

**DAMNED FOREVER: FATALISM IN JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE'S *RIDERS TO THE SEA*****PUJA CHAKRABERTY****PUJA  
CHAKRABERTY****ABSTRACT**

Fatalism plays a crucial role in the working of Synge's "Riders To The Sea" and is scrutinized so as to determine the extent to which it precipitates into a tragedy. In this connection, the faiths, beliefs and aspirations of man are taken into account, which necessarily guide a man towards his fortune. The fragile innocent human is studied meticulously from the gigantic vision of mystic fate. The nature of the characters concerned and their idiosyncrasies have been laid out to depict humankind in general. The concept of "free will" has been elaborated upon. Also, the feasibility of "existentialism" has been closely analysed for a proper assessment of the play.

**Key Words:** fatalism, scrutinized, tragedy, faiths, beliefs, aspirations, idiosyncrasies, humankind, free will, existentialism.

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**INTRODUCTION**

"Riders to the Sea" presents the tragic predicament of a few members of a once full and thriving family, which dwelt on one of the Aran Islands of the west coast of Ireland that happened to be secluded from the rest of the world. The family not just languish into poverty, but also irreparable loss without any visible fault of their own. The present paper examines the hedonistic influence of fate over the life of these characters. Fate in the form of the sea is shown not only to be the giver but also the destroyer of everything mortal. In this connection, the free choice of individuals is questioned and the limited scope of human desires and motives

profoundly investigated. The characters in the play with all their distinctive features, big and small represent universal mankind, all victimized and battling for a common survival. Their perseverance and dignified battle for existence make the one-act play a feast for the eye as well as the mind. The theory of "existentialism" is also shown to join the missing piece of the puzzle called life.

Text. To begin with, the alluringly mystic title of the play "Riders To The Sea" suggests a major working or functioning of the sea in the lives of the characters. The sea appears to one as a visually dynamic enchantress, which lures its travellers to a world of obscurity and speculation. The sea in the tradition of Christianity is connected with mankind

and its dwelling by the flood. In ancient Mexico, the sea was regarded as, "the watery underworld" and the symbol of fertility. Even in Egyptian mythology, the origin of earth and consequently life was believed to have been emerged from the sea (see Mouparna Sen, 2011). Thus, among all the other symbols that add to the gloom and horror of the play, the symbol of the sea appears to be the most prominent and enduring. The sea plays a pivotal role, because of its relevance to both life and death. Life because, the sea provides sustenance for nearly all the people of Aran Island, who depend upon it for earning their bread and butter and look towards it as their only consolation. The sea also impersonates death because many people have fallen a victim to the hungry and relentless tides of the sea and lost their lives prematurely. In this way, the sea appears to be the benevolent giver and also the tyrannous taker of life. It imperceptibly and heedlessly swings to its whim both ways.

As regards the structure, the dramatist maintains a stringent unity in his work, which can be paralleled to any rich classical drama. The action covers the limit of a single day. The place remains fixed, being a fisherman's cottage. The action is also well-knit with a neat beginning, a middle and an end; with no sub-plots and inessential happenings to hamper and impede the progress of the main action. In this sense, it is a well-wrought play. But as regards the tragic flaw or the moral blindness of the central character is concerned, there is none to be found; unless one regards a headstrong Bartley and his imprudence to be the cause of the tragic action; and also his downfall. Neither is there any chorus. Thus, the play fails to figuratively conform to the standard notion of a tragedy.

Two essential Christian doctrines, hope and faith should be examined at the start. Hope appears to be very feeble in the play, because as the play progresses one is made to understand that a poor fisherman's family has cruelly suffered at the hands of fate. Maurya, the old peasant woman has lost her husband, father-in-law and all her five sons to the sea. Her son Michael is shown to be missing at the sea for nine days and she is shown to be distraught and grief-stricken. She has not slept for days and

knows for sure that she has lost him. She has even bought a rope and a dainty set of white boards for making his coffin. This definitely displays a lack of hope in working. Faith also plays a minimal role in the functioning of the play (see Fiyinfoluwa Onarinde). Though Maurya is deeply religious and prays regularly, she suffers all the same. At one point, there is a stark suggestion. If the young priest is taken to be the agent of God and all that symbolizes faith, then Maurya chooses to disbelieve him and also indirectly the Christian faith, even though at the end she is shown to make a religious compromise (see Hassan Basarally, 2007). When Nora tells her mother that the priest has assured her that God would never do the injustice of leaving her impoverished "with no son living", Maurya replies, "Its little the like of him knows of the sea..." The element of faith in the play never crosses one's mind as something that enlightens, displays miracles and relieves one of all the "keening" and suffering presented in the play. Thus, one may say that "fate" acts as the biggest contributor in the play as contrasted to "faith".

