



**CULTURAL IDENTITY
IN
John Millington Synge's
Theatre**

by

822
M.K.
Mona Kamal Hassan Mansour

An M.A. Thesis

Submitted to

The Department of English

Faculty of Alsun

Ain Shams University

Supervised by

Prof.: ***Ramsis Awad***

Department of English

Faculty of Alsun

Ain Shams University

Assistant Prof.: ***Hanaa Hassanein Aly***

Department of English

Faculty of Alsun

Ain Shams University

1995

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to ***Professor Ramsis Awad*** for the invaluable guidance and extensive assistance he has given me during the past few years.

Whole - hearted thanks are also due to ***Professor M. Shebl El Komy***, Head of the Department of English, Faculty of Alsun for his understanding and sincere encouragement that have stimulated the development of that work.

I am deeply indebted to ***Professor Hanaa Hassanein Aly*** for her precious and generous help ; whose pervasive influence is felt throughout the research. My thanks to her cannot be adequately expressed. I am proud to be one of her M.A. candidates.

I must mention with special gratitude all librarians of the faculty of Alsun, the AUC and the British Council Library for all the help they so generously extend to research workers. The formidable job of getting access to books has been made quite easy for me. Their unfailing assistance is deeply appreciated.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
--------------------	---

Part I

Chapter I :	
A General Survey Of Culture And Identity	13
Chapter II :	
Synge's Concept of Cultural Identity	36

Part II

Chapter I :	
<u>Riders To The Sea</u>	61
Chapter II :	
<u>The Well Of The Saints</u>	133
Chapter III :	
<u>The Playboy Of The Western World</u>	202
CONCLUSION	276
BIBLIOGRAPHY	293
SYNOPSIS	312
ARABIC SUMMARY	

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Cultural identity is a new catchword that has won considerable attention in the modern world and has become a fashionable topic for conversation. The term implies an ethnic culture that is strictly confined to a particular people. It, therefore, intimates the exclusion of other cultures lest it should be alienated from its characteristic features. At present, many countries are losing a lot of those particular features that would distinguish one country from another, features that could make people say this country is well known for this or that. Who am I? Do I belong? Where am I going? What do I belong to? These are major questions that occupy the greatest part of modern man's mind. A cultural identity crisis is the plague that threatens man today. The collapse of tradition, the disappearance of national barriers, the appalling advance of technology, social mobility and lack of higher values have contributed to man's restlessness, anxiety and alienation. Further reasons could go back to colonization, occupation, decline of cultures or the introduction of new civilizations and new values, that would very likely affect cultures, customs, traditions of a country, uproot the old and foster the new. This process could pose a great danger to the culture of a people if they do not take active steps to preserve or regenerate those very qualities that would distinguish them from other nations.

Preserving the cultural identity of the Irish people in general and the Irish peasants living on the Aran Islands in particular occupied a great part of J.M. Synge's ⁽¹⁸⁷¹⁻¹⁹⁰⁹⁾ mind. He was painfully aware that the cultural

identity of those people was vulnerable. Overwhelmed by a great love for the Irish, Synge channeled most of his writings, and precisely those discussed in this thesis, to that very purpose of arousing the Irish people's interest in their culture so as to stimulate them to maintain the qualities that make them stand unique and unparalleled amidst other European cultures.

Synge lived in an age of intense nationalist ferment. Ireland was strictly held by the tough hands of British Protestants. Home Rule and land reform were the two main political issues at the time around 1880s when Synge was growing up. Equally pressing were also problems of famine, eviction, impoverishment, landlordism, political stagnation and the like. Nonetheless, such issues were said to have had a very little effect upon Synge's mind. W.B. Yeats emphasizes Synge's detachment from that field.

Synge seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought, and with the exception of one sentence, spoken when I first met him in Paris, that implied some sort of Nationalist conviction, I cannot remember that he spoke of politics or showed any interest in men in the mass....⁽¹⁾

John Masefield likewise asserts Synge's complete indifference to political affairs.

He was the only Irishman I have ever met who cared nothing for either the political or the religious issue. He had a prejudice against one Orange District, because the people in it were dour. He had a prejudice against one Roman Catholic district because the people in it were rude. Otherwise his mind was untroubled... He would have watched a political or

religious riot with gravity, with pleasure in the spectacle, and malice for the folly.⁽²⁾

However, a close scrutiny of Synge's plays, namely, The Well Of The Saints and The Playboy Of The Western World would better make one decide whether one should approve of, or refute such assertions. Moreover, Synge cannot be said to have really belonged to the Irish Dramatic Movement that Yeats founded at that time. He had his own life, and he presumably hated to commit himself to any particular organization or committee. This is stressed by Sean Day Lewis :

He is classified as part of the Irish literary revival because it was there at the time, but he never belonged to it in any real sense and would not have taken to flag waving if he had lived through the troubles of 1916 and beyond.⁽³⁾

If Synge is little interested in politics, what do the concepts "nationalism" and "cultural identity" mean to him then? Are these spurred by political motives? Are they influenced by his aesthetic propensities? Further, what objectives did Synge have in mind while writing Riders To The Sea, The Well Of The Saints and The Playboy Of The Western World?

