

## A Study of Irish Cultural Identity in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

Bilal Waziri<sup>1</sup> and Md Najimuddin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Paktia University, Paktia, AFGHANISTAN.

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, Scholars' School and College, Dhaka, BANGLADESH.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author: bilalwaziri2015@gmail.com



[www.ijrah.com](http://www.ijrah.com) || Vol. 3 No. 2 (2023): March Issue

Date of Submission: 15-02-2023

Date of Acceptance: 08-03-2023

Date of Publication: 18-03-2023

### ABSTRACT

John Millington Synge (1871-1909) is one of the most outstanding Irish playwrights. He is known for his realistic vision and authentic contributions to Irish drama. He was one of the earliest realistic writers to represent Irish society brilliantly in his plays. One of his greatest contributions has been his association with the Irish Literary Revival. The Irish Literary Revival also called the Irish Literary Renaissance or Celtic Twilight began around 1885 and ended during the early twentieth century. Though the primary aim of this movement was to gain home rule and independence from England, it also resulted in vigorous literary productions. Writers and scholars struggled to create works that were authentically and originally Irish. Here Synge played an active and key role in writing plays in stylized peasant dialect. He was a prominent figure in the Abbey Theatre of Ireland, founded in 1903 by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, which opened its doors in 1904. Thus, he contributed immensely to the development of modern Irish drama and left an indelible impression on Irish literature. This paper aims to analyze Synge's role in the Irish Literary Renaissance and the formation of Irish cultural identity vis-a-vis his play *Riders to the Sea*. *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is a one-act tragic play that contains both modern and classical elements of tragedy. This play deals with the sorrows and predicaments of human beings on Aran Island. The paper will further explore the representation of Irish peasant society which is based upon his keen observation of the sufferings, perils, and traditions of Irish people during his staying in Aran Island.

**Keywords-** Synge, Irish drama, Cultural Identity, Language, Superstition, Religion, Culture.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Edmund John Millington Synge was a younger son of his large family and was born on April 16, 1871, in Rathfarnham, Dublin. Synge's father John Hatch Synge was a barrister and died the year after John's birth. John Millington was a sickly child, plagued by frequent bouts of asthma and cold. He graduated from Trinity College where he had learned Gaelic or the Celtic language. John Millington had a great interest in natural science. Therefore, natural landscapes made the prominent theme of his writing. Lonely by disposition, his feeling of isolation was even greater sharpened by his disillusionment with Christianity. He died on March 24, 1909. Like his short physical existence, his artistic life was also not prolific. Five plays were the sum of it and he became the laureate modern dramatist of Ireland. He has left an indelible impression on Irish literature.

John Millington Synge is one of the most outstanding Irish playwrights. He is known for his realistic vision and authentic contributions to Irish drama. He was one of the earliest realistic writers to represent Irish society brilliantly in his plays. One of his greatest contributions has been his association with the Irish Literary Revival. The Irish Literary Revival or Irish Literary Renaissance began around 1885 and ended during the early twentieth century. The primary aim of this movement was to gain home rule and independence from England. This literary movement brought so many gigantic changes in every sphere of their life, including political, social, cultural, religious, and familial. People, especially writers, and scholars inspired to raise their voices against the colonizers and give them their rights. Because they were absolutely colonized by the British and deprived of their basic rights. Thus, Synge had a key role in the development of the Irish drama. He was

inspired by W.B. Yeats who was one of the founders of the Abbey Theatre of Ireland in 1903. Synge was also one of the laureate figures of the Abbey theater and was famous for its realistic vision. He pushed Irish drama to the highest peak and fulfilled the deficit of Irish drama. He brought raw materials from the Aran Islanders and he honestly observed every ups and downs of their lives, culture, religion, language, and entirely their whole life on the Aran Island. Therefore, Castle states that Synge went to the islands, he “collected stories, songs, folktales, local histories, and anecdotes and described burial ceremonies, domestic arrangements, clothing and the rituals associated with work and recreation” (Castle, *Modernism* 110). He tried to interpret and depict rural Ireland which he portrayed in *Riders to the Sea*

John Millington Synge portrays “different aspects of the Irish cultural identity through dramatizing the perils and sufferings, traditions and rituals of the Irish people. In doing so, he plays a major role in the preservation of the Irish identity that is almost disappearing” (Al-Azzawi and Kadhem 1). Moreover, Synge “brings to the audience’s mind the glory of the Irish peasantry, their hopes, dreams, despairs, and joys by means of the language of their daily lives” (Michener 11).

*Riders to the Sea*. *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is a one-act tragic play that contains both modern and classical elements of tragedy. It is modern in theme and characterization, but it is classic in its form and its concept of tragic conflict. So, mingling of the modern and classical elements in this play has made it a remarkable drama in the history of Irish Literature.

