

# The Role of Memory in John Banville's 'The Sea'

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## Abstract

Among the various genres in English novels, one specific genre identified as the novel of recollections which revolves around the first person narrator talked about the distressing memories of character's life. The paper is an attempt to focus on the narrative voice and the role of memory concerning the content in John Banville's *The Sea*. The novel shares the reflective narratives of a split between two narrating voices in an extraordinary way. The split between the experiencing self and narrative self has long been put forth in the narrative theory and puts a thematic impact on the recollections of the past events. There is a crucial role of memory in the shaping of life narratives. The sense of identity is based upon the permanence of consciousness and memory ensures the personal identity through the medium of connection between the past and present events.

Keywords: Novel of recollections, memory, narratives, identity

The protagonist in the novel 'The Sea' ensures the personal identity through the role of memory and the recollections of memories from the past events. The protagonist's memory has been well-preserved from the past chapters of his life which he recalls with the due course of time. The one is about finding the bird's nest in the novel and states:

"I should not make too much of the moment, I am sure I was as sentimentally heartless as the next boy, but I can still see the gorse, I can smell the buttery perfume of its blossoms, I can recall the exact shade of those brown speckles, so like the ones on Avril's pallid cheeks and the saddle of her nose. I have carried the memory of that moment through a whole half century." (S 159).

The sense of continuity gets generated by memory and also ensures the model of permanence in time. The narrator in the novel signifies the disposition by which a person is known and which makes a lasting impact on the flow of the story through its narratives. Though, Banville's narrative, although obviously grounded in memory, in fact

struggles the form of story and quotes the definition, “a series of real or fictitious events, connected by a certain logic or chronology” (Hawthorn 2000:227).

The Sea (2005) is a captivating endeavor to ask the old questions anew. Max Morden, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, revisits the place where he has spent his holidays with his parents. The narrator recalls the memories of his past events, feels nostalgic about his memories of those times. The narrator struggles with his lack of selfhood. The novel is written in a first-person reflective narrative. It is a nostalgic recollection of a memorable summer, an elegy for the narrator’s wife and an attempt to recover an irrecoverable past. The novel is read as a record of the narrator’s internal split, going back to the birth of his self-consciousness, which is conveyed by a lifelong sense of self-estrangement. Elke D’hoker stated that in Banville’s early fiction “His never fully reliable first-person narrators can be observed in the process of representing their traumatic past, their tormented thoughts and divided selves in a coherent narrative so as to achieve a sense of self that is unitary, solid and clear” (2004:2).

The narrator’s identity becomes problematic in the novel due to his name ‘Max’ which he has given to himself, as it is not his real name. The narrator discloses this fact indirectly, by quoting his mother’s dissent to his use of a false name. The protagonist refers to himself with the usage of personal pronoun in the entire narrative in the novel. The novel focus on the narrative’s themes like memory, past experiences, personal choices, family responsibilities along with the relationship between past and present events. The story takes place in the mind of the narrator through the medium of his memories, contemplations and feelings reminding him of his role in past events. The story takes place at Cedar where Max, the protagonist lived his childhood and create good memories. He recalls the memory of his first meeting with Mrs. Grace at the seaside. He gets infatuated with the mother of his youthful lover, which takes him to the realization of the vital importance of a female companionship in man’s life. He recalls the memory of his imagination of romancing Mrs. Grace during the picnic with Grace Family. Subsequently, he develops feelings for Chloe as well. All these memories document the influences of the moments in Max’s life which matures him as an adult. In the novel, the protagonist develops strange feelings and attraction towards the opposite sex which leads to the stormy relations. These tempestuous relations through the recollections of his past events help him to discover himself. He states, “The man’s growth is all dependent upon

his relationship with the women in his life.” In the novel, Max’s growth is witness through the various women in his life like his mother, Mrs Grace, Cloe, Anna and his daughter Claire.

In the novel “The Sea”, the sea represents the power of both healing and hurting. The sea and the memories associated with it reflect both safety and security. The narrator visited the sea thrice in his entire life; the first time in his childhood, the second time during the illness of his dead wife and third time after the demise of his wife, Anna. The protagonist recalls the memories of the sea, which reminds him about the womb warmth, the coldness of the sky and other varied problems of life. The incident quoted below embodies the protagonist shift from succeeding to concurrent narrating, recalling the events from past to present and narrates:

“We three were the only ones on the beach. The misty grey air of evening had the feel of dampened ash. I see us turn and walk away towards the gap in the dunes that led to Station Road. A corner of Chloe’s towel trails in the sand. I go along with my towel draped over one shoulder and my wet hair slicked down, a Roman senator in miniature. Myles runs ahead. But who is it that lingers there on the strand in the half-light, by the darkening sea that seems to arch its back like a beast as the night fast advances from the fogged horizon? What phantom version of me is it that watches us – them – those three children – as they grow indistinct in that cinereal air and then are gone through the gap that will bring them out at the foot of Station Road?” (S 136-37)

In the novel, the narrator’s speech is composed of refined language and style which is presented with varying coherence, from the continuous descriptive passages to flows of imaginative scenes and motives representing the collection of past memories.

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