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Mourning, Memory and Nostalgia in John Banville's *The Sea*

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In 2005, when books for the Booker Prize were being shortlisted and again when the committee whittled the shortlist down to John Banville's *The Sea* and Kazoo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* the literary world was buzzing with the sound that the history was going to repeat itself. They thought they would hear the news similar to that they had heard in 1989 with John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* losing to Kazoo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. But the year 2005 was quite different from the year 1989, and this time the committee did not 'marvel' at Banville's brain 'how small it was' and his thirteenth novel *The Sea* won 2005 Man Booker Prize. The award paved the way for another one in the same year, the Irish Book Awards Novel of the year.

Like Banville's novels, *The Sea* is a clear example of his perfectly crafted, beautiful and dazzling style. A minute observer of things and human behaviour, his fiction is close to poetry than prose as poetry seems to come easily to him. His fiction is infused with ideas and radically differs from the great Victorian tradition, which deals with direct representation of society, politics, and morals. His main concern is with the individual's consciousness, revelation of the self, facing outward and inward changes. *The Economist* published the review of the novel writing : "Mr. Bvanville's style affords the reader a voluptuous, unfashionable pleasure that grows with every re-reading of the book and casts the story with ease into second place. His is a very deliberate and well-wrought style that comes only after intense concentration and a good deal of mental exertion. He explains this in an interview:

> The kind of writing that I do springs from an intensity of concentration that makes the words flare what is neither into prose nor poetry but something else. I don't like the definition 'poetic prose', which is the worst kind of prose, I mean 'poetic' in the sense of prettiness, floweriness, over

IJELLH
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> sensitiveness. But when prose is pressed on strongly enough it begins as it were to blush, blood begins to flow, and that is what makes it something that acts on the reader like poetry. It is not poetry, but it is not prose either. (qtd.in Monica Facchinello 41)

How deliberate and careful hi is in his writings can be guessed by the fact that he writes only about a hundred words a day for his literary novels, versus several thousand words a day for his Benjamin Black crime fictions. This careful writing, also found in *The Sea*, imparts it a lyrical quality, musicality and the aching sense of loss which is reminiscent of Valadimir Nobokove's *Lolita* (1955). The opening lines of both the novels are enough to take the reader with surprise in their stark similarities as if both spring from the same fountainhead. Here are extracts form both the novels.

> *THEY DEPARTED*, (my italics) the gods, on the day of the strange tide. All morning under a milky sky the waters in the bay had swelled and swelled, rising to unheard of heights, the small waves creeping over parched sand that for years had known no wetting … (*The Sea* 3)

> *LOLITA*, (my italics) light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-Lee-ta; the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to top, at three on the teeth... there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea oh when? (*Lolita* 14)

Even more than a decade before the publication of *The Sea* memories of past haunting of the events of the past happened long before in a character's life yet looking back to those events with longing, and an acute sense of loss, had been Benville's favourite subject. His sixth novel Ghosts (1993) runs on the similar track where the ghost of the past haunts the protagonist, Freddie Montgomery's life, giving the novel almost a gothic aura. Similarly, The Sea is also a novel of past, childhood curiosity, innocent adventures and of the idea of lost home. It is a torrent of past, which was by no means so beautiful to be wished, and now it is blended with the uncertain, ever shifting sea-like present of the protagonist.

The novel is the protagonist Max Morden’s reflections on his past which are paralleled with his present events. An art historian, Max Morden is mourning the death of his cancer succumbed wife and is overcome with the desire to travel to the seaside village, Ballyless, where he spent a life

IJELLH
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changing summer during his childhood with the Graces—a wealthy middle class family of twins, Chloe and mute Myles and their parents Carlo and Constance (Connie) Grace and the twins' nursemaid, Rose. Living in a Chalet at that time with his master, Max Morden becomes friend with the twins spending their holidays in Cedar. Now in his middle age, when he starts narrating about the Graces, he names the as 'the god', "THEY DEPARTED, the gods, on the day of the strange tide (*The Sea* 3). And again "when I was all those years ago, in the times of the gods, the Cedars was a summer house, for rent by the fortnight or the month." (*The Sea* 5) How precious that summer of his childhood and the company of the Graces were, it has been suggested by the word 'the gods' for them. Max Morden felt being protected by a almost god-like family who taught the chalet boy table manners at different occasions and whose company made the neighbouring boys of the chalet jealous of him. Since the novel opens with the description of the Graces the readers feel, at the very first line of the novel, their god-like presence. They were gods for max Morden, yet 'THEY DEPARTED' causing all the aching sense of loss and longing in his heart for those days who is now also mourning the death of his wife in his fifties. At this point, we must note that John Banville is well-known for his style and here we have an example. The Graces' departure was not an ordinary turn in his life rather as macabre as to write it in upper case. He seems to have buried his own being as if the life after their departure is a mere shadow of his real being and he, lying deep in his grave, has been stirred by their thoughts: "someone has just walked over my grave. Someone." (*The Sea* 4) The Graces' company, the twines, Chloe and Myles and specially their mother Connie, who he becomes infatuated with upon her first sight, are imprinted on his mind and his present stay at Cedars is an attempt to relive those lost golden days and to pick up the pieces of the past. But this time he is with his unsympathetic daughter Clair who comments with almost annoyed tone on his recollection of the past and his longing for them: "you live in the past', she said, she was right after all". (*The Sea* 60) Max Morden is very positive and convinced that the power of recollection has all the potential to make him able to relive the past.

