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JOHN BANVILLE'S *THE SEA*: MEMORY AS BURDEN IN A SERIES OF MOVING  
PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE PAST

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ABSTRACT

Time remains in the form of incidents and they do not fade away from the banks of one's memory once for all. They stay deep inside the unexplainable chambers of human mind according to the importance and impact. Incidents are considered lost and forgotten but suddenly something like smell, taste, colour, climate or a sudden phenomenon takes them out from the depth of one's mind and immediately they become very much alive with the power that they possessed earlier. A memory does not simply emerge and fade away, but it brings out another memory as a continuation and they define the existence of a particular character. Like this, memories become a crowd of ants which form a line, one behind the other, trying to reach the top of the mountain of peace in vain. John Banville's novel *The Sea* remains one such crowd or a collection of memories by getting linked with everlasting past incidents. The minute feelings of the moments get themselves linked with one another automatically to get constructed as a huge, solid rock like structure of the unforgettable past. The narrator of the novel Max Morden has recently lost his wife Anna and has come to stay in a seaside village. Each and every spot there brings out his past life settled in the deep areas of his consciousness. He then lives again those moments of past glory and the narrative becomes a heavy splash of his evergreen memories which remain as a burden for and against his present.

**Key words:** Time, incidents, memories, narrator, consciousness, past glory.

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INTRODUCTION

In Irish literature, John Banville is known for his minute craft that observes keenly human behaviour and environment. This is Banville's thirteenth novel that made him world famous and he received Man Booker Prize for it in the year of its publication 2005. In the name of Benjamin Black, he wrote crime stories also. *The Sea* is a poetic prose written performance by John Banville dealing with the life of an art historian Max Morden. He has lost his beloved wife Anna recently and the impact of it takes him back to the seaside village

where his early days were spent during a summer. Almost fifty summers earlier, he stayed there in a boardinghouse in which the Grace family also stayed. Max now tries to find out the meaning of his existence by connecting the present with his past. The flood of memories of his wife and his painful early childhood move front and back in his mind without his permission and the conflict brings the inevitable understanding on the nature of human life.

John Banville's intimacy with the sea is very much visible in this novel whenever he tries to describe the form and beauty of the sea and its shore. A careful reader is bound to understand the communion between the characters, the writer, the story and the elegant presence of the sea as the backdrop of the novel. It is true that this novel could not have been written in any other setting except the sea. The experiences of Max with his wife Anna brings back his early experiences with Grace family members in the Cedars Inn in that seaside village- he calls them "Gods". The series of photographic memories of his past dwell as a sweet and yet bitter burden in his wounded heart forever. He relives those experiences when he is unable to live his present which is deprived of both those beauties. For him past seems to be comfortable to think and even to live in.<sup>2</sup> The narration makes the magic as it progresses like an unseen slow galloping horse throughout the novel exploring the immense pleasure of Max with Chloe and the painful last days of his loving wife Anna who is fighting a fatal disease. We cannot simply neglect Max's attraction towards Mrs.Grace because it denotes a strong affinity towards a kind of longing for an affectionate mother near him who can give him anything. When he thinks of the death of his wife, it reflects his own death too. For him death is separation and in that sense Mrs.Grace, Chloe and the seaside village which he has visited now- all are dead!

Mr. Carlo, Mrs.Constance, Chloe, Myles and the governess Rose(members of the Grace family) play their tunes in the mind of Max Morden only to relieve the pain of being with quarrelling parents. Max's early life had the traces of a heartless father who was not fond of his wife and child. His 'broken home' atmosphere leads him to find his refuge in a soft and warmth female body/ heart irrespective of age. The haunting memories include the misunderstanding between his mother and father, the running away of his father from the family, infatuation for Chloe's beautiful mother Mrs.Grace, his fascination for Chloe's brother Myles and the stunning and silent elegance of the governess Rose. "The past beats inside me like a second heart" is one of the memorable quotes from the text explaining the life of Max Morden. The memories regarding the medical file of Anna, a dream in which Max is walking in a very long road, the beauty of Mrs.Grace in her swimsuit, the beautiful sea, the summer time in that seaside village along with his indifferent parents, the first symptoms of the deadly disease of Anna, the smell of Mrs.Grace, the Teddy Bears of his daughter Claire, the silence he felt during his suffering due to fever in his childhood, the quarrel between his parents in contrast to the pleasant atmosphere in Grace family etc., are the few occasions to remember from this extraordinary emotional melodrama from John Banville.

