

**The Troubled Irish Mother Figure in J.
M. Synge's Riders to the Sea and Tom
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The aim of this paper is to examine the mother figure in *Riders to the Sea* (1902) by John Millington Synge and *Bailegangaire* (1984) by Tom Murphy. The mother image will be related to the traditional figure of Mother Ireland. The two writers' motives in presenting such figures will be analyzed. The paper will investigate the playwrights' use of the art of story-telling as a technique effective in exploring the depth of the mothers' traumas. The study will also shed light on the innovative sort of language used by the two playwrights and seen as one of their contributions to the theater. It is hoped that the study will help offer a better ground to understanding especially Murphy's work due to the relatively underdeveloped state of his criticism and interpretation.

Besides the treatment of Synge and Murphy of the troubled mother in their plays, other Irish playwrights have shown interest in this theme past and present. In their play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory recount the story of an old woman, Cathleen, who mourns a double loss; the usurpation of her land and the actual and anticipated deaths of numerous men for her sake. Sean O'Casey has also dealt with the image of the troubled

woman in his play *Juno and the Paycock* which depicts the struggle of Juno Boyle to mend the affairs of her family with her drunken husband who spends his last penny in the pub, a crippled son persecuted for his betrayal and a daughter deserted by the father of her child. Marina Carr portrays troubled women in two of her plays; *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats*.... In both plays, the heroines are deserted wives and mothers and the author records their struggle which reflects Carr's comment on certain unfavorable aspects of the Irish nation.

The relation between Synge and Murphy is ascertained through the latter's confession that: " It took me 20 years to discover geniuses like Synge and O'Casey" (Renton 11). Due to youthful prejudice against anything that is Irish, Murphy tried at the onset of his literary career to evade the influence of his Irish predecessor and it is only through the Spanish dramatist, poet and pianist García Lorca that he discovered Synge who "means an awful lot to me", as Murphy once declared in an interview (Tóibín). The Lives of the two authors share certain common traits some of which could be responsible for the congruence between the plays discussed in this paper.¹

Both *Riders to the Sea* and *Bailegangaire* center around Irish female figures whose misfortune is the core of each play. Maurya, in *Riders*, is grief-stricken due to the loss of seven male members of her family to the sea including five sons, her husband and her father-in-law. When the play opens, her sixth

son, Michael is missing and reported drowned while her only remaining son, Bartley, intends to ride the sea on a trip to Galway to attend a horse-fair. Maurya's attempt to dissuade Bartley from journeying through a rough sea is to no avail and he leaves without his mother's blessings. The heart-broken Maurya is urged by her two daughters, Cathleen and Nora, to go to the spring well to meet Bartley, bless him and give him the bread he forgets. When the mother goes on her mission, the daughters start to inspect a bundle of clothes brought by the young priest and are dismayed to find out that it is Michael's. The family's tragedy is complete when Bartley's drowned body is carried into the cottage and the play ends with Maurya's resignation to fate.

The central event in *Bailegangaire* is the telling of a story by Mommo, an old bed-ridden crone looked after by Mary, her granddaughter who has sacrificed her successful career as a nurse for her grandmother's sake while her sister Dolly is married, has many children and just drops in to chat and then resumes her illegal sexual adventures. Mommo's narrative revolves around a laughing competition in a town called *Bailegangaire*. Night after night, Mommo leaves off her story at the same point and is urged over and over again by her granddaughters to finish the story so as to set the family free of the strains of the past and renew their hope for happiness.

Riders is set in a peasant cottage on the Aran Islands, which are located off the western coast of Ireland, in the late 19th century. Such a location renders the natives insular and

untouched by the modernizing influences of British colonialism, and consequently they are viewed as representatives of pre-colonial Irish culture. In this remote and isolated environment, the primitive inhabitants are denied "the benefits of modern technology and tools of communication whereby they could possibly learn about the happenings both in their unfrequented piece of land and the big world beyond it" (Kaya 156). The entire action of the play occurs in the cottage kitchen which is primitively furnished with a turf-burning oven used for cooking and as a source of heat, a spinning wheel, a turf-loft and other items which all stress the extreme poverty and isolation of the inhabitants of the place.

