

# “REMEMBER ME, IN YOUR STORIES AND IN YOUR SONGS”: THE MAGICAL JOURNEY TO CELTIC CULTURAL RESURRECTION AND THE RE-DISCOVERY OF SELF IN *SONG OF THE SEA*<sup>1</sup>

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สำรวจแนวคิดสัจนิยมมหัศจรรย์ (magical realism) ผ่านเทคนิคการนำเสนอภาพยนตร์ (cinematic techniques) ในภาพยนตร์การ์ตูนเรื่อง *The Song of the Sea* ในฐานะตัวบททางวัฒนธรรม โดยชี้ให้เห็นว่า ตัวบทดังกล่าวอาศัยการเล่าเรื่องแบบสัจนิยมมหัศจรรย์เพื่อหลอมรวมโลกแห่งความจริงและโลกแห่งความอัศจรรย์ (fantasy) ไว้ด้วยกันอย่างแนบเนียน เพื่อนำเสนอการมองโลกแห่งความจริงแบบใหม่ที่มีความลุ่มลึกมากยิ่งขึ้น ผู้เขียนนำเสนอว่า ตัวตนและการดำรงอยู่ของเซลเกียส์ เป็นต้นธารในกระบวนการเยียวยา รักษาของตัวละครหลัก ผ่านปฏิสัมพันธ์ของเขากับเซลเกียส์และสิ่งมีชีวิตในตำนาน

<sup>1</sup> “อย่าลืมฉันในเรื่องเล่าและบทเพลงของเธอ”: มหัศจรรย์แห่งการเดินทางสู่การฟื้นฟูวัฒนธรรมไอริช และการค้นพบตัวตนใหม่ในภาพยนตร์การ์ตูนเรื่อง *The Song of the Sea*

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อื่นๆ ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น บทความยังชี้ให้เห็นว่า กระบวนการเยียวยา รักษาได้ค่อยๆ เปลี่ยนกระบวนการที่ผ่านการรับรู้ความจริงของตัวละคร โดยการมองรากทางวัฒนธรรมของตัวเองในโลกแห่งความเป็นจริงแบบใหม่ ซึ่งเกิดขึ้นจากการออกผจญภัยของตัวละครหลักในการช่วยเหลือเซลเกียส์ การออกเดินทางดังกล่าวไม่เพียงแต่ช่วยเยียวยาบาดแผลในจิตใจของตัวละคร แต่ยังทำให้ตัวละครยอมรับในรากทางวัฒนธรรม รวมถึงความสูญเสียในครอบครัว ที่ย่ำที่สุด การคลาไคลปัญหาของตัวละครหลักที่มีต่อเซียวาร์ (Saoirse) ผู้ซึ่งเป็นสัญลักษณ์ของวัฒนธรรมไอริช ที่ยังมีชีวิตอยู่ ยังทำหน้าที่สะท้อนการป้องกันรากทางวัฒนธรรมไม่ให้ถูกลืมเลือนอีกด้วย

## Abstract

*This study examines the deployment of magical realism along with cinematic techniques in Song of the Sea. Analysing the animated film as a cultural text in light of magical realism, it argues that the film intermingles two different worlds, the mundane and the fantastic, to provide audiences with a more inclusive view of reality. The existence of Celtic mythical beings, selkies, brought to life by magical realism, becomes the cornerstone in the protagonists' healing process as their interactions with these mythical beings gradually reshape their conception of reality. A new “reality” is, thus, employed to vex the protagonists' mind and make them reconsider reality in a new light by helping them vividly see Irish cultural aspects in their mundane life. Taking two selkies,*

*Bronagh and Saoirse, as a metaphor for Irish cultural roots, this paper asserts that the protagonists’ embarking on their magical journey to retrieve the selkie’s coat not only heals their shattered selves but also induces them to hark back to their cultural roots. Ultimately, the research posits that the protagonist’s newly developed self, which eventually allows him and his family to come to terms with their loss, resolves his conflict with Saoirse, who successfully prevents the Irish cultural roots from being forgotten.*

**Keywords:** magical realism, Irish culture, cultural studies

## Introduction

*Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world’s more full of weeping  
than you can understand.  
(Yeats, 1990)*

This passage taken from one of William Butler Yeats’s (1990: 31) poems entitled “The Stolen Child” from *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* is deployed in *Song of the Sea*’s opening scene. In this poem, Yeats describes a fairy, a Celtic mythical creature, who tries to lure a child away to fairy land. He portrays the mythical creature as a means of alerting the reader to the possibility of a new reality where this fairy may materially dwell, hiding in wild places. Taking into consideration the cultural context and Yeats’s project to revive Celtic culture through his depiction of Celtic mythology, we can see that the animated film may have the same agenda as Yeats.

