
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF J. M. SYNGE'S RIDERS TO THE SEA AND MANIK BANDYOPADHYAY'S PADMA NADIR MAJHI

***Sunanda Chakraborty**

PG. Student of NSOU (Bankura Christian College.)

Article Received: 29 June 2026, Article Revised: 19 July 2026, Published on: 06 August 2026

***Corresponding Author: Sunanda Chakraborty**

PG. Student of NSOU (Bankura Christian College.)

Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.1851>

ABSTRACT

J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* emerge from two distinct literary, geographical and cultural traditions, yet both are deeply concerned with the precarious existence of fishing communities whose lives are inseparably connected with water. Synge's one-act tragedy presents the inhabitants of the Aran Islands, particularly Maurya and her family, whose existence is shaped by the relentless Atlantic Sea. Bandyopadhyay's Bengali novel, on the other hand, portrays the fishermen and boatmen of the Padma River through the life of Kuber and the wider community of the Malo people. In both works, water is simultaneously a source of livelihood and a destructive force. The sea and the river are therefore not merely settings; they function as active forces that shape human destiny, social relations, economic structures, religious beliefs and psychological experience. This paper undertakes a comparative study of *Riders to the Sea* and *Padma Nadir Majhi* through the interconnected themes of water and survival, poverty and economic dependence, fate and human agency, death and suffering, women and family, community consciousness, religion and superstition, and the symbolic function of the aquatic landscape. The paper also draws upon Ramen Goswami's study of Synge's play published in the *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM)*, particularly his interpretation of the sea as the source of both life and death and his analysis of the "one way journey" of the riders toward the sea. The central argument of this study is that although Synge creates a compressed tragic drama and Bandyopadhyay constructs a socially expansive novel, both writers represent marginal communities whose relationship with water reveals a universal conflict between human aspiration and forces beyond human control. However, their conclusions differ significantly: Synge moves towards tragic acceptance, whereas

Bandyopadhyay exposes the possibility of social escape while simultaneously questioning whether escape from poverty, exploitation and illusion is genuinely possible.

KEYWORDS: J. M. Synge, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Riders to the Sea, Padma Nadir Majhi, sea, Padma River, tragedy, poverty, fate, fishermen, comparative literature, social realism.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has repeatedly turned towards water as one of the most powerful symbols of human existence. The sea, river, ocean and flood are not simply geographical realities. They may represent life, death, fertility, destruction, memory, destiny, movement and uncertainty. For communities whose economic existence depends upon water, however, the symbolic meaning of water is inseparable from its material reality. The fisherman goes to the sea or river not because he wishes to encounter the sublime but because he must earn his daily bread. In this relationship between necessity and danger lies the central significance of J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi*. J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, first performed in the early twentieth century, is one of the most concentrated tragedies of modern English drama. Set in the Aran Islands, the play depicts Maurya, an old mother who has lost almost every male member of her family to the sea. Her last surviving son, Bartley, also goes to the sea despite her fear and ultimately dies. The drama is remarkably brief, but its emotional and philosophical implications are immense. The sea is the source of the islanders' livelihood, yet it continually takes away their husbands, fathers and sons.

Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi*, generally translated as *The Boatman of the Padma* or *Padma River Boatman*, is one of the significant Bengali novels of social realism. The novel represents the lives of the Malo fishing community living beside the Padma. The central figure, Kuber, is a poor fisherman whose life is shaped by hunger, economic insecurity, desire, social restrictions and the unpredictable river. Around him exists a complex world of fishermen, women, boatmen, traders, religious beliefs and dreams of escape. The novel's narrative is considerably broader than Synge's drama. Where Synge compresses the tragic experience of one family into a single dramatic movement, Bandyopadhyay expands the experience of an entire community into a socially detailed narrative. The comparative study of these two works is significant because both writers place a marginal community at the centre of literary representation. The people of Aran and the fishermen of the Padma do not belong to the dominant social and economic structures of their

respective worlds. Their lives are determined by labour, poverty, natural uncertainty and dependence upon an environment that cannot be fully controlled. The sea and the river provide sustenance but also threaten annihilation. Thus, the fundamental paradox of both works is that the same natural force that sustains life also produces death.

