

Female Predicament in J. M. Synge's Drama 'In the Shadow of the Glen'

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Abstract

Female predicament has remained a hot debate since ages and a lot of writers have raised their voice against the said issue in their writings. Despite being equally involved in the development of a society a woman has always been at the receiving end. She has always suffered at the hands of man. She has always been ignored and has remained confined to the four walls of her house. In a male dominated society she has always been a mute spectator. But with the passage of time and evolution of feminist movements, the said issue has gained a lot of impetus. The article shows the wrongs to which women are subjected and will focus on the problems and psychological trauma faced by the women with special reference of J M Synge's drama In the Shadow of the Glen. It aims to portray the problems and obstacles which the Irish women in general and the women living in the country Wicklow in particular came across. These women were imprisoned in a male dominated society unable to share their grief and agony.

Keywords: Wicklow, psychological, trauma, predicament, portray, agony.

Introduction

Feminism has emerged as a strong movement which fights for the equal rights of women and voices against injustice. Feminism as a movement stresses upon the social, political and economic equality of men and women. It states that men and women are not treated equally by society, and that women have always been barred from participating fully in all the available social fields and situations. According to Billington "feminism" can be defined as:

A movement seeking the reorganization of the world upon a basis of gender equality in all human relations; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the grounds of gender, that would abolish all gender privileges and burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of women and men as the foundation of law and custom (Kramarae and Treichler, p.158).

Feminism thus advocates social change in women's status by changing the way in which society views them. It wants society to change its "ideas on patriarchy and accept women as being a valuable part of society" (Peter, p.30). Feminism is supported by various other movements which fight for the rights of women; one such movement is "Womanism" which was created to support and protect the rights of black women. "Womanist theory has always played a pivotal role in consciousness-raising, while it also acts in the public spotlight to improve the life of women in general" (Peter, p.204).

The role of women in the development of a society cannot be underestimated as she contributes equally to the society. As Mnthali mentions that "woman remains a beacon of hope and a source of strength to those who do not as yet see the light, which is the sum total of the struggle for the land" (Mnthal, p.37). She deserves equal respect and should be treated as an equal. Women is an essential component of a society as Janet Todd says: Friendship is "a nurturing tie not pitting women against society but rather women is essential, since through their teaching of female lore, criminal or conventional, women aid and sustain each other" (Janet Todd, p.4). The following paper will treat J M Synge's drama In the Shadow of the Glen from a feministic point of view, exploring the obstacles which Nora (who represents women world) came across in a male dominated Irish society.

J.M Synge who belonged to the Irish soil was largely fascinated by Irish language and Irish folklore. He wrote only a few dramas but they exhibit his great craftsmanship. He was deeply fascinated by the beauty of Aran Islands and it is these islands which later became a great source of inspiration for him. He was bitterly aware of the harms of scientific development that might destruct the delicate beauty as well as life of the Aran Islands. We can imagine what he saw and might have felt while writing this drama, and our thoughts, and imagination are made to traverse backward to the Ireland of Synge's days when the life was in total chaos especially that of women folk. The economic dependence of women on men, loveless and unequal marriages, rigorous divorce laws, the dependence of women on their husbands were some of the vital aspects of life on these islands which attracted J.M Synge's attention the most.

In the Shadow of the Glen is a single act mock heroic representation of Irish peasant life. It is the story of a quiet and aged husband (Dan Burke) who feigns death in order to trap his young wife (Nora Burke)

suspected of disloyalty. A tramp comes to take shelter from the rain and to him she talks about her old useless husband. Soon her lover Michael comes and the fuming husband turns his wife out of the house. The tramp finally saves her life. The Irish audience denounced this play as an insult to Irish womanhood. The thought that runs throughout is that “you cannot match youth with age, you cannot confine beauty.” The isolated glen symbolizes the bare and lonely life of Nora.

The predicament of Nora Burke is the central issue here. The life portrayed here reflects the tragic aspect that life is made of sobs and sniffles in this part of the world which is universalized by focusing on the elements of fear of loneliness and old age and the yearning of a ‘caged’ woman for freedom and delight. In a reply to the tramp Nora says, “What good is a grand morning when I’m destroyed surely, and I going out to get my death walking the roads?” (Synge, P.37).

When we first see Nora she is as cut off from the human world as their cottage which is “the last cottage at the head of a long Glen in country Wicklow”. Her keen interest in the tramp demonstrates her passionate desire for human care. She has been devoid of any human warmth and has spent a life full of gloom and loneliness. She had married Dan Burke, but their marriage has been a total failure and devoid of any affection.