That is, the content of the animated film corresponds with Yeats’s agenda to bring Celtic culture to the front in order to ask the reader to hark back to their cultural roots. In this sense, the fairy is not merely an ordinary mythical figure—added to appeal to children’s fantasy—but rather the embodiment of Celtic mythology as part of Irish culture.

## Irish Historical and Cultural Context

In order to see the connection between the animated *Song of the Sea* (2014) and Yeats’ attempt to revivify Celtic myth, Ireland’s historical and cultural background must be taken into consideration. It is important to point out that Ireland is a country that has struggled for cultural independence from England and sought its own “voice”. In *A Brief History of Ireland*, State (2009) traces Ireland’s history to investigate how Irish culture has developed since the first settlement of the Celts and how its culture was later subsumed under the English. As the very first settlers in Ireland, the Celts have always been part of Ireland’s cultural identity. State (2009:11) points out that, “[The Celts’] beliefs and institutions would dominate life on the island for the next 1,000 years, with traces of their ways surviving among the Irish-speaking population today”. Celtic myth, in this sense, as State asserts (2009:24), signifies the roots of Irish cultural identity. These cultural roots gradually vanished due to the Celts’ defeat by the Roman Empire, Christianity, and lastly England. In an attempt to promote Irish culture, the government of an independent Ireland has tried to promote a sense of national identity. For example, as State (2009:265) puts it, “The Irish Free State, as

part of its efforts to create a new national identity, sought to put into practice the objectives of Gaelic Literary Revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries". In doing this, the government has also put an emphasis on Irish folklore as the Irish Folklore Institute was established "to preserve the country's oral story telling tradition".

However, Ireland's quest to retrieve its cultural roots is an unfinished project even in the twenty-first century due to the influence of political and economic contexts. As State (2009:342) points out in *A Brief History of Ireland*, "The Irish identity of long repute—one that is rooted in a solid sense of place, that is localised and family-based—is being left behind, regrettable to some but inevitable given the inexorable push of 21st-century social, cultural, and economic forces". The abrupt changes of the present become an impediment to the long-lasting Irish quest for to retrieve a cultural identity. According to Mays' (2005:6) "Irish Identity in An Age of Globalisation" one article from *Irish Studies*, he points out the problem of Irish cultural identity in relation to a globalised context as he argues that "Neither homogeneous nor static, and increasingly unconstrained by territorial boundaries, national identities have become far more stratified and regional, in constant flux, contradictory, open, and porous" (6). Mays, in other words, notes how the globalized world is ceaselessly reshaping Irish cultural identity. Due to the intervention of the interconnected world, a sense of cultural purity may not be applicable today when cultural diversity inevitably permeates our lives. As Mays (2005:4) postulates, "Authenticity" has

always been a specious category, a construct more honoured in the breach than in the observance, yet it isn't simply a matter that the 'real' Ireland [...] has ceased to exist". In other words, Ireland's quest to construct and re-construct its cultural roots based on the idea of purity remains problematic.

### **Celtic Myth in Popular Culture**

So far, we have considered a brief survey of Ireland's sociocultural context in relation to its endless struggle to reclaim its cultural roots. It is worth noting that literature is not the only art form that tries to make visible the idiosyncrasy of Irish culture; this is evident in its popular culture as well. For example, David Richardson's documentary series *The Celts* (1987) explores Celtic culture and its legacy by incorporating historical records, arts, and Irish myths. Celtic culture also exerts an influence on films through some mythical allusions. An instance can be seen in the classic *Titanic* (2004) as an Irish mother narrates the story of "Tír na nÓg", a heaven in Celtic myth according to Koch's (2005:1671) *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*. The prolific number of references to Irish myth in popular culture are physical manifestations of the long-lasting impact of Celtic culture upon present-day society. On the other hand, these works, inspired by Celtic myth, are also a testimony to Ireland's on-going quest to find its national identity.

