



Samuel Beckett and J M Synge: A Comparison in Themes and Techniques

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Both Synge and Beckett dealt with a singular theme in their works, Synge's being the depiction of the lives of real and simple population; and Beckett's, revealing the ultimate reality of human life. But, while Beckett experimented a lot with this sole theme presenting the old wine in a new bottle each time; Synge falls prey to monotony. Beckett explored and re-explored his theme and strived to make the presentation all anew always; Synge suffered from repetition. Besides, all his works relied for the subject matter on the folklores of the same people and the language purposely made poetic which hampered variety. T. S. Eliot analyses Synge's plays and concludes, "The plays of John Millington Synge form rather a special case, because they are based upon the idiom of a rural people whose speech is naturally poetic, both in imagery and in rhythm...Synge wrote plays about characters whose originals in life talked poetic so that he could make them talk poetry and remain real people." Too much detailing, too much talk, are what destroy interest in Synge's plays. The motive of joy and realism together hampers him from being straightforward. As Synge himself overjoys the experiment he conducts and goes gaga about his *innovative* gesture in the *Preface of The Playboy of the Western World* saying, "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." Actually, exaggeration of expression is the element that draws our attention away from the action and the reader feels being strangled in the web of words.

The only excuse for this could be the miserably short life of Synge. Had he lived more, he would, perhaps, conducted experiments for improving his skills. Beckett had, no doubt, got a large time-span for furnishing his art as even his early works appeared to be almost alike. John Fletcher in his critical guide on Beckett's plays accepts the fact that Beckett became Beckett not suddenly or miraculously but through a process of refinement over years. Plus, Synge doesn't seem to be such a vast reader like Beckett. He focused on the Aran Island only as the motive was to elevate his native language and culture and people only. While Beckett was not influenced by any such bias or pre-occupations; and welcomed any literature and culture

that came his way. That is why one can find so many different ways and techniques available in his works to deal with the same idea. Synge dealt with physical realities and challenges of human beings in a physically visible world while Beckett unveiled the psychic barrenness and spiritual impotence in the physicalized form. Plato's *The Republic* talks about two worlds; one of ideas and the other, the materialistic world where we find the solid forms of those ideas. Synge's world is that solid world and Beckett's, the world of ideas.

Despite the differences, what draws a common line of consent between these two prodigies is their inclination towards forbidding the conventional path. Neither of them follows the Aristotelian dictum of a conventional tragic play which is 'the fall of a man from high to low, the intensity of the tragic effect proportional to the height'. Beckett's characters are no kings or knights, no businessmen or warriors; nor are Synge's characters suffused with extraordinary spiritual potential. They are poor, common and fragile personas who surrender so soon. They have no courage enough to throw challenges upon something out of their grasp. There resides the Quietist element underneath their incapableness; impotence of the self, leaving all to the will of God, no thinking, no prayers, renunciation of whatever has been acknowledged yet. Be it Maurya (*Riders to the Sea*), voluntarily resting her case after all her sons are dead, or Christy (*The Playboy of the Western World*) who runs for his life to the island hiding himself behind the inhabitants there, or the blind couple (*The Well of the Saints*) who are disgusted with each others physical appearances even after so many years of conjugality or Winnie (*Happy Days*) who does suffer but never complains, or Hamm (*Endgame*) or the two tramps (*Waiting for Godot*) who offer no prayers to God. They are real people with real fears and failures, hopes and wants, desires and disappointments, wishes and weaknesses. They convince us that they are real. There is the difference of attitude only; Synge has optimism as the force that keeps the people going on and Beckett has the pessimism, the acknowledgement of the truth that no help could ever help, which forces his people to remain consistent. A comparison, in this case, between Synge's tragedy *Riders to the Sea* and Beckett's works dealing with the similar themes is inevitable.

