

# Immanent Indeterminacy: Tracing Postmodernity in John Banville's Neo-Realist Novel *The Sea*<sup>1</sup>

Mahya Haji Gholam<sup>2</sup>, Mona Hoorvash<sup>3</sup>

Received: 22/07/2018

Accepted: 24/01/2019

## Abstract

This study aimed at exploring the ontological indeterminacies of *The Sea* (2005), a novel by John Banville using the postmodern catena put forth by Ihab Hassan. Hassan's catalogue of the features of postmodern fiction includes indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, depthlessness, the unrepresentable/unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, performance, participation, constructionism, and immanence. In the present study, the use of each of these traits was traced in the novel and the appropriateness of these techniques with regard to the world of the novel was studied. Max Morden, the protagonist, desperately excavates his memories in search of a meaning for life, but in vain. The postmodern features incorporated in the narrative of the novel help uncover the inconsistencies of the subject's mind when faced with an indeterminate world.

**Keywords:** Indeterminacy; Irish Literature; Postmodernism; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fiction

## 1. Introduction

When discussions of postmodernism developed in 1960s to 1980s as a reactionary movement to the fixities of modernism, a whole range of fictional works appeared which conveyed the spirit of the time and displayed uncertainties and instabilities of the world through their disruption of modernism's rationalist treatment of the plot, setting, and characterization. Postmodern narratives have come to be known as incorporating a series of common features which dramatically distinguishes them from literature of the previous period. However, McHale, borrowing the concept of the *dominant* from Jacobson, offers a basic criterion and suggests that "in

---

<sup>1</sup>Please cite this paper as follows:

Haji Gholam, M., & Hoorvash, M. (2019). Immanent indeterminacy: Tracing postmodernity in John Banville's neo-realist novel *The Sea*. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 10(1), 155-171.

<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran; m.hajigholam@student.alzahra.ac.ir

<sup>3</sup>Corresponding Author, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran; m.hoorvash@alzahra.ac.ir

postmodernist texts . . . epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology” (2004, p. 11). In other words, whereas modernist literary works focus on knowing the existing world, postmodernist ones tend to display the confusion of the split self among the borderless worlds.

Nevertheless, the very definition of postmodernism has always been problematic for scholars of the field. Hassan, one of the most prominent postmodern theorists, acknowledges that he “can propose no rigorous definition of it” but offers to “theorize the term” (1986, pp. 503-504). Not far from McHale’s (2004) focus on the ontological problematique of postmodernist fiction, Hassan specifies “indeterminacy” and “immanence” as two major “tendencies in postmodernism” (1987, p. 281) along with his introduction of a “catena of postmodern features” (1986, pp. 504-508) which list various strategies or techniques which are of significance in postmodern fiction.

However, as early as mid-1980s, critics started contemplating that postmodernism was already over; a problematic contemplation since, as Burn (2008) quotes from John Barth’s 1996 short story “*The End: An Introduction*,” these declarations of the end of postmodernism started appearing “just when we thought we might be beginning to understand what that term describes” (p. 12). The 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a critical travail to distinguish the nature of the literature that was appearing after postmodernism, critics were talking about post-postmodernism (Turner, 1995; Wallas, 1993), minimalism was gaining favor, and the term *avant-pop* was being used in the titles of critical volumes (McCaffery, 1995; Olsen & Amerika, 1995). But the majority of the terms that were coined to describe the new literary consciousness had to do with the reappearing of the realist tendency that was supposedly a reaction to postmodernism: *dirty realism* (Buford, 1983), *new social novel* (Wolfe, 1989), *neo-realism* (Rebein, 2001), and *speculative realism* (Saldivar, 2011), among others.

However, as time passed and the new literature enjoyed vaster and deeper critical analysis, it has become evident that this new literature is not capable of shaking off much of postmodernism (Brooks & Toth, 2007; Burn, 2008; Crockett, 2007; Huber, 2014). Brooks and Toth (2007) list some of the writers who have argued most heartedly for the end of postmodernism as “renewalist writers,” including “David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, . . . [and] Richard Powers” in whose works a new wave of postmodernist attitudes can be detected (pp. 7-8). Hutcheon (2002) believes that although postmodernism “[i]s over” (p. 166), “its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on” (p. 181). Hassan also considers the resurgence of postmodernism in the new realist fiction as “a revenant, the return of the irrepressible” (2001, p. 1).

