

Nationalism in W.B.Yeats' Play, Cathleen ni Houlihan

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Abstract - A lot has been said about and written on W.B.Yeats' and his poetry because he was a poet of par excellence. He has written many memorable poems like Lake Isle of Innisfree, Sailing to Byzantium, The Second Coming, Leda and the Swan. But as a playwright, he has been neglected and a very few critics have paid attention towards Yeats' plays and so most of his plays have remained unexplored, and as a result, his reputation relies only on his poems. But if we study his plays in details, we will discover that W.B.Yeats was also a playwright of par excellence. In fact he has written near about twenty six poetic and realistic plays, some of them in the collaboration with Lady Gregory, like The Countess Cathleen, The Player Queen, The Land of Heart's Desire, etc. In this paper we propose to study his play, Cathleen ni Houlihan to find out the nationalistic attitude of the characters in the play and the symbolism in it which is related with the freedom movement of Ireland and which represents an independent and separate Irish state.

Index Terms - Cathleen, Gaelic, Irish States, Nationalism, Symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

The play, Cathleen ni Houlihan has been written against the background of the Rebellion of 1798 when there was a great Irish Uprising against the British rule in Ireland. Since a long time Ireland had been a colony of the British Crown. During this period Ireland was deprived of its independence and the Irish people were not allowed to have property and the right to vote in the government election. The people were suppressed by the British soldiers. Great anger and hatred against the British rule and its army were among the Irish people. As a result of suppression by the British rule, an uprising against the British rule took place in Ireland in 1798 which is called the Rebellion of 1798. The uprising was led by a republican revolutionary group who were inspired by the American and French Revolutions. On 22nd August 1798, near about 1000 French soldiers landed in the north-west of the country to support Irish people against the British rule. The

presence of the French army excited the Irish men.. Near about five thousand local people joined the French army to fight against the British army. An emotional call for total sacrifice was given by the rebels which attracted a lot of Irish people. But the uprising was suppressed and the rebellions were defeated and most of them were brutally killed by the British army. The French army also met the same fate. They faced a humiliating defeat by the hands of British army. They were forced to surrender and were repatriated to France in exchange of British prisoners of war. This rebellion of 1798 became a memorable event in the history of Ireland and its culture.

As we have mentioned earlier, Ireland was under the complete control of the British government and besides other restrictions imposed on the Irish people, they were also not allowed to speak their own language, Gaelic. The English culture was imposed on them. They were not allowed to develop their own culture and traditions. Due to all these restrictions and oppressions, a strong Irish nationalism emerged among the Irish people who aim at the independence of Ireland from the British rule and the revival of the culture and tradition of Ireland. Thus there were two types of nationalism in Ireland, political and cultural nationalism. The political nationalism aimed at the removal of British rule from Ireland and its total freedom. This political nationalism was led by O'Leary and Maud Gonne while the cultural nationalism was led by W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory who wanted to revive the Irish culture and tradition through the spread of literature. They believed that unless the Irish literature became known to all and became popular, the revival of Irish culture was not possible. They also believed that this could be done only through the participation of a large number of people. So Lady Gregory and W.B.Yeats wrote a number of plays which were based on Irish culture and tradition. Through the performance of the plays on the stage they wanted to introduce the Irish culture to the Irish people who have forgotten their culture and

tradition with the coming of the British to Ireland. W.B.Yeats believed that a large number of people cannot be involved through the poems only It needs the participation of the people which can be easily done through the performance of the play on the stage because a lot of audience attend the theatre to watch the play. Thus a large number of people will come to know about their culture and civilization.

In this background of cultural deterioration and rebellion of 1798, W.B.Yeats, with the collaboration of Lady Gregory, wrote the play, Cathleen ni Houlihan. Since W.B.Yeats did not know the Gaelic, the language of Ireland, he requested Lady Gregory to write the dialogues of peasants because she was well aware and well known of Irish peasants' culture and language. In spite of being an Irish, W.B.Yeats was brought up in the British culture of high society. Later on he realized that his association with the elite British culture is taking him away from his people and Irish culture. So, when he decided to write plays for the Abbey Theatre, he paid attention towards the ancient culture and tradition of Ireland which was not popular that time. It is well known that W.B.Yeats is a great poet as well as a dramatist of Ireland. It was he who endeavored, along with Lady Gregory and J.M.Synge to establish the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The main aim of his works, particularly of plays, was to revive and popularize the Irish identity and culture in English, "From the mid 1880's to 1914, William Butler Yeats was at the hub of the Anglo-Irish literary revival producing a stream of poems, and manifestos." (Hutchinson quoted in Galloway 5). It is true that Yeats was devoted to the revival of Irish heritage and cultural identity which he did very well through his plays, but through Maud Gonne's influence, he was involved in politics and joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood. With Lady Gregory and others, Yeats was a founder of the Irish Literary Theatre which sought to revive Celtic dramatic literature.