Ramen Goswami, in his study of *Riders to the Sea*, observes that “The Sea is the source of their living and dying” (Goswami). This concise formulation provides an important foundation for a comparative reading of Synge and Bandyopadhyay. In both works, water is a contradictory presence. It gives food, employment and economic possibility, but it also creates danger, bereavement and uncertainty. Goswami further argues that the journey of the riders towards the sea becomes a “one way journey” with “very little possibility of return” (Goswami). This idea can be extended comparatively to the fishermen of Padma Nadir Majhi. Their movement upon the river is also a journey of necessity. They go to the water to return with fish, yet the river continually threatens to transform the journey of livelihood into a journey towards death. The present study therefore argues that *Riders to the Sea* and Padma Nadir Majhi are united by a common literary concern: the struggle of human beings whose survival depends upon an uncontrollable aquatic environment. Nevertheless, the two works differ in their artistic methods and ideological conclusions. Synge creates a tragic and almost ritualistic drama of loss, while Bandyopadhyay creates a social novel in which poverty, class, sexuality, religion and economic exploitation interact with the natural world. Synge’s world ultimately moves towards acceptance of death; Bandyopadhyay’s world remains open to movement, rebellion and the dream of another social order.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research employs a comparative literary methodology. The purpose is not to claim that Synge and Bandyopadhyay were directly influenced by one another. Rather, the study examines how two writers from different linguistic, cultural and historical backgrounds represent comparable human experiences. First, both works are examined as representations of marginal communities. The Aran Islanders and the Malo fishermen are not treated as decorative regional figures but as central subjects whose lives reveal wider human and social realities. Second, the sea and the river are studied as forms of environmental agency. Neither the Atlantic in Synge nor the Padma in Bandyopadhyay is a passive background. Both actively determine the economic and psychological lives of the characters.

Third, the study examines the relationship between natural determinism and human agency. The characters are not simply helpless victims. They work, desire, resist, dream and make

choices. Yet their choices remain limited by poverty, nature, social structures and historical circumstances.

Finally, the study uses a comparative approach to tragedy and social realism. Synge's drama is constructed through compression, symbolism, prophecy and silence. Bandyopadhyay's novel is constructed through social detail, multiple characters, economic struggle and psychological complexity.

I. Water as the Foundation of Life

The most important point of comparison between *Riders to the Sea* and *Padma Nadir Majhi* is the dependence of the communities upon water. In Synge's play, the people of the Aran Islands live in a harsh environment. The island is associated with barren land, poor soil and difficult living conditions. The sea becomes the principal means of survival. The men go to the sea to fish, travel and earn money. Consequently, the sea becomes inseparable from the family economy. The fishermen cannot simply abandon the sea. Their dependence is economic and existential. Bartley knows the danger of going to sea, and Maurya knows the danger even more deeply because her entire life has been marked by loss. Yet Bartley must go. The sea is dangerous, but remaining on the island may also mean hunger and poverty. This creates the central paradox of the play: the characters must move towards the very force that may destroy them. Goswami rightly identifies the "clash between man and the sea" as an archetypal conflict and connects it with "man's surrender to fate" (Goswami). The sea is therefore both economic necessity and metaphysical power.

A similar contradiction dominates *Padma Nadir Majhi*. The Malo fishermen depend upon the Padma for their daily existence. Fishing is not an abstract occupation. It is the material basis of their lives. The river determines when and where they work, what they eat, how much they earn and whether their families survive. Kuber's life is constantly controlled by the uncertain conditions of fishing. However, the Padma is not merely a destructive force. It is also a provider. Fish, boats, trade and movement are all connected with the river. The fishermen therefore maintain a relationship of dependence that is both intimate and dangerous. The important difference is that Synge's sea appears more directly as an almost mythic force, whereas Bandyopadhyay's Padma is presented through a realistic social world. Synge concentrates the destructive force of the sea into a tragic pattern. Bandyopadhyay shows how the river participates in a complete economic system.

In both works, however, the human being does not stand outside nature. The fishermen are not masters of water. They are participants in a system larger than themselves.

