

Duty and Patriotism in Lady Gregory's play, the Rising of the Moon

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Abstract:

Lady Gregory's play, *The Rising of the Moon*, is a political play written against the background of war of independence of Ireland from the British rule. When the play was written, Ireland was struggling for her independence against the British rule. On the issue of war of independence the Irish people were divided into two groups. One group was in opinion that the war of independence is not necessary because there were peace and prosperity under the British government. On the other hand, the other group opined that slavery in any form was not good. So, they launched a guerrilla war against the direct rule of British government and called themselves Irish Republican Army (IRA). The play mainly deals with the two characters who are opposite in their thoughts and actions. One, the revolutionary hero, is full of patriotism and struggles for the freedom of his motherland. The other, an Irish police sergeant in the service of the British government, is very loyal to perform his duty. When the two characters meet and indulge into a discussion, they are torn into duty and patriotism. In this paper we propose to study the power of these two opposite senses, patriotism and duty, and to find which sense becomes triumph in the end of the play.

Keywords: Duty, Irish Republican Army, Patriotism, Political Play, War of Independence.

Isabella Augusta Persse (15 March 1852—22 May 1932), popularly known as Lady Gregory, was born at Roxborough, County Galway, Ireland. She got her education at home and "her future career was strongly influenced by the family nurse (nannie), Mary Sheridan, a catholic and a native Irish speaker, who introduced the young Augusta to the history and legends of the local area."

At the age of twenty eight she married Sir W.H. Gregory, a sixty three years old widower, a neighboring landowner, an ex- Member of Parliament and governor of Ceylon, at present Sri Lanka. Her literary activity really started after the death of her husband in 1892. In 1896 she met

William Butler Yeats and became his life-long friend and patron. She began writing plays by helping Yeats with the peasant dialogue of his plays and thus she co-authored his early plays, including *Cathleen-ni-Houlihan*. Lady Gregory was an Irish dramatist, folklorist, theatre manager and promoter of Irish drama. She had a great interest in Irish mythology and folklore and throughout her life she remained busy in promoting Irish mythology and folklore through her writings. She has written numerous plays and stories based on Irish mythology. She played an important role in reviving interest in Irish literature at the beginning of the 20th century. She co-founded the Abbey Theatre along with W.B. Yeats in 1904 and gave Ireland its own national theatre. Till 1904 there was no national drama of Ireland. It was Lady Gregory who, along with Yeats gave Ireland its national theatre and national drama. This was a great contribution of Lady Gregory to Irish literature and culture. That is why George Bernard Shaw, a great Irish dramatist, once described Lady Gregory as “the greatest living Irish woman.”

Lady Gregory wrote many plays for the Abbey Theatre at its early days which were very popular at that time and collected fund to run and to maintain the Abbey. For her drama, she chose materials from Ireland. The main aim of her writing drama was to propagate the sentiments of nationality and unity which was also the main aim of the Irish national drama. In writing on-act plays, Lady Gregory is at her best. Some of her famous one-act plays are tragic and comic as well. *Spreading the News* (1904), *The Gaol Gate* (1906), and *The Rising of the Moon* (1907) are classical examples of Lady Gregory’s plays.

Many dramatists were influenced by Lady Gregory’s dramatic craftsmanship. Influenced by Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge, the most popular Irish playwright, used local dialects in his plays. The famous American dramatist, Eugene O’Neill had openly declared that he knew about the method of introducing local dialects in plays from Lady Gregory. It has been rightly said that “as a playwright, she wrote pleasant comedies based on Irish folkways and picturesque peasant speech, offsetting the more tragic tones of the dramas of Yeats and J.M. Synge.”

The Rising of the Moon is a politically motivated one-act play. The playwright wrote this play to motivate the Irish people to fight for the independence of their country, Ireland from the slavery of the British rule. When the play was written, Ireland was under the control of the British government. Lady Gregory, being a nationalist herself, wanted to propagate the sentiments of the

political independence among the Irish people. It is true that Lady Gregory's sympathies were with the people of Ireland. She was however, against the violence. She sympathized with the Irish calls for independence from English rule, but she did not join the Irish revolutionaries. Rather she chose to spread the patriotism through language and literature. She believed that by knowing the culture and custom of Irish people, the English would appreciate the desire of the Irish to self-rule. Keeping this in her mind she wrote this play.

