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A Comparative Study of 'Absurd Woman' Maurya from J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Albert Camus' 'Absurd Man' Sisyphus from *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Zinat Renesa

Independent Researcher, Bardhaman, West Bengal, India
Email: brella44nix@gmail.com

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Abstract

When questions like if God exists then why there is so much pain and injustice in the world, why the good people suffer and bad persons live happily, if there is the existence of God then why He is not protecting us from dangers remain unanswered and we receive the silence, the indifference from the universe is exactly when absurdism arises. 'Absurdism' according to Albert Camus means a futile and meaningless life, it arises when there is a conflict between our continuous search for meaning and the multiple questions that we ask but there is no one to give us answers and clear our doubts.

This paper attempts to analyze the character of Maurya in J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) from the perspective of Albert Camus' philosophy of 'Absurdism'. This work mainly focuses on the character of Maurya, compares her to Sisyphus from Camus' book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and tries to find the similarities between them, to learn from what perspectives can Maurya be considered as or is the female counterpart of Sisyphus or how is she 'The Absurd Woman.' Though the main focus of this paper is on Maurya, the other characters in the play would also be studied from the same perspective of 'Absurdism' and to compare them with the rest of the people of the world who are the 'Non-Aran Islanders' thus making this study a universal one. Sisyphus is the base of our study. Primary focus is on Maurya and other characters are also studied deeply without whom the research work shall remain incomplete.

Keywords: Sisyphus, Maurya, the Absurd, Absurdism, existence of God, repetition, acceptance.

Methodology

To discover something new and bring them to the light need a lot of hard work, study and proofs to support the main arguments. Research work cannot be done alone but rather needs verification and evidence from other reliable sources to champion the central idea of the work. The subject of the present research work is qualitative in nature involving principal texts like *Riders to the Sea* by J. M. Synge and *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. Data is collected from different sources like *Shodhganga*, text books, internet and the academic writings and published research papers in journals of other researchers.

The writer of this work has thoroughly read others' research papers that provide support. The subject of the present study is a comparative philosophical-literary analysis and pertains to the philosophy of absurdism of Albert Camus and its application on the character of Maurya from J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Where Camus sees Sisyphus as an absurd man, this current study tries to analyze and prove Maurya as an absurd woman and Sisyphus' female counterpart. Deep textual analysis, intensive readings of academic writings and thorough character analysis have been conducted. This work is a comparative study of characters.

In the field of academic writing no such work has been published which studies Maurya as an absurd woman. In this regard it became a challenging task to collect materials. But nonetheless a thorough investigation made it possible to collect academic writings which, though not on the same topic, were closer to the present research area and have proved to be quite helpful and supportive.

Absurdism, Sisyphus and Maurya

Absurdism focuses on repetition and cyclical patterns in life, on accepting the futility and meaninglessness of life and still deciding to move on, it rejects any kind of suicide, be it physical or philosophical, it embraces the absurdity which itself is an act of freedom, to live without any hope and also being entirely conscious of this hopeless life. Maurya mirrors the features of 'Absurdism.' She has witnessed eight deaths in her family, repeatedly, the same events, same prayers, same tasks performed by the other Aran Islanders.

Sisyphus, the Greek King of Corinth, was punished by the gods to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill every day. The moment he was about to reach the top of the hill the boulder rolled back down. He then had to start the task all over again. And this happened repeatedly for an eternity without any end.

Maurya in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* prayed to God repeatedly for the safety of the eight male members of her family but they all died in Sea: her father-in-law, her husband and her six sons. She prayed for them endlessly but in the end, she received the same futile and fatal result. She also knew about Bartley's tragic end and yet she prayed for his safety. Finally, she resigned with the acceptance of her absurd life. Maurya is moving in a loop, a repetition. She is trying to save the male members of her family and to come out of that infinite loop but every time she is failing, like Sisyphus.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus says,

"This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity." (Camus 7)

"The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (Camus 22)

Maurya prayed to God for her sons' safety, searched for answers but received none. All her prayers failed in the end. She asked questions but the universe remained silent.

Before moving on further to our main topic analyzing Maurya as the female counterpart of Sisyphus or considering her 'The Absurd Woman' let us start with the other characters in the play first,

namely the Young Priest, Nora and Cathleen. In the play Maurya is not presented or shown immediately. She comes after a few conversations that take place between Nora and Cathleen, then understand the thoughts and viewpoints of the characters on life and God based on the philosophy of absurdism and then to Maurya herself.

Edmund John Millington Synge and *Riders to the Sea*

Synge an Irish playwright, went to the Aran Islands on the advice of another Irish man, the famous poet W. B. Yeats who asked him to learn Gaelic and live among the peasants as mentioned by the editor of *Riders to the Sea* R. K. Kaul in "A Note on J. M. Synge." Out of those experiences grew Synge's great dramatic works like *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Tinker's Wedding* and others.

