

Death Matrix, Thanatopolitics and Gendered Expressions of 'Death' in J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

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Abstract

Death has been always considered a unique concept by critical thinkers all over the world. Among the modernist works, J.M. Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea*, is remarkable for the intensity with which it portrays the experiences of death and the act of mourning the dead. This preoccupation with death is a frequent feature of Western literature as well as metaphysics, and Giorgio Agamben's idea of thanatopolitics, in particular, informs us how death is not just an aesthetic or metaphysical concern, but also a socio-political factor. My paper reads J.M. Synge's play in the light of Giorgio Agamben's works to highlight how *Riders to the Sea* relates to the modernist predicament. My paper highlights how the experience of the First World War conditioned the modernist perception of death, and this, in turn, gave women individuals a problematic locus with respect to the ambit of thanatopolitics. This paper also traces the hyper awareness of death, the near paranoia that gives way to a cathartic feeling when the actual death takes place. We see the character of Maurya stepping out of this matrix of thanatopolitics, where the sea cannot threaten her any further. This, in turn, highlights the discrepancy of the treatment between the deaths of men and women within the grip of thanatopolitics, which becomes another key factor that could define modern lives.

Keywords: death, thanatopolitics, matrix, modernist, culture.

The concept of death is unlike most other concepts that are widely interspersed in philosophy as well as cultural theory. Usually we have an object and the concept of that object. For example, we have a horse and the concept of a horse. The abstract concepts too can be felt in some way or the other. However, the concept of death is absolutely without any object whatsoever. Thinking about the prospect of one's own death is a constant meditation upon our own ignorance. There is no method for getting to know death better, because death cannot be known at all. The concept of death and speculations regarding it are as old as time itself. The aim of this paper is to find a fresh perspective on death, as reflected in the literature of the modern times. For that purpose, I aim to briefly analyze J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, which resides within the limits of the modernist ambit.

Riders to the Sea undoubtedly exudes an aura of imminent death, but the idea of death, as depicted in the play, is not as simple as it often is painted by earlier critics. The play, if anything, constitutes a complex matrix where the concept of *Memento Mori* can give rise to an elaborate reading in thanatopolitics, which, if amalgamated with other modernist texts, could constitute an entire thesis in its own right. Giorgio Agamben has stated the concept of thanatopolitics in the context of cultural studies (Agamben 1998: 86), and therefore to disambiguate a modernist text such as *Riders to the Sea* in this light would definitely be less orthodox and yet be genuine and insightful. The play's innumerable facets all deserve to be paid individual attention, but given the limited scope, this paper shall deal with only a few aspects that should be of fundamental

importance when we aim to clear almost a hundred years worth of fog from this play, which is both beautiful and at the same time, full of pathos.

The transition from biopolitics to thanatopolitics might be a gradual one, but it is inevitable, as Foucault opines when he explains "thanatopolitics," which is Agamben's way of denoting the mobilization of entire populations "for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity." (Foucault 1978: 137) The traditional criticism overlooks the complexity of the situation that owes to the hyper-awareness of death, resulting in a near-paranoia especially for the female members of Maurya's family. This awareness gives birth to that grey zone, which is the area where biopolitics morphs into thanatopolitics, (Agamben 1998: 72) rendering both the words and the holy water delivered by the priest, futile. By this, Synge hints at the futility of religious consolation in the modern times. The male members of the family are actually driven by death-instinct or *Thanatos* - something similar to what Freud would later work out into concepts ("death instinct" and "death drive") in many of his works and papers, especially in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940).

If we are to suppose that biopolitics can give way to thanatopolitics, this may derive from the fact that the life here produced, namely, a *Zoë* entirely separate from a *bios*, is a life destined to die, a life that has death inscribed into it from the very beginning, just as all the evidence of Michael's death foreshadows that of Bartley's. Stated in a positive manner, an affirmative conception of the power of life requires conceiving of life as eternal, a *zoëaionios* that is not destined to die, that stands over mythical fate itself. However, beginning from Heidegger's suggestion of an essential relation between language and death, Agamben argues that Western metaphysics has been fundamentally tied to a negativity that is increasingly evident at the heart of the ethos of humanity, and this concept matches with the natural fatality of the situation that Synge presents us with. The lifestyle of the populace living in the Aran Islands amount to a bare minimum, and Maurya's family had already been a struggling one since the opening of the play, if their decision to sell cattle were any indication.

The question of the subjectivity of the experience of death is discussed elaborately by Heidegger in his *Being and Time*. (Heidegger 2004 [1953]: 322) Lindsay Anne Hall, in her thesis, comments on the modernity of deaths by stating that death is often called "the great equalizer", and "yet our experiences of death are quite different and quite unique to the historical moment in which we live. In other words, despite the fact that morality itself is common to all beings, the death that you and I experience will be particularly modern. The question then becomes, what is distinctive about death in modernity?" (Hall 2007: 1) Hall also quotes Norman Mailer, who suggests that "we are living in a new collective experience of the time of death brought about primarily by the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear annihilation in the twentieth century, but perhaps rooted in modernity itself. It is the new time of death, he claims, we live as if we were already 'doomed to die' because we live a life saturated with the threat of death. While Mailer's insights might not accurately depict the general experience of those events by individuals in Western culture, he has put his finger on a crucial gap in theoretical analysis-the modern experience of death." (Hall: 2)

