CHAPTER – VII

*Riders to the Sea*

The Woman-Nature Connection

Like *Juno and the Paycock*, *Riders to the Sea* is also a pure Irish play. However, unlike our previous play that depicted the travails of the woman protagonist in the urban setting of Dublin, *Riders* explores the same problem in the distinctively rural setting of the Aran islands. The play was written by John Millington Synge, born in a conservative, aristocratic landed Irish family in Dublin in 1871. Having lost his father in his infancy, it was his mother who single-handedly brought him up and his siblings and according to some critics, she was Synge’s model for Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*. After graduating from the Trinity College, Dublin, where he dabbled in music and studied foreign languages, Synge left Ireland to explore other countries. He spent a few years in Germany where he first came across Ibsen’s works and later travelled to Italy, England and France, adopting a pan European outlook that was to be imbibed in his plays. Nevertheless his reading of the literature of different countries left him confused about the language and content to be used in his works. According to Elaine Sisson, in her essay, “*The Aran Islands* and the travel essays”, “the Synge whom W.B. Yeats met in Paris in 1896 was struggling to articulate himself in the language of the material he was reading: of the aesthete and urbane scholar-poet”, and it was Yeats who brought about a turning point in his life with his suggestion, to visit the Aran islands in Ireland. The experience was an eye opener: Synge was to explore the rich heritage of Irish folk culture and language in his sojourns on these islands and “discovered a life that had not yet been expressed in literature”. He now concentrated on depicting Irish history and culture through his
plays. Unlike his earlier contemporaries, Shaw and Wilde, Synge was not to pursue his creative talents in London, but returned to Dublin and established a new touchstone in Irish drama.

This proved to be a boon to the newly established Abbey theatre in Ireland that wanted to represent Ireland as “the home of an ancient idealism”. Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, co-founders of this national theatre encouraged Irish dramatists to produce works of “deeper thoughts and emotions rather than mawkish sentimentality”. Synge’s plays depicted the true Irish peasant life.

His brand of realism was a shift away not only from the tomfoolery and false naivety that was the Irish peasant’s representation on the English stage, but also from a merely symbolic representation of Irishness.¹

His tragedy Riders to the Sea (1902) is considered one of the greatest one act plays in the history of modern drama, notable for its graphic and realistic depiction of the life of peasants in rural Ireland, making critics like Maurice Bourgeois call it a “flawless masterpiece”. The play stays true to the Abbey Theatre’s clarion call of reality on stage. Moreover, it gave a new perspective of rural life to urban audiences by portraying the struggle for survival and a range of complex emotions generally considered alien to the ‘pastoral’ peasant life.

Riders to the Sea is much more than a naïve tale about a group of noble primitives. It is an account of a cultural battle, a battle whose tragic outcome is as predictable as is the death of Bartley. Viewing the play as a psychologically accurate representation of turn-of-the-century Irish peasants rather than as an idyllic, romanticized picture of them, expands our understanding of the characters, offers new and revelatory insight into the interaction among them.²

Synge’s first hand experience of life on the Aran Islands brought a unique verisimilitude into his writings. It is widely believed that Synge “does not so much
travel through Ireland as within it”- sleeping in ditches, lying by the road side and hiking through bogs and mountains with ears attuned to the local dialect. His travels find faithful representation here in the story of Maurya and her peasant surroundings: Synge not only uses local dialect and realistic settings but also represents local customs like “keening”, local myths of visions of approaching death and superstitions rising from withheld blessings.

CATHLEEN (to Maurya): Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You’ll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say ‘God speed you’, the way he’ll be easy in his mind.3

In the play, the local fisherfolk who rely on the wild and unpredictable sea for a living, combat with nature in their quest for survival. The young men who venture out onto it are often destroyed leaving behind keening mothers and wives. Una Ellis Fermor describes the sea here as "terrible and beyond the power of any but the young men who still have some of its own fierce hardness".4 On these islands a destructive nature dominates over the peasants unlike modern civilisation where nature remains more as a backdrop and unobtrusive element in people’s lives. Sisson, with reference to Synge’s travel essays believes that Synge with his unique talent is able to understand the cycle of life and thus merge different elements into his work.

