

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

Poornamathi Meenakshi Ph.D. Scholar and Dr. Sushil Mary Mathews



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.

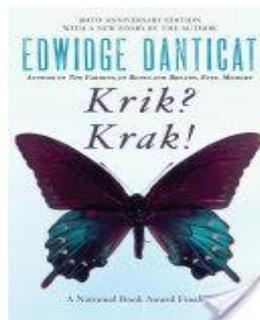
The first story in the short story collection *KK* is "Children of the Sea". In this story, Danticat vividly pictures the political violence in Haiti, which is located in the island of Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles archipelago of the Caribbean Sea. Haiti gained its independence from France in 1803. 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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Poornamathi Meenakshi
Ph.D. Scholar
Department of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore-641004
Tamil Nadu
India

Dr. Sushil Mary Mathews
Associate Professor of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore-641004
Tamil Nadu
India
meenaarvinth@gmail.com