One recent animated film entitled *Song of the Sea* (2014) by Tomm Moore can be seen as part of the Irish's arduous endeavor to seek and revive their cultural roots as the film beautifully interweaves Celtic myth, specifically the myth of the selkie, with Irish

mundane life to represent an alternative way to discern reality. As Tamm Moore pointed out in Lambie's (2015) "Song of the Sea: how an animated treat was made", "'I realised that these were stories that we were losing - that connection to the landscape, that folklore, was dying out,' and 'I was hoping to make a film that reinvigorated the folklore for kids of my son's generation, and I thought an animated film would be an ambitious vehicle to do that with'". The film director's interview makes explicitly clear his intention to bring to the front the significance of cultural roots to posterity through the film. It can also be interpreted that the film represents an attempt to counter the notion of an in-flux Irish identity in the globalized world as proposed by Mays' (2005) "Irish Identity in an Age of Globalisation" since the animated film highlights the Irish notion of cultural purity in relation to its national identity through its appropriation of the myth of the selkie. According to Jacobs' (1970:99) *Celtic Fairy Tales* edited by Joseph Jacobs, the Sea-Maiden Irish folklore, also known as the selkie meaning a seal, tells the tragic, romantic tale of a selkie, a woman capable of transforming into a seal. A selkie mates with a human male who usually has some clue about his wife's true form. He will realize that the woman is a selkie after she leaves him in the form of a seal as a selkie can make contact with a man for only a short period of time.

*Song of the Sea* incorporates and reappropriates the myth of the selkie into the film's setting. It tells the story of a family that lives in a lighthouse on an island near the city. Ben is a traumatised boy whose mother, Bronagh, mysteriously disappears

after she gives birth to his sister, Saoirse. Meanwhile, Conor, the father, who seems to realize his wife's true identity, chooses to keep it a secret and, consumed by sorrow, never again mentions Bronagh's name. He also hides Bronagh's selkie's coat, hoping that she will come back one day. Traumatized and angered by his mother's departure, Ben takes his frustration out on Saoirse, who has not learned to speak yet, and secretly blames her for Bronagh's disappearance. One day, Saoirse happens to find the hidden coat and puts it on, thereby evoking her selkie power. In fear of losing his daughter too, Conor sends Ben and Bronagh to live in the city and prevents Saoirse from completing her mission to save mythical creatures through her singing.

## Major Arguments

Analysing *Song of the Sea* as a cultural text in the light of magical realism, this paper argues that the film intermingles two different worlds, the mundane and the fantastic, to provide audiences with a more inclusive view of reality. That is, it deploys magical realism to merge mundane reality with the magical elements of Irish myth by endowing Celtic mythical creatures with life and putting them in the human world. The existence of these Celtic mythical beings, brought to life by magical realism, becomes the cornerstone in the protagonists' healing process as their interactions with these mythical beings gradually reshape their conception of reality. The new "reality", thus, is employed to vex the protagonists' mind and make them reconsider reality in a new light as they can vividly see the Irish cultural elements in their mundane life. Taking two selkies, Bronagh and Saoirse, as

a metaphor for Irish cultural roots, this paper postulates that the characters' sense of denial of their cultural roots ironically reinforces the characters' trauma and leads to their mistreatment of their living Celtic culture. In addition, my analysis of the film points out that Ben's and Saoirse's embarking on their magical journey to retrieve the selkie's coat not only heals their shattered selves but also induces them to hark back to their cultural roots. In other words, Ben's journey gradually opens his eyes to Celtic culture, and at the same time serves as a metaphor to help save the fading Irish cultural roots. Lastly, the research posits that Ben's newly developed self allows him and his family to come to terms with their loss, resolves his conflict with Saoirse, who successfully prevents Irish cultural roots from being forgotten.

### Magical Realism

In order to comprehend the film's incorporation of Celtic myth into the mundane reality of modern-day Ireland, the magical realist elements in *Song of the Sea* can help shed an interesting light on this cultural text. Magical realism is an exploding field of literary study and also considered a genre that deals with intertwined narrative strands between the mundane and the fantastic. The genre first emerged in Latin American literature during the 1960s, according to Hart's (2005) "Magical Realism: Style and Substance". In his book *Magical Realism and Postcolonial Novel between Faith and Irreverence*, Warnes (2014:5) summarises the distinctive features of magical realism from Zamora and B. Faris's (1995) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, landmarks in

literary magical realism, as "a mode of narration primarily characterised by five features".

First, the text contains an "irreducible element" of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity (5). It should be noted here that Warnes argues that only the first two elements listed here are the core values of literary magical realism. In essence, there is the presence of magical elements in physical reality and, together, they paradoxically coexist. He also points out that the deployment of the magical realism genre is to "[write] back' of [sic] the margin to the center [...], [blur] the binaries of modern thought [...], [critique] the assumptions of the Enlightenment, [and reveal] the ethical failings to [sic] realism" (6). Given the subversive nature of magical realism, which puts one static conception of reality in to question, Warnes emphasises the fact that magical realism prompts readers to reconsider their conception of reality.