W.B.Yeats' Cathleen ni Houlihan was published in 1903. This play is based on a dream he had one night. He wrote the play in co-operation with Lady Gregory since she was familiar with peasants' pattern of thought and their tradition. we know that Lady Gregory was keen interested in the revival and development of the Irish culture and tradition. To achieve her aim she herself wrote many plays based on Irish culture and traditions which were successfully performed on the Abbey Theatre stage. Keeping her

aim in mind she collaborated with W.B.Yeats and other intellectuals of Ireland and throughout her life she kept on trying to revive the Irish culture and tradition. She became a life-long companion of Yeats and wrote many plays in co-operation with him. In Cathleen ni Houlihan all the dialogues of peasants have been written by Lady Gregory because W.B.Yeats was unaware of the Gaelic language and peasants style of life. But Lady Gregory's authorship was overshadowed by Yeats who took the full credit of writing this play. Showing her generosity, Lady Gregory did not mind it. She did not object even at the time when Yeats took the full credit of the play's influence and boastfully claimed his authorship and did not even mention Gregory's name. But it is well known that Lady Gregory wrote most of the play's lines, while Yeats focused only on the lines spoken by Cathleen ni Houlihan herself.

The play, Cathleen ni Houlihan is a nationalistic play which is full of symbolism and deals with the Irish men sacrificing their lives for their motherland. They are always ready to sacrifice their lives for Irish Independence which has been a colony of the English. Cathleen ni Houlihan, in the disguise of an Old Woman, is the representative of Ireland. She goes to a house where the preparation of the marriage of an elder son of the family is going on. Cathleen ni Houlihan convinces the boy, the groom, Michael to avoid the marriage and to go to fight for his country. Convincing Michael to sacrifice his life for his country, Cathleen ni Houlihan who is an Old Woman admits that there will be many deaths.

When Cathleen succeeds in convincing Michael and he goes to fight for his country, Ireland, leaving his parents and his fiancée, in spite of their effort to stop him, there is a surprising change in Cathleen. She is no more an old woman rather she becomes a young girl walking like a queen. In response to Peter's query, if he saw an aged woman going outside, Patrick's replies in negative and says that rather he saw a teenager girl who was walking like a queen. This is a symbolical reply which symbolizes that when all the Irish men will fight collectively, the condition of Ireland will be changed. It will get its independence and will restore its past glory, the glory of a queen. It means that there will be revival of Irish culture and its traditions which were the main aim of W.B.Yeats and Lady Gregory in writing plays for the Abbey Theatre. Cathleen in the play is a symbolical figure. She appears in the play as

an old woman and arouses pity by her loneliness and by her lack of shelter. But in fact she is a woman of flesh and blood. She is not an earthly figure rather she is a mystical character who represents Ireland, “She is not an earthly figure, but a mystical one, a symbol for a kind of divine female deity, or goddess, and representation of the reclamation of Irish identity under colonial rule. (www.soporte.technolab.net/02whim/cathleen-ni-houlihan-symbolism-425a95). The old woman in the play is the representative of various cultures and traditions. “This mystical creature who had largely disappeared during the Irish Renaissance, is brought back in the Literary Revival, when this play was written, as a symbol of hope.” (www.soporte.technolab.net/02whim/cathleen-ni-houlihan-symbolism-425a95).

It is true that death is very common during the war of independence or during any kind of rising but to sacrifice one’s life and become a martyr for one’s country is something most admirable. During the rising of 1798 the Irish people were ready to die for their country so that they may become heroes in the memory of the people. The martyred will be remembered for ever. This is one of the themes of the play, Cathleen ni Houlihan. The notion of heroic remembrance convinces men to go out to fight for their country. Thus we see that this play is about Irish Independence which contains a lot of symbols. Through this play the dramatist is trying prepare the Irish people to save their country from the foreigners. Although this play has been written against the background of the Rebellion of 1798, it is a kind of preparation for and to inspire people for the 1916 Rising which was an armed insurrection in Ireland during Easter Week in April 1916 with the aim of establishing an independent Irish Republic. Throughout the play we find the central reference to memory and its influence on the public. Those men who died for Ireland were considered heroes that is why the memory and the martyrdom as themes have been treated in this play. Glorifying the martyrs, Cathleen , in the end of the play, sings a song which emphasizes that the martyrs will never die.