Max Morden's curious relationship with the Graces was smooth in comparison to his present relationship with his daughter and his dying wife. Though we are acquainted with the Graces, Morden's mourning and his sense of loss at the very first line of the novel, yet the unfolding of the past comes from a memory which appears to be confused, not very certain about the exact nature or number of things. Max Morden is "amazed, disappointed" that he would go so far to say appalled,

IJELLH
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"for reasons that are obscure to him". (*The Sea* 4) His is an example of an ailing man who has a blurred idea of his unpleasant past yet he has come to live amidst the rubbles of it because "the past beats inside him like a second heart". Morden's memory which initially appears very uncertain and unreliable gradually reveals all the events, telling all the small details of the company of the Graces. Thus, we learn how the Graces behaved on certain occasions, what they wore when they went together on picnic, and how and where they sat in their car.

This is John Banville's amazing achievement in the novel. He has imparted striking similarity between Morden's memory and the narrative style of the novel. The narration is not linear, it goes dream-like, moving back and forth. Past, cold present and the colder future are brought together while Morden's memories overlap without order in his mind. John Crowley expresses the same idea in his review of the novel:

> Memory also plays games (and so does Max, occasionally), and account is a mix of precision and questions, Banville expertly describing how we relive our past, that mix of memories we choose and those forced upon us, and the shifts between absolute clarity and dream-like vagueness. Max imagines living solely in the remembered memories of the past, but realizes … and proves every step of the way … that memory is inconstant, gapped blur, that it is like the ever changing huge expanse that is the sea. (The Reviewer's Review)

Looking back to the past with nostalgic sense has been Banville's favourite subject in his fictions and in a due course he mastered over his craft as he moves one step ahead in *The Sea*. As soon as the novel begins the reader finds the familiar subject of invoking the past. But putting the past with present is an entirely new thing for Banville's readers. The fluid narration of the novel though makes the story complex, it brings Max Morden's past alive before his present. This effect is achieved with three different times and settings of the novel all belonging to Max Morden's life. The first is his immediate present, his stay at the Cedar, a cottage home at Ballyless now owned by Miss Vavasour where he has returned after his wife Anna's death. The second is his mid-past in which Max Morden is looking after his soon to be dead wife reeling under the fatal disease cancer. The third is his remote past, his childhood with the Graces and his friendship with Chloe and Myle's drowning while Max and Rose are standing helpless at the shore, Anna's last breaths, her final words and Max Morden's

IJELLH
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final departure from the Cedars with his daughter Claire. These three settings and times are so jumbled together that a relatively careless reader is unable to comprehend the events of the novel as happening in three different times and spaces.

Similarly, Max's initial involvement and his growing love for Chloe, his daughter's revelation of an affair with 'the scoundrel' Jerome, and his first meeting with his wife Anna where her size caught her attention which resulted in their marriage, have been heavily diced with each other. In short, this new Banvillian narrative technique has enabled him to bring the past alive. The remote past, the mid-past and the present of Max Morden's life stand together on a parallel lines, breathing in the same space and gazing in others wife. Max Morden seems to remark on the same effect in the novel: "The truth is it has all begun to run together past and possible future and impossible present." (*The Sea* 96) What could be better remembrance of the past and longing for its days than this which Banville has achieved with his remarkable technique.

People go back to their past and long for the days of the past for different reasons. There is a reason behind Max Morden's nostalgic nature too. He expresses that 'the past beats in him like second heart'. There is reason behind his realization when he sees himself in the mirror. 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." (*The Sea* 128)

Max Morden feels his past self was his real self and his present 'visage' is a parody of his past while the real being has been elbowed aside. Which sources these feelings emanate from has been the most interesting issue for the critics of the novel. Max Morden is discontented with his present state of affairs and his past seems to be his best refuge. He is trying to escape from the hard realities of his present that leave a bad taste in his mouth and his past days are the best protection and effective arms against the ghost of the present. Max remarks when his daughter comments that he lives in the past:

> Life, authentic life, is supposed to be all struggle, unflagging action and affirmation … to be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have truly wanted, to borrow down into a place of wombly warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky's indifferent gaze … 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

IJELLH
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future. (*The Sea* 60,61)

Joanne Watkiss, in an important article "Ghost in the Head; Mourning, Memory and Derridean 'Trace' in *The Sea*", has argued that it is very hard and unclear to find out why Max is mourning. Whether he is mourning his youth, his wife, disappointment in his life or perhaps his childhood friend … whose ultimate death returns to him in grief forcing him to return to moments of loss in the past. Infact, Max appears to be an agonized figure who is unable to comprehend the degree of his loss and like tides in the sea his mind is fluid, moving back and forth from one loss.

IJELLH
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