Riders to the Sea (1904) is set on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. Apart from the living characters there is one more character which plays a significant and pivotal role and that is the Sea. It is both the provider and destroyer of the Aran Islanders. The residents of the Aran Islands are tremendously dependent on the Sea that provides them livelihood like fishing, going to the fair for the selling and purchasing of animals and other objects for the functioning of a better livelihood. And the primary gender that gets sacrificed in the sea is the male. Maurya has lost many male members of her family like her father-in-law, her own husband, and her five sons. She has a total of six sons out of which only one is still surviving and that is Bartley but towards the end of the play he also dies. Maurya has only two daughters left, Nora and Cathleen and they take care of the household. Now Maurya is trying every possible way to stop Bartley from going to the Galway fair, just to save her last surviving son but all her efforts were fruitless. The grey pony knocked him down. She lost her son Bartley.

This is not just a story of Maurya only. It is the story of all the Aran Islanders, of all the other Mauryas who have lost their sons in the sea and mothers who will lose their sons in the near future.

Young Priest, Nora and Cathleen

Nora shows Cathleen a bundle that she received from the young priest which contains the clothes of Michael, another son of Maurya and now dead. He drowned in the sea and was swept away to the far north. During their conversation Cathleen asks Nora if the young priest is going to stop Bartley from going to the Galway fair or not. Nora informs that his answer was negative. The sisters are worried about Bartley because they too have seen the destroying nature of the sea and like their mother want to save their only surviving brother.

The young priest believes in the Almighty God and so does Nora and Cathleen. Cathleen has immense faith on the young priest. Nora believes in God. The young priest said that he would not stop Bartley from going to the fair because he believes that God knows about Maurya's condition that she has already lost five of her own sons and is now left with only one son Bartley. He believes that God is kind, God is all-forgiving, He will protect Bartley from death, He is kind to Maurya and will not take away from her last surviving son. Nora quotes the young priest's words –

'I won't stop him,' says he; 'but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute,' says he, 'with no son living.' (Synge 3-4)

These three characters support God and have faith in Him. This resonates with Camus' concept of the 'philosophical suicide' where he rejects God or religion.

"The perception of an angel or a god has no meaning for me." (Camus 35)

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus criticizes three thinkers. First, Karl Jaspers, who tries to solve the absurd by taking a leap towards 'transcendental faith.' Camus quotes Jaspers' words,

"Does not the failure reveal, beyond any possible explanation and interpretation, not the absence but the existence of transcendence?" (Camus 25)

Camus comments on Jaspers,

"He contributes nothing new. He has found nothing in experience but the confession of his own impotence and no occasion to infer any satisfactory principle. Yet without justification, as he says to himself, he suddenly asserts all at once the transcendent, the essence of experience, and the superhuman significance of life...Nothing logically prepares this reasoning. I can call it a leap. And paradoxically can be understood Jaspers' insistence, his infinite patience devoted to making the experience of the transcendent impossible to realize." (Camus 25-26)

Second, Lev Chestov, for using faith in God to escape the absurd life. Camus quotes Chestov who defines the absurd as,

"...he does not say: 'This is absurd,' but rather: 'This is God: we must rely on him even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories.'" (Camus 26)

Camus' opinion on Chestov,

"...the Russian philosopher even hints that this God is, perhaps, full of hatred and hateful, incomprehensible and contradictory; but the more hideous is his face the more he asserts his power. His greatness is his incoherence. His proof is his inhumanity. One must spring into him and by this leap free oneself from rational illusions...The moment the notion transforms itself into eternity's springboard, it ceases to be linked to human lucidity...This leap is an escape." (Camus 26-27)

Third, Soren Kierkegaard for taking a leap of faith to escape the absurdity of existence. Camus says,

"Kierkegaard likewise takes the leap...He makes of the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world." (Camus 29)

Sashikanta Barik writes in Chapter 2 of their dissertation titled 'Multi-Angles of Suicide and Its Solution: A Study of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*' about philosophical suicide in simple words:

"Jasper claims to find transcendence by means of illogical leap, just at the point where reason break down, Chestov asserts that the absurd is God. We need God only to help with impossible and incomprehensible. Kierkegaard is famous for that 'leap of faith' where he equates God with irrationals." (Barik 40).

He says that all these existential philosophers have committed philosophical suicide because,

"They all refuse the human reason and equate irrational universe with God." (Barik 40)

Alexis Karpouzou remarks in their article 'Camus, Kierkegaard & Dostoevsky | Existentialism' on Camus' concept of 'philosophical suicide' –

"Apart from the physical act of suicide, he talks about "philosophical suicide", where we accept something as true that isn't convincing but is convenient and easy for us to believe in. Such as believing in some ready-made belief system, which is practically all of the world's religion."

Alexis quotes Camus, "I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist" and then remarks –

"This reflects the notion of the Absurd. The search of the possibility of the existence of God is humanly impossible, but this also entails that the proof that God does not exist is impossible too."