Despite Murphy's intent desire at the outset of his dramatic career to avoid the-country-cottage kitchen which he perceives as "conservative representationalism" (Greene, "Children" 214), the setting of *Bailegangaire* is 1984, the kitchen of a traditional three-roomed thatched house which contains "some modern conveniences: a bottle-gas cooker, a radio, electric light"². Murphy's choice of the time and place of the action is significant as is seen in the special reference to the year 1984 in the play. With George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) in mind, Murphy intends to prove that Orwell is at fault since he presents in his novel that 1984 would be a time "when everyone would live in fear under the panopticon eye of Big Brother" (Greene, *Politics* 219). Murphy's characters are marginalized people with lost lives that no one is watching. Brian Lavery asserts that Murphy's

earlier rejection of the kitchen setting stems from his repudiation of "the myth of a rural Irish utopia: a vision of thatched cottages inhabited by happy peasants speaking Gaelic, originally imagined by William Butler Yeats and the Gaelic revival movement of the early 1900". To expose the reality that lurks underneath that dream façade, Murphy presents in *Bailegangaire* dissatisfied characters, like Mary who considers emigration as the only possible solution to problems suffered at home.

There is a sort of parallelism between the titles of the two plays in that each is connected to the place of the action. In Synge's play, the "Riders" of the title are poor peasant and fisher folk of the Aran Islands. A sample of these inhabitants is exemplified in the male members of Maurya's family who are all riders to the sea. Out of necessity and need, the men folk of the family go to the sea in almost the same manner of riding horseback, and take cattle and horses which they hope to sell in neighboring markets in order to provide for their family. Having no other alternative route, those helpless riders wrestle with the turbulent sea, the antagonist of the play, and they meet their tragic death. The poor peasants, like the rest of the islanders, are defeated and crushed not because of any flaw inherent in them, but because they are struggling against a fierce adversary, the sea, which devours them mercilessly. On the other hand, Murphy entitles his play *Bailegangaire* which literally means town without laughter, while the subtitle "The story of *Bailegangaire* and how it came by its appellation" will

be displayed in Mommo's narrative. Hence, the title is linked, as in Synge's play, with the place of the action and the audience will come to know, through Mommo, how the town previously called Bochtan has acquired its name. In the course of Mommo's story, we hear of a laughing contest to which her husband challenged a hefty Bochtan and the latter's eventual death which led the natives to stop laughing forever and change the town's name to that of the title.

The main character in *Riders and Bailegangaire* is an old matriarch who has two daughters in the first play and two granddaughters in the latter. Synge opens his play with the grief-stricken mother who has been mourning and keening for nine days for the loss of her son Michael. The play also records the hardships she has gone through all her life when she bitterly narrates how she "had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house – six fine men, and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them"³. Out of pity for Maurya's condition, Cathleen and Nora do not tell her about the news of the dead man's body that is washed up by the sea to the north, and they hide the bundle that contains his clothes in the turf-loft since "she'll be getting her death... with crying and lamenting" (15) as the young priest explains to them.

Maurya's worry and anxiety over her only remaining son, Bartley, are consuming and turn her into a querulous mother who repeats every now and then: " 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" (16). But after Nora reassures her mother that the priest cannot stop Bartley, poor Maurya tries other means to restrain her son from going. Having turned deaf to her plea: " 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" (17), Maurya struggles hard to keep her son from the sea and we witness, as Alan Price points out, "a battle of wills, with the mother trying desperately to break her son's resolve to carry on the ageless tradition of their kind, of wresting a living from the sea; a battle more tense because it cannot be fought openly and directly but is carried on by nuance and suggestion" (182). Stubbornly ignoring his mother's appeals, Bartley starts giving instructions to his sisters on how certain tasks are to be carried out in his absence and the mother utters her painful cry: "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses, you had it, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" (17). But Bartley neither softens nor shows any regard to his mother's agony that is given full vent at his departure: "He is gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He is gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world" (18).

In Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, the senile grandmother, Mommo, is lying in bed, eating and drinking out of a mug and narrating a story to imaginary children sitting at the foot of the bed. Mommo's rambling narrative provides us with penetrating fragments of her life with the stranger who is eventually

identified as Seamus O'Toole, her husband. At a certain point of her story, we realize that Mommo was not happy in her marital life. She recounts in vivid details how she used to be ill-treated by her husband:

They could have got home... But what about the things had been vexin' her for years? No, a woman isn't stick or stone. The forty years or more in the one bed together an' he to rise in the mornin', and not give her a glance. An' so long it had been he had called her by first name, she'd near forgot it herself ...

Brigit... Hah? ... An' so she thought he hated her... An' maybe he did. Like everything else ... An'. (Her head comes up, eyes fierce) "Yis, yis-yis, he's challe'gin' ye, he is!" She gave to the Bochtáns. And her husband returning?- maybe he would recant, but she'd renege matters no longer....- she hated him too (51).

Obviously the husband and wife did not have a loving and intimate relation and it is suggested in the above quotation that she encouraged her husband to get involved in the laughing competition which resulted in the death of the local contestant and her husband being lynched by the natives.

