

**Love, Suffering, and Hope in Edwidge Danticat's  
"Children of the Sea"**

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Edwidge Danticat

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**Abstract**

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on January 19, 1969. She is a Haitian-American diasporic writer who writes in English. Danticat's first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) had been selected by the Oprah Book Club in 1998. Her short story collection *Kirk? Krak!* published in 1995, became a National Book Award finalist.

The first story in the short story collection *KK* is "Children of the Sea". In this story, Danticat vividly pictures the political violence in Haiti, which is located in the island of Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles archipelago of the Caribbean Sea. Haiti gained its independence from France in 1803. The aftermath of the political situation and the ruthless regimes threatened the very existence of humanity. Amidst the violence and suffering, Haitians continue to love and remain hopeful.

Haiti, widely popular for its poverty and repression, has an overlooked story of resistance. Haitians have played a remarkable role in shifting the correspondence of political and social power, even as they have endured distressing state-sponsored violence which includes torture, abuse, illegal

arrest, disappearance, and assassination. Danticat, who is concerned with the plight of Haiti and Haitians, fuses the political with the personal in her stories and thereby she creates testimonials which aim to address the social injustice. This paper attempts to picture the unyielding spirits of the Haitians even in the face of unfathomable loss.

**Keywords:** Love, Political violence, Suffering, Hopeful.

## Haitian Literature and Edwidge Danticat



Haitian literature has close ties with the socio-political and cultural life of Haiti. Haitian history which is marked by many revolutions, upheavals, atrocities, and injustices is also a rich source of inspiration for the writers. These writers assume the role of defenders of the nation and black race in general. The dominant and most influential figure in Haitian literature is Edwidge Danticat, born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on January 19, 1969. She is a Haitian-American diasporic writer who writes in English.

Danticat's fascination for Haitian storytelling traditions is the reason behind her short story collection *Krik? Krak!* (1995). In Haiti, *Krik?* is a request to tell a story, and the excited listeners reply *Krak!*. The collection contains nine stories and an epilogue. These stories revolve around Haitians who continue to remain strong and high spirited amidst the violence around them.

## Historical Background

The first story in the short story collection *KK* is "Children of the Sea". In this story, Danticat vividly pictures the political violence in Haiti after the coup against Haiti's democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. Post-coup, Aristide's supporters were terrorized by Emanuel Constant who led FRAPH (Front Revolutionnaire Pour l'Avancement et le Progres Haitien). As the post-coup violence shattered many civilian lives, Danticat felt the need to record their stories.

## Plot

The protagonists of the story are nameless male and female narrators who are in love with each other. As they are separated due to the socio-political atmosphere in Haiti, they make diary entries in which they record their love for each other, the violence they have witnessed, and the agonies of the fellow human beings.

## The Government and the Haitian Youth

The male narrator is a university student who has cleared his exams. Being a Youth Federation member, he comments against the government on a radio show and eventually becomes the target of the *macoutes* (Haitian paramilitary organization). Unsure of his future, he sails in a boat loaded with refugees.

The destiny of the Haitian youth was in the hands of the government. The young man's active involvement in politics has put his life under threat and made him leave his beloved homeland. He feels shy to cry in public and so he hides his tears. He thinks that if he were a girl, he would not have involved himself in politics and risked his life.

## Male Narrator's Diary

The male narrator in his diary entry recounts the story of a pregnant young woman named Celianne, on the boat. She was raped by the *macoutes* at the age of fifteen and is traumatized, "...stares into space all the time and rubs her stomach" (10). She is disturbed by nightmares and gives birth to a stillborn child. Owing to her trauma, she throws the child aboard and jumps along with it, "And just as the baby's head sank, so did hers. They went like two bottles beneath a waterfall. The shock lasts only so long. There was no time to even try and save her. There was no question of it. The sea in that spot is like the sharks that live there. It has no mercy"(26). The sea is compared to the hungry sharks which engulf the human lives.