The play, Cathleen ni Houlihan, set in Killlala in 1798. The Gillane family is preparing for the forthcoming marriage of their eldest son, Michael to Delia. They are discussing about the dowry which they will receive from Delia’s parents. They are so much engaged with

the discussion of dowry and their future plan that they are not aware of the happenings outside. Meanwhile Michael comes and gives dowry to his parents. He also informed them about his discussion with the priest about the preparation of the marriage. At this moment, an old woman, in a pathetic condition, comes to them. Out of pity they offer her something to eat but she refuses. At first the Old Woman arouses pity by her loneliness and by her lack of shelter when she is engaged in conversation with Peter and Bridget:

Old Woman: Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quite, but there is not quiet in my heart.

When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir

Has gone out of me. But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends.

Bridget: What was it put you wandering?

Old Woman: Too many strangers in the house.

Bridget: Indeed you look as if you’d had your share of trouble.

Old Woman: I have trouble indeed.

Bridget: What was it put the trouble on you?

Old Woman: My land was taken from me.

(www.etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send-file?accession=osu1211912530&disposition=inline). Here these “four beautiful green fields” symbolizes the four provinces of Ireland which have been taken up by the British army. To restore her provinces Cathleen wanders here and there pleading the people to sacrifice their lives to free and redeem Ireland. According to Rosalind Clark “To the audience it is clear that her talk has a double meaning, but to the family in the play it sounds perfectly natural at first: the old woman’s situation is only too unusual among Irish beggar women.”(www.igivedonations.com/5ribz/eaad51-cathleen-ni-houlihan-painting). “There is another side of her talk that they cannot understand, but they put that down to the fact that she has had so much trouble that ‘it has put her wits astray’. But these speeches are full of meaning and produce intense emotion in the audience, who are suddenly realizing that this old woman is Cathleen”. (www.yeatseroticmythology.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/rosalind-clarks-take-on-cathleen-ni-houlihan/). We also find that “the reader is immediately able to make connections between Cathleen’s abstract dialogues and their parallels to Irish history, supporting the ideal that she is an embodiment of Ireland”. (www.literatureessaysamples.com/catagory/cathleen-ni-houlihan/).

She sings patriotic songs and Michael is very much impressed by her and declares that he would go with her. Neglecting his parents and his fiancée Michael goes to join the French army for the liberation of his country. Cathleen goes away by singing the patriotic song. When Michael becomes ready to fight for his country, Cathleen is totally changed. In place of an old woman now she looks like a young girl who walks like a queen. The Old Woman is the symbol of Ireland. She wants the young Irish men to fight against the British in order to liberate Ireland from their rule. Due to the British rule the Irish culture and traditions have been forgotten as an old culture and tradition which is like the old woman but when the country will be free, Ireland will again become a beautiful country and with her own culture and traditions she will look like a beautiful queen. Richard Keary rightly suggests that “the Kathleen ni Houlihan myth represents view that the blood sacrifice of heroes is indeed to free and redeem Ireland. At the same time, these heroic sacrificial martyrs are rewarded by being “remembered for ever.” (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kathleen_Ni_Houlihan). It has rightly been said by Yousef Al-Yousef that “Cathleen ni Houlihan is mainly concerned with unifying the whole country by associating the wedding day with the day of independence.” (www.taslimgroup.com/bipolar-and-oji/fed858-cathleen-ni-Houlihan-themes). Thus we see that Cathleen is a mythical symbol who is portrayed as an old woman who does not have her home because her home has been captured by someone which she has been trying to liberate with the help of the youth of the country. She is hopeful to liberate her house that is Ireland with the help of her friends that is the youth of the country. “I have good friends that will help me. They are gathering to help me. I am not afraid. If they are put down to-day, they will get the upper hand tomorrow. (she gets up) I must be going to meet my friends. They are coming to help me, and I must be there to welcome them. I must call the neighbours together to welcome them.” Her level of confidence is very high as she declares, “I have my thoughts and I have my hopes... The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house.” (www.etc.ohiolink.edu/!etc.send-file?accession=osu1211912530&disposition=inline). Here we can understand the pathetic condition of Ireland. The Irish people have forgotten their culture and traditions. They have even forgotten Irish

mythology because they have been overpowered by the English culture. When the old woman discloses her name, a faint memory comes to their mind and Peter says that perhaps he has heard this name when he was a child. But he does not remember whose name was this.

Although Cathleen ni Houlihan is a very short play, yet it has become a very important play due to its themes and political implications. Thus we see that Cathleen ni Houlihan is a short play but it became very popular when it was first performed in the Abbey Theatre.