Three arbitrary epithets can be applied to interpret the behaviour of the chief characters of this one-act play. These are optimism, pessimism and realism.

Optimism can be applied at length to describe the role of the two sisters namely, Cathleen and Nora. Cathleen spins at the wheel, bakes cake and take care of all the household chores. She represents the true female figurehead, who in the company of her motherly instincts manages to run the whole house and prevents it from falling apart. Nora, the younger sister, with her over-conscious mind and springy steps keeps knowledge of the world outside. Nora also with her sprightliness helps to keep some of the gloom and grief at bay. Both the sisters have a positive outlook towards life and always hope for the better. Their optimism surely helps to keep the spirit of the play alive and withstand able. In this context, another thing should be mentioned, the young priest who is only mentioned but does not play any role in the drama also acts as the torch-bearer of faith and hope. He does not prevent Bartley from going to the sea and rests assured believing in God's grace and mercy.

Pessimism can be applied to relate the behaviour and mental outlook of Maurya, the leading character of the play "Riders To The Sea". She has lost nearly all her family at the sea and is shown to stand at a loss of losing even her last surviving son, Bartley, who it seems is adamant on leaving for the sea. No amount of "keening" and pleas fall to the deaf ears of Bartley, who chooses otherwise. After nine days of crying over Michael, with no news of him to be found, Maurya knows instinctively that Michael is dead and has thus acquired that unwholesome calmness that comes over a person after an outbreak of tremendous emotion and passion. She is shown to live all her life in dread, anguish and despair brooding over loved ones and constantly praying for their safety. She creates an atmosphere of gloom and melancholy around her and can be phrased an utter pessimist. Even though she has faith in God, she has no hope for the survival of her sons at the sea.

The character of Bartley seems appropriate to be labelled as a realist. He is the last surviving son of Maurya in the play and the sole bread-winner of the family. But he sees things plainly as they are. His brother Michael has been missing for nine days at the sea and is considered as dead, leaving him i.e. Bartley as the only hope of the family to pull it out of its poverty and misery. He understands this and as a man of the family, takes full responsibility of carrying out this noble task. He believes himself to be righteous and acts accordingly. Bartley also seems to be unmoved by either God or ghosts and any ill omen. Says Dostoevsky,

" Miracles are never a stumbling-block to the realist. It is not miracles that dispose realists to belief. The genuine realist, if he is an unbeliever, will always find strength and ability to disbelieve in the miraculous, and if he is confronted with a miracle as an irrefutable fact he would rather disbelieve his own senses than admit the fact. Even if he admits it, he admits it as a fact of nature till then unrecognised by him."

The same is with Bartley. He portrays the ordinary layman who works all day to ensure a better livelihood for his family.

Now referring to the main theme of the paper, it is interesting to note that "fatalism" occupies a dominant part in the course of actions and events, which are fundamental to the working of the play. There happens to be a fine line of distinction between what one determines and what is followed by destiny. This applies to all individuals regardless of their birth, sex, colour, nature, etc. Tolstoy believes "free will" to be only an illusion that has fooled historians, scientists and even the common man over the ages. He negates any such thing as "free will" and interprets man's actions to be in tune and rhythm with a whole course of previous history, predestined from times immemorial.

Subjective inclusion and determination of reason and logistics is a big hoax. Only by perceiving the matter objectively can one endeavour to comprehend and concatenate the machinations of enigmatic fate. Alluding to the play, one finds three such conditions that establish this dynamic truth. One is when Maurya believes that Bartley can be dissuaded by her constant entreaties from undertaking a trip that might cost his life. She says, "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?". The second is when the two sisters naively resolve to believe in the phenomena that the giving away of blessings by the mother can probably reverse the bad omen and avert the lurking danger from the life of their brother. Instead, the old woman is unable to offer her blessings and also has a supernatural vision of her dead son, Michael riding on a grey pony behind the red mare of Bartley. What is phenomenal is in itself meaningless and has no connection whatsoever with the course of events governing a man's fate. The third is the implicit dramatic irony that manifests itself in the white boards bought previously by Maurya for her dead son, Michael. The white boards ironically serve as the coffin for her last son, Michael who is hit by the grey pony into the sea with his body being washed out thereafter. As a result, the mother's grief knows no end.

One observes a sharp and stinging blow of fate functional in this extraordinary tragedy. Schopenhauer says that, man being what he is and in the given circumstances cannot act and think otherwise than what the current situation permits. He compares the life of a man and all its happenings with the mechanical movement of an ordinary clock, the working of which is stringently bound by destiny. In his own words:

“every man being what he is and placed in the circumstances which for the moment obtain, but which on their part also arise by strict necessity, can absolutely never do anything else than just what at that moment he does do. Accordingly, the whole course of a man’s life, in all its incidents great and small, is as necessarily predetermined as the course of a clock.” (see Arthur Schopenhauer,2008).