Despite Mommo's responsibility for the affair that led to her husband's death, she did not show grief over his loss. Dolly, her granddaughter recalls this moment with resentment towards Mommo's attitude:

But I remember – now try to contradict this- the day we buried granddad. Now I was his favourite so I'll never forget

it. And whereas – No, Mary! – whereas! She stood there over that hole in the ground like a rock – like a duck like a duck, her chest stickin' out. Not a tear... Not a tear. And – And! – Tom buried in that same hole in the ground a couple of days before. Not a tear, then or since. (53-54)

It might be argued that Mommo's hard feelings towards her husband stem from her unhappy experience with men in general including her father. The image of "the omnipotent, omniscient father" (Lawley "Legacy") with a big stick in his hand is recurrent in Mommo's mind and alludes to the old man's strict discipline of his children with whipping and lashing.

The bad treatment Mommo receives from her husband affects her relation with her many children and it is reported in the play that "Them (that) weren't drowned or died they said she drove away" (15). Even her three grandchildren do not fare well under her guardianship. Tom, the youngest, meets his death as a result of neglect and carelessness, while Mary and Dolly grow up to be wretched and lost souls. It is obvious that Mommo harbors feelings of guilt and her protestations "There's nothing wrong with me" and "I never done nothin' wrong" (22) are futile and show how troubled she is with a guilty conscience for being responsible for the disasters that occurred in her family.

The tragic status of Maurya and Mommo is ascertained. Maurya is traumatized by specific practices, economic in her case, and the play reveals how the helpless mother and her

daughters see their men folk risk their lives to earn a living away from home. Maurya's struggle with forces too great for her to overcome is remarkable as is the peace of reconciliation she displays at the end when she expresses her stoic acceptance of the fate that has befallen her: "Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied" (24). With such a declaration, Maurya proves herself, as Price suggests, "the true tragic protagonist" who has attained "tragic stature and insight" through the pain and suffering she has experienced, and "reached that final illumination which sees life as essentially tragic, and accepting this fact, gains thereby 'calm of mind all passion spent'" (181). Her agony, endurance and reconciliation lift her beyond the borders of the Aran Islands and she becomes, as Spehn notes, "not only a fisherman's aged wife who has lost her sons to the sea but a representative of motherhood everywhere; in her dignity and resigned acceptance of fate she is akin to the characters of an Aeschylean tragedy"(70).

Synge draws attention to Maurya's remarkable endurance in the play. After Michael is reported found in the far north, and Bartley's drowned body is brought in by the villagers, Maurya starts keening and recounting the numerous times this scene has repeated itself with the men folk of her family. She expresses a sense of relief and a calm acceptance of her fate:

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 sea. ... 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 other women will be keening. ... 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 (23).

Despite her tragic condition, Maurya is able to see beams of hope in her dark situation, her anxiety is relieved and peace prevails after she resignedly perceives the death of her men folk as a blessing that will bring them all together. While sprinkling Holy Water over Bartley's dead body and Michael's clothes, she asks God to have mercy on herself, her family living and deceased, and on everyone that is still living in the world. Her tragedy has taught her the invaluable lesson of resignation as she realizes that death is inevitable.

Maurya's reconciliation and peace of mind are echoed to a certain degree by Mommo in Bailegangaire. Throughout the long story of the stranger and his wife who turn out to be Mommo and her husband, we get glimpses of the traumatic life of the couple, and the suffering of the "decent woman" of Mommo's narrative at the loss of her children which resembles

that of Maurya. None of her "Nine" or "Ten" children is present now; they either drowned, died or deserted their mother for good. By the end of the play, Mommo's narrative, which often falters at the same point, is concluded and the circumstances of Tom's death are revealed for the first time. In fact, the memory of Tom, who was "only a ladeen was afeared of the gander" (76) is the reason behind Mommo's frequent interruptions of her narrative for she is reluctant to face the assumption of being responsible for the boy's death. Left to the care of his young sisters while the grandparents were away, Tom "threw too much paraffin on the fire, was caught by the flames and died of burns in hospital in Galway" (Greene, *Politics* 225). By indirectly acknowledging her responsibility for Tom's accidental death, Mommo reaches a state of reconciliation as she utters her last words in the play:

Mommo: Be sayin' yere prayers now an' ye'll be goin' to sleep. To thee do we send up our sighs. Yes? For yere Mammy an' Daddy an' granddad is (who are) in heaven.

Mary: And Tom.

Mommo: Yes. ...An' tell them ye're all good. Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. ... And sure a tear isn't such a bad thing, Mary, and haven't we everything we need here, the two of us. (And she settles down to sleep) (75-76).

The traumatized family is now reconciled as Mommo's story is concluded and Mary is finally recognized by her grandmother.