The present study sought to place John Banville's neo-realist novel *The Sea* within the current debates over the lingering of postmodernism in contemporary fiction. *The Sea*, a Man Booker Prize winning novel by the Irish novelist John Banville (2005), is an example of this difficulty to draw a line between the new realism and postmodernism. With its realistic setting and characters, the novel may seem not to follow the peculiarities evident in many postmodern works. Banville once stated in an interview that all his "books are aimed at going behind mere human doing to the question of what it is to be, the question of being in the world" (Houghton & Radley, 2011, p. 865). *The Sea* is a first person narrative, narrated by Max Morden, a middle aged man who embarks on a quest for an answer to the very question of being in the world. He who has recently lost his wife to cancer, returns to his childhood village after fifty years, and resides in the Cedars house. He wants to explore his memories to investigate the past in an attempt at self-exploration. Max is in a quandary not only to define his personality, but also to find a meaning in life, death, or, generally, the world. It is in this search for the meaning and nature of life and identity that the novel deals with certain ontological questions which can only be shown by adopting postmodernist strategies. His state of perplexity reflects the nature of life after postmodernism. Even his name, Max, suggests a modernity that is scrambled beyond recognition that no longer makes sense.

The current article applied Hassan's (1986) catena to study the resurgence of postmodernist attitudes when fiction is dealing with the desperate attempts of human mind in search of a criterion to make sense of the world in an otherwise realist novel. This study was an attempt to show that it is not strange to find postmodern traits in a supposedly realist narrative because the world we live in is a mixture of modernist longings for an ultimate answer with postmodernist indeterminacies which frustrates the hope of reaching that answer.

## 2. Literature Review

Not just *The Sea*, but many of Banville's works have most often been studied thematically. Wondrich (2000), in her study of postmodernity in the narrative of Banville's novels, focuses on the themes of love, desire, death, and text structure in *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), *Athena* (1995), and *The Untouchable* (1998). She believes there is always an absent female figure, compared to art objects, who "becomes the object of a self-questioning search for atonement, meaning and beauty at the same time" (p. 84). In *The Sea*, Chloe and Anna, two deceased beloved ones, play a similar role in raising ontological concerns and imaginary "self-reflexive" thoughts in the readers, which according to Wondrich "cannot but be channelled into the order of language and culture, though always bound to exceed it" (pp. 86 & 84). Wrethed's (2014) article deals with ontology and indeterminacy in the

narrative of *The Sea* by drawing on visual arts, namely ekphrasis in relation to “memory, temporality and the phenomenology of life” (p. 193). He points to the indeterminacy in Banville’s narratives where both epistemological and ontological quests are shown, but usually the former is “disillusioned” by the latter in a postmodern state of affairs (p. 186).

Whereas the present research studies ekphrasis with regard to intertextuality and hybridization as postmodern features, Wrethed (2014) looks at it from another perspective. He stresses that Banville employs ekphrasis as a style in order to delve into basic ontological matters. Ekphrasis is intermingling of spatial pictorial art with temporal verbal prose which provides static moments for the narrator to bring about his recollections and represent his perception of affairs and Banville uses the style to create “temporality” in the entire narrative structure to explore the “phenomenology of life” (p. 210).

Some studies have focused on the subject of memory and mourning which plays a defining role in the whole narrative as Max Morden explores his world and self. Jie (2016) examines the ethical aspect of memories and how it functions in the formation of Max’s identity. Jie, referring to Jacques Derrida’s concept of the other, concludes that Max during a course of remembrance and mourning, especially “speaking to” the dead can finally situate his self in the world self and find salvation in life (p. 362). However, the present study shows that Max is always in search of the other to define himself, but never succeeds in his endeavor.

Similarly, Costello-Sullivan (2016) in her psychoanalysis of *The Sea* deals with the matter of trauma. She suggests that the protagonist through recollection of his traumatized past experiences a “painful process of identity reconstruction,” which finally leads to his recovering from his last sufferings” (p. 340). In other words, she relates the main character’s identity crisis to the loss and trauma in the past, rather than his lacking a criterion to firm up a destabilized personality.

On the other hand and similar to the perspective of the present study, Kucala (2016) proposes that “Banville’s fiction demonstrates how the individual cannot establish and sustain a stable identity” (p. 10). Based on this assumption, she further observes that the Protagonist’s unstable identity is reflected in the narrative structure and point of view of *The Sea* and states, “Just as his selfhood is volatile, so are the narrator’s perspective and the focus of his narrative” (p. 21). The voice of the narrative is divided between the “narrating self and the experiencing self” (p. 13), indicating Max’s being split between past and present which eventually leads to his “permanent erosion of identity” (p. 9).

Facchinello (2010), employing Hiedegger’s “link between language and being” (p. 34) observes the style of Banville’s prose with relation to identity in *The*

*Sea*. First, she analyses the protagonist's personality through Freudian psychology and states, "with Morden, Banville creates a character whose characteristic feature is to have virtually no characterizing features" (p. 36). She concludes Banville's prose style reveals his tendency to make writing a home to settle his unsettled identity: "In the writing in which the writerly protagonist Max Morden loses self, the writer John Banville constructs one for himself" (pp. 40-42).

