

## Exploration of Psyche in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

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“Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature” (Barry 92). *Room* is a remarkable novel that can be viewed as a life-affirming fable of mother-child love and its triumph. The novel is about the mother, Ma and is narrated by her son, Jack. By narrating the entire piece of work from the point-of-view of the five-year-old child, with amazing critical intelligence, Donoghue shows how Ma plays an unchallengeable role in Jack's psychic development (*Room*) by an old pervert (Old Nick), with its reference to Ma's past (that is, Ma being kidnapped and repeatedly raped by Old Nick at a tender age), and most importantly its celebration of the unquestionable maternal power (the power that results in the final escape of Ma and Jack from Old Nick's captivity). *Room* aims to tell an oddly life-affirming tale of raw emotions.

As life moves on, in the novel, one can find that despite all their (Ma and Jack) suffering, struggle, trauma of solitary confinement and the trauma following their rescue which Ma calls as their heroic “Great Escape,”(133) Ma re-emerges as the heroic survivor and Jack as an epitome of happiness. In the end of the novel, both the mother and her son have regained their physical liberty too.

According to Jacques Lacan, “the subject of psychoanalysis is not the self-sufficient, “autonomous’ subject of knowledge as it is constructed in the tradition of philosophy, that is to say, as corresponding to consciousness, to the conscious cogito, but the ex-centric subject, one structured around a radical split, a radical lack” (Stavrakakis 22). Lacan's important innovation in the field of psychoanalysis constitutes his identification of the different stages in the development of the human psyche. Before the sense of the self emerges, the child exists in a realm which Lacan calls, the Imaginary in which there is no distinction between the Self and the other and there is a kind of idealized identification with the mother. This stage lasts up to six months of age. Between six months and eighteen months comes what he calls the mirror-stage, when the child sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive of itself as a unified being, separate from the rest of the world. After this stage the child enters the language system, essentially a system which is concerned with lack and separation, the crucial Lacanian concepts, since language names what is not present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it.

The novel opens on Jack's birthday when he turns five. His imagination is very powerful though he is young. He thinks of himself as an appendix of his mother, an inseparable part of Ma, Jack sees himself as an extension of Ma's personality, Ma's self, Ma's body. This is vivid in the novel, when Jack tries to conceal from Ma the presence of cob-web inside their room. He says:

I still don't tell her about the web. It's weird to have something that's mine-not-Ma's. Everything else is both of ours. I guess my body is mine and the ideas that happen in my head. But my cells are

made out of her cells so I'm kind of hers. Also when I tell her what I'm thinking and she tells me what she's thinking, our each ideas jump into our other's head, like coloring blue crayon on top of yellow that makes green. (12)

Thus, for Jack, it is impossible to hide or have anything of his own which does belong to his Ma. The sense of his self is deeply merged with that of the woman-mother that Jack, at an instance, even dreams of becoming bigger and bigger till he turns into “a woman, with a w” (16). For him, being “human” means growing up into a “woman” like his Ma. Jack, at an instance, says: “May be I’m a human but I’m a me-and-Ma as well” (342). The imaginary stage is not a developmental phase, it is not something that one goes through and grows out of, but remains at the core of the experience.

Children possess the ability to imagine the inanimate objects around them as animate beings. It is called as animistic in early childhood and it more implicit. Jack imagines the inanimate things in his room as objects with life and says, “Good night, Room, Good night, Lamp and Balloon” (7). This indicates animistic of Jack who is five-year-old before he sleep he says good night to every furniture in the room. In pre-operational stage, 4 or 5 years old children will think that everything in the world of nature is alive, conscious and has a purpose.

The other indicators of animism are a child’s belief to animation in television. Jack believes that Dora, a character in a cartoon that he watches is real. The belief of animism in this context refers to moving objects Dora the Explorer in television. It can be known in the sentence “Dora is a drawing in TV but she’s my real friend, that’s confusing” (24). Dora the Explorer is an animation TV show series which tell about the journey by solving a puzzle and asking the audience to solve the quest. It means that Dora like a real thing. In this context, Jack will pass this animistic belief when he believes that Dora as his real friend.

