

C H A P T E R - I

THE MAN AND THE ARTIST

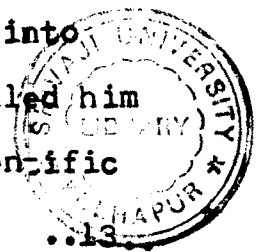
CHAPTER - I

The Man and the Artist

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next,
That dying chose the living world for text
And never could have rested in the tomb
But that, long travelling, he had come
Towards the nightfall upon certain set apart
In a most desolate stony place,
Towards nightfall upon a race,
Passionate and simple like his heart.¹

The very lines suggest the intrinsic qualities of the man, John Millington Synge and his work. A thin, dark-haired, gloomy-eyed young man with broad, ashen-coloured cheekbones and 'not very much to say for himself' - is the description of Synge that Michael MacLiammoir has gleaned from those few elderly men who remembered him.

Synge was born on 16th April, 1871 in a Dublin Suburb, Rathfarnham. He belonged to the protestant ascendancy and the landed gentry in the poverty stricken and strief torn Ireland. His father died in 1872 and he was brought up by his religious minded mother, the daughter of a Northern Irish clergyman, a strongly evangelical member of the church of Ireland. But Synge's inborn interest in Natural History and his wide reading into scientific literature, especially of Darwin⁹⁷ compelled him to doubt the basis of religion. He acquired a scientific



outlook and adopted a non-religious attitude. At the age of eighteen he announced his loss of faith in religion and became a permanent source of worry to his mother. The hero of his first play When the Moon has Set (1900-1) was a non-believer. In fact, Synge's conversion to Darwinism was a transition that led him to intellectual liberation. The Intellectual background of the Nineteenth Century and the spirit of Revolution and Modernity was of a great impact in the development of his personality. He wanted to liberate himself from the atmosphere of a conventional home background as well as from Ireland.

Synge was interested in languages. He studied languages at Trinity College, in Dublin. After leaving Trinity College, he pursued his studies from 1893 to 1897 in Germany, France and Italy. He mastered German and Italian languages and knew French well enough to feel at home in Paris - the then cultural centre of Western civilization. He was good at Irish and Hebrew. In addition to languages Synge was interested in music. He was ambitious of becoming a musician. During his University years he practised hard at fiddle. He was a member of the students' Orchestra and took part in some public concerts. But he was conscious of his limitations and his interest shifted from music to literature.

Synge read with interest the contemporary writers at home and abroad. He read Mallarmé, Huysmans, Oscar Wilde, Anatole France as a sort of training for his own

literary style. Pierre Loti and Anatole Le Braz, the writer of Breton folklore who in different ways celebrate the virtues of the Breton Peasant community aroused his natural interest in the Celtic Culture of Ireland. The French writers Francois Villon, Moliere, La Pleiade, Petrarch and Cervantes influenced him much more. In the early nineties he started to translate Villon and Petrarch. But Yeats was the main influence on Synge's career as a dramatist.

In 1899, Synge met William Butler Yeats in Paris. Yeats was just returned to Paris from his visit to the Aran Islands in 1896. His imagination was filled with those grey islands and he advised Synge to abandon scholarly pursuits in Paris and to go to the Aran Islands :

I said : "Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands, live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression".²

Synge decided to go to the Aran Islands, attracted by the ideal of the simple harmony of the lives of the peasants, to escape the decadent culture of Paris. He determined to learn Gaelic and to live among the

peasants as one of them. He visited the Aran Islands on five successive occasions from 1899 to 1902. During these visits he made a number of friends and imbibed into his psyche the life of Irish peasantry. The experience at the Aran Islands later on provided him with the material of his plays.

His first trip to Inishmaan gave him a moment of exquisite satisfaction when he found himself moving away from modern civilization to the primitive experience of man. In addition to the Aran Islands, Synge visited other parts of the Western Ireland in 1905 viz., Mayo, Kerry, Blasket islands and many other impoverished areas of Ireland. All these visits had brought to him a closer understanding of country life and it became the source of his dramatic work. He found the natural charm in the lives of the islanders. He found the poetic quality in their language. He decided to draw upon this ceaseless source of living imagination and gradually found his way towards creativity.

Synge started to contribute to the Abbey Theatre, drawing intensively from his experience at the Aran Islands. He was actively associated with the Irish Literary Theatre from 1902 to 1907. His work was the part of the Irish Literary revival and he became the leading figure in the Irish literary renaissance.

In 1892, The National Literary Society was founded by W.B. Yeats in Dublin. In 1893, the Gaelic League was founded by Douglas Hyde and others. The main objectives of these organisations were the preservation and revival of the Irish language; the study of its existing literature; the encouragement of a new literature to be written in Irish and the renewal of National consciousness.