The notion of magical realism is influential not only in literary works but also films. As Ouyang (2005:14) points out in "Magical Realism and Beyond: Ideology of Fantasy", "To experts and connoisseurs of contemporary fiction, art and film, the spread of magical realism across continents and cultures [...] may be a welcome sign that marks the opening up of the global literary, artistic and visual landscapes to

diversification held together by a common core”. In other words, Ouyang brings to light the transnational and interdisciplinary nature of magical realism as it transcends the concept of boundaries and art forms. In this sense, the theory can be used to examine *Song of the Sea* despite its different art form and its emergence in Ireland.

### ***Song of the Sea* and its Magical Elements**

This section argues that the existence of mythical creatures in *Song of the Sea* is the result of the employment of a magical realist narrative. The Celtic mythical creatures exist in the same physical reality as humans. At the same time, the film also highlights the characters’ sense of a mundane life in the film through the portrayal of their routine. Furthermore, it will argue that the film’s use of magical realism plays a significant role in giving life to mythical creatures and at the same time presents an alternating view of reality where Celtic culture actually has been part of the Irish life all along. It will further elucidate how the defamiliarising effects of magical realist elements gradually help the protagonists perceive the Celtic mythical beings as part of their ordinary life.

What renders *Song of the Sea* distinctive is the way the screenwriter gives the Celtic mythical creature flesh and blood as they actually coexist with humans. We can see this aspect in the opening scene in which Bronagh, the mother, appears to be a selkie who mates with a human male and then disappears. The fact that a selkie is able to mate with a human suggests that mythical creatures in the film are presented as real and tangible. It should be noted that a selkie

is not the only mythical being depicted in the film as there are also fairies, an owl witch, and a giant. The fantastic elements in the film, in this sense, are manifest through the lives of Celtic mythical creatures. On the other hand, despite the use of fantastic elements in the film, the story presents the ordinary life of a family that tries to cope with their loss as Bronagh mysteriously disappears after giving birth to Saoirse. The emphasis on mundane life can be seen in the family’s normal daily routine as Ben and Saoirse play, eat, and sleep like ordinary kids.

It is worth pointing out that the film does not present the elements of the real and the magical in a separate manner; rather, they coexist as we can see the interplay between the two contrasting elements throughout the film. For example, there are fairies whose den is located in the middle of the roundabout of a city as illustrated in the wide shot of “Figure 1”. Cars drive past the place every day, and it is also surrounded by inhabited buildings. The juxtaposition between the mundane and the fantastic thus resolves the normal binary opposition and defamiliarises the audience’s perception of reality as the sense of demarcation between the real and the fantastic is blurred. The other pivotal unifying figure that transcends the opposition of the real and the magical is Saoirse herself.

Saoirse is later revealed to be half-human and half-selkie as she is the offspring of a selkie mother and a human father. In this sense, in human guise, Saoirse unexpectedly bears a trace of a selkie, pointing to the vestiges of Irish cultural roots in Saoirse. The subtlety of these dualistic elements in

the film prompts the audience to reconsider the way in which s/he perceives reality. In other words, this sense of incongruity embodies the characteristics of magical realist narrative as the defamiliarising effect forces the audience to rethink the concept of reality as including Celtic myth in everyday life.



**Figure 1** *Song of the Sea. The Fairies' Den*

Thanks to the marked presence of magical elements in the film, the characters' healing process is, thus, inseparable from the mythical elements in the film that paradoxically coexist with the mundane reality. Over the course of my analysis of the film, I will illustrate how the protagonists' encounters and interactions with the magical elements through Celtic mythical beings, brought to life by magical realist elements, become the cornerstone of their healing process. That is, the protagonists' interactions with the Celtic mythical beings gradually open their eyes to their cultural roots, heal their shattered selves, and simultaneously allow them to re-discover their sense of self.

## The Family's Trauma

Just as the Celtic mythical creature, which signifies Irish cultural roots, is able to exist in the human world, this extraordinary figure in mundane reality is also manifest in Conor's family as Saoirse, who seems to be a normal girl, is also a half-selkie. However, Ben and Conor are not able to see the hidden Celtic cultural traces in Saoirse because of trauma resulting from Bronagh's sudden disappearance.