Magical thinking in this context refers to the main character in this story. In early childhood, children have magical thinking to be one of the heroes or other characters that have power. In this context, a child is like Jack that ends to be magical thinker to be hero, Jack is influenced by English folktale Jack the Giant Killer, He believes that he can save her mother from the captor by being a hero. Related to the actions of child that tend to have magical thinking, it can be a help for children to handle and explore their ideas and creativity.

Children tend to be magical thinker to have magical power. In this context, a son shows his view about Santa and believes to have magical power like Santa. It illustrates the magical thinking of children who still believe that there is a magic of Santa who can grant their requests with his different perception. The belief of children in Santa Claus, a traditional figure who is believed to bring presents to people, especially children, during Christmas time. In this context, the averages of children usually tend to be magical thinker and believe having magical power to get anything spontaneously.

Children usually believe that there is a tooth fairy in real world. Related to tooth fairy, it was one iconic fantasy figure of early childhood. The tooth fairy first appeared around the 20th century American creation. There is a belief that the tooth fairy brings their tooth when they drop their tooth under their pillows. In this context, Jack as young American child believe a tooth fairy and when his mother gets

toothache, he wants Ma put her tooth in her pillow and with the belief that the tooth fairy will take her tooth away.

The other indicators of a child's perception about identity can be seen from the struggle of a child who confuses his real identity. In this context, the struggle of Jack as a child has perception to view his identity. The struggle of Jack to know his own identity is still blurred for him as a child. He cannot understand with his limited intellectual capability of being known the reality of his identity as one of the humans outside the room. Jack and his mother are human and Old Nick, as the captor is a non-human. And Jack as a young child finds it difficult to understand the difference between both

Self-centered identification by seeing the activities and attitude when someone only interested in his or her own activities and become the central of attention. Children in general will show their desire to be self-centered in every activity. This geocentricism in early childhood is different from adult because children are young individual who believe their perspective without thinking too much. Jack always thinks that he is right and he wants anything with his naïve character as a child.

Donoghue describes characters who illustrate the phenomena of child perspective in this novel. This perspective of children can be understood through characterization of child named Jack, who is naïve. Jack because, the first narrator of the novel narrates his conflicts of mind and his perception of life is completely different from others.

Ma takes care of her son and as an adult views the condition of child. This is evident of how child perspectives are reflected by the struggle of mother who try to make her son understand the explanation of adult. In this context, a mother is like Ma in the story who illustrates the understanding character as a mother who tries to care to children. Dr. Clay and Jack's grandma also try to do therapeutic isolation for Jack.

Donoghue uses lyrics from the rhymes for children in the novel. The lyrics of "The other side of the mountain" is one part of children songs. The title of the song *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*. Children love singing and it is one of the ways to make children have fun and increase their creativity, especially in the development of language in early childhood. The other one is *The Worms Crawl in the Worms Crawl Out*. It was one of the folk songs sung by American children with their families. In this context, Jack always sings that song before sleep and his mother teach him to sing that song to make him happy before sleep. The author of the novel uses the titles of the books to tell it to the readers that Jack is a young child who likes stories and his mother to be storyteller for him. "From the kidnapping events that build this story, it illustrates how the first time of Ma as young girl kidnapped by unknown man and they call the man is 'Old Nick' because she does not know his real name" (Nurhayati 9).

Based on the analysis above, the indicators of child perspective in the novel can be seen through indicators namely animistic, magical thinking, egocentrism, non-logical thinking, and imaginative. Animistic happens when they pass the period of cognitive development. The other indicator is magical thinkers. They have high self-confidents to be a hero like others superhero in television and story books and their imagination influences children to view what the world actually looks like in the child's eyes and they tend to be self-centered person and adults must fulfill everything

they need. They tend to think in non-logically manner when they try to reconstruct what they have seen, hear, and touch something around them.