Though a number of these studies have pointed to the lack of definite identities or conclusions in the novel, the question of the indeterminacies and multiple and ambiguous identities and definitions in *The Sea* have not been studied fully and the appropriateness of the choice of several postmodernist techniques for its narration has not been justified. What is more, the approach and conceptual framework of the present research have not been used previously by the critics of this novel.

### 3. Methodology

As a library research, this study was an attempt to distinguish the postmodernist techniques used by the author of a novel which is leaning more towards modernist narration, to show how these techniques highlight the ultimate concern of the novel, which is the modernist quest of the search for identity and of true being in a world which no longer valorizes and respects such a quest. As mentioned above, the main conceptual framework of this study is Hassan's (1986) catena of the features found in postmodern fiction. Hassan's catalogue of these features includes concepts and techniques such as indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, depthlessness, the unrepresentable/unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, constructionism, and immanence, each of which will be separately defined and analyzed in the discussion which follows. As Hassan himself asserts, these concepts may overlap or at times contradict each other, which adds more complexity to the nature of postmodernism in which everything tends to disintegrate and disperse, rather than come under unification. These contradictory, sometimes ambiguous qualities, make it hard for many readers to discriminate easily between modern and postmodern fiction. In the present study, the use of each of these techniques has been traced in the novel and the appropriateness of these techniques with regard to the world of the novel is studied. It is suggested that the presence of these features is not merely a playful technicality on the part of the author, but is significant in the overall narrative plan, developing the sense of confusion and loss that permeate the novel. As a result, greater attention is given to the notion of indeterminacy and its connection with the other notions, especially immanence which concludes Hassan's list.

Hassan's numbered list of postmodern features, as he acknowledges, is "paratactic" (1986, p. 504). However, an attempt was made that the present analysis

follows a logical path in moving from one feature to the other according to the meaning and function of each in the context of the novel.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Indeterminacy

*The Sea* is about the confusions of the main character, Max, in facing the ontological and epistemological indeterminacies in life. According to Hassan, “indeterminacy elicits participation” (1986, p. 507). The narrative is told from the first person point of view and it seems as though the narrator carries the readers along with himself to show them the fragmented pictures in the scrapbook of his life, his sufferings and instabilities and ask for sympathy and consolation or, at least, an explanation. He lacks a fixed, developing and coherent sense of identity and resembles many postmodern characters whose notion of the self is a “malleable” entity, “a vague, decentered collection of unconscious and conscious” forces and ideas (Mehrabi & Maleki, 2010, p. 101).

Max, in the latter part of the novel, poses two major questions to his audience and invites them, indirectly though, to reflect upon them. He asks “Is this not, indeed, the secret aim of all of us, to be no longer flesh but transformed utterly into the gossamer of un-suffering spirit?” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 58). And, in another part, “Who, if not myself, was I? The philosophers tell us that we are defined and have our being through others. Is a rose red in the dark?” Both questions are ontological, concerning the philosophy of existence which are proposed only to be called later “absurd questions” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 99). The novel also contains many gaps for which the narrator remains silent. For instance, when Chloe and Myles go far away into the sea and disappear, the narrator is not explicit about their motives, except that they hated Rose, their nursemaid. So, the readers are free to fill these gaps and propose their own explanations.

However, the questions of what the indeterminacies stem from and how they affect the protagonist’s life remain. Hassan briefly defines indeterminacy as “ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society” (1986, p. 504). In Max’s case, his inner displacement affects his outlook towards the world. His state of mind in dealing with the complexities of life is reflected throughout the story from the narrative structure to Max’s personality and his marriage and relationships. However, when he admits “from earliest days I wanted to be someone else,” he reveals the very cause of his confusion (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 98). Max is desperately in need of a criterion to define and situate himself among all the oppositions, losses, sufferings, and inadequacies in the world. He hopelessly asks “Where are the paragons of authenticity against whom my concocted self might be

measured?" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 100). When he loses his beloved ones, his wife to cancer and Chloe to the waves of the sea, his mourning is more for the loss in himself. He becomes inwardly ruptured and his emptiness is reflected in his furious words against deceased Anna. Addressing her with the most vulgar expressions, he says "how could you go and leave me like this, floundering in my own foulness, with no one to save me from myself" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 68).