The early development of Synge's ideas should, therefore, be traced, as it played a great role in formulating his career. To his mother's disgrace Synge renounced Christianity at an early age. Serious talks from his brother Samuel who was training to be a medical missionary were of no avail. Synge himself felt that such a step alienated him from his background. His life was thus brought to a completely different focus.

Such a renunciation was immediately replaced by profounder values that enriched his mind, and acquainted him with a new vision of the world. Synge was aware of the change that came upon him. He admits : "The forces which rid me of theological mysticism reinforced my innate feeling for the profound mysteries of life".⁽⁴⁾ By that time he had already started to develop a great liking for nature and the people. That was the real turning point in his life.

Soon after I had relinquished the kingdom of God, I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to a temperate Nationalism. Everything Irish became sacred ... and had a charm that was neither quite human nor divine, rather perhaps as if I had fallen in love with a goddess ... (prose, p. 13)

From these lines one can deduce that Synge's nationalism was hardly stimulated by political motives. As implied, nationalism could be inculcated by feeling intensely the charm and beauty of Ireland, by falling in love with the place. However, Synge's fervent wish was that Ireland would develop a strong sense of nationalism because only through this, he believed, the Irish could manage to resolve many of their economic and political problems. For instance, concerning the problems of emigration that Ireland suffered from, Synge writes "one feels that the only real remedy for emigration is the restoration of some national life to the people. It is this conviction that makes most Irish politicians scorn all merely economic or agricultural reforms, for if Home Rule would not of itself make a national life it would do more to make such a life possible than half a million creameries". (prose, pp. 342 - 3)

Great writers of his time such as W.B. Yeats firmly believed that if Irish writers dramatized the ancient Irish myths, legends, and folkloric tales, they could engender people's love for their nation. That kind of sentiment ran through almost all of Ireland and Synge was undoubtedly not unaffected by it, W.B. Yeats writes in his autobiography :

National feeling could be roused again if some man of good education, if a Catholic he should have been educated outside Ireland gathered about him a few men like himself, and founded a new Nation newspaper, forbidding it all personal attacks, all arguments that assume a base motive in an opponent, and choosing for its national policy, not what seems most desirable in the abstract, but such policy as may stir the imagination and yet gather to its support the greatest possible number of educated men. ⁽⁵⁾

The question of nationalism was very crucial to the Irish people ; they were exhausted with the English colonialism as they felt their identity as a strong Irish race humiliated, ignored and mocked. Such feelings stirred the imagination of writers to produce plays that would stimulate the national feeling of the Irish, draw their attention to the richness of their past legends and folklores and demonstrate their people as a distinguished race.

However, if Synge is interested in restoring a national life to the Irish people, and if, for him such a feeling is engendered not by involving politics, rather, by developing a great love for all that is charming and beautiful in Ireland, in what way does Synge guide the Irish towards a national life in the plays? Further, what are the qualities that constitute the cultural identity of the Aran Islands?

In an attempt to answer these questions the researcher has divided the thesis into two parts. Part One is theoretical. It is divided into two chapters. In chapter I, the candidate attempts to make a survey of what the term culture stands for ; different views about identity are further surveyed in order to find out what the concept cultural identity means. The identity of man as an individual is likewise reviewed. Moreover, attempts are made to illustrate how diversity of cultures could be important for preserving a people's specificity and distinctiveness. The researcher attempts to depict how cultural identity could be vital, and how it could play an important role in people's lives, something that Synge was, presumably quite conscious of at the turn of the last century. The chapter, thus, attempts to give answers to the following questions : What is culture? Is it a property that belongs to a particular people? Can language play an important role in the formation of culture? Can a culture be said to exist without the existence of human society? Can culture have a unifying and a diversifying effect? Why is culture apt for the study of laws of human thought and action? Does it mean having and resting or prevailing and growing?

With regards to identity, does the identity of a thing mean that a thing remains invariable and uninterrupted despite variations of time? How could people then attribute an identity to things that undergo a change? Further, does identity mean that one should be able to determine definitely and peremptorily what a thing is? How can man's identity be defined? Is it connected with possessions, is it a God-given quality, or is it something acquired? Is it static or dynamic? Can identity be like any other aspect of a culture? What does the term cultural identity mean in general? In what

way can a country with a clear and definite cultural identity affect its people? Why can the diversity of cultures be important for preserving a people's specificity and distinctiveness?