The rise of the Irish national movement at the end of the nineteenth century stimulated Irish playwrights "to draw upon their native traditions and define their country's violent political and social upheaval" (Watt). Rural Ireland and the Irish peasant gained prominence in most of the works presented in the Irish Literary Theater. The image of the mother in *Riders* and *Bailegangaire* is related to the traditional Mother Ireland figure presented in various Irish literary works as "an old woman to be rejuvenated by the sacrifice of her young male patriots" (Greene, "Children" 216). Synge contributed to the narrative of Irish nationalism in his own democratic way. Instead of indulging himself in the expression of conventional political issues and getting involved with revolutionary and semi-military movements, he focused his attention, as Mathews observes, to writing plays, essays and poetry that treat "the details of the material and cultural impoverishment of life among the most marginalized of people in remote rural Ireland" (10), people who live in contemporary times, yet the life they lead is archaic, old-fashioned and free of any struggle with colonialism. Frawley suggests that the particular delineation of Maurya's character enables Synge to criticize contemporary Irish culture and shed light on "the strain that results from insisting that women remain merely symbolic for a nationalist and chauvinist society" (26). Feminine traits such as dependence, submissiveness, passivity and self-denial exemplified by the females in *Riders*, especially Maurya, are sometimes ascribed to the Irish as a result of their colonialisation experience. The female figures

meet the requirements of the true Irish woman propagated by Irish writers⁴. All the women in *Riders* stay at home and do traditional house work like kneading, cooking and spinning while the men are in charge of providing for the family through riding the dangerous sea to sell and buy in remote markets. By presenting them under this light, Synge burlesques the nationalists' ideals for motherhood through questioning "the efficacy of maternity itself as a means of regenerating, restoring and reproducing Ireland" (Harris 110) since it only leads to a catastrophe as shown in the play. In addition, Synge stresses the idea that maternal feeling is a source of torment to the women of the peasant society depicted in his play. After going through the hard experience of bearing and raising up their sons, these mothers watch with agony how their sons are lost to the sea while attempting to earn a living.

The traditional Mother Ireland figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan has become a bed-ridden crone in Murphy's *Bailegangaire* for whom many family members have died because of her stubbornness. However, their sacrifice will not rejuvenate the senile old woman who is obsessed with her past and cannot conclude her story and this brings to mind Ireland's buried children and history. Though Murphy's image challenges the idealizing myth of the Cathleen ni Houlihan tradition, it is not wholly grim as the audience sympathizes with Mommo's losses and understands the reasons of her tragedy. The characters of Mary and Dolly, who "stand for the Ireland of the 1980s" (Greene, "Children" 214) are used to

create a sort of discourse between past and present. The contribution of the new generation is needed to make Ireland come to terms with its history and offers it, as Russell points out, " a hopeful trajectory that looks to a limitless future even as it remembers and rejects cyclical, restricting past" (89). Therefore, the joint narration of the story by the old and young as well as the mutual confession of sins stress the sense of joy symbolized by Mary's laughter of relief that closes the play and the possibility of a fresh beginning.

Both Maurya and Mommo are not content in their relation with their female offspring. Being the older of the two sisters, Cathleen, in *Riders*, is the one who takes the lead in running the household affairs. She prepares the food, spins at the wheel and does most of the arrangements inside the house. Her practical down-to-earth attitude to life puts her in direct contrast with her mother when she impatiently complains: "There's no sense left on any person in a house where an old woman will be talking for ever" (18). Her sympathy and understanding of Bartley's motive to ride the sea make her urge the grieved mother to follow the son with the forgotten bread and formerly withheld blessing. Grene argues that Maurya displays a rough behavior towards Cathleen due to her "normal old mother's jealousy of the daughter who has succeeded her as domestic manager" (*Politics* 228). That is why Maurya tries to underestimate Cathleen's ability to manage the tasks to be done during Bartley's absence: "How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?" (17). Tension

between mother and daughter is also sensed when Maurya addresses a great deal of her speech to Nora, her youngest daughter and tries to ignore the presence of her eldest with whom she adopts a querulous and contentious attitude that reflects resentment of Cathleen's usurpation of her position.

Mary in *Bailegangaire* is the counterpart of Cathleen in *Riders* for she is in charge of all the domestic affairs of cleaning the house, washing clothes and feeding her grandmother. Having given up her successful career as a nurse and become a dutiful caregiver of Mommo, Mary's service, like that of Cathleen, is unappreciated. Mary's situation is a step worse as Mommo takes her for an interfering servant and never acknowledges her kinship till the end of the play. Mommo harbors suspicious thoughts about Mary: "You! Miss! Take this. Did you manage to poison me?" (12), and she even warns Dolly to "Be careful of that one... Yes, watch her" (26). If Cathleen and Nora in *Riders* "manage not to hear or else to mishear the complaints of an old woman with one thing and she saying it over" (Kiberd 87), Mary and Dolly are distressed by Mommo's never ending story. Both sisters want to shake off their responsibility towards their grandmother. In the past, it was Mary who migrated to England to pursue her career, and in the present, it is Dolly who mistakenly thinks that her marriage to Stephen would rescue her from "a place like this" (26) and threatens that the County Home will be Mommo's final place if Mary decides to leave.