When this play was written, Irish people were divided into two groups. One group of people thought that since the life under the British rule was a relatively better and so there was no need of a separate or independent nation. But the other group argued that the independence from the British rule is must because under the British rule Ireland had been losing her cultural resources, her own languages and political independence. They wanted to raise a voice against the gradual impoverishment of Ireland under the British rule. So, a group of Irish people launched a war against the slavery of Ireland. With a firm determination to free Ireland, The Abbey Theatre was established in 1904 to revive and highlight the Irish culture through the medium of drama. In order to revive Irish native language, Gaelic language, the Gaelic League was also established by the Irish freedom fighters. Moreover, they used every means and medium to get freedom. But it was very dangerous and risky to launch a revolution against a very strong government, like British government. But the revolutionaries were ready to face any kind of danger for the independence of their country. In this play, the dramatist has tried to show the bravery, intelligence and firm determination of the Irish freedom fighters.

The *Rising of the Moon* is a play about a revolutionary hero in the disguise of a ragged ballad singer who, with a great intelligence, brings a drastic change in the mindset of a police sergeant who is Irish but a loyal worker of the British government. He has escaped from the jail and wants to escape by the sea route with the help of his friend. The government has put an award of 100 pound on his arrest. The Sergeant, with two policemen, has come on the seaport in search of the revolutionary hero and putting up his poster describing him as "dark hair—dark eyes, smooth face, height, five feet five...." and announcing a 100 pound award on him. The Sergeant sends the two policemen to guard the other side of seaport. He is alone thinking about the revolutionary man and about the award money. Suddenly a ragged man enters. He is stopped by the sergeant. The Ragged man introduced himself as a ballad singer and tells the Sergeant that he has come to

sell his ballads to the sailors as he is very poor. The Sergeant does not allow him to go further and tells him to go back as a search operation is going on there. As he is unwillingly going back, he looks at poster and tells the Sergeant that he knows the man in the poster and also tells him that he is a very dangerous man and is expert in the use of all types of weapons and has killed many policemen. Thus the Ragged man puts a psychological pressure on the Sergeant and succeeds in terrifying him. The Ragged man offers to stay there as a company to the Sergeant as he is alone. The Sergeant becomes interested in him and allows him to keep a watch on the other side of the seaport, may be out of fear. Suddenly, the Ragged man starts singing nationalistic songs. The Sergeant stops him from singing. The Ragged man says that he is singing the nationalistic song to keep his heart warm and to keep away the fear. So, the Sergeant allows him to sing. The Ragged man, during his singing, consciously missed a line of nationalistic song. The Sergeant interrupts him and tells the correct line. Now the Ballad singer reminds the Sergeant his childhood when he was full of national spirit. The Sergeant accepts that he is a very nationalist and used to sing nationalistic song in his childhood and wanted to see his country free from the British rule but the family responsibility made him loyal to British government. Thus, very cleverly and intelligently, the Ragged man arouses nationalistic feelings in Sergeant's heart. Then he reveals his identity and promises a great favour for the Sergeant when he will be in a great position after the independence of Ireland. The Sergeant, out of patriotic feelings in him, aroused by the Ballad singer, does not arrest the revolutionary hero and let him escape. When he feels that he has lost 100 pound award money and a promotion by not arresting the revolutionary hero, he thinks that he is a great fool.

The *Rising of the Moon* was presented as one of the curtain raiser plays in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin during its early days. This play proved to be a grand success when it was performed in the Abbey Theatre. The play was written in keeping in the mind to contribute to cultural consciousness and cultural self-respect in Ireland of that time and the play succeeded in achieving its goal.

The play opens with a sergeant and two policemen pasting poster with physical description of a revolutionary man who has been fighting for the freedom of Ireland from the British rule and has escaped from the jail. The Sergeant and two policemen have been assigned the duty to arrest him. The sergeant has doubt that the revolutionary man will escape by sea route and so he has

sealed the sea port area. He expresses his doubt in the following lines. “There’s a flight of steps here that leads to the water. This is a place that should be minded well. If he got down here, his friends might have a boat to meet him; they might send it in here from outside.”⁴. The Sergeant orders to put up the notice on the barrel. He reads the notice and feel regret that he has not seen the revolutionary man before he escaped from the jail. As he is reading the notice, the Sergeant , unconsciously, praises the courage and intelligence of the revolutionary man and also seems to be impressed by him which is a hint that he is going to be mesmerized by the personality and intelligence of the revolutionary man in the course of the play:

Sergeant: (Reading it.) Dark hair—dark eyes, smooth face, height, five feet five—there’s not much to take hold of in that—It’s pity I had no chance of seeing him before he broke out the gaol. They say he’s a wonder, that it’s he makes all the plans for the whole organization. There isn’t another man in Ireland would have broken gaol the way he did. He must have friends among the gaolers.