Chapter II attempts to make obvious what the concept cultural identity means to Synge. It falls into two parts. The first part talks about Synge's attitude to primitive nature ; the second part talks about myth that he found rampant on the Aran Islands. However, both parts highlight how these two aspects of life formed an important part of the culture of the Aran people. The chapter aims to give thorough answers to these questions : What does nature mean to Synge? Is it primitive nature or man-made nature? Does Synge's concept of diversity and permanence correspond to Arnold's views that favour dissemination? What is myth and what function does it play in the lives of primitive people? Does it express, enhance and codify beliefs? Does myth sometimes translate the real into terms of the ideal? Does Synge's keenness on preserving the cultural identity of the Aran people make him show readiness to welcome modernization that encroaches upon the Aran Islands from the other side of the Atlantic? What kind of relation does Synge wish should exist between man and nature?

Part Two tackles the plays in question in practical terms. It falls into three chapters and a conclusion. Riders To The Sea (1904), The Well Of The Saints (1905), The Playboy Of The Western World (1907), are chosen to form the body of the thesis as they delineate the conflict between primitive nature and mythical thinking on the one hand, elements in which the islanders' cultural identity is contained, and reality

as representing progress and civilization on the other ; in other words, the plays display a conflict between authenticity and modernization, permanence and change, unity and diversity. Further, they mark three different stages in Synge's attitude towards myth and reality.

In chapter I, Riders To The Sea emphasizes the superiority of nature over man. It depicts how helpless, minute and incompetent man is in the universe. Further, the great power that myth can have on the lives of primitive people is given salience in the play. It is tackled with as a matter-of-fact and as a natural occurrence on the islands. Moreover, Riders exposes a tension between myth and reality that permeates althrough. It is no more than a tension between authenticity and modernization, civilization and moral order. At the deepest level, it delineates a tension between the cultural identity that Synge wishes the islanders would preserve, and the inevitable advance of progress that threatens to eliminate the very qualities that make the cultural identity of the islanders possible. The play thus attempts to give answers to a set of questions : does Synge succeed in giving us a true picture of life on the Aran Islands? What is the significance of hinging the play upon a supernatural vision? What techniques does Synge adopt to give richness and intensity to myth in the play? How does Synge in cold blood bring the audience to believe in myth as a natural occurrence and a matter-of-fact? Further, how does Synge depict the tension between authenticity and modernization, between old convictions and future outlooks, between fear and ambition, uncontrollable nature and helpless man? Does Synge attempt to reach universal truths about man and life in the play? How does he manage to effect reality in the

play? And for what purpose is he keen to effect reality? How does Synge manage to create a tragic effect? Why has Riders often been compared to Greek tragedy? How does Synge succeed in bringing nature on to the stage? Does Synge manage to stimulate the Irish to preserve their cultural identity on the Aran Islands through Riders?

In chapter II, The Well Of The Saints delineates a further tension between myth and reality as the tension between both aspects grows inside Synge himself. However, he seems more determined to emphasize the superiority of myth over reality in the play. In other words, Synge apparently prefers the maintenance of the islanders' cultural identity to the introduction of a modernized life.

Nature is emphasized as a place where security and peace could be sought. Moreover, the astounding effects that myth could have upon the lives of the people is delineated through the characters of the blind beggars. Synge is keen to depict how myth could dispel anxieties, and how it could make life happier at times.

In this play Synge shows great interest in the identity of man as an individual in society. He depicts how man's identity is vulnerable to get lost in a hectic world unless he struggles hard to reach self-realization and self-awareness. The Well Of The Saints attempts to give answers to the following questions : how does Synge succeed in presenting the supremacy of the world of myth over the world of reality in The Well Of The Saints? How do the beggars succeed in getting over their grueling

experiences and in rediscovering their identity? How far do they succeed in giving meaning to their lives? What is the double function of myth in the play? What does Synge prefer to do through The Well Of The Saints : to stimulate the Irish to preserve their cultural identity or to introduce progress and improve their living conditions? In other words, which does Synge prefer myth or reality? Does Synge's bewilderment between both aspects begin to take shape? How far does Synge succeed in giving expression to problems that concern modern man? Is Synge's philosophy about life in The Well Of The Saints different from that in Riders? What exactly does Synge attempt to satirize in the play? Why do Synge's beggars insist on quitting society at the end?

In chapter III, The Playboy Of The Western World depicts how the tension between myth and reality reaches culmination. Synge's attitude towards both aspects becomes highly ambivalent. The play shows how bewildered he is between whether to emphasize the superiority of myth, or to admit the inevitability of getting down to reality. However, he appears more inclined to admit the importance of giving way for reality to prevail ; that is the inevitability of accepting the idea of change on the Aran Islands, notwithstanding how perilous this could be for their primitive life.

The play, likewise, makes prominent what admirable effects myth could have upon people's lives. This is evidenced in Christy Mahon's total metamorphosis from a callow youth to a champion, a hero, and the playboy of the western world, and that is brought over by the power of the myth created by the villagers.