*Riders to the Sea* (1904) reflects the realistic and authentic documentary of peasant life in a vivid, naturalistic, and simple way. Synge portrayed the desolate, deprived, and sorrowful life of islanders in *Riders to the Sea*. The most important themes of the play are the power of nature, religion, paganism, tradition, modernism, genders role, and symbolism. *Riders to the Sea* focuses on the lives of the poor sea-faring Irish insulars and their relationship with nature. Therefore, nature has a drastic role in their life as well the sea is their big enemy for them. The sea is the taker and giver of their lives.

The main characters of the play are Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora. The protagonist of the play is Maurya the aged wife of a fisherman who had drowned in the sea, and the mother of six sons of whom only the youngest one Bartley is not taken by the sea. The sea has already taken all male members of her family including her husband, father-in-law, and four sons. She has two daughters named Cathleen and Nora.

“At the beginning of the play, Maurya has been waiting for news from her son Michael who got lost at sea nine days ago. The young priest brings some fragments of clothing found on the coast of Donegal to Cathleen and Nora to identify their brother by examining them. This will be the fifth victim that the sea has taken

from the desolate cottage of Maurya. Cathleen and Nora have to determine whether these fragments belong to their absent brother. However, they are concerned about their old mother and her health. They speak in hushed voices lest Maurya hears them, and hide the bundle brought in the turf-loft” (Elif, O. 2013. P,66).

As the two daughters try to keep the news about the death of Michael from her, she attempts to deter Bartley from the perilous journey on the Galway for selling the horses. Bartley wanted to act as the provider to the family because he is the only male to feed his family. Therefore, he gives himself in danger for supporting his family. As Maurya was a superstitious woman her experience taught her to anticipate the truth. While her daughters find confirmation of Michael’s death in the bundle of clothes, she sees a vision of Bartley’s drowning. While the daughters tell her about Michael’s death, the neighbors carry Bartley’s body. The play ends with Maurya’s wailing for all male members who had lost and praying for all the living and the dead.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Riders to the Sea* actually has opened a broad spectrum for researchers. Massive research have been done about *The Riders to the Sea* and analyzed each and every perspective by different researchers. Regarding this research, there are some that have been already conducted. So I am going to mention two of them.

The first, is done by (Al-azzawi & Kadhem)<sup>1</sup>. J. M. Synge’s S Plays: *The Creation of Irish Cultural Identity*. They elucidated very important aspects in these J.M. Synge’s plays like, “different aspects of the Irish cultural identity through dramatizing the perils and sufferings, traditions and rituals of the Irish people. In doing so, he plays a major role in the preservation of the Irish identity that is almost disappearing” (Al-Azzawi & Kadhem 1). On the basis of this research they discussed different aspects of the *Riders to the Sea* play through the analysis of the text and also they elucidated J. M. Synge’s role in the Irish literary renaissance movement.

The second, research is done by Dr. Taha Khalaf Salim. (*Stoicism in Synge’s Riders to the sea*. 2017. P1-15) The aims of this article are to investigate the great influence of stoicism philosophy on the Anglo-Arish dramatist J. M. Synge and his one act- tragedy *Riders to the Sea*. And also this research provides the readers basic information about Synge as a leading figure in the Irish literary renaissance. (1)

Based on this research, the researcher discussed J. M. Synge’s contribution to the Irish Literary Renaissance and acted a key role in pushing Irish drama to its highest peaks. And also elucidated the philosophy of stoicism which is basically “concerned with the way a person could live a morally good life in accord with nature” (2017,p.1). Maurya as a stoic character in *Riders to the Sea* fully explained and also the researcher

clarified the cultural, natural, religious, and political elements in the play.

The third research is done by Arezki Khelifa (*Language and Identity: Indifference and Singularity as Identity Destroyers*, 2011, pp. 5–21). The researcher in this article proposes to study the use of language by individuals to construct their identity under to colonialist, the imperial mainstream discourse of England in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland also the study shows two major aspects: first, the way language is adopted as a personal strategy of inverting and of combating the imposed identity canons of the colonial power. The second aspect is that language is a tool in the perpetual edification of an individual's never-stable identity. On the basis of these questions, the writer of the article analyzes two tragedies by M.J. Synge as a sample of the Irish identity quest against the English hegemony. (5)

Based on this research, the researcher elucidated the role of colonizers in colonized countries, so largely colonizers isolated and marginalized the cultures of the colonized people and kept them under their influence for ages. In 1885 the Irish literary movement came up to raise their voiceless voice against the colonizer for their freedoms and they started to write until they had got freedom. And also, the researcher illustrated *Riders to the Sea* is one of the best plays of the Synge which portrayed the rich culture of the Aran islanders. As well, this play represents the real landscape of the islanders and their language, religion, culture, and rustic life.

