

## The Agony of the Captive Woman: A Study in Euripides ' Helen and Synge's Rider to the Sea

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### Abstract

Helen of Troy is quite possibly one of the most inspired characters of all times in all literature, ancient and modern. She has become a symbol of man's erotic desires and of the varied moods of womanhood. But at the same time, she can be regarded as a symbol for the miserable captive woman whose tragedy through the sea cannot be overwhelmed. The main goal of this study is to prove peculiarity of Helen and Maurya who are the two mourning female characters whose tragedy is caused by their struggle with the mighty power. Hence this study displays how Euripides (484-406 B.C.) and J.M. Synge (1871-1909) who are different two dramatists belong to diverse cultures (Greek and Irish) and to dissimilar ages (classical and modern), be almost alike in tackling the agony of captive woman that reflect the natural common emotions of human hearts that are the same in all ages. The novelty of this study is determined by a new approach to study the image of the captive woman in Euripides' Helen (412 B.C.) and in Synge's Riders to the Sea (1904) and it is based on comprehensive, multidimensional study of such literary image from different cultural, historical and psychoanalytic perspectives.

**Keywords:** Euripides, Synge, Helen, Maurya, Captive, woman, sea, and Tragedy.

### Introduction

Literature is a vital record of what humans have experienced, taught, felt, and seen in life. Such aspect let literature gain the most immediate and continuing interest of all. Essentially, literature is the criticism of life and most of the authors tried to document the history of their ages in their literary works.

One of the prominent literary pieces that demonstrate how literature connects with history is the story of Helen of Troy. Contradictory viewpoints have been developed around the character of Helen and such contradiction provides a variety of interpretations of Trojan War and numerous perceptions for the captivity of woman and the moral standards of their different ages.

#### *Euripides' Helen*

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss:  
Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies!  
Come Helen, come, give me my soul again.  
Here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips,  
(Doctor Faustus, 12, 81-86)

Helen of Troy, the epitome of feminine allure and the devastation that can wreak on society, had a face that launched a thousand ships and many variations on her life story. She is the character who has charmed involvement through ages from Homer's poetry to modern Hollywood movies. She is the character whose name overwhelms the test of time and her far-fetched beauty captivates the center of the majority of body-concern works as that of the bloodiest wars in history. She is one of the most Greek mythic characters that have enduring personality traits. Such fact can be observed by reading her accounts in dissimilar works by various authors. The numerous adaptation for her tragedy, complicate the possibility of obtaining a unified perspective for her character. The more one reads about Helen, the more conflict one feels as to her true nature.

Helen is an inspirational female that transcends the strict boundaries imposed on Greek Women. Commonly, she is employed as a woman of desire, a deceitful heroine, shameful adulterous, wronged wife, and the careless queen for the deaths of thousands of brave Greek and Trojan men. These extremely are the major images of Helen that are seen in lyric poetry, classical art, Hollywood Movies and in epic tradition. It is true that, Helen stands for the incarnation of undying lust and the accursed beauty that poisons everything that she approaches or touches, but also no one can deny that Helen remains an elusive character who also appears in other shining and honest images in other literary works as in Euripides' Helen.

Euripides (484-406 B.C) is the prominent classical writer, painter and athlete.(Bates, 1906,163) He is the classical dramatist who has immortalized in the minds of generations and been named "the stage philosopher"(Ibid,160). The majority of his plays are centered round a female character who is involved in extreme thrilling and risky situations like battlefield, mixed marriage, infanticide, and captivity as in his *Medea* *Andromache* , *Hippolytus*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Electra*, and *Helen*. (Ibid,161)

In his early plays on Trojan theme, Euripides insists that Helen was a villain of the Trojan war, and during this course Helen is married to Paris, a Trojan citizen, and she is protected cared for by his family, therefore her faithfulness to the Greeks involve a betrayal of the Trojans. Helen departed with Paris willingly, she is the sole reason for the downfall of the Troy, therefore she is hated by both, the Greeks and the Trojans. While in another play, *Andromache* the title character says that it was Helen's fault that let the Greeks and the Trojans fight. And all the Trojans blames her for their misery except her husband, Menelaus who insisted that Helen is an innocent and faithful woman who did not go to Troy by her own will but she is forced by gods to go there.

In *Helen*, Euripides extremely changes Helen's portrait in this play which is opened by beautiful description of Egypt's Nile where the action of the play set.

