

## Mapping Female Agency in Masculine Domain: A Feminist Study of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

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**Abstract:** In *Riders to the Sea*, John Millington Synge exhibits how the female agency is concealed and sidelined in a patriarchal establishment due to the males' refusal to accept the females as their equal 'selves'. This paper contextualizes Synge's *Riders to the Sea* within feminist literary criticism to understand how female agency is shadowed and marginalized in a masculine domain under the aegis of religious institutions, linguistic politics, and cultural hegemony. It scrutinizes the micro-politics behind the binary construction of homemaker-breadwinner, and its connection to patriarchal domination in every masculine domain like the Aran Island one. The way female experiences, opinions, and judgments are devalued in *Riders to the Sea* ultimately questions whether the female agency is achievable considering the contingency of patriarchal establishment in a masculine world. By mapping female agency in the masculine domain, the study attempts to expose how Synge brings into the foreground the existing gender inequality and oppression of his time.

**Keywords:** Female agency, masculine domain, patriarchal establishment, gender inequality

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John Millington Synge (1871–1909) is a notable Irish literary figure who contributed to the Celtic revival and is famous for his “unique and felicitous blending of cosmopolitan literature and Irish social experience into a work of heart-rending universal appeal as well as of individual self-expression” which is exemplified in his 1904's one-act play *Riders to the Sea* (Bourgeois, 1913). In this play, Synge has romanticized Irish peasant life in western Ireland by exhibiting the culture of Aran Island society where women are marginalized, female experiences are devalued, and most importantly, the female agency is concealed and sidelined in the existing patriarchal establishment. The overpowering existence of female characters is dominant in the whole play since apart from managing the kitchen, they [the female characters of the play] help the males to earn a livelihood, weep on the dead bodies, wash them, and make arrangements for burials which are essentially considered as masculine duties; yet their superior roles in a family remain unacknowledged due to their feminine identities. Till the death of the only alive male family member – Bartley, he is credited for taking the family forward in all spheres; but in reality, it is Maurya, the old mother, who handles the whole family with the help of her daughters – Nora and Cathleen. In every masculine domain, the contribution of women, their sacrifices, and their accomplishments are depreciated and unacknowledged

strategically since their “subordinate position [both in family and society] is a systematic ignorance that the patriarchy imposes upon the women” (Millett, 1970, p. 42). With the death of Bartley, all the male members of Maurya’s family are physically disappeared; finally, the islanders acknowledge Maurya, Nora, and Cathleen’s contribution to the family. Their contributions and sacrifices are acknowledged since no male member is left in the family to be ascribed those credits and to continue patriarchal domination over the female family members. Thus, the question arises: whether the female agency is achievable in the existing masculine domain, or the elimination of the males is a must for achieving the female agency. This paper scrutinizes how the female agency is shadowed and marginalized in a masculine domain like the Aran Island society under the aegis of religious institutions, linguistic politics, and cultural hegemony.

In *Riders to the Sea* (1904), the Aran Island society becomes a cultural and political battleground – a masculine zone – where the female agency is subdued under the aegis of religious institutions, linguistic politics, and cultural hegemony. The play is an “outcome of Synge’s actual experience during his staying of five summers in the Aran Island, and it is the culture, traditions, and superstitions of that land which he portrays throughout the play” (Uddin & Chowdhury, 2016, p. 7). Machhar (2013) emphasizes that *Riders to the Sea* is not merely a story of “a grief-stricken mother” (p. 7) rather a battleground of two worldviews – protagonist Maurya with her feminine identity and the established patriarchy. Kataoka (2017) suggests that according to Kubler-Ross’ grief model, “the mother [Maurya] must live on after all her sons’ death with the knowledge that she has to, which makes her predicament different from the earlier version of Maurya who does not care for her own life any longer” (p. 20). Through this, the question of female agency comes into the foreground.