As the leader of the movement for the Irish Independence, Yeats was aware of the importance of the theatre as a political force. He chose drama as a means to convey his political ideas to the people. Keeping this in mind he wrote the part of the play, Cathleen ni houlihan in which he has universalized his political ideas to get Ireland free from the British rule. In his part of the play, Yeats glorifies the sacrifice for one’s country and reminds us that the independence of one’s country is much more important than our luxurious life. He believes that without the revival of the nationalism among the Irish people, the Irish independence cannot be achieved and for which the bloodshed is necessary. But one thing which is noticeable in the play is that here he emphasizes only on national politics and does not glorify the women empowerment unlike Lady Gregory who, in her part of writing, emphasizes on the women empowerment by giving the power to Cathleen to change the mind and heart of the Irish youth and due to which the mind of Michael is completely changed and he joins the army to fight for Ireland leaving his marriage ceremony which was going to be held soon

If we look into the twentieth century Irish literature, we find that women characters are not given important roles. Their roles are only confined to as a maiden or a wizened old woman as we find in the plays of Sean O’Casey, J.M. Synge and other playwrights of Ireland. But in case of the present play, Cathleen ni Houlihan, it is different from traditional writing because Lady Gregory was also a great feminist and she wanted women to have an active participation in the war of independence of Ireland. So in this play she has glorified and presented Cathleen as a hero like figure. She has been presented as an empowered woman whose name is associated with Ireland. In fact, as we have mentioned earlier, she is the representative of the

Ireland which has been made a slave by the British army who have been described as “strangers” in the play. The reference of the British is a realistic aspect in the play which makes the theme of nationalism legitimate in the play. So, Cathleen’s blood thrust and demand for sacrifice is not shocking to us. Innes has rightly analyzed the role of Cathleen ni Houlihan when he says, “Cathleen ni Houlihan celebrates death (and) summons men to die for an abstract notion of the four beautiful green fields and idealized concept of Ireland.”(www.literatureessaysamples.com/catagory/cathleen-ni-houlihan/).

CONCLUSION

Thus we see that, although the play, Cathleen ni Houlihan, is a beautiful play jointly written by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, but still there is a debate among critics that if the play is a political propaganda or a pure literature. It is true that those parts of lines written by W.B. Yeats propagate his political ideas which believe in the freedom of Ireland from the foreign rule which is evident of through the speech of the Old Woman who, through her emotional speech and patriotic songs, inspires the youth of Ireland to fight for their country and sacrifice their lives for Irish freedom. But, on the contrary, those parts of lines written by Lady Gregory depict the lives of the poor Irish people for whom the ultimate goal of life is to lead a happy and prosperous life for which they are ready to go to any extent. Even they are not hesitant of taking dowry for the marriage of their sons. When Michael enters the house the first thing his father, Peter asks him is about the dowry and then boastfully describes how he bargained for the dowry with the bride’s father, John Cahel. He forced the bride’s father to give the whole dowry in one instalment, although John Cahel wanted to keep half of the dowry till her daughter give birth to her first child. But Peter forced him to give whole dowry now before the marriage and threatens him that unless he gives the dowry he will not allow his daughter to enter into the house. This materialistic attitude of the characters in the play depicts the realistic nature of the human beings which has got the universal impact in its nature. Thus, we see that in this short play we find both the realistic and the poetic qualities which are the basic elements of literature. As we know that literature reflects the life and it is a mirror in which we see the

culture and tradition of the time in which it has been written. Our study of the play shows that it depicts the life of the Irish people, their thoughts and their desire before the independence of Ireland. So, to say that the play is only a piece of political propaganda and not literature is not true. It is, of course, literature which reflects the political as well as the social life and thoughts of the people of the time when Ireland was struggling for her independence. The sensationalism of Yeats’s political opinions often has distracted the discussion of his plays’ literary and theatrical merit. To conclude we can say that undoubtedly, Cathleen ni Houlihan is a masterpiece of literature which has been written against the background of Irish war of Independence and deals with the theme of nationalism. W.B. Yeats himself rejected the idea that Cathleen ni Houlihan was only a piece of political propaganda. He said that he wrote a dramatic form of literature in which he put human life and thoughts. At the end of this paper we come to a conclusion that the play, Cathleen ni Houlihan which was co-authored by Lady Gregory, is a great piece of literature which was a grand success when it was first performed at the Abbey Theatre and it deals with the theme of nationalism which was very popular at the time when Ireland was struggling for independence. The encouragement of the people through literature was also very common in India during the war of its independence. Even in France, during the French Revolution, a lot of patriotic literatures were produced to encourage the people to participate in the struggle of freedom.

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