The hardships encountered by the Haitian refugees at the sea like sunstroke, seasickness, thirst, and lack of hygiene are described in detail. To overcome their grief, the refugees sing about their homeland, Haiti. The pain of leaving the homeland is depicted in the man's text to his lover:

When we sing, *Beloved Haiti, there is no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you*, some of the women start crying. At times, I just want to stop in the middle of the song and cry myself. To hide my tears, I pretend like I am getting

another attack of nausea, from the sea smell.... If I was a girl, maybe I would have been at home and not out politicking and getting myself into something like this.... (9)

The man's texts are written in a leisurely and thoughtful manner. An old man requests the male narrator to write his name in the book, in which he records the events around him. The man's name is Justin Moise Andre Nozius Joseph Frank Osnac Maximilien. The grandeur of his name will go unnoticed if not recorded. This expresses the need to record the stories of those who are officially denied a voice. As the boat begins to crack letting the water in, the occupants try and seal with tar. Despite their efforts, the boat starts to sink and the narrator throws the diary overboard and awaits his fate.

### **Female Narrator's Diary**

The female narrator, in her diary entry, describes the killings in Haiti: "... a group of young students got shot in front of fort dimanche prison today. they were demonstrating for radio six. that is what they are calling you all. the radio six " (7). The other five of the boy's colleagues at the radio station were murdered. The girl has witnessed the fate of one of the families of 'radio six', as she lived next to them:

....our neighbour madan roger came home with her son's head and not much else....by the time we saw her, she had been carrying the head all over port-au-prince. just to show what's been done to her son. the macoutes by the house were laughing at her. they asked her if that was her dinner.... they are always watching you, like vultures. at night i can't sleep. i count the bullets in the dark. (7-8)

The girl's words exhibit the insecurity in the Haitian climate and the anxiety of the civilians. Unlike the boy's text, her letters are in a hurried and distracted manner and the way it is written in lower case exhibits the uncertainty of life under the coup.

The details of Madan Roger's assassination by the *macoutes* are quite terrifying. Even after killing her son, one of the Youth Federation members, they have come again for her, suspecting her involvement in the group:

....they started to pound at her. you can hear it. you can hear the guns coming down on her head. it sounds like they are cracking all the bones in her body.... you can hear madan roger screaming. they are beating her, pounding on her until you don't hear

anything else. manman tells papa, you cannot let them kill somebody just because you are afraid. papa says, oh yes, you *can* let them kill somebody because you are afraid. they are law. it is their right. we are just good citizens following the law of the land. it has happened before all over this country and tonight it will happen again and there is nothing we can do.(17)

The inability of the civilians to raise their voice against the atrocities of the *macoutes* is depicted in the above conversation between the girl's parents.

### **Symbol**

Black butterflies in the story symbolize death. When the black butterflies surround the girl, she guesses the fate of her lover.

### **Pain and Suffering**

The story "Children of the Sea" depicts the sufferings of Haitians, who come from different backgrounds in a unique way. Though they have encountered different experiences, the pain they suffer unites them:

"Children of the Sea" does not retreat from the full horror of life under the coup regime, and the story leaves us with the wrenching knowledge that those on the raft likely will drown, or be intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard, only to be returned to Haiti or incarcerated in Guantanamo; that the girl and her family will have to struggle to rebuild a life far from their original home; and that many more Madan Rogers will feel the full force of soldiers' attacks. And yet, even here, points of light emerge in moments of hope, tenderness and connection. (Scott 85)

### **Love and Hope**

The words 'behind the mountains are more mountains' echoed by both the narrators not only suggest the enormity of loss and struggle they have confronted in their lives but also express the love shared by them in the face of unfathomable loss. Their love for each other helps them to get through their period of struggle. Amidst the violence, Danticat pictures love to be an indispensable human experience. The girls love for the young man and her love for her father when she comes to know that he has sacrificed everything to save her from the *macoutes*, can be cited as examples, "... Above

all, a moment of love, of fully shared human emotion at its most intense, something that no violence can deny” (Nesbit 78).

The despair of Celianne in “Children of the Sea” as she throws herself into the ocean is felt by the young man when he becomes ready to embrace death. Yet, he hopes that life after death will be heavenly as opposed to the life on earth which is full of violence and bloodshed:

I must throw the book now. It goes down to them, Celianne and her daughter and all those children of the sea who might claim me.