Helen: These are the lovely pure streams of the Nile, which waters the plain and lands of Egypt, fed by white melting snow instead of rain from heaven. (Helen, 1)

Helen is the woman of an enchanted beauty and eerie glamour which can be partially interpreted according to her origin and magical birth. She was the daughter of Zeus and Leda. The latter who is labeled as a great icon of prettiness was raped by Zeus who came in the form of a swan, and the product of such union was Helen and her brother Pollux.

Helen: My own fatherland, Sparta, is not without fame, and my father is Tyndareus; but there is indeed a story that Zeus flew to my mother Leda, taking the form of a bird, a swan,

which accomplished the deceitful union, fleeing the pursuit of an eagle, if this story is true. (Helen, 1)

Helen is the highly attractive and pretty woman that is regarded as the creature who is twisted between the mortal world and the divine one. The twisting between these two worlds was the starting point of the tragic story of Helen's destruction and personal sacrifice that draw the first line in the history of Trojan War.

In a banquet that organized at Mt. Olympus, the gods and goddesses fall to invite Eris, goddess of discord. Consequently, Eris was displeased and angry and appeared unexpectedly at the banquet. This goddess hurled a golden apple that bears the ascription "To The Fairest" down the table in front of the astonished guests before leaving. The goddesses quarreled about this apple, and each goddess claimed that this apple is a prize to her. Then, it was decided to leave the choice up to a handsome shepherd in the valley ( young Trojan prince Paris). Being under the choice of this man, each goddess tried to bribe him by certain gift. Hera offered him power, Athena offered him wisdom, but Aphrodite won the apple since she promised him the most beautiful woman in the world, queen Helen of Sparta. (Harvery, 1967, s.v "Olympus")

Helen: My name is Helen; I will tell the evils [kaka] I have suffered [paskhein]. For the sake of beauty, three goddesses came to a deep valley on Mount Ida, to Paris: Hera and Kypris, and the virgin daughter of Zeus, wishing to have the judgment [krisis] of their loveliness decided. Kypris offered my beauty, if misfortune is beautiful, for Paris to marry, and so she won. Paris the shepherd of Ida, left his ox-stalls and came to Sparta, to have me in marriage. (Helen, 2 )

In Euripides's play, Helen is a pure woman and honest wife who never commits a sin, " Helen: I in countless troubles am involved/ First, although I never sin." (Helen, 6) Helen of this play never goes to Troy, but is carried to Egypt, where she remains during and after the Trojan war waiting faithfully for her husband Menelaus to rescue her. Meanwhile, Helen of Troy, a mere phantom fashioned by gods, has blighted the real life with undeserved hatred, since she cannot escape other's blame for the destruction and death in which she had no part, or in more accurate words, a part in name only.

In Helen, Euripides introduces a different story concerning the presence of Helen of Troy and mirrors her as a faithful and honest woman. Such treatment can be analyzed in relation to the conflict between appearance and reality which is one of the major idea in modern world. Euripides in his play suggests a world of confusion where nothing is precise, and even the life of man may turn amusing into disturbing, and serious into playful dilemmas. Here-upon, this play is twisted in its classification among, tragedy, philosophical divertissement, and romantic comedy.

Helen is found after seventeen years after the Trojan war. She has been exiled to Egypt by Hermes and captivated there, while her phantom that is given as a prize to Paris.

Helen: But Hera, indignant at not defeating the goddesses, made an airy nothing of my marriage with Paris; she gave to the son of king [turannos] Priam not me, but an image, alive and breathing, that she fashioned out of the sky and made to look like me; and he thinks he has me—an idle fancy, for he doesn't have me. (Helen, 2)

Theme of captivity that is prevalent in Greek drama does also appear as a dominant idea in modern art which generally explores the imprisonment of a character's inner being and

specifically is that of woman. As a fact, modern female character is a victim of mental and emotional captivity to attitudes, beliefs, conventions, objects and people. The imprisoned identity out of deep oppression forces woman to set a decision for her fatal end.

Interestingly, the captive character has several involvement in the zones of literature and performance. In other words, Helen's captivity to her weakness, her gender, god's decisions, to her fate, power of sea, cruelty of death, and to her masculine society are all experienced by Maurya, the heroine of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*.