They illustrate not only Synge’s ability to read the Irish landscape, captured in language, but his acceptance of mortality, beauty, fragility, death and the cyclical nature of life.5

It is not surprising that Ireland, being an island nation looks upon the sea as an integral part of its culture. Traditional Irish literature focused on the eventful lives of sea faring males and their adventures, within which women characters were generally inconspicuous and marginalized. In contrast, in Riders To The Sea (which would also qualify as an indirect voyage literature) the focus is on women, their emotions and
their (in)action while the men are only talked about. According to some critics, Synge established a new precept in Irish drama with his focus on the woman protagonist.

He inaugurates an Irish national theatre that not only attempted to diminish the stage Irishman, but also initiated the Irishwoman into the drama in a new and significantly vocal way, in a manner comparable to Ibsen’s narrative.  

Strikingly different in setting from the rest of the plays in this dissertation, *Riders to the Sea*, when read from a feminist perspective, shows that a woman is a victim not only in human society but also in nature. The play opens on a somber note, with the daughters trying to identify the clothes that would confirm their brother Michael’s death, while the old matriarch Maurya, unaware of this development, is fatefuly awaiting the news of his death.

CATHLEEN: *(spinning the wheel rapidly)*: What is it you have?
NORA: The young priest is after bringing them. It’s a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal.
*Cathleen stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen.*
NORA: We’re to find out if it’s Michael’s they are, some time herself will be down looking by the sea.(7)

The wild and cruel side of nature manifested here in the persona of the sea, has already devoured Maurya’s husband, father-in-law and five young sons and she is now left with only one son and two daughters. Predictably, she is worn out and depressed and in a vision even foresees her youngest son being led to his death by her elder son who is already dead.

MAURYA: *(with a weak voice)* My heart’s broken from this day.
CATHLEEN *(as before)*: Did you see Bartley?
MAURYA: I seen the fearfallest thing…. I seen Michael himself.
CATHLEEN *(speaking softly)*: You did not, mother. It wasn’t Michael you seen, for his body is after being
found in the far north, and he’s got a clean burial by the grace of God.

MAURYA (*a little defiantly*): I’m after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare, and I tried to say ‘God speed you’, but something choked the words in my throat…. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it- with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet. (15)

The tragic fate of Maurya compels the reader to reflect on the havoc that nature creates, reducing human beings to mere spectators. Nature, in the form of the sea, is a powerful element in this play and affects the other characters in a major way "shaping their action, moods and fates". The sea supposedly seals Maurya’s fate and she seems doomed to despair and dejection. Surprisingly, however, especially after the death of her youngest son, Maurya reconciles to her destiny and stoically accepts the deaths of her loved ones.

MAURYA: (*drops Michael’s clothes across Bartley’s feet, and sprinkles the Holy Water over him*). It isn’t that I haven’t prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn’t that I haven’t said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn’t know what I’d be saying; but it’s a great rest I’ll have now, and it’s time surely. It’s a great rest I’ll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain. (18)

In the course of the play she acquires a unique strength of character, refusing to break down and keen for her sons as was the custom. According to Alan Price, Maurya gains a little peace and consolation towards the end as she has nothing to lose.

Having supped pain and horror to the full and known the pitch of agony, Maurya gets beyond the world, since she no longer has any claims upon it, nor it upon her. Accordingly calm and compassion come to her, she forgets herself and acquires humility and charity.

