



## Atmosphere, traditions and beliefs of the people for Aran Island in “*Riders to the Sea*”

<sup>1</sup> M Kokila, <sup>2</sup> S Thavamani

<sup>1</sup> M.Phil, Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup> M.A English, Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni, Tamil Nadu, India

### Abstract

The south island, Inisheer, like the middle island but slightly smaller. They lie about thirty miles from Galway, up the centre of the bay, and they are not far from the cliffs of County Clare, on the south, or the corner of Connemara on the north. Kilronan, the principal village on Aranmor, has been very much changed by the fishing industry so that it has now very little to distinguish it from any fishing on the west coast of Ireland.

**Keywords:** atmosphere, habits, beliefs, aran island peoples

### Introduction

Synge went to Aran Islands in May, 1898 and he returned to these islands in four succeeding summers. He lived with the people and made a close study of their habits and beliefs. He based his plays on these observations. *Rider to the sea* is based on his third and fourth visits. In this play we see the habits and beliefs, the manners and misfortunes of the Maurya family. This family represents the people of Aran Islands. These people had to struggle all the time against the stony soil and the cruel sea. The seas around these islands were very rough and every storm meant mourning in some houses. Synge felt that these people were under a judgment of death. They struggled against heavy odds and were crushed down by cruel Fate. The depiction of their ways and beliefs in *Riders to the sea* creates the proper tragic atmosphere in this play.

### Stony soil and cruel sea

The people of Aran Islands were half-peasants and half-fishermen. They worked very hard and yet were very poor. The soil was stony and only crops like rye grew there. The young men had to go to the sea constantly for fishing and for going to the mainland. The sea was the giver and taker of their lives. It was their arch-enemy and yet they were wholly dependent on it. From the sea they collected sea-weeds for fuel and kelp to be used as manure for their fields.

In *Riders to the sea* the sea is the agent of Destiny. It does not appear on the stage but outside it roars hungrily for its annual toll of human lives. Maurya has lost her husband, her husband's father, and four sturdy sons during a span of about twenty years. Nine days before the play opens Michael was drowned and the drowning of Bartley is the main tragedy in the play.

### Family Ties

As usually happens in isolated communities, family ties are very strong among these people. Maurya loved her husband and her sons very dearly and so the drowning of all these men

has been the greatest calamity of her life. Cathleen and Nora are very affectionate to each other and they have great love for their mother and brothers. That is why the deaths cause deep wounds in their heart.

### Nearness to death but sense of duty

The seas around these islands are usually very rough and so the young 'riders to the sea' face the risk of dying any moment. But the young men have a sense of duty and they go to the sea at all times in spite of the risks involved. Maurya tries her best to persuade Bartley not to go to the sea that day but he is determined to do his duty. Cathleen says, "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea".

Every storm at the sea brings mourning to some families. They have a system of ritual mourning known as "keening". It is a lamentation for the dead in which the women wail and moan and sway their bodies rhythmically. We see the women "keening" when Bartley dies.

Women keep praying for the safety of their menfolk but prayers are usually of no avail. Maurya has been praying for Bartley through half the nights but in spite of that he dies. At the end Maurya finds no hope or comfort in prayer and so she seeks relief in bowing before mortality. Everyone has to die. There is no way of avoiding it. So we should be satisfied if our dead get proper burial.

### Making of a coffin

There were no trees on these islands and so the boards for making coffins had to be purchased and brought from the mainland. The custom was that the male members made the coffin for the dead members of the family. When Bartley dies there is no male member left in the house and so Cathleen asks some other persons to come and make the coffin. She tells them that they can eat the cake, which had been baked for Bartley, while they are making the coffin.

As the play opens we see the while boards kept in the kitchen against the wall. That creates the tragic atmosphere at the very

beginning of the play. When Bartley dies Maurya's consolation is that he will have a fine coffin made out of these fine boards and a deep grave.

### **Portents and Omens**

The islanders judge the state of the weather from the position of the stars and the direction of the winds. Maurya thinks that the sea will be rough because the previous night she saw a star near the moon and the wind was rising from the south and the west. She tries her best to stop Bartley from going but when he does not listen to her and leaves, she has a strong premonition that he will not come back alive.. Maurya's forebodings make us certain that Bartley is doomed and would not come back to his mother alive.

### **Their beliefs and superstitions**

The islanders are Roman Catholic Christians but Christianity does not play an important part in their lives. The poor peasants feel the menace of Death all around them and so they forget the teachings of Christianity and seize upon any belief of superstition that offers hope of safety and comfort. The consolations of Christianity do not console them. They have pagan beliefs which are older than Christianity. The priest is referred to in the play but he is absent physically as well as spiritually from the lives of the natives. His words of comforts do not comfort them..

It has magical properties. Maurya sprinkles this holy water on the clothes of Michael and on the dead body of Bartley.

The islanders believe in spirits and spectres. She was frightened because it was a sure indication that Bartley would die very soon. The girls are also superstitious and hearing this they start "keening" and Cathleen says, "It's destroyed we are from this day".

The appearance of a ghost following a man is a very bad omen. It creates the dark atmosphere of terror in the play.

In her last speech also Maurya is a typical old woman of the island who is prepared to accept whatever Destiny has in store for her. She says that no one can live forever and so we must be satisfied. This is the feeling of stoic resignation and not one of the Christian faiths in the immortality of the soul and the mercy of Christ.

Pagan beliefs are stronger than Christian faith among these people. This strengthens the tragic atmosphere in the play.

### **Conclusion**

The sea is the agent of Destiny. The men cannot help going to the sea and so they are all the time under the danger of sudden death. Their families have, therefore, become superstitious. They believe in magic, spectres and spirits. The depiction of these habits and beliefs in *Riders to the sea* creates the atmosphere of tragic doom in the play.

### **References**

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