The family's firm grasp of their cultural roots serves as a knothole that binds the family together as symbolized in the frame in the opening scene as illustrated in "Figure 2". In this picture the images of Conor, Ben, and Bronagh are surrounded by paintings of Celtic mythical beings such as, clockwise, Seanacháí, Macha, a selkie, Maclir, and fairies. This particular frame connotes the family's attachment to their cultural roots as signified by the Celtic mythical beings. This aspect also corresponds with the first part of the storyline before Bronagh's departure, during which time the family lives a happy life.



**Figure 2** *Song of the Sea. The Opening Frame*

The chronological aspect of the film also hints at the impact of the family's cultural ties to the myths in relation to their psychological well-being. To elucidate, before Bronagh's departure, the family has lived a peaceful life enriched by Celtic culture. For example, Ben's bedroom wall is decorated with the painting of a selkie, a creature whose story his mother has told him. The painting of a selkie in Ben's bedroom illustrates the boy's attachment to the Celtic myth and his cultural roots. In addition, it could also be seen as an indication that Conor is aware of his wife's identity as a selkie. As one of the conversations between Ben and Conor reveals their cultural ties to the Celts: “Do you like the selkie? / She's beautiful”, the conversation suggests that Conor may be aware of Bronagh's true identity, which reflects his attachment to Celtic culture. Both Ben's and Conor's knowledge of the Celtic myth before Bronagh's absence implies that they have a firm grasp of their cultural roots. In short, the magical myths are an integral part of the family's existence.

Nevertheless, Bronagh's disappearance marks the turning point for both Ben and Conor as they are traumatised by her sudden absence. Their trauma also makes Conor deny Bronagh's existence as he never again mentions her name to his children. Ben grows up without knowledge of the reason for his mother's disappearance and thus becomes traumatised. His trauma can be seen from his fear of the sea as Bronagh has given him an ancient seashell to listen to the song of the sea. For instance, in the scene in which he tries to save his sister from walking toward the sea, Ben abruptly halts. His fear suggests that he is traumatised

because the sea may remind him of his mother. Another example is his attachment to the seashell as he does not let anyone touch it, not even his sister. In the scene in which his sister holds the seashell in her hands, Ben accuses Saoirse of being “a dirty thief”, which connotes a sense of hostility toward his own sister.

It is important to note that Ben has a tendency to project his anger and sorrow on Saoirse as he secretly blames her for the absence of his mother because, during the night of Bronagh's departure, his father carried baby Saoirse but declined to tell him where his mother was. Another example is the scene in which his family celebrates Saoirse's birthday and he pushes Saoirse's face into her cake. It can be seen that there is an underlying sense of psychological, emotional abuse in the film. The fact that Ben mistreats his daughter thus testifies to his trauma, rooted in the disappearance of his mother.

On the other hand, Conor also suffers from Bronagh's departure as it affects the way he raises his children. This is manifest in the scene in which Ben and Saoirse play on the shore without an adult to look after them. Conor's absence suggests that the children may remind him of his wife. Instead of playing with the children, Conor spends his time at the top of the lighthouse near his house hopelessly staring at the gloomy sea as illustrated in “Figure 3”. In this wide shot, Conor's facial expression along with the depiction of the gray clouds he stares at demonstrates Conor's longing for his wife, who has disappeared into the sea. The alignment of elements in this full wide image also captures Conor's sorrow as the



scene highlights a sense of emptiness. The empty space around Conor, surrounded by dark-grey clouds, along with the gloomy atmosphere of the scene further demonstrates his sense of alienation from the place, as the empty space and dark clouds reflect the interior state of his mind too. The trauma of losing his wife accounts for Conor's preventing his children from realizing their cultural identity. For example, he forbids his children to go to the sea as seen when Ben points out that Saoirse has broken her father's rule. Ben warns his sister, "Dad said I'm in charge and I say there's no going in the water. It's dangerous". Conor's restriction suggests that he is still traumatised by the fact that he has also lost his wife to the sea, thereby rendering him scared of losing his children to the sea too.



**Figure 3** Song of the Sea. Conor's Sorrow

At the same time, both Ben's and Conor's trauma can be seen as rooted in their sense of cultural detachment. It is interesting to compare the family's mental state before and after Bronagh's departure. In Bronagh's presence, the family lives a peaceful life, and Ben grows up with love and care. After her departure, however, the family falls

apart and becomes traumatised. This family trauma thus can be interpreted as their separation from their culture as well because Bronagh's presence carries with it the family's cultural root.

Moreover, the depiction of the family's trauma, in the light of magical realism, can be seen as a critique of realism, which excludes the cultural dimension of one's life. In other words, the family's trauma, which stems from their lack of understanding of their cultural roots and national identity, in this sense, points to the pitfalls of realism. The family's trauma, therefore, forces us to question the validity of the static perception of the world as proposed by realism.