Through focusing their attention on the image of the troubled mother, both Synge and Murphy are able to handle themes and issues that have interested them. The experience of colonial rule had a profound effect on the Irish nation. Since the founding of the Abbey Theater and the Irish Literary Revival, dramatists sought to resist the colonizing power through the composition of plays that highlight the Irish identity. The works of the first generation writers of the Abbey Theater depicted how Ireland was searching for a national identity; for once this identity is asserted, the Irish would secure a position in the world, and would stop believing that they were merely a conquered nation that has no identity. It is essential, however, that before establishing a national identity, the Irish should be urged to find their own individual identities and understand who they are. In fact, this was the very same reason that made Synge sojourn Europe and finally land in the Aran Islands where he mingled with the peasants there. Having spent a great deal of his life looking for "a group of people he could belong to," Synge realized that the Arans were those people through whom he "found a way to express his own identity and, moreover, an identity of the Irish people" (Rackwitz).

The question of identity has occupied Murphy's mind and we see it reflected in *Bailegangaire* in the delineation of Mary's character who feels uprooted and suffers a strong sense of alienation from her family. Her migration to England has proved fruitless and she returns to the family home of her

childhood hoping to find, as McHugh suggests, "what she was missing during her years in exile; a sense of rootedness, belonging and self-identity through the family and the home". However, her homecoming is equally disappointing as Mommo fails to recognize her due to her long absence: "Mommo: Miss? ... Do I know you?" (60). Mary's attempt to help Mommo finish her narrative is beneficial for both of them. Through achieving recognition and acknowledgement, there would be a possibility of a positive change.

In the process of identity search, the individual undergoes traumas and experiences grief. Both Synge and Murphy handle this issue in their plays. Bereaved Maurya, in *Riders*, mourns the loss of her men folk and becomes the martyr mother who stoically accepts her fate. The message Synge wants to convey to his audience is assumed from Maurya's final resignation and acceptance that "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied"(24). The characters in Murphy's play do not accept this passive attitude and aspire to free themselves of all sorts of oppression and make an active, empowering change. To achieve this stage of maturity and adulthood, grief becomes a very important experience which is often initiated by the loss of a dear relative. The young generation in *Bailegangaire*, Mary and Dolly suffer the loss of their parents, their little brother Tom and eventually their grandfather and they lead lives devoid of achievement and fulfillment. Mary's emigration to England proves fruitless, while Dolly, who has acquired most of her material needs; a well-furnished house, lots of

money and a car, suffers from her husband's serious maltreatment and neglect. However, the two sisters are intent to move on with their lives by returning to the home of the family where all the problems of the past are to be solved.

The question of faith has always stimulated Irish writers past and present and their treatment of this issue fluctuated between "criticism of blind faith in the Catholic religion or an investigation of Catholicism as part of the Irish identity" (Farrelly 32). Both Synge and Murphy are classified under the first category. Despite the idea that the characters in *Riders* quite often invoke God for help and protection and the play concludes with Maurya's prayer for mercy, the authority of the village priest is questioned and his testimony that "the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living" is doubted by Maurya who is firm in her conviction that "It's little the like of him knows of the sea" (21). Therefore, if Synge is considered one of the Irish playwrights who encourage "the Irish people to look in the mirror and understand that God [would] not save them" (34), as Farrelly contends, then it seems that, by ending his play with the heroine's resignation, he "wanted the Irish to shout at Maurya, "We must not be satisfied – we must not be resigned to live a life of suffering" (35). In fact what Synge is really criticizing is the Irish desperate acceptance of the suffering of Mother Ireland and their ineffective invocation to God to save the people of Ireland. Banning religion would not solve the nation's suffering. Instead, the Irish should be encouraged to

probe into the causes of their problem and find effective solutions.

Murphy, on the other hand, believes "that religion has not at all fulfilled a need that is within us all" (Murphy, "Conversation" 111). Despite being bitter and disillusioned with institutional Christianity, Murphy tries through his work, to teach the Irish to liberate themselves of all kinds of oppression and to live free of desperation and resignation as exemplified by the characters in *Bailegangaire*. Mommo and her granddaughters work for their redemption, as Richard Russell notes, "by admitting their sins and offering them up for forgiveness in a dark kitchen, whose confined area recalls that of the confessional" (91). Their confession and confrontation of past sins will enable them to be free and to have hope of a better life.

