means for the exploration of human nature in all its varieties and manifestations. The Irish Literary Drama *Riders to the Sea*, written by John Millington Synge, appeals to the intellect and the spirit then to the senses. Being a natural mystic, the dramatist Synge had brilliantly sketched out a peasant life so as to absorb the sense of humor and all characters therein are the works of imagination. Hence, he has been extolled as "a silent, an aloof, a listening man" (Tandon 56).

Synge did not write his play in verse but his prose has a rhythm and harmony, which gives it the effect of poetry. He had included idioms of local people at suitable places in this drama which was endowed with full of similes that figure-out speeches silently to enhance its beauty and harmony. Further, the language seems to merge with the life and emotions of the simple, poor, suffering women in rural areas. He took some of his plots from stories he heard in the Aran Islands, and the people there gave him impressions for the kind

of world he wanted to create in his plays. He had chosen a peasantry background and peasant idioms to create something new in drama portraying the events in a voyage. His characters are not real and yet poetic. While appreciating the writings of Synge, T. S. Eliot says, "The plays of John Millington Synge form rather a special case, because they are based upon the idiom of a rural people whose speech is naturally poetic, both in imagery and in rhythm."(Benson 12). For that reason, his language can be better called Anglo-Irish.

Synge had succeeded in creating a tremendous momentum within the single drama, *Riders to the Sea*, which has been one of the few celebrated one-act plays in English Literature. In this tragic masterpiece, the sea plays the critical role of fate and a family of people, who are certainly real actors of this play, struggles in vain against their fate but is powerless to resist and act against the supernatural force. It is sometimes said that Synge, who has strong faith in the Greek Philosophy, has considered fate as the cause for all human sufferings. In this drama, the sea symbolizes destiny or the will of the Gods, which never appears on the stage but outside it roars hungrily for its toll of human lives. Its victims are the men of the island but the chief sufferers are the women who are left destitute after all the men have been drowned. In this play, Synge has introduced only four characters- Maurya, her two daughters, Cathleen and Nora, and her last surviving son, Bartley. It has only one theme of destruction caused to man by the sea. It deals with the shadow of Michael's death on his mother and sisters and closes with the death of Bartley.

In the real scenic background of this play, a peasantry of Aran Island bordering the sea was destroyed by the giant tides of sea. Even though the victims of the tragedy are the several men-folk of Maurya's clan, the real sufferers in the play are Cathleen, Nora and above all Maurya. When the play opens, a son of Maurya has been reported as having been drowned in sea. Maurya has been waiting for Michael's dead body to be washed ashore and she has even made arrangements for a coffin for Michael's burial. The reported death of Michael is certainly a big disaster for this peasant family which is one of the well-known families in the community of Aran Island. However, the three women are shown as facing this particular misfortune with stoical calm. Michael's death was not due to any fault in his character or to any error of judgments; he just got drowned in the sea perhaps because of a storm on the sea. No references are made to any human error or any misdeed committed by any human being. Nature acted spitefully in snatching away Michael from his family and nature represents fate.

Incident of Michael's death is just opening of this play, but the entire tragedy in the play centres round the death of Bartley. Bartley is preparing to go to the main inland in order to sell a couple of horses at cattle fair. Now, his decision to go to the mainland does not imply any wrong-doing on his part, neither any misjudgment nor any error. After all, a man has to pursue his avocation, whatever it may be. Since Bartley belongs to a family of peasant fishermen, there had been a custom that the males of this family have to confront the sea relentlessly either for fishing from sea or for going over to the mainland to sell their agricultural produce or horses. Further, Bartley needs cash for the family and so he must go to the mainland to

sell the horses. It is the need for money that makes him tell Cathleen that she should sell the pig with the black feet in case a good price is offered for it.

When Bartley was leaving from the house, Cathleen and Nora realized that he had left without food. Cathleen asked her mother to walk quickly to meet him by the well, to give him bread and the neglected blessing. Maurya accepted, picked up the walking stick belonging to the drowned Michael and went to look for Bartley. With sadness in mind, she taught herself “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.” In the meantime, the girls hurriedly retrieve the bundle of clothes to examine them more closely. They matched the flannel shirt with one of Michael’s that had been left hanging on a hook and then discovered that Bartley had taken that shirt to wear, as it was newer than his own. Nora took the stocking from the bundle, counted the stitches, and recognized her own work. Once more, they hide the clothes from their mother, thinking that she will be in a better frame of mind when she returns, having had an opportunity to give a blessing to Bartley.

The young Priest decides not to stop Bartley from going to the mainland, because the Priest realizes that men must go about doing their jobs. Bartley goes on his trip and is drowned in the sea. Consequently, Maurya, the mother who had just sent her first son to burial ground and not come out of tears yet, has lost her last surviving son. What man should be blamed for it? The responsibility is neither that of Bartley whose intension is earning money by selling horses nor that of any other human being including the priest for not stopping him in his task. It is just that the man is drowned in the sea. The sea is the unbeatable and unexpected villain.

