



"Beyond Irishness: J.M. Synge's Foray into Literary Stardom"

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(1) Abstract:

Though it is widely accepted that John Millington Synge played an active role in the revival of Irish nationalism and the regeneration of Irish culture and literature, Synge had within himself the creativity and capacity that helped him to transcend narrow nationalism and express the artistic and the universal. His escape from the decadent Paris atmosphere into the primitive and lively Ireland on the suggestion of the revered literary figure of the time W.B. Yeats was a watermark in his literary career. The life and nature of the Aran Island provided him with not only the material for his plays, but also the necessary inspiration to produce good work of art. That is why his plays are not mere sketches of the peasant life and natural scenery, but they are also the works of imagination close to a myth and a faerytale.

(2) Keywords: Irishness; nationalism; art; universality; colonialism

(3) Introduction:

Though Ireland forms a part of the British land, she had never really been a part of the British nation. To counter British colonialism and its aggression, Ireland had been fighting a battle on many fronts. On the cultural front, Irish National Theatre was established and along with W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Miss Horniman and others, Synge also became its member. Some of the members confined themselves solely within the periphery of Ireland. But Synge broke the narrow domestic wall and produced

literature that was fluid and amorphous in nature.

(a) Art Assailed:

Synge visited the Aran Island quite a few times and literally fell in love with her. What attracted Synge to Aran Island was as much of her Irish connection as is his genuine urge for the primitive, pristine and the unsophisticated. That the performance of some of his plays like "The Shadow of the Glen", "The Playboy of the Western World" and "The Tinker's Wedding" on stage was accompanied by violent protestations not only by the laymen but also by Maud Gonne and Arthur Griffith, is itself a testimony to the fact that Synge's Irish sojourn was not unchallenged. In his farce "The Tinker's Wedding", Synge has given an objectionable portrayal of an Irish priest who is brutally forced into a sack and tied. Synge believed that despite their rich gift of imagination and sincerity, the Irish were also wild and unorganized. This unpredictability in dealing with Irish themes is as much a product of his national character as is his love for the natural and the universal. A naturalist, Synge has been described as "a silent, aloof listening man" and certainly Nature has played a significant role in the moulding of his mind as well as his works.

(b) Artlessly Artful:

What is distinctive about Synge's affinity with Ireland is that his portrayal of



everything Irish-life,culture, language -was apolitical. He did not make Ireland a propaganda or a tool to counter the colonial experience as had been the case with many Irish writers.Though he exploited the Irish material to the fullest, he was not overcome with it.Irish identity made him self-confident.His one-Act play "Riders to the Sea" has distinct Irish flavour, but what stands out in the play is the tragic destiny of the Aran people which is an apt parable of the helplessness of mankind in general before ruthless nature..In that sense it is not only the menfolk of the Aran Island of Maurya's family that are the riders to the sea,but also we all human beings are riders to the sea.

(c). Rich Imagination:

Though there have been vehement protests against the portrayal of a fancied murderer as a hero in his masterpiece "The Playboy of the Western World",it is one of the most animated of the plays of that era.Its wild reality and profundity is vastly different from contemporary theatre of cruelty..Just before Christy bites Shawn Keogh's leg, the hero Christy Mahontqetc .ussays,

"If I can wring a neck among you,I'll have a royal judgement looking at the trembling jury in the courts of law and won't there be crying out in Mayo-the day I am stretched upon the rope,with ladies on their lacy kerchiefs,and they rhyming songs and ballads on the terror of any fate"

Such utterances give the drama a vehemence,vitality and zest quite uncommon in the theatre of cruelty.The humour is astringent but never destructive. Syngé did not disapprove of the worm in the clay or the sense of decay in beauty.Syngé's writing is genial oddly humourous and sane.That makes him more of an original rather than Irish writer.

(d). Uniqueness of Syngé:

What is special about Syngé is that he had synthetic and selective imagination.He could create extraordinary out of the very common.That is why whereas some of Syngé's ordinary characters achieve universal symbolic significance,grandly conceived characters like Countess Cathleen of W.B Yeats fail to achieve intended effect.Syngé's Christy Mahoney or Maurya,though they hail from insignificant Irish background, transcend their national identity and become mythic or universal characters.For an instance let us take the case of Maurya.A bereaved mother rises from her broken state to tragic dignity by her sheer strength of stoicism and suffering:

"May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul,and on Michael's soul,and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch,and Stephen and Shawn(bending her head);and may He have mercy on my soul,Nora,and on the soul of every one is left living in the world."

(Syngé,J.M."Riders to the Sea")

Not many writers have been able to transform unlettered men and women into heroes and heroines.

(e) Conclusion:

Syngé did not view nationalism from the perspective of a colonized writer.For him Irishness involved far too deeper things,an essential awareness of one's own culture as part of understanding the mythical and the universal scheme of things.Through his disinterested but essential involvement with Irish National Movement and Irish National Theatre, he has proved that an artist has the greater role of celebrating the triumph of life and the triumph of art "romancing through the romping lifetime".



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