### *Synge's Riders to the Sea*

Edmund John Millington Synge (1871-1909) is an Irish playwright, poet, and a collector of folklore. He is one of the co-founders of the Abbey Theatre. His plays are well known as "rigid economical tragedies where all unnecessary details and extra words are eliminated". (Ritschel:2002,15)

*Riders to the Sea* is like all other Synge's plays that show "staid domestic world into the adventure of life".(Sternlicht:2005, 111) It is opened by Maurya who is an old peasant woman from Aran island. She is the mother who mourns and weeps for her fifth son, Michael who was drowned in the sea nine days back. She was lost her husband, father-in-law, and her five sons: Stephen, Shawn, Sheamus, Patch, Michael, and she is left only with Bartley whose sign of death at the sea is also predicated by Maurya.

MAURYA: A little defiantly.—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 by quickly; and "the blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.(*Riders to the Sea*,12)

Maurya is a typical mother who sacrifices everything for her children and all the time she is praying for their safety and success. But those sons cause their mother merely pain and troubles from the moment of their birth. She is agonized by the sea that swallows all the men of her house. "Maurya: I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world".(*Riders to the Sea*,2) She receives the dead body of her last son Bartley with no wail or moan, since she becomes too powerful woman whose new sturdy faith defeats the cruelty of fate or what's called destiny. She finds strong consolation in the death of the last son, that she will not pray or cry more as she left with no son.

MAURYA :Raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her.—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.(*Riders to the Sea*, 14)

" [T]here isn't anything more the sea can do to me." This sentence shows the actual result of Maurya's conflict with the sea. Listening to her narrated story of past experience of losing all her men at the sea, one expects her destruction and defeat, but when reads it according to the common law of nature: all who live must die, finds Maurya as victorious wise woman whose contest with sea enriches her spiritual faith.

MAURYA: Continuing.—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 for ever, and we must be satisfied. [She kneels down again and the curtain falls slowly.] (Riders to the Sea, 15)

Maurya has experienced an indescribable grief in her loss. "What way will I live and the girls with me and I am old woman looking for the grave;". (Riders to the Sea,13) It's undoubtedly, such loss cause an extreme sorrow. She is the mournful figure who represents all the Irish mothers in the island who sacrifice their own husbands and sons to the sea in the earning of their living. Moreover, in this island the grief-stricken mothers are used to have tokens from their sons and not the opposite, while in its natural sense it is the old who leave token to the young.

MAURYA: Taking a stick Nora gives her.—In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.(Riders to the Sea, 8)

In this play that is regarded as a tragic masterpiece of Irish life and character presents the heroine (Maurya) as destructed woman who is "standing up unsteadily"(Riders to the Sea, p.8) since her power is sucked by the sea that is referred to continuously in her speech.(Styan:1981,104) Synge and the majority of Irish artists, employ the sea as a private background as it is deeply connected with lives of the humble rustics.

The sea has not been engaged as a mere geographical entity or an elementary agent of nature, but as an enemy for Maurya as all her miseries are rooted in the sea. She percepts that it is a futile contest with the sea that is proved to be the opponent of her peace.

MAURYA: It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest....Turning round to the fire, and putting her shawl over her head.—Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea? (Riders to the Sea, 7)

In brief, the sea cannot be merely interpreted as an agent of life, or a force of nature that pleases the human senses by its magnificence. It is not the part of the earthly environment that can be viewed as *la mar* (woman in Spanish) or "el mar which is masculine". (Old Man and the Sea, 13) It stands for sustenance and destruction. It is all the rider's antagonist, and not only for Maurya.

The sea is the agent whose role affects human life, custom, habit, climate, atmosphere, and superstitions. It is the absent character that designs the role and the end of all other characters in the play. Moreover, it can be a representation of the power of Divinity or God and also can add more to the account of Existential crisis in the modern age. Many images can be attached to the sea that keeps to be a perpetual source of inspiration, as in this study where Synge's Maury joins hands with Euripides's Helen

### ***Helen and Maurya: Common grounds of both characters***

Euripides' Helen and Synge's Riders to the Sea are dominated by strong female characters that outshare their male counterparts all the conditions of the setting. They use man-dominated language to defy the patriarch structure the supernatural forces of their islands. In both plays, the author involves certain force that compels the major female character to think and a spire only how to deal with male character.