I go to them now as though it was always meant to be, as though the very day that my mother birthed me, she had chosen me to live life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth where you live.(27)

The refugees who lost their lives in the sea are termed to be ‘children of the sea’ and they are supposed to be free and lucky than those who stay back and suffer. Though the narrator knows that he is going to die young, he anticipates his death as it will help him to become free from the clutches of slavery which his country has bestowed upon him.

Danticat in “Children of the Sea” voices the injustice targeted at her people. She presents love and hope as the counterpoints to gory descriptions of suffering and inhumanity. Her works can be categorised under the genre of testimony as the stories are narrated by the marginalised who recount their personal experiences of social injustice.

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## Configuration of Memory in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

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### ABSTRACT

Memory is the ability to recall or remember information or events in the past. This is carried out through three distinct processes such as encoding, storage and retrieval. Memory plays a significant role in the narratives of Edwidge Danticat, a Caribbean-American Diasporic writer.

The protagonists in Danticat's novels are very much influenced by their past and its memories. These memories act both as a preserver and destroyer of life in her novels. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it acts as a destroyer. The protagonist Sophie is haunted by the memories of 'testing' and her mother Martine is obsessed with nightmares of rape. This paper attempts to study the impact of memory on the psyche of Danticat's characters.

### KEYWORDS

Short term memory, Long term memory, Episodic, Semantic.

Memory is the ability to recall or remember information or events in the past. This is carried out through three distinct processes such as encoding, storage and retrieval. Encoding is a process of receiving sensory input and transforming it into a form, or code, which can be stored; storage is a process of actually putting coded information into memory; and retrieval is the process of gaining access to stored information when it is needed.

Memory can be classified into short term memory (STM) and long term memory (LTM). As the capacity of short term memory is small, the information stored here is lost because it is displaced by incoming items of information. Long term memory stores large amounts of information over a long period of time.

Two types of information are stored in LTM- semantic and episodic. Semantic memory involves the abstract knowledge and meaning of words, symbols, ideas and rules for relating them. Episodic memory records an individual's past experiences and episodes of daily life. It consists of long-term memories of specific things that happened to people at particular times and places. Thus episodic memories are memories of episodes which have a biographical reference.

Memory plays a significant role in the narratives of Edwidge Danticat. Danticat was born on January 19, 1969 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She is a Caribbean-American diasporic writer. She earned a Master's degree in Fine Arts in creative writing from Brown University in 1993 for "My turn in the fire – an abridged novel", which was later published into her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). She has taught creative writing at the New York University and the University of Miami.

The protagonists in Danticat's novels are very much influenced by their past and its memories. These memories act both as a preserver and destroyer of life in her novels. In *BEM*, it acts as a destroyer. The protagonist Sophie is haunted by the memories of 'testing' and her mother Martine is obsessed with nightmares of rape.

'Testing' is a Haitian tradition for centuries. It is a process with which a mother ensures that her daughter is a virgin by inspecting to see whether her little finger can pass the daughter's hymen. Martine was tested by her mother lfe, until she was raped by a macoute. She forced the same on Sophie in their Brooklyn home, "I closed my eyes upon the images of my mother slipping her hand under the sheets and poking her pinky at a void, hoping that it

would go no further than the length of her fingernail" (*BEM* 155). Sophie hated testing.

Sophie used the technique of 'doubling' while being tested. She did this by imagining beautiful things to distract her mind, "Doubling refers to a split identity that characters such as Sophie Caco generate in order to cope with trauma in their lives" ( Munro 43). She disengaged herself from the present and thought of her childhood days in Haiti "I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tante Atie's gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils" (*BEM* 155).

In spite of 'doubling', the crippling weight of 'testing' psychologically shattered Sophie. Her rebellious nature urged her to put an end to her mother's insane ideology of keeping her pure, so she used a spice pestle to fail the test, "My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed them into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she tested me... Finally I failed the test" (*BEM* 87). Thrown out of the house, she married her lover Joseph.