Secondly, child perspective is depicted in novel through character and characterization, questions raised by children, events and style. The characterization can be seen through naïve character, understandable character, and sadistic. The questions that children raise are the ways to see how children have questions of real and unreal things. The novel also is a criticism in high rate of child abduction in US. It describes the social condition in that time with many of criminal cases, especially abduction of children that often occur in big cities like America. This novel is the reflection of high rate of child kidnapping. Related to literary as reflection of situation of writer, Emma Donoghue is a mother of a five-year-old son and she writes this novel as reflection of being mother who tries to understand the world through the eyes of a child. It influenced her to write this novel from the perspective of a child as the manifestation of Emma as an adult who try to know children's perspective actually look likes.

The most important point to be noted here is that, the overlapping stages, Imaginary and Mirror-stage have extended themselves to the realm of the Symbolic in Jack's psyche. Even though he is a five-year-old child, Imaginary and Mirror-stage have been retained in his psychic development thereby shaking the fixity of the Lacanian Symbolic. However, in this novel, one can find that the Symbolic in the five-year-old Jack is not strong enough to effect a change in the world of the mother and her child, the extended Maternal Womb. This is because of the overlapping Imaginary and Mirror Phases being extended further into the Symbolic in Jack.

Jack, of course, has two biological parents, but he barely glimpses the patriarchal man/father (whom he calls "Old Nick") who fathered him. Nameless and storyless, in the novel, Old Nick has a fairytale, bogeyman quality. Jack, at an instance, says:

Nothing makes Ma scared. Except Old Nick may be. Mostly she calls him just him, I didn't even know the name for him till I saw a cartoon about a guy that comes in the night called Old Nick. I call the real one that because he comes in the night, but he doesn't look like the TV guy with a beard and horns and stuff. I asked Ma once is he old, and she said he's nearly double her which is pretty old. (14)

Old Nick, for Jack, is thus an illusory figure. Old Nick's access to his son Jack is deliberately denied and restricted by Ma, the woman-mother. Ma strongly restricts Old Nick's access to Jack by not allowing him to touch, talk or get a sight of his son. She stands as a strong, unbreakable barrier between the patriarchal man/father and his son which at times tempts Old Nick, who may be taken as a representative of patriarchy, into locked room in the night, Old Nick makes an attempt talk to his son, Jack, which is ultimately warded off by the strong intervention of Ma as follows:

Old Nick's looking right at me, he takes a step and another... I see his hand shadow. 'Hey in there.' He's talking to me. My chest's going clang clang. I hug my knees and press my teeth together. I want to get under Blanket but I can't, I can't do anything. 'He's asleep.' That's Ma.

'She keep you in the closet all day as well as all night?... Doesn't seem natural... I figure there must be something wrong, he's saying to Ma,

'you've never let me get a good look since the day he was born. Poor little freak's got two heads or something?'... 'Bought him that fancy jeep, didn't I? I know boys, I was one once. C'mon, Jack---`He said my name.

"C'mon out and get your lollipop'. (90-91)

Furthermore, Donoghue's narrative can be read as a superb exploration of the phenomenon of resilience, a psychological construct that explains how, under traumatic circumstances of distress, human beings might develop an unexpected capacity to cope with pain and suffering.

Told entirely from the perspective of a five-year-old boy, Jack, *Room* is divided into five parts, which follow his developmental stages as he perceives his surroundings, during and after confinement and also outside and within society, with the effect of challenging the meanings culture has ascribed to such roles as parenthood and education. "The choice of narrative perspective is shrewd, enabling a curiously playful, even joyous, style of narration"(Gopal 20). Believing that his world is the only one that exists, the first part of the narration focuses on their daily routines and on the delight that mother (Ma) and child share in each other's company throughout their horrifying incarceration, while their eventual freedom from their captor (Old Nick) in the second part will be the subject of debatable issues regarding their psychic well-being and alienation from the social order.