The sea happened to be the lifeline of the Aran people, so it is to the fishermen and tradesmen of the proposed place, 'an island off the West Ireland'. The protagonist Maurya, not a protagonist in the true sense of the term at all, has lost her father-in-law, husband and five sons to the reckless sea. And, her last alive son is determined to do a trade through the waves. She is lamenting and is of the thought that Bartley (the last son) is also going to die soon. Her daughters snipe her for saying bad words for a man going out on a voyage. She realises her fault and tries to chase him with a piece of cake baked for him for the journey. He sees her second last son who gets missing in the high tide on a pony that is following Bartley. Meanwhile, her daughters verify the tatters of cloths retained from a dead body far away to see if they are their brother Michael's. They confirm the information. Maurya returns and tells them what she saw. As the daughters Nora and Cathleen claim that what their mother just saw was impossible as Michael is dead, Maurya takes it as a bad omen and laments that Bartley might be dead now. Her fear turns to be true as some women come to them keening and behind them; four men come with Bartley's body. The reason of his death, as told by the men was that the pony following him had kicked him hard into the water.

On the other hand, Beckett keeps his characters away from any emotional turmoil. They appear to be somewhat objective even towards their own quandary, towards the pain of their kith and kin and indifferent to the rest of the world too. Here in Synge's play a mother is so much concerned about her son. All mothers are like that; but not in the world of Beckett. Hamm's parents used to put ear buds on whenever their son needed them. Mrs Rooney mentions death of a little girl, probably her own one, but with a dispassionate tone. Synge, in this play, has provided a kind of sublime essence to the idea of 'death'. Maurya has kept fine white boards for the coffin of her son. White is a serene colour, a colour of purity and peace. She wishes that Bartley would get a deep grave and perfect rituals at his death and sprinkles the holy water on him. This is the religious notion related with 'death as a divine thing after which a man's soul transcends to the other world to find peace and immortality'. Beckett has shown the gross side of the story. Death can be a relief from the drudgery of life which is a journey towards death itself. And man has to suffer mental and physical decay, literally, to reach to the other end. Sometimes life is more a hell than the conceptual hell of the holy books a man's soul gets condemned to in his afterlife. Beckett's plays delineate this deterioration in its worst form. Physical maladies, men forced to live in dustbins, crawl in mud, buried half in sand. Lucky is treated like worse than a beast, starved, parched and bleeding all the time. He is not even allowed to think on his own. Clov has to follow the egoistic orders of a lame master. They are not the slaves of their masters but of their fates. So are Synge's characters but yet not in such a crude manner. They are what their creator has meant them to be. Also, they seem to be alike when it comes to their verbal skills as Synge has put poetry in the mouth of every single character of his.

The unrest, the pain and suffering of Beckett's plays goes beyond the physical to the metaphysical world. In *Play*, the two women and men are reiterating their stories from inside their respective urns. It is horrible to see that they are unable to 'rest in peace' even after death. The 'mother and daughter duo' in *Footfalls* hinge upon the edge of life and death. Whether they are ghosts or living persons, it is a mystery. Synge's concept of life is that of bravery, and a positive struggle. But Beckett proves that life is even worse than death. Waiting for death and getting on with a meaningless time-pass; that is how Beckett defines 'life'. Synge paints his plays with the colours of lively spirit, bonhomie, family, love, faith, and courage; Beckett's world is all grey- no love for family and friends, loss of faith in anything, innate renunciation of courage, mental and bodily impotence. Synge's people carry on with life accepting fate, loss and death as parts of the journey; but Beckett's people are sick of "First the body. No. First the place... Sick of the either try the other... Till sick of both. Throw up and go... Throw up and back... The body again... Try again. Fail again..." This extract from Beckett's *Worstward Ho!* Sums up it all; *it all*. Man becomes sick of his body and the mortal world. The cycle of birth and death keeps him churning again and again and he tries to escape the trap again and again and then, his soul surrenders much before his body does as he learns that he will "Fail again. Fail better."

Although both Beckett and Synge don't follow the rules of Aristotelian concept of drama, they at least comply with the unity of time, place and action. Synge focused his all to the Aran Islands and its stories, folklores, lifestyle, inhabitants, their problems, faith and fears. The story of *Riders to the Sea* ends up in a

single day, in a single room with four characters. Likewise, Beckett's plays almost always started and ended up at the same location- a room or a barren spot or other such things with the same people and same action. Both of them use, to some extent and to arouse some amusement, supernatural elements. The fear of the unknown works as an overpowering grasp on the audience and readers as well. Maurya's vision of his dead son Michael on Bartley's pony gives her shivering. Water dripping out from the cloths of Bartley's body creates a trail from the sea to the house as if fate and death, in the form of sea-water, has come following them. The rubber ball in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *All That Fall* is a mysterious object as it is found at a place where someone's death occurs. Krapp is holding the ball when his mother is on death bed in a nursing home and Mr Rooney has it when a child dies when ran over by the train he is coming home in. In *Footfalls*, the mother and the daughter are confusingly supernatural. Their existence is the ultimate question of the play. Beckett makes urns of the deceased talk in *Play*.