The one theory, which seems as a viable condition for a play like “Riders To The Sea” may be said to be “existentialism”; existentialism puts emphasis on humankind’s search for logic and meaning in a world which is completely indifferent to its being and even hostile to its actions. The world is meaningless and has no purpose of its own. There are no rational explanations, no logical consistencies, no essential moralisms neither any metaphysical interpretations to determine the ways of life. Life works in strange and unknown ways. Every man is unique and isolated with regard to his own personal experiences. In this world that has no meaning he is expected to create his own meaning through his experiences in life and attach importance to it. In this sense all his actions are reduced to an absurdism of their own which he does in order to prefix a purpose in a world that is itself purposeless. Existentialism began as a reaction against the philosophies of Kant and Hegel and was linked with Nietzsche’s absolute atheism. Existentialism had a large number of proponents each with their individual perspectives of the idea, which eventually flowed into a common mainstream and became part of a major philosophical process. Existentialism propounded by the famous philosopher Jean Paul Sartre can be summarized in his own words as, “existence precedes essence”. By this is meant that

our experiences are the only foundations on which we have to build our logistics and sensibilities and not on any other formulations and deductions.

According to Sartre, common man is faced with many problems of existence. However, there are various choices open to a person at every turn of his or her life. One has to make a choice and stick to it. A man’s behaviour cannot be judged by any outward standards. Every man is responsible for the possible consequences of his own choice. It is so because there is nothing to bind a man as regards what he should do and what he should not. This in a way is Sartre’s idea of freedom. Then again the logical conclusion is that he has no right to accuse others for his own faults and mistakes. This involves the mental state called anxiety because there is no appeal from the person of choice. You make your bed you lie on it. Sartre judged literature in terms of this combination of choice and anxiety. All this has to be kept in mind when one thinks of applying the existentialist approach in “Riders To The Sea”. From the beginning one sees that nearly all the male members of Maurya’s family have been swept off by the sea, leaving her all alone with her two daughters and her only surviving son, Bartley. The sea acts as the agency of universal hostility that is insensitive and careless to the needs and desires of man and deliberately prevents an honest man from achieving his desired goal. The world, which pretends to be the keeper of order and harmony silently acts as the invisible adversary and reverses the conscious efforts of a man to bring about his own downfall. Even Bartley makes his “choice” and pays for it at the expense of his life. This is so because, no man can sit quietly and allow fate to take over the complete reins of his life. He will wantonly try to go against. In Camus’s “The Myth Of Sisyphus”, the Greek mythical hero Sisyphus was cursed by the God of Gods Zeus. He kept on pushing his physical capacities towards placing a stone on the top of a hill, which kept on sliding down despite his incessant efforts to avert it. Man however, cannot be both subject to fate and also be responsible for it (see Paul Russel, 2000). While approaching Synge’s “Riders To The Sea” a significant work of literature, which also has a direct connection with life (is actually inspired by a true incident happened in the

life of one of the natives of Aran Island), it turns out to be too great and sophisticated for any such hard and fast formulations.

If one considers the lines, "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old." And, "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied." At once, the reigning supremacy of fate over all human motives and actions becomes conspicuous. The truth, which Maurya counters at the end of the play is not a reconciling and embalming one, but a rather reluctantly imposed one which leaves very little room for choice. But then, it helps her turn a new leaf in her otherwise miserable and restless life (see Hassan Basarally, 2007).

Conclusion. No other writer seems to have presented the overriding and rebounding impact of fate in so plain convincing a fashion as Synge has done, without being the least romantic about it and cramming it with sentimentalism. The play is as hauntingly beautiful as it is grim and melancholic. But that doesn't take away the rather uniqueness of the play as it stands apart for its undying appeal to mankind. At last, when Maurya affirms that, "with all of them gone now" the sea cannot hurt her anymore; that now she can finally sleep in peace without caring a straw for the rest of the world, immediately recalls to one's mind the brilliant lines of Philip Larkin's,

"For this ignorance of me  
Seems a kind of innocence.  
Fast enough I shall wound it:  
Let me breathe till then  
Its milk-aired Eden,  
Till my own life impound it-"  
(The Arrival)

This sudden recognition of spiritual freedom alongside a temporary ignorance of everything that is painful lends the play an air of peace and pleasantry after a long series of heart-rending sorrows and disruptions. Fate, which intermittently plays the master of all uncalled-for disasters in the

play, is however not shown to be able to thwart the essential spirit and effort of the noble human. There lies the unparalleled grandeur of "Riders To The Sea".

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