Throughout the novel, Donoghue seems to be suggesting that Ma's ability to meet Jack's developmental needs as he grows springs from innate mothering skills, which are presented as a combination of natural instinct and intuition. In spite of the absence of social training. Jack's upbringing is notably rich in stimuli and affection, two key components of positive child development. Although his microcosm in confinement is literally reduced to an eleven-by-eleven foot room, his mother fuels his imagination with stories, rhymes and songs, and creatively enriches his mind by inventing a hundred uses for inanimate disposable objects. She protects him from the excesses of TV, that "rots our brains", letting him watch only one show at a time, and she keeps him away from the damage that the awareness of an alternative existence could cause him, "muting commercials because they mush our brains even faster" (11). In spite of the adverse circumstances and surprisingly considering that she was only nineteen when she was kidnapped, she is depicted as a sensible mother capable of fulfilling Jack's needs giving meaning to everything they do through a daily routine that will contribute to their physical and mental well-being.

From the very beginning of the novel, reality is presented as a construction, whose validity relies on the point of view of the onlooker and not on shared common perceptions. The secluded experience is thus conversely comprehended by mother and child. However the fact that his joyful ignorance contrasts with her woeful submission does not make such reality any less authentic for either of the pair. While the mother's view is deliberately limited and mediated by that of Jack, who has the agency to tell the story and it is only the adult reader who is privileged to read through her emotional states, the child has been made to believe that the place where they live is the real world. Jack is convinced that reality is only constituted by the tangible things they possess, while unreal things only exist in an "Outer Space"(8), on television or in their imagination; "Boys are TV but they kind of look like me, the me in Mirror that

isn't real either, just a picture”(54). However, as his mind matures, his musings about the boundaries between these two realms also grow.

Here, one can find that before the true evolution of Jack's Ma as a new subjectivity, a new consciousness, before her re-emergence as an emotionally strong, independent single woman-mother sufficiently determined to earn a living for herself and her son, before claiming her social, political and economic independence, there occurs a mental-breakdown in Ma as she is struck down by neurosis, leading her to attempt suicide, though she later succeeds in recovering from her neurotic trauma. Ma, at the age of nineteen, was kidnapped and locked-up by Old Nick in a tiny room. In the following days, Ma was sexually abused repeatedly and all her efforts to break apart the tiny room, and her attempts to attack and hurt Old Nick finally failed. And finally she gave birth to a baby girl, but she was born dead as the umbilical cord was all knotted around her neck. Old Nick took her dead body away and buried her under a bush in the backyard. Soon, after all the trauma of being subjected to terrible imprisonment, multiple counts of rape and the experience of abortion at an early age, on a cold March day, Ma finally gave birth, all alone under medieval conditions, to a healthy baby-boy, Jack, all on herself. Hence, after Jack's birth, Ma pretended to be polite towards Old Nick in order to keep her son safe in room. She deliberately wore the disguise of playing wife to Old Nick. Ma continued with her disguise until she thought time really became favourable for her Great Escape from room with her son.

After all her struggles and trauma, when she finally enters the outside world, she is initially struck by the sense of being denied the real freedom and independence that she craved for. Under the guidance of the police who assisted the escape of Ma and Jack from the locked room, both of them are admitted to the Cumberland Clinic where the psychiatrist, Dr. Clay takes in charge of them. It is during this interim before the final re-emergence of Ma and Jack as a single whole totally immune to the forces of patriarchy that Ma is struck by neurosis which leads her to attempt suicide. Following this, Jack is separated from Ma for a short while. However, finally, Ma (the woman-mother) incredibly reaffirms life over death using her maternal power and returns to her son. She, thus, takes hold of her life, her lost youth, her dreams, as she returns the life-experiences of a woman-mother.

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