Camus has famously said in his *Notebooks 1951-1959*:

"I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist".

It is clear from this remark that he did not completely brush aside the concept of God and nor did he accept Him. He was in the middle path. He sounds like an agnostic here. According to Merriam-Webster agnostic means –

“a person who does not have a definite belief about whether God exists or not”

It seems from this remark of his that Camus believed in something which cannot be explained and claimed as ‘pure truths’, he left a gap which other people filled with the concept of God and religion. Camus, may be, knew about this gap where other worldly and mystical events occurred but he did not fill it in with his own personal concept and views of God or religion and then forcefully impose it on others. He questioned the gap. He did not accept the gap but did not reject it either. In other words, he was not blind in faith, he did not blindly follow God or religion. All he did was just question them, the higher authority.

“It is important to note that Camus does not deny the existence of God or that there is some inherent meaning or purpose behind everything.” (Barik 41)

Bhagyalaxmi Das writes in Chapter 1 of her thesis work ‘Individual Struggle in the Absurd World with Special Reference to the Works of Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett’,

“Prior to World War II, Humans conducted their lives according to ethical rules. They believed everything occurred for good and according to God's will. The belief was transmitted from generations that we must all live in harmony and brotherhood because by doing so God is pleased and the evildoers are punished. During the war, people observed that if that was the case, then why men killed their fellow-men in a bloody battle that lasted from 1939-45 and claimed over sixty million lives. Mankind witnessed and suffered the deadliest war in human history. The war claimed an estimated twenty million military personnel and forty million civilians as a result of genocide, massacres, mass-bombings, disease, hunger and starvation. Spine chilling incidents during the war, nurtured the absurd feeling in humans. One such incident was the Nanking Massacre, in which, thousands of Chinese civilians were brutalized, raped and murdered. The Axis forces tested poisonous biological and chemical weapons on the civilians and prisoners of war. The Holocaust claimed approximately six million Jews, over two million ethnic Poles and four million others who were considered ‘unworthy of life’. The people considered ‘unworthy of life’ were the physically challenged, mentally ill, prisoners of war, children of Jews, homosexuals and many more. Following these outrageous incidents, millions of men who fought in the war, prisoners in the concentration camps and people in general gave up on life; they lost their hope to lead a normal life again. They died more from loss of hope and less from deficit of food and medicine. Those who lingered on to hope, survived and those who didn't died. Man began to wonder whether God really heeds to human prayers. If God lived and remained silent to the brutality undergone, then all ethical rules prove wrong. These questions that lurked in human mind exterminated all ethical rules and gave way to the absurd. Life which was based on ethical rules gave way to a rational world. Where faith ends; the absurd begins. So, loss of faith in God is the basic premise on which the absurd is based. This loss of faith took an increasing proportion during World War II. Human experience during this time, terrible as it was, reinforced the idea that suffering is inevitable. We suffer for reasons we do not know. Man questioned the motive behind life and death.” (Das 13-14)

Camus believes that the world is absurd. Anything can happen to anyone. Good things can happen to bad or evil people and bad things, injustice, unfairness can happen to good and pure-hearted people. There is no rule or formula to predict the ‘Karma.’ Evil persons can flourish in life and be highly successful, commit a crime and then roam freely here and there while good people can achieve little success or zero success, or may not commit any crime and still be jailed (The most prominent example is Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* where Josef K. is arrested without any explanation even when he knows that he has committed no crime). This is intimately linked to the concept of ‘Karma’ which believes that good people are always rewarded and the evil or bad persons are always punished, if not immediately

but surely in the future. Though this is not true always. It is not that 'Karma' is unreal or the good is not rewarded or the evil is not punished, there are cases of 'Karma' being real but they are few. Justice is served sometimes and not always. The Hindu American Foundation says,

"According to Hindu philosophy, every action (karma) has a reaction or outcome. When an individual's actions are positive or selfless, and righteous (dharmic), they will experience positive effects or rewards. If their actions, on the other hand, are negative (i.e. lying, stealing, hurting, etc.), the results will be negative. The karma of an individual's actions, positive or negative, may be experienced immediately, later in their present life, or possibly in a future life or lives. It is important to remember that an individual's karma is based on their thoughts, words, and actions and the choices they make."

So, if according to the young priest, Nora and Cathleen, God is kind and generous, a protector who protects His own children (as humans are His own children), then Bartley should survive. But towards the end of the play, we see Bartley's dead body is being brought into the house with water dripping. Bartley is dead because the grey pony knocked him into the sea, he then drowned and the strong current dashed him against the white rocks. God took away from Maurya her only and last surviving son. She is now 'sonless.' So, is God kind now or not? Is He kind to Maurya? Is there God at all? If He is present why did Bartley die then? The questions still remain unanswered. These questions coincide with Albert Camus', the French absurdist philosopher, thinking of not the complete acceptance and not the complete rejection of God and religion. The gap of uncertainty remains.