Both sets of series of memories- memories of life with Anna and the early childhood memories with his own parents and the Grace family, narrated in a poetic and metaphorical language make the reader understand the attempt of Max in escaping from the empty life after the death of his wife Anna.<sup>3</sup> Max was unable to enjoy the love of his mother and he is not able to live totally with Anna either. For him, life was/ is against him- against his ordinary desires. Whether he relives or it comes back itself, the past is both sweet and bitter at the same time. The pressure mounts on the mind of Max as well as the reader as the novel reaches the climax giving the details of the deaths of the most loved females of Max- Chloe(drowning) and Anna(fatal disease). So Max loses what he longs for, with whom he is intimately bonded. Death stands as a great challenger to all those who are fond of creating a world in which people love one another. Recalling life experiences with Chloe and Anna in the latter part of the novel, lead him only to make a suicide attempt because past is not the present, because past is like a dream that does not get repeated in any one's sleep. He is saved from that unfortunate attempt but he knows that his death is imminent. This can be understood from one of the incidents in the second part of the novel which talks much about Anna's falling health and her sufferings in the hospital during the treatment. When once Max looks at the mirror, he feels that he himself is slowly reaching his end. He states: "There was a time when I quite liked what I saw in the looking-glass, but not

anymore. Now I am startled, and more than startled by the visage that so abruptly appears there, never and not at all the one that I expected. I have been elbowed aside by a parody of myself."<sup>1</sup> At the end of the novel, the narrator feels peace as he understands that waves are inevitable in the sea. The presence of the waves are both disturbing and meaningful to the very existence of the sea. May be, there will be no one to watch a sea without waves!

John Banville's *The Sea* is an attempt to recapture the past. It reminds us strongly the lines of Matthew Arnold: "We are wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born." The old world dies and the old people are unable to accept the new world and it is a continuous trouble that man faces during all the time. Death looks like a great threat and in the terrific atmosphere created by it, every one remains as shadow. Max's mother, his father, members of the Grace family and even Anna now remain as shadows in his consciousness and they are appearing and disappearing in a series of non-linear incidents within the world that is created by his mind. Almost, that has become his world- his present now. A present that is mixed with his past and future! The seaside village which he has visited opens up places that are linked to many incidents of the unforgettable past with the same flavour. Though it is not totally the same place, the seaside village has the capacity to bring him back parts of his favourite past. The Strand road, shops, restaurants, houses, post office, liquor bars, stone church, green fields, huts, clock tower church etc., appear before him in a slide show and whatever appears before him has the shadow of either Mrs.Grace or Chloe or Anna in it. We can say that Max actually confronts his recent loss of his wife Anna with the loss he has faced during his childhood- the loss of love from his parents and the loss of affection from Mrs.Grace and Chloe. He oscillates between the ideas of what does he really want right now and his stumbling on the debris of his memories makes his daughter Claire shout at him, "You live in the past." Max understands his daughter's attempt to pull him back to the present. He explains to convince her in his remarks: "...That is why the past is just a retreat for me, I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off the cold present and the colder future."<sup>1</sup> It is true that the sea stands as a test for Max; it has a lot of fishes of memories for him. In the sea shore, at the sight of him, all those fishes jump to his feet without his request and ask him to cherish them in his boiling mind. The narration reminds us of Samuel Beckett when it goes on to raise questions on the meaning of life.

It seems Mrs.Grace has almost an equal impact on the psyche of Max like Anna. It is very much evident in the passages that describe his longing for the intimate relationship with her. Her physical beauty kindles in him a strange attraction towards her though she is the mother of Chloe to whom also he is attracted. He wants to be both a son and lover of Mrs.Grace, reminding us the *Sons and Lovers* of D.H.Lawrence. We are able to find out in few pages of this novel, the Indian spiritual tradition too, especially the 'Siddhar' tradition in understanding and approving the aspects of life. This is known from one particular incident in which the eleven year old Max's infatuation for Mrs.Grace is spoiled by her snore during her sleep in the picnic spot. He feels like he is removed of the air of glamour for her. The pain and the illusion of beauty are well revealed in this description. Also it reminds us of Siddhartha's loss of interest in women when they are allowed to sleep in the palace; he saw them look ugly during their sleep.<sup>4</sup> At another place there is an expression that has the same tone: "Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it." Again, he questions himself about the longevity of memory and who will remember whom for how many generations.

### Conclusion

The beauty of *The Sea* is its exquisite prose which looks like poetry. It is more suitable and has emerged out successful in this novel because it talks about love, loss and past. We can even say that the elegiac tone of the novel is submerged by the visual beauties created by the writer John Banville.<sup>6</sup> In the passages of description, it seems the John Banvillean language seems to overwhelm even the story itself: "that vast bowl of water bulging like a blister, lead-blue and malignantly a gleam." He is strong in describing everything- waves, beach, birds, clouds, sky, the smell of female bodies he come across, food varieties etc., Further, it proves that John Banville is a screen play writer too. When this novel was made into a film in 2013, Stephen Brown directed it and John Banville himself wrote the screen play.<sup>7</sup> The physical escape to the Cedars

Inn and the psychological escape to the past try to have a combined effect on the psyche of Max. And we can realize that it cannot help him in any way as he himself is sure of his own end. This tremendous work is definitely a deep meditation on the existential issues of modern man who battles with invisible challenges like the indifference of time. The novel builds up the tales of passion and possession to realize the power of the past: "There are moments when the past has a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it." The whistling *deedle deedle* helps Max to escape from the grip of the past to the present and future. Surely, Max's desperation and anguish with his past, present and future are very well related in this novel and it does not really say that memories of the past, whether clear or half-remembered, can help one to live in peace of mind.

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