#### ***4.2. Selflessness and Depthlessness***

In a sense, the whole novel is about Max's selflessness. Hassan believes that in postmodernism "traditional self" as a "totalizing principle" is relinquished (1986, p. 505). Postmodernism either provokes "self-effacement" or, on the contrary, "self-multiplication, self-reflection" (p. 505). Both possibilities seem to be true about Max. He says he has never had a personality but as the narrative moves on it is revealed that it is not the lack of personality but the multiplicity of selves which perplexes him. Interestingly, he sees other people being in the same situation and wonders how they cope with their multiple selves. For example, he wonders how people can distinguish between their erotic self and their church going self. He is at pains to choose between his many selves and cling to that chosen one. Even when he recalls his memories he wonders which one of his many selves is narrating or is there in the scene of the memory: "What phantom version of me is it that watches us?" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 2).

Thus, Max, from childhood to adulthood, holds onto others to save himself from selflessness. As a child, he who has always resented his "origins" befriends Grace Family whose members are elevated as gods and goddesses in his childhood world (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 76). Grace Family is from the upper social class and Max coming from a low status family is fascinated with them. He says, "How proud I was to be seen with them, these divinities" (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 180). He falls in love with Chloe just to be "on the level of her family's superior social position" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 76). He is evaluating his sense of selfhood by his reflection in the eyes of the world. However, what may seem only a childhood ambition continues to stay with Max all his life. His identity rests on a superficial sense of association with the powerful. On the other hand, his marriage with Anna was a "medium" for him to transmute from being a "distinct no one" to "an indistinct someone"; a fluctuation between "self-multiplication" and "self-effacement" in Hassan's terminology (1986, p. 505). He saw Anna as a "fairground mirror" to correct his deformed self (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 98). The notion of *identity* is here external to the self and based on mirror reflections (as Lacan would agree). The depthless image makes the illusion of identity.

### **4.3. Decanonization**

The uncertainties in the protagonist's mind extend to the external world and affect his outlook on the established fixities. After all, postmodernism is about "decanonization" (Hassan, 1986, p. 505), rejecting "all canons, all conventions of authority" (p. 505). In a postmodern world, all the tools of unification are turned down. Max's standard for shaping his personality is the other, especially one in a higher position, "the paragons of authenticity" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 100). As mentioned before, he frequently refers to Grace Family as gods, "In those days I was greatly taken with the gods. I am not speaking of God, the capitalised one, but the gods in general" (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 124). However, as we move toward the end of the novel, Grace Family becomes more human as mortal beings and their godlike qualities gradually fade away. The aging Max looking back in retrospect asks why he had put up with Chloe's arrogance and finds no justification better than to protect her and "to save her from herself and her faults" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 31). Therefore, their positions are exchanged ironically or one might say their class oppositions dissolve. Decanonization occurs in the fact that it gives divinity a commercial face, and also in that Max deludes himself by pretending to have power over one of the gods. Max who thought he needed their power, now pictures himself as having power over the divinities.

Banville's (2005) subversive attitude is also expressed towards money, death, and media. In fact, postmodernism tends to expose the absurdity of the world and the ideas and entities which have always been considered in command. Money which has always been a status criterion loses its significance because now that Max has enough of it, money cannot save him from his incessant confusion over the meaning of life. Other than Grace Family, Anna was also rich, though "the product of a classless class," and Max's intention in marrying her was in the shadow of monetary motives. However, he, at this stage of his life when those people no longer exist, comes to the idea that "What is money, after all? Almost nothing, when one has a sufficiency of it" (chapter 2, para. 75).

The theme of the novel is about death and mourning, but the authority of death is also subverted and considered nothing in the view of the world. From the beginning, Max talks about the suffering and phobia he undergoes at the thought of his wife's death. However, just before the nurse come to him to tell the sad news, Max remembers himself standing before the sea, watching the repetitive movements of the waves and describes the moment as nothing, "a momentous nothing, just another of the great world's shrugs of indifference" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 162). Moreover, when Myles and Chloe go far away into the sea and at last disappear, Max witnessing the incident says: "then nothing, the indifferent world closing" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 139). These examples are not merely the naturalistic



experience that the world is indifferent toward the loss of a human life, but the shocking portrayal of the indifference toward the loss of a beloved in one who considers himself tormented by loss and mourning. The reality of loss, mourning and even indifference can be questioned as the idea of death loses its canonical place in the definition of life's meaning.

Hassan in his paper, "*The Culture of Postmodernism*," points to Lyotard's idea about media and how it can form "the languages of self and society in advanced capitalist states" (1985, p. 9). Lyotard (2011) believes that postmodernity comes into existence when grand narratives lose their validity. According to Lyotard, grand narratives "are no longer able to legitimize, in the name of progress, the benefits and detriments that the West has bestowed upon itself and the world throughout the centuries" (p. 203). On the other hand, Baudrillard, a prominent postmodernist scholar, holds a very skeptical view on media for "confusion of mass culture" and "ambiguity of ideologies" (1994, p. 61). He further asserts that media, especially television, blurs the face of reality and "inculcates indifference, distance, skepticism and unconditional apathy" (p. 61).

