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Fusion of Political and Cultural Consciousness in Synge's Plays: A Chronological Approach

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Abstract

J.M. Synge's contribution to the Irish Dramatic Movement has not been evaluated properly till recently. Even W.B. Yeats's efforts in this direction were not properly appreciated but from his Nobel Prize lecture, it becomes clear that he was deeply attached to the cause of the establishment of Irish National Theatre. In fact, recent studies on the subject suggest that there were various people who contributed to the dramatic movement for Irish National Theatre. There were political, economic and cultural and linguistic issues. Moreover, there were sentimental, nostalgic and realistic issues. Apart from major players like Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory, there were various people of Irish decent in 18th and 19th centuries who were aware of the beauties of Irish language and its dramatic possibilities but only a handful of Irish writers wrote in Irish language for certain obvious reasons. Moreover, the dramatic movement passed from various phases to reach maturity fruition in the works of Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory in that order.

The present paper offers a chronological account of the Irish Dramatic Movement in a systematic manner. It highlights the contribution of J.M. Synge as a playwright in an objective manner.

Keywords: Irish Dramatic Movement, kiltartanese, Cultural Consciousness, Dark Comedy, Patriarchal Rights, Political Activities, Melodrama, Restoration Comedy, Linguistics Issues.

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Fusion of Political and Cultural Consciousness in Synge's Plays: A Chronological Approach

It is customary to describe Synge's dramatic achievement in the minor key. However, the fact remains that neither the plays of W. B. Yeats nor the unique plays of J. M. Synge were properly recognised. Only after getting the Nobel Prize people came to know that the Irish National Theatre was the joint effort of 'seven people' of which Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory were dramatists while the other four were actors but there were several other personalities and minor dramatists who contributed to the Irish Dramatic Movement and Literary Theatre. Synge's contribution was unnoticed or ignored because he wrote various kinds of plays which were experimental, not only in technique or mixing of genres but they were controversial, provocative and critical of the existing political and economic scenario. A recent critic Anthony Roche rightly pointed out, the initial impulse would be patriotic, sincere and partial to Ireland's ancient glory and prestige. "They would be aesthetic in aim and would be detached from overt politics (Roche - 14). However, the fact remains that his plays present a constant challenge to notions of 'Identity' both in terms of politics and gender (Roche-16). Even Synge was aware of controversies regarding the response of the audience on the event of staging of his plays.

From a close study of the development of Irish Dramatic Revival from 1899-1939, it is clear that even early writers like Douglas Hyde and Dion Boucicault (Roche-21) were trying to set an agenda for both cultural and political activities in Ireland by choosing proper subjects, translating old myths and using a hybrid English 'Kiltartanese' a dialect spoken by native Irish speakers in certain localities (Roche p- 19). The playwrights just mentioned wrote satirical and farcical plays which were also exploited by Synge in his unique manner not subscribing to the Melodrama or overtly political solutions. Synge's social consciousness and political awareness goes back to well-known Restoration Comedy writers (Farquhar), anti- sentimental Playwrights like Goldsmith, Sheridan and 19th Century Irish Dramatist Oscar Wilde and the 20th Century writer G.B. Shaw. Shaw's interest into wit and music, Wilde's knowledge of Irish folklore also helped Synge in manipulation of language and rhythmic prose. Even Ibsen's social consciousness and championing the cause of fighting women carving for liberation resulted in creating characters like Nora and the 'intruding tramps' (Roche -31).

Synge's plays from this point of view are a successful fusion of an individual talent and a long historical tradition of ancient and recent European drama. The point to establish is that Synge was a man of various interests viz sharp intellect and deep social awareness. His visits to Aran Islands show his keen awareness of various social economic issues as well as political and cultural decline of Irish people for a long time. His deep knowledge of history of Ireland and his tours to several European countries stimulated him and widened his political consciousness. Hence, Yeats's famous advice to 'give up Paris and return to Aran Islands' rekindled his interest in the local customs, manners, language and the painful realities and hardships of the Irish people. He fully shared the efforts of Yeats and Lady Gregory to explore the possibilities of authentic Irish drama by creating a proper audience for his country which was once the home of an ancient idealism but Synge did not agree fully with the aims and goals of his mentors and he wanted to write such plays which were rich and visualized for the common people without compromising the aesthetic standard. Synge did not want to write completely realistic and political plays but he also did not want to avoid the genuine problems faced by Irish people in his own time. Both Ben Levitas and Daniel Corkery had testified to Synge's efforts from looking at Irish life by entering into the healthy competition with European nations culturally and also politically. "Europe cleared his eyes..... not entirely, of course"(Roche-11). Synge's plays show his inclusive sensibility in two ways. He first used a mixed language (Lingua Franca) and secondly, he gained much knowledge about socialism and various forms of constitutions and governments.

Certainly, therefore, Synge's plays cannot be understood in complete isolation and in simple aesthetic terms. He was fully aware of the main goals of Irish Dramatic Movement and various political events of the then political events of Ireland namely agricultural unrest and radical political activities of men like Parnell. He had his own revolutionary views about Irish nationalism, cultural life and poverty and suffering in the countryside. In fact, the impact of Yeats on Synge is often 'exaggerated' and Synge's Plays are wrongly dismissed 'as political and pure works of art' (Mathews-6). Yeats recorded his views on this subject in a number of poems such as *September 1913*, *Easter Rising* (1916) and some of his latest poems *Cooile Park* (1929) and lastly *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* (1937) and showed disapproval of the politics of violence (*Selected Poems of W.B. Yeats*). Synge shared Yeats's views up to a point but did not completely agree to Yeats's notions of aestheticism and cultural symbolism (Mathews-5). Hence Yeats was better appreciated by the later of Irish dramatists viz Sean O Casey and Dennis Johnston who responded positively to Synge's 'guarded response' and different views point on the issues of cultural and political decline in his plays and other writings.