It is very largely true that the real enemy of Maurya and other members of the community on this island, is not the sea as such but fate or destiny which in this particular case makes use of the sea as its agent. The sea is not at all the fate but natural piece of elements that supports the lives in the Island and it becomes hostile to Maurya’s family when the fate recruits the sea as its agent to destroy the family. If truth is to be revealed, the seas as the natural thing does not destroy Maurya’s family but the fate, when it comes to action, makes it as the cause of destruction. It is in this way that *Riders to the sea* reminds of ancient classical tragedy in which man was fore-doomed to suffer. In the context of fate, this tragic drama is more remembered like Oedipus drama wherein nothing could save the King Oedipus from meeting the tragic end of death which had been prophesied for him beforehand. Even if the life of Maurya and Oedipus are biographically quite different, in the operation of fate Maurya’s life reminds the inconveniences in the life of Oedipus Rex because of fate.

In this play, the anti-hero is the sea itself and the entire play narrates the conflict between man and the sea. T. R. Henn says:

“The conflict is between sea and humanity, singly and collectively. The human opponents are on three levels: Bartley who must sell his horses at the fair, his sisters who seem to have a sacrificial prophetic function, like Antigone and Ismene, Maurya who speaks the great elegies for the dead not only of Aran but of the world. The sea is the tyrant—god full of mystery and power, the giver and taker of life, the enemy and challenger of the young; it is pre-existent evil and good.” (Benson 47)

The sea may here be interpreted to mean other natural forces also, all those natural forces which destroy human happiness and human life.

As the literature addressed to society, there are three dramatic unities in this play. The first unity is the unchanging locale of the action of Maurya’s tumbledown cottage which stands high on rocky plain exposed to the storms of the sea, which pays high intensity and concentration to draw the attention of readers. The second unity is the unison of time that favours the incidents, which is another notable facet in the *Riders to the Sea*. It begins with a hushed mourning over the identification of the clothes of frowned Michael, followed by a brief debate on the advisability of Bartley’s sea voyages, his setting out and the speedy arrival of his corpse on the sea-shore. The third unity, as in a Greek tragedy, the unity of action is also observed in *Riders to the Sea*. The whole play is between the two death events. Bartley preserved the ropes of Michael and wore the dead brother’s shirt. The notion of Bartley’s doom reminds Maurya of the other deaths she suffered in the past. Her instinct calls up the past of the family and links it up with the present and future when Bartley wore his brother’s shirt. One cannot expect a chorale in a one-act play like *Riders to the Sea*, yet Maurya herself performs the task usually taken by a chorus in a Greek tragedy. Maurya, the central character has the additional function of presenting the tragic doom of the whole family pitted against the vindictiveness of the sea which has snatched away from her everything.

Synge has depicted in this play that the sea the architect of Maurya’s cruel fate. Maurya’s men folk are poor fishermen who cannot earn much wealth to enjoy livelihoods and most often drowned in the sea, but people of all ranks and classes are drowned in the sea. The hungry sea devours the rich and the poor, kings and nobles, as well as poor fishermen and sailors. The poet Shelley was drowned into the sea. The suffering of the mother would be the same whether Bartley is a poor fisherman or a rich prince. The sea has already devoured Maurya’s father-in-law, her husband and four of her sons. Her fifth son was drowned nine days back and before the curtain falls her last son is also killed by the sea. The cup of her sorrow is full. She stoically resigns herself to her fate. She is calm now because the sea cannot do anything worse than this. She says, “they are all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me”(43). Having seen the body of Bartley, the mother Maurya kneeled by the corpse and though resigned to her fate -having lost six sons to the sea - triumphantly announces, “There’s no more the sea can do to me. . . . it’s a great rest I’ll have now, and it’s time surely. . . . They’re all together. . . . No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied.” of

Bartley. Cathleen asked the men to make a coffin, but they found that there are no nails for making a coffin, denoting the family's great poverty.

Without doubt *Riders to the Sea* is not at all a tragedy of characters and nobody in the play is to blame for what happens; this is wholly a tragedy of fate. The sea is an archetypal symbol and has a universal significance. The hostility between man and the sea has been going on the earth since times immemorial. The fate takes all people alike but at different times and conditions for everyone. Fate does not happen to Maurya because she is poor because it is independent of caste, ranks and social status. Things, which have happened to Maurya and her family, may happen to people of high status, rank and position. A queen will have the same feelings of Maurya if the dead body of her last surviving son is brought before her. So, incidents like Maurya's tragedy may happen to anybody at any time due to the action of fate, which is the central theme of this short play.

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