Banville (2005) seems to reject the authority of the language of media as a grand narrative of the contemporary world, so that, between the lines of the novel, one can detect the ironic approach that Max adopts in referring to media. Colonel, one of the residents of the Cedars house, is used to listening to the radio programs about which Max sarcastically comments, "the ones in which irate members of the public call up to complain about villainous politicians and the price of drink and other perennial irritants" (chapter 1, para. 7). Therefore, by using the word *perennial*, he points to the vicious circle of the programs. Max also refers to Colonel's habit of reading newspapers and how he reads them for "gathering intelligence, missing nothing," but Max wonders "Does he notice that the world he reads about in the paper is no longer the world he knew?" In another part, they are in front of TV watching a comedy and Max describes the scene, "We sit in silence, the canned audiences doing our laughing for us" (chapter 2, para. 67).

#### **4.4. Immanence**

Along with the idea of language, there comes the notion of immanence. Hassan defines immanence as "the growing capacity of mind to generalize itself through symbols" (1986, p. 508). According to him, the world and its constituents such as "culture" are recreated within the "immanent semiotic system" of language and this constructed reality is exerting an ever-increasing dominance over human existence (p. 508). Similarly, Foucault points to language's "insistence in a unity" and enquires if man is not "in the process of perishing as the being of language continues to shine ever brighter upon our horizon" (2005, p. 421).

Banville (2005), in his narrative, tends to rebel against this ascendancy of language or, at least, reveal its inadequacies, its deception. Max in a dream wants to type down his will but the machine lacks the letter *I* (chapter 1, para. 121); therefore, he is unable to locate his existence within the system of language. According to Hassan, “languages, apt or mendacious, reconstitute the universe” (1986, p. 508). Banville’s (2005) focus is on the mendacious nature of the language. At times, Max delivers sarcastic utterances about language like “What a business it is, the human discourse” or “how imprecise the language is, how inadequate to its occasions” (chapter 1, para. 117). Besides, Anna’s doctor is Mr. Todd—recalling the murderer Sweeney Todd in George Pitt’s play—which Max interprets it as “a joke in bad taste on the part of polyglot fate,” and continues “There is a name De’Ath, with that fancy medial capital and apotropaic apostrophe which fool no one (chapter 1, para. 15). In the other part, Anna in her last days tells Max “‘Patient’ . . . ‘that is an odd word. I must say, I don’t feel patient at al’” (chapter 2, para. 5).

Therefore, Max feels confined in the immanence of the world. He claims that Chloe was the one who made him aware of the immanence and had the capacity to free him. He says: “in Chloe the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity . . . . She expelled me from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 33). However, Chloe’s grace has been transient and Max is still enclosed within the “immanence of all things” and struggles for emancipation.

#### **4.5. Fragmentation and Hybridization**

Max’s mental perplexity is reflected in the narrative structure of the novel. He recalls and relates his memories in a fragmented style, rambling from one subject to another, not essentially in a coherent manner. For instance, when he is talking about a documentary about elephants on the television, he suddenly insults Anna for her death and leaving him, borrowing Hassan’s words, “fragments are all he pretends to trust” (1986, p. 505). Hassan defines fragmentation as the postmodernism’s “preference for montage, collage, . . . , schizophrenia over paranoia” (p. 505). The monologue, constructed of flashbacks and flashforwards, best reveals Max’s disrupted, disintegrated state of mind which very much resembles a wavy sea. Schizophrenia is itself a manifestation of “a fragmented identity” (Moosavinia & Hosseini, 2012, p. 144). Max is in a constant fluctuation between past and present, reality and imagination and, sometimes, close to the point of schizophrenia, he is lost in his visions, confused among his many selves. He uses the simple present tense in retelling his memories and starts with “I see . . . .” Max admits his state of mind to be a “wandering through the chamber of horrors in my head” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 91).

Fragmentation includes collages and, therefore, is close to the concept of *hybridization*. Hassan defines hybridization as “mutant replication of genres, including parody, travesty, pastiche,” mixing the “high and low culture” (1986, p. 506). *The Sea* is imbued with intertextuality and Banville (2005) makes a sarcastic use of different genres like mythology, ekphrasis, medical dictionary, documentaries on the television, and pictures. Max refers to the Graces as gods to parody the high opinion he held of them in the past. For example, he calls Carlo Grace, the father of Grace Family, as “the Poseidon of our summer” (chapter 1, para. 192). Another instance is when, alone and downcast, he is sitting in his room in the Cedars house in a stormy night where he pictures himself as one of the demi-gods in Richard Wagner’s opera:

At last, I thought, at last the elements have achieved a pitch of magnificence to match my inner turmoil! I felt transfigured, I felt like one of Wagner's demi-gods, aloft on a thunder-cloud and directing the great booming chords, the clashes of celestial cymbals. (Banville, 2005, hapter 2, para. 58)