In contemporary Irish theater, the act of narration is considered one of the most interesting formal tendencies encouraged by the pioneers of the Abbey Theater who sought, through their plays, "to turn the theater into a place in which the revival of an oral presentation of literature could be started" (Wehemann 246). The two mothers are preoccupied with narrating the family's past history. Maurya, in *Riders*, gives different accounts of the family's life suffering and conflict with the sea. The memory of the poor old mother is busy not only with past events but also with present and future happenings. When Cathleen and Nora send their mother after

Bartley to give him her blessings and the forgotten piece of cake, Maurya returns terrified after seeing Michael's ghost:

I went down to the spring, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the grey pony behind him. [she put up her hands as if to hide something from her eyes.] ... I seen Michael himself... I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping.

Bartley came first on the red mare, and I tried to say 'God speed you,' but something choked the words in my throat. He went quickly; and "The blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it – with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet (21).

Maurya compares the fearful vision she has seen to that of Bride Dara who has "seen the dead man with the child in his arms" (21). Both Maurya and Bride Dara experience the vision of loved ones who are dead; when the legendary goddess sees a dead man carrying a child in his arms, she loses her son in the battle, just like the deceased Michael who significantly comes from the dead to lead his brother to the other world. It is not only Bartley's death that Maurya perceives, but her own end as well: "Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them" (21).

Mommo is the Irish figure of *seanchaí*, or storyteller who was renowned and respected and used to have: " Lots of stories, nice stories" that made people "come miles to hear you tell stories"(30), as Mary has once told her. As the play opens, Mommo's senile dementia takes the form of repeating the story of a mortal laughing competition started by a decent stranger and fueled by his decent wife. However, as the play unfolds, we realize that Mommo is involved in her own story, and as Paul Lawley observes, "what is presented as folktale is hardly impersonal" ("Orality" 3). The "decent wife" is Mommo herself and her family story is tightly interwoven with that of the Bochtans. The juxtaposition of the folkloric narrative about the pre-modern world of the Bochtans in 1950 and Mommo's family history extending for three generations becomes obvious. What unites that folkloric narrative with the family history is the subject matter; the theme of "Misfortunes" (65) with which the stranger's wife prompts the contestants to laughter. We see how the stories of the "unbaptised an' stillborn shoeboxes planted" and "of the field, haunted by infants" (71) mingle with Mommo's personal accounts of her departed sons and the tragic deaths of her husband and grandson. Mommo's never acknowledged responsibility for the sin and guilt is central in the story and her redemption, as well as the redemption of her granddaughters, occurs at the end when Mommo acknowledges her part in the narrative which is always told in the third person and then changed to the first person towards the end when the three women confess their guilt and accept

one another. This change is observed in the following extract where Mommo uses the first person "we" which stresses the shared responsibility and acknowledgement among the three women and highlights Mommo's involvement in her own narrative: "To thee do we cry. Yes? Poor banished children of Eve" (75) (*italics mine*). The child they will have soon after will be called Tom and will replace the sisters' brother who died in the past. This child becomes a symbol of hope and a bright future for those marginalized and unnoticed women. Dolly's "brand new baby" would "give that – fambly ... of strangers another chance, ... to gladden their home" (76).

Therefore, through Mommo's story, Murphy is giving an answer to a question that used to trouble him a great deal and Bailegangaire becomes Murphy's offered solution for the national problem. The play presents Ireland as a nation "in which past and present are radically disjunctive" (Falkentein 71) and proposes the solution of bringing the two into dialogue. If the three characters in the play can be engaged in a meaningful interaction, then the gap that separates them will be bridged and the problem will come to an end. Ireland, in turn, would be able to come to terms with the troublesome questions of identity that used to irk its past. The national crisis would be solved only when the nation is ready to learn its lesson from its colonial past and find answers to the problems of the disturbed present.

Synge's contribution to Irish literature is seen in his bold experimentation with language; his innovative use of a dialect

which fuses English "with idioms, rhythms and syntax of Irish" (Mathews 9). The created English of his plays retains Gaelic speech pattern and at the same time enjoys the spirit and richness of the Irish language. This Hiberno-English, as it is sometimes called, is effective for achieving Synge's dramatic and poetic purposes. The colloquial speech of the rural people in *Riders* is free of cultural sophistication, naturally poetic and artistically beautiful. A major influence on the artistic beauty found in Synge's dialect could be attributed to "his thorough musical training... and... a sound knowledge of musical theory" (Spehn 106) obtained at Trinity College. Besides Synge's musical talent, the common speech of the Aran Islands has certain characteristics that enhance its poetic nature. There is a tendency in the local dialect to repeat the present participle as seen in the following quotation: " He went down to see would there be another boat sailing in the week, and I'm thinking it won't be long till he's here now, for the tide is turning at the green head, and the hooker's tacking from the east" (16) (*italics mine*). This tendency bestows a cadence to the fabric of the utterances rendering them very close to poetry. The rhythmic pattern of the Arans' dialect is further enhanced by the use of "disjointed sentences" and "after construction" (Ardhendu De) which are constantly employed in the play. Maurya's utterance: "I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping" (21) exhibits the three features of the Aran idiom used by the characters in the course of the play. Synge's skill at handling his dramatic language could be one of the reasons that encouraged critics like Alan Price to