Chronologically, in the very first play *In the Shadow of the Glen*, he offers a unique example of his complex response to the problems faced by Irish peasants. In this play, based on an Irish folk tale, he made a new kind of dramatic experiment by creating a proper setting and moving description of nature's fury on the inhabitants who are removed from the comforts of city life and communal harmony. Instead of that, we find a lonely suffering housewife in County Wicklow. Synge shows that here weather and climate play a damaging role on the inhabitants. However, in comparison to the husband Michael Dara and his wife, Nora suffers more acutely. She lives a life of drudgery without any hope or prospect of betterment in her status and living conditions. The husband is a kind of parasite but wants to behave like typical, jealousopathic males and he plans a trap by pretending to be dead. Thus, when a tramp intrudes, he wants to teach his wife a lesson. However, the tramp runs away and the play turns into a typical farcical comedy but actually the play is a kind of 'Dark Comedy' or 'Problem Play' which Synge learnt from both Shaw and Ibsen and perhaps also from Shakespeare's Dark Comedy. What is important to notice that Synge wants to present a genuine problem about the backwardness of Ireland and raise political issues about the failures of marriage based on wrong notions of biology and traditional views of Patriarchal rights over one's wife. That also explains why Synge's plays were criticised but later on, they drew the attention of many Knowledgeable recent critics'. In this play, main issues of incompatibility and economic insecurity is broached. Thus, at once Nora tells the untold truth about her weak husband---"he was always cold, every day since I knew him.... and every night, stranger. " (Henn-83). Another view comes from the husband who blames his wife for the failures of his marriage without acknowledging his own weakness and helplessness. "It's herself, surely, it's a bad wife she is--a bad wife for an old man, and I'm getting old. God help me, though I've an arm to still"(Henn-87). However, the play shows Nora's confession and looking for support outside her wedlock is not a case of adultery. She is indeed 'more sinned than sinning'. "What way would I live, and I an old woman, if I didn't marry a man with a bit of a farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?"(Henn-90). However, in the end of the tramp runs away and sympathies with the old man who has to move on the roads. The 'problematic ending' of the play shows the all is not well with Nora and Michael. Synge, however, points to the political, economic situation and the role of nature in making the couple incommunicative, pathetic and resigned to their lot.

In the next play *Riders to the Sea* Synge once again turns to the problem suffered by women living in the Islands and suffering the shock of successive deaths of the male children on the other side of the sea. In this play, there is greater emphasis on poverty, shallow soil and stony grass where there is dearth of fuel, food and fodder, essential commodities for survival of men and animals. In this one-act play, Synge achieved a tragic grandeur by presenting the

sea as a double symbol of nature as 'a giver and taker' where as the human beings are presented symbolically as 'riders'. Even in this play, the hardship of the simple villagers living on the margins is presented powerfully. The conflict between Maurya and Bartley is depicted very powerfully. The young aspiring Bartley and the constant suffering old mother Maurya are beautifully presented in evocative language. In Maurya's words of protest to his son, there is violation of rules of syntax. Cathleen defends Bartley and supports the move for journey and while the mother is right in her apprehension of losing her only son in the fair. Her own son and daughter laugh at such fears as foolish words of an old woman who prevents the young son from going to the sea. Synge achieves a rare balance and Maurya's fears have a prophetic ring. "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again"(Henn-99). But after the son's death, Maurya achieves a rare calm and resignation because the sea can do no harm to her. "It's a great rest I'll have now" and finally, an acceptance of the fate--"what more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied"(Henn-106). Even in this play, there are realistic details of the suffering of the Irish people in Coastal areas and endurance of the people and men's indomitable will and power.

In the other plays viz. *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and even in the posthumous play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, we find the same kind of dramatic tension and the conflict between idea of the dream and the reality. In the *Tinker's Wedding* and *The Well of the Saints* we find treatments of neglected sections of the clergy, the licenced beggars and the migrants who realise that even boons can turn into curses and there is not escape from harsh lives of the privileged people viz. the farmers, labourers and the tinkers who have no fixed centres or status in society but everyone knows that Synge's best play is *The Playboy of the Western World* where Synge makes a hero out of a clay figure but this play is different from the social plays of Shaw and Galsworthy but the play expands into a double edged satire. He blames the Western World for turning a simple villager into *The Playboy of the Western World* but also he creates a world of escapism and instant success by selling a dream, but in the end he ruins the life of a young girl Pegeen --"a wild-looking but fine girl, of about twenty "(Henn --176) because Christy Mahon turns out to be a bluffer and a cheater. He wins the praise of the all village people by claiming to be a hero in the eyes of all young girls because he had spread a rumour that he had killed his father in encounter and left the country but his return results into a comic exposure in an anticlimactic appearance of his 'supposed' dead father. He thus overnight becomes a hero and then a cheater and everything is lost for Pegeen--"Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World"(Henn--229). In this play of three acts, we have a subtle criticism of worldly values represented by religion and primitive ethics adopted by simple villagers and wandering people seduced by the dream of success and commercial glory. *The Playboy of the Western World* is an example of Synge's subtle satirical criticism of Western values.

In short, in all his plays, including the posthumous play *Deirdre of The Sorrows*, we find evidence of Synge's progressive views and social satire within the confines of one-act, two-act and three-act plays where characterization, imagery and manipulation of different styles and dialects create an effect of enduring significance.

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