Few questions need to be answered if God exists and is kind: Why did God take away Bartley's life? Why did God make Maurya 'son-less'? Is He not merciful and kind? Why did God take away eight male members from Maurya's family? Why is God giving so much pain to Maurya? People believe that humans are children of God. If that is so then why is He causing so much pain to His child Maurya? Who is going to answer these? The Universe? God? Here comes absurdism.

The Sea is the Absurd life

Cathleen says –

"It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea." (Synge 6)

This is a daily, regular and a cyclical lifestyle of the people of the Aran Islands. There is no escaping the sea if they want to live and survive in the island. The sea cannot be avoided. The sea is the absurd life. It does not care about how many sons are left in the family. It is both kind and unkind, the preserver and destroyer. It provides food, it is essential for survival, the route for trade, business, to attend fairs and fishing. It provides livelihood and also takes away life without any mercy, whether one prays to God or not, the end cannot be avoided. It is both merciful and merciless.

There is no escape, especially in the life of a young man. It is the only way of earning the livelihood of the people of the Aran islands where men go to sea for fishing or other places for a fair or to trade animals to earn some money. There is no other way out. It is not just about Bartley but all the people of Aran islands. It is not just about Maurya but the stories of all the mothers of Aran islands who constantly worry about their son's life, those sons who at some point of their life do not return home as the sea swallows them. This is the life of the Aran islanders. Thus, it makes this a play of universal importance.

Aran Islanders and Non-Aran Islanders (The rest of the world): Absurd World V/S Absurd World

These hardships, loss, death and pain are not the case of Aran islands only. The sea provides; the sea takes away. They cannot avoid the sea. The rule of the world is to work and earn money, live, repeat, each day, every day. People all around the world live a life in the same manner of the Aran islanders. They may not be living around the sea but they work, earn, live life and repeat, each day, every day.

Even if they are tired, they still go to work. Aran islanders cannot escape the sea, their absurd life. Non-Aran islanders too cannot escape their absurd life.

Aran islanders know the Sea can take their lives but still they work. Non-Aran islanders also know they can die at any moment without any warning, they are tired of their repeated works, mundane life, daily cyclical activities but still they wake up and go to work. Many non-Aran islanders die while going to work or returning from their work, or at their work places. Death is everywhere. Death doesn't care about people whether they live near the sea or not. Death takes us all. It is not forgiving. It is harsh and cruel. Whenever it is meant to come it will come. It does not care about profession, time, people or place. Only acceptance is the key to survive and being aware of death itself. Being aware of the absurd and still carry on with this mundane life is what Camus calls 'The Absurd Man.' Maurya has accepted the repeated deaths occurring in her family. She is aware of the truth that every man on the islands in particular and humans in general will die one day. This awareness is very much prominent when she says,

"No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied." (Synge 15)

This last line uttered by Maurya herself makes her 'The Absurd Woman.'

Male Absurd Archetypes, Male Dominated Aran Islands and Maurya

Albert Camus' book is thoroughly masculine in nature and is dominated by male characters. While talking of the absurd man Camus has used characters where none of them is a female. Camus' philosophy of absurdism is based on male-centric archetypes namely Don Juan the seducer, the Actor, the Conqueror, Sisyphus. They are defined by traits like aggression, conquest, pursuit of earthly passion, physical defiance which are dominantly attributed to males. Females, in other books of Albert Camus, are represented as objects of desire as found in *The Outsider*, or in the domestic and maternal arena as in *The First Man*. The women represented in Camus' work lack any deep psychological insights, sometimes unnamed, or remain inside houses. The same happens in *The Myth of Sisyphus* with no presence of absurd female characters at all let alone with the masculine traits. The male absurd men that dominate Camus' philosophy are Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror and Sisyphus. Against these masculine characters, in this paper, alone stands the only female absurd woman and that is Synge's Maurya.

Don Juan is an absurd man because he does not crave for eternal love or true love. He believes to live and enjoy in the present moment, to love as many women as possible, to gain as many experiences as possible. Camus comments on Don Juan –

"The more one loves, the stronger the absurd grows. It is not through lack of love that Don Juan goes from woman to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as a mystic in quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest. Whence each woman hopes to give him what no one has ever given him. Each time they are utterly wrong and merely manage to make him feel the need of that repetition. 'At last,' exclaims one of them, 'I have given you love.' Can we be surprised that Don Juan laughs at this? 'At last? No,' he says, 'but once more.' " (Camus 51)

"He is an ordinary seducer. Except for the difference that he is conscious, and that is why he is absurd." (Camus 53)

J. M. Synge's character Maurya is not a seducer like Don Juan but her struggles are the same as his. He takes pleasure in loving multiple women with all his heart, wants to experience as many love as possible while Maurya is facing multiple deaths in her family. She is not getting any pleasure in these deaths but like Don Juan she is gaining multiple experiences. One is experiencing physical love and the other physical death multiple times. Don Juan believes living in the present moment as he has accepted that there is nothing in the afterlife, and all the deaths in the Aran Islands have taught Maurya that this

is life, people will die and nothing could be done, even praying to Gods cannot save her family members. It is a futile task. Her acceptance is to eat 'wet flours' and 'a fish that would be stinking.' She is an absurd woman because she is aware of the futile life and has accepted it.