'Testing' led to trauma. Memories of 'testing' built up a phobia for sex in Sophie as she felt ashamed of her body. She used the same technique of 'doubling' for diversion, when Joseph made love to her. Here again 'doubling' helped her only for a short span of time. Unable to continue the relationship with Joseph, she took her daughter Bridgette and returned to Haiti. To discover the reason behind this Haitian tradition, Sophie enquired Grandme lfe the cause for testing her daughters and Grandme lfe stated that it was a mother's duty to safeguard her daughters' purity until marriage.

Grandme lfe suggested Sophie that patience was the tool, which would aid in fading her pain, "Now you have a child of your own. You must know that everything a mother does, she does, she does for her child's own good. You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself." (*BEM* 156). Later that night, Grandme lfe gave Sophie her statue of Erzulie and told her, "My heart, it weeps like a river," she said "for the pain we have caused you" (*BEM* 157). To overcome the trauma inflicted by testing, Sophie attended therapeutic classes conducted by the therapist Rena.

Like 'testing' which resulted in phobia, memories of rape ended in nightmares. Martine was raped at the age of sixteen by a masked



macoute in the cane fields of Haiti. The rape not only left her with a child-Sophie, but also evoked constant nightmares in her. The nightmares which haunted Martine after rape affected her sanity. She lost her sanity after the rape and attempted suicide several times during the post delivery period, as the nightmares appeared too real, "For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside her. At night, she tore her sheets and bit pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares" (*BEM 138*). Martine emigrated to the U.S. after Sophie's birth and worked hard to earn a living. Sophie joined her at the age of twelve and was taken aback to see her mother struggling with nightmares:

Later that night, I heard the same voice screaming as though someone was trying to kill her. I rushed over, but my mother was alone thrashing the sheets. I shook her finally and woke her up. When she saw me, she quickly covered her face with her hands and turned away....

"It is the night," she said. "Sometimes, I see horrible visions in my sleep." (*BEM 45*)

Place became a mediator of memory in this novel. For Martine a visit to Haiti was like returning to the scene of rape. Martine hesitated going to Haiti because it made her nightmares more violent, "I have to go back to make final arrangements for your grandmother's resting place. I want to see her before she dies, but I don't want to stay there for more than three or four days. I know that sounds bad, but that is the only way I can do it. There are ghosts there that I can't face, things that are still very painful for me" (*BEM 76*). Martine struggled with sleepless nights at La Nouvelle Dame Marie in Haiti, "Whenever I'm there, I feel like I sleep with ghosts. The first night I was there, I woke up pounding at my stomach" (*BEM 192*).

Pregnancy is a phase to be cherished by women but Martine's trauma became intense during her second pregnancy. Martine conceived for the second time with Marc's child. As the baby started to grow, the nightmares which disturbed her only at night took a different turn and troubled all the time, "You know what happens now. I look at every man and I see him" "Marc?" "Non non," she whispered. "Him. Le violeur, the rapist, I see him everywhere" (*BEM 202*). Her second conception left her more anxious, as she heard the rapist's voice from the baby, "Last night when I heard it speak to me." "....It has a man's voice, so now I know it's not a girl...Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me. You tenten, malpwop. He calls me filthy whore. I never want to see this child's face" (*BEM 221*).

The burden of inheritance was clearly evident in Sophie as Martine's nightmare echoed in her. She, too in her dreams, saw a masked man raping a young girl in the cane fields. This showed the devastating influence of human beings on one another:

After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had "caught" from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn't both spent the night dreaming about same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl. (*BEM 196*)

Martine haunted by her past committed suicide, "Indeed, however far she could be from Haiti, the memory of that fateful night in the sugar cane field became the one single obsessive event that determined her life's outcome. So potent was this memory that every night of her life, she had nightmares in which she is pursued by a shadowy figure" (*Christophe 98*). Sophie on the other hand chose therapy. Martine's fear to attend therapeutic classes and to encounter the scene of rape resulted in ending her life while Sophie's therapeutic sessions and her final encounter with cane field liberated her from the traumatic memories:

They were only few men working in the cane fields. I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding (*BEM 238*)

Thus memory becomes an inevitable factor in determining the psyche of Danticat's characters. The novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* draws an explicit relationship between the past and the present. It is a testimony of Caribbean tradition and women's suffering.

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