When she is talking to the stranger we get a glimpse of her loveless relation with her husband. “He was an old man, and an odd man, stranger, and it is always up on the hills he was thinking thoughts in the dark mist” (Synge, P.10). It is not merely lovelessness in their relationship but Dan’s old age which is responsible for the cattle-like condition of Nora who has to suffer at the hands of cruel fate. What held the couple together till then was Nora’s economic dependence on Dan and Dan’s need for Nora to look after him. As Nora herself remarks, “what way would I live and I an old woman if I didn’t marry a man with a bit of a farm, cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?” (Synge, P.28). Here we are able to feel the pain that Nora Burke might have felt. She had to marry Dan because she was poor and with the result their marriage proved to be an utter failure. She was never in love with Dan who was much older than her and was unable to give her manly love and produce children. Dan had traded her only to look after him and as a result their relation proved to be a total disaster and devoid of any love. These lines are strong examples of female predicament and portray the miserable condition under which women had to live.

While recalling her past life we get a glimpse of how she had to sacrifice her love for freedom and joys of life to momentary requirements, thus forcing her to marry an old man. While recalling her past she says, “...it’s a queer thing to see an old man sitting up there in his bed with no teeth in him, and a rough word in his mouth, and his chin the way it would take the bark from the edge of an oak board you’d have building a door...” (Synge, p.32). Nora’s sense of loneliness and futility in life is intensified by her being denied of motherhood which makes her life even more tragic.

When Dan orders her to leave his house, to our horror Michael instead of offering his hand to her withdraws himself and moves back as he does not wish to marry her now when she needs him the most because she has lost everything. His relationship with Nora is based only on material gains. Poor Nora gets shattered into pieces on each of these occasions. Both Michael and Dan are equally responsible for her downfall and they represent two faces of the same coin who torture her beyond endurance. They truly represent the cruel male world where a woman is worthy of nothing. Male dominance can be seen when Dan orders Nora to get out of his house, as he remarks, “you’ll walk out now from that door, Nora Burke, and it’s not to-morrow, or the next day, or any day of your life, that you’ll put in your foot through it again” (Synge, p.34).

The main aspect that the paper possesses is the aspect of loneliness. The life of the heroine, Nora Burke, has been full of intense loneliness. She has had a very dull and unsuccessful married life with the useless old Dan Burke. She had married Dan Burke because of economic pressures. She seems to be completely cut off from the human society as she sits all day and night in her little cottage only. What Nora requires is freedom, sympathy and love. There is a cruel paradox in her life—a combination of the pressing demands of physical existence and a ‘fiery’ imagination trying to release itself from the very surroundings from which it draws its life. Imagination always makes a person to think about the pleasures of the past and to be dissatisfied with the present. Nora too had lovely dreams before she fell in the hands of Dan due to economic needs. But the very means of sustenance hamper man’s freedom making his life miserable. Her fear of loneliness coupled with her economic dependence on her husband is further deepened by her being childless.

What a woman desires most for is affection of her husband and motherhood. But cruel fate had denied Nora of both these joys. Her world has been full of materialistic and selfish people. Her young lover Michael too is interested only in the money that she will inherit from her dead husband. As soon as he learns that Dan is still alive and is driving Nora out of the house he avoids Nora and escapes. Male cruelty towards women cannot be harsher in its expression than the treatment meted out to Nora by Dan and Michael. The present paper is deeply rooted in the soil of the Wicklow glen. The miseries of women – whether married or not, with or without children, their economic dependence and loveless marriages, the male dominance and the blows inflicted upon them, all seem to portray the life of the women of the Wicklow Glen.

The present paper contains the prospect of female predicament in a poor Irish family. Dan’s ruthless

and bitter treatment towards his wife reflects his cruelty and failure as a husband. As Dan remarks, "Let her walk round the like of Peggycavanagh below, and be begging money at the cross- road, or selling songs to the men"(Synge,p.34). The cruel joke played on Nora by her husband is definitely very harsh and she suffers much, much more than what she deserves. All our sympathies go to her. We admire her courage and frankness and are relieved as she gets freedom from the confines of the cottage.

Michael too fails to understand the simple aspirations of Nora. He is grossly materialistic, selfish and a coward. He is so selfish that while lonely Nora speaks about the problems of youth, horrors of poverty and old age he is sitting and counting money."That's five pounds and ten notes, a good sum, surely!..."(Synge, p.31).Also when she is miserably treated by her husband he quietly removes himself from the scene instead of offering his hand to her. There is a close affinity between Nora and the tramp as regards their poverty, loneliness, and good nature.

In Nora's life there is pain, aspirations, longing, suffering and cruel humour. She is a tragic character whose sufferings spring from her failure to adjust to her situation and from the incompatibility between her aspirations and any hope of their realization. She leads a very lonely life and has had an unhappy marriage with a much older man whom she married, only for financial support.

CONCLUSION

This brief survey concludes that female has always been considered a mere liability and an outcaste who has to pay the price at every step of her life. Female depravity and subjectivity is apparent in the drama from the very beginning. 'In the shadow of the Glen' is a dark comedy which, like a rainbow, has different shades of bright and dark colours. It has a short story in which an aged husband feigns death in order to trap his young wife with her lover and finally turns her out of the house. Here Dan and Michael represent the dominant male world that oppress women beyond endurance and make them suffer while Nora represents the women world that has to make sacrifices and suffer at the hands of male dominated world. All our sympathies here go to the poor lonely wife who has to suffer at the hands of her brutal husband.

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