



LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN J. M. SYNGE'S *IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN*

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ABSTRACT

Cofounder of the illustrious Abbey theatre John Millington Synge is one of the eminent figures of the Irish literary revival. *In the Shadow of the Glen* is Synge's first play to be staged. The play portrays the life of an unhappy couple who lives in one of the lonesome hills of rural Wicklow. The one-act play is set on a chaotic rainy night, which also reveals the melancholic darkness in which the characters are living. The thesis tries to discuss the character of Nora Bruke, who is often perceived as an unfaithful wife. Loneliness and isolation are the chief theme of the play as the main characters as haunted by the fear of loneliness. The thesis also discusses how the geography of a place like Wicklow can influence the essential fate of its natives.

Key Words: Synge, Isolation, Fear of Loneliness, Wicklow, Patriarchy, Nora Bruke.

Introduction

J. M. Synge is one of the most famous playwrights of Irish origin who is known for his plays like *Riders to the Sea* and *Playboy of the Western World*. "His boyhood was spent among the hills and mountains of the south of Dublin; an almost Wordsworthian passion for the country side, and a knowledge of natural history more intimate than Wordsworth's." (Henn 2) It is sure that his boyhood in Wicklow gave him sufficient knowledge of the peasantry which later strained his mind to write *In the Shadow of the Glen*. When the works of most of his contemporaries, including W. B. Yeasts are based on the theme of nationality Synge's work is "non-political, detached, ironic; concerned with this excited yet dispassionate exploration of the world of western peasantry..." (5) He concentrated on the simple and the ordinary affairs of the peasants.

Loneliness and isolation are the most prominent theme of the play. Synge himself was a "solitary and quiet man" and during the last phase of his life he lived in constant fear of isolation. We can see a similar kind of fear in his characters like Nora Bruke or Maurya. The life in rural Wicklow

where the play is set is also characterised by loneliness. The geography of the place has a lot to do with the life and characteristics of the characters. The people "live for most part beside old roads and pathways where hardly one man passes in the day... At every season heavy rains fall for often a week at a time, till the thatch drips with water stained to a dull chestnut and the floor in the cottages seem to be going back to the condition of bogs near it" (22). Strong winds and heavy storms often haunt the place. "This peculiar climate acting on a population that is already lonely and dwindling, has caused or increased a tendency to nervous depression among the people, and every degree of madness, from that of the man who has spent half his life in the madhouse, is common among these hills" (22).

Discussion

Nora Bruke, the protagonist of *In the Shadow of the Glen* is a middle aged woman married to an old man. Like Maurya of *Riders to the Sea* Nora Bruke is also vulnerable to the fate, but she too courageously fights against the odds of life. Even though Maurya and Nora Bruke fear, isolation and are haunted by loneliness, it is their courage to

stand alone in perishable circumstances that distinguish these two female characters. They are bold enough to accept their fate, but refuse to surrender to it.

In the hills of Wicklow the prolonged storms isolate lonely farms and the misty hills itself possess a sort of melancholic spirit that drive the men queer and mad. Dan Bruke the husband of Nora has gone queer in this manner. Nothing could ever vitalise his mind which has gone cold and rough in the traumatic melancholy of the hills where he spent most of his time. Nora suffered both due to patriarchy symbolised by her husband and the wild nature – and both played a role in her isolation.

When the play opens we find Nora Bruke and the dead body of her husband Daniel Bruke in a lonely cottage “at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow” (*Plays* 11) Nora welcomes a poor tramp who seeks shelter for the night. She narrates to the Tramp how wretched her life is. She reveals herself as an unhappy woman. They didn’t have children or a neighbourhood. Some passersby would stop and talk with her and that was her only comfort. She tells him about “the black curse” that Dan Bruke put on her on that morning, which prevented her from touching his dead body. The curse was that if anybody except his sister who lives in a faraway place touches his dead body she will be damned by that moment. As she is afraid she asks the Tramp to check the dead body to confirm whether he is dead or not. She is not sure about his death as “maybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I [Nora] knew him...” (13) She gives the Tramp some hot drinks and a needle and thread to patch his coat. She requests him to take care of the dead body while she goes and meet her only friend Michael Dara. When she is away to find Michael, Dan rises from his bed to the amazement of the Tramp. He reveals to the Tramp that he acted as dead to test her loyalty. Nora returns with Michael and Dan once again pretends to be dead. Michael proposes to marry Nora as she is now the only heritor of Dan Bruke’s wealth. At the end of play Dan announces that he is not dead and orders Nora to leave his house. The Tramp invites her to his life when Michael and Dan drink whisky.