It is worth noting also that the family does not realise that actually the roots of their cultural identity still exists in their everyday lives. In other words, Conor and Ben think that their cultural identity has been lost and cannot be retrieved. However, as we have discussed, the film's deployment of magical realism allows us to see that even something as ordinary as a city roundabout can be endowed with cultural significance. Here Ben and Conor do not realise that Saoirse too has a trace of her mother as a half-human, half-selkie hybrid. The family, therefore, still has the possibility to heal their shattered selves and to restore their cultural identity through Saoirse.

### **Harking Back to the Roots**

We have discussed how Bronagh's disappearance becomes the cornerstone of the family's traumatic experience and their cultural loss. Conor's psychological wound also galvanises him to deny Bronagh's

existence, refusing to provide his children with any information about her. He also seeks to prevent his children from reconnecting with their roots as he forbids his children to play in the sea because he is afraid that they will suffer the same fate as Bronagh. Yet, it is one of his attempts to “protect” his children that prompts them to embark on a journey to heal themselves and retrieve their cultural identity through their interactions with magical elements, specifically Celtic mythical beings, which are the pivotal factor that triggers the family’s healing process.

Saoirse plays an important role in not only her family’s healing process but also the survival of Irish cultural roots as she is a hybrid. Her hybrid status reflects how she serves as a unifying figure for the Irish people because she is half Irish and half selkie. To elaborate, her duty as a selkie is manifested on her sixth birthday when she stares at the sea as if some magical force compels her to do so. Then a herd of seals appears and Saoirse stares into their eyes to communicate with them. Saoirse’s interaction with the seals suggests that her mythical power has been awakened. That night, Saoirse is drawn to the locked chest which contains her selkie mother’s coat. Wearing the coat, Saoirse is enchanted by the mythical glittering lights as seen in “Figure 4”. Captivated by the lights, Saoirse, who at first could not speak, dives into the sea where she transforms into a white seal surrounded by other seals and then temporarily retrieves her voice. Her union with the herd of seals suggests that Saoirse must now carry out her quest as a selkie to sing the song and save the Celtic mythical creatures, but she can only sing when she

wears the coat. Saoirse’s ability to find her voice thus can be seen as her firm grasp of her cultural roots. Later swept back by the sea, she lies on the shore where Conor happens to see her. Confused and scared of losing his daughter too, Conor locks away the coat and throws it into the sea. In this way, Saoirse is deprived of her cultural roots. At the same time, Conor asks his mother to adopt the children and relocates them to the city. It should be added that the mythical lights, portrayed in “Figure 4”, are a significant motif of the film as these small glowing lights represent the light of Celtic culture. These lights actually exist in the mundane world but no one except Saoirse and Ben seems to pay attention to them. The mythical lights are visible only when Ben or Saoirse encounters a mythical. In this sense, the lighting in the film suggests that only the lights of Irish culture can illuminate the bleak atmosphere of a rootless Ireland.



**Figure 4** *Song of the Sea. The Selkie Coat*

Although Saoirse and Ben are forced to leave the sea which bears a trace of their cultural identity, the magical journey the children embark upon leads them to the

quest to not only heal Ben's trauma but also save Celtic mythical creatures from being lost. In other words, their journey gradually opens Ben's eyes to the presence of Celtic mythical beings, which reconnects him with his lost cultural identity. Ben's awakening to the inextricable bond between Celtic myth and his own life allows him to make sense of what happened to his mother, and prompts him to develop a stronger connection with Saoirse.

Despite having different attitudes toward the idea of cultural roots, both Ben and Saoirse help each other make sense of this heritage as Saoirse gradually reveals to Ben the Celtic culture that is a part of his everyday life. During her stay in the city with her Granny, Saoirse feels attached to her mother's ancient seashell and tries whistling with it. The sounds from the seashell prompt the fairies to realise that another selkie has been born. Approaching Ben and Saoirse during their walk in the town, the fairies introduce themselves and lead the children to their den in the middle of the city. In the conversation between Ben and the fairies, he realises that his sister has an important mission to save the fairies. As one fairy puts it, "The selkie song will send us all home". In other words, Saoirse has a duty as a selkie to sing her song of the sea in order to save the remaining Celtic mythical beings. Ben also realises for the first time that his mother's stories are true. He tells the fairies: "That's what Mum called the fairies. You're actually real, not just stories". Ben's sense of excitement and happiness upon encountering these real mythical beings suggests that he feels closer to his mother through his interactions with them because the mythical beings are part of his mother's

bedtime "stories". In this sense, Ben and Saoirse's quest to help save the Celtic mythical beings through her singing will help save not only Celtic culture but also Ben's traumatised self.