consider him a writer of "good poetic drama within the severe limits of naturalism" and that he "can today compete successfully with the conventional prose play" (220). Besides, Synge's blend of realistic incidents with "a richly musical, often poetic dialogue" results in "a unified, distinctive whole" (Spehn 95). This new literary approach to language enabled Synge to render vividly rural customs and landscapes in such a manner that enlists "him to the cultural programme of independent Ireland", as Mathews suggests (7), and made his limited literary production reflect the conviction that words could be effective means of liberation.

Likewise Murphy is talented in the use of language to the extent that made the catholic church seek his help in finding a new vernacular language for the mass and the sacraments. When asked about the particular rhythm inherent in his plays, he asserts that: "All art aspires towards music, so I try, as far as I can, to make a symphony out of the language" (Tóibín). His effort, Lavery points out, is quite often manifested in a "dialogue [that] can grace the most fallen and forlorn types with an eloquent, individualized speech". Mommo's story exhibits aspects of Murphy's talent and the audience see how even the old woman's "giggles, grunts and shouts become the play's musical vocabulary" that enables her to express "herself with a subtlety that would be unattainable in mere words or even body language" (Lavery). Murphy's skill at language is obvious first in the choice of a Gaelic title that conveys the sense of misery and suffering which befall all the people

concerned in the tale. This sense is further stressed by another Gaelic word, "Bochtan" which means poor place.

The use of the classic Irish form of story-telling can be seen as a reversion to the past and to the early Irish culture and nationalism. Besides, it has enabled Murphy to connect the disjointed threads of his characters' lives that would remain otherwise. Mommo who was a respected storyteller narrates a never ending story about her life to her two granddaughters who in turn have unhappy stories about their own lives. Within the course of the play, the connection between Mommo's tale and that of Mary and Dolly starts to materialize. While Mommo's narrative revolves around the sad past reflecting on the personal misery of her marital life as well as the hardships and misfortunes experienced by the peasant folk, Mary and Dolly focus on the present hoping to find solutions to its problems. Mommo's monologues may sometimes overlap with the dialogues of Mary and Dolly in a way that requires focus. An instance of this overlap occurs at the opening of Act Two:

Mommo An' John was in suspense.

Dolly Happy birthday! (Mary sniffs back her tears and nods! Smiles her thanks) Mommo An' then of a suddenness didn't the frown go disappearing up the Stranger's cap.

Mary I'm sorry for (crying).

Mommo He had it at last.

Dolly Ar – Phhh – not at all.

Mommo "Well," says he – oh lookin" the merchant between the two eyes _ 'Well,' says he, 'I'm a better laughter than your Costello'. (45)

In the above quote, we see how Mommo's speech differs from that of Dolly and Mary. While Mommo is recounting the contest event between Costello and the stranger which took place in John Mahony's pub in the past, Dolly is congratulating Mary on her birthday which is an occurrence of the present. This juxtaposition of past and present recurs regularly throughout the play and it is, as Lawley notes, "accomplished in and through language" ("Orality" 1). In fact, Murphy uses language in this way to stress the transition between the old way of life and the new. We also notice that the use of Irish or Gaelic words often appears in Mommo's speech, as the one below, when Mommo gives an account of the peasants' crops and markets in the past: "So you can be sure the people were putting their store in the poultry and the bonavs (bonhams) and the creamy produce for the great maragadh mór (big market) that is held every year on the last Saturday before Christmas in Bailethuama in the other county" (12) (italics mine). Presumably, Murphy's use of Gaelic or Irish words could be interpreted, as I mentioned regarding storytelling, as an attempt to return to the past when the language reflected the Irish tradition and the nation was enjoying a unique identity of its own.

It is true, as Lawley contends, that Murphy has designed "a hybridized oral narrative style" which employs "weighty

Latinate ('educated' or 'literary') words to inflate the account and brings them into juxtaposition with localized concrete particulars" ("Orality" 4). Thus while relating how the laughing competition would start in the local pub in the presence of the peasant folk, Mommo says:

'He is, he is, challe'gin' yeh, he is!' Putting confusion in the head of Costello again. But the stranger – a cute man – headin' for the door, gives (the) nod an' wink to Costello so he'd comprehend the better excitation (that) is produced by the aberration of a notion. Then in fullness of magistrature, "Attention!" roaring he to declare his verdict was dismissal, an' he decreed that 'twas all over. (50)

In the above quote, the use of elevated words (aberration, magistrature, verdict and decreed) would seem rather odd against an environment of primitive illiterate peasants and they are employed to bestow more importance on the simple event of the competition.