In 1902, the Irish National Theatre Society was formed. Miss Horniman, Edward Martyn, George Moore and Lady Gregory joined it. They wanted to part from the English commercial theatre and started protesting Ibsen-type drama. Yeats wanted to re-establish the Celtic culture. He believed that poetry still lived in the Irish peasants and that its spirit revealed itself in the living language which they alone still spoke. He believed in their love of the heroic and homely in legend and in daily life. All the members of the Irish National Theatre Society believed in simplicity, naturalness and economy in acting and in setting. The ideals of the workshop can well be summarised from Synge's preface to The Playboy of the Western World :

"..... In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this

literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why 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..... In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks³.

Synge had already started to write in the early nineties. He had written some articles and had done some

reviewing. He wrote a lot of verse, all of which has not been preserved by him. He had started to translate Villon and Petrarch. But his contribution to Abbey Theatre began in 1903 with The Shadow of the Glen, a play in one-Act. His first one-act play viz. Riders to the Sea came out in 1902 and was produced in 1904. The well of the Saints in three - acts was produced in 1905. The playboy of the Western World , a full - length comedy was opened on Saturday 26th January, 1907. The Tinker's Wedding, a comedy in two - acts was written in 1908 and was produced in 1909. Deirdre of the Sorrows, a full-length tragedy was produced posthumously, with a preface by Yeats, in 1910. In 1907, Synge published his travelogue viz. The Aran Islands . When he was working on the Aran Islands. he continued to write and revise the lamentable Etude Morbide, Vita Vecchia and When the Moon has Set, a play written around 1900-1 which was never produced. His poems and translations from Villon and Petrarch were published in 1909. In Wicklow , West Kerry and Connemara, the prose was published in 1911.

The body of Synge's dramatic work is small. It is to be classified into tragedies and comedies. Riders to the Sea (1904) and Deirdre of the Sorrows (1910) are tragedies. The Shadow of the Glen (1903), The Well of the Saints (1905), The Playboy of the Western World (1907) and The Tinker's Wedding (1909) can be termed as tragi-comedies. His plays, prose and verse from a unity in

respect of tone, attitude and idiom.

Synge's plays are non-political. He explored the world of the Western peasantry attracted by the simplicity and beauty in their lives. The Irish landscape, the mountains, the sea, the glens, the cliffs and all the phenomena of the fierce but beautiful nature had a special appeal to his artistic inclinations. Synge loved Nature and admired the ways of life of the islanders. He became aware of the cruelty and destructive power of the nature. He realised the pagan sorrow of the peasants. The passing of beauty, brutality and violence awakened his artistic imagination and found an outlet in dramatic poetry. He observed closely the landscape and the people of the Aran Islands. He realised the impact of situation on their lives in which they were placed. He penetrated into the minds of the people around him and projected his vision of life in the characters of his plays. For example, in one of his notes he says;

"The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in continual danger on the sea"⁴.

The very tragic view of life initiated by the desperate battle with the sea is projected in the character of Maurya in Riders to the Sea. Moreover, he

was stuck by a sense of loneliness amidst the grand nature. This sense of loneliness is very acutely projected in the character of Nora in The Shadow of the Glen. But he portrayed his characters with objective detachment and presented a more joyful reality. Synge was introspective. He was a solitary man and loved solitude. He always remained engrossed in his thoughts. Even when he was associated with the Abbey Theatre he used to go into deliberate exile as the necessary condition of creative work. His very introspective nature had brought to him a clear insight into the minds of his characters.

But the reality with which he portrayed his characters outraged the Irish nationalists; Pegeen, Widow Quin and a chorus of girls in The Playboy of the Western World and Nora in The Shadow of the Glen were felt to be an insult on Irish womanhood. The playboy of the Western World gave rise to continuous riot in Dublin which was spread among the Irish Nationalists in America. They boycott the Abbey plays throughout the Eastern states. The members of the Gaelic League were outraged against the picture of Irish life and morals presented in the plays. Synge was not willing to defend his position against the riot. He wrote in a letter to the young man;

"I follow Goethe's rule, to tell no one what one means in one's writings"⁵.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that though Synge's

attitude to Ireland and to the Irish peasantry was highly ambivalent, his imagery was exaggerated and the violence intentional.

Synge was one of the Co-Directors of the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin from 1904 to 1909. During this period he developed a close friendship with the Roman Catholic actress, Molly Allgood. She was fifteen years younger than Synge. His love for Molly was strong and jealous. His mother and sister, naturally disapproved Molly but somehow he got engaged with her. This engagement lasted till March, 1909 when Synge died of a lymphatic sarcoma in his neck at the age of thirty eight on 24th March, 1909.

Yeats wrote of Synge after his death :

"He was a solitary, undemonstrative man, never asking pity; nor complaining nor seeking sympathy but in this book's momentary cries; all folded up in brooding intellect; knowing nothing of new books and newspapers, reading the great masters alone; and he was but the more hated because he gave his country what it needed, an unmoved mind where there is a perpetual last Day, a trumpeting, and coming upto judgment"⁶.

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