It is important to point out that Ben's journey towards healing also induces him to develop a bond with Saoirse whom he has previously mistreated out of anger. As pointed out, Ben is connected to his mother through the mythical beings his mother has told him about. Ben's sudden awareness of his sister's identity also plays a role in strengthening the bond between the children. For example, in the conversation between Ben and Saoirse after he learns the truth from the faeries, he says, "Those stories that Mum told me, they're all true. Are you really a...selkie?". Saoirse, who cannot speak without the selkie coat, answers him with a smile and Ben realises it is true. By learning the true identity of his sister, Ben now feels more attached to her as she is also a mythical being like his mother. Another instance that attests to the growing bond with Saoirse is the way Ben treats Saoirse when she is sick due to the absence of her selkie coat. Ben carries Saoirse on his back and walks toward the deserted shelter where Saoirse treats his scratched legs with the herbs she has found. Ben smiles as she is treating his wounds and says "Thank you" as illustrated in the close-up in "Figure 5". This "two shot" captures both Saoirse and Ben's familial love as the frame highlights their smiles, connoting their sense of understanding. This heartwarming scene also points to how their relationship has developed over the course of their journey. We can see the glaring differences in the

way he treated his sister back when he blamed her for his mother’s disappearance.



**Figure 5** *Song of the Sea. The Developing Bond*

During his journey, Ben comes to realise how the Celtic mythical beings are all tied to his personal story through his encounter with the Great Seanachai, another Celtic mythical being. According to Ellis’ (1994:196) *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, the word “Seanachai” means a story teller and historian. The film presents the Great Seanachai as an old man whose white hair is so long it covers all of his body and fills the underwater cave, as portrayed in the frame in “Figure 6”, where Ben arrives to look for his sister, who at that time was kidnapped by the villain’s owls. Each hair on the old man’s head contains a story. The great abundance of hair corresponds with one of the main themes of the story: how each personal memory is also part of the same collective memory. In other words, the Great Seanachai is a historian who collects each person’s story and myth in his hair. As he puts it, “I have no memory, except for what is in these hairs”. His remark also suggests that the old man embodies history itself. Ben’s encounter with the Great Seanachai

reveals to him the interconnectedness between personal and collective memory as well as the significance of the selkie song:

The Sulcha and the selkie, all of us are connected. This is not good. Something must have happened to [Saoirse]. Very few hairs still grow because very few of us are left. You see, without her coat, the selkie has no voice. And without her song, she’ll not last the night. And we’ll all share in her fate.



**Figure 6** *Song of the Sea. The Great Seanachai*

The Great Seanachai is pointing out that the selkie’s song is not only about Saoirse’s survival but that of all the mythical beings, who symbolise Irish cultural identity. If Saoirse cannot perform the song, all the mythical beings and their stories will cease to exist, thereby resulting in the permanent loss of cultural roots. Another example of the interconnectedness between personal and collective history is manifested in the scene in which one of the Great Seanachai’s hairs reveals to Ben what happened to his mother on the night of her disappearance.

Overwhelmed by the discovery that his mother disappeared in order to protect Saoirse, Ben cries. This emotional scene hints at how his search for cultural identity also allows him to tap into his lost memory as he learns the truth of his mother's departure from The Great Seanacháí. This revelation suggests that his personal memory is never separate from collective memory.

### **The Healing Song of the Sea**

The family's healing self is made manifest toward the end of the movie when Ben and Saoirse are able to find a way back to their home on the island, sailing their boat out on to the vast sea in search of the selkie coat somewhere at the bottom of the sea. The father is able to accept the true cultural identity of his daughter and stops denying Bronagh's existence. At the same time, Ben can conquer his fear of the sea and embraces Celtic myth as part of his life. Moreover, Saoirse's completion of her quest to obtain the selkie coat suggests that the Celtic myths will always exist through the song she bequeaths to her family.

Determined to save his sister, Ben conquers his fear of the sea and dives down to find the selkie coat. His fearless attempt to save his sister reflects Ben's victory in overcoming the trauma of having lost his mother to the sea. It is also worth noting that while Ben is seeking the selkie coat, he is helped by seals, who guide him to the coat. The collaboration between the boy and the seals signifies Ben's union with his cultural roots. On the other hand, Conor can make peace with his loss and accept the reality that Saoirse too is a selkie. As he puts it when he sees Saoirse singing the song of the sea, "She's a selkie".