However, those previous researches are clearly different from this present research. The above researchers discussed *Riders to the Sea* from different angles and lens their works are highly appreciated in the field of research. Thus, it is new research that analyzes the Irish cultural identity in J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*.

### III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to analyze Synge's role in the Irish Literary Renaissance and the formation of Irish cultural identity vis-a-vis the play *Riders to the Sea*. *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is a one-act tragic play whithantains both modern and classical elements of tragedy. This play deals with the sorrows and predicaments of human beings in the Aran. The paper will further explore the representation of Irish peasant society which is based upon his keen observation of the sufferings, perils, and traditions of Irish people during his staying in the Aran Island.

On the other hand, this paper aims:

- A. To analyze the Synge's role in the Irish Literary Renaissance
- B. To analyze the Irish cultural identity in *Riders to the Sea*
- C. To disclose the real image of the Irish society

### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research is a qualitative method, according to John W. Creswell, "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009: 20). The data used are words, clauses, sentences and paragraphs presented in the play containing Irish cultural identity issues. The source of data in the study comprises secondary data sources. The primary data source is the play written by J. M. Synge (1904). The secondary data is taken from other sources like journals, articles, and online internet sources in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Data collection procedures are conducted by means of note-taking techniques and summarizing techniques where the writer stands as the key instrument.

### V. DISCUSSION

"Identity is people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2). And also, "Identity is used to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (Deng 1995, 1). Cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. In addition, Cultural identity is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a deep interest among the Irish to reveal and promote true Ireland and authentic Irish ancient customs and traditions. *Riders to the Sea* is the representation of seafaring society at that time. The living condition of the islanders as well as religious, traditional, social, and cultural elements are clearly and vividly portrayed in the *Riders to the Sea*. Therefore, the play presents different portrayals of the Irish rural community. Though Ireland is remarkable for its rich culture and traditions which are peculiarly depicted in the play. So, for exploring all these aspects which are clearly mentioned in the *Riders to the Sea* play. I want to elucidate and clarify all these aspects on the basis of the text analysis which really portrays Irish cultural identity and its people. They are their language, religion, and culture.

Synge has ample insights into a delineating peasant and rural life through his works. He reflects his society from different lenses and angles and is highly admired for the comprehensive features of his works such as the language (Gaelic- English) which is used by the characters is unique, strange, melodious, authentic, and simple and he mostly used figurative language in his plays which is highly appreciated in Irish literature.

*Riders to the Sea* is a symbolic tragedy that symbolizes the rustic and simple life of the islanders. Therefore, the visual and aural imagery in the *Riders to the Sea* has not been chosen randomly. It is of utmost significance since it promotes the apprehension of the play when it opens with an air of anxiety in a cottage on Inishmaan. So, all these symbols and images are presented in the play like a cottage kitchen, with nets, oil skins, a spinning wheel, ropes, horses, the stick, the rope, the boards, Michael's flannel shirt, the knife, Bartley's tobacco, horses and pigs are all the elements of the simple and domestic life of the islanders which massively signify and symbolize their proud and rich culture.

Superstition has a key role in the *Riders to the Sea* and drastically affects the lives of the islanders, so Maurya expresses a superstitious fear that she will lose Bartley because five of her other sons have died on the sea. She attributes supernatural powers to the sea that takes her sons from her like:

MAURYA. [*crying out as he is in the door way*]  
*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. (RS 100-5)*

The Aran people had different and strange suppositious beliefs for example, the islanders do not learn to swim because if there is a storm and a person falls on the waves it is better that he should be drowned quickly. If he tries to swim his suffering would only be prolonged. There is a ritual of drowning. If a person has fallen into the water and is about to be drowned nobody would save him because the belief is that you must not take back what the sea has claimed. If a person's cap blows off and falls on the sea, he must not look at it. He should ask another, whether it is a floating crown or brim uppermost, and if the crown is on top you must leave it, for the sea may think that you are beneath it and take it as an image of you.

However, the Aran people had a combination of Christian and pagan beliefs. Both beliefs are clearly mentioned in the play like the young Priest in the play representing Christianity. At the beginning of the play, the conversation between Nora and Cathleen discloses the apathy of the young priest who is regarded as a representative of the Church:

CATHLEEN. [*looking out anxiously*]  
*Did you ask him would he stop Bartley going this day with the horses to the Galway fair?*

NORA. *"I won't stop him," says he, 'but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute,' says he, 'with no son living.'* (RS 16-20)