II. The Sea and the River as Active Forces

The sea in *Riders to the Sea* possesses a kind of dramatic agency. It is never physically represented on stage, but its presence dominates every conversation. The sea is invisible yet omnipresent. It is represented through reports, memories, visions and death. The deaths of Maurya's family members create the invisible history of the play. The dead are absent from the stage, but their absence is caused by the sea. Michael's death is central even before the play begins. Bartley's death takes place outside the visible dramatic action. Thus, the sea operates through absence. This dramatic technique is highly significant. The audience does not see the sea directly. Instead, the sea is experienced through the emotional consequences of its power. The sea is therefore both physical and psychological.

Goswami's analysis of Maurya's vision is particularly important. The red mare associated with Bartley represents life, while the grey pony associated with Michael's apparition becomes a sign of death. The vision connects the living and the dead and anticipates Bartley's fate. In this way, the natural world becomes a medium through which the future is symbolically revealed. The Padma in Bandyopadhyay's novel is more physically present. It is part of the daily landscape of the characters. The reader encounters boats, fishing, currents, banks and riverine life. Yet the river also possesses a symbolic power beyond physical geography. The Padma represents uncertainty. It changes, moves and refuses complete human control. The life of the fishermen is therefore unstable because the river itself is unstable. Their economic condition is reflected in the movement of the river. The comparison reveals two different methods of representing nature. Synge creates a symbolic and theatrical nature, while Bandyopadhyay creates a social and material nature. But both writers refuse to present nature as a neutral background.

III. Poverty and Economic Dependence

Poverty is one of the central forces in both works. In *Riders to the Sea*, the islanders live in a condition of material hardship. Their lives are marked by physical labour and limited economic opportunity. The men must go to sea because there are few alternatives. The sea therefore becomes a form of economic compulsion. The tragedy of Bartley is not simply that he chooses danger. He is compelled by the structure of his life. The economic necessity of the fisherman transforms the sea into a permanent threat. Maurya's maternal fear cannot prevent Bartley from going because the family must survive. The play therefore contains an important social dimension. The tragedy is not merely the result of supernatural destiny. It is also the result of economic dependence. In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, this social dimension becomes even

more explicit. Kuber's poverty affects every aspect of his existence. His relationship with his wife, his children, his work and his desires are all influenced by economic insecurity. The fisherman is not simply poor because he lacks money. Poverty becomes a psychological condition. It produces anxiety, dependence and vulnerability. It influences sexual relationships, family relationships and social identity. Bandyopadhyay's realism is particularly powerful because he does not romanticise poverty. The poor are not automatically morally pure, nor are they simply heroic victims. They experience jealousy, desire, selfishness, love, anger and ambition. Their humanity is complex.

The tragic irony is that the audience understands the danger before Bartley's death is confirmed. Maurya's vision of Michael riding behind Bartley symbolically reveals the future. The supernatural and the realistic are therefore combined. Goswami argues that Maurya's vision "foreshadows Bartley's bereavement" (Goswami). This is one of the most important structural features of the play. The tragedy is not created by sudden surprise. It is created by the terrible knowledge that death is approaching. In Padma Nadir Majhi, fate operates differently. The characters are also limited by circumstances, but Bandyopadhyay places greater emphasis on social and economic structures. Kuber's life appears determined by poverty, but he also possesses desire and ambition. He does not simply accept his condition. He imagines alternatives. His movement towards Hossain Mian's island is connected with the dream of a new life. The island represents a possible escape from existing social structures. Yet the dream is also ambiguous. Is it a genuine utopia or another form of illusion? This ambiguity distinguishes Bandyopadhyay's treatment of fate from Synge's. Synge's characters move towards a tragic conclusion that cannot be avoided. Bandyopadhyay's characters move through history and society, where change appears possible but uncertain. Thus, Synge presents fate as an almost metaphysical force, while Bandyopadhyay presents destiny as a combination of nature, poverty, social structures and human choices.

V. Death and the Culture of Suffering

Death is the central reality of Riders to the Sea.

Maurya's entire existence is shaped by death. She has already lost several male members of her family before the dramatic action begins. The play therefore begins in the shadow of death. The death of Bartley completes the pattern. Maurya becomes the mother who has lost every son. Yet the final movement of the play is not simply an expression of uncontrolled grief. Maurya finally reaches a state of acceptance. Her words express the tragic recognition

that death has completed its work. This is one of the most powerful features of the drama. The play moves from fear to certainty and finally from certainty to acceptance. The structure resembles classical tragedy. The characters cannot defeat death, but the human spirit achieves a form of dignity through recognition.