Against the backdrop of a patriarchal, convention ridden society, Maurya establishes that, society apart, even nature cannot break the resilient spirit of a woman, thus becoming a heroine worthy of analysis. While the heroines in our other
plays faced hardships from men in a male dominated world, Maurya's opposition is 
much more formidable as it comprises the non human sea. The fact that she gains a 
psychological victory over the sea establishes Maurya in the league of tough women 
who manage to survive and succeed even in hostile situations.

The heroine Maurya is the main protagonist of the play, but *Riders to the Sea* 
is unique in also having a non human protagonist-cum-antagonist-nature in the form 
of the sea, and ironically both these are set against one another. This comes as a 
surprise, as most often women are considered to be in harmony with nature. Right 
from ancient times, woman has been seen as being close to nature and umpteen 
reasons have been given to justify this association. Not only male chauvinists, but 
some women too believe that woman's power lies in her biology and in her 
association with nature. Cultural feminists firmly believe in the woman- 
nature connection and attribute human behaviour to human biology thus increasing the man-
woman divide.

> Human nature is grounded in human biology and 
> humans are biologically sexed and socially 
> gendered.  

Women's biology and nature are celebrated as sources of female power. Andree 
Collard believes that woman's reproductive capacity creates a strong bond between 
nature and women.

> Nothing links the human animal and nature so 
> profoundly as woman's reproductive system which 
enables her to share the experience of bringing forth and 
nourishing life with the rest of the living world. 
> Whether or not she personally experiences biological 
> mothering, it is in this that woman is most truly a child 
> of nature and in this natural integrity lies the wellspring 
> of her nature.  

Ancient Greek culture also associated women with earth or land. The myth that 
the universe began with the union of the earth (Gaia) and the sky (Uranus) has always
supported this idea. Greek literature abounds with references to women connected to the earth. In his classic *Antigone*, Sophocles refers to Antigone and women in general as land.

ISMENE: You would kill the bride of your own son?
CREON: There are other fields just as fertile.11

However most feminists are against the woman-nature association and believe that linking women's biology to nature is to deliver women over to male stereotypes that root women's character structure entirely in their biological being. Sherry Ortner elaborated on the nature-woman association in her essay. She theorised that patriarchs associated three major characteristics of women with nature viz. physiology, psychology and social role. Women's physiological experience of bringing forth life from their bodies and undergoing the pleasures and pains of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing are seen as being close to nature. Women are more emotional because psychologically they have greater ties to the personal and the particular, and socially, their roles as child rearers confine them to the hearth and home. As against this, men are free to travel outside without any thought of domestic responsibility and hence they establish themselves in the public sphere from which women are alienated. Ortner concluded that "women are identified or symbolically associated with nature as opposed to men who are identified with culture". 12 In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir tried to find the source of these different associations for men and women, and came to a similar conclusion.

Maternity dooms women to a sedentary existence and so it is natural that she remain at the hearth while man hunts, goes fishing and makes war. 13

*Riders to the Sea* portrays Maurya as a matriarch. She is the perfect homemaker who stays behind, while her husband and sons venture out to the high seas for a living. Her whole identity, in fact, is in her persona as a mother to young
men and we perhaps sympathise more with her because of her loss as a mother. Oona Frawley called the play a “sublime feminine tragedy” that focused on hardships that women in general and mothers in particular face when they are left destitute with the desertion of their men/sons. This situation questions whether the ‘noble’ institution of “motherhood” is actually an instigator and perpetrator of women’s woes. Motherhood is considered the most intimate and most personal relationship that a woman shares directly with nature and in Maurya’s case the association is even more striking as she is more connected to nature with her peasant surroundings. Is nature then an associate of women or is it a false lure to perpetrate women’s subjugation? For Maurya, the sea is her arch rival that takes away her sons one by one till she is left with nothing. According to Susan.C.Harris, though Maurya fulfills all her maternal and womanly functions, she does not gain any benefits from a nature that is hostile to women.