The Sergeant decides to mind the place himself because he is sure that he will arrest the man. But he also regrets that nobody helps him. In fact the Sergeant is a poor family man and he is in need of money to run his family. Here we find irony that a police officer is in need of money where as a revolutionary man has a 100 pound award on him. 100 pound is a handsome amount for a poor family man like the Sergeant. So he is determined to arrest the man himself:

I’ll mind this place myself. I wouldn’t wonder at all if he came this way. He might come slipping along there (points to side of quay), and his friends might be waiting for him there (points down steps), and once he got away it’s little chance we’d have of finding him; it’s maybe under a load of kelp he’d be in a fishing boat, and no one to help a married man that wants it to the award.

The police man X says that if they capture him, the people will abuse them and even their relatives will not be happy with them. This shows that the revolutionary man is very popular among the Irish people and he gets their support. It also proves that common people of Ireland are in favour of ongoing war of independence. Replying the Policeman X the Sergeant says that they are only doing their duty. “Well, we have to do our duty in the force. Haven’t we the whole country depending on us to keep law and order? It’s those that are down would be up and those

that are up would be down, if it wasn't for us." Thus, here we find a conflict between the common Irish people and the Irish police officers, working in the British government. The police officers, being Irish, love their country but they have to be loyal to the government because they are getting salary for maintaining law and order in the British government. They suppressed their patriotism for money and for the sake of their family. They need some catalysts to arouse their feeling of patriotism which is, later on, done by the revolutionary man who appears on the scene in the disguise of a ballad singer.

Sergeant sends the two policemen to guard the other side of the seaport. He is alone and, in a comic vein, thinking about the award money and is amused. "A hundred pounds and promotion sure. There must be a great deal of spending in a hundred pounds." As the Sergeant lost in his amusing thought, "A ragged man appears at left and tries to slip past." The Sergeant stops him and asks who he is. The reply of the ragged man, "You'd be as wise as myself if I told you..." although comically, summarizes the whole gist of nationalism and patriotism. Here the ragged man who is in disguise of a ballad singer wants to say that if he tells the Sergeant that he is a freedom fighter, he would also become a freedom fighter leaving the slavery of the British government which will be a wisdom on his part.

The Ragged man, who is in fact a revolutionary hero in the disguise of a ballad singer, is a live hearted intelligent man. When the sergeant forces him to go back to town he declares that "I know well the man you're waiting for—I know him well—I'll be going." It is here that the Sergeant is trapped in his talk. Since the Sergeant has not seen the revolutionary man so, he thinks that the ragged man will be helpful in recognizing him. So, he allows him to stay there. The ballad singer describes the revolutionary man as a very dangerous man who is expert in using all types of weapons and has killed many police men:

Man: I saw him in my own place, in the County Clare. I tell you wouldn't like to be looking at him. You'd be afraid to be in one place with him. There isn't a weapon he doesn't know the use of, and as to strength, his muscles are as hard as that board.

Sergeant: Is he as bad as that?

Man: He is then.

Sergeant: Do you tell me so?

Man: There was a poor man in our place, a sergeant from Ballyvaughan—It was with a lump of stone he did it.

Sergeant: I never heard of that.

Man: And you wouldn't, sergeant. It's not everything that happens gets into the papers....

Sergeant: Do you say so? It's a terrible country to belong to.

Thus we see that through his art of speaking, the Ballad singer puts a psychological pressure on the sergeant. He is so much terrified that he declares that "It's a whole troop of police they ought to put here to stop a man like that." Out of fear the Sergeant gives permission to stay there and to keep a watch on the other side of the sea port. Thus, the ballad singer very cleverly creates an opportunity for himself to complete his mission. Thus we see that in this play the dramatist depicts the rebel's cleverness and not his crimes because Lady Gregory was also a nationalist and to fight for one's country is not a crime. This is the message the dramatist wants to convey through her drama.

Now the Ballad singer gets an opportunity to indulge into a long discussion with the Sergeant and thus to arouse patriotic feelings in him. When the Sergeant gets sympathy from the Ballad singer he discloses his dissatisfaction with his job as a sergeant in the British police, "Indeed it's a hard thing to be in the force, out at night and no thanks for it, for all the danger we're in. And it's little we get but abuse from the people, and no choice but to obey our orders, and never asked when a man is sent into danger, if you are a married man with family."⁸ Here we find the irony of situation of the Sergeant and the ballad singer. The Sergeant is poor family man who ekes out a living whereas the Ragged man is an Irish diplomatic patriot who disguises himself as a poor man.