If Synge’s arts of characterization in *Riders to the Sea* are analyzed, Bartley, Young Priest, and the Townpeople are found the representers or advocates of the existing masculine domain; even Nora being the youngest daughter of Maurya is found slighting her mother echoing the Young Priest voices. In contrast, Maurya is found striving against the established masculine domain with her feminine identity searching spaces for her female agency. Thus, we notice that the playwright portrays not only the picture of Aran Island society and its culture throughout the play but also the mindset and psyche of the inhabitants regarding gender stereotypes. Again, Bartley wants to control his mother and sisters by imposing his decision on them; and Young Priest and Townpeople constantly provide moral support to this imposition. In the course of the play, the opinions of Maurya, Nora, and Cathleen are also ignored and devalued when they suggest anything to the males. Feminist criticism brings to light the inequality inherent in traditional gender roles, and explains how languages, shaped by the patriarchy, inject inferiority into women’s consciousness; moreover, it uncovers the degree of the difficulty women face for their feminine identity in a masculine domain. In studying *Riders to the Sea*, this paper follows an Anglo-American feminist critical approach that critiques gender stereotyping in male-written literary works.

Elaine Showalter in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” implies two distinct modes of feminist criticism: a. feminist critique, and b. gynocriticism. Between these, Synge’s *Riders to The Sea* will be analyzed from the perspective of feminist critique which implies “feminist reading of the texts which consider the images and stereotypes of

women in literature, the omission and misconceptions about women in criticism” (Showalter, 2000, p. 309). Showalter (2000) also suggests four models of difference to examine gender inequality and oppression: “biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural” (p. 313). These models will be applied in *Riders to the Sea* to understand how Synge brings into the foreground the existing gender inequality and oppression of his time. Besides, Showalter’s interpretation of Ardener’s diagram is also used in this study to examine the relationship between the males as the dominant group and the females as the muted group in a masculine domain.

The masculine domain is defined as a political, social, and cultural system where “women’s reproduction, women’s sexuality, women’s mobility and property, and other economic resources are under patriarchal control” (Walby, 1990, p. 20). In this structure, males hold the dominant positions in every power exercising agency and instruments, and consequently subordinate the females psychologically by defining various roles or duties as feminine ones or masculine ones. The binary construction of woman as ‘home-doer’ and man as ‘breadwinner’ is the ultimate inception of every masculine domain; the same we find in *Riders to the Sea*. At the very beginning of the play, Nora and Cathleen are found observing their duties as ‘home-doers’ in the kitchen while baking cake for their brother, Bartley, who is going to sail on the sea to attend Galway Fair so that he can observe his duty as ‘bread-winner’. Cathleen constantly insists Nora to bake the cake faster otherwise Bartley will leave without any food with him. She has complete authority over the house to such an extent that she knows where the rope is, where the shirt is, and where the kitchen appliances are. Apart from being a ‘home-doer’, she also sells pigs in Aran Island society and contributes to the family financially. But her role as ‘home-doer’ is only acknowledged in that masculine domain. Mother Maurya often gets surprised that “how would the like of [Cathleen] get a good price for a pig?” (Synge, 2018, p. 9). Neither Cathleen nor Maurya nor any other female character shows any resistance to that patriarchal construction of homedoer–breadwinner gender roles. In this way, the female agency is undermined in every masculine domain.

Along with Nora and Cathleen, their mother Maurya also gets a hint of the upcoming death of Bartley because of their understanding of the natural phenomena; especially Maurya has a deep, sharp, and profound knowledge about the Aran Island and the sea. Leder (1990) mentions that “Maurya knows it [the island] intimately — its winds, its graves, its portents” (p. 208). All female characters in this play are well aware of the fact that Bartley has grown up in such a society which devalues women’s experiences and opinions. So, it is obvious that he will undermine every piece of advice from his mother and sisters. For this reason, Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora contact the Young Priest to stop him (Bartley) from attending the Galway fair sailing the sea. In response, the priest refuses to do so; and, without understanding any natural phenomenon, he assures that “let you not be afraid...almighty God won’t leave her destitute with no son living” (Synge, 2018, p. 4). Later, in response to priest’s assurance, Maurya asserts, “it’s little the likes of him knows of the Sea” (Synge, 2018, p. 21). In fact, Young Priest’s attitude resembles the colonial powers which “suppress the ‘Other’ mentally, physically, and economically” (Uddin & Chowdhury, 2016, p. 6). Maurya tries to resist the priest’s Victorian confidence in God but gets overruled. Though she tries over and over to stop Bartley from attending the Galway fair, he remains constant in his decision. Considering the condition of the sea, before

sailing, he even takes advice from his male neighbors Eamon Simon, Stephen Pheety, and Colum Shawn not from his mother and sisters since those male neighbors overpower the existing masculine domain. When those male members vote in favor of sailing, Bartley sails neglecting his mother's warnings. At the end of the play, we find Bartley's fate to be sealed for undermining Maurya's female agency.