Nora Bruke is a victim of a dominant and rude husband, whom she describes as “an old man, and an odd man.” He spent most of the time outside his home “thinking thoughts in the dark mist” letting his wife to immerse in melancholic loneliness. She was forced to live an isolated life by her “always queer” husband who suspects her as disloyal. It is clear from her conversation with the Tramp that she was unhappy that her husband gives her no love or companionship and they shared no joy. She has to endure his rudeness because he was her only source of food and shelter. He on the other hand didn’t need her company. He married her to take care of him when he is old and bedridden. He actually enjoyed his own loneliness and also isolated himself from his wife. This culminates in the overhaul isolation of Nora, who loves to socialise and make friends. This culpable loneliness enjoyed by Daniel, is quite different from that of the Tramp who is always alone in all his ventures. In a way both the men enjoy their loneliness, but it provides them the freedom to immerse in their own hobbies and practices. Their perception of nature is also different. Dan Bruke enjoys rearing while the Tramp loves to wander the world. While nature made Dan cold and queer it has a positive influence on the Tramp. But Dan Bruke’s self-created loneliness which resulted from his perception of nature attribute to the wretched fate of Nora. She hates loneliness, but don’t try to escape it until her husband fakes his own death.

The playwright didn’t portray Nora as completely disloyal to her husband. She is portrayed as being fed up by her husband’s behaviour. She did not invite men in her bedroom when her husband is away. Talking with passersby like Patch Darcy or Michael Dara was indeed a solace for her and in fact it does not prove that she is adulterous. All of her friends are men, but this also fails to prove her as a flirt as all the passersby surely will be men as the society rebuked woman from travelling alone. Michael proposes to marry her only after Dan’s death. We are not provided with adequate information about their relationship. Instead of empathising with her situation, most readers think of her as adulterer having an extramarital affair with Michael. There was a protest against the play when

it was first staged. They accused that the play distorted Irish Womanhood. But Nora Brooke is a courageous woman who attempted to fight against her fate and a husband who is loveless as well as doubtful. She always dreamt of a better future. She is not mourning her rude husband's death, but instead planning her future: "He after dying on me, God forgive him, and there I am with a hundred sheep beyond on the hills, and no turf drawn for the winter" (12). She is determined to live and manage the wealth after her husband is dead.

The Tramp impresses Nora by commenting on her loneliness: "I've walked a great way through the world, lady of the house, and seen great wonders, but I never seen a wake till this day with fine spirits, and good tobacco, and the best of pipes, and no one to taste them but a woman only" (14). These words also indicate that Nora is different from other woman of her time. She is also not afraid when a stranger knocks at her door at night and it further amazes the Tramp as he says: "a lone woman would be afraid of the like of me in the dark night, in a place wouldn't be as lonesome as this place..." (15)

Nora was not a good woman, according to the society because she was not ready to sacrifice her freedom. She is not afraid to talk to strangers or give them shelter. Talking to strange men was rebuked by the patriarchal society. When she goes alone in the horrible night to find Michael Dara, Dan Brooke, who symbolises the patriarchal society, says: "Ah, the devil mend her.... Do you hear that, stranger? Did you hear another woman could whistle the like of that with two fingers in her mouth?" (19) A woman of the period is not even supposed to whistle, but Nora was not ready to follow the norms. Her desire for love or companionship and freedom is totally neglected by her husband who keeps a stick "for I've a bad wife in the house."