Synge's Maurya is a peasant woman who belong to the common fishing community of the Aran islands. So, she is different from Euripides's heroine and all other classical protagonists in the nobility of birth. Helen is highborn, but she joins hands with Maurya in many aspects that assure Helen being a timeless feminine appeal.

Both of Helen and Maurya open their plays as a passive and helpless victim in the hands of certain destructive power that captivates their own human free will and set their predestination.

Helen: Kypris offered my beauty, if misfortune is beautiful, for Paris to marry, and so she won. Paris the shepherd of Ida, left his ox-stalls [30] and came to Sparta, to have me in marriage Hermes caught me up in the folds of the air and [45] hid me in a cloud—for Zeus was not neglectful of me—and he set me down here in the house [oikos] of Proteus.(Helen,2)

MAURYA: It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drown'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave? (Riders to the sea, 7)

Helen and Maurya do not incarnate, domestic violence, social oppression or man's torture for woman in order to be classified under the traditional feminist texts. The application of feminist theories that focus on man-woman relation is missing in both plays. And as a justification(an account) for such idea, one can illustrate the following words of Toril Moi:

Feminist criticism and theory must in some way be relevant to the study of the social institutional and personal power relations between sexes.(Moi,2006,4)

In fact, the actual conflict is between the mighty power and a woman who bears its distortion with heroic gallant resignation.

Heroically, Helen defies the cruelty of gods and Maurya resists the brutality of the sea, and their endurance enables them to have spiritual transcendence over their own calamities. Furthermore, the consequence of such hard conflict is the tragic foreknowledge of an islander women whose bereavement grants them with highly intuitive knowledge and too influential spirits.

It is true that many women have been victimized intellectually, emotionally and physically by men, it is also true that some have managed efficiently to counter male power.(Belsey & Moore, 1989,119)

Everything is related to power. So, Euripides centers his Helen on the mighty power of god, and Synge also builds his Riders to the Sea upon the supernatural power of the sea whose mighty power does not differentiate from that of god's in classical drama. As it is stated by Robin Skelton, general editor of Synge's Collected Works, the play's "emphasis upon the dominance of the sea makes sea itself into a power, a god".

Helen: Oh! Oh! Maidens of Hellas, the prey of barbarian sailors! An Achaean sailor [195] came, he came bringing tears upon tears to me. (Helen,10)

MAURYA: Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea?... Crying out as he is in the door.—He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.(Riders to the Sea, 7)

It is remarkable to note that though the sea is commonly preserved as feminine, Maurya loses her femininity possibly because of the sea's violent, destructive and cruel image that indirectly overshadows her benignant characteristics. To add more about this point, Danial Corkery, an Irish politician, writer and academic, states that there is no adjective or personification or any special synonym used by Maurya when she mentions the word "sea" in her speech. She just says that: the sea; on the sea; in the sea, by the sea. (Corkery, 1965, 181)

As god guides Helen to painful lands and decides her misery, the sea also plans the misery of Maurya. So, the sea that provides life in its connection with the mainland, according to Maurya, it takes life and be death's synonym. It seems that Synge knows that it is the custom of the Aran islanders to earn both their livelihood and death from the sea.

In terms of conflict, both Euripides and Synge focus on what's going within the protagonist against the supernatural power as an attempt to dramatize the universal conflict between human and their pre-determined fate. The audience understands the great misery of Helen and Maurya through their laments, narration of the prehistory of the play, but not through the actual interaction with gods or sea. In other words, Helen and Maurya are two tragic protagonists who prove the highly elevated classical spirit in their resistance.

Actually, Helen and Maurya are traumatized by fear and devastated anxiety to the extent that interpret everything round them as an ill-omen or a curse. They no longer pay attention to the difference between black and white, since the duality chains their thoughts exactly like the enchantment of the superstitions for their islands. Anguish, captivity, and the loss of the most dear ones: husband and the child, let Helen and Maurya realize the actual relation between death and life in one cycle of universe. They find their antagonists (god / sea) as a life-giver and sometimes as a life-taker. They complain them as destroyers and sometimes call upon them as saviors.

Helen blames gods who took her as a captive beside Nile and polluted her name to be another synonymy for adultery and unfaithfulness. "Helen: There is no mortal who does not hate Helen; I am famous throughout Hellas as the one who betrayed my husband and lived [oikeîn] in Phrygia's golden halls." (Helen, 43) But then she begs gods to help her in such bleak condition and save her husband from death.