The Actor is an absurd man because he knows that his fame and artistic creativity are fleeting in nature. He is enjoying the present while living out numerous lives and then they are gone after three hours. Nothing is permanent. He is not permanent, his performances and acts on stage are not permanent, his own life is not permanent. The Actor believes in ethics of quantity. He is not in search of a single, deep and lasting meaning in life. The Actor is "Aware" that life is fleeting and futile. He plays multiple roles and then it is gone, he lives, experiences and enjoys multiple lives which ends after few hours. An absurd man is consciously aware of the meaninglessness of life. Camus comments on the Actor –

"The actor has three hours to be Iago or Alceste, Phèdre or Gloucester. In that short space of time he makes them come to life and die on fifty square yards of boards. Never has the absurd been so well illustrated or at such length...By thus sweeping over centuries and minds, by miming man as he can be and as he is, the actor has much in common with that other absurd individual, the traveller. Like him, he drains something and is constantly on the move. He is a traveller in time and, for the best, the hunted traveller, pursued by souls. If ever the ethics of quantity could find sustenance, it is indeed on that strange stage...For that is his art – to simulate absolutely, to project himself as deeply as possible into lives that are not his own. At the end of his effort his vocation becomes clear: to apply himself wholeheartedly to being nothing or to being several...He will die in three hours under the mask he has assumed today. Within three hours he must experience and express a whole exceptional life. That is called losing oneself to find oneself. In those three hours he travels the whole course of the dead-end path that the man in the audience takes a lifetime to cover." (Camus 58-59)

Like the Actor, Maurya is also playing her multiple roles as a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a housewife, a neighbour. She has played, enjoyed, lived and now stopped playing the roles of a wife and a daughter-in-law. As the speaker melancholy Jaques said in William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*,

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts,..." (*As You Like It* 2. 7. 139-142).

The Actor played his role for three hours; Maurya played her role for years and is still playing. Nevertheless, both ended their roles after a certain period of time. Death in the form of sea ended her role as a daughter-in-law and wife and then the mother of six sons. At present, she is a mother of two daughters only, a resident of an island and in the future, she is going to play a new role that is the bread earner of the family along with her two daughters – a working and independent woman Maurya. After Bartley's death she has decided to live and eat low quality foods. As there is no male in her family it is quite evident that the remaining last three members have to work outside the house, earn money like any male and also look after the household, cook and clean. All-rounder women both inside and outside the house. Prayers to God will not give her food by magic because those prayers that she murmured for her sons and Bartley and others did not save anyone. Maurya's "white tossed hair" is a proof of her old age and her experiences in life.

The Conqueror is an absurd man because he is also aware of the futility and meaninglessness of life and actively engages himself in the present. He is a 'Man of Action.' He believes in realities that are tangible, he rejects religion and any kind of political ideologies. He does not believe in anything that promises eternal salvation. What he believes is action over contemplation, revolt and passion, 'ethics of quantity' and embraces futility. The Conqueror says –

"Even humiliated, the flesh is my only certainty. I can live only on it. The creature is my native land. This is why I have chosen this absurd and ineffectual effort. This is why I am on the side of the struggle." (Camus 64)

"Yes, man is his own end. And he is his only end. If he aims to be something, it is in this life." (Camus 64)

"We are not ignorant of the fact that all churches are against us. A heart so keyed up eludes the eternal, and all churches, divine or political, lay claim to the eternal. Happiness and courage, retribution or justice are secondary ends for them. It is a doctrine they bring, and one must subscribe to it. But I have no concern with ideas or with the eternal. The truths that come within my scope can be touched with the hand. I cannot separate from them. This is why you cannot base anything on me: nothing of the conqueror lasts, not even his doctrines. At the end of all that, despite everything, is death. We know also that it ends everything." (Camus 65)

The Conqueror is entirely absorbed in the temporal and mortal world. He rejects any kind of transcendent meaning and eternal salvation. He seeks to gain as much experiences as possible rather than hoping for the possession of a perfect, eternal life.

Maurya does not fight in battlefields like the Conqueror does and has never gone to war, killed people with swords or bow and arrow. Physically she is not a warrior but a commoner, a housewife, an old woman and a mother with full of affections, love, care, softness and is afraid of losing her family. But emotionally and mentally she is a warrior. She does not know what giving up looks like. She might go weak on her knees, break down and cry. But in the end, she again gets up like a true warrior in a battlefield. She was afraid of Bartley's death and wanted to save him while being fully aware that he is destined to die. Then she saw the grey mare behind the red mare on which Bartley was riding and broke down completely after returning home. In no time Bartley's dead body was brought in and laid on the table in front of her. Like a strong fighter she faced the dead body of her last son, performed the last rites and decided to live along with her two daughters. She showed her fighting spirit in the past; she showed it now. Maurya has always been a strong woman. She remained resilient even in the face of death, she remained mentally tough even when she lost her children.