At the same time, Saoirse, who is now wearing the selkie coat, is able to complete her quest and save all the faeries and Celtic mythical beings. That is, through the selkie's song, the mythical beings are able to depart for Tír na nÓg, the otherworld of everlasting life and joy. The song echoes and produces a golden aurora over the sea and across the city, thereby evoking the Celtic mythical spirits that are sleeping all over as depicted in "Figure 7". The mythical beings' journey to Tír na nÓg is a metaphor for how Celtic culture will last forever. The wide shot illustrated in the picture provides the audience with a panoramic view of the city where the golden aurora becomes part of the sky. The lighting of the city in this wide shot suggests that Celtic culture has now become part of the city as well.



**Figure 7** *Song of the Sea.*  
*The Resurrection of Celtic Culture*

That it is the selkie's song which revives Irish culture, points to the fact that the film deploys "song" as a genre that weaves together all the stories of both personal and collective memory of Celtic myth. In "Irish Music", Laoire (2005:268) postulates that "Irish music" originates from "Gaelic heroic

poetry”. The selkie’s song, thus, represents the roots of Irish cultural identity. The vanishing mythical beings in the film can be seen as victims of the globalised world where the notion of cultural purity is also vanishing and the only way to help maintain a sense of cultural identity is to hark back to the origins through the act of “singing”. *The Song of the Sea*, as the title suggests, becomes the means by which all the Celtic myths can be saved from oblivion.

Moreover, a part of the lyrics of the selkie song also highlights how the Celtic myth transcends spatial and temporal aspects and unifies people:

Between the here, between the now  
Between the north, between the south  
Between the west, between the east  
Between the time, between the place  
From the shell  
A song of the sea  
Neither quiet nor calm  
Searching for love again (Hannigan)

The lyrics accentuate the spatial and temporal aspect of the presence of cultural roots. That is, no matter where one lives, the sense of the cultural identity will always be there through this song, as the first four lines suggest. Furthermore, the sense of cultural identity is never far away as, like the sea, it has actually been part of the human world all along.

With the family’s exposure to and acceptance of their cultural roots, their shattered selves are ultimately healed. Toward the end of Saoirse’s singing, Bronagh appears to say good bye to the family before joining the other mythical

beings in Tír na nÓg. In this scene, she says to her son, “Remember me, in your stories and in your songs. Know that I will always love you. Always”. Bronagh’s farewell speech wraps up the theme of the story as it highlights the cultural significance of how collective memory, in the forms of legends and songs, is actually always part of one’s personal memories. He realises that his mother will always exist through her story and songs, thereby bringing about healing. On the other hand, Conor is also able to make peace with Bronagh’s departure after he also understands what Bronagh says to his son. As he puts it, “It’s as though I’ve been asleep, all these years. I’m so sorry”. His awakening to this reality hints at his healed self as well.

It is worth noting that the cultural resurrection scene may differ from magical realism’s agenda as Bronagh’s departure to the other world signifies a demarcation between the real and the fantastic worlds. However, elements of magic are still present through the existence of songs and legends, the roots of Irish cultural identity. Plus, the film highlights the significance of one’s cultural roots in relation to one’s sense of self as demonstrated in how the characters’ firm grasp of their culture can heal their shattered selves. In other words, in spite of the literal absence of Celtic mythical spirits, they are still present in the songs they bequeath to posterity. In this sense, mythical elements are never-ending, thereby denoting the coexistence of the mundane and the magical.



## Conclusion

In essence, we have discussed how *Song of the Sea* deploys magical realist elements to make the audience reconsider the way in which s/he perceives the reality. What the film vividly exhibits is the impact of globalisation, which tends to assimilate all cultures in a hybridised manner. One's sense of cultural roots may be subsumed under this in-flux world as well. However, the film also shows that our sense of cultural roots may be hidden in our daily life, too. That is, the underlying message in the film may help provide us with a keener perception of our cultural self as our view of everyday life needs to incorporate cultural aspects of reality as well. It should be noted that the film tends to underpin the discourse of cultural purity rather than the multicultural approach as part of an endless project of seeking an Irish sense of national identity. Furthermore, our analysis of Conor's family also points to the significant role of myths and legends in unifying people, just as Conor's family has been reunited through Celtic myths, which provide them with a stronger bond. At the same time, Celtic myth also leads to the family's re-discovery of their sense of self, resulting in the resolution of their conflicts.

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