Maurya’s reward for her labour is the excruciating experience of watching her sons die. Maurya is struck by the cruel futility of motherhood as she has experienced it.14

The undervalued status of maternity remains a bone of contention for feminists who believe that the patriarchal nature of society deliberately gives less importance to motherhood. Traditional male chauvinists have always tried to portray their world of culture as superior vis-à-vis the feminine world of nature. They look down upon the qualities of love and care, which are normally associated with women and mothers and cite these as major reasons for women’s inefficiency in the public sphere. Radical feminists vehemently oppose this attitude and have waged a war against "the low value that patriarchy assigns to female qualities like nurturance, emotion and gentleness".15 Many feminists believe this is because of a feeling of jealousy and fear of the reproductive capacity of women. In The Politics Of Reproduction, Mary O’Brien gives us the whole concept in a nutshell when she concludes that patriarchy is
man's compensation for his alienation from reproductive consciousness. Shulamith Firestone makes it clear that women's biology is abused by men to gain the upper hand.

Throughout history, in all stages and types of cultures women have been oppressed due to their biological function.\textsuperscript{16}

Taking the above theories into consideration it becomes clear that associating women with nature is just another patriarchal excuse to confine women to the domestic realm and bar their entry into the active cultural world outside.

Ecofeminism, aims to merge the best of ecology with feminism. It tries to integrate humanity with non human nature with emphasis on redefining women's historical role in child bearing and child rearing. However, in doing so, ecofeminism reiterates that woman's place is in nature and involuntarily gives a boost to patriarchs who take undue advantage of this association. In contrast to this viewpoint, traditional feminists have always believed that "women would not be free until the connections between women and the natural world were severed"\textsuperscript{17} They insist that patriarchs and patricentric cultures created the woman -nature connection to debase women.

Women have long been associated with nature in western culture by males. The earth was long called "Mother Earth" in ancient Mediterranean cultures because of her agricultural fertility and seasonal cyclicity.\textsuperscript{18}

Many feminists are of the view that women need to go beyond the domestic realm into a new politics if they want a radical social change, wherein men and women would be treated as equals. Socialist ecofeminists rate women and nature on the same scale because both are exploited by men. In modern civilisation, the woman is at the receiving end of male oppression while the cultural world has succeeded in keeping the forces of nature under its control and does not hesitate in exploiting it.
Modern man has learnt to tackle natural disasters to a certain extent. He has cut down forests for material benefits and has even succeeded in pushing the sea behind to make homes for himself. Industries not only exploit nature for raw materials but also pollute the environment with toxic gases. Socialist ecofeminists believe that the capitalist relations of production reveal the domination of nature by men. The (ab)use of nature "inherent in the market economy's use of it as a means of resources " shows man's domination over nature. They believe that the idea of dominating nature, stems from the domination of human by human.

Only ending all systems of domination makes possible an ecological society, in which no states or capitalist economies attempt to subjugate nature.

In this ideal society human beings would not dominate over nature, nor men over women. The society portrayed in Riders To The Sea is different. The dichotomy between the traditional rivals viz. men vs. women and nature vs. culture is non existent on these islands. Here nature dominates over humans. It is wild and merciless in its treatment towards the islanders who are reduced to mere pawns in its powerful hands. Women who are traditionally associated with nature find themselves isolated on these islands as the forces of nature gang up to destroy their men. However, women have a knack of knowing nature. Maurya, the peasant woman who has grown up on the island recognizes the signs of a sea that is soon to claim a victim, and desperately hopes that Bartley and the young priest too would read the signs.

MAURYA: He won’t go this day with the wind rising from the south and west. He won’t go this day, for the young priest will stop him surely. (8)

However, the men are incapable of seeing the nuances of the sea and it is left to Maurya, to save Bartley’s life and she tries her best to dissuade her youngest son from undertaking the fateful voyage.
MAURYA: Isn’t it a hard and cruel man won’t hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea? (10)

Having faced the terrors of the sea for years, Maurya who is now old and dependent, realizes the tragically ironic situation that she finds herself in, on this hostile island in contrast to the world outside, when she is given a walking stick left behind by her dead son Michael.