Finally comes the epitome of Absurd Man Sisyphus who is conscious and completely aware of his futile struggle of pushing the rock up the hill while knowing he would never reach the top. And he accepts his fate.

"...Sisyphus is the absurd hero...one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments towards that lower world whence he will have to push it up again towards the summit. He goes back down to the plain." (Camus 87)

Maurya pushes her boulder of prayers and efforts to save her family only to see the boulder of death or the boulder of failed prayer roll back down. When the boulder first rolled down, she lost her father-in-law, rolling down the second time she lost her husband and it goes on until Bartley dies. She carried on with this task while knowing and accepting that those are just futile efforts. She still moved on. This rolling up and down of the boulder would never stop as it is the story of all the Aran Islanders and Non-Aran Islanders. This is universal. The absurd is universal.

The deaths of the male members in Maurya's house in particular and of the Aran islanders in general are not just deaths in the literal sense but hardships or repetitions of daily mundane life that

people all over the world face. No matter how hard one tries to escape this cycle of repetitions one can never really escape it.

The non-Aran islanders cannot escape this absurd life. Maurya, an Aran islander cannot escape her absurd life. Camus' Sisyphus cannot escape his absurd life, his vein and futile task of pushing a boulder up the hill which rolls back down and reaches the bottom before it gets to the top. Maurya and her family know the hardships that they have to face and are also aware that they cannot escape those hardships. Eight members in total died in Maurya's family and then she dares to say -

"...No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied." (Synge 15)

This single sentence proves that even after facing so much of loss, and enduring such tremendous amount of pain she is still not ready to give up i.e. to commit suicide to escape her painful life. Maurya is weak and vulnerable yet strong and does not kill herself (accepting the absurdity). After Bartley's death Maurya describes how she and her two daughters are going to live the rest of their life. Maurya says -

"It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking." (Synge 14)

Even without the male members the rest of the family would still survive. The flour might be wet; the fish might stink but they would still live and survive. She has accepted her fate and her life. It is what it is. No questions of 'Why me?' and no one to answer. Just survival strategies.

Dr. Ilham El Majdoubi writes in their research paper titled 'The Influence of Religiosity on Narrative Elements and Character Development in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*' -

"Maurya is an unremarkable peasant woman with no discernible noble origins. Upon realizing her impending demise, she is compelled to acknowledge the inevitability of suffering as an inherent aspect of the human experience. Having lost her loved ones, she is rendered completely defenseless and is forced to confront the reality of their demise with unbearable poignancy." (El Majdoubi 6361)

In the patriarchal society Maurya has always been subdued, ignored or sidelined. Even her own daughters try to impose their opinion on Maurya and scold her. When Maurya does not give her blessings to Bartley Cathleen scolds her -

"Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on everyone in this house without your sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard work in his ear?" (Synge 7)

Bartley avoids his mother's words when she tries to stop him and save him from his impending death. Maurya complains -

"Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea?" (Synge 6)

Regardless of all the controls from her own family, opinions being sidelined and undervalued Maurya stands out as the most practical and the strongest woman. Despite losing all her sons and other males in her family Maurya, though weak and broken, is still standing straight in a society dominated by males and she alone overpowers the patriarchal realm.

Md. Rezoan Hossain writes in his paper titled 'Mapping Female Agency in Masculine Domain: A Feminist Study of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*' -

"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..." (Hossain 33)

Whenever Maurya tries to put forth her opinion it becomes inconsiderable to her family. She is an old and experienced woman whom no one valued, especially her son Bartley. Had he considered his mother's words with a bit sincerity he would have been alive. In the end Maurya's practicality turned out to be true in a society where the opinions of the males mattered. When Maurya was trying to stop Bartley from going to the sea, she had a faith on the Young Priest that he would stop her son.

"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." (Synge 4)

But the answer that Nora gave makes it prominent that for Bartley his friends are more important than his mother and their opinions matter the most to him and not his experienced and aged mother's. Bartley took advice from his friends and told them that he would definitely go to the fair. Nora answers to her mother Maurya –

"He'll not stop him, mother; and I heard Eamon Simon and Stephen Pheety and Colum Shawn saying he would go." (Synge 4)

Md. Rezoan also points out the same in his paper,

"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." (Hossain 36)

From the moment of the death of her son Bartley Maurya became the bread earner of the family, a profession which is highly dominated by males. She may not go to the sea and make huge transactions in business like the males but she would still earn small amount through small transactions or collect food, though low quality, that are available on the land which does not require one to go to the sea. She would not die without food at least. In a male dominated patriarchal society Maurya, Cathleen and Nora became the three pillars of their household and also each other's' strengths.