Further, neither of the dramatists offers any social, political or religious solutions; all they do is depicting the existing problems leaving the audience to decide the impression. Both of them follow, say, the path of 'art for art's sake'. Their concern is mankind, its basic nuances, the problems they face every day and definition of life in its most stripped form. They just provided their audience with the happenings and a generalised view. The variation comes at the point where there is the question of a conventional structure of the plays. Synge has a perfect beginning, middle and end of his story. A plot which develops gradually and reaches to the denouement, characters who start from ignorance and end up with a certain realization, all the events and actions leading up to a single motive- all which comprise a conventional drama. Beckett's plays are known for abrupt starting, inactiveness and circular structures. They show neither development nor a modest consistency of a story or a plot.

The greatest dissimilarity of the styles of Synge and Beckett lies in the narrative and language they use. *Riders to the Sea* also, like other Synge plays, is saturated with poesy. The characters deliver a consistent, well-furnished rhetoric and rhythmic sentences. It is more the efforts of the playwright than the practice of the Aran people that makes his narrative too poetic to be called a prose. Instead of saying in a plain manner, "he is coming in a hurry", Nora says about Bartley, "He's coming now, and he in a hurry." When Maurya wants to tell that Bartley that he should stay at home as he is the only remaining male member of the family, she comes to it with lots of roundabouts, "It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin, and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you'd find in Connemara." It is a tongue-twister language, hard to memorise and the perpetual use of it makes the whole narrative somewhat monotonous and soggy. Beckett through the decades as an improving dramatist learnt to spend words with austerity. He employed words with the mathematical efficiency to provide symbolism through language. As he progressed, this efficiency was revealed in the best way where in his later plays Beckett used syllables and sentences that could easily be counted on fingers. If the journey from his first hit *Waiting for Godot* to his last work *Comment dire* (a poem) is viewed at a glance, the reducing number of pages can be traced easily. But Beckett never failed to convey the meaning of the plays in the minds of his audience. From Lucky's delirious speech in *Waiting for Godot* to the whispering of

three friends in *Come and Go* to a completely dialogue-free drama *Breath*; Beckett has come a long way to prove that words are not an essential to carry on feelings. Forget about any poetic or rhetoric touch, Beckett's characters don't practice even the normal conversational language of normal humans. They are either in a trance posing brainiacs or not worth speaking smartly. They, however, appear to be real because there are actually people of these two types who draw attention.

Summing up, it is not that much difficult to decipher, on comparing both the realists, that though their tools are different and their attitudes towards reality itself are ways apart; the lesson one can learn from their works is one and the same. The extract of their efforts is to make people realise what life is and what people are. Whether life is flourishing on a distant island or some bleak barren place, whether the populous are peasants or they are tramps and beggars, whether they are brave voyagers or crippled and blind, fate never spares anyone. *The Well of the Saints* deals with disillusionment from the world. When the blind beggar couple is given yes, they are so much disgusted with each-other's face that they part their ways. Later, when again age snatches the eyesight away from them, they realise that it was not their physical beauty that was the cause of their bonding but the compatibility without which the two are weaker than ever. They also learn the ways of the treacherous and merciless world which made fools of them. The decision of not receiving the blessings of the saints for the second time comes as the moment of enlightenment which doesn't need physical eyes. *Act Without Words* by Beckett depict a man's toilsome efforts to reach to a small jar of water hanging from upward in a vast desert. First, he is allured by a shady tree then a water bottle but both things are snatched away mercilessly by some entity unseen. When giving up he tries to commit suicide, he is not allowed to do that too. The branch of the tree he wants to hang himself with comes down shockingly. The rope and the scissors are also taken back by the same unseen power. There is the difference between dying and being killed that Clov talks about in *Endgame*. Man, whether he strives to live or wait to die, he suffers and endures so much. When he makes efforts to live, the supreme forces thrash him down and; when he becomes fed up of living day by day in fragments and wait to die, the same forces turn away from him leaving him to rot.

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