

## CHAPTER - IV

### The Irish Dramatic Movement and J. M. Synge

"We have now several dramatists who have taken to drama as their most serious business, and we claim that a school of Irish drama exists, and that is founded upon sincere observation and experience."

Mr. Synge alone has written of the peasant as he is to all the eyes; of the folk imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing grounds. His people talk a highly coloured musical language, and one never hears from them a thought that is of today and not of yesterday".

W.B. Yeats, Synge, pp. 182-83

(italics mine)

The Irish Literary Movement was in the beginning, the Irish National Movement. The spirit of liberation kindled the spirit of nationalism which resuscitated the glorious cultural heritage of Ireland. The untapped store house of Irish legends, sagas and folk tales were revived and given a fresh lease of life. Unfortunately no Irish writer had previously made use of these home-spun literary sources in his writings. In the wake of the national movement, there came the cultural movement in Ireland.

A country's liberation movement aimed at attaining not only political freedom but cultural freedom as well.

Before the cultural movement was launched, the Irish literature was truly a foreign literature and the type of dramas which were produced on the Irish stage, were the so-called realistic dramas of Ibsen and his school which dealt with the "sooty problems of modern life". It was at this hour that the literary movement wanted to direct its attention to the country's dramatic resources which remained unutilized so long. The fighters of the literary movement earnestly felt that if the resources were properly utilized, they would give birth to the tradition of a new dramatic genre in Ireland. Thus, the Irish National Movement was responsible for the upsurge of the Irish Literary Movement which finally became the Irish Dramatic Movement.

During the period of the country's national resurgence, J. M. Synge was away from his own country and living in Paris. It would be improper to think that he was not at all aware of what was going on in his country. After he had renounced christianity at the age of sixteen or seventeen, Synge was taking real interest in Ireland. Naturally even living at a distance, he kept a watchful eye on the activities of his country. Fortunately for him, in Paris he noticed "the growing interest in Celtic culture and archaeology".<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in Chapter I, while

---

1. F. R. Henn, "Introduction", The Plays and poems of J. M. Synge ed., F.R. Henn (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963), p. 2.

he was in Paris, he attended Professor H. d'Arbois de Jubainville's lectures on Celtic civilization and reviewed The Irish Mythological cycle and Celtic Mythology. During the years of his stay in Paris, his interest in Irish culture and the Irish language really deepened. And there in 1890 he met W.B. Yeats in a Paris hotel. This meeting, indeed proved prophetic for Synge and made him for the Irish Dramatic Movement an inevitable figure. While the Aran Islands moulded the artistic being of Synge and gave him a true vision of life about humanity, the Irish Dramatic Movement on the other hand paved the way for the artist in Synge to come into the limelight. "It was the rise and development of the Irish drama which gave Synge his chance of distinguishing himself"<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, a study of the Irish Dramatic Movement in relation to Synge is important.

From Paris, Synge went to the Aran Islands. He lived there and drank that life to the lees. The experience he gathered during his visits, stirred his imagination and heralded the birth of a new literary artist in Synge. The members of the movement for a long time felt the urgency of setting up a theatre house of their own. In 1904 the famous Abbey Theatre came into existence.

---

2. D.J.O. Donoghue, "John M. Synge : A personal appreciation", Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed. Mikhail, p. 19.

Its purpose was to propagate that "The Irish Literary Drama will appeal rather to the intellect and spirit than to the senses. It will eventually, it is hoped, furnish a vehicle for the literary expression of the national thought and ideas of Ireland such as has not hitherto been in existence"<sup>3</sup> while bringing "back to the English theatre the poetry that is missed in Ibsen"<sup>4</sup>. J.M. Synge wished to bring what he discovered in the Aran and its neighbouring Islands to Dublin, where it seemed that "the popular mind had grown harsh and ugly"<sup>5</sup>. W.B. Yeats advocated in essays that the plays of his school would be of two kinds, "plays of (a) peasant life and plays of a romantic and (b) heroic life, such as one finds in the folk tales"<sup>6</sup>. Synge fulfilled the very dream of Yeats by establishing a national drama founded upon sympathetic observations and experiences of life. In his claim that J.M. Synge was the product of the Irish Dramatic Movement, W.B. Yeats perhaps hinted that the ideals of the Irish Literary Movement inspired and nourished Synge and moulded his writings in the direction the Irish Dramatic Movement was destined to attain. J.M. Synge could not accept the type of Drama which "are far away from the profound and common interest of life"<sup>7</sup>.