In another point, Max gives a detailed description of the *Nude in the Bath, With Dog*, a painting by Pierre Bonnard and makes a comparison between the lady in the bath as “pink and mauve and gold, a goddess of the floating world, attenuated, ageless, as much dead as alive” with Anna in her last year of life, “she too, my Anna, when she fell ill, took to taking extended baths in the afternoon” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 20). One more example includes a complete reading of the definition of rosacea from a copy of *Black’s Medical Dictionary*, by the estimable and ever unflappable William A. R. Thomson, M.D.—Adam & Charles Black, London, 30<sup>th</sup> edition, with 441 black-and-white, or grey-and greyer, illustrations and four colour plates” after he spots some rashes on his face one morning (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 198). In addition, when Max and Anna return from the doctor’s office, informed of the sad news about incurability of Anna’s illness, the house is in an awkward, embarrassing silence. The kettle is boiling on the stove which Max ironically describes as “vaguely suggestive of genie and lamp. Oh, grant me a wish, just the one” (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 35). Therefore, Banville adopts a parodical approach towards the previous literature while bringing different voices into his narrative. In fact, Hassan believes that hybridization in postmodernism points to pluralism, the “interplay between the Now and the Not Now, the Same and the Other” (1986, p. 506).

#### **4.6. Constructionism**

The aim of parody in postmodernism is, in fact, to reveal what Hassan (1986) calls *constructionism*. To illustrate the constructed reality of the world, Hassan quotes Nietzsche as saying “what can be thought of must certainly be a fiction” (p.

507). Throughout the novel, the main character, who is entangled in his thoughts, strives to reach the reality and free himself from all that which is fake. He refers to his personality as a “concocted self” and aims to search for his “singular essential.” He tends to reject all “the congeries of affects, inclinations, received ideas, class ties,” that his “birth and upbringing had bestowed on” him “in place of a personality” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 98). Anna tells him to be himself, not to know himself and that is especially problematic for Max because he does not know who he wants to be. Actually, Max sees life as a drama, waiting for a role to be bestowed upon him after the “continuous rehearsal” of his life with all its “misreadings”: “The real drama for which I have ever and with such earnestness been preparing will at last begin” (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 58). Additionally, Max believes our existence finds its meaning in other’s memory and as a consequence “in the minds of the many does the one ramify and disperse” because everyone has a different version of someone else in their memory (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 190).

#### ***4.7. The Unpresentable/Unrepresentable***

Consequently, to rebel against the constructed reality, postmodern literature brings the dark and dismaying facts of existence into light. The portrayal of unsightly scenes fits the feature of postmodernism which Hassan (1986) calls representing the unpresentable/ unrepresentable. Hassan draws upon Kristeva’s definition of the term as “that which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable: the horrible, the abject” (p. 506). According to Kristeva (1982), the sense of abjection experienced at the revolting sights helps the “I” be bordered as a living being and, consequently, feel to be released from the fear of death; however, the “I” cannot dispose of the abject because it originates from inside (pp. 2-6).

Accordingly, *The Sea* contains morbid descriptions of wounds and ghastly hints to death. For instance, whereas Chloe is “engrossed in picking at the stippled of a ruby cicatrice just below her elbow,” Max also reports in detail the appearance of an injury he gets when playing as a child: “I examined the fern-wound on my ankle, an angry pink groove between translucent deckle edges of whitish skin; it had not bled but in the deeps of the groove a clear ichor glinted” (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 185). Moreover, he depicts what happened to the grasshoppers which he burnt for Chloe’s entertainment: “the unfortunate creatures . . . they seethed, boiling in their own fat” (chapter 1, para. 186). However, these death-bound portrays reaches to its most appalling effect in Anne’s pictures. In her last days in the hospital, Anna takes up her camera and starts shooting photos of the patients that are in their worst conditions. Wondering how all the people in the pictures are smiling against their undesirable status, Max describes them:

There was an old man with one leg gone below the knee, a thick line of sutures like the prototype of a zip fastener traversing the shiny stump. An obese, middle-aged woman was missing a breast, the flesh where it had been recently removed all puckered and swollen like a giant, empty eye-socket. A big-bosomed, smiling mother in a lacy nightdress displayed a hydrocephalic baby with a bewildered look in its otter's bulging eye. The arthritic fingers of an old woman taken in close-up were knotted and knobbed like clusters of root ginger. (chapter 2, para. 47)

What is searched for in these ghastly images is, in fact, the naked presentation of reality. Pain, as Anna calls it, is an “authenticator, the thing to tell her that what had happened to her was realer than any reality she had known before now” (Banville, 2005, chapter 1, para. 161). The body, therefore, becomes the only tangible site where being, unaffected by discursive effects of class, gender, and generation gaps, appears in its pure state. Still, “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2), these short snaps of morbid feelings, provide hooks for sense of the self and separation from the other, thus reducing the confusion of an insecure mind.