Obviously Mommo's narrative is problematic and difficult to follow due to her use of Irish slang and Gaelic expressions and her tendency to break off the story at illogical points. Besides, her repetition of the story and her unwillingness to end it has a psychological dimension. It could be seen as a strategy of postponement and evasion. Since she realizes how tragic the end is, Mommo is reluctant to confront it and thus absorbs herself in an act of repetition that frustrates her granddaughters and the audience alike. In her speech

addressed to Mommo, Mary contemplates on their predicament:

No, you don't know me. But I was here once, and I ran away to try and blot out here. I didn't have it easy. Then I tried bad things, for a time, with someone. So I came back, thinking I'd find – something – here, or, if I didn't, I'd put everything right. Mommo? And tonight I thought I'd make a last try. Live out the – story – finish it, move on to a place where, perhaps, we could make some kind of new start. I want to help you (61).

Mary is certain that the healing of the present has its roots in the past and the freedom she is looking for could be obtained only when Mommo is encouraged to conclude her narrative so the: "Poor brandished children of Eve" (75) could have another chance at happiness. What is important here is that Mary, not Mommo, is the one who finishes the story and this is a clear hint, as Fintan O'Toole illustrates, that "the power of rebirth [is] lying not with the old world of the past, but with the present and the future which Mary is free to face" (247-48). Mary's ending of Mommo's narrative does unite past and present, tradition and modernity and this is an effective procedure for a fresh beginning.

To achieve a better insight into the nature of Mommo's relation with her granddaughters, one would follow Elyse Sommer's advice not to try "to understand every word of Mommo's endlessly repeated story" which may seem boring, but with little patience the audience would be able to visualize

the image the play is trying to draw. In fact Murphy's declaration that: "I'm a difficult playwright to interpret for audiences and actors" (Clarity) rings true especially in *Bailegangaire* which continually poses a challenge and requires close attention.

In conclusion, one is apt to say that the image of mother presented by Synge and Murphy in their plays could be considered as the playwrights' contributions to the nation's crisis. Through providing a picture of simple marginalized folk struggling earnestly for survival, and are at grips with their lives' problems, Synge and Murphy reflect on certain aspects of Ireland's hard history. On the one hand, Maurya struggles and is overcome by forces greater than herself. The lesson she learns from her traumatic experience is that life is essentially tragic and one has to accept fate in order to achieve the peace of mind and be able to see beams of hope even in the darkest situations. Mamma, on the other hand, has lived a life of suffering and hardships and is able with the help of her young people to attain reconciliation and come to terms with her turbulent past. Both Synge and Murphy use their plays as a means of asserting the Irish national identity. Establishing this "Irishness" is of vital importance to counteract the negative effects of colonial rule under which the Irish have suffered dire consequences.

Notes

1. Both Synge and Murphy are connected to the Abbey Theater, the former is considered one of its influential playwrights whose contribution to Irish literature is appreciated by critics now and then, while the latter took a long time before gaining recognition due to his difficult style of writing. Both writers showed musical talents; Synge received thorough training and became a master of the flute, the piano and the violin, while Murphy is gifted with a very beautiful singing voice. If Synge, at a certain point of his life, had influenced Lorca, Tom Murphy had been affected by the same Spanish artist, and the three share a common trait seen in their theatrical language that is very close to music with rhythm, tone and cadence. (See James F. Clarity, "Praise Doesn't Equal Fame, but Playwright Persists" and Colm Tóibín. "Tom Murphy").
2. Thomas Murphy. Bailegangaire. Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1986, p 9. All page references are to this edition and will be incorporated parenthetically in the text of the paper.
3. J M. Synge. Riders to the Sea. Twenty-four One-act Plays. Ed. John Hampden. London: Everyman's Library, 1997. 13-24, p 21. All page references are to this edition and will be incorporated parenthetically in the text of the paper.
4. In some of his poems such as "No Second Coming", "A Woman Homer Sung", "Her Praise", "A Bronze Head", "The Two Trees" and "A Prayer for my Daughter", Yeats

reflects the general tendency about women prevalent in the Irish society of his time. A woman was expected to devote herself to her home and children. Yeats, in the above poems criticizes the woman who consumes her energy for the participation in the Irish struggle for freedom. In his belief, a woman should focus her attention on the beauty of her body and household affairs and leave nationalist activities for men only.

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