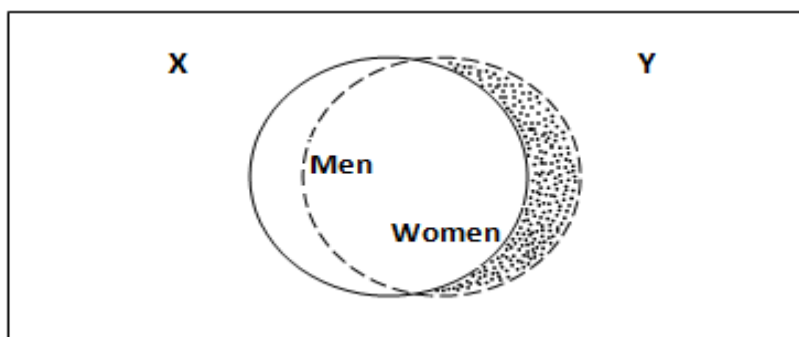
In the Aran Island society, as portrayed in *Riders to the Sea*, the linguistic difference propagates in injecting the sense of superiority or inferiority into the consciousness of both genders. Language is constructed socially by males; and, when a woman speaks, she is compelled to speak through it. In the male-constructed language system, all the things that are bold, positive, and strong are associated with masculinity whereas the opposite qualities like timid, powerless, and pale are seen as feminine qualities. In the play, the sea, the sun, and the dark night are addressed as 'he'; in contrast, the moon, the land, and the offshore are addressed as 'she'. When Bartley devalues his mother's opinions and suggestions, Maurya addresses him as a 'cruel man'. Later, she also personifies the sea, and the dark night as 'cruel' ones, addressing them as 'him'. It is a clear indication that the sea is considered masculine from the perspective of the female characters in the play. At the time of describing her dream, Maurya personifies 'the moon' as a woman, which refers to her; on the contrary, she personifies 'the star' referring to her son Michael. The hypocrisy of the male-constructed language system lies in the fact that it personifies the attire of God as masculine. The young priest of this play repeatedly asked Nora, Cathleen, and Maurya to seek help from 'Him' [the God]. Undoubtedly, God is superior to all beings. In this case, the pronoun which is used to refer to God is also used to refer to a man. Therefore, linguistically, the males become superior to females; and the women own no floor "to create a new language of their own" (Showalter, 2000, p. 314). In this way, the male-constructed language system kills the women psychologically. In *Riders to the Sea*, dramatist Synge shows how invisibly the structure of oppression works through language. Ultimately, it is language in a masculine domain that sets barriers to the female agency being recognized.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the female characters of this play, Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora are well aware of different types of natural phenomena. In the opening scene, Cathleen asks Nora, "Is the sea bad by white rocks" (Synge, 2018, p. 4)? Nora responds positively and says, "Middling bad. God Help us" (Synge, 2018, p. 4). It is noticeable that mother Maurya has a better understanding of nature than them. For this, she continuously forbids his son Bartley to sail on the sea. But he devalues her suggestions, and goes to his friends Eamon Simon, Stephen Pheety, and Colum Shawn for advice regarding whether he should go or not; to which they respond positively. Even the priest doesn't understand the law of nature. All the female characters in this play understand nature more than the males. But Bartley devalues their opinions since they have smaller brains. In talking of biological differences, Showalter quotes the Victorian anthropologists' belief as "the frontal lobes of the male brain were heavier and more developed than female lobes and thus that women were inferior in intelligence" (Showalter, 2000, p. 313). Because of existing biological differences, women are never considered as the producers of meaning or the source of knowledge. Cathleen creates the meaning of Bartley's death by seeing the worse condition of the sea.

Similarly, Maurya smells the upcoming danger of seeing the gray pony. Though the males ignore all of their understanding and devalue their opinions, the predictions of the women prove accurate in the end. When finally Bartley leaves for the Galway fair, Maurya utters, “He’s gone now, God spare us, and we will not see him again” (Synge, 2018, p. 11). So, before the death of Bartley, she has an intuition that he will surely die. Hence, the Anglo-American feminist critique “rejects the attribution of literal biological inferiority” (Showalter, 2000, p. 313). Showalter (2000) in her writing “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” uses Ardener’s diagram to demonstrate the rapport between the dominant and the muted group in any masculine domain (p. 323); which is described below in the context of *Riders to the Sea*:

**Figure 1**

*Ardener’s Diagram (Showalter, 2000, p. 323)*



In Figure 1, the Y-zone refers to the knowledge and understanding of nature of the female characters of this play, Maurya, Nora, Cathleen, whereas the X-zone refers to Bartley, Simon, Stephen, Shawn, and Young Priest’s knowledge and understanding of natural phenomena. In this play, the males don’t understand women’s grasp on natural phenomena, because they don’t have access to it. So, it is men’s failure that they lack the mental faculty to understand women’s experiences. On the other hand, females don’t have the authority to establish their understanding of nature as an authentic form of knowledge. This is how Maurya’s understanding of nature is sidelined in that particular masculine domain.

Nora and Cathleen know that Bartley will devalue their opinions regarding his attending the Galway fair. Parallely, they also understand that Bartley may ignore them, but he will listen to Young Priest since the priest complements the existing masculine domain under the aegis of a religious institution, i.e. the church. Even Maurya also possesses the same conception; so, she says to her daughters, “He won’t go this day, for the young priest will stop him surely” (Synge, 2018, p. 6). In this situation, they seek Young Priest’s intervention in Barley’s sailing on the sea. It is unfortunate that being a mother/sister, they need to contact an outsider to stop their own son/brother from sailing due to their feminine identity. Even in the end, Bartley priors his friends’ advice to the opinions of his mother and sisters. In fact, out of superiority, the males do not want to

“understand women’s tongues” (Showalter, 2000, p. 317). Showalter terms these conditions of women as psychological and cultural oppression of women in a masculine domain. Barry (2018) is of the opinion that the representation of women as ‘others’, as ‘lack’ as part of ‘nature’ is a form of psychological domination that is constructed culturally (p. 135) in every masculine domain.

In the course of the play, Nora is found echoing the Young Priest’s worldview though her mother’s influence on her can’t be neglected. In fact, she never “quotes the priest directly, she rarely editorializes, offering neither reflection nor comment on what she repeats” (Leder, 1990, p. 216). She has so much trust in Young Priest that she remains in certainty when the priest assures her about Bartley’s safe return. Price (1961) claims that Nora is “hardly aware that a battle [between female agency and patriarchal establishment] is happening” (p.182). Similarly, Cathleen also admits that it is young men’s duty to go to the sea. Often, her worldview resembles what the masculine domain establishes. She quotes, “In this place, it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old” (Synge, 2018, p. 10). So, neither Nora nor Cathleen has any idea of the battleground they are fighting in. When the females accept and echo the beliefs, customs, and norms offered by the masculine domain, their female agency is undermined and sacrificed.

In the opening scene of *Riders to the Sea*, all female characters – Maurya, Nora, and Cathleen are entitled to a set of feminine responsibilities, for instance preparing food, doing the household chores, simplifying males’ lifestyle by providing what they need, and observing different festivals like Samhain night. But, in the end, when all the male members of the family die, their [women’s] feminine responsibilities shift to masculine responsibilities. The females of the family arrange everything to bury Michael and Bartley – which is predetermined as a masculine responsibility. Maurya becomes the guardian of the family and manages the livelihood of her two daughters. By fulfilling all of her responsibilities, she is doing nothing less than a man. But society will not acknowledge her break free from femininity. To Maurya, femininity is constructed by society, and it is a limitation or barrier that is imposed on her for which her female agency is undermined and concealed.

Being a naturalist dramatist, Synge sets *Riders to the Sea* in western Ireland and reflects on the existence of women in a masculine domain and exhibits how female agency is sacrificed and undermined strategically under the aegis of religious institutions, linguistic politics, and cultural hegemony. Maurya’s striving for her female agency is not confined to Aran Island society rather she becomes a universal figure representing women’s condition of existence who are marginalized in every culture in any timeframe. Undoubtedly, she gets relief from all kinds of feminine responsibilities at the cost of the physical disappearances of the male members.

It is obvious that Maurya’s potential and her capabilities of observing masculine duties are hidden and sidelined in that particular masculine domain due to the males’ existence. Through this, Synge implies how impossible it is to have a harmonious coexistence between males and females in every patriarchal establishment. At the end of the play, after losing all of her male members, Maurya mourns, “They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me” (Synge, 2018, p. 15). This is an inclination that the masculine sea has lost its power to dominate over the feminine persona of Maurya.

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