MAURYA: *(taking a stick Nora gives her)* 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.(12)

The outside world for her signifies a place where things are normal and human beings do not have to carry out a day to day survival struggle, which is true to a large extent.

On the islands, when nature unleashes her fury the men are killed but women survive to bear the brunt of the aftermath. Maurya's sons must have surely had a terrible time when faced with their watery deaths; however, we cannot deny the fact that their struggle ceases when they perish while Maurya's struggle begins with the deaths of her sons. While they were alive, she lived in perpetual dread of their imminent deaths. After the actual deaths, her sufferings take on material shape when she is left to fend for herself. In the conservative island society she lives in, she knows it will be a difficult life for her with no male member in the house, and though Bartley is still alive, she already foresees the difficulties following his death.

MAURYA: Its hard set we’ll be surely the day you’re drowned with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave. (10)

This is a complete volte face from her earlier attitude that pleaded to Bartley as a mother, who did not want to lose her only surviving son. Gradually her arguments take on a material shape. This may also be a ploy on her part, for she knows that
Bartley is a man of the world and would perhaps realize the troubles that would fall on the family after his death. Bartley, who is adamant on undertaking the voyage to get a good price for the horses is chided by Maurya for not being able to look beyond materialistic gains.

MAURYA: If it isn’t found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. 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? (10)

Maurya’s situation brings to light the patriarchal nature of the society she was living in. On these islands, as in all patriarchal societies, the men went out to work while the women stayed at home. Cathleen voices this age old tradition, when Maurya tries to prevent Bartley from undertaking the journey and emphasizes that "its the life of a young man to be going on the sea". (10) However Bartley is not the typical male chauvinist. He believes his sisters capable enough of doing odd ‘male’ jobs and entrusts them with this responsibility, though Maurya herself is not too pleased, as she believes in the traditional division of labour.

BARTLEY (to Cathleen): Let you go down each day, and see the sheep aren't jumping in on the rye, and if the jobber comes you can sell the pig with the black feet if there is a good price going.

MAURYA: How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?

BARTLEY (to Cathleen): If the west wind holds with the last bit of the moon let you and Nora get up weed enough for another cock for the kelp. It’s hard set we’ll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work. (10)

But it may also be significant to add that Bartley knows, there is no option once he leaves, and the house would have to run even in his absence. Moreover, in his ignorance of the signs of danger sent by the sea and in his turning a deaf ear to his
mother’s ominous warnings, Bartley reemphasises his untraditional personality. According to Judith Leder, Bartley is a character, caught between the traditional and the modern.

Though an islander by birth and training, he must, by virtue of economic necessity, be a part time mainlander. Although Nora may dream of the big world, and although her mother has the freedom to reject that world, Bartley can do neither. He must balance the old and the new. 

Bartley, the man, is untraditional, but it is significant to add here that all the women characters in the play are prototypes of the patriarchal concept of womanhood who adhere to the hearth and home. Moreover from the viewpoint of Irish nationalism, they are the perfect representatives of Irish womanhood. At the time, that Synge was writing, the Irish National Movement against England was gaining momentum. A critic and political columnist, Arthur Griffith advocated the Irish-Ireland strain of nationalism that aimed to deAnglicise Ireland economically and culturally. In this, he emphatically sought a specific role for the Irish woman- that of an idealized woman and the embodiment of pure Irishness; a woman who would help in increasing the Irish population and at the same time increase Irish economic independence by consuming everything Irish. In Riders to the Sea, the women conform to these norms. Maurya is a mother to eight children and remains confined to her home while her daughters Cathleen and Nora are not involved in work outside the house. Their duties are limited to doing domestic jobs for their brothers like spinning, making their stockings and baking their cakes when they embarked on a journey.