#### **4.8. Irony**

Consequently, the more Max struggles to discover the truth and reality in the world, the more he encounters the ironic nature of things. Towards the end of the novel, especially in the concluding lines, Max refers to the apathy of the world and it is as though he is going to take the same approach for the rest of his life, coping with the contradictions and living with them. He has depicted the world from his own perspective and it becomes clear that in some parts he has been totally wrong in his judgments. For example, in what can be called a surprise ending, Mrs. Vavasour, the nursemaid, talking about the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Grace and their untimely deaths, reveals her feelings for Connie Grace, ““it was never him, with me,’ she says. ‘You didn’t think that, did you?’” whereas previously, Max had decidedly ascertained the truth about affair between Rose and Carlo Grace, a deduction created in his mind from all the distracted clues he had encountered as a child (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 161). Therefore, as Hassan (1986) observes, the ironies in postmodernism calls for “perspectivism,” a term borrowed from Burke (p. 506).

Burke’s (1984) perspectivism, drawn from Nietzschean ideology, acknowledges the productivity of “dialectic” as a “pluralistic” mode which might replace “relativist” and “objectivist” trends of thought (Simons, 1989, p. 6). Burke (1984) posits that the differences in sensory perceptions and “point of view” substantiate “a corresponding difference in the discovery of relevant facts” (p. 256). Perspectivism requires celebrating the growing diversity of views in life.

#### 4.9. *Carnivalization*

Similar to Burke's (1984) idea is also Hassan's (1986) adaptation of carnivalization from Bakhtin (1981). Hassan (1986) declares that "it riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony, hybridization, . . ." (p. 507). Carnivalization is the "gay relativity" of things, perspectivism and performance, participation in the wild disorder of life" (p. 507). *The Sea* is a mixture of different outlooks towards life, social classes, generations, and so on. Max, from the beginning, strives to make sense of the differences and justify the disagreements but at the end he learns to accept them. His daughter's fiancé, Jerome, had been the one whom he abhorred the most. He had considered Jerome as a deceitful man who had prevented Claire from making progress in life. Claire blames her father for his role in their break up. Nevertheless, in the final part of the novel, when Max awakens from a night of intoxication and is going to leave the Cedars house, he finds Jerome, that "chinless innamorato" sitting beside his bed. Claire declares their engagement and Max is going to go home with them.

I must pack up and leave the Cedars forthwith and let her take me home—home, she says!—where she will care for me, which care will include, I am given to understand, the withholding of all alcoholic stimulants, or soporifics, until such time as the Doctor, him again, declares me fit for something or other, life, I suppose. (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 156)

Leaving the Cedars house is like leaving the world of the dead. Max should also recover from intoxication of his memories, give up the resistance and accept a life which is "pregnant with possibilities" (Banville, 2005, chapter 2, para. 156). The life in the memories is pleasing for Max because its stasis prevents him from experiencing and feeling anything new. But the life of endless possibilities is, in fact, the kind of life on which postmodernist philosophy focuses (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This, however, rejects the belief in a fixed and singular identity.

Therefore, it can be assumed, Max finally comes to the conclusion that there is no self hidden anywhere in the world to be found. He arrives at the final phase of acceptance; where every attempt to explicate all the things which happened proves to be fruitless and ceases to be of any importance. "The recurrent doubling of the self in his narration," as Kucala proposes (2016, p. 22), finds its last resort in accompanying the world in its indifference. Simultaneously, Banville through Max's narrative, once again brings up the "postmodern questioning of the fictionality of reality" (Wondrich, 2000, p. 85).

## 5. Conclusion

The current study aimed at the analysis of the narrative of *The Sea* based on Hassan's (1986) catena of postmodern features. *The Sea* as a postmodern novel concentrates on the displacement of human mind in facing a world which is a carnival of varieties, resisting unification. In fact, it brings realism and postmodernism together to best portray the condition of contemporary era. The protagonist, Max Morden, seeks escape from all the indeterminacies which have entangled him. His main problem is *knowing* for which there is no solution. He only has to accept the incomprehensibility that is the nature of things. Therefore, he is in a continual oscillation from epistemological to ontological questions. Moreover, Max is frequently at pains for finding the right word for conveying meanings and expressing himself and his experiences. The world is bound by the immanence of language whose incapacities has been proved many times. In such a world, he is selfless or rather rebels against his constructed self which is a depthless product of family, school and society. He turns to others and sees them as touchstones to discover his essential self; however, the question is how it might be possible when his own understanding of others is so partial and defective? He has no choice other than stepping into a world which much resembles a sea, flat with no hierarchy, no authority; a world full of ironies, paradoxes and sufferings that altogether make the reality of life.