---

3. Quoted in Ellis Fernald, The Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 37.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

5. Ibid., p. 80.

6. W.B. Yeats (ed), Essays 1903, p. 194.

7. Synge, "Preface", The Playboy of the western world, Plays and Poems of Synge, ed. Henn, p. 174.

Synge was an advocate of "humour" in the drama. It was his conviction that "of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful"<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately "in these days the play house is too often stocked with the drugs of easy seamy problems, or with the absinthe or vermouth of the last musical comedy"<sup>9</sup>. As its result, "the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality"<sup>10</sup>. J.M. Synge brought on the Irish stage both reality, and joy which are "founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer"<sup>11</sup>. The Irish Dramatic Movement became really a practical success when the Abbey Theatre was established. It became the living organism of the movement. W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge and other playwrights now got their own play house to present, before the Irish audience, the type of drama which they had not come across before and which at the same time became the most powerful agents

---

8. Synge, "Preface", "The Tinker's Wedding", Plays and songs of J.M. Synge, ed. Hearn, p. 108.

9. Ibid., p. 108.

10. Synge, "Preface", "The Playboy of the western world", p. 174.

11. Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre (New York & London, 1914), pp. 100-2.

to focus the aims and ideals of the movement. For "in times of acute national consciousness the theatre is the form of literature which makes the most direct impact on the people, becoming at times a means for propaganda, but ultimately the means by which the deeper life of the people is expressed"<sup>12</sup>.

But it was not an easy task to present on the stage the deeper life of the people "founded upon sincere observation and experience". And it was difficult to present on the stage some plays of Synge. No play in recent history created such an uproar at the theatre as did Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. Even Lady Gregory could not approve of Synge's Playboy theme. In a letter written to Molly Allgood, Synge had referred to the reactions and their impact produced by the Playboy on him, "I had a dreadful turn of despair over the playboy last night — it seemed hopeless, ... it is too bad but I must get done with the thing or it will kill me"<sup>13</sup>. Walter Starkie in his article, "An exciting Experience" had recorded his own experiences of the Abbey riot, and how it worked on Synge<sup>14</sup>. One should remember that The

---

12. Robert O'Driscoll, "Introduction", Theatre and Nationalism in 20th century Ireland ed., Robert O'Driscoll (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 11.

13. Laddisayer (ed.), Letters to Molly, p. 44.

14. "When I saw him on the night of the Abbey riot his face was pale and sunken, and he looked like a ghost of the sun-tanned wanderer. ... I watched him closely as he sat motionless through the dumb-show of his play, amidst the rioting and insults of the mob, but not a trace of emotion could I discern in his pale mask-like face that gazed unseeing at the raging auditorium". E.H. Mikhail (ed.), J.M. Synge: Interviews and Recollections. (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), p. 47.

Playboy of the Western World was written at a time when Synge was really ill. And the hostility which the play had to face, aggravated his illness. But that "hullabaloo" was indirectly a blessing in disguise for Synge. For it was with this play that he was able to achieve a landmark in the Irish literary history. With this play, W.B. Yeats had seen "the rise in his country of a new thought, the new opinion that the country had long needed"<sup>15</sup>. The riots kindled the imagination of the people and poetry which is a precious life blood of every great drama was brought back on the stage. Language which is the soul of drama was given a magnificent poetical expression. W.B. Yeats who had foreseen in Synge "the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland"<sup>16</sup> and predicted "a European reputation"<sup>17</sup> for Synge, gave him the protection and strength he needed at that hour. Mary Colma, a girl student who was present at the Abbey Theatre wrote, "I never witnessed a human being fight as Yeats fought that night, nor knew another with so many weapons in his armoury"<sup>18</sup>.

---

15. W.B. Yeats (ed.), Synge, p. 227.

16. W.B. Yeats, Autobiography (London, 1955), p. 206.

17. Alan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1956), p. 461.

18. Quoted in Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge and Pirandello, p. 206.

All the six plays of Synge were performed at the Abbey. Synge's Riders to the Sea and his last unfinished play Deirdre of the Sorrows were not assailed by the audiences.

It is heartening to note that Synge's own relatives did not attend any play of Synge produced at the Abbey. This <sup>in</sup> difference of his relatives to his plays caused him much mental suffering. Synge had to move amidst this inhospitable atmosphere of his family on the one hand and the world outside on the other. In spite of these heavy odds which came upon Synge's life, he did not lose heart. Rather, through trials and misfortune, Synge got "the tragic ecstasy" leading to the unification of "joy and sorrow"<sup>19</sup>. In the creative world of Synge both joy and sorrow are wedded together while the imaginative reality which is a far deeper reality than the surface reality of our day to day life, constitutes joy, the surface reality with "the relentless stride of time the ceaseless advance of age" and death, produces sorrow. And Synge advocates the poetic reality. In his last play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, despite its tragic undertone, it speaks of "a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time"<sup>21</sup>.

---

19. Robert O' Driscoll, "Yeats's conception of Synge", Sunshine and Moon's Delight, ed. Bushrui, p. 185. (Italics mine).

20. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, p. 174. (Italics mine).

21. Synge, "Deirdre of the Sorrows", p. 272. (Italics mine).



Synge's major contribution to the Irish Dramatic Movement was that he presented in his plays a vision of life which was commensurate with the ideals of the Movement. He had left "to the world the type of play that has since become the prototype of Irish folk drama"<sup>22</sup> and "a glorious heritage to make the theatre a Synge theatre"<sup>23</sup>.

---

22. Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (New York & London, Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 3.

23. Robert Hogan and Michael J O'Neill (eds), Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre, (Carbondale, 1967), p. 172.