Maurya's view on God is that He cannot save Bartley from drowning because the sea is more powerful. This also turned out to be true while overpowering and subduing the Young Priest's opinion who said that God would save and protect Bartley. Maurya is experienced and the Young Priest is not and yet no one prioritizes and appreciates her experience. Again, in the field of religion which is dominated by males, a patriarchal domain, as represented by the Young Priest, Maurya excelled and outshined. The more the patriarchal society tried to subdue her, the more she defied them and outshined them all.

Maurya and Her Faith in God

R. K. Kaul comments that the Aran islanders are Christians (converted to Christianity in the fifth century). But in spite of their conversion, they were not completely rid of their pagan superstitions.

According to Merriam-Webster –

"Paganism: a religion that has many gods or goddesses, considers the earth holy, and does not have a central authority"

Some of the pagan elements present in the play are *keening*, dead Michael riding behind living Bartley signaling impending death (the sight of Bride Dara, an Irish folklore), nature worship (the sea),

pagan festival Samhain. Kaul points out that in Christianity the younger ones bury the older ones. While in this play, the role has been reversed. The older ones bury the younger ones, a pagan tradition. Maurya says,

“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.” (Synge 7-8)

Some of the Christian elements in the play are the young priest, holy water, prayer and resignation for a Christian burial.

Maurya believes in the young priest and also believes that he would stop Bartley from going to the fair. She says,

“He won’t go this day, for the young priest will stop him surely.” (Synge 4)

In spite of all those repeated deaths in Maurya’s life, she is still trying hard and her best to save her son Bartley. She did this earlier, she failed. She is doing it now and the result will be the same. Bartley is dead. She is conscious of the harsh reality –

“It’s hard set we’ll be surely the day you’re drowned with the rest.” (Synge 6)

At first Maurya is afraid of her own and her daughters’ future –

“What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?” (Synge 6)

And towards the play’s end she says –

“It’s a great rest I’ll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it’s only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking.” (Synge 14)

Two completely opposite thoughts. First there is uncertainty and scepticism, second is acceptance and resignation.

Maurya believes in God, asks God to “spare us” after Bartley leaves because she will not see him again and she knows that. She tried to give blessings to him saying “God speed you” but the words did not come out of her mouth. But her relationship with God is a bit complex. When Nora said that the young priest believes that God will not take away all sons of Maurya then she replied,

“It’s little the like of him knows of the sea.” (Synge 11)

She believes in God and has faith in Him but deep within she doubts Him too. Her white hair shows her experience in life and its harsh realities. She knows that the Sea is more powerful than any God or any faith. On one hand Maurya is taking the name of God for solace and for her son’s protection but on the other hand she knows God cannot do anything and Bartley will be dead soon.

“He’s gone now, God spare us, and we’ll not see him again. He’s gone now, and when the black night is falling I’ll have no son left me in the world.” (Synge 6-7)

R. K. Kaul claims that,

“In the play, there is an implicit suggestion that religious consolation is feeble.”

Maurya prays to God to have mercy on all her sons and on all of the rest of the world, she is grateful to God that Michael has got a clean burial but her faith in the Almighty is not strong. Because experience has showed her the harsh truth of life: the destructive nature and brutality of the Sea which took away eight of her family members. The name of God, and prayer to God might give her peace and solace for the time being but she is not blind in faith and not a blind follower of God. She is in the middle path, not rejecting God completely and not accepting Him or believing Him completely. She

prayed night and day for the well-being of the members with no positive result. She did not give up rather accepted her fate and decided to live a simple life with wet flours and stinking fish to eat. She decided to live on with her two daughters. And this, makes her 'The Absurd Woman.' Her attitude towards life and towards God is quite similar to Camus' thought when he says he does not believe in God but nor is he an atheist which somewhat makes Camus an agnostic.

Absurd characters live in the present moment and find their own happiness

Camus' character Meursault from *The Outsider*, lives in the present moment and he embraces his absurd and lonely prison life when he realized there is no escape. This moment has been beautifully presented by Camus. Meursault loves to swim and spends his time at the beach, physical pleasure is very important to him and smokes regularly, he sleeps a lot, he loves sex or physical intimacy, watches movies especially comedies. Meursault is a sensualist. He prefers sensualism above anything else. He repeats these activities daily. He is defined by sensualism. He is an absurd man and sex and smoking give him peace. God and religion give peace to those who believe in them. Meursault is not searching for any one grand, deep and final meaning like Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror and Sisyphus. He is not searching for any deep, eternal and true love, he believes in the present moment and tangible things, he smoked beside his dead mother's coffin, he played the part of a son and left the cemetery without any emotion or feeling for his dead mother and immediately went to meet his female colleague Marie, supposedly his love interest for fulfilling his sexual desires and behaved as if nothing happened. He killed the Arab because of extreme heat. Don Juan gives love to multiple women and is also not a believer of eternal and true love, he loves more women, gains more experience, lives in the moment. The Actor is busy in experiencing and enjoying multiple lives, the Conqueror believes in winning as many battles as possible and is a man of action, Sisyphus lives in the present moment and continues his futile task without any expectation of positive result.