CATHLEEN: There's a cake baking at the fire for a short space and Bartley will want it when the tide turns if he goes to Connemara. (8)
Susan Cannon Harris emphasizes the important part played by the women protagonists in *Riders to the Sea* in spreading the message of the gender norms of the Irish-Irelanders, that incidentally gave a boost to patriarchy.

Maurya and her two daughters, Nora and Cathleen, live in a home built of authentic Irish materials. After bearing eight children to her husband, Maurya has certainly done her reproductive duty. ...Nora and Cathleen are wholly concerned with caring for their failing mother and their remaining brother. Both girls are good Irish homemakers....From an Irish-Ireland perspective, these women are perfect. 

However it does need mention that both Cathleen and Nora are not the typical women who would be idealized in Victorian society. Though they unquestioningly do their domestic duties, they also have a penchant for curiosity and knowledge. Like her mother, Cathleen is quite familiarized with the weather conditions of the island. Her practical and canny nature makes her a natural leader under the circumstances. She is in charge of the household, “directing, deciding, arranging everything that goes on”. She is bold and emotionally strong and is well prepared to see the bodies of her dead brothers. The fact that Bartley asks her to do chores outside the house shows the faith he has in her.

The character of the younger sister Nora is more sketchy. She seems to be less interested in the island and its ways, than in the mainland. Her role in the play is more as a voice of the absent priest rather than her own.

CATHLEEN: How would they be Michael’s, Nora? How would he go the length of that way to the far north?
NORA: The young priest says he’s known the like of it. “If it’s Michael’s they are”, says he, “you can tell herself he’s got a clean burial, by the grace of God; and if they’re not his, let no one say a word about them, for she’ll be getting her death”, says he, “with crying and lamenting”. (7)
According to Judith Leder, Nora is a significant minor character who epitomizes the islander who is desperately searching for a better life.

She has the marks of a peasant-in-transition and shares with the priest a modern orientation. Her experience is limited, but her interests lie in a world beyond the cottage walls….She rarely shows the sort of knowledge, we might expect of a young woman who lives in the cottage. Her constant fumbling and confusion evidence both her basic insecurity and her genuine lack of interest on the island.24 Her character is in contrast to Cathleen’s who has a thorough knowledge not only of the island, but also of the odd things lying about the house.

CATHLEEN (looking at her anxiously): Give her the stick, Nora, or maybe she’ll slip on the big stones.
NORA: What stick?
CATHLEEN: The stick Michael brought from Connemara. (12)

Nevertheless, to a certain extent both Cathleen and Nora are products of a patriarchal society that treats women as vulnerable creatures who have to be protected at all times. Hence a girl is protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in adulthood and by her son in her old age. John Hardwig tried to delve into the female psyche and find the reason for this dependency.

Females in our culture define themselves more in terms of relation to others, less in terms of opposition to others.25 This results in a loss of identity and independence, which is the fate of the majority of women. Maurya's attitude of connecting her well being to that of her sons shows a conventional attitude of regarding the male members of the family as indispensable. When Maurya, who is highly dependent on her sons keeps losing them one by one, she is heartbroken and finds it impossible to fathom life without them. The untimely and sudden deaths of her elder sons and the imminent death of Bartley leave her without any enthusiasm for life and induce a death wish within her.
MAURYA: ...Bartley will be lost now and let you call in Eamon, and make me a good coffin out of the white boards for I won't live after them. I've had a husband and a husband’s father and six sons in this house...but they're gone now, the lot of them.(16)

Maurya is here seen in her most vulnerable position. Her weak-kneed behaviour at this juncture portrays her as a woman steeped deep into the patriarchal notions of womanhood. However, in this play, the patriarchal attitude of society does not come into conflict with the woman's viewpoint or her ideologies. Patriarchal and social tenets of the man- woman divide seem insignificant on the islands. Here both men and women have to come together to put a brave fight under severe circumstances. Patriarchy merely forms a background to the major conflict between woman and nature. Maurya’s laid-back attitude towards life changes when she puts up a creditable opposition to the sea by refusing to break down in the face of the miseries that the sea imposes on her. She achieves a tremendous victory when she rises above her grief. Her sufferings and subsequent stoicism emphasise that woman and nature are not always allies, however, if a woman wishes she can bravely tackle the forces of nature and emerge victorious.