Obviously, he does not fulfill the roles and responsibilities attributed to a priest. The islanders are all concerned about Bartley's decision about whether he will go to the fair in this dangerous weather. Nora says: *"I heard Eamon Simon and Stephen Pheety and Colum Shawn saying he would go"* (RS 41). With the assertion that the Almighty God will save Maurya from facing the

death of her last son, the young priest does not stop Bartley from sailing to the Galway Fair on the mainland. Thus, this incident reveals the alienation of the priest from the islanders. However, Maurya is representing paganism and superstitious belief because she has lost her belief in Christianity when the priest promised her that he will not allow Bartley to go for the trade. she will not stay destitute. when she lost her last son then she completely lost her belief in Christianity whereas she already believed in supernatural things like the sea, wind, stars, and so on. On the other hand Even as Maurya is the traditional woman (who, by orientation, custom, and worldview, guards the ways of the island), the young priest is the "modern" man, whose interests are extra-insular, whose ways are alien, and whose worldview is nontraditional.

Saying holy blessing is an authentic and inherent Irish custom and culture by the islanders for both the living as well as the dead. largely, a holy blessing saying for those who leave on a journey like when Bartley wanted to sail over to Galway for the horse fair. Cathleen turns and scolds her mother and states:

*Why wouldn't you give [Bartley] your blessing and he looking round at the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on everyone in this house with you sending him out with an unlucky word behind him and a hard word in his ear?" (RS.).*

This speech is representing the real custom of the islanders whose mother did not deliver her blessing to her son Bartley. And she does not either say goodbye or utter a word of blessing. Cathleen, Maurya's daughter speaks: *Its destroyer he'll be, surely no sense left on any person in the house where an old woman will be talking forever.*

(R.S.) Bartley had left not only without the blessing of his mother, but also his share of cake that had been cut and wrapped in a piece of cloth. The sisters had forgotten to give him at the time of departure. So, in spite of her love and respect for her mother, she says such words which sound harsh or rude. She is indirectly also suggesting to her mother not to be so agitated and keep her peace of mind. In addition, entering a house, a guest or visitor will say "God bless the house," and the eldest replies:

*"And you too". "God speed you" (RS, 100) is said for a leaving person and "God rest his soul" and "May the Almighty God have mercy on his soul" (RS, 106) are said when someone remembers a dead one.*

Another very highly well-known custom of the islanders is the burial rituals. It has strange characteristics like expensive coffins and deep graves are the signs of expressing their respect and love for the dead. so, the islanders have the belief that the deeper the grave is the more the spirit will find comfort and peace. Like in the play, Maurya's solace is in *"giving a big price for the finest white board ... in Connemara,"* (RS, 98) and in letting her dead son have *"a deep grave surely"* (RS, 106).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Synge succeeds to push Irish literary drama to the highest peak and was able to modernize Irish material and share it globally. He was one of the laureate figures of the Abbey theater and was famous for his realistic vision. Synge was able to revive Irish national identity by reintroducing Irish myths and folktales as source material for his plays. Synge introduces his theme in a local Irish context, with a focus on peasants; he was able to transform the Irish theatre from the local context to universality. In *Riders to The Sea*, he celebrates the life of the people, particularly those Irish outcasts who exist in a tragicomic world inside a skeptical vision of man's critical life which has no trust and is full of strife and inconsistencies. This play reveals a realistic and authentic image of Irish society and it truly represents Irish peasantry society's destructive and suffering life. This paper will help all those who are studying post-colonial literature. Extensive information can be provided on the colonization of Ireland by England and its influence on Irish culture and heritage.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Azzawi, Qaddus & Kadhem. "J. M. Synge's Plays: The Creation of Irish Cultural Identity"(n.d.). <<http://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=33971>>
- [2] Castle, Gregory. *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, (2001.P,110)
- [3] Creswell, J. W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mix Methods Approaches*. USA: SAGE. (2009, p.20)
- [4] Deng, Francis M. *War of Visions: Convict of Identities in the Sudan*. Washington, DC: Brookings (1995)
- [5] Elif, O. Thesis: *The Representation of Rural Irish Characters in J. M. Synge's Riders to the Sea*. Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Science, English Department. Turkey: Ankara. (2013.P,66).
- [6] El-khitab, Revue. *Language and Identity: Indifference and Singularity as Identity Destroyers*. (2011, pp. 5–21).
- [7] Hogg, Michael and Dominic Abrams. *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. London: Routledge. (1988)
- [8] J.M. Synge, *Riders to the Sea* in *Collected Works IE*, edited by Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 25.
- [9] Michener, Christina. "The Importance of J. M. Synge." *Irish Literature*. (2004): n.pag. Web. April 21, 2005
- [10] Narula, S.C. *Jhon Millington Synge: Riders to the Sea*. New Delhi: Surjeet Publication. (2007, p74)
- [11] Synge, J. M. *Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities Stoicism in J. M. Synge's Riders to the Sea*. no. 2017, 2018, pp. 1–15.