Meursault, in *The Outsider*, while inside the cell wanted to kill time. So he found a way. He started remembering and memorizing the objects and their places that were in his bedroom and that passed the time. He was not bored anymore. He was busy all day. Classic moment of absurd man. For the first few days as a prisoner he felt trapped inside the jail, the prison walls felt like gradually surrounding and moving towards him, almost crushing. Meursault says –

“...it struck me how much the walls of my prison had closed in on me.” (Camus 69)

After a point of time he got used to the surroundings of the prison.

He reveals –

“Once again, it was all a matter of how to kill time. I finally stopped being bored altogether from the moment I learned how to remember. Sometimes I started thinking about my bedroom and I would imagine starting at one end of it and walking around in a circle while mentally listing all the things I passed. At the beginning, it took no time at all. But every time I started doing it again, it took a little longer because I would remember all the different pieces of furniture, every object on the furniture, every detail of each object, their colour and texture, and any marks, cracks or chips. At the same time, I tried to concentrate so I would have a complete inventory. I became such an expert at this that by the end of a few weeks I could spend hours simply listing everything in my bedroom. The more I thought about it, the more things came back to me, things I hadn't noticed before or had forgotten. I realized then that a man who had only lived for a single day could easily live a hundred years in prison. He would have enough memories to keep him from getting bored... Then there was sleep. In the beginning, I slept badly at night and not at all during the day. Little by little, my nights got better and I could also sleep during the day. In the last months, I would say that I slept between sixteen and eighteen hours a day. That left me six hours to kill with meals, my basic needs, my memories and the story of the man from Czechoslovakia.” (Camus 70-71)

At first Meursault questioned his existence in prison and how was he going to spend time in the dark room that suffocated him. And the next moment he found a way to spend time by counting the things in his bedroom, sleeping, eating, reading from newspaper. Now he is not bored at all. He questioned, received no answer, he was not happy for his life in prison but also there was no way out. He accepted that he was destined to be there inside the dark and lonely cell and law would never release him. He accepted his fate and embraced the absurdity, found a way to kill time, a way that no one provided him but he found on his own. Now he is happy. Albert Camus has impeccably portrayed how to live while embracing absurdism. Meursault only missed women, sea and smoking. But he was happy, rather he found his own happiness –

“Apart from those few problems, I wasn’t too unhappy.” (Camus 70)

And one must remember what Camus stated for Sisyphus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* –

“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Camus 89)

J. M. Synge’s Maurya is also destined to live in the present like Meursault, Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror and Sisyphus. Like these male absurd characters Maurya has also gained multiple experiences but on death, cried when she lost her family and seen families cry when they lost their sons. The only thing that is left with her is acceptance. She cannot leave the islands to avoid witnessing any further deaths. Even if she leaves the Aran islands, she will not be free from death. A very prominent feature in Maurya’s character is ‘acceptance.’ She accepts truth without any hesitation no matter how harsh and bitter it is. Because life is harsh and illogical and no one can run away from this. Like Meursault she has also accepted her life in the Aran Islands which is surrounded from all sides by the Sea just as Meursault is surrounded by the four walls of prison which feels like closing in on him. He cannot escape the prison and she cannot escape the sea and death. So the best way out of this imprisonment is a happy acceptance. Gain more experiences on death by sea, witness more deaths and accept it. She finally decided to live a life with low quality foods rather than questioning and giving up.

Conclusion

“One must imagine Sisyphus happy” but it is difficult to specify whether Maurya is at all happy like Sisyphus or not. Multiple deaths in a family cannot make anyone happy but nevertheless people accept it with a heavy heart. After looking at Maurya’s life and the struggles she has gone through one can say that she is not a happy person. Happiness comes from within. There is not a single moment in the play where Maurya has genuinely smiled or laughed, be it in the present or past. She is distraught and despondent yet carrying on. At the most that she could do is to force happiness on her face. After Bartley’s death Maurya says that all her troubles are gone and now, she is carefree –

“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, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. 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.” (Synge 13-14)

It seems as if she is putting on a façade, a brave act which she is actually not. No mother can ever be happy after losing six young sons. Whether she is happy or not is not in the least important to the destroyer Sea. It will kill everyone and nothing can be done. Maurya cannot stop the Sea. What matters here is acceptance. There is nothing that she could do apart from accepting her fate. Here one can ‘imagine’ Maurya happy just the way Camus tells his readers to imagine Sisyphus happy. Maurya found a way to live life, Meursault found his own way of happiness in jail, Actor found a way to happily experience multiple lives simultaneously, Don Juan found his happiness in multiple love, Conqueror found his way of happiness by winning many battles, Camus ‘imagines’ Sisyphus is happy and so one should ‘imagine’ Maurya too is happy.

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