Helen: Maiden, I fall at your knees as a suppliant, [895] and seat myself in this sad posture on behalf of myself and of this man; I am on the point of seeing him slain, after I have found him with such difficulty. (Helen, 46)

Maurya who also laments her great loss because of the violence of the sea, she ends her play with the emblem of triumph over the power of sea, as she "won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening". (Riders to the Sea, 15) The tragic experience grants her wisdom and enables her to realize that death is the inescapable ending point in the universal cycle of life: "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. [She kneels down again and the curtain falls slowly]". (Riders to the Sea, 15)

The closing concluding line reflects the spiritual sublimity of Maurya, from the common peasant status into the highly elevated heroic level like that of Helen of Troy. So both Helen and Maurya achieve the same classical tragic glory in their attempts to liberate themselves from the captivity of their gender-weakness and from the pre-destined fate. They are universal legendary women whose misery proves the futility of life. Each of Helen and Maurya create a tragic picture of an islander woman whose loss is compensated with great

mysterious patience and superstitious foresight for their reality that have been gain through the mighty power of god and sea.

The relation between the sea and the sight is one of the major analogies between Euripides' *Helen* and Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, the two plays whose overwhelming sense of doom hunts their audience from the early beginning (very start). The sea which represents the source of the main thread hangs Maurya and Helen is never lost sight of in both plays. Moreover, the sea sets the tragic background by reporting the past tragic events that cannot be performed on the stage. Successfully, both playwrights, Euripides and Synge, develop the employment of the sea from being a background into a developing symbol that brings destiny step by step through the dramatic hints that forebode the catastrophe of the play. Furthermore, the sea provides both plays by the structural compactness and formulates the dramatic unity of an action that set in single place and one day. In brief, the sea motivates the conscience of Destiny to which the captives Helen and Maurya lament.

Captive women lament their fallen city as much as they lament their husbands, brothers, and sons And the mourner expresses fear and anxiety about her own future in captivity and longs for death.

(The Captive Woman's Lament in Greek Tragedy, 2006, 3)

Dramatically speaking, the traditional captive female character narrates the past in order to gain sympathy and attracts the audience's attention towards the contrast between the past and present conditions.

The traditional lament women express their desperation since they no longer have the protection of their men who no longer here either because of death or departure. Generally, the captive women use lament as weapons to defend themselves in desperate situations and as a medium through which communicate with public voice.

In Synge's play, strong female characters assert themselves in unorthodox ways, defying custom and legend. Synge is intended to herald the end of the mythologizing era and the heavy treatment of mythology in art, by presenting a new source for a legendary plot. According to Synge, the legendary events are no longer caused by fate or gods, but by personal heroic decision, like that of Maurya who chooses her life and death as she follows her own values.

Each of Helen and Maurya represents the image of a tortured woman who is doomed to misery but never loses power or hope. Helen and Maurya resist their agony and desolation with the great longing for a savior at the ending point. Both are facing the sea that initiates the first point in their tragic journey. Helen hopes that the waves of the sea bring her deprived darlings: husband and daughter, Hermione "Ah, my husband!.... Alas! Is our daughter Hermione alive?" (Helen, 31) and Maurya hopes that the almighty God have mercy on her sons' souls, her own, and on the soul of everyone.

MAURYA: Puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet.—They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn [bending her head]; and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world. (*Riders to the sea*, 15)

## Conclusion

The early Greek drama, particularly that of Euripides has been and remains as a momentous source that provides the English and European theatres with characters and plot. Here-upon, many artists of various literary ages implant their literary works with Euripidean theme or character and Synge is not an exception.

Actually, Synge in his *Riders to the Sea* employs the agony of Euripides's Helen which is a permanent human passions that are found in any age. Helen and Maurya underline the theme of captivity that is the pedestal that may use by any cruel mighty power in this universe whose humanity is predestined to suffering. Both playwrights introduced the tragedy of woman's acute awareness to the futility of life and its contradiction.

Interestingly, the theme of captivity has several application in different areas of art, and the image of the captive woman is so recurrent in literature. So, Helen's captivity to god's decision, to her beauty, to her gender, to her masculine society, and to her fate are reflected in Maurya's one. They are chained by the iron of the mighty power and that of past, of memory, of grief, of heresies, of mental illusions, and of the expectation to what may be brought by the waves of the sea.

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