In Padma Nadir Majhi, death is also a constant possibility. The fishermen live with the danger of drowning, storms and accidents. However, death is represented within a wider social world. The novel contains not only physical death but also social and psychological suffering. Poverty may destroy human dignity. Hunger may destroy relationships. Social rules may destroy individual freedom. Desire may create guilt and conflict.

VI. Women, Family and the Burden of Loss

The representation of women offers another significant point of comparison. Maurya is the emotional centre of *Riders to the Sea*. Although the men go to the sea, the women remain behind to experience anxiety, waiting and grief. Maurya's tragedy is therefore not simply the loss of sons. It is the experience of a woman whose life is structured by repeated male death. She cannot accompany Bartley into the sea. She cannot control his decision. Her power is limited to warning, prayer and emotional resistance. Yet Maurya is not weak. Her final acceptance gives her a form of moral and spiritual strength. She becomes larger than her individual grief. The women in Padma Nadir Majhi inhabit a more complex social environment. Kuber's wife Mala is affected by poverty, domestic inequality and emotional insecurity. Kapila represents a different kind of female presence. Through her, the novel explores desire, social taboo and the conflict between personal emotion and social morality. Unlike Maurya, the women of Bandyopadhyay's novel are not united by a single tragic experience. They occupy different positions within the social structure. Nevertheless, they share a condition of vulnerability. Their lives are affected by male economic instability and social patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* are separated by language, culture, geography, genre and historical context. One is an Irish one-act tragedy; the other is a Bengali social novel. Yet their comparative significance lies in their representation of communities whose lives are shaped by water. In Synge, the sea becomes the ultimate symbol of fate. It provides livelihood but also takes away fathers, husbands and sons. Maurya's personal tragedy becomes the tragedy of the Aran community. The sea

represents the cruel contradiction of existence: the force upon which people depend is the force that destroys them. In Bandyopadhyay, the Padma is equally contradictory. It gives the fishermen their livelihood, but it also creates danger and uncertainty. Yet the river is not merely a symbol of death. It is also a space of movement, desire and possible escape. The social world around the river is more complex, and the novel explores the relationship between nature and poverty, labour and desire, religion and utopia, individual freedom and social restriction. The most important similarity between the two works is therefore the representation of human beings as dependent upon forces beyond complete control. The fisherman does not go to the sea because he is fearless; he goes because he must live. The boatman does not enter the river because he has conquered nature; he enters because poverty leaves him no alternative. The most important difference is the nature of the final response. Synge's drama moves towards tragic acceptance. Maurya recognises the inevitability of death and achieves a form of spiritual dignity through acceptance. Bandyopadhyay's novel remains more socially restless. Its characters continue to dream of escape, even when the possibility of escape remains uncertain. Thus, *Riders to the Sea* and *Padma Nadir Majhi* may be read together as two powerful literary studies of aquatic existence. The Atlantic Sea and the Padma River are not merely settings. They are economic forces, symbolic forces, psychological forces and historical forces. They determine how people work, love, fear, hope and die. The comparison finally reveals a universal truth: human beings often live through the very forces that threaten their lives. For the Aran Islanders and the Malo fishermen, the sea and the river are simultaneously home, workplace, destiny and danger.

WORKS CITED

1. Bandyopadhyay, Manik. *Padma Nadir Majhi*. Bengali editions. Translated editions include *The Boatman of the Padma*, translated by Ratan K. Chattopadhyay, Orient Blackswan, 2012.
2. Goswami, Ramen. "Symbolism, Sea, Choric Characters and Life of Aran Islanders Are Five Factors Are Primal Objectives of *Riders to the Sea* by J. M. Synge." *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2021, pp. 2401–2406. DOI: 10.35629/5252-030624012406.
3. Synge, J. M. *Riders to the Sea*. 1904.
4. Bandyopadhyay, Manik. *Padma River Boatman*. Translated by Barbara Painter and Yann Lovelock, University of Queensland Press, 1973.
5. Chattopadhyay, Ratan K., translator. *The Boatman of the Padma*. Orient Blackswan, 2012.