The Ragged man begins to sing Irish patriotic song. First the Sergeant stops him from singing but later on he allows him to sing. The Irish patriotic song brings back memories to the Sergeants. When, the Ragged man misses a line while singing, the Sergeant completes it with the correct lines. In their discussion, the Sergeant reveals that as youth he had patriotic feelings and used to sing patriotic songs with his friends. The Sergeant accepts that if his circumstances were different that he might have become a patriot for the Irish cause:

Sergeant: ...I had a great spirit in the days....That's a queer thought now, and a true thought. Wait now till I think it now....If it wasn't for the sense I have, and for my wife and family, and for me joining the force the time I did, it might be myself now would be after breaking gaol and hiding in the dark, and it might be him that's hiding in the dark and that got out of gaol would be sitting up where I am on this barrel...And it might be myself would be creeping up trying to make my escape from himself, and it might be himself would be keeping the law, and myself would be breaking it, and myself would be trying may be to put a bullet in his head, or to take up a lump of stone the way you said he did....no, that myself did....Oh!

It is irony that the Ragged man has actually disguised himself to be a poor man eking out a living by selling his patriotic songs to the sailors, while the Sergeant, who had been a patriotic at heart as a youth, tries to capture the escapee.

When the Ragged man realizes that the patriotism has been fully aroused in the heart of the Sergeant, he discloses his identity as a revolutionary man. Since the Sergeant is overwhelmed by the sense of patriotism, he does not arrest him and let him escape thus losing the award money and his promotion. The last words of the Sergeant "I wonder, now, am I as great a fool as I think I am," in the end of the play show that the sense of patriotism triumphs over the sense of duty and loyalty to the British government. Thus we see that there is a conflict between patriotism and loyalty in this play. The Sergeant is working under the British government and gets salary to run his family. So, being a servant in the British government, he has to protect the British government against any harm. He is bound to be loyal to the British government and so he is compelled to arrest the revolutionary man. But as an Irish he, too, wants freedom. Like the revolutionary man, he, too, does not like slavery and wants to see his country free. The dialogue between the Sergeant and the ballad singer evokes Irish love. They, both share Irish speech and knowledge of old sentimental and patriotic songs which is a feature of nearly all Gregory's plays. Before joining the British government the sergeant had also revolutionary instinct. But when he joined the job under the British rule, his revolutionary instinct disappeared but still there is a patriotic feeling in a corner of his heart. That is why he let the revolutionary man escaped. It shows that there is a conflict, in the mind of the Sergeant, between his sense of duty and his love for his country. This conflict between the sense of duty and the impulse of freedom is one of the

main themes of this play. Beside this we also find other conflict which is going on in the Sergeant's mind---the conflict between political idealism and the materialistic concerns which leave the sergeant in the end of the play. James Pethica has rightly remarked in this sense:

While his (The Ragged man) talk and song inspire beneficial human connection, they leave the sergeant actually conflicted at the end of the play between the claim of political idealism and the materialistic concerns of ordinary life, and far from sure he has done the right thing: left mulling over the reward he has forgone, he wonders, "Am I as great a fool as I think as I am".

To conclude we can say that *The Rising of the Moon* is a political play without violence and shedding of blood. The play deals with the theme of relationship between the master and the slave that is the British rule and Ireland. As we have discussed earlier, Lady Gregory, being an Irish, was in favour of the freedom of Ireland. But she did not like violence. In her opinion it is only unity among the Irish people and not the violence which can bring freedom to Ireland. She believed that this unity among the Irish people can be brought only by their shared heritage, folklores and patriotic songs. In the play we see that the two different characters are eventually united together as Irishman through the folklore, myths and patriotic songs. It is clear in the play that:

...the sense of being the citizen of a country is greater than the sense of duty towards a foreign country. Due to this sense of patriotism the sergeant let go the Ragged man. The Ballad singer or the Ragged man (Rebel) and the sergeant are the major characters through who the issue of unity among the Irish people is exposed. Thus, by bringing together an Irish rebel and an Irish police officer serving the British government, Gregory is emphasizing the unity of Irish people.

Through this play, Lady Gregory wanted to unite the Irish people to fight for the independence of their country without indulging into violence and she greatly succeeded in her aim, as has been shown in the play. Not to indulge into violence is humanity and fight for one's country is an impulsive instinct of every citizen of a country. Thus we see that Lady Gregory has used a unique dramatic technique in this play which, at the same times, treats the human nature and the

impulsive nature of a citizen of a country. This dramatic art, used by the dramatist in this play, has been nicely summarized by Alexander Gonzalez in the following words:

The greatness of Gregory's dramatic art rests precisely in its ability to deal simultaneously with the human experience and with the Irish experience. For example, the one-act play, *The Rising of the Moon* illuminates the human condition of two native Irish men while at the same time encouraging revolt against England.

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