In Maurya's case, it is indeed beyond grief that she had to witness the deaths of all her sons before her own death, but it is the fact that she had to face the harsh realities of death seven times over (including the death of her husband) that builds up her identity as a universal mother figure to a war-plagued world. She is instantly stamped with the pathos of the Madonna, yet bearing a spine of steel. What is often missed out is her treatment towards her daughters, which almost borders on neglect. This, in my opinion, creates a powerful subtext while adding a gender

based idea of dying, which perhaps, in turn, has its root in the economic worth of the person in question. While Maurya finds a way to accept the grief of losing all her sons, she never once counts on her daughters to look after her in future. This subtly, but surely indicates the economic prospects that a woman could have in the Aran Islands without the aid of male members.

When Bartley is determined to go to the Mainland, Maurya says, "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses, you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" (Synge 2011: 5) In reply, Cathleen says, "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?" (Synge 2011: 6) Here Cathleen uses "a young man" whose time it is to go to war, creating a masculine connotation. Synge truly depicts the Irish society where women depend on others for their existence and livelihood. Religion guards the society like a manacle, from which Maurya breaks free at the end of the play. She says,

It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time, surely. 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 2011: 14)

Here, though Maurya has faith in God and the prophecy of the clergyman, she has got nothing and lost instead every of her sons. So, it is useless to keep herself awake up to the dead night. Furthermore, once she accepts the departure of her husband, father-in-law and six sons for getting a good livelihood, because it is satisfactory to have "a bit of wet flour" and "a fish that would be stinking." (Synge 2011: 14) This complements clearly an indication that they can also earn their bread and butter without any kind of dependency of men, though the society has tried to make them dependent on the male. The final phase of Maurya's suffering reveals a transition from misery to a profound tragic transcendence.

Coming to the issue of the death matrix, when we undertake a close reading of the play, we note that death is deeply embedded in the cultural, social, or political environment of the Aran Islands to the point where the ambience of death pervades the minds of the audience as well. Synge makes a significant peripatetic transformation with the death of Bartley. The almighty sea now loses its power over Maurya's family, thereby loosening its thanatopolitical grip on the islanders as a whole.

The play, if studied from this perspective, gives a highly modernist experience of death by considering death primarily as a male experience. The perspective owes itself to the First World War, and the inevitability that the sea stands for. This masculine experience of death can be contrasted to the women experience, which acts as a foil or a counterpart that helps in highlighting the masculine experience. The women in this play represent a locus that is somehow parallel to the marginalized condition of the Refugees, both because of their economic dependence and also their lack of agency to keep themselves in the forefront. The play nowhere utters the possibility of their dying and, in effect, takes away from them the privilege of death, and, therefore, the privilege of being properly alive. As such, the Aran Islands become the theatre of death, and the women, despite being active members in Synge's play, remain as ciphers within the theatrical space. The grip of thanatopolitics eludes them.

The margin, says Butler, (Butler 2007: 39) is the most politically charged area. Modernism needs these cipher-like women figures to define the male experience of death and dying. Death remains within the mail domain, but rather than neglecting these women, Synge, in a subtle political move, deftly positions these women as the bare observers to complete the circuit of

thanatopolitics. Therefore, we must read the characters of these women as elaborate channels and portals of power.

Keening becomes the act which gives currency to death and dying in this play. Keening also tends to draw an end to the framework of thanatopolitics. The play opens with mourning and closes with Maurya's ability to transcend, if not death itself, at least the act of mourning, thereby drawing to herself a permanent end to the hidden currents of thanatopolitics. The end of keening brings in silence, and a sense of peace laden with sorrow descends upon the stage, which reminds us of Jean Jacques Rousseau's words, "Absolute silence leads to sadness. It is the image of death." (Rousseau 1992 [1782]: 70) Especially since we have already witnessed how thanatopolitics acts in favour of males, and how the male experience of death is incomplete without the female experience, the actions of the play become doubly significant, rendering death and the act of dying a controversial locus.

Now if we make a close study of the death matrix created in the play, one thing is to be noted. The dearth of a fictional account of death experienced firsthand by a woman in the modern era strikingly brings to notice how the distribution of the matrix of death is uneven and historically regulated. In contrast to the numerous facets and possibilities of women's deaths embedded in literature stretching up to the Victorian times, the monopoly on death taken up by the First World War makes the death of the male subjects the only recognizable cases in literature for a long time.

In light of the brief discussion above, I would like to conclude that *Riders to The Sea* represents how the concept death works in the modern era. The lives of the society members of the Aran Islands are at the same time, both dependent on and independent of the mainland. Culturally, they might be somewhat independent, but from an economic perspective, they are highly dependent on the mainland market. Echoing Agamben's line of thought, we might be able to understand that death in the modern world is no longer a natural or biological moment, but it is, instead, a highly socio-political decision. Exploring the thanatopolitical aspects of the modern concept of dying, therefore, keeps the possibilities of yet unexplored avenues alive, making "death" the promised end, to act as a locus of never ending speculations.

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