Maurya here transcends her traditional role of a woman waiting for her sons to come home. She faces the reality of the deaths of her sons and gains a virtual victory in defeat when she refuses to break down in the face of this calamity. Earlier, Maurya could not even bless the departing Bartley thinking of his inevitable death.

MAURYA: Bartley came first on the red mare, and I tried to say 'God speed you' but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and 'the blessing of God on you', says he, and I could say nothing. (15)

After the deaths of all her sons, Maurya gains a kind of iron will that helps her in keeping her composure in her hour of crisis. She is now able to give the withheld
blessing not only to Bartley but also to the other dead family members. According to Alan Price, this is because Maurya has reached “a condition of complete simplicity”.

Her gesture in putting the empty cup mouth downwards upon Bartley’s body symbolizes that she has drained life to the lees, and feels that the end is come. Hence in her last great speeches it is not so much on the agony she has experienced that she dwells but upon the comfort that may come through total defeat and acquiescence.26

MAURYA: (puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley’s feet)
They’re all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley’s soul, and on Michael’s soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn (bending her head); and may He have mercy on my soul Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. (19)

Edwin Engel remarks that this attitude of Maurya gives a determinate finality to Synge's play for "when the sea has taken the last of the male members of the family it completes an emotional cycle. If pity and terror are not purged they are atleast definitely terminated".27

The simultaneous news of the deaths of her two sons changes her perception towards life and death. Maurya who earlier wished to die rather than live without her sons, now stoically accepts the bitter facts of life and tries to make the best out of what is left in her life.

MAURYA: Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, an’ we must be satisfied. (17)

Maurya's stoic grace at this juncture elevates the ordinary peasant woman to the status of a tragic heroine. Una Ellis Fermor believes that "Maurya's resignation is not that of love or understanding but of relief that the end has come of a heroic contest even though in defeat."28
MAURYA: (raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her). They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me….I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south…. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (17)

Through the character of Maurya, Synge is here trying to challenge the assumption that woman and nature are associates and that woman is close to nature. In her fight with nature, Maurya breaks free of these patriarchal assumptions. In the process she also becomes a rebel against the social impositions of womanly behaviour. She refuses to keen on losing her loved ones as expected from a traditional society. She is no longer afraid of the sea, and the norms and expectations of society do not bother her anymore. Christopher Murray rightly states that “Liberation is the strangely unexpected theme sounded at the end of Riders to the Sea.” Synge sets out to write a tragedy of the local Aran islanders, but in the process, he depicts his woman protagonist Maurya with unconventional attributes. Maurya, in her native simplicity, performs a dual rebellion- against nature as well as against a custom enforcing culture. Her emotional and psychological victory in both spheres shows she has the courage to face challenges and succeed. She is able to maintain her dignity and self respect in the face of adversity and thus deservedly qualifies to become a heroine worthy of analysis.

This chapter has looked at the different ways in which women and nature are associated with one another and questioned the woman- nature connection because the woman is a mute victim to nature’s sufferings. However in the next chapter that focuses on Eugene O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms, the debate of whether women and nature are truly associates, would continue even more vigorously wherein the main protagonist deliberately severs her ties with nature.
NOTES


3. J.M. Synge, Two Irish Plays, Riders to the Sea & The Playboy of the Western World (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1986) 11. This edition has been used throughout the chapter and page numbers have been mentioned in parentheses.


10. Quoted from Andree Collard's "Rape of the Wild" by Janet Biehl in Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1991) 12.


20. Ibid. 9.