We also don't know whether the young Michael Dara is her lover or friend. But with the available information it is evident that he is just a friend to her. Michael Dara is also a shepherd like Dan Bruke. The playwright describes him as an "innocent young man." He is not even a good shepherd and possesses no notable qualities to

impress a woman at least Nora. Her friendship with Michael thus indicates that she is not a flirt who craves for men to satisfy her physically. What she wanted is a company to share her sorrows and dreams. As said earlier, only men were there talking with her or the society and the climate or nature permitted only men to travel through lonesome places like where her home is situated. When Michael accuses her for her friendship with Patch Darcy, she tells him that

"it's in a lonesome place you have to be talking with some one, and looking for some one, in the evening of the day, and if it's a power of men I'm after knowing they were fine men, for I was always a hard child to please (she looks at him a little sternly), and a hard girl to please, and it's a hard woman I am to please this day, Michael Dara, and it's no lie I'm telling you.?" (24)

Dan Bruke at the end of the play talks friendly with Michael rather than punishing him and this also proves that Nora hasn't had an adulterous relationship with Michael. This change of behaviour from Dan Bruke reveals the inner agony of Dan. Once he enjoyed the solitude and isolated himself from his wife. But now he has sent away his wife to live with a tramp and now the ultimate loneliness could carve him in his last phase of life.

What she wanted is complete freedom and a companion. She married Dan Bruke not because she wanted to marry someone or she believed in the institution of marriage. There was no other choice for her as she lived a patriarchal society. The society conditioned woman to be dependent on man. Nora didn't blame her fate or regret her decision to marry Dan. As a victim of the patriarchal society, she asks: "What way would I live, and 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?" (25) She hoped that Dan will be a good companion for her and she would not feel seclusion. But he destroyed her hopes and pushed her into the pit of loneliness. The society doesn't allow a woman to be self-sufficient and independent. So Nora is forced to depend on a man.

She accepts the Tramp's invitation wholeheartedly. It also shows that she gave more importance to freedom than money or comfort or

handsome men. She respects herself as a woman and so she does not beg to Dan Bruke not to isolate her. Instead she points out that Dan Bruke was also dependable on her: "what way will yourself live from this day, with none to care you? What is it you'll have now but a black life, Daniel Bruke; and it's not long, I'm telling you, till you'll be lying again under that sheet, and you dead surely" (32). She is sure that she will get freedom with the Tramp and hopes to overcome isolation.

The play is set in a "bad night, and a wild night." But as the play ends the Tramp who can be considered as much a better man than Dan hopes that the wildness of the nature will vanish as the day break. He hopes "the rain is falling, but the air is kind, maybe it'll be a grand morning, by the grace of God." He lives a happy life not even without a shelter. He invites her to live with him by completely merging with nature. Tramp reflects Synge's own conviction of nature. Synge is aware about the peasant with "his qualities of stoic endurance, his sense of pagan sorrow; and of its brutality and violence in action or in thought" (23).

"We'll be going now, I'm telling you, and the time you'll be feeling the cold, and the frost, and the great rain, and the sun again, and the south wind blowing in the glens, you'll not be sitting up on a wet ditch, the way you are after sitting in this place, making yourself old with looking each day, and it passing you by. You'll be saying one time, "It's a grand evening, by the grace of god," and another time, "It's wild night God help us: but it'll pass surely." You'll be saying..." (31)

He promises her freedom from the dreary life she was living in the "lonesome cottage." He describe nature as the only source where Nora could find real freedom where she could hear not only the blathers of men but also the "herons crying after the black lakes," the songs of larks, she will be hearing "fine songs...when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear." We can see "a profound love and understanding of nature and the Irish landscape" (Skelton 23) in Synge's works and it is well apparently conveyed through the final dialogues of

the Tramp who sees ultimate freedom in nature, who live in bliss by understanding the nature.

Conclusion

Patriarchal society isolates Nora. She is deprived of her social life and freedom. The social conditions forced her to marry an old man. She says she has got no other options than marrying Dan Bruke who is a cold man. She is portrayed not as a typical woman who sacrifices her happiness for her husband and family. She wants happiness and freedom and also craves for a good company. But she is dependent on her husband for food and shelter and it is what sustains their relationship. Dan Bruke is also afraid of isolation. That's why he marries Nora. Nora is well aware about it.

Nora's relationship with other men like Patch Darcy and Michael Dara cannot be measured as an adulterous one. In those days only men visited such a lonesome place like rural Wicklow. Talking to them was her only comfort and it saved her from complete isolation. Her conversation with Michael also confirms that she respects herself and is not a flirt.

Nature plays a vital role in the chaotic life of both Nora and Dan. Dan's coldness is a direct result of his communion with the "wild nature" and his coldness further isolated Nora. Nora's character is also influenced by nature. Tramp change Nora's concept of nature and security and she finally gets ready to live a life by submitting to the nature, by understanding nature, by merging with nature.

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