As a result, we can trace the presence of all Hassan's (1986) postmodern traits in the novel as the narrator moves on to explore his life and memories. Therefore, it can be concluded that the postmodern features generate from the indeterminacies of mind, which, in the absence of any criteria, desperately attempts to find a meaning in the world and his existence. In this regard, it is worth noting that in contrast with typical postmodern literature which is characterized by explicit distortion of the world and language, John Banville with a rich, literary style of writing uncovers the spirit of postmodernity within the mind of a 21st century man in confrontation with his authentic environment and memories. In fact, Banville does not construct a postmodern world; he only surfaces the immanent uncertainties that the cotemporary individual experiences when old structures of meaning are prone to fall down.

## References

- Banville, J. (2005). *The sea*. New York: Knopf.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *L'illusion de la fin [the illusion of the end]*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Brooks, N., & Toth, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The mourning after: Attending the wake of postmodernism* (pp. 1-13). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Buford, B. (Ed.). (1983). Dirty realism [special issue]. *Granta*, 8, 4-5.
- Burke, K. (1984). *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Berkely, CA: University of California Press.
- Costello-Sullivan, K. (2016). My memory gropes in search of details: Memory, narrative, and founding traumas in John Banville's *The Sea*. *Irish University Review*, 46(2), 340-358.
- Crockett, C. (2007). Postmodernism and the crisis of belief: Neo-realism vs. the real. In N. Brooks & J. Toth (Eds.), *The mourning after: Attending the wake of postmodernism* (pp. 263-283). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, trans.). London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Facchinello, M. (2010). The old illusion of belonging: Distinctive style, bad faith, and John Banville's *The Sea*. *Estudios Irlandeses*, 5, 33-44.
- Foucault, M. (2005). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- Hassan, I. (1985). The culture of postmodernism. *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2(3), 119-131.
- Hassan, I. (1986). Pluralism in postmodern perspective. *Critical Inquiry*, 12(3), 503-520.
- Hassan, I. (1987). Toward a concept of postmodernism. In J. P. Natoli & L. Hutcheon (Eds.), *A postmodern reader* (pp. 273-283). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hassan, I. H. (2001). From postmodernism to postmodernity: The local/global context. *Philosophy and Literature*, 25(1), 1-13.
- Haughton, H., & Radley, B. (2011). An interview with John Banville. *Modernism/Modernity*, 18(4), 855-869.
- Hutcheon, L. (2002). *The politics of postmodernism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Jie, Z. (2016). Towards an ethical subject: Mourning and memory in John Banville's *The Sea*. *English Language and Literature*, 62(3), 361-375.



- Kristeva, J. (1982). *The powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kucala, B. (2016). Memory and the splitting of the self in John Banville's *The Sea*. *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature*, 40(1), 9-23.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (2011). *Miscellaneous texts: Aesthetics and theory of art*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- McCaffery, L. (Ed.). (1995). *After yesterday's crash: The avant-pop anthology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- McHale, B. (2004). *Postmodernist fiction*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Mehrabi, B., & Maleki, N. (2010). The sense of loss: Postmodern fragmented identity in three plays of Sam Shepard. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 101-114.
- Moosavinia, S. R., & Hosseini, S. M. (2012). Janus-faced madness in Bessie Head's a question of power. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 135-150.
- Olsen, L., & Amerika, M. (Eds.). (1995). *In memoriam to postmodernism: Essays on the avant-pop*. San Diego, CA: San Diego State University Press.
- Rebein, R. (2001). *Hicks, tribes and dirty realists: American fiction after postmodernism*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Saldívar, R. (2011). Historical fantasy, speculative realism, and postrace aesthetics in contemporary American fiction. *American Literary History*, 23(3), 574-99.
- Simons, H. W. (1989). *The legacy of Kenneth Burke*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Turner, T. (1996). *City as landscape: A post-postmodern view of design and planning*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Wallace, D. F. (1993). E unibus pluram: Television and U.S. fiction. *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13(2), 151-194.
- Wolfe, T. (1989). Stalking the billion-footed beast: A literary manifesto for the new social novel. *Harper's Magazine*, 279(1674), 45-56.
- Wondrich, R. G. (2000). Postmodern love, postmodern death, and godlike authors in Irish fiction: The case of John Banville. *Bells: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 11, 79-88.
- Wrethed, J. (2014). A momentous nothing: The phenomenology of life, ekphrasis and temporality in John Banville's *The Sea*. In R. Moi, B. Boyce, & C. I. Armstrong (Eds.), *The